

Creative Idiomaticity

Author(s): Zili He

*Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* (1989), pp. 150-160

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

---

*The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

# CREATIVE IDIOMATICITY

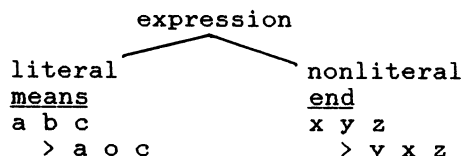
Zili He

University of Kansas

For the purpose of my discussion, the terms "idiomatic" and "creative" are restrictively applied as follows. An idiomatic expression is a conventionally fixed multiword form, which is actually used for its noncompositional meaning to express a significant cultural concept. Creativeness means rule-governed innovativeness and originality in language use.

Creative idiomaticity refers to the ingenious manipulation of idiomatic expressions normally taken as fixed, which requires cultural or literary awareness (Cowie 1983), and which effects all sorts of subtle variations and surprises (Nattinger 1980). It is the use of idiomatic expressions not in the normal way, as part of the ordinary use of language, but in the creative way, as part of the imaginative use of language, conceding that a clear-cut distinction between "ordinary" and "imaginative" language is highly problematic (see, e.g. Fish 1973 and Friedrich 1979).

Idiomatic expressions can be creatively manipulated in various ways on all levels of the language. What intrigues me the most is the semantic, conceptual, and cultural aspects of creative idiomaticity. In particular, I am interested in the following phenomenon:



An idiomatic expression has a literal (i.e. compositional) meaning--a b c, and a nonliteral (i.e. noncompositional) meaning--x y z. Through deliberate substitution of component(s) in the literal means (e.g. a b c > a o c), an intended change of interpretation at the nonliteral end (e.g. x y z > v x z) can be achieved.

This phenomenon of creative idiomaticity raises different questions from some previous concerns about (a) whether people ordinarily process the literal meaning in the conventional nonliteral use of an idiomatic expression, and (b) whether people directly process the literal meaning in the exceptional literal

use of an idiomatic expression (see, e.g. Gibbs 1986). In other words, in (a) and (b), the idiomatic expression is intended to be processed either purely nonliterally or purely literally, respectively. What I have in mind, by contrast, is that the creatively manipulated idiomatic expression is intended to be processed literally, but as a means, to achieve the end of a special nonliteral interpretation.

Let us look at some examples from Chinese (the morpheme-for-morpheme translation appears in parentheses, and the nonliteral meaning, between quotation marks):

- (1) zǒu hòu mén 走后门 (enter-by back door)  
'use one's influential connections to gain an objective'
- (1a) kāi hòu mén 开后门 (open back door) 'use one's influence to let someone gain his objective'
- (1b) dǔ hòu mén 堵后门 (block back door)  
'impede the channel whereby people gain their objectives through influential connections'
- (1c) kāi qián mén 开前门 (open front door)  
'open up the channel through which people can gain their objectives properly and fairly'
- (2) jiè dōng fēng 借东风 (borrow east wind)  
'take advantage of a favorable situation'
- (2a) sòng dōng fēng 送东风 (present east wind)  
'promote the unhealthy trend'
- (2b) shā dōng fēng 杀东风 (stop east wind)  
'check the unhealthy trend'
- (3) wáng yáng bǔ láo 亡羊补牢 (lose sheep mend sheepfold) 'immediately take measures against future problems after something has gone wrong'
- (3a) guān yáng bǔ láo 关羊补牢 (shut-in sheep mend sheepfold) 'always take proper care to do things right as well as taking precautions against potential problems'
- (4) zǒu mǎ kàn huā 走马看花 (pass on-horseback view flower) 'take a cursory glance at things'
- (4a) xià mǎ kàn huā 下马看花 (get-off horse view flower) 'go deep into the realities and make thorough investigations'
- (5) shā jī gěi hóu kàn 杀鸡给猴看 (kill chicken for monkey see) 'punish one as a warning to others'

- (5a) shā hóu gěi jī kàn 杀猴给鸡看 (kill monkey for chicken see) 'punish an official in front of the people'
- (5b) shā hóu gěi hóu kàn 杀猴给猴看 (kill monkey for monkey see) 'punish an official as a warning to all other officials'

(1), (2), (3), (4) and (5) are the original idiomatic expressions; (1a-c), (2a-b), (3a), (4a) and (5a-b) are their creative usages. In these examples we can see that the nonliteral meanings are altered through deliberate, overt alterations in the literal meanings (with substitutes underlined).

