Idioms beyond their dictionary borders: how figurative meaning functions in texts

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Abstract

This paper discusses semantic approaches to idiomatic meaning and their implications for lexicographic practice, focusing on idioms, whose meaning is described as 'figurative' and is generally thought to be non-compositional. It is argued that figurative meaning is a function of so-called 'literal' meaning, and can only exist on the basis of compositional semantic structures. Idioms are approahced as expressions that employ culturally prominent source domain scenarios in a figurative way with the purpose of projecting a clear evaluation onto a complex target situation. This hypothesis is supported by an analysis of how two idioms - 'carry the ball' and 'carry the can' - function in a number of texts.

In this paper I would like to discuss the current approaches to idiomatic meaning and lexicographic practice. I will argue that figurative meaning is a function of so-called 'literal' meaning, and can only exist on the basis of compositional semantic structures. Treating idioms as combinations that have an integrated phraseological meaning leads to inaccurate descriptions of their semantics and syntax in dictionaries. My position results from analysis of a wide range of texts that employ idioms. However, in this paper I will refer to only four political opinion articles for the sake of confining it to an acceptable number of pages.

According to the accepted opinion, idioms that 'have a figurative meaning' are 'semantically non-compositional' (Granger, Paquot 2008: 36, 43). At the same time, it is difficult to find clear and straightforward definitions of either literal or figurative meaning.

This issue was recently discussed by Harold Burger (Burger 2007), who succinctly defined the key methodological problem of phraseology in the following way: 'One of the main semantic problems in phraseology is describing and explaining if and how the two meanings or levels of meaning are connected' (Burger 2007: 91). He acknowledges the difficulty of supplying definitions for both 'literal' and 'phraseological' meaning (Burger 2007: 94-95) and points out that traditionally phraseological meaning is often represented by paraphrases, which can be very misleading. Are we studying the properties of the expression or the properties of the paraphrase that we have provided for the given expression (Burger 2007: 94)? Most dictionaries do not systematically supply any information on the way 'phraseological' meaning of idioms is related to the 'source' domain, i.e. the 'literal' meaning.

A closer look at two common idioms may be helpful for illustrating these statements. Both *carry the ball* and *carry the can* are recorded in most dictionaries, be it dictionaries of idioms or learner's dictionaries. They look very similar in terms of structure; moreover, their definitions often exhibit similarities. Compare:

(1) **Carry the ball** - assume **responsibility**, take command, take control, bear the burden (Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language)

Carry the can - to be the person considered **responsible** for something (Macmillan Dictionary Online)

Other dictionaries, thought, seem to suggest more differences than similarities in the meaning of these two idioms. Compare:

(2) **Carry the ball** - to **be in charge**; to be considered **reliable** enough to make sure that **a job gets done** (McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs)

Carry the can – (UK informal) to take the **blame** or responsibility for **something that is wrong or has not succeeded** (often + *for*) (Cambridge Dictionaries Online)

So, going back to Burger's dilemma, we could ask: 'What are the criteria of accuracy in explaining the meaning of idioms?' This question can only be answered by addressing the question 'What is the function of idioms?' This article offers an analysis, based on the hypothesis that the main function of idioms is to employ culturally prominent scenarios in a figurative way with the purpose of projecting a clear evaluation on a complex situation.

I will, therefore, regard 'literal' meaning as the sense that words have within certain domains of experience. So, if we consider the word *ball*, its 'literal' meaning in the domain of sports will be something like 'a round object used for various actions demonstrating control, such as holding, kicking, throwing, passing, etc.' This meaning is 'literal,' because it has an indispensable function in that domain of experience and is regarded as its integral part.

'Figurative' meaning is a textual function that is manifest when an 'alien' scenario is used as an evaluative filter to provide a certain perspective on a given situation. This hypothesis automatically suggests that in order to study idioms, we need to study the texts, in which they are used, because their functioning occurs on the textual level.

Let us consider the functioning of *carry the ball* in three articles on American politics. This expression may be encountered as a short figurative insertion in the text, but, even more often, it is accompanied by other figurative elements that represent a political situation as an American football game.

For example, the article by Paul Krugman *Deliverance or Diversion*, which was published during the 2008 US presidential primaries, projects a negative evaluation of Barak Obama in contrast to Hilary Clinton. Krugman describes Obama as an inexperienced politician, who has not yet shown an ability to win. At the end of the article he uses the words of an Illinois legislator that sum up the evaluation in figurative terms: 'No one wants to carry the ball 99 yards all the way to the one-yard line, and then give it to the halfback who gets all the credit'. It would not be very productive if we tried to replace *carry the ball* in this sentence by any of the definitions offered by dictionaries. In fact, *carry the ball* in this context implies an ability to fight off opponents and eventually win by getting the ball to the end-zone and performing the touchdown.

The article describes Obama's potential responsibility as that of winning: 'an overwhelming electoral victory', 'a landslide victory'. Moreover, winning depends on the ability to fight off opponents: 'Mr. Obama has never faced a serious Republican opponent', 'overcome bitter conservative opposition'.

Given this context, we may hypothesize that *carry the ball* is quite transparent, analyzable and fully compositional: it represents a desirable action by a successful football player. Its figurative meaning is derived from its 'literal' meaning. Football players who are capable of 'carrying the ball' demonstrate leadership qualities, determination, ability to fight off opponents, etc. This expression is used to represent the political situation as a football game and Obama as an inexperienced player.

