

摘 要

第二语言的学习往往是第二种文化的学习,尤其是当我们学习文化蕴含丰富的习语时。本文于非母语英语学习者在学习英语习语时所遇的困难入手,讨论了习语与文化各种方面的关系,并调查了主要的四本英语习语词典,发现并提出当前的习语词典中存在的问题,并在最后提出了为英语习语词典提供文化信息的建议。

本文导论部分首先陈述了习语和文化的特点定义,并因此而产生了目前非母语英语学习者在学习英语习语时的困难,由此提出了本文文化研究的目的。接下来,本文研究了习语,文化和语言的关系,为接下来的几章做好铺垫。第一章描述了历史与习语的关系,本文着重陈述了英国历史与英语习语发展的关系。第二至第五章分别详细阐述了习语与宗教,风俗习惯,文学及社会生活的关系。第六章作者详细调查了四本主要英语习语词典中文化信息部分:《朗文英语习语词典》,《英语习语大词典》,《牛津英语习语词典》和《剑桥国际英语成语词典》。通过调查得出了四种提供文化信息的方式。最后一章里,作者提出了现存英语习语词典中存在四个主要问题,并就所存在的问题,联系非母语英语学习者的困难提出了自己的几点看法及对习语词典编纂者的几点建议。

关键词: 文化、习语、英语习语词典

Synopsis

Second language learning is often second culture learning, especially the culture-bound idioms learning. The present thesis starts from the problems and difficulties that ESL learners meet when learning English idioms and discusses the relationship between English idioms and all aspects of culture. At the end, the author investigates four of the main English idiom dictionaries; finds out the incompleteness existing in the present dictionaries and gives some suggestions on providing cultural information to the idiom dictionary compilers.

The introduction first analyses the purpose of the thesis and gets the aim of the cultural study of English idioms. That is, to solve the problems existing in ESL learners when studying English idioms. Then the author studies the idioms and culture respectively and last the relationship between language, idioms and culture is discussed to prepare for the theory of the following chapters. Chapter one states the relationship between history and idioms. The author especially states the English history and its influence on English idioms' development. Chapter two to five state the relationship between idioms and religion, customs, literature and social life respectively in detail. Chapter six, the investigation of the culture aspect in four main English idioms dictionaries is taken: *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms*, *A Dictionary of English Idioms (Wuhan University)*, *Oxford Idioms Dictionary for Learners of English* and *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*. Through the investigation, four ways of cultural information providing. In the last chapter, four problems existing in the dictionaries are summarized, and the author gives some suggestions to English idiom dictionary compilers aiming at the problems of the learners and present dictionaries.

Keywords: Culture, idiom, dictionary of English idioms

Abbreviation

CIDI	<i>Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms</i>
DOEI	<i>A Dictionary of English Idioms (Wuhan University)</i> 英语习语大词典
LDOEI	<i>Longman Dictionary of English Idioms</i>
OIDLE	<i>Oxford Idioms Dictionary for Learners of English</i>
ESL	English as second language

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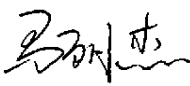
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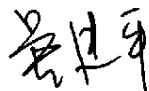
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Introduction

I. Purpose of the thesis

Second language learning in some respects involves the acquisition of a second identity. Second language learning is often second culture learning. In order to understand just how to use a second language as well as a native speaker does, one needs to understand the nature of its language, i.e.: culture.

Generally, a language is culturally loaded, since the language is almost always learned in a context of understanding the people of another culture. Idioms, a more culture-bound part of language, cannot be understood without understanding the culture.

America and Britain are the countries that have Christianity and Hebraism as their cultural background. Most idioms produced in this background carry rich religious elements. Getting to the roots of idioms, we can find that they originated from literary masterpieces, the Bible, Greek and Roman mythologies, ancient fables, historic events, anecdotes, customs, seafaring, agriculture, daily life, animal habitual behaviors, etc, which involved every aspect of life. That is why idioms are hard to understand. The essential point of studying idioms well is to realize them through the background of the traditional culture, thought pattern, geography, religion, and custom.

People from culturally and linguistically diverse groups, including individuals learning English as second language find idioms extremely challenging. The figurative meanings of these expressions generally do not translate from language to language, or from culture to culture. Learning idioms present a host of difficulties to ESL learners, primarily because they don't know the culture and history behind English idioms.

That's why they often use idioms incongruous with the situation. Indeed, ESL learners utilize idiomatic expressions very carefully, being afraid of using them incorrectly and being misunderstood. They find idioms very problematic to both understand and memorize.

As a most important tool of foreign language learning and teaching tool, dictionary, has to, therefore, attempt to deal with the cultural connotations of the foreign language.

II. What is idiom?

Let's first look at this story written by David Burke (*Without Slang and Idioms, Students are in the Dark!*) :

When I was working out at the gym with a French friend of mine, Pascale, a friend of his came up and enthusiastically inquired, "What's up?" Pascale paused a moment, took a step backward and looked up, checking out the ceiling.

Realizing he didn't get it, I quickly piped up and explained, "Oh, that's slang for 'How are you?'" He looked confused; obviously not understanding how "What's up?" could possibly have anything to do with "How are you?" But his friend didn't stop there.

"So, Pascale, did you hear how the Italian soccer team licked the French team?" As Pascale's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open, an expression I hadn't seen since the days of "Our Gang" comedy, I suddenly realized where he had gone with that one and could only imagine what image his mind was conjuring up.

It was at that moment that I realized for the first time that there was absolutely no way a nonnative speaker of English could fully understand an American movie, TV show, news broadcast, or even a typical conversation without help because our language is loaded with slang and idioms.

Idioms are used in both spoken and written English, and often appear in newspaper articles. They are frequently utilized by native speakers, who feel the language at inborn genetic level.

Then what is an idiom? There are many definitions about it:

‘A peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of the language and often having a signification other than its grammatical or logical one’

- *Oxford English Dictionary*

‘A group of words with a meaning of its own that is different from the meanings of each separate word put together’

- *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*

‘An expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either grammatically (as no, it wasn't me) or in having a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements (as Monday week for "the Monday a week after next Monday")’

- *Webster Dictionary*

Generally speaking, an idiom is a phrase that is commonly understood in a given culture or subculture to have a meaning different from its literal meaning. An idiom is a phrase where the words together have a meaning that is different from the dictionary definitions of the individual words, which can make them hard for ESL students and learners to understand. A good example of this is "to bend over backwards." This phrase is commonly understood in our culture to mean "to exert an enormous effort in order to accomplish something." The literal meaning, however, is the physical act it describes, of which few may actually be capable of doing!

Idioms are not a separate part of the language which one can choose either to use or to omit, but they form an essential part of the general vocabulary of English. Our daily conversation would seem rather dull without them.

English is very rich in idiomatic expressions. In fact, it is difficult to speak or write English without using idioms. English is a language with a vast idiomatic basis, which makes its learning very exciting and intriguing. There are about 4,000 idioms used in the American English. Wikipedia suggests that "to even explain what they mean needs about 2000 words of the vocabulary"(Linda Correlli). An English native speaker is very often not aware that he is using an idiom; perhaps he does not even realize that an idiom which he uses is grammatically incorrect.

Why is English so heavily idiomatic? The most probable reason is that as we develop new concepts, we need new expressions for them, but instead of creating a brand new word from the sounds of the language, we use some already existent words and put them together in a new sense. This, however, appears to be true of all known languages. There are, in fact, no known languages that do not have some idioms. Consider the Chinese expression for 'quickly', for example. It is 马上, and translated literally it means 'horseback'. Why should the concept of 'quick' be associated with the back of a horse? The answer reveals itself upon a moment's speculation. In the old days, before the train, the automobile, and the airplane, the fastest way of getting from one place to the other was by riding a horse, i.e., on horseback. Thus Chinese 马上 is as if we said in English hurry up! We must go 'on horseback.' Such a form would not be unintelligible in English at all, though the speaker would have to realize that it is an idiom, and the foreigner would have to learn it. However, in learning idioms a person may make an incorrect guess. (*A Dictionary of American Idioms*)

An idiom is different from other literal expressions in that you could not guess its meaning just by understanding all the words in it. Put as simply as possible, an idiom

is a fixed expression whose meaning can not be taken as a combination of the meanings of its component parts. Thus, the common phrase *kick the bucket* has nothing to do with either kicking or buckets, but means simply, "to die." In other words, idioms are not literal expressions.

However, the meaning of some idioms is more obvious. The act of '*taking the bull by the horns*' clearly points to bravery and decisiveness in action. This is what this idiom means in:

'I can't wait for you to discuss this matter with the manager. I shall take the bull by the horns and do something about it myself.'

Because of their characteristics, learning idioms requires both rote-learning and analytical skills. The way in which the words are put together is often odd, illogical or even grammatically incorrect. These are the special features of some idioms. Other idioms are completely regular and logical in their grammar and vocabulary. Because of the special features of some idioms, we have to learn the idiom as a whole and we often cannot change any part of it (except perhaps, only the tense of the verb). Bearing this in mind, following features have been designed to help learn idioms

1. The meaning of an idiom is metaphorical rather than literal.

It is not a result of the compositional function of their parts. Idiom is defined as an expression that does not mean what it literally says. Hence, its meaning is often quite different from the word-for-word translation.

The meaning idioms convey is non-compositional. It implies that you cannot understand the meaning of the whole phrase putting the meanings of each word together. If you look at the individual words, it may not even make sense grammatically. Idiom has the meaning only as a unit. Professor Koonin defined idiom "as a stable combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning." This

definition emphasizes two inherent and very important features of the idiomatic expressions.

2. The grammatical form of an idiom is invariable and fixed.

The process of substitution is not allowed and passive constructions cannot be formed. Idioms have lexical and grammatical stability. It implies that they are fixed in their form, hence any substitutions and rearranging in their structure can lead to complete loss of their primary meaning. Idiomatic expressions are integral units. It literally means that idioms possess indivisible completeness, so all the components are bound within one idiom.

The expression 'have other fish to fry' means that 'to have something to do that is more important or profitable'. However, we could not say 'have other *salmon* to fry' or 'the other fish is to be fried'.

But idioms vary a great deal on how metaphorical and invariable they are. In other words, idiomaticity (the quality of being idiomatic) is a matter of degree or scale.

There are many different criteria for identifying idioms; we take Makkai's as our principle. Makkai (1972) has proposed five criteria in identifying idioms. They are:

1. The presence of at least two free morphemes in a given expression
2. The ability of these morphemes to function with different meanings in more than one environment
3. The potential ambiguity of all idioms of decoding arising from the possibility of literal interpretation
4. The semantic unpredictability of idioms arising from the fact that an idiom has a meaning which cannot be deduced from its component parts
5. Institutionalization

It cannot be explained why a particular idiom has developed an unusual arrangement or choice of words. The idiom has been fixed by long usage--- as is sometimes seen from the vocabulary. There are many different sources of idioms. As will be made clear later, the most important thing about an idiom is the meaning. This is why a native speaker does not notice that an idiom is incorrect grammatically. If the source of an idiom is unknown, it is sometimes easier to imagine its meaning. Many idiomatic phrases come from the every-day life of Englishmen, from home life, e.g. to be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth.....agricultural life has given rise to "to lead someone up the garden path". Nautical life and military life are the source of "to be in the same boat as someone" "to be in deep water.....many idioms include parts of the body, animals, and colours. The Bible gives us "the apple of one's eye".

