

## Idioms as Pragmatic Messages

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### Abstract

This study argues that idiomatic expressions are essentially used as pragmatic messages which are heavily laden with implicatures and/or contextual effects. This implies that idiomatic expressions are not pure propositional elements that necessarily have (non-compositional) semantic content, whereas any pragmatic messages are affiliated with context. In this study, we defend an alternative view that idioms are composed of fixed semantic content, plus a variant speaker-related meaning. In order to show this, the current study draws on data from Jordanian Arabic (JA) and a judgement survey where 30 speakers are asked about the difference with respect to a certain meaning when delivered through the use of an idiomatic expression or through equivalently propositional content.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics; Jordanian Arabic; idioms; implicature.

### التعبيرات الاصطلاحية كرسائل براغماتية

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### ملخص

تبين هذه الدراسة بأن التعبيرات الاصطلاحية تُستخدم أساساً كرسائل براغماتية تنطوي إلى حد كبير على تضمينات و/أو تأثيرات سياقية. هذا يعني أن التعبيرات الاصطلاحية ليست عناصر افتراضية بحتة، بل تتضمن بالضرورة محتوى دلاليًا (غير تركيبية)، في حين أن أية رسائل براغماتية ترتبط بالسياق. تدافع هذه الدراسة عن وجهة نظر بديلة مفادها أن التعبيرات الاصطلاحية تتكون من محتوى دلالي ثابت، بالإضافة إلى معنى متغير يتعلق بالمتحدث نفسه. وعليه، فإن الدراسة الحالية تُبنى على بيانات في اللغة العربية الأردنية، بالإضافة لاعتمادها على استطلاع رأي يُسأل فيه ثلاثون شخصاً عن اختلاف معنى معين حين يُنقل من خلال استخدام تعبير اصطلاحية أو من خلال محتوى افتراضي مشابه. الكلمات الدالة: البراغماتية، اللهجة الأردنية، التعبيرات الاصطلاحية، تضمين

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## Introduction

Existing research in Arabic linguistics has paid attention to areas of syntax (Jarrah & Abusalim, 2021), the use of speech acts (e.g., Alghazo et al., 2021) and discourse markers (e.g., Jarrah et al., 2019; Harb, et al. 2022), grammaticalization (Al-Shawashreh et al., 2021), and on persuasion in media discourse (Rabab'ah et al., 2020). Although idiomatic expressions (idioms, henceforth) have been a topic of much debate in the current linguistic enterprise (Espinal & Mateu, 2019), they have not received due attention in Arabic. They have been much discussed, particularly in relation to non-compositionality and how their lexical import is expressed (Talmy 1985, 2000; Glaser 1998; Mateu & Espinal 2007). One important point is that idioms, according to Jackendoff (1997, 2002), are part of language due to their phonological structure, syntactic structure, and conceptual structure. However, most pertinent research has not much examined the pragmatic use of idioms, although pragmatics is undoubtedly a core part of language (see Leech 1983). Although works such as Strässler (1982), Murar (2009), and Liu (2017), among many others, tackle some issues of the pragmatics of idioms, the link between idioms and pragmatics is still viewed as peripheral. In this regard, the current study argues for a more radical and stronger version of the relation between pragmatics and the use of idioms. It particularly, and essentially, views idioms as pragmatic messages. In other words, idioms should subsume a certain pragmatic meaning. This alludes to—but not necessarily entails—the suggestion that idioms are fossilized pragmatic messages which are affiliated with certain speaker's meaning. Therefore, instead of viewing idioms as propositional content which may or may not have pragmatic meanings, we believe the opposite—as we will come to see evidence for—that idioms are primarily pragmatic messages to begin with.

The following discussion proceeds as follows: Section 2 discusses the findings of some pertinent research that examined the pragmatics of idioms, in general, highlighting what aspects of the study of idioms the literature focuses on, Section 3 details the process of data collection and the judgement survey conducted specifically for the purpose of the current work, Section 4 provides the main discussion, and Section 5 concludes the paper.

### *The pragmatics of idioms*

In this section, we intend to discuss the most relevant studies that have dealt with idioms from a pragmatic perspective. To our knowledge, we have found less research that examines idioms pragmatically. Even so, we can mention some works of high interest that focus on the theme of idioms in general and to its pragmatic approach in particular (see Strässler 1982, Vega-Moreno 2003, Murar 2009, Abdou 2012, and Arseneault 2014). Strässler (1982) is one of the first studies on the pragmatics of idioms. However, this work does not add solid value—as we will see later—to this topic because much space is used to review previous works and to discuss the Gricean theory of pragmatics. In this theoretical part, we do not find any relevant information that sustains the academic field. This is also evident in Hogan's (1984) review of the book which criticizes the theoretical part commenting that the work “reproduces the standard components of the pragmatic theory (the work of Grice, Searle and Austin)” (p. 268). On the other hand, the author analyses data from a corpus of more than one thousand words and demonstrates the importance of the pragmatic function of idioms in that their use is determined by the speaker's decision. This last observation is equally criticized by Hogan (1984, p. 269) who argues that “Strässler does not explain how—if at all—the decision to use or not use an idiom is different from any choice involving levels of diction” and that “there is little fresh information about language use here.”

