

WATER IDIOMS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract. *The present paper aims at analysing English idioms related to water according to certain criteria of classifying figurative fixed expressions to identify the features characterising them, which can be useful during the process of translating them. The article discusses the classifications of idioms according to the degree of idiomaticity, the types of meaning they have, and part-of-speech meaning, providing examples for each category. These are the classifications based on which 80 water idioms, which make up the corpus of the research, are examined to determine their types and characteristics. The results of the analysis show that the great majority of water idioms are phraseological unities, have literal and metaphorical meanings, and function like major parts of speech. As most figurative fixed expressions containing the word ‘water’ are not highly idiomatic and there is a close connection between their literal and metaphorical meanings, their translation does not seem to present many difficulties. Moreover, the latter can be dealt with much easier if to consider the nature of water idioms revealed through the study under focus.*

Key words: *water idiom, literal meaning, idiomatic meaning, part of speech, degree of idiomaticity.*

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Rezumat. *Studiul de față are ca scop principal analiza idiotismelor din limba engleză referitoare la apă, conform anumitor criterii de clasificare a expresiilor idiomatice, pentru a identifica caracteristicile lor ce pot fi utile la traducerea acestora. Articolul ia în discuție clasificările idiotismelor în baza gradului lor de figurativitate, tipurilor de sens pe care le au și părții de vorbire, rolul căreia îl îndeplinesc, oferind exemple pentru fiecare categorie în parte. În concordanță cu aceste clasificări, 80 de idiotisme legate de apă, care alcătuiesc corpusul cercetării, sunt examinate cu scopul de a determina tipurile și trăsăturile lor. Rezultatele analizei arată că marea majoritate a idiotismelor ce conțin cuvântul ‘apă’ sunt unități frazeologice, au două tipuri de sens (propriu și figurat) și funcționează ca părți de vorbire majore. Dat fiind că expresiile idiomatice referitoare la apă nu sunt foarte figurative și că există o strânsă legătură între sensul lor literal și cel metaforic, traducerea lor nu pare a prezenta multe dificultăți. În plus, acestea din urmă pot fi depășite mai ușor dacă se ia în calcul natura idiotismelor legate de apă scoasă în evidență prin intermediul studiului respectiv.*

Cuvinte cheie: *idiotism referitor la apă, sens propriu, sens figurat, parte de vorbire, grad de figurativitate.*

The notion of ‘idiom’ has been debated for many years, as it can be defined in narrow and broad senses and is used in various, sometimes conflicting, ways. This paper is not intended to discuss the wide range of definitions given to the term

'idiom', but to deal with certain classifications of idioms in general and water idioms in particular. Nonetheless, it is necessary to mention that in the present article the term 'idiom' refers to a figurative fixed "expression whose meaning differs from the individual meanings of its elements"¹, not including other fixed and/or figurative expressions, such as proverbs, sayings, metaphors, etc.²

Idioms have aroused the interest of many scholars. Being part of the large and varied collection of figurative expressions, they have been explored by eminent linguists, as well as anthropologists, "aiming at elucidating the linguistic and social sources of figurative language"³. The research has demonstrated that the figurative meaning of idioms has its basis in the beliefs, cultural values, or anything else characterising a community⁴. Hence, idioms are closely related to all spheres of life, being part of everyone's vocabulary, although their use is not indispensable for correct conversation.

The English language is considered to be rich in such figurative fixed expressions as idioms⁵. They are of various types and fall into certain categories according to the ways they are formed, according to the degree of idiomaticity, types of meaning they have, key-words used to create them, their structure, part-of-speech meaning, etc. Some of these classification criteria will be discussed in what follows.

According to **the degree of idiomaticity**, idioms, or phraseological units, as they are called by eastern scholars, can be classified into three big groups:

a) **Phraseological fusions** are the word-groups whose meaning cannot be guessed from the meanings of their components. They are highly idiomatic, which makes their word-for-word translation into other languages impossible. Examples of such idioms are *white elephant*, meaning 'an expensive but useless thing'; *as mad as a hatter* — 'completely crazy'; *at sixes and sevens* — "in a state of total confusion or disarray"⁶.

b) **Phraseological unities** are the word-groups whose meaning can generally be understood through the metaphoric meaning of the whole expression, e.g. *to wash one's dirty linen in public* — "to advertise in public the moral lapses

¹ John C. Hodges, Winifred Bryan Horner, Robert Keith Miller, *Harbrace College Handbook Brief*, Harcourt Brace & College, 1998, p. 87.

² Rosamund Moon, *Fixed Expressions and Idioms in English. A Corpus-Based Approach*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 2-4.

³ Cristina Cacciari, Patrizia Tabossi, *Idioms: Processing, Structure, and Interpretation*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ, 1993, p. XI.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Daphne M. Gullanda and David Hinds-Howell, *The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms*, 2nd edn, Penguin Books, 2001, see *Preface*.