III. What is culture?

The term culture, although usually taken for granted, has been defined in many ways. Culture is pervasive. It is a truism that cultures are essentially social facts, not individual ones; they are properties of populations of people who have come to be, by degrees, tightly or loosely bounded in respect of their groupness, their modes of cohering as a group. Cultures are historically contingent though, as experienced, relatively perduring values and meanings implicit in the ways people do things and interact one with another. Such doings, as events, have value and meaning only insofar as they are patterned-the textually oriented word is "genred"-so that even as they are participating in them, people in effect negotiate the way that events are plausibly and problematically instances of one or more such patterns. So, culture being manifest only in such socio-historical facts, anything "cultural" would seem to depend on the contingencies of eventhood that, in complex ways, cumulate as genred norms of "praxis" or "practice." Yet, in the event, culture is always presumed upon in the course of that very praxis, even as it is always potentially transformed by people's very doings and sayings.

And yet, we feel-do we not?-that cultures, like languages, are fundamentally ideational or mental-or conceptual -insofar as in communicating people seem (at least at first) to be giving evidence of knowledge, feeling, and belief, even creating, sharpening, and transforming knowledge, feeling, and belief in themselves and others. What, then, is the sociological condition of existence of such-as we should term them-"cultural concepts" of which cultures are constituted in the face of the very individual-centric assumptions that our own culture persists in having about knowledge, feeling, and belief? How can we see that language as used manifests such cultural concepts, ones specific to a socio-historical group, notwithstanding the "freedom" we think we manifest in saying what we want, as a function of what we, as individuals, "really" believe we want to communicate about? Is there, in short, a socio-cultural unconscious in the mind-wherever that is located in respect of the biological organism-that is both immanent in and emergent from our use of language? Can we ever profoundly study the social significance of language without understanding this socio-cultural unconscious that it seems to reveal? And if it is correct that language is the principal exemplar, medium, and site of the cultural, then can we ever understand the cultural without understanding this particular conceptual dimension of language?

IV. Culture, language and idioms

Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. Language express, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality. Social life, which is made up of instances of mutual interpretation, is possible because language offers the possibility of the negotiation of meaning. Language seeks to encompass culture but does not define it. Language maps the social terrain of a speech community but never colonizes it. Language and culture are inseparable in the very sense that they shape and in turn are shaped by each other; the understanding and study of one requires the

acknowledgement of the other.

It is commonly observed that the manner in which an idea or “fact” is stated affects the way we conceptualize the idea. Words shape our lives. The idioms world is a prime example of the use of language to extreme imagination. No discussion about idioms in second language acquisition is complete without some treatment of the relationship between cultures and idioms. Cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language; culture-specific world views are reflected in language.

In Russian, they don't speak of crying over spilled milk; they say *kusatsebe lokti*, which means "to bite one's elbows." That may be better than breaking your heart in Japanese, because *harawata tatsu* translates literally as "to sever one's intestines." To be hopelessly in love in Colombian Spanish is to be "swallowed like a postman's sock" (*tragado como media de cartero*). That happy state may lead to dancing closely which in Central American Spanish is *ispitlir hebillas* ("to polish belt buckles").
(*by Adame Jacot De Boinod*) So culture can cause big differences on the expression of idioms. An idiom is a way of using a language that belongs to a group of people who make it up and is something that has no meaning that makes sense from the words themselves. The one thing about English is that it is filled with these kinds of words and phrases. While their sources are as diverse as English culture itself.

Idioms derived from the culture of the nation and from day-to-day life. Idiomatic expressions pervade English with a peculiar flavor and give it astounding variety, bright character and color. They help language learners understand English culture, penetrate into customs and lifestyle of English people, and make a deeper insight into English history.

Chapter 1 History and Idioms

The history of a society imposes great influence on language. With the time changing, old languages died and new languages appeared. During the progress of human languages, the track of historical culture can be seen mainly in idioms.

1.1 Roman Conquest and its influence on English idioms

From 55BC, Julius Caesar began invading Britain. And with the military occupation, Roman culture and customs started entering Britain too. Social life became Romanized. With the cultural changes, language got changed as well. Latin flared and spread fast in Britain, especially in the upper classes. Official language, law language and commercial language are all in Latin. There was once a time, people who didn't speak Latin couldn't assume a governmental post.

400 years of Roman Occupation was long enough to form a Britain-Latin culture. Their culture and influence stayed in the Island though Roman left. It's not difficult at all to find the imprint of Old Roman culture.

Consider the English idiom 'oh well, the die is cast!' You can now try to reconstruct how this idiom came into being: the image of the die that was cast in gambling cannot be thrown again, whether you have a one, a three, or a six, you must face the consequences of your throw. Actually the phrase was used by Caesar when he crossed the Rubicon to fight with Pompeii. He said, "The die is cast" when he crosses the river, and also he burnt all the boats to show his determination, so that all the soldiers had to fight without any other solutions. This story left two other idioms:

"Burn one's boats"

"Cross/pass the Rubicon" (metaphor: take action from which there is no turning

back)

What's more, we also learn some of Roman soldiers' life through some idioms:

“Bear the palm” (win prize in competition): In Roman, the warrior who won the fight in the arena gained a palm corolla as the symbol of victory.

“Worth one's salt” (fully qualified or competent): Salt was very valuable in Roman time. Part of Roman military pay included some salt, which later turned into a kind of ticket called *salarium*. The word developed into salary. But salt, as salary is kept in idioms.

1.2 Norman Conquest and its influence to English idioms

In 1066, the Norman duke, William defeated English army with his French army and fleet. He crowned himself as the king of England and called himself “William I”. The Palace Coup started the House of Normandy (1066-1154).

Norman Conquest had a potent effect on English language. French became one of the three sources of modern English and exerted French cultural influence on English society. This influence hadn't faded until the beginning of 20th century. The feudal aristocracy treated speaking French as a fashion. They wore French costume and hair styles, which was taken as status symbol. While some of the common people looked down upon French. They call condom “French letters”. As we know there is an English idiom, “take the French leave”, which means leaving without saying goodbye. That also came from French customs.

Ever since the Norman Conquest, French had exerted significant effect on English and French culture had exerted great effect on English culture and on English idioms as well. Many English idioms are directly translated from French:

“Take heart” (collect one’s courage): It comes from French “prendre coeur”.

“Return to one’s muttons” (return from the digression; get to the point): It comes from a French pastoral poem. This idiom is directly translated from “Revenons a nos moutons”, which means “Let us go back to our sheep”.

“Put all one’s eggs in one basket” (put all one’s expectation in one thing): It comes from a French idiom “mettre tous ses oeufs dans le meme panier”

Some of English idioms are borrowed French idioms. For example: in the English idiom “on the qui vive”, “qui vive” means “who” for French soldiers when inspecting. English borrowed it and gave it the meaning of “be alert”.

1.3 Other wars and their influence on English idiom

When a country is in a war, its language will develop very fast. Abundant new words popped up, especially in oral language. For example: There are 3,000 new words added each peacefully year in American English; whereas, it doubled during World War Two.

Many new military new words were born in the World War Two. G.I. was the initial for government issues, which means all clothes, food and commodity issued by government to soldiers. Gradually GI became into the byword of American soldiers. Idiom-“have everything run GI”-means “everything according to military principles”.

There are many other idioms came from wars:

“The fifth column”: It came from Spanish civil war. When General Mola started attacking Madrid with his four columns, he gave an announcement that the fifth column were in the city. The fifth column meant “the planted agent in the city”. Now it generally refers to spy or agent provocateur. Afterward, words like “fifth columnist” and “fifth columnism” derived from it.

“Turn a blind eye” is an idiom meaning deliberately to overlook or ignore something. The expression, in origin, is said to refer to the behaviour of Lord Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen (1801). He was second-in-command and he ignored the signals given for the fleet to withdraw by putting his telescope to his blind eye. He then proceeded to attack and the French were defeated and forced to surrender. As an idiom the expression dates from the 19th century and is popular today in all but the most formal contexts.

“Have one’s back to the wall,” is an idiom meaning to be in an extremely difficult or dangerous situation, so that one has to make a final defensive stand in order to survive. It dates from the 16th century but it was popularized by an order given to British troops by General Haig near the end of World War 1: ‘With our backs to the wall and, believing in the justice of our cause, each one of us must fight on to then end.’ As an idiom it is often used to refer to a difficult financial situation now.

1.4 Brief summary

In summary, language learning, especially idioms learning is regarded as a process of acquiring knowledge, like studying history or other subjects. The end result is that learners will know something about the language. The future of languages in the twenty-first century obviously depends on how individual nations will evolve socio-economically during that time. The changing conditions in England in the late Middle Ages triggered a particular evolution of English, then the typical language of nationalist expression. The re-emergence of the vernacular was accompanied by the functional specialization of language according to the different areas of knowledge that were springing up under the cultural trends of the period.

Historic truth is communicated indirectly through the vision of society depicted in the work or spread through verbal narration. History of a particular language is deemed to explain the current state of that language. It seems the further back into history you go

the closer the link will be between the names and the object, so providing some actual process of the historical context of language, a dictionary of English idioms can help ESL learners learn more about English historical background as well as the language history.

Chapter 2 Religion and Idioms

Religion, as a human social phenomenon, came into being in a very early time. The primitive believed that there was a god who had supernatural power, which became the origin of religion. Religion is a very important part of human conceptual culture. Different religions have different cultural expression and show different cultural characteristics, background and tradition.

Language is closely related to religion. There are many religious vocabularies in modern English. Religion belongs to culture, while culture is bound to idioms, so idioms can reflect religious influence on language a lot.

Christianity played a significant role in European and English-spoken countries. People were born in the Christian environment and lived through it. All big events in their life were connected with Christian, Bible and church. They listen to God and have great faith in God. Therefore, there are many idioms concerned about God, Angel, Heaven, Hell, church and so on. For example:

God helps those who help themselves.

Be as poor as church mice.

2.1 Greek and Roman Mythologies

Mythologies are ancient stories that are based on popular beliefs, which explain natural or historical events because the people of the primeval society were scared of the nature and longed for a better future. Mythologies have obvious national traits. They are rooted in the national culture and reflected by language, especially by idioms. Greek and Roman mythologies have lasted for centuries and provided valuable language materials for world culture. Because both Greek and The Romance languages

belong to Indo - European languages, they exerted considerable influence on other nations' culture as well in the Indo-European languages. Western poems, dramas, sculptures, paintings and many customs are all connected with the mythologies. English, as the main language in Indo-European languages, absorbed a lot from the mythologies, so there are many English idioms got from Greek and Roman mythologies. For example:

“Midas touch”: the excellent skill of making money. (The idiom is to a Greek legend in which Midas, a legendary king of Phrygia, requested of the gods that everything he touched might be turned into gold. His request was granted, but as his food became gold the moment he touched it, he prayed the gods to take their favor back. He was then ordered to bathe in the Pacto'lus, and the river ever after rolled over golden sands. By the 17th century the idea was being used figuratively and it is still common today.)