Drawing on the Relevance Theory, Vega Moreno (2003) argues that the meanings of idioms are pragmatically reconstructed through inferential relevance-driven mechanisms. To this end, the author analyses some examples to show that the construction of the meaning of an idiom is similar to that of other phrases or words. However, this analysis does not provide a sufficient clarification of how idioms pragmatically deliver meanings. Moreover, the study does not include any type of quantitative or qualitative analysis of the data. Rather, the author presents her findings based on an analysis of a sample of examples, which were not conversationally tested by speakers of the language. In a more recent work on the pragmatics of idioms, Arsenault (2014) draws on the traditional approach to the study of idioms and affirms that the pragmatic accounts would be more adequate when the semantic and syntactic inflexibility of the idiom is taken into account. To this end, Arsenault stresses the importance of the pragmatic approach in analyzing the meaning and use of language. However, this work does not empirically (i.e., drawing on real-life data) explain the pragmatic process of the construction of meaning of idioms.

As for the study of idioms in Arabic, a review of existing literature reveals that studies on phraseology in Arabic are currently not very abundant nor profound (see Abdullah, 2018). Most of the phraseological works are related to lexicography, semantics, and/or syntax, but we do not find works of idioms related to aspects of pragmatics such as the pragmatic and functional uses of idioms. Of the few works on phraseology in Arabic are Al-Jallad (2012), Abdou (2012) and Baccouche (2007). All these works are descriptive in nature and—with the exception of Abdou (2012)—do not examine idioms from a pragmatic perspective. Abdou (2012) is a corpus-based work that covers major patterns of Arabic Idioms. However, the pragmatic use of Arabic idioms is briefly discussed because the author mainly focuses on the contextual aspects of idioms, but does not allude to the aspect of pragmatic use in context. This lack of research in this field calls for more research to examine Arabic idioms from a pragmatic perspective, and this is what this study ventures to do.

As has been shown in this overview, the pragmatics of idioms has been discussed cross-linguistically. Researchers have shown that idioms can deliver pragmatic messages which can be calculated, depending on the context and the speaker. However, idioms are not mainly viewed as pragmatic objects in the literature. In this study, we view idioms as inherently pragmatic objects in the sense that pragmatics is part of their conceptual make-up, not an external feature, or an added feature that is acquired through context.

### ***Method and Corpus***

For the purpose of this study, naturally-occurring data were collected. We asked 30 speakers (5 speakers in each session) to speak spontaneously about topics of their choice. They were asked to talk about different topics including their past memories, fashion, important occasions in their lives, future expectations, among other topics. Each session lasted for an average of 2 hours and was recorded upon the permission of all of the participants. All idioms found in the recordings were documented. The participants were then asked questions about their use of idioms and why they did not use the non-idiomatic equivalent expression. Additionally, they were asked to provide their judgement on some made-up examples which we created in order to investigate some aspects of the use of idioms (as we shall show below).

### ***Analysis and discussion***

In this section, we show that idioms are necessarily used when contextual effects are present. Evidence for this is found in the incompatibility of the use of idioms in out-of-the-blue settings where no context is obtained. Additionally, we show that idioms are an important source of pragmatic inference, i.e. creating implicatures; idioms are barely used with no implicature obtained. Afterwards, we provide evidence to the effect that idioms are also employed as—using relevance-theoretic terminology (Sperber & Wilson 1986a)—maximizers of speaker's meaning and/or contextual effects and minimizers of processing cognitive effort.

### ***Idioms as contextually-linked messages***

One of the main properties of the use of idioms in Jordanian Arabic (JA) is that they are highly preferred when contextual information is present or provided by the speaker (see Ortony et al., 1978; Holsinger 2013). For instance, a speaker may use an idiom rather than the non-idiomatic, but propositionally equivalent content, when his/her communicational message includes information that is related to the reported context, a point reinforced by the participants of the study. Consider the following dialogues:

(1)

a.	ʔana	haket maʕ	ʔil-mudi:r	bi-xusʕu:sʕ	ʔil-maʕru:ʕ	ow	ʕasʕab
I	spoke with	def-manager	in-relation.to	def-project	and	became.angry	
w-	itahamni:	b-il-xija:nih	ow	ga:l	ʔinnoh	hal-muqtaraħa:t	
and-	accuse.he.me	in-def-treason		and	said.M that	this-suggestions	

mumkin t-ʕarrid<sup>ʕ</sup>-na l-il-musa:ʔalih il-qa:nunni:jeh  
possible it.expose-us to-def-questioning def-legal.fem

‘I spoke with the manager about the project and he got angry then accused me of treason and said that such suggestions could make us liable to legal questioning.’

b. yaʕni ha<sup>ʕ</sup> ʔidzreh b-il-het<sup>ʕ</sup>?  
means put.M legs.him in-def-wall

Lit: ‘Meaning, he put his legs in the wall?’

IR: ‘He cannot be convinced to change his mind.’

a. b-il-d<sup>ʕ</sup>abt<sup>ʕ</sup>

In-def-correct

‘Exactly’

In Dialogue (1), Speaker A expresses the fact that the manager of the company utterly refuses the idea of the project, as put forth by Speaker A and is firm about his/her decision. The added details given by Speaker A about the context and to which extent the manager refused the offer serves to give the propositional content of a refusal plus taking a firm, unchangeable decision about the refusal, a propositional content that Speaker B was able to pick up on quite easily given the details of the context explained by Speaker A. This can be seen in Speaker B’s response with the use of the idiom ha<sup>ʕ</sup> idzreh b-il-het<sup>ʕ</sup> ‘Lit: He put his legs in the wall’. Dialogue (2) below shows the reverse case whereby the idiom is used first, before a detailed context is given.

(2)

a. wa:fag ʔil-mudi:r ʕala ʔil-muqtaraħa:t?  
Agree.M def-manager on def-suggestions?

‘Did the manager approve of the suggestions?’

b. laʔ. ha<sup>ʕ</sup> ʔidzreh b-il-het<sup>ʕ</sup>?  
No, put.M legs.his in-def-wall

Lit: ‘No, he put his legs in the wall?’