My discussion of such phenomenon of creative idiomaticity in imaginative language use consists of three parts: (i) theoretical assumptions, (ii) prerequisite cultural knowledge, and (iii) the cognitive basis for creative idiomaticity.

Theoretical assumptions. I have adopted Grace's (1981) view of TWO MODES OF KNOWING a language. Accordingly, an idiomatic expression may be known both holistically, as a ready-made complex unit with a noncompositional interpretation, and analytically, concerning its constituency and structure. It is familiar to the language users-in-the-culture as a conventional expression for an established cultural concept, with its lexical and grammatical properties brought to consciousness in creative usage.

I have also adopted the view of a CREATIVE-MEMORIZED SPEECH CONTINUUM (see, e.g. Nattinger 1980, Pawley & Syder 1983). Simply put, "creative speech" and "memorized speech" are two extremes of the continuum, between which there could be numerous delicate gradations, depending on how much creation and how much memorization are involved, and in what ways the two factors interplay. In a sense, we can think of the creative use of idiomatic expressions under consideration as a mental process of creation which is modeled on specific memorized expressions.

As to the relationship between the nonliteral meaning and the literal meaning of an idiomatic expression, my position is that there are various types ranging from deadly opaque to vividly transparent. Idiomatic expressions with a more transparent nonliteral-literal relationship are more likely to become candidates for creative usage.

Prerequisite cultural knowledge. I have in mind the notion of cultural knowledge with the following understanding: (a) there is no sharp distinction between linguistic and cultural knowledge, for, as it

has been argued, semantic knowledge in principle presupposes basic cultural knowledge about "the world" (see Searle 1978, Keesing 1979, and Haiman 1980); (b) for the purpose of discussion, linguistic knowledge can be abstracted and reduced to what constitutes the mere computationality of language (Chomsky 1986), against which cultural knowledge can be defined as what else one should know in order to use the language effectively in real-life communication in a given language-culture community. The basic question is what else, beyond purely linguistic, computational knowledge, ought to be known about an idiomatic expression to the members of a language-culture community in order that the creative manipulation under discussion could be performed with the intended effect. I would suggest three aspects of cultural knowledge.

The first aspect of cultural knowledge concerns knowing the idiomatic expression as what it is, i.e., knowing that the expression is, by convention, not to be interpreted literally, and that its well established nonliteral meaning expresses a culturally significant concept. Consider the example, (3) *wáng yáng bǔ láo* 亡羊补牢. Members of the Chinese language-culture community know for sure that this is not a literal description about some accidental happening of losing sheep and mending the sheepfold, but a familiar idiomatic expression embodying a piece of institutionalized cultural wisdom, 'immediately taking measures against future problems after something has gone wrong', with the moral "it is never too late to mend". I would argue that even when the language users-in-the-culture are conscious about the literal interpretation of this expression, it will indeed serve to VITALIZE the nonliteral, idiomatic meaning, instead of causing any ambiguity. This leads us to the next consideration.

The second aspect of cultural knowledge concerns knowing how the nonliteral and literal meanings of the idiomatic expression are associated. Very often, for the sake of simplicity and convenience, the linguistic analyst is tempted to assert that the relationship between the nonliteral and the literal meanings of an idiomatic expression is by definition arbitrary, and that an idiomatic expression is necessarily ambiguous between its nonliteral and literal meanings (Weinreich 1969). This is related to a commonly held basic assumption that no part of an idiomatic expression contributes to the interpretation of the whole (Fraser 1970). Such a view about idiomaticity is, in my