“Pandora's Box”: a prolific source of troubles. (In Greek mythology a box containing all the evils of mankind and given by Zeus to the mythological Pandora, who opened it against the command of Zeus, thus, all the evils flew forth and they have ever since continued to afflict the world, only Hope remained in the bottom; something that produces many unforeseen difficulties)

“Sphinx's riddle” means ‘the difficult riddle’ (Sphinx is a monster of ancient mythology; The Grecian Sphinx was generally said to be a daughter of Typhoon and Chimaeras; she infested Thebes, setting the inhabitants a riddle and devouring all those who could not solve it. The riddle was

What goes on four feet, on two feet, and three

But the more feet it goes on the weaker it be?

It was at length solved with the answer that it was a man, who as an infant crawls upon all-fours, in manhood goes erect on his two feet, and in old age supports his tottering legs with a staff. On hearing this correct answer the Sphinx slew herself and Thebes was delivered.)

The 12 major gods and goddesses inhabiting Mount Olympus liked playing tricks on human beings. The Greek mythology mocks at the wickedness and injustice of gods to show people's discontentment to the government. Prometheus was one of the few good gods, who was ordered to create human by Zeus, the supreme God. Yet, it was impossible to make the shape without fire, so he stole fire from Olympus to the earth, which enlivened the first man in the world. However, Zeus was furious with Prometheus and chained him to a rock and sent an eagle to eat his liver, which grew back daily. Prometheus never surrendered to Zeus even under that suffering and was secured by Hero Hercules. In English, therefore, Prometheus has three meanings:

A, giving life to

B, being creative

C, fighting spirits

"Promethean fire" means "vitality".

The movie "Troy" brought everyone again the war of Troy. It's very easy for us to understand the idioms, as "as fair as Helen", "Helen of Troy" (the root of all evil), "wooden horse of Troy" or "the Wooden Horse"

"Achilles' heel" was also mentioned in the movie. Achilles was the son of Sea Goddess Thetis, who held Achilles' heel and dipped him into the River Styx, so that Achilles' whole body would be invulnerable. Only his heel remained unprotected. Achilles was brave and distinguished himself in the war of Troy. But he was eventually killed by an arrow which pierced his heel. Now, the idiom, "Achilles' heel" means the only fatal weakness and is especially used by people of a literary bent.

Strauss saw the myths of a culture as variations on a limited number of basic themes built upon oppositions related to nature versus culture. Any myth could be reduced to a fundamental structure. Myths help people to make sense of the world in which they live. Strauss saw myths as a kind of a message from our ancestors about humankind

and our relationship to nature, in particular, how we became separated from other animals. However, the meaning was not to be found in any individual narrative but in the patterns underlying the myths of a given culture. Myths make sense only as part of a system. The form of myths should be treated as a kind of language. We reach here the very principle of myth: "it transforms history into nature... myths help us to make sense of our experiences within a culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 185-6)." Therefore, providing mythological background to those idioms from myth in an idiom dictionary is a very practical way to help ESL learners learn the language system better and efficiently.

2.2 Ancient fables

Though ancient fable stories are short and refined, they teach people many philosophic and educational theories while being narrated. They are also parts of the kindergarten education of children.

It was said that there was a slave, Aesop, who told lots of stories went around the folk. All the stories were collected into a book, called "The Fables of Aesop". All the stories are short and vivid to describe people's life style and show the way to keep straight and just.

The Fables of Aesop has great artistic value and is regarded as the forefather of western fables. It has been translated into many different languages, which profoundly affected western, and even world philosophy and literature. Till now, there are still many proverbs, allusions and idioms originated from there.

"Naked truth" (the plain, unvarnished truth; the truth without trimmings): The fable says that Truth and Falsehood went bathing; Falsehood came first out of the water, and dressed herself in Truth's garments. Truth, unwilling to take those of

Falsehood, went naked.

“Sour grapes” (disparage something that is beyond one’s reach): The allusion is to Aesop’s well-known fable of the fox, which tried in vain to get at some grapes, but when he found they were beyond his reach, he went away saying, “I see they are sour.”

“Bell the cat” (risk one’s own life to do something dangerous): The allusion is to the fable of a cunning old mouse, who suggested that they should hang a bell on the cat’s neck to give notice to all mice of her approach.)

“Cat’s paw” (the tool of another, the medium of doing another’s dirty work): The allusion is to the fable of the monkey who wanted to get some roasted chestnuts from the fire, and used the paw of his friend, the cat, for the purpose.

“The lion’s share” (the largest part; all or nearly all): In Aesop’s Fables, several beasts joined the lion in a hunt; but, when the spoil was divided, the lion claimed one quarter in right of his prerogative, one for his superior courage, one for his dam and cubs, “and as for the fourth, let who will dispute it with me.” Awed by his frown, the other beasts yielded and silently withdrew.

“Cry wolf” (the one who lies will harm himself): A shepherd boy always cries “The wolf comes” to make fun of the neighbors who run out to help, but he was eaten when the wolf really comes, while the neighbors no longer get out helping him.

“Open sesame” (is a hackneyed phrase used to refer to an even, situation, etc that leads to success of some kind): In the story ‘open sesame’ is the secret password that opens the door to the robbers’ treasure cave. By the 19th century open sesame was becoming a synonym for a password, particularly a password to success.

2.3 The Bible

It is a firm concept of western people that God created people. They think that God is omnipotent and sacred. God, Christ, devil, Adam and some educational segments of the stories in the Bible are passed down because of people’s favor or even some historical and political causes. The Bible is comprehensive of nearly all the matters in

life so that it acts not only a classic in religion but also an important supporter of British culture, or even of western culture. English people are affected by osmosis. Bible is read in churches and homes by English generations and becomes the necessary book in each family. Many stories and allusions in Bible have become epigrams or watchwords in daily life.

Innumerable idioms are originated from the Bible, such as the idiom referring to the unwise act of forcing the extremely conservative person to accept new conceptions, 'to put new wine in old bottles', the idiom describing thrilling horror caused by something, 'to make one's hair stand on end'. Besides, the idiom 'as poor as a church mouse' also is somewhat influenced by religion. In Christian church, there is no devoted food, which however is not the same case in Chinese temples. Therefore, the mice in the church can be said as poor.

There are mainly two types of influence on the English idioms from Bible. One is some of the stories and figures were formed into idioms after long time. The other is some of the sentences or phrases were said widely and became into idioms as well.

2.3.1 Idioms from stories and figures

Bible has many popular stories that are still spread in the world, which becomes one of the important sources of English idioms. Some of the stories' figures are even endowed with metaphor and symbolized meaning.

"At the eleventh hour" is an idiom meaning the last possible moment, only just in time. It has been suggested that in origin the expression is an allusion to the Biblical parable of the laborers in Matthew (20:9) 'And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour they received every man a denarius.'- a reference to the fact that workers taken on at the eleventh hour of a twelve-hour day received as much pay as those who started work at the beginning of the period.

"Kiss of death" is an idiom meaning a destructive effect. In origin the expression

refers to the kiss with which Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus Christ at the Last Supper, Judas having indicated to the enemies of Jesus that he would identify him to them by kissing him (Matthew 26:47-49). As an idiom the phrase is not related to treachery and dates from about the middle of the 20th century.

“Doubting Thomas”: refers to those who don’t believe others easily. Jesus rose from his dead on the third day after he was crucified on the cross and appeared before his disciples, but Thomas, one of his disciples, was there and refused to believe that Jesus’ resurrection. Later “doubting Thomas” has become standard expression for someone who displays incredulity.

“Old Adam”: Adam, the first man created by God, ate the forbidden fruit and was driven out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis, 2 and 3). Later, there appeared the idiom “old Adam”, referring to the original sin.

2.3.2 Idioms from words in the Bible

Each house has at least one Bible in western countries. It was the first book for people in old time, therefore, many words and sentences were recited and spread through generations and went into idioms.

“Wash one’s hands of” is an idiom meaning to refuse to have anything more do with or to take any responsibility for. The expression has been common since the middle of the 19th century and is Biblical in origin. It is an allusion to the behaviour of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor at the time of the trial of Jesus Christ. In Matthew (27:24) he is said to have ‘washed his hands before the multitude, saying I am innocent of the blood of this just person.’

“Turn the other cheek” is an idiom being a reference to a Biblical passage where Jesus tells his followers that if someone hit them on one cheek they should offer their attacker the other cheek also ‘Unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other.’ (Luke 6:29) the expression means to accept meekly insults, acts of provocation, attacks, etc.

“Separate the sheep from the goats” is an idiom which refers to a Biblical in passage Matthew (25:32) ‘And before him shall be gathered all the nations; and he shall separate them one from the other, as shall separate them one from the other, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats. And he shall set the sheep on his right hand but the goats on the left.’ The expression means to separate the good from the bad, the clever from the stupid, the competent from the incompetent, etc. As an idiom the expression probably dates from the 19th century and is still common.

“Labour of love” is a hackneyed phrase indicating a task done, not for money or other reward, but out of affection or regard for the person for whom one is doing it or because of the pleasure or satisfaction which one derives from doing it. In origin the expression may be Biblical, being a reference to 1 Thessalonians (1:3) ‘Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father’. The passage refers to people who do God’s work as a labour of love.

2.4 Superstition

Even now, we still can not mock at our ancestors who believe in superstition and supernatural power controlling the world. In English culture, some people are still afraid of the number 13; some still believe rabbit foot can get rid of bad things. There is an English idiom: knock on wood, which means wood can bring you good luck if you touch it. In ancient time, wizards and gods were believed to live in trees, so if you patted the tree, they would get out and protect you.

In English daily life, when one gets up in the morning in a bad temper, someone else may tell him, “You must have got out of the bed on the wrong side today.” The expression is an allusion to the legendary superstition that it was bad luck to put the left foot down first. If someone had a day of exceptional ill luck it was put down to rising from the wrong side of the bed. By the 19th century the concept of ill-luck had

changed to bad temper. In ancient time, “right” is considered lucky, while “left” unlucky. This kind of superstition can also be seen from idioms, “to set off on the right foot” (be lucky from the very beginning); “be born on the wrong side of the blanket” (be born unlawfully) and so on.

2.5 Brief summary

In summary, religion has a deep and far-reaching influence on language. By the logic of evolutionary psychology, religion, as a universal human trait, must be treated as an adaptation on an equal footing with language. Providing idioms religious background in a dictionary of English idioms is necessary and compulsory, since religion has been an essential part of people’s spiritual life.

Chapter 3 Customs and Idioms

Custom, “a social convention carried on by tradition and enforced by social disapproval of any violation (Guralnik, 1980; 349), is the material and spiritual life of a nation. It is represented in many aspects, like food, accommodation, action, marriage, funeral, festivals and so on. Customs reflect a nation’s economy, natural environment, historical tradition, and philosophy. It is influenced by a nation’s politics, economy, religion, literature and art, and in turn it influences them as well. It is a distinguished characteristic of a nation, as well as a most important part of national culture. Language, as a special component of a nation’s culture, reflects the national customs without a doubt. Idioms are closely connected with a country’s customs and economic life, because “people in a particular culture need to have words to name and explain objects and conditions present and important in that culture (Irving, 1986:37).”