IR: ‘No, he cannot be convinced to change his mind.’

a. kef?

How?

‘Please explain.’

b. ʕas<sup>ʕ</sup>s<sup>ʕ</sup>ab w-itahamni b-il-xija:nih ow ga:l ʔinnoh  
became.angry and-accuse.he.me in-def-treason and said.M that

hal-muqtaraħa:t mumkin t-ʕarrid<sup>ʕ</sup>-na l-il-musa:ʔalih il-qa:nunni:jeh  
this-suggestions possibly it.expose-us to-def-questioning def-legal.fem

‘He got angry then accused me of treason and said that such suggestions could make us liable to legal questioning.’

Speaker B is forced to ask ‘How?’ in response to Speaker A’s use of the idiom ha<sup>ʕ</sup> idzreh b-il-het<sup>ʕ</sup> ‘Lit: He put his legs in the wall’ without context. Speaker B essentially understands the propositional content delivered by the relevant idiom, but also realizes that such a use also carries with it extra information other than the mere propositional content of refusal

with a firm stance. Speaker B realizes that Speaker A could have used non-idiomatic language to convey the same propositional content but chose not to. This motivates Speaker B to ask for the context in which the refusal occurred just to make sure that the extra information other than the propositional content arrived at by the idiom is warranted and is indeed the case.

Dialogue (3) also illustrates the importance of context in receiving the full effect of the use of idioms (i.e. not merely the propositional content). In the following dialogue, Speaker A's use of the idiom 'hut<sup>s</sup>(-i) idek(-i) bi-maj ba:rdih' 'put your hands in cold water', is first taken with its literal propositional content meaning only due to the fact that the idiom is used out of context.

(3)

a. marhaba salma  
Hello Salma  
'Hello Salma.'

b. ahlen  
Hi  
'Hi.'

a. hut<sup>s</sup>-i idek-i bi-maj ba:rdih  
Put.you.F hands.you.F in-water cold.F  
Lit: 'Put your hands in cold water.'

b. lef ... ma:l idej  
Why ... whats.is.wrong.with hands.my  
'Why, what's wrong with my hands?'

a. la? ... qas<sup>s</sup>d-i it<sup>s</sup>ma?inn-i ?innoh ?il-mafru:s rah jihaqiq nadza:h kbi:r  
No ... mean.I be.worry.free that def-project will result success big  
'No ... I mean don't worry because the project will surely be a big success.'

b. a:h ... hasa fhimit salek-i ... lef ma wad<sup>s</sup>d<sup>s</sup>aht-i ?inn-ik b-tihk-i  
Aha ... now understand.I on.you-F ... why not made.clear-F that.you-F talking-F

san ?il-mafru  
about def-project  
'Aha ... Why didn't you say that you were talking about the project?'

As we can see, then, Speaker B is forced to ask what is wrong with her hands such that she must put them in cold water, meaning that the message delivered to Speaker B was only the propositional content of the idiom. It is only when Speaker A explains the context that Speaker B understands the secondary purpose of the idiom aside from its propositional content. Dialogue (4), on the other hand has the context introduced first, and as is clear from Speaker B's response, no further context is needed to receive the propositional plus idiomatic reading of the idiom.

(4)

a. marhaba salma  
Hello Salma

b. ahlen

Hi

a. ?il-xabi:r ga:l ?innoh il-maʃruʕ rah jihaqiq nadʒa:h kbi:r

Def-expert said.M that def-project will make success big

‘The expert said the that project will make big success.’

b. mumta:z yaʕni ?ahutʕ idej bi-maj ba:rdih?

Excellent meaning put.me legs.my in-water cold?

Lit: ‘Excellent! So does that mean that I can put my hands in cold water?’

IR: ‘Excellent! So does that mean that I can rest assure and be worry-free?’

a. naʔam ... sʕaʕi:h

Yes ... correct

‘Yes, that is correct.’

Dialogues (1-4) ascertain that idioms carry contextual effects. The speaker selects the idioms when his/her propositional content is strongly affiliated with certain contextual effects which we assume to be part of the inherent make-up of the idiom. The evidence for this strong relation between idioms and context can be adduced from the incompatibility of the use of idioms in out-of-the-blue context, a matter that we take up in the next section.

#### **Idioms and out-of-the-blue incompatibility**

Closely related to the previous discussion on the importance of context for idiom use, the prime evidence that the use of idioms is subject to context comes from the unavailability of idioms in the so-called ‘out-of-the-blue’ setting which presupposes no previous context/discourse (cf. Nippold & Martin 1989). Consider the following dialogue.

(5)

a. ʃa:jif ha:ðʕ ?il-zalamih?

see.you.M this def-man?

‘Do you see this man?’

b. a:h ... ʃa:jf-uh ... ʃu: ma:l-uh?

Yes ... see.I-him ... what about-him?

‘Yes, I see him. What about him?’

a. ha:ðʕ ?il-zalamih ʕani:d

This def-man stubborn

‘This man is stubborn.’

b. tʕajib kamil ... ʃu: bihhimni ?inn-uh ʕani:d?

Okaycomplete ... what care.I that-uh stubborn?

‘Okay, please continue ... What do I care that he is stubborn’

a. ʕabet aʕki:l-ak liʔinnuh hu: masʔu:l

wished.I tell.I-you because he in.charge

ʕan muwa:faqa:t ?idʒa:za:t-ak

of approvals leaves-your

'I wanted to tell you because he is in charge of giving approvals to your (sick) leaves.'