opinion, too restricted by a purely linguistic consideration, namely, the part-whole relation is semantically noncompositional. For, beyond mere part-whole compositionality, if one looks at how the literal meaning, as a whole, is associated with the nonliteral meaning, certain nonarbitrariness of idiomaticity may be seen. That is, the language user-in-the-culture may know how the nonliteral-literal association of an idiomatic expression is culturally motivated. Then, the expression will not be impartially ambiguous between its literal and nonliteral meanings pending some decisive clues provided by specific linguistic and/or situational contexts. Instead, the knowledge and consciousness of the literal meaning and the cultural nonliteral-literal association serve to vitalize the nonliteral, idiomatic interpretation. Such cultural knowledge may reflect the genuine, original nonliteral-literal association, or may be the product of folk reconstruction of the association. Also, the association is diversely based, e.g. on conceptual metaphors, historical stories, customary practices, traditional beliefs, etc., and vary in degree of transparency (see He 1988). Idiosyncratic and irrelevant though it may appear to the linguistic analyst, the cultural knowledge about the nonliteral-literal association of an idiomatic expression is, for the language user-in-the-culture, definitely a prerequisite for the creative manipulation of its literal means to serve its nonliteral end.

Let us examine (2) *jiè dōng fēng* 借东风 (borrow east wind) 'take advantage of a favorable situation'. From the viewpoint of the pure linguistic analyst, (2) is strictly noncompositional: the actual meaning of the whole expression is by no means the composition of the meanings of the parts. However, the failure of part-whole composition does not entail that the meanings of the parts should be totally opaque or irrelevant, or that the literal and nonliteral relation should be wholly arbitrary. As a matter of fact, the nonliteral-literal association in (2) is based on a well known historical story: Zhuge Liang, a strategist during the "Three Kingdoms" period (168-265 A.D.), assumes the garb of a Taoist priest to summon the southeastern wind in a winter, which blows against the enemy's fleet of chained ships and so assists his fire attack to a complete success. The story gave rise to the expression, which evolved into an idiomatic expression with a generalized and abstract nonliteral meaning. It is precisely the cultural knowledge of the nonliteral-literal

association that vitalizes the idiomaticity of the expression. In other words, we can say that to the language user-in-the-culture, it is such cultural knowledge that renders the expression idiomatic, and it is such cultural knowledge that underlies his creative manipulation of the idiomatic expression.

The third aspect of cultural knowledge concerns knowing the contexts in which the idiomatic expression is understood and used. Context is central to language use. Three types of contexts can be roughly distinguished: the discourse context, the concrete situation, and the context of pertinent background experience and knowledge.

Let us first consider the discourse context. It is typically the case that the creative manipulation of an idiomatic expression takes place within a specific discourse context, the knowledge of which is indispensable for it to make sense. As an example, in an article (People's Daily, August 3, 1988) criticizing the malpractices of the government officials, the author introduces, at the very beginning, the idiomatic expression: (2) *jiè dōng fēng* 借东风 (borrow east wind) 'take advantage of a favorable situation'. However, he immediately specifies that it is to be taken in this particular case with a drastically modified nonliteral interpretation: 'take advantage of the official corrupt practices to make huge profits in business'. Then, with this special nonliteral meaning, (2) is creatively manipulated throughout the entire discourse, giving rise to expressions such as: (2a) *sòng dōng fēng* 送东风 (present east wind) 'promote the unhealthy trend', and (2b) *shā dōng fēng* 杀东风 (stop east wind) 'check the unhealthy trend'.

Situational context generally involves such concrete factors as time, place, participants, relevant activities and happenings. Its effect on the creative usage of idiomatic expressions is a fascinating question, which I will set aside for a more detailed investigation.

Let us look at the third type of context, namely, background experience and knowledge. In the most general sense, meaning presupposes fundamental cultural background knowledge about "the world" (see Searle 1978); in a more specific sense, we can conceive of the context of concrete cultural experiences within which an expression is understood and used (see Fillmore 1976). Although the nonliteral meaning of an idiomatic expression could be known in generalized terms, true understanding of its actual usage requires knowing the specific experiential context of its

application. For instance, the Chinese idiomatic expression (1) zǒu hòu mén 走后门 (enter-by back door) 'use one's influential connections to gain an objective' and its English counterpart "to pull strings" may be regarded as more or less equivalent. The experiential base of the understanding and use of each is, nevertheless, culturally different. We can further imagine that if one came from another society where such practices and the like had never been experienced, then it might be rather difficult for him actually to comprehend the message at all. It is also important to see that the creative manipulations of an idiomatic expression, as shown in (1a-c), are crucially based on the understanding of relevant real-life experiences.