3.1 Food and drinks

Food is closely related to the geography and living customs of a nation. Wheat, barley and oat are the main food for European countries. Bread, butter, jam and cheese are what Englishmen have everyday. They brought them to all the other countries when immigrating, especially North America and other English-spoken countries. Consequently, many idioms sprung out concerning these main foods, reflecting their daily life. For example: “earn one’s bread”, “take the bread out of someone’s mouth”, “bread and butter”, “butter up” (means flattering), and so on. There are lots of stories behind some of the idioms, which cannot be understood only from the literal meaning.

“Bakers’ dozen” originated in 15th century. England was very strict at bread’s weight, but it was not easy to keep the weight at that time. In case of shortage of the weight, bakers usually add one more piece of bread to a dozen. Thereby, “baker’s

dozen” is 13 instead of 12. Since Englishmen didn’t like the number 13, “baker’s dozen” was kept and represented for 13.

“Cheese cake” is another idiom with a funny story. An American photographer, James Kane, was not only good at photography, but also fond of eating cheese cakes. One day, when he was pressing the shutter release button, the girl’s shirt was flipped up by a gust and the voluptuous legs were exposed. When the photo was developed in his darkroom, he was very excited and couldn’t find a word to describe and plumped out, “That’s a real cheese cake!” later, “cheese cake” became an idiom and is still used now, referring to sexual girls.

Tea, milk and beer are very popular drinks in England. Tea was introduced to Europe from China by Dutch in the early 17th century. Although tea in Europe was very expensive, it still got popular soon. Usually they put milk or sugar in the tea, and they have morning tea and afternoon tea. Many idioms were born from tea too, like “a storm in a tea cup” (a situation where people get very angry or worried about something that is not important); “for all the tea in China” (if you say that you would not do something for all the tea in china, you mean that nothing could persuade you to do it.); and so on.

Stockbreeding in Britain was very developed, and milk was of great quality and loved by all people. Every morning, milk was delivered to each house, so there are also lots of milk idioms, like “come/go home with the milk” (stop out all night and go home in the morning); “There is no use crying over spilt milk.”(It’s a waste of time worrying, complaining or feeling sad about something which is done and cannot be changed.)

Pubs or public houses have a long history and are very popular in European countries. Whisky and beer are sold at public bars and lounge bars, which are very important cultural places. People make friends and chat there, and then a pub culture appeared and produced many idioms about it, like “cry in one’s beer” (drown one’s sorrow);

drink one's beer (shut up).

3.2 Weather

The Great Britain Island lies in the temperate zone and has a typical maritime climate, so it always has lots of rain, winds and fog. The Island is famous for its fog and rain. It rains 5 days in a week in the pluvial region, and still 160 days a year in London, which is the least rainy region. Rain is just as common as the sun rises everyday. Weather, therefore, becomes the most frequent topic in the Britain. There is an idiom goes like, "as right as rain" (fine, all right). As raining happens almost every day, and uncertain weather conditions can often affect the holding of events or people's attendance at them, so English people usually add "come rain or shine" (come what may) whenever they have an appointment. As it often rain heavily in England, so there is another idiom goes like, "It never rains but it pours." (Indicating that when something bad happens it is either very bad or is accompanied by several other bad things.) The rainy weather brings great inconvenience to people living in England, especially to agricultural workers.

"A rainy day" is an idiom used to refer to a time when one might be in financial difficulties. It is mostly used in the phrase "keep/save something for a rainy day" meaning to save some money while one has it against the day when one might not. The concept dates from the 16th century. In origin it refers to wet days in England when agricultural workers could not work and so would not earn any money.

Every coin has two sides. Rain sometimes brings good luck too. There is an idiom goes like, "Small rain lays great dust." (Small things may be useful). Britain fog is unimaginable much and heavy. Concerning London fog, there are many stories read and spread in many countries. The idiom "in a fog" means to be uncertain or confused.

3.3 Other customs

Besides food, drinks and weather, there are many other daily customs affecting people's thinking, behavior and language. As people of the world is mobile, one nation's customs can even affect others' language when people immigrating or emigrating.

Let's look at the following idioms originated from other customs.

"Indian File": one after the other, singly. (The American Indians, when they go on an expedition, march one by one. The one behind carefully steps in the footprints of the one before, and the last man of the file is supposed to obliterate the footprints. Thus, neither the track nor the number of invaders can be traced.)

"A feather in one's cap": an honor; something to be proud of. (The allusion is to the very general custom in Asia and among the American Indians of adding a feather to the headgear for every enemy slain.)

"Nest egg": money laid by. (The allusion is to the custom of placing an egg in a hen's nest to induce her to lay her eggs there. If a person has saved a little money, it serves as an inducement to him to increase his store.)

"The skeleton at the feast": the thing or person that acts as a reminder that there are troubles as well as pleasures in life. (Plutarch says in his *Moralia* that the Egyptians always had a skeleton placed in a prominent position at their banquets.)

3.4 Brief summary

In summary, custom is served as a mirror to reflect the social life of the people within the same culture. Each nation has different custom. English idioms are brief and expressive, which is the crystal of a national culture. Language and custom interact each other. To know a country's language, we need to know a country's custom. England is a country full of all different customs. Only by knowing them, can we

really understand the meaning of its language, so providing the idioms custom background in a dictionary of English idioms is quite necessary, so that ESL learners can learn more about the idioms as well as the country's customs.

Chapter 4 Literature and Idioms

The relation of literature to language is of an existential character. Literature is written in words. Writers become the creators of an elaborated language. For writers, words are the breath of life; they constitute its rhythm and express its idiosyncrasies. Language itself becomes their struggle, their history. An elaborated expression, under the rules of sensitivity and truth, carries testimonies, merges experiences, crystallises the story, and forms the ideas and the suffering of human beings. By this means, literature, as language within language, becomes a value in its own right.

Literature language is usually the elite of a nation's language, which comes from the folk and gets refined by many writers. The literature works descend generation by generation, some through drama, spreading to wider areas and promoted the development of a nation's language. For example, "dues ex machina" (Latin for 'got out of a machine') refers to a person or event that offers unexpected and fortuitous assistance in a difficult or dangerous situation. The origin of the expression lies in ancient Greek theatre where a god appeared on the stage from a machine or mechanical contrivance to resolve some aspect of the plot.

Many of the words and well-turned phrases in literary works were recited and spread in the folk and formed into idioms. Usually there are four ways that the literature affects idioms: a, some of the sentences go into social daily life and are used repeatedly and turned into idioms; b, some very impressive stories loved by people go into idioms; c, some of the figures in the literary works are so distinguished and have symbolic meaning, that they go into idioms; d, there are some idioms that were used seldom, but become popular and refreshed in literary works.

4.1 Shakespeare's influence on idioms

We owe many proverbial sayings to the Bible, to Shakespeare and to other major authors of the past. These saying or quotations have been readily accepted by the people and handed down to the present day because they have a universal value.

Any discussion of Shakespeare's life is bound to be loaded with superlatives. In the course of a quarter century, Shakespeare wrote some thirty-eight plays. Taken individually, several of them are among the world's finest written works; taken collectively, they establish Shakespeare as the foremost literary talent of his own Elizabethan Age and, even more impressively, as a genius whose creative achievement has never been surpassed in any age. The Elizabethan Age, then, was an Age of Discovery, of the pursuit of scientific knowledge, and the exploration of human nature itself. Nevertheless, the Elizabethans also recognized that the course of history was problematic, that Fortune could undo even the greatest and most promising, as Shakespeare revealed in such plays as *Antony & Cleopatra*. More specifically, Shakespeare and his audiences were keenly aware of the prior century's prolonged bloodshed during the War of the Roses between the houses of Lancaster and York. Thus Shakespeare's works reflects both the humanism and the social contradiction at that time. Shakespeare is the most influential writers in English history, and numerous of his sentences are quoted by his descendants frequently. Here are a few examples that must not be unfamiliar with everyone:

“One pound of flesh” is an idiom meaning what is due or owed to one. In origin it refers to Shakespeare's “The Merchant of Venice (4:1)” in which the moneylender, Shylock, demands the pound of flesh that was promised him when he lent Antonio money.

“Hit the mark” means to be correct, suitable, or successful. In origin it refers to “Romeo and Juliet (2:1)” in which Mercutio said, “if love be blind, love cannot hit the

mark.”

“Tender loving care”: the meaning is self-evident. The expression became popular in the second part of the 20th century. Shakespeare makes a reference to it in “Henry VI (3:2)” ‘Go, Salisbury, and tell them from me, I thank them for their tender loving care.’ It is often being abbreviated to TLC/tlc which is used mostly in informal contexts.

“Out of joint” means not working or behaving in the normal way. In origin it refers to “Hamlet (1:5)” in which Hamlet claimed, “Oh cursed spite/ That ever I was born to set it right.”

“The world’s your oyster” is an idiom used to try to inspire optimism in someone with the number of possible opportunities that offer themselves. As an idiom it has been popular since the 19th century and is still widely used. In origin the expression may derive from Shakespeare’s “The Merry Wives of Windsor (2:2)” ‘Why then, the world’s mine oyster, which I with sword will open.’ The implication is that the world is a place from which success and profit can easily be extracted just as a pearl can be extracted from an oyster.

4.2 Other authors and their influence on idioms

English literature is one of the richest literatures in the world. The earliest representative is Geoffrey Chaucer, and following him are hundreds of brilliant writers in England, as: Milton, Byron, Dickens and so on. And many other writers from other English-spoken countries like American Hemingway, Hawthorne and so on. Many popular western literary masterpieces have the classic words, phrases and sentences that go into English idioms and are being said by people everyday.

“Heads I win, tails you lose” sounds obviously unreasonable. In origin it appears in Samuel Butler’s poem—Hudubras—“For matrimony, and hanging here, /Both go by destiny so clear, /That you as sure may pick and choose, /As cross I win, and pile you lose. It means I will definitely win.

“Eat one’s hat” is a hackneyed idiom used to indicate that the speaker is convinced that something is unlikely to be true, etc. it first appeared in print in “Pickwick Papers” by Charles Dickens (1836) ‘ Well if I knew as little of life as that, I’d eat my hat and swallow the buckle whole.’

“The moment of truth” is an idiom meaning a crucial point, the point at which something will be proved to have been successful, etc. in origin this was described by Ernest Hemingway (1932) in “Death in the Afternoon”, which referred to the point in a bullfight at which the matador is about to kill the bull. It is often used of situations that are relatively minor and is frequently found in humorous or ironic contexts.

“Man Friday” is a faithful and willing attendant, ready to turn his hand to anything. (The young savage found by Robinson Crusoe on a Friday, and kept as his servant and companion on the desert island.)

4.3 Famous people and their influence on idioms

Famous people influence is also another important way of idioms’ formation. In China, for example, we have “孔融让梨”, “学雷锋” and other idioms concerning famous people. They do not need to be a great writer or hero, influential as they are, people remember and repeat them, and they got immortal life in people’s language, idiom. Although America is not a long-history country, American people are very original and creative. They have a great number of influential people who influences not only the society, but also the language, especially idioms. Let’s look at these two idioms concerned with two great presidents.