In Dialogue (5), Speaker A conveys to Speaker B that a third person is *ʕani:d* 'stubborn'. There is no idiom use in this dialogue; however, it is important to underscore the response given by Speaker B to such piece of information about the third person. Speaker B replies by asking why such information is being given to him/her i.e. why is such information of relevance to Speaker B? At this point Speaker B does not know the third person in question and therefore finds the random fact about that person odd and difficult to process. Not only this, but Speaker B also asks Speaker A to continue his/her speech about the third person, indicating that Speaker B is wishing that Speaker A gives more information about why such a fact about the third person is relevant to Speaker B in the first place, and is also signaling to Speaker A that he/she should have continued with giving the relevant information surrounding the fact about the third person without Speaker B having to request it. In essence, Speaker B's use of the phrase 'Okay...please continue' signals that Speaker A should have continued on his/her own. Speaker A then proceeds to say that the third person in question is in charge of giving approvals to Speaker B's requests for leave and that this information regarding the third person, therefore, should be known to Speaker B who will have to deal with the third person in the future.

The important remark to notice in this dialogue was that Speaker B understood the fact given by Speaker A about the third person right away but did not understand the relevance of such information out-of-the blue. On the other hand, Dialogue (6) illustrates a case where the idiom '*ħa:tʕ / biħutʕ idʒreh b-il-ħetʕ*' 'puts his legs in the wall' is used instead of the phrase 'is stubborn' which is of equal propositional content. The result, unlike in the previous dialogue where the idiom was not used, as can be seen from Speaker B's response to the use of the idiom is that he/she does not understand.

(6)

a. *ʃa:ʒif ħa:ðʕ ʔil-zalamih?*

see.you.M this def-man?

'Do you see this man?'

b. *a:h ... ʃa:ʒf-uh ... ʃu: ma:l-uh?*

Yes ... see.I-him ... what about-him?

'Yes, I see him. What about him?'

a. *ħa:ðʕ ʔil-zalamih ħa:tʕ / biħutʕ idʒreh b-il-ħetʕ*

this def-man put.M / is.putting legs.his in-def-wall

Lit: 'This man is putting his legs in the wall.'

b. *miʃ fa:him ʕal-ek*

not understand on-you

'I don't understand what you mean.'

a. *jaʕni ʕani:d*

meaning stubborn.M

'Meaning that he is stubborn.'

b. *tʕajib kamil ... ʃu: biħhimni ʔinn-uh ʕani:d?*

Okaycomplete ... what care.I that-uh stubborn?

'Okay, please continue ... What do I care that he is stubborn.'

a.   habet   ahki:l-ak                   li?innuh hu:    mas?u:l  
wished.I    tell.I-you               because he    in.charge

ʕan muwa:faqa:t    ʔidʒa:za:t-ak  
of   approvals       leaves-your

‘I wanted to tell you because he is in charge of giving approvals to your (sick) leaves.’

As illustrated in Dialogue (6), hence, it is only when Speaker A explains the matter that Speaker B understands the issue completely. More importantly, though is the fact that the use of the idiom out-of-the-blue here resulted in a failed communication between the speakers; Speaker B just did not understand what Speaker A intends to deliver. The interesting aspect here is that speakers of Arabic know what the idiom generally means, but in this case, since it was used out-of-the-blue, Speaker B questions his/her own knowledge about what the idiom actually means at first given its use without a context.

A further illustration is given in Dialogues (7-8). The idiom jisʕi:r jiwwaḏin ‘to begin performing Athan’ is used out-of-the-blue in Dialogue (7), and as can be seen from Speaker B’s response, the idiomatic reading was not achieved. Instead, Speaker B understood only the literal content as evidenced by his/her follow-up questions.

(7)

a.   ʃa:jif                   ha:ðʕ   ʔil-zalamih?  
see.you       that.M def-man  
‘Do you see that man?’

b.   a:h ... ʃa:jf-uh ... ʃu:       ma:l-uh?  
Yes...see.I-him...what       about-him  
‘Yes, I see him...what about him?’

a.   hasa raḥ               jisʕi:r               jiwwaḏin  
now will       become perform.athan  
‘He will now perform Athan.’

b.   miʃ fa:him               ʕal-ek / leʃ ...   hu       fi:       waqt   sʕala:h       hasa?  
not understand.me   on-you / why ...   is there time   prayer       now?

leʃ ... hu   muʔḏin masdʒid?               leʃ ... ʃu ʔil-muna:sabih  
why ... he muʔḏin mosque?               why ... what def-occasion

‘I don’t understand what you mean. Why...is it time for prayer? Why...is he a muʔḏin? Why...What is the occasion?’

a.   laʔinnuh               fari:g-uh               xisʕir   b-il-muba:ra:h  
because   team-his       lost in-def-match  
‘Because his team (the team he roots for) lost the match.’

b.   a:h ... hasa               fhimit               ʕal-ek  
okay... now       understand.me on-you  
‘Okay, now I understand what you mean.’

Given that the idiom jisʕi:r jiwwaḏin ‘to begin performing Athan’ is used out-of-the-blue, Speaker B understands only the literal meaning. As a result, he/she asks whether it is prayer time i.e. a time to perform Athan (a call to prayer). It is only



when Speaker A explains the context that Speaker B understands the idiomatic reading of the idiom in use and then begins to ask about why the person in question will now get so angry. Notice that in Dialogue (8), on the other hand, the part where Speaker B misunderstands the intended propositional content is resolved due to the fact that the equivalent propositional content of the idiom is used without the use of the idiom i.e. in plain, direct language. The only question Speaker B has now is just to ask why the person in question will suddenly become very angry.

(8)

a. ʃa:jif ha:ðʕ ʔil-zalamih?

see.you that.M def-man

'Do you see that man?'

b. a:h ... ʃa:jf-uh ... fu: ma:l-uh?