Cognitive basis. My contention is that the phenomenon of creative idiomaticity in question is linguistically feasible because the creative power resides in the underlying cultural conceptual system, which is based on the physical and intellectual experiences (cumulative historicity) of the community, and which is given instrumental shape by the linguistic system. I would therefore briefly explore the cognitive basis for creative idiomaticity.

Take the idiomatic expression (5) shā jī gěi hóu kàn 杀鸡给猴看 (kill chicken for monkey see) 'punish one as a warning to others'. The relationship between its literal and nonliteral meanings is grammatically unpredictable. Therefore, to change the nonliteral meaning through altering the literal meaning by componential substitution is inexplicable, from a purely linguistic point of view.

Conceptually, evoked by the expression with its nonliteral meaning is an abstract concept of a social practice of punishing with the real intent to signal a warning to others. The expression with its literal meaning, on the other hand, conjures in the mind an image of slaughtering a chicken before the eyes of some monkey(s). Given as a prerequisite for creative usage, the cultural nonliteral-literal association is assumed to be known and to be brought to consciousness, which, in this case, is based on the following bits of cultural knowledge. Monkeys by nature dread the sight of blood; to train them, a chicken is slain right before their eyes, which will scare them into obedience and docility. Humans, like animals, need to be frightened sometimes. When a human wrongdoer is punished in public, all the others will learn a lesson. With such cultural knowledge, a conceptual association is established between the two concepts



(corresponding to the nonliteral and literal meanings of the idiomatic expression) in the cultural conceptual system (cf. White 1987). This conceptual association is indeed conventionalized by the very existence, in the culturally inherited terminological resources of the language-culture community, of the ready-made idiomatic expression, which embodies a bit of traditional cultural knowledge or wisdom of interpreting one type of experience in terms of another type, and which is commonly used to express one culturally significant notion in terms of another. It is precisely such established cultural conceptual association that allows: (a) the more abstract, propositional concept (that which is usually linked with the nonliteral meaning) to be reconceptualized in terms of, or grasped by means of, the more concrete, imagerial one (that which is usually linked with the literal meaning); and (b) the more abstract, propositional concept, to be elaborated or modified, when called for by the need of a real-life experience, through elaborating or modifying the more concrete, imagerial concept with details of knowledge drawn from the source of some more clearly delineated experience (see Quinn & Holland 1987, Lakoff & Kovecses 1987, and Lakoff & Johnson 1980). On the basis of such underlying conceptual association and as a result of an art of conceptual creativity, the literal composition can be deliberately manipulated linguistically as a means to achieve a special end of nonliteral interpretation.

In an article (People's Daily, December 19, 1988) directed at the political and economic crises in current Chinese society, the author creatively manipulates the idiomatic expression, (5) *shā jī gěi hóu kàn* 杀鸡给猴看 (kill chicken for monkey see) 'punish one as a warning to others', to elaborate on the theme "who should be punished to warn whom". In his opinion, the basic nonliteral meaning of (5), when applied to the real-life experiences, ought to be qualified, in order to accentuate the supremacy of punishing the corrupt and law-breaking officials as a warning to all other officials. To achieve the ends, in the nonliteral interpretation, of discriminating between the officials and the common people and of identifying the due target of punishment--the officials (rather than the masses) who have much more power and cause much greater destruction engaging in wrongdoings--the following folk beliefs are called upon to support the manipulation of the literal means of the expression. Monkeys are rare creatures of remarkable ability and character and chickens are mere

common animals of much less value. Thus the difference in value between monkeys and chickens can be used to stand for the contrast in social status between the officials and the people. Sacrificing the life of a chicken to discipline the monkeys is really unjust to the innocent chicken. To be fair, if the problem is the monkeys', a monkey ought to be punished instead of a chicken. Then a suggested modification of (5) is examined, which is in the form of (5a) shā hóu gěi jǐ kàn 杀猴给鸡看 (kill monkey for chicken see) 'punish an official in front of the people', with hóu 猴 (monkey) now symbolizing the superior and the ruling, and jǐ 鸡 (chicken) the subordinate, and with the monkey being the executed and the chickens the witnesses. While the proper target of punishing is singled out, namely, the officials, no matter how high their authority and how great their power, the author still considers (5a) inadequate in respect to understanding the problems in the actual experiential context and specifying the due maneuver and purpose of the punishment. The punishment of an official, he argues, should not be done just as a show in front of the common people. It should be unequivocally aimed at all other officials, so that it will have substantial effects. Motivated by such consideration of what should be seen, said and done about reality, the author again explores the imagerial concept and its underlying folk experiences and ideas. If the monkey is killed only in front of the chickens, then the other monkeys will not be scared at all since they are not seeing the blood with their own eyes. If the purpose is truly to frighten the monkeys, let them be present and witness the execution of one of their peers. Hence the author strongly suggests a change of (5a) into (5b): shā hóu gěi hóu kàn 杀猴给猴看 (kill monkey for monkey see) 'punish an official as a warning to all other officials'.