⁶ *Definition of at sixes and sevens*. Oxford University Press [online] available at: https://www.lexico.com/definition/at_sixes_and_sevens (Accessed: 11 February 2021).

and difficulties of one's private life"⁷, *to bend the knee* — "to submit to a stronger force, to obey submissively"⁸;

c) **Phraseological collocations** consist of a metaphorical element and an element used in its direct meaning, as in the following instances: *to hit the hay/sack*, *to meet the requirements/expectations*. This type of idioms is not completely fixed, because certain substitutions are possible, but only with the preservation of the meaning of the metaphorical element⁹.

According to **the types of meaning** they have, idioms can be divided into:

1. Phraseological units that have two meanings: a literal meaning which does not mean very much, and a metaphorical one, e.g. *someone wouldn't say boo to a goose* — 'someone is very shy or reticent'¹⁰;

2. Phraseological units that have no literal meaning at all, only an idiomatic one, e.g. *to go Dutch* — 'share the cost of something, especially a meal, equally'¹¹.

As far as **part-of-speech meaning** is concerned, it is worth mentioning that the Russian scholar Arnold I. V. classifies idioms into six groups according to this criterion:

- a) Idioms used as nouns (e.g. family jewels);
- b) Idioms used as verbs (e.g. see how the land lies);
- c) Idioms used as adjectives (e.g. as angry as hell);
- d) Idioms used as adverbs (e.g. behind bars);
- e) Idioms used as prepositions (e.g. on the ground of) and
- f) Idioms used as interjections (e.g. for heaven's sake).

Most of these groups are further divided into smaller subgroups based on idiom structure. For instance, idioms functioning like nouns can have one of the following structures: N+N (e.g. brains trust); N's+N (e.g. mare's nest); N+prep+N (e.g. the arm of the law), etc.¹²

The last classification to be discussed in this article is performed by grouping idioms round the **key-words used to create them**. These key-words can refer to concrete things, such as plants, animals, birds, the human body, clothes, food, houses, and towns, as well as to abstract concepts, for instance, relations, education, emotions, politics, and business. Many special dictionaries present

⁷ Daphne M. Gullanda and David Hinds-Howell, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

⁹ Vladimir Vinogradov, *Osnovnye tipy leksičeskogo značeniya slova*, *Voprosy jazykoznanija* 5, 1953, pp. 3-29.

¹⁰ *Definition of wouldn't say boo to a goose*, Oxford University Press [online] available from <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/wouldn't_say_boo_to_a_goose> (Accessed: 7 March 2021).

¹¹ *Definition of go Dutch*. Oxford University Press [online] available from <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/go_dutch> (Accessed: 7 March 2021); Daphne M. Gullanda and David Hinds-Howell, *op. cit.*, see *Preface*.

¹² I. V. Arnold, *Лексикология современного английского языка*, 3rd edn, Высшая школа, Moscow, 1986, pp. 172-173.

idioms in categories according to the key-word with the aid of which they are made up, making the process of finding them much easier¹³. The categories and the number of idioms in each category vary from one dictionary to another. Therefore, in order to analyse idioms from a certain group, it is necessary to consult a various dictionaries of idioms.

In the following paragraphs, attention will be paid to the analysis of 80 water idioms, which make up the corpus of the present research, based on the aforementioned classifications. There is a large number of idioms that have a component belonging to the lexical field of the word 'water', for instance, rain, river, sea, ocean, wave, tide, ship, etc. Nonetheless, this article is concerned exclusively with idioms that contain the word 'water'. The latter is mainly used in the corpus as a noun and only in some examples, it is a verb. A small number of the figurative fixed expressions analysed contain a derivative of the word 'water' (e.g. *watering hole*, *watered-down*) or one of its compounds (e.g. *jerkwater*, *high-water*, *ditchwater*). The water idioms constituting the corpus of the study have been collected from the following dictionaries: *The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms*, 2nd edition (2001)¹⁴, *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*, 3rd. edition (2010)¹⁵, *The Free Dictionary by Farlex*¹⁶, and *The Idioms*¹⁷. These dictionaries provide a detailed explanation of the idiomatic meaning of figurative fixed expressions and clear examples of their usage in context. Moreover, they indicate the literal meaning from which the metaphorical meaning of certain expressions has developed. In other words, the resources consulted have been of great help in determining the types to which water idioms belong when explored from the point of view of the three classifications described in the first part of the article.

As a result of the analysis performed according to the degree of idiomaticity, only 16 out of 80 water idioms are highly idiomatic and can be included in the category entitled phraseological fusions. Among them, the following ones stand out: *water under the bridge* – "past events that are not important anymore"¹⁸, *clear blue water* – "[a] separation between rivals or opponents"¹⁹, *to*

¹³ Daphne M. Gullanda and David Hinds-Howell, *op.cit.*, see *Preface*.

¹⁴ Idem, *The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms*, 2nd edn, Penguin Books, 2001.

¹⁵ John Ayto (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*, 3rd. edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press [online] available from <<https://books.google.md/books?id=g9ynBrageYIC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Oxford+Dictionary+of+English+Idiom&hl=ru&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwifIM6nsLLvAhUF7KQKHbOZBVYQ6AEwAHoECAEQAg#v=onepage&q=Oxford%20DictiDicti%20of%20English%20Idioms&f=false>>.