Yes...see.I-him...what about-him

'Yes, I see him...what about him?'

a. hasa raħ jiʃasʕib

now will become.angry.he

'He will now get angry.'

b. leʃ biduh jiʃasʕib?

why will.he become.angry.he

'Why will he get angry?'

a. laʔinnuh fari:g-uh xisʕir b-il-muba:ra:h

because team-his lost in-def-match

'Because his team (the team he roots for) lost the match.'

b. hag-uh jiʃasʕib

right-his become.angry.he

'He has every right to become angry.'

Accordingly, idioms are not compatible with out-of-the-blue settings where no previous discourse is present, and hence it is not the desired environment that gives rise to contextual effects. This fact is interesting as it shows that idioms are not pure semantic messages, but objects which are contextually-laden messages. In the following subsection, we shed light on the main property of idioms in that they generate implicatures.

### **Idioms and implicatures**

A significant property of idioms is that their occurrence generates implicatures that the interlocutors can calculate depending on the context and their encyclopedic knowledge of the world. Idioms largely induce implicatures that speakers intend to express. Idioms here are not only used to deliver certain propositional content but also to give rise to unstated messages which the hearers are expected to understand and build their subsequent conversational input on accordingly.

Dialogue (9) does not contain any idiom use. Speaker A says to Speaker B that the manager is being stubborn and does not want to amend the regulations by making use of literal language.

(9)

a. ʔil-mudi:r imʃʃanid, bidhu:ʃ iʔʔadil ʔil-taʃlima:t.

Def-manager being.stubborn, want.he.NEG amend.he def-regulations

‘The manager is being stubborn; he does not want to amend the regulations.’

b. tʕajib xalina inħa:wil niqniʕ-uh b-il-ʔidzɣtima:ʕ

Okay let's try.us convince-him in-def-meeting

‘Okay, let's try to convince him otherwise during the meeting.’

a. a:h tʕabʕan... la:zim inħa:wil

Yes of course .... must try.us

‘Yes of course, we must try to (convince him to change his mind).’

The use of literal (i.e. non-idiomatic language) by Speaker A in describing the situation is only enough for Speaker B to understand one aspect of the situation at hand; namely, that the manager is being stubborn. Speaker B does not get the impression that this stubbornness on the part of the manager is non-negotiable, and therefore, suggests to go and talk with the manager in an attempt to convince him/her to change his/her mind. Speaker A agrees with such suggestion, thus, also illustrating that Speaker A was correct in his/her choice of using the non-idiomatic expression here, since the implicature that the refusal is non-negotiable is not present in this case. On the other hand, in Dialogue (10) Speaker A uses the idiom ‘ħa:tʕ idzreh b-il-ħetʕ’ ‘put his legs in the wall’.

(10)

a. ʔil-mudi:r ħa:tʕ idzreh b-il-ħetʕ, bidhu:ʕ iʔʔadil ʔil-taʕli:ma:t

Def-manager put legs.his in-def-wall, want.he.NEG amend.he def-regulations

Lit: ‘The manager has put his legs in the wall; he does not want to amend the regulations.’

IR: ‘The manager will not change his mind. He does not want to amend the regulations.’

b. tʕajib laʕa:d leʕ bidna: inru:h ʕala ʔil-ʔidzɣtima:ʕ ... ma: fi: fa:jdeh min-ha

Okay then why want.us go.us on def-meeting ... not exists benefit from-it

‘Why then should we attend the meeting. It is clear that there is no benefit of doing so.’

Unlike the case in Dialogue (9), Speaker B in Dialogue (10) does not suggest to go and try to convince the manager to change his/her mind. This is clear evidence that the use of the idiom has not only the propositional content expressed by saying that the manager is being stubborn, but also an added piece of information which is the implied fact that his/her stubbornness is non-negotiable (implicating also that the speaker is required to use his/her social connections with the manager, given the Jordanian culture). This is clear evidence that idioms, although sharing a similar propositional content with their non-idiomatic counterparts, have a more essential function; namely, an implicature intended to be understood in the communication. A further illustration regarding this same idiom is given in Dialogue (11).

(11)

a. smiʕit ʔinnuh ʔil-mudi:r imʕʕanid ... ʕu raʔjak

Heard.I that def-manager being.stubborn ... what opinion.your

ʔaha:wil ʔaqniʕ-uh?

try.me convince.me-him?

‘I heard that the manager is being stubborn about his decision. Do you think I should try to convince him to change his mind?’

b. ʔil-zalamlh ħa:tʕ idzreh b-il-ħetʕ

Def-man put legs.his in-def-wall

Lit: ‘The man has put his legs in the wall.’

IR: 'The man will not change his mind at all.'

a. jaʕni                      ʔahfaðʕ majjit    widʒhi    ow    ma    ʔaha:wliʃ    ʔahssan-li?  
 Meaning        save.me water.of face.me and not try.me.NEG        better-for.me?

b.    a:h ...    ʔana hek                      raʔji  
 Yes ... I        like.this opinion.my  
 'Yes, that is my opinion.'