We can observe a similar picture in another article, *Bailout failure shows leadership vacuum*. Here the expression *carry the ball* is used about a group of congressional Democrats who could potentially support the bailout plan, proposed by the Republican administration to ease the economic crisis: 'And much as pro-labor Democrats were more willing to carry the

ball for the administration, they were not eager to claim ownership of the bailout plan'. This expression is used in paragraph 3, while in paragraphs 1 and 2 we learn about Obama, who 'never threw himself into the fight in a major way', and Ben Bernanke, who is 'clinging to the sidelines'. So, by the time the reader finds the description of pro-labor Democrats, the situation is already represented as a game that is dragging on ('fatigue from that battle', 'larger fight', 'entangled in the fight'). So, the use of *carry the ball* is warranted by the structure of the text.

Again, we see that *carry the ball* retains its 'literal' meaning, and is employed in its figurative function only by virtue of representing the football game scenario. What about contexts where *carry the ball* is not 'supported' by other expressions coming from football? May it be that in such contexts we are dealing with a true idiom, whose meaning becomes opaque and non-compositional? My answer would be 'no'.

The article *Assemblyman vows to carry the ball for English-only action* can serve as an example. It discusses a ballot initiative, directed at barring the use of languages other than English in the domain of state services in California. Although there are no overt references to American football per se (apart from *carry the ball* itself), the situation is presented as a hard competitive game between two teams: 'backers of Proposition 63' and 'groups that opposed the initiative'. The description 'vows to carry the ball' applies to the actions of Assemblyman Hill, who is thereby represented as a leading player on his team. Other members of his team are described as less active: 'Except the proposals of Assemblyman Hill… there were few signs… that supporters of "official English" were planning immediate moves.' A quote from Hill compounds the impression of a competitive game: '"If we're not successful… we'll package them all together… put it on the ballot and **pass it over the heads** of the Legislature."'

Therefore, we can assume that even when *carry the ball* is not supplemented by extended descriptions from the football game scenario, it still metonymically evokes this scenario and employs its figurative force. The reader is invited to see political events as a football game and apply the logic of the game to evaluate exceedingly complicated political processes.

The comparison of the three articles demonstrates that the use of the idiom *carry the ball* is invited by the structure of the text, which represents the situation as a competitive and aggressive game between two teams. It is noteworthy that *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs* provides a description of the source scenario in the entry for *carry the ball*. Significantly, in all the three articles *carry the ball* tends to be accompanied by a modality marker of willingness, which, apparently, is part of the idiom, even though it varies in form: 'no one **wants** to carry the ball'; 'were more **willing** to carry the ball'; '**vows** to carry the ball'.

However, as we turn to *carry the can*, we may be hard pressed to find extended descriptions that would easily confirm the dependence of its figurative meaning on its 'literal' meaning. This idiom is accounted for with the following etymology: 'The job of carrying the group's ration of beer was obviously one that laid you open to much unpleasantness if you spilled any or dropped the can' (World Wide Words). However, most native speakers who use or at least understand the idiom are not necessarily aware of this story.

Larger contexts, in which *carry the can* is used, tend to display the following characteristics: they always describe a situation of drudgery and hard work, in which no one wants to perform a certain task or bear responsibility for something; eventually, one agent is forced by stronger or more devious agents to do it. Even more significantly, *carry the can* is not the full expression: the idiom, apparently, includes an obligatory modal component. This is the modality of unwanted obligation, prototypically expressed by *have to carry the can*,

with a very frequent variant *left to carry the can*. Apparently, the idiom represents a generalized scenario, which is a kind of blend: the *can* may be a trashcan or a beer can, but it is always heavy and unpleasant to drag around.

The article *Europe should help carry the can for the banks* projects a negative evaluation of the Irish government and the EU in the light of possible Irish default in late 2010. The EU is described as the agent who does not want to bear the costs of the problem: 'We need a massive subvention (not a loan) from the EU, and the EU can't – or won't – give us that…' Moreover, the whole task of reviving the Irish economy is seen as tremendously laborious: 'The hope was that the European and US economies would **drag us out of our morass**…'

The author suggests that the EU has to be manipulated into bearing the costs: 'Tell them we are going to pull the plug on banks unless Europe takes on a large part of the bailout burden'. Although the title of this text uses *should* as the modality marker, its overall structure suggests that the EU is being forced to perform a certain action.

Carry the can is, indeed, a different type of idiom than *carry the ball*: instead of triggering a highly specific scenario (e.g., 'a football game') that tends to produce extended figurative descriptions, it is more frugal and introduces a more generic scenario. The key word in *carry the can* is *carry* rather than *can*, because of the stronger relevance of the unpleasant effort involved in the process as it is revealed in some senses of *carry*.

Thus, the meaning of either of these idioms cannot be accurately described by rephrasing them in abstract terms. An alternative strategy for idioms dictionaries would be to provide a reasonably detailed description of the source domain scenario with a particular emphasis on the evaluative role of the script. Examples should give the user a clear idea about the effect the borrowed elements will have on the utterance. General dictionaries ought to present idioms under the relevant senses of the word that serves as the most prominent marker of the source domain.

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