¹⁶ *The Free Dictionary by Farlex* [online] available from <<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/>>.

¹⁷ *The Idioms: Largest idioms dictionary* [online] available from <<https://www.theidioms.com/>>.

¹⁸ The Idioms: Largest idioms dictionary. *Idioms by topic: Water*. [online] available from <<https://www.theidioms.com/?s=water>> (Accessed: 13 March 2021).

¹⁹ The Free Dictionary by Farlex. *Definition of clear blue water*. [online] available from <<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/clear+blue+water>> (Accessed: 14 March 2021).

make a hole in the water – “to commit suicide by drowning”²⁰, *long drink of water* – “a tall, typically slender person”²¹. The rest of 64 examples are phraseological unities (e.g. *like a duck to water*, *spend money like water*, *tread water in something*), as no phraseological collocations have been found. That is, the great majority of water idioms (as shown in figure 1) have metaphorically transferred meanings that can be understood based on the meanings of their components.

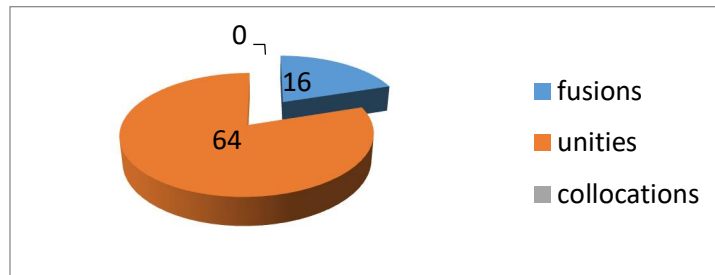


Fig. 1. Types of idioms according to their degree of idiomaticity.

As for the criterion referring to the types of meaning the phraseological units may have, it is worth mentioning that only 6 water idioms have no literal meaning (e.g. *swim between two waters*, *troubled waters*, *joy water*). The other 74 idioms have two meanings: a literal meaning and a metaphorical one (e.g. *Keep one’s head above water*, *could talk under water*, *with both oars in the water*, *blood in the water*). In most of these idioms, the connection between the literal and idiomatic meanings is relatively close, which facilitates the understanding of the latter.

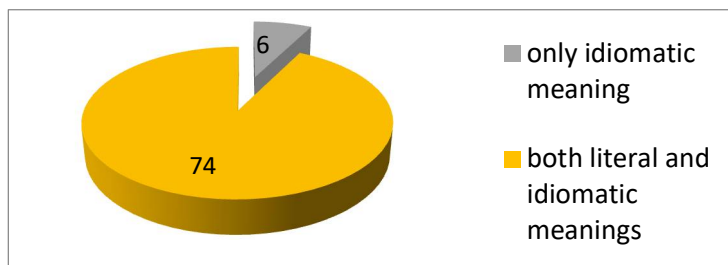


Fig. 2. Classification of water idioms according to the types of meanings they have.

By contrast to the proportions presented above, the proportions regarding the categories into which water idioms fall from the point of view of part-of-speech meaning are not as different. Although the idioms functioning like verbs are the

²⁰ Daphne M. Gullanda and David Hinds-Howell, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

²¹ The Free Dictionary by Farlex. *Definition of long drink of water*. [online] available from <<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/long+drink+of+water>> (Accessed: 14 March 2021).

most numerous, they represent only slightly more than half of all examples. The other half is constituted by idioms used as nouns (22), adjectives (9), adverbs (8), and sentences (2).

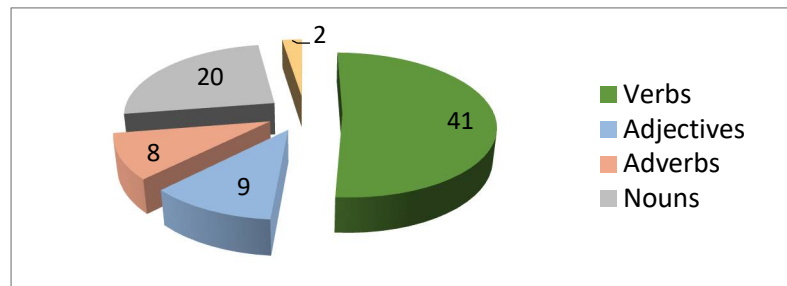


Fig. 3. Types of water idioms according to part-of-speech meaning.

All the findings emerging from the analysis of water idioms discussed in this article create an overall image of the nature of water idioms and can be particularly useful in translating them. The fact that most examples from the corpus are phraseological unities and not fusions indicates that their translation is not very arduous, as their meaning can be guessed based on the meanings of the words from which they are made up. The same idea is reinforced by the high percentage of water idioms that have both literal and metaphorical meanings, especially taking into account that the two are often very close, the latter deriving from the former through transference based on resemblance or similarity. Besides, the results of the analysis of part-of-speech meaning show that figurative fixed expressions that have 'water' as a key-word function as major parts of speech and have a definite lexical content, which means that they cannot be ignored when translating texts in which such idioms are found. Considering these peculiarities of water idioms, one can avoid certain difficulties encountered during the translation process and deal with them much more effectively.