So far, then we have suggested that idioms share with their non-idiomatic counterparts the same propositional content. However, unlike the non-idiomatic counterparts, the idiom carries along with it a piece of information in the form of an implicature. Hence, the choice of a speaker to use the idiom in a particular situation rather than the non-idiomatic counterpart is not haphazard, but rather motivated by the desire to convey the implicature that is part of the idiom, but absent from the non-idiomatic counterpart. Dialogues (12-13) illustrate this suggestion further with another idiom. The idiom in question is 'bi-ffali ʔin-namlīh' 'meticulously searches (even) the ant'. Speaker A is advising Speaker B to carefully proofread his/her dissertation for any language errors. The difference is quite clear between non-idiomatic use, and idiomatic use as in Dialogue (12), the non-idiomatic counterpart used to describe Speaker B's Dissertation Advisor is daqi:q kθi:r 'Very meticulous'. However, despite the fact the intensifier 'very' is used to describe the degree to which the advisor is meticulous, Speaker B still insists that his/her advisor will probably not be able to spot all the mistakes i.e. that a few mistakes here and there will most likely not be spotted. It is only in Dialogue (13) where the idiom is used that Speaker B understands that not a single error will be missed by the advisor and that Speaker B should do his/her best to fix all mistakes before handing in the dissertation.

(12)

a.    daqiq                      risa:lt-ak                      mli:h  
 Edit.you        dissertation-your good  
 'Edit your dissertation well.'

b.    leʃ  
 'Why'

a.    muʃrif                      risa:lt-ak                      daqi:q                      kθi:r  
 Supervisor        dissertation-your                      meticulous a.lot  
 'Your supervisor is very meticulous' (i.e. He will spot any mistakes.)

b.    batwwaqaʕ        ma        ʕind-i                      axʔa:ʔ kθi:r-eh ...        raħ        abʕaθ-ha ...  
 think.I                      not        have-me errors        a.lot.F ...                      will.M        send-it ...

ma batwwaqaʕ ila:hiðʕ        kul        ʔiʃi  
 not think.I        notice.he        every thing

'I believe I don't have a lot of mistakes ... I will send it to him ... I don't think he will be able to spot everything.'

(13)

a.    daqiq                      risa:lt-ak                      mliħ  
 Edit.you        dissertation-your good

‘Edit your dissertation well.’

b. leʃ

‘Why’

a. muʃrif                      risa:lt-ak                      bi-ffali                      ʔin-namlɪh

Supervisor      dissertation-your                      searches.meticulously      def-ant.F

Lit: ‘Your supervisor meticulously searches (even) the ant.’

IR: ‘Your supervisor is extremely meticulous and will spot anything.’

b. tama:m ... xalas<sup>s</sup> ... babʃaθ-ha ʃala muddaɪq luyawi

Okay ... that’s.it ... send.me-it on      editor      language.of

‘Okay, that’s it ... I will send it to a language editor.’

a. mumta:z

‘Excellent.’

This can only be explained by suggesting that, even though the non-idiomatic expression ‘very meticulous’ and the idiomatic expression share the same propositional content (which is ‘very meticulous’), the idiomatic expression carries along with it an implicature not available in the non-idiomatic counterpart which implies that no error will go unseen by the advisor, as evidenced by Speaker B’s response to the idiomatic expression.

In the next two sections, we discuss the impact of the use of idioms on the communication between the interlocutors. We show that the use of idioms helps to facilitate communication as it minimizes the amount of processing cognitive effort required to process what the speaker means by his/her utterance and at the same time maximizes the contextual effects of the utterance on the interlocutor. This indicates that idioms help in creating maximal relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1986a, 1986b, 2002; Wilson and Wharton 2006).

### Minimizing of effort

Idioms are also important in their underlying role in expressing the speakers’ message directly and effortlessly. They have a real impact in rendering the ongoing conversation concise in that more emphasis is placed on the integral parts of the speaker’s message rather than indulging in details which linger the conversation and make some parts of it redundant. Idioms minimize the speaker’s effort to deliver the required message and minimize the hearers’ effort to understand it.

Comparing Dialogues (14-15), we find that, even though Speaker A ends with the same response in both dialogues, it is Speaker B’s responses that differs in each dialogue. In Dialogue (14) Speaker B is asked by Speaker A about what happened during the meeting. More precisely, Speaker A is asking Speaker B whether they were able to convince the manager to change his/her mind about something during the meeting. In Dialogue (14), Speaker B is in a hurry and does not have time to explain in detail what happened. Therefore, Speaker B chooses to express the idea in a more concise manner by making use of the idiom rather than opting for the longer more long-winded explanation that is necessary to get the idea across to Speaker A that not only was the manager stubborn, but that Speaker A should not suggest after that that they attempt to convince him/her otherwise because the manager’s stubbornness is non-negotiable. Therefore, the use of the idiom in Dialogue (14) serves to get the main idea across in a more concise manner. Compare with Dialogue (15) where a more long-winded explanation becomes necessary to arrive at the same response from Speaker A where he/she does not suggest trying to convince the manager otherwise.

(14)

a. marhaba                      ʔahmad...ʃu:      sʰa:r                      b-il-ʔidʒtima:ʃ ...

Hello Ahmed...what happened in-def-meeting ...

yajjar raʔj-uh ʔil-mudi:r ?  
changed.M opinion.his def-manager ?

‘Hello Ahmed. What happened in the meeting? Did the manager change his mind?’

b. ismaʕ ʔana mistaʕdzil ʃwej...bas b-ʔixtisʕa:r...  
listen I in.a.rush.me a.bit...but in-short...

ʔil-zalamih hatʕ idʒreh b-il-hetʕ  
def-man put.M legs.his in-def-wall

Lit: ‘Listen, I am in a bit of a rush, but, in brief, he put his legs in the wall.’

IR: ‘Listen, I am in a bit of a rush, but, in brief, he stuck by his decision and will never change it.’

a. laʕa:d xalasʕ... xali:n-a nilyi ʔil-fikrah  
Then that’s.it...let’s cancel.us def-idea  
‘Okay, then let’s cancel the idea.’