This paper has explored a unique phenomenon in imaginative idiomatic usage: the deliberate substitution of component(s) in the literal means of an idiomatic expression to achieve the end of a special nonliteral interpretation. The phenomenon, which I call creative idiomaticity, cannot be satisfactorily accounted for in terms of purely computational creativity or strictly noncompositional idiomaticity. Three aspects of cultural knowledge are prerequisite to such creative idiomatic usage, in particular, the knowledge of the nonliteral-literal association, and the knowledge of the experiential context in which the idiomatic expression is understood and used. I sug-

gest that, with the culturally inherited, ready-made idiomatic expression, the conceptual association is conventionally established between the more abstract, propositional concept and the more concrete, imagerial one (corresponding to the nonliteral and the literal meanings of the expression). This association in the cultural conceptual system allows the former to be reconceptualized in terms of the latter; it also allows the former to be elaborated or modified through elaborating or modifying the latter. The phenomenon of creative idiomaticity under discussion is linguistically feasible because the creative power resides in the underlying cultural conceptual system. It is deep-rooted in substantive cultural experience, originates through profound understanding and creative thinking, and is expressed with innovative talent.

#### Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank Akira Yamamoto for his valuable advice on this study.

#### References:

- Chomsky, N. 1986. Knowledge of language: Its nature, origin, and use. New York: Praeger.
- Cowie, A. 1983. In R. Mackin & I. McCaig (eds.) Oxford dictionary of current idiomatic English. Oxford, vol. 2, p.xvi.
- Fillmore, C. 1976. Frame semantics and the nature of language. Origins and evolution of language and speech, ed. by S. Harnad et al. (Annals of the New York Academy of Science, 280), 20-32. New York.
- Fish, S. 1973. How ordinary is ordinary language? New Literary History 5.41-54.
- Fraser, B. 1970. Idioms within transformational grammar. Foundations of Language 6.22-42.
- Friedrich, P. 1979. Language, context, and the imagination. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gibbs, R. 1986. Skating on thin ice: Literal meaning and understanding idioms in conversation. Discourse Processes 9.17-30.
- Grace, G. 1981. An essay on language. Columbia, South Carolina: Hornbeam.
- Haiman, J. 1980. Dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Lingua 13.329-57.
- He, Z. 1988. Idiomaticity: From the perspectives of cultural knowledge and actual usage. Proceedings of the 1988 Mid-America Linguistics Conference Papers.
- Keesing, R. 1979. Linguistic knowledge and cultural

- knowledge: Some doubts and speculations. *American Anthropologist* 81.14-36.
- Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- , and Z. Kovecses. 1987. The cognitive model of anger inherent in American English. *Cultural models in language and thought*, ed. by D. Holland & N. Quinn, 195-221. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nattinger, J. 1980. A lexical phrase grammar for ESL. *TESOL Quarterly* 14.337-44.
- Pawley, A. and F. Syder. 1983. Natural selection in syntax: Notes on adaptive variation and change in vernacular and literary grammar. *Journal of Pragmatics* 7.551-79.
- Quinn, N. and D. Holland. 1987. Culture and cognition. *Cultural models in language and thought*, ed. by D. Holland & N. Quinn, 3-40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. 1978. Literal meaning. *Erkenntnis* 13. 207-24.
- Weinreich, U. 1969. Problems in the analysis of idioms. *Substance and structure of language*, ed. by J. Puhvel, 23-81. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- White, G. 1987. Proverbs and cultural models. *Cultural models in language and thought*, ed. by D. Holland & N. Quinn, 151-72. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.