“Pass the buck” means to try to avoid responsibility for something by passing to someone else. “The buck stops here” is a development of the expression. It means that the ultimate responsibility lies with the person referred to. It was used by Harry S Truman, President of the United States, around 1949 and later became an idiom in both America and Britain, being used in informal and slang contexts.

“The silent majority” is used to describe the bulk of the population who attract less attention than their more vocal counterparts, it being the assumption that they are quite happy with their lot and with how things are going. It is often used in political contexts, being much favoured by politicians and others in public life and by journalists. The expression probably dates from the 1920s and was popularized by Richard Nixon, President of the United States, in a speech on the Vietnam War made in 1969.

4.4 Brief summary

In summary, literature, as experience and emotion expressed in language, as human testimony verbally formed, is created in an environment that has a specific culture and history. It is a literary creation that helps the reader experience the social and cultural situation. It is essentially communicative, since the readers are seeking to understand the situation.

Literature, as material for reading, is attractive for students because it puts them in touch with language situations familiar to them, such as colloquial ways of speaking which by nature are simple, emotional and meaningful. On the other hand, literature helps them get in touch with an unknown world, difficult to understand and to perceive. In that way, their imagination is excited and they are invited to take part in a particularly pleasant game with words and their significance.

Consequently, providing literary background when the idioms are from literary works in a dictionary of English idioms can provide ESL learners a colorful and interesting environment to understand idioms.

Chapter 5 Social life & Society and Idioms

The relationship between language and society has long been recognized and examined. Social life begins just after human being developed. Scholars have vacillated for centuries between two opposing assessments of the relationship between social life and language. A long tradition of thinking about language and society argues that language provides a central dynamic force in shaping the society and social life. Nonetheless, these people have often been marginalized by anthropologists and linguists who believe that language are merely parasitic upon anthropological fields as economy and social organization. We don't need to give either of them an opinion, but their interpretation of the relationship between language, culture and society leads to such a belief that language can never function independently without social contexts fitting it in.

According to the popular power theory recently, Substantial changes in social life have changed the nature of unequal power relations, and therefore the agenda for the critical study of language, so the relationship between language and social life can never be over-emphasized. Language has no function independently of the social contexts in which it is used. Sociolinguistics, as an interdisciplinary study of language use, appears and attempts to show the relationship between language and society. We can know more about a given society or community by examining the linguistic behavior of its members. The relationship between language and society can be embodied through the special part of language, idioms.

5.1 Professions

Culture can't leave the social environment, though it is not decided by the environment. Different environments form different cultures. Culture develops itself in its social and

natural environments and bears different characteristics according to different region, climate and social environments. Professions are the ways that people make a living. We work and talk about work almost everyday, many idioms then generated in this way.

“...our best idioms like our most vivid and living words, come to us, not from the library or the drawing-room or the “gay parterre,” but from the workshop, the kitchen and the farm-yard.” (Smith)

5.1.1 Seafaring

Many ports stand along the Britain coastline. The farthest distance from inland to the sea is 120 kilometer, which is very advantageous to seafaring and fishery. Sea transportation played a very special role in English transportation. Britain merchant and fighting fleets occupied overwhelming percentage in the world in 19th century. England won't exist without sea transportation. The developed seafaring produced lots of idioms related to it.

Keep one's head above water: avoid bankruptcy. (The expression becomes an idiom in 19th century and is still very common used of remaining financially solvent. The allusion is to swimming; so long as one's head is above water one's life remains, but bad swimmers find it hard to keep their heads above water.)

“Sail close to the wind” is an idiom meaning to come very close to breaking the law or rules. In origin the expression refers to a ship or boat sailing so close to the wind that it is dangerous. The figurative expression dates from the 19th century and is still common today being found in all but the most formal contexts. An older form of the expression is “sail near to the wind”.

“Tell that to the marines” is an idiom used to indicate that one does not believe something and that only a fool would do so. The expression dates from the early 19th century and in origin it refers to the fact that sailors thought marines inferior to them, a marine being a soldier who serves at sea.

“Be three sheets to the wind” is an old-fashioned idiom meaning to be drunk. In origin the expression comes from sailing: if three sheets (that is the ropes attached to the sails) are loose, the wind blows the sails about and the boat moves in a very unsteady way. For example: By 11 o’clock he was three sheets to the wind and we had to take him home in a cab.

“Welcome aboard” is an idiom used when someone new joins a firm, club, community, etc. it dates from the late 19th century, and is still used today, though mainly by older people in rather a pompous way. In origin the expression is probably naval greeting welcoming soldiers aboard ship.

5.1.2 Fishery

Seafaring and sea transportation’s development helps and promotes English fishery a lot. Fishery occupies an important position in English economy especially before the Industrial Revolution. Large population make a living on it, and create bunches of idioms concerning about fishery. People like fish, eat fish and talk around fish everyday, so fish is personalized in many occasions, and endowed with many vivid meanings. For example, a “big fish” means a magnate; a “shy fish” means a shy people.

As lots of fisher people hang out in the Britain Island, they talk about fish everywhere, in bars, restaurant and market at any time, when cooking, drinking or swimming. They create lots of phrases or words about fish or fishery and influence people around them, which gives a very good condition and environment for idioms to come into being. Let’s look at the following examples and it will not difficult at all for us to imagine their forming environment and time.

“A fish out of water” is an idiom referring to someone who is completely out of his/her element or feels uncomfortable or ill-suited to a particular environment or situation. The origin is the obvious one that a fish cannot survive long out of water.

“Drink like a fish”, although not a particularly apt as a simile, it is the standard idiom to describe the act of one who regularly consumes too much alcoholic drink. Fish are open-mouthed most of the time, supposedly giving the appearance of constantly drinking.

“Have bigger/other fish to fry” is an idiom indicating to have something more important or more interesting to do.

“Alive and kicking” is a doublet idiom, both words in the context meaning much the same thing. The idiom is being restricted to informal or slang contexts. In origin it was a term used by fishmongers to emphasize the freshness of their wares. A less colourful form of the expression is “alive and well”.

“Teach fish to swim” is a proverb meaning to try to show someone, usually someone more experienced than oneself, how to do something that he or she can do perfectly well. It dates from the middle of the 20th century, and another similar form of idiom is “teach one’s grandmother to suck eggs”.

5.1.3 Agriculture & Stock-raising

With the development of agriculture, a new and stable source of food became available, relieving economic stress and eliminating a primary impetus for waging war. For societies engaged in full-time subsistence agriculture, warfare cannot be undertaken easily. The development of agriculture is not a necessary precondition for a peaceful world, but it provides accommodating environment within which people live happily. Population growth, satisfying village life, happy environment combine in developing a harmonious culture and society. Language is affected in an also very steadily developing way.

Stock-raising is one of the prominent features of English agriculture, while field farming isn’t the main way of agriculture. As stock-raising and poultry farming are well developed and many common people engage in the profession, many idioms and phrases are created and commonly used even today.

“Tarred with the same brush” is an idiom indicating that someone has the same faults or bad qualities as someone else. The expression became popular in the middle of the nineteenth century and is still common in fairly informal contexts to day. In origin the phrase probably refers to the former practice of shepherds of applying tar to a sheep’s sores with a brush.

“The end of one’s tether” is an idiom meaning the limit of what one can endure, the very limit of one’s resources. As an idiom the expression dates from the nineteenth century while its origin lies in the tether or the rope that ties up an animal to allow it to move or graze only as far as the length of the tether allows.

“A/the black sheep” (of the family) is an idiom referred to a person who is considered to have done something bad, or to be a failure, by their family or the group to which they belong. In origin Shepherd used to dislike black sheep because their wool was not as valuable as white wool.

5.2 Animals

Human is an animal. Human language cannot be independent from animal. Animals live on the earth together with human beings in a close relationship. At first glance, language seems to have appeared from nowhere, since no other species speaks. Language, as linguists see it, is more than input and output, the heard word and the spoken. It's not even dependent on speech, since its output can be entirely in gestures, as in American Sign Language. However, the essence of language is words and syntax, each generated by a combinatorial system in the brain. Some researchers contend that many components of the language faculty exist in other animals and evolved for other reasons, and that it was only in humans that they all were linked. This idea suggests that animals, although may have some to teach about language, can no way speak language. Yet, animals and human beings interact a lot, and human languages get influence from animals too. Many words come from animals. But even professional

interpreters know very few translations for animal sound onomatopoeias. They may tell you that a rooster "goes "... "(cock-a-doodle-doo) and that the verb is ... ("to crow"). And the better ones may know that, in some cases of bird related content, they would not translate "... as "Peter," but as "rooster." Our inventive language has turned "... into many words, like:

Duck (...) ... (quack):

Goat (...) ... (bleat):

Pig (...) ... (grunt):

Snake (...) ... (hiss):

Sparrow (...) ... (chirp)....

With time, some of these animal verbs and sounds have acquired additional, indirect meanings. For example, when someone tells you: "... ("Don't caw"), it means "don't jinx it" When a husband says to his wife, "....." ("There you go cackling again!"), it means he thinks the wife is panicking without reason. When someone wants to shut someone up rather abruptly and rudely, he can say:" ("Just sit and don't cock-a-doodle-do!").

As we know that there are lots of English idioms concerned about animals. Knowing people's feeling to these animals, we will easily understand the origins and their meaning.

"Birds of a feather" is an idiom used to refer to people who are very similar in character, tastes, attitudes, etc, often in a derogatory way. It is an allusion to the proverb "birds of a feather flock together" meaning that people of like tastes and character tend to stick together.

"Flog a dead horse" is an idiom meaning to pursue a futile aim, especially to go on trying to arouse interest in a subject which has already been fully discussed, but which has already proved a failure. It was used in the 1860s to describe Lord John

Russell's attempt to bring a new reform bill into Parliament, when the members were totally apathetic towards the issue. The most obvious origin of the expression is an allusion to someone fruitlessly whipping a dead horse to get it to work or run a race.

"Go to the dogs" is an idiom meaning to be ruined. The expression can be used either of institutions, etc. when used of people, the ruination is often of a moral nature and is usually self-induced. As an idiom it is used mainly in informal contexts. Its origins lie in the fact that dogs were generally considered to be inferior creatures.

"Long in the tooth" is an idiom meaning old or ageing. The expression has been popular since 19th century and is commonly used in humorous contexts. In origin it refers to the fact that the gums of horses recede as they grow old which makes it seem as if their teeth get longer. A horse's age is gauged by examining its teeth.

5.3 Body parts

When we come in contact with other people, we always communicate. This can take place through using words, via our voice - spoken language - but also without, or alongside the use of words - non-spoken language or non-verbal communication. Posture and movements, our place in space, use of time and intonation when we speak are all part of this. Non-verbal communication is better known as body language.

Several investigators estimate that at least 70% of the communication between people takes place through body language and tone of voice. The best known theory is that of the American psychologist Mehrabian. He states that when it comes to expressing feelings:

55% of the communication consists of body language,

38% is expressed through tone of voice and only

7% is communicated through words.