(15)

a. marhaba ʔahmad...ʃu: sʕa:r b-il-ʔidʒtima:ʕ ...  
Hello Ahmed...what happened in-def-meeting ...

yajjar raʔj-uh ʔil-mudi:r ?  
changed.M opinion.his def-manager ?

‘Hello Ahmed. What happened in the meeting? Did the manager change his mind?’

b. ʕasʕsʕab w-itahhamni b-il-xija:nih ow ga:l ʔinnoh  
became.angry and-accuse.he.me in-def-treason and said.M that

hal-muqtaraħa:t mumkin t-ʕarriɖ-na l-il-musa:ʔalih il-qa:nunnijeh  
this-suggestions possibly it.expose-us to-def-questioning def-legal.fem

‘He got angry then accused me of treason and said that such suggestions could make us liable to legal questioning.’

a. laʕa:d xalasʕ... xali:na nilyi ʔil-fikrah  
Then that’s.it...let’s cancel.us def-idea  
‘Okay, then let’s cancel the idea.’

Dialogue (16) illustrates the alternative situation where Speaker B did not use the idiomatic expression, nor did he/she give the detailed context that would suffice in place of the idiomatic expression. Instead, Speaker B uses the literal counterpart of the idiomatic expression, which though carries the same propositional content of the idiomatic expression, lacks, as discussed in the previous section, the implicature necessary to prevent Speaker A from suggesting to try to convince the manager otherwise. Consequently, Speaker A, as predicted, suggests convincing the manager to change his/her mind by using alternative means.

(16)

a. marhaba ʔahmad...fu: sʕa:r b-il-ʔidʒtima:ʕ ...  
Hello Ahmed...what happened in-def-meeting ...

ʔajjar raʔj-uh ʔil-mudi:r ?  
changed.M opinion.his def-manager ?  
'Hello Ahmed. What happened in the meeting? Did the manager change his mind?'

b. ismaʕ ʔana mistaʕdzil fwej...bas b-ʔixtisʕa:r...  
listen I in.a.rush.me a.bit...but in-short...

ʔil-zalamih imʕʕanid kθi:r  
def-man being.stubborn a.lot  
'Listen, I am in a bit of a rush, but, in brief, the man is being quite stubborn.'

a. laʕa:d ibniqniʕ-uh b-il-fikrah bi-ʔuslu:b θa:ni  
Then will.convince.us-him in-def-idea in-method second  
'Then we shall/should use another method to try to convince him.'

For further illustration, we present another idiom in Dialogues (17-18). Once again, we notice that the idiomatic expression is used in situations where the Speaker needs/wishes to express the content in the most concise manner as possible.

(17)

a. marhaba ʔahmad... fu: raʔj-ak b-il-mudi:r ʔil-dʒdi:d ?  
Hello Ahmed... what opinion-your in-def-manager def-new ?  
'Hello Ahmed. What do you think of the new manager?'

b. ismaʕ ʔana mistaʕdzil fwej...bas b-ʔixtisʕa:r...  
listen I in.a.rush a.bit...but in-short...

ʔil-zalamih maðʕru:b bi-ħadʒar kbi:r  
def-man is.hit with-rock big  
Lit: 'Listen, I'm in a bit of a rush, but, in brief, the man is hit with a big rock.'  
IR: 'Listen, I'm in a bit of a rush, but, in brief, the man is not as (qualified/competent/strong) as people think.'

a. laʕa:d leʕ itʕʕajan  
then why was.hired.he  
'Then why was he hired?'

b. ma: baʕrif  
not know.I  
'I don't know.'

In (17), Speaker B quickly understands the propositional meaning along with the implicature of the idiom in question which is that the person in question is nowhere near what people actually think of him/her. Apart from the propositional

content, the idiomatic use also expresses that it is not a small difference between what people think of him/her and the actual case, but a very big one that does not merit any further discussion of the matter. Speaker A, therefore, responds by asking why the person was hired if that is the case, thus proving that Speaker A quickly understood the entire message intended to be delivered by the use of the idiom, but in a concise manner; Speaker A does not ask for details or further explanation. However, in Dialogue (18), Speaker B instead does not make use of the idiom and is therefore forced towards the longer alternative in order to get the same propositional content across to Speaker A.

(18)

a. marhaba                    ʔahmad... ʃu:            raʔj-ak                    b-il-mudi:r            ʔil-dʒdi:d?  
Hello                            Ahmed... what opinion-your in-def-manager def-new            ?  
'Hello Ahmed. What do you think of the new manager?'

b. ʔil-zalamih ma ʃind-uh nusʃ ʔil-xibra                    ʔil-matʃlu:ba  
def-man            not have-him half def-experience            def-needed

wala dʒa:b                    nusʃ ʔil-daʃim l-al-dʒa:mʃa                    ʔilli kun-a: imfakri:n-uh  
nor brought.he half def-funds for-def-university that were-we though-it

'The man doesn't have half the experience nor has he brought half the funds for the university that we thought he had.'

= (He is not as strong a manager as people say.)

a. jaʃni            maðʃru:b bi-ħadʒar kbi:r ?  
meaning is.hit.M with-rock big            ?

b. naʔam ... sʃaħi:h  
'Yes... Correct'

a. laʃa:d leʃ            itʃʃajan  
then why was.hired.he  
'Then why was he hired?'

b. ma: baʃrif  
not know.I  
'I don't know.'

This role of idioms in minimizing the processing cognitive effort of the listener to calculate the speaker's intended meaning is strongly tied to the assumption that idioms are pragmatic messages. When a speaker uses an idiom, he/she implies that there is an intended meaning, which can be easily revealed given the selection of the idiom used.

### **Maximizing of effect**

Idioms' role in maximizing the effect is related to its role in minimizing the effort of the speaker and the hearer in their conversation. Idioms require the speaker just to report the needed information and the hearer to fathom the message properly given that idioms are pragmatically motivated. This economic role of idioms results in that the speaker's message has a bigger effect on the hearer. This can be seen in the following dialogues. In Dialogue (19), for instance, Speaker A says that he/she has heard that the manager is being stubborn. Speaker B agrees, but does so by first negating Speaker A's proposition by saying 'no...he is not being stubborn'. At first, this may seem to Speaker A to be a refutation of his/her information, but in reality, Speaker B follows with the idiom instead, as if to tell Speaker A that the manager is not only being stubborn, but that there is no possible way to convince him/her otherwise. In essence, then, Speaker B's negation of Speaker A's

information at first is to signal to Speaker A that Speaker A used the wrong linguistic device to convey the message since the reality is much more dramatic than the literal expression can possibly convey.

(19)

a. smiʃit ʔinnuh ʔil-mudi:r imʃʃanid

Heard.I that def-manager being.stubborn.he

'I heard that the manager is being stubborn.'

b. laʔ...mif imʃʃanid... ʔil-zalamih ha:tʃ idʒreh b-il-ħetʃ

no...not being.stubborn... def-man put.he legs.his in-def-wall

Lit: 'No...he is not being stubborn...he is putting his legs in the wall'

IR: 'No...he is not only being stubborn, but being extremely stubborn such that there is no possibility of him changing his mind.'

Another idiom in this regard may help to illustrate this idea further. In Dialogue (20), Speaker A suggests that Ali will probably forget about the woman he loves, Salma. Speaker B suggests that that is impossible, and then proceeds to use the idiom 'ha:rig ha:l-uh ʃale-ha' 'He is burning himself over her'. Speaker A then responds with the end-result being that, if that is the case, then Ali must tolerate, one way or the other, the absence of the one he loves (perhaps due to Salma travelling abroad).

(20)

a. batwwaqaʃ ʃali rah jinsa salma

Think.I Ali will forget Salma

'I think Ali will forget Salma.'

b. mustahi:l ... huwa ha:rig ha:l-uh ʃale-ha

impossible ... he burning self-him on-her

Lit: 'That's impossible because he is burning himself over her.'

IR: 'That's impossible because he is doing and will do anything in the world to keep her.'

a. laʃa:d jithamal ʔil-buʃd ʃan-ha

then be.patient.he def-distance from-her

'Then he should be patient with being away from her.'

On the other hand, in Dialogue (21), where the idiom is not used, but the same propositional content is used instead in the form of literal language, Speaker A does not make the same reply with the end-result, but rather suggests the opposite which is that many people have loved and then forgotten their love due to distance and therefore, Ali has nothing to worry about when Salma leaves because his longing for her will soon disappear. It is only when Speaker B then replies with the idiom that the severity of the situation is conveyed to Speaker A, which forces Speaker A to change his/her analysis of the situation.

(21)

a. batwwaqaʃ ʃali rah jinsa salma

think.I Ali will forget Salma

'I think that Ali will forget Salma.'



b. mustahil ... huwa bihhib-ha kθi:r

Impossible ... he loves-her a.lot

‘That’s impossible because he loves her a lot.’

a. ʕa:di ... fu: jaʕni ... ja: ma: na:s hab-u wo tarak-u baʕaðʕ

normal ... so what ... [oh how many times] people loved-they and left.they each.other

‘That’s normal...so what!...Oh how many times people have loved and then left each other.’

b. bas huwa miʕ bas bihhib-ha ... huwa ha:rig ha:l-uh ʕale-ha

but he not only loves-her ... he burning self-him on-her

Lit: ‘But he not only loves her, he is burning himself over her.’

IR: ‘But he not only loves her, he is doing and will do anything in the world to keep her.’

a. laʕa:d jithamal ʔil-buʕd ʕan-ha

then be.patient.he def-distance from-her

‘Then he should be patient with being away from her.’

Through viewing idioms in this way, we are capable of answering some lingering questions related to the very existence of idioms. According to our data (see below), idioms do not express a unique semantic meaning that cannot be expressed through any synonymous counterparts found in the language. The same propositional/semantic meaning can be supplied through other words/expressions. However, the main difference between idioms and semantically equivalent words/expressions lies in the fact that idioms should necessarily deliver a speaker's message, whereas the latter may not. This implies that the pragmatic messages delivered by idioms are not given to the idioms through the context, but they are an inherent property of idioms. This allows us to account for the infelicitousness of the use of idioms in some contexts, whereby the pragmatic message imposed by the context is inconsistent with the inherent pragmatics of idioms. Our conjecture of the rise of idioms is that they are generated when a pragmatic message is highly prevalent in the community. Such a pragmatic message is fossilized through grouping some words whose overall meaning is not necessarily a sum of the meaning of each word (i.e. non-compositionality).

## Conclusion

This research paper shows that idioms in JA should carry some intended meaning that interlocutors can determine through recourse to the context of the utterance, combined with their interpersonal knowledge. This indicates that idioms are not used because they express a certain semantic meaning that cannot be otherwise stated. They are used inherently and primarily to convey a pragmatic message. In this way, idioms are a product of semantics-pragmatics contribution. This can lead us to the assumption that idioms are fossilized semantic-pragmatic messages. Such a dependence on pragmatics is the main reason, we think, that idioms are not universal. For instance, the JA idioms “put his/her legs in the wall” is not found in English and possibly in any other language. This idiom delivers a certain pragmatic meaning in which the English culture/people, for instance, do not affiliate it with a certain semantic meaning.

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