If this is the case we express 93% of our feelings in a non-verbal way! We do not talk continuously, but do give out signals continuously through body language when we are in someone else's company. Specifically we express the content through words and the relation through body language. Spoken language and body language go mostly hand in hand. When someone says something, information is conveyed through body language at the same time.

Human body has always been a privileged site on which to demonstrate the evidence of power. In the communication of interpersonal attitudes, body language is much more powerful than verbal language, with the facial channel alone estimated to be more than five times as powerful as the verbal channel. Body language is not separate functionally from verbal language. They both work together to communicate interpersonal relationships and both work together to convey semantic information. It has been argued that in some forms of body language one can see the unconstrained human mind in action, working alongside verbal language to communicate meaning in its own unique way, in everyday talk.

The traditional theory of body language holds that verbal language in the form of words and sentences is used primarily to convey factual or semantic information about the world whereas body language, in the form of facial expression, eye gaze, posture, gesture, head movement, and foot movement, is used to convey information about interpersonal attitudes, crucial to the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Verbal language articulates thought; body language, on the other hand, communicates emotion and especially about relationships.

Since body language is so active in human languages, all parts of body can embody and express people's feeling and mind. According to Smith's study (1943:250), about fifty parts of the human body including the head and its features, the arms and hands and fingers, the legs and feet and toes, the hearts, the bones, the blood and breath are

used in idioms. (*Cultural Study on English Idioms & Lexicographical Treatment of Cultural Information in Bilingual Dictionaries by Lin Pang*) “The first of these great sources of idiom is nothing less than the human body itself.” (Smith) Let’s take a look at these idioms concerned about all body parts.

“Cheek by jowl” is a doublet idiom, cheek and jowl being more or less synonymous. It is used to mean very close, often excessively, uncomfortably or inappropriately close. It has been an idiom since the middle of the 18th century and is still widespread today.

“Blood is thicker than water” is an idiom meaning that, however binding the ties of friendship, those of family are stronger. The concept dates from the Middle Ages and the term appears in John Ray’s collection of proverbs in 1670 and is still very common today.

“Feel it in one’s bones” is an idiom meaning to feel intuitively that something is the case, to have a premonition about something. The something in question can be either good or bad. The origin probably lies in the fact that people with rheumatism or arthritis sometimes claim to be able to predict when it’s going to rain because of the ache in their bones or joints.

“Has the cat got your tongue?” is a catchphrase idiom used to someone who has given no reply or comment when one might be expected. It is most often used to children who understandably have nothing to say to the other idioms frequently directed at them by adults.

“Head over heels” is a hackneyed idiom meaning utterly and completely. The idiom in its modern form and in its association with love dates from the 19th century and is still popular nowadays. The implication of the phrase is that one is so much in love that one is turning upside down. It does not seem particularly appropriate and it was originally found in the more appropriate form of “heels over head”.

5.4 Sports

Sport is one of the most visible social institutions in the United States. It affects every aspect of the economy. By the year 2000, sport is expected to be a \$121 billion industry in the United States alone. Sport is a socializing agent that teaches both participants and spectators the values and attitudes of their culture. It can also be an agent of social change. Sport is experienced by people of almost all ages, from young children to seniors, as participants, spectators, and fans. What happens in sport has both overt and covert consequences in society.

Lots of strange terms are used in sports. The masculine inclination to talk sports the majority of the time. Men use sports idioms, metaphors, and clichés, making business a "peculiar language" which excludes "naive" listeners, females. Sportscasters and sportswriters carry around a mental thesaurus that seems to have been compiled at the Pentagon. In times of need, which is to say in the heat of the action or on deadline, they pull it out to describe, in football, for example, long passes (bombs).

Sporting terms have been used as metaphor and analogy to describe and prescribe life experiences. It has been suggested that the use of sport terminology can assist in the general understanding of complex terms and situations. The use of sport as metaphor and analogy may be advantageous. Not only can sports idioms and phrases be used in non-sporting contexts to clarify meanings, we understand other concepts through their connection to sport. Sport has been used as an analogy to describe and to prescribe life experiences. It is well documented that the use of sport terms as metaphor and analogy for everyday occurrences may promote clarity of meaning and precision of communication in everyday language in the form of 'sports talk'. Let's look at some idiom instances about sports:

"Throw in the towel" is an idiom meaning to give up or to acknowledge defeat.

As an idiom the expression dates from the later part of the nineteenth century and is still popular today in informal or slang contexts. An alternative form of the expression is “throw in the sponge”. Both expressions derive from boxing, from the fact that the sponge (later a towel) used by a boxer was thrown into the ring as a sign that he was conceding defeat.

“Saved by the bell” is an idiom used to indicate that because of the chance intervention of someone or something, one has been saved from some form of difficult or dangerous situation. In origin it refers to the bell rung at the end of a round of boxing.

“Neck and neck” is an idiom used to refer to the closeness of some form of competition. In origin the expression refers to horse-racing where two runners who were close together were literally neck to neck.

“Having something up one’s sleeve” is an idiom meaning to keep something secret for possible use at a later time. In origin the expression refers to the practice among card-sharps in the 19th century of keeping a card, often an ace, up their sleeves, for use at an appropriate moment in the game.

“Jump the gun” is an idiom meaning to act prematurely or impetuously. In origin it refers to competitors who start out before the sounding of the starter’s gun that marks the beginning of a race.

The single most dominant influence on the way in which sport is experienced in society is through the media. In other words, our knowledge about sport, and in particular the roles of participants in it, is mediated. Native speakers listen to the media and follow them and then the idioms go into their daily life and dictionaries. However, without explaining the original background, English as second language learner can no way understand them.

5.5 Color

Consider the following example: The boss gave Fred the green light to go ahead with

the project. Of course the boss did not actually give Fred a green light, but the idiom “green light” here symbolizes that Fred has permission to start the project. Colour idioms make our language more interesting and, well, “colourful”. The use of color in daily idioms has grown slowly for years. People love to see color in many places, like advertisement, cartoon paper, and so on. It' will be an exciting addition to the daily paper too.

Colour is a sophisticated concept which requires the ability to make connections between things that are otherwise quite different from one another. Most, if not all words that are used as colour names in English were first used for something else, ‘orange’ being a clear example. In some cases the original meaning has got lost in history. Philologist Anna Partington has traced the word ‘red’ through its migrations from one language to another to an ancient word for ‘blood’. This seems a likely scenario: Someone notices a similarity in appearance between blood and a particular flower and describes the flower as ‘blood-like’. With increasing use of the expression it becomes possible to describe the flower simply as ‘blood’ – a colour name has been born. Clearly, colour remains for many linguistic science related disciplines a fascinating micro-world in which some of the most fundamental issues for linguistics and culture can be studied.

Human beings have endowed the colour red with more connotations than any other colour, so let’s look at all the possible idioms and meaning from the colour red. Indeed, red used to be really the only colour. Before the discovery of the spectrum in the seventeenth century, all other colours tended to be considered variations of either black (brown, blue, green, and violet) or white (yellow). Our colour range therefore was black -- red -- white.

In several tongues "coloured" means only "red," like Colorado in Spanish. Many languages use surprisingly few colour terms, but all of them include black and white,

and nearly all have red. In English, only three colours become verbs by adding - en: blacken, redden, and whiten. Red is most fundamentally associated with blood and with fire, and each of those mighty preoccupations can be either terrifying or a basic good -- so that the ramifications of red, both positive and negative, are extraordinarily complex and resonant. Red is alive, and vibrant. Angry people go "red in the face"; embarrassment causes us to blush (a word linked with "blaze": red as both blood and fire). "Like red rag to a bull" is a simile idiom used to indicate that someone or something is a source of anger or fury to someone else. In origin it refers to the erroneous idea that bulls are infuriated by the sight of a piece of red cloth being waved in front of them, hence the red lining of the matador's cape in bull-fighting. In fact, bulls are colouring blind and it is the movement, not the colour of the cape that infuriates them.

The dynamism of red, together with its warnings of blood and fire, make it the colour of revolutions, "angry people on the march" -- and finally of Communism and the Left generally. What's more, wedding dresses, until well into the nineteenth century in Europe, were usually red. The festive meaning makes red one of the two Christmas colours, favoured for balloons, paper hats, candies, decorations -- but also there is fire (warmth in the depth of winter), new life (in the "death" of darkness), love (the main Christian message), and even eroticism. Red carpets are often used to welcome a much honored guest, so "roll out the red carpet" means to give an important person a special welcome.

Colours, not only red, contribute to people's life and language; others are the same. Let's look at the following examples:

"Black sheep", probably one of, if not the most common colour idiom, it describes someone who is a disgrace to the family or group. Shepherds once considered black sheep to be an unwelcome addition to the flock. We assume that this

is because black wool cannot be dyed and is, therefore, less valuable. This may also be derived from the negative associations with the colour black.

“Whiter than white” means extremely pure, often unbelievably so. It refers to an advertising slogan describing the cleaning properties of soap powder.

“Blue collar” is someone who does physical work, often in factory.

As a result of our research we come to the conclusion that the meaning of these idioms is greatly influenced by either symbolic or historical color associations. The meaning of such idioms as black dog (melancholy or depression), and black ox (misfortune), for example, is determined by negative cultural associations connected with the black color. The appearance of the idiom red-letter day (a day when something very important or exciting happens) is due to the color tradition to mark the saints’ days in red.

5.6 Brief summary

In summary, language does not exist in a vacuum but are powerfully affected by social, political and technical changes. “Language faithfully reflects the spirit of the age (Foster, 1981:1). We can see that the relationship between society and language, especially idioms can never be over-emphasized. In traditional linguistics, for instance, issues concerning meaning and communication have been for long ignored, but new linguistic theories hold that a good mastery of grammar can never make an appropriate language user in a real social context of language use, and that a serious linguistic study should not only confine itself to the inquiry of the formation of linguistic competence of the speaker, but also need to pay enough attention to the development of communicative competence of the speaker (*Linguistics: An Advanced Course Book*). In relation to idiom dictionary compiling, we should include social and cultural things in our idioms dictionaries, so that idioms could be more efficiently learned and taught by adopting a functional or sociolinguistic approach and ESL learners can be trained as

successful communicators rather than pedantic grammarians.

If ESL learners from a given cultural background are not fully aware of the relevant constraints socially and functionally institutionalized in another society, they may easily get themselves hurt when involved in some socially interactive activities. Consequently, a purposeful selection of idioms with fully explanation of cultural background to convey an appropriate meaning in a certain social setting becomes all-important and indispensable in second language idioms learning.

Chapter 6 Investigation on idiomatic dictionaries

6.1 Longman Dictionary of English Idioms (LDOEI)

“The expressions collected in this dictionary are ... metaphorical rather than literal... Because they are metaphorical, one cannot usually discover their meanings by looking up the individual words in an ordinary dictionary”. (Page viii, LDOEI) Such being the case, the explanation of the cultural background is necessary for learners’ better understanding of the expressions included in this dictionary. The cultural information in this dictionary is presented mainly in the historical explanations of some idioms that often cause problem of understanding to learners. As is stated in the dictionary, “The metaphorical meaning of some idioms is easier to understand when one knows how it developed. When possible, historical explanations of the idioms are given in the dictionary. ... In many cases, however, it is not possible to explain exactly the connection between the literal words of an idiom and the metaphorical meaning that has developed. ... The explanation given is therefore a probable one, but it cannot be definitely established”. (Page ix, LDOEI) Whether the explanation is exact or probable, the purpose is to help the learners better understand the idioms.

In this dictionary, “<” is used to refer to the background information about the idioms. The author here classifies the cultural information into five categories: history, religion & mythology, literary works, human behavior & nature and social life.

1. History

Worth one’s salt: to be of any worth, of strong character; worth the money that one is paid, and the expression came from ordinary workers life in ancient times < In ancient times workers were paid their wages in salt rather than money.

Sell down the river: to be unfaithful or disloyal to (a person), esp. by revealing his secrets or faults to an enemy < Referring to the selling of slaves in America who were taken down the river Mississippi to New Orleans, where living and working conditions were very hard

Spend a penny: to urinate < It formerly cost a penny to use a public toilet

2. Religion and mythology

Greek mythology and the Bible are two most important origins of English-speaking culture, and many English idioms are closely connected with Greek mythology and the Bible. Some came directly from them. For a student, esp. a foreign student, who is not very familiar with the mythology and the Bible, it is difficult to understand this kind of idioms if the background information is not explained in a dictionary of idioms. This kind of information is abundant in the dictionary. For example, Abraham's bosom is defined as "the place where the good go after death; heaven", and the background is explained at the end of the entry: "From the Bible: 'And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom ...' (Luke 16:22)".

Out of the Ark: to be very old, and the source of it is as follows < Referring to Noah's ark in the Bible, in which two of every sort of animal were saved from a great flood; therefore out of the ark means existing from the earliest times

Rise from the ashes: to develop out of ruin and destruction into new greatness or importance. < According to an ancient story, a bird called the phoenix would set fire to itself at the end of its life and then be reborn from its ashes

3. literary works

Literary works, esp. Shakespeare's plays are very important sources of English idioms.

We can find a lot of expressions that came directly from his works and some of other authors’.

Suit the action to the word: to behave in accordance with one’s spoken words < From Shakespeare’s Hamlet (1604): ‘Suit the action to the word and the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o’er-step not the modesty of nature.’ (Act 3, scene 2)

Give hostage to fortune [history, time]: to take a risk that may cause trouble for one in the future < From a piece of writing by Francis Bacon (1561-1626), ‘Of Marriage and Single Life’: ‘He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune.’

An Uncle Tom: a black American who is thought to have deserted the values, interests, etc., of his own people and to pay too much attention to the opinions, behaviour, etc., of white people <Originally the name of the main character, a slave, in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s story, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852)

4. Human beings and nature

Play possum: to pretend to be asleep or dead in order to deceive a person into believing that one does not know what he is doing. <Referring to the opossum, a North American animal that pretends to be dead when threatened by other animals

(As) mad as a March hare: acting in a silly or mad way < These animals can be seen leaping about wildly during March, when they breed

5. Human activity and Social life

Dress (up) to the nines: dressed in one’s best clothes, e.g. for a special occasion

<This phrase originally meant to the highest degree, to perfection. The phrase perhaps refers to the setting of a standard, with 10 as the highest point one could reach. Something or someone that was up to the nines was very good indeed

Have one over the eight: to have too much to drink < Referring to the belief that if one has more than eight drinks one will become drunk

Clear the deck(s): to make everything ready, esp. before great activity, a fight, etc.
< Referring to getting a ship ready for a naval battle

A dark horse: a person or thing whose true character or worth is unknown but may be better than is thought < Referring to a horse in a race, whose ability to win races is unknown

6.2 A Dictionary of English Idioms(DOEI)英语习语大词典

Compared with LDOEI, the expressions collected in this dictionary are much richer, and there are many non-metaphorical expressions in it. For example, phrases like “commit suicide”, “a little”, “a lot”, “deal with”, etc., which are not usually regarded as idioms, can find themselves in this dictionary. Some cultural background information in this dictionary could not be found in LDOEI. For example: Carey Street; much cry and little wool; the widow’s cruse; Ping-pong diplomacy; dig a pit for and so on. However, once an expression enters into LDOEI, it is more likely that it has the cultural explanation in LDOEI than in the dictionary under discussion.

Cultural background of different categories can also be found in this dictionary. In most cases, this dictionary provides the cultural background information with a note at the end of an entry or a specific sense. For example:

Penny plain and two pence colo(u)red: 不值钱的花花绿绿(对庸俗的华丽的嘲笑)

注: 本语源自伦敦东区木偶剧剧场的一家商店, 该店把人物和布景印在厚纸上, 供人剪玩, 黑白的售一便士, 彩色的售两便士, 实际上两者差不多

Sometimes, we can find the cultural background in LDOEI while we cannot in this dictionary. Here are some examples, the following idioms are not provided with cultural information as they are in LDOEI:

Up a (gum) tree: 处于困境; 不知所措; 困惑不解; 进退两难

Worth one's salt: 称职, 能胜任, 有能力; 值得雇用

Dressed (up) to the nines: 穿着非常讲究[奢侈]; 衣饰华丽

Give hostage to fortune [history, time]: 采取冒险行动时有后顾之忧; 有家室之累

Rise from the ashes: 从灰烬中再生, 从废墟上重建

Make mincemeat of: 1 粉碎, 彻底击溃; 严加惩罚 2 把...驳得体无完肤

The author thinks that as a bilingual dictionary of idioms, its target readers are ESL learners. It should give as much background information as possible to help the learners to better understand the idioms and to better grasp them. The above idioms are totally abstract and difficult to grasp without the related cultural background, which will help the depth as well as the breadth of understanding. Learners, especially ESL learners will be puzzled at their meaning, no mention using them in their daily talk.

While LDOEI presented the cultural background information solely by means of cultural explanation at the end of each entry, DOEI sometimes treats it as an independent sense of the idiom besides providing notes giving this kind of information. The historical development of the meanings is thus presented to the readers.

Here are some examples:

Clear the deck(s) (for action): 1 (清除甲板上不必要的东西)准备战斗 2 (为某行动)做准备

In this entry, the meaning development is shown not by an explanation in the end, but by an independent sense preceding the more common one.

Some more examples:

An ace in the hole: 1 秘密王牌 2 秘藏的法宝; 锦囊妙计; 备而未用的人[物]力

The original meaning, i.e., the background of the idioms is also presented as an independent sense in this entry.

Moment of truth: 1 (斗牛中斗牛士刺向牛的) 最后一剑的时刻 2 (接受考验、挑战的) 关键时刻[紧要关头]

Dark horse: 1 黑马(赛马中出人意外获胜的马) 2 有可能出人意外的高强能力的人; 实力不明的人; 竞争中出人意外的获胜者 3 (政治选举上) 出冷门的候选人

Sometimes the cultural information is presented as a part of the definition, being put in the brackets. For example: "Be chained to the oar(s)" is defined as (象以前船上荡桨的奴隶一样) 长时间的被迫做苦工. The related cultural background is presented in way of explanation within the definition.

These methods have also achieved the purpose of helping the learners to understand certain idioms, besides; it saves a lot of space for the dictionary. It takes this advantage of a bilingual dictionary of idioms, and helps the students better understand these idioms by relating English idioms to Chinese ones. Here is a good example:

Cross [pass] the [one's] Rubicon: 背水一战; 采取断然手段; 做出重大决定

注: 卢比孔是意大利一河名。公元前 49 年, 凯撒决意在此渡河, 与罗马执政庞贝决战, 并下令将船只烧掉, 以此向士兵指明后路已断, 不可能退却。本语来源与汉语“背水一战”的典故相似, 可参见《史记·淮阴侯列传》韩信背水列阵的故事。

6.3 Oxford idioms dictionary for learners of English (New Edition)

2003(OIDLE)

OIDLE is a typical learner's dictionary of English idioms and is quite suitable for ESL learners to learn and practice English idioms. There is a 24-page section of study pages in the middle of the dictionary. The feature that distinguishes it from other dictionary of English idioms is that it provides clearly the origins of English idioms and notes following each idiom that needs and the origin or notes parts are all highlighted with grey shadow, so that learners can easily figure out the 330 pieces of origins and 199 pieces of notes. The author looked through the dictionary and picked up these examples at random and found they actually include many aspects of cultural information: sports, history, literature, religion, custom and so on.

Have/hold (all) the aces (also hold all the cards)

be in a controlling position because you have certain advantages over another person

ORIGIN

This expression refers to card-playing. The ace usually has the highest value, and is associated with success.

Under the counter

(of goods bought or sold in a shop) secretly or illegally

ORIGIN

This expression comes from World War 2, when some shops held scarce or special goods for their best customers. They would hide them under the shop counter so that the other customers could not see or buy them.

Hope springs eternal (saying)

Human beings never stop hoping

ORIGIN

This comes from *an Essay on Man* by Alexander Pope: 'Hope springs eternal in the

human breast’.

Have, etc. teething problems/troubles

experience small problems or difficulties in the development of a product, business, etc., or when sth new first becomes available to the public

NOTE

When a baby is teething, its first teeth are starting to grow, which is painful for the baby.

The promised land

a place or situation in which people expect to find happiness, wealth, freedom etc

ORIGIN

This expression comes from the Bible and refers to the land that God promised the Israelites.

Through the above examples, we can see that OIDE is very distinct in providing the cultural background. It first tells the readers where or when the expression comes from, and then the real story or knowledge about it. The explanations are by no way redundant or unnecessary words, on the contrary, they are brief and clear enough to give the readers a conception about the origin of the idioms, so that they could be vivid and easy to be understood.

Let’s take one example from the above two idiom dictionaries:

Worth one’s salt(LDOE): to be of any worth, of strong character; worth the money that one is paid, and the expression came from ordinary workers life in ancient times < In ancient times workers were paid their wages in salt rather than money.

Worth your/its salt (OIDE)

Deserving respect, especially because you do your job well

ORIGIN

In Roman times, soldiers were given an allowance of salt as part of their pay.

I believe, only with a glimpse, everyone can see which is brief, which is precise and which is correct. We will not talk about their definitions, though there is also some discrepancy. From the origin aspect, LDOEI says that “in ancient times” “workers” were paid their wages in salt “rather than money”, while OIDE says that “in Roman times” “soldiers” were given an allowance of salt as “part of their pay”. As the author talked in chapter 2.1, this idiom appeared in Roman Occupation, and part of Roman military pay included some salt, so the author suggest dictionary compilers making full and accurate investigation before compiling any information into a dictionary.

However, OIDE also can't include all cultural information into the dictionary. Some obvious culture-bound idioms, like “nest eggs” “clear the decks” and “a hostage to fortune” have not any cultural explanation, while we can easily find they are explained in DOEI and LDOEI.

6.4 Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms (CIDI)

As Cambridge series of dictionary consistently pursues international feature, CIDI also tries to cover all international English idioms: British, American and Australian idioms. In its introduction, it points out that the main problems students have is that the meaning is difficult to guess from the words, so it provides necessary explanations on individual words in the idioms or the history of idioms. There is another notable point in this dictionary: some keywords have groups of idioms which use the same figurative meaning of the keyword. In such cases, a note explains the figurative meaning and all the idioms which follow it have that meaning. There are, the author counts, totally 44 notes highlighted with a frame around each one. Take “sights” as the example:

sights

Sights are the part of a gun you look through when you want to aim accurately at something. Sights is used in the following phrase connected with aiming at or achieving something.

Following the note, there are four idioms about sights: *have sb in your sights*, *have sth in your sights*, *lower your sights*, *set your sights on sth/ doing sth*.

In this way, not only learners can get the cultural knowledge about the idioms concerned, but much space of the dictionary can be saved, which is really a good innovation for compilers to follow and extend.

Besides this way, CIDI also provides some of the idioms' cultural background respectively following the definition, indicating with a hand sign. Let's look at a few examples from several aspects:

an Achilles' heel (*Greek mythology*)

a small fault in a person or system which might cause them to fail 🖐️ Achilles was a man in Greek mythology (=an ancient set of stories) who was killed when he was injured on the heel. This was the only part of his body where he could be harmed.

shut up like a clam (*fishery*)

to suddenly stop talking and to refuse to say any more 🖐️ A clam is a fish with a shell which closes up very quickly if something attacks it.

the day of reckoning (*the Bible*)

The time when an unpleasant situation has to be dealt with, or the time when you are punished or criticized for the things you have done wrong 🖐️ In the Bible, the day of reckoning is the day at the end of the world when God will judge everyone.

a false start (*racing*)

a failed attempt to begin an activity or event 🖐️ In a race, a false start is when one

person starts before the signal has been given.

It's all Greek to me. (literature)

something that you say when you do not understand something that is written or said



This phrase comes from Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar*.

Through the whole dictionary, the author finds that CIDI provides many sports, animal, literary and common sense background, but as to the Bible, it doesn't refer much. Like idioms *the salt of the earth*, *the moment of truth* and *give a hostage to fortune*, we can easily find them in the other dictionaries, but cannot in CIDI.

6.5 Brief summary

Through the study of these four typical English idiom dictionaries, there are generally four ways of providing cultural background:

1. Giving the cultural background just after the idioms' definition. All these four dictionaries have this feature.
2. Treating cultural background as an independent sense of the idiom and putting it as the first meaning of the idioms, like what DOEI does.
3. Highlighting the background parts with a frame or shadow, following the whole idiom entry as a separate paraphrase, like CIDI and OIDE do.
4. Grouping idioms with the same keywords which use the same figurative meaning and giving a note explains the figurative meaning and all the idioms which follow it. CIDI is a very good example.

Chapter 7 Problems and Suggestions

7.1 Four problems

We say that all of the four methods mentioned in the last chapter are good and useful for the idiom dictionaries, but dictionaries published home and abroad are quite incomplete in this respect. There are still many problems existing. The main problem is that most of English idiom dictionaries are too casual and random in providing cultural background. All dictionaries say “idioms historical background is provided when necessary”, but when is “when necessary”? It is too casual for a dictionary to provide information in that way. The author summarizes them as follows:

1. Although each dictionary of English idioms tries to include the historical explanation of idioms, there is never a dictionary that could include all; even there is never a dictionary that could include all the explanation of those main and obvious culture-bound idioms. (We discussed this above, and found out many examples from each dictionary).
2. Some idiom dictionaries give little information on idioms background, which is almost helpless to learners. For example: idioms *apple of one's eye*, *turn the other cheek*, from “*A Comprehensive Dictionary of English Idioms and Phrases*” are only given the explanation “from *Bible*”, which are still puzzling to learners since the dictionary doesn't give the detailed stories.
3. Idiom dictionaries are too casual in the stylistic rules about cultural information providing. In one dictionary, for example, Bible information is given in detail, while literary information is quite short, or vice versa.
4. Wrong cultural information exists in the present dictionaries of English idioms, e.g. LDOEI made mistakes in “worth one's salt” (Chapter 6.3)

7.2 Idioms learner's problems and difficulties

Actually some difficulty or problems in learning English idioms are not merely caused by English idioms itself. It is high time we began to consider intercultural communication in a sense broader than language, from the cultural point of view with which language inseparably intertwined. It is said that language learning and culture acquisition are becoming like "Siamese twins", whose separation would be both costly and dangerous.

Misunderstanding or confusion may arise due to the negligence of the role cultural factors play in communication. What is more, without cultural knowledge, complete and thorough understandings of idiomatic expressions would be much more difficult to attain than we usually imagine. (by Lin Lin) only by learning a culture, can we learn a language well.

7.3 Suggestions on compiling idiom dictionaries

English is a rich example of the "melting pot" ideal. In English, through its idioms, it displays its rich ethnic and cultural diversity. The use of cultural notes is the orientation of the present English dictionaries. Not only idiom dictionaries, many English language dictionaries, OALD6, for instance, added a lot of cultural notes this time, like *one's pound of flesh*, *sword of Damocles*, *writing on the wall* and so on. The frequent use of cultural notes can not only liven up the text and but also catch the attention of the reader. Bearing all the theories in mind, and with the help of the investigations of those idiom dictionaries, the author has the following suggestions for English idiom dictionary compilers.

7.3.1 Provide derivational cultural information

The metaphorical meaning of some idioms is easier to understand when one knows how it developed. Therefore, provide the information on the derivation of the idioms to

help ESL learners, for the idiom characteristics and its close relationship with culture as we talked in the first chapter.

For example: “break a leg”. It is very difficult for ESL learners to understand why its meaning is “to wish somebody good luck”, so it is advisable for compilers to provide its origin: It is thought that wishing for something bad to happen will prevent it from happening.

7.3.2 Provide accessory cultural information

However much we may learn about idioms, they have a habit of remaining rather shadowy figures in the language, so an idiom dictionary cannot simply supply a succinct and readily comprehensible definition that will enable everyone instantly to recognize them when they are encountered. It is mentioned before that to learn a language well, we need to learn its culture well first. So each idiom’s accessory cultural information, not only the background as we talked in the first point, should also be provided.

For example: “keep your fingers crossed” (hope something will be successful). People cross their fingers when praying or wishing, which is how the idiom originated. We can add to the entry that “People often cross the first two fingers of one hand when they use this expression, and it is usually restricted in informal context”. This accessory cultural information can definitely help the learners better understand and know how to use the idiom.

7.3.3 Provide cultural environment, especially for literary quotations and allusions.

As I mentioned at the first chapter, “One of the main difficulties is that the learner does not know in which situations it is correct to use an idiom. He does not know the level of style, that is, whether an idiom can be used in a formal or in an informal situation.” A dictionary needs to provide as much cultural environment as possible by giving original derivation, for example, the exact sentences, and the exact environment the

idioms formed and so on.

E.g. “eat one’s hat” is from “Pickwick Papers” by Charles Dickens (1836) ‘Well if I knew as little of life as that, I’d eat my hat and swallow the buckle whole.’ (The author also mentioned it in chapter 4.2.)

7.3.4 Provide correct information

Dictionary is regarded by all learners the most authentic studying tool, so it needs to be authentic and correct. No information mistakes should be made like the author mentioned in chapter 6.3, which will mislead learners.

7.3.5 Provide necessary comparison between different cultures in bilingual dictionary of English idioms

For second language learner, a knowledge of the commonalities between two languages or of the universal features of language appears to be fruitful for understanding the total language learning process. While we can recognize different world views and different ways of expressing reality depending upon one’s world view, we can also recognize through both language and culture some universal properties that bind us all together in one world. As in every other human learning experience, the second language learner can make positive use of prior experiences to facilitate the process of learning by retaining that which is valid and valuable for second culture learning and second language learning. So it will be very helpful if an English idiom dictionary can give some comparison between two different cultures, as we talked in chapter 6.2 “*Cross [pass] the [one’s] Rubicon*”.

7.4 Two samples

The author here tries to give a couple of samples, which hopefully can give some idea and help to English idiom dictionary compilers. Let us look at the same idiom entry in CIDI and OIDE:

a happy hunting ground (*humorous*)

a very good place to find what you want: *The Sunday antique market is a happy hunting ground for collectors.* (OIDLE)

a happy hunting ground

a place where you can find exactly what you want 🐾 The happy hunting ground was a Native American way of referring to heaven, or where they went when they died. • *Flea markets are a happy hunting ground for people looking for antiques at good prices.* (CIDI)

Here the author gives her idea about the idiom:

a happy hunting ground (*humorous*) is a place where one often goes to obtain a great many things that one wants, as *The local market used to be a happy hunting ground for antique dealers but nowadays it just sells rubbish.* It dates from the twentieth century, in origin American Indians believed that after death they would go to a kind of heaven which would be very well stocked with game.

The author recommends this idea of the sample because it provides both its historical background about “happy hunting ground”, and the cultural information about the idiom: it is humorous and dates from 20th century, which tells the idioms is restricted to humorous context and tells learners about the time where it originates, which can give learners more information to understand the idiom’s background.

keep a weather eye on sth/sb *British & Australian*

to watch something or someone carefully, because they may cause trouble or they may need help • *I'd like you to keep a weather eye on the situation and report any major developments to me at once.* (CIDI)

keep a weather eye on sth/open for sth

watch sth very carefully for signs of change so that you will be prepared for a problem, difficulty, etc: *It's an ambassador's job to keep a weather eye open for any important political changes.* (OIDLE)

The author's suggestion:

Keep a weather eye on means to watch closely in case of any trouble or difficulty, as *Keep a weather eye on the new boy's work. He is totally inexperienced.* It is nautical in origin, a reference to a sailor on a sailing ship watching carefully for signs of a change in the weather that might affect the vessel.

All of these three entries take four lines of space (as we all know, space is very important for a dictionary.), but the last one gives more information. Learners will be puzzled at this idiom if the origin is not provided. “‘Why keep a weather eyes’ on means watching carefully?” With the explanation of nautical use, they everyone can easily understand this idiom.

Conclusion

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis of Linguistic Relativity suggests that societal structures and cultural traditions can be reflected in and perpetuated through language. Since the inception of this hypothesis, scholars have vigorously debated the strength of the relationship between culture and language. Few deny, however, that culture and language are inextricably intertwined.

Idioms are colorful and expressive phrases that add spice and season to language. A good dictionary of idioms is essential for anyone learning a second language. "We cannot teach a language well without coming to grips with its cultural content. There can be no real learning of a language without understanding something of the patterns and values of the culture of which it is a part." (Lado, 1964:149) So providing cultural background will remain part of our linguistic enterprise in the future, while my study has managed to show that as an intriguing topic.

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Acknowledgements

As the final version comes into reality, I would like to express my gratitude to all who ever helped me during this master journey.

First and foremost, my gratitude goes to my supervisor, Prof. Wu Jianping. His insightful comments have accompanied me during the whole journey. I am indebted to his great care and patience in reading the thesis draft, and have been influenced by his personal characters, especially his kindness, consideration, gentlemanliness, and great sense of responsibility, etc.

Special gratitude goes to Prof. Zhou Jinghua, who spent his precious time in reading my thesis, and gave me valuable suggestions. My gratitude also goes to Prof. Luo Shiping, Prof. Chen Yan and all the other teachers in the English Department, whose lectures have broadened my vision in the fields of lexicography, idioms studies and linguistics studies which are of great help for this thesis.