

Idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms in English

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Abstract. This article is about the following issues:

- Defining the concepts of “idiomatic variants” and “synonymous idioms”
- Criteria for the distinction between idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms
- Forms and signs of idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms

1. Introduction

Several linguists have given a lot of definitions about an idiom basing on its fixed characteristics. For example, “An idiom is a phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit” [1]. Sharing the same point of view, Thomas Hill (1979 [2]) considered an idiom as a fixed group of words with a special different meaning from the meaning of several words. The fixed characteristics of an idiom can be realized as follows:

- Form: The words of an idiom are generally fixed. It means that the components forming an idiom are unchanged in using.

- Structure: The fixed characteristic of structure of an idiom is expressed by the fixed order of the components forming an idiom.

In fact, we can see a lot of idioms violating the principles of their fixed characteristics such as to swear like a bargee - to swear like a trooper, to die a dog’s death - to die like a dog,

one in a thousand - one in a million etc. This gives us some questions as follows:

Are the idioms above the idiomatic variants or synonymous idioms?

What criteria make a clear distinction between idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms?

What are the forms and signs of idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms?

2. Idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms in English

2.1. What is meant by “idiomatic variants”?

Variant is something that differs in form only slightly from something else, as a different spelling or pronunciation of the same word [3].

It can be said that phonetic variation of words has its own limitation performed by synonyms. It means that the forms of the words change but their contents are the same. That a word is pronounced in two ways makes two phonetic variants of a word.

Basing on the structures of synonymous idioms, we can give the concept of idiomatic variants as follows:

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Idiomatic variants are idioms having the same contents and grammatical structures or having different components belonging to the same field of meaning.

2.2. What is meant by “synonymous idioms”?

Synonymy (synonymia in ancient Egyptian) means “the same name” and displays the relationship between two expressions which are literal but not identical [4]. Literality is the correspondence or something in the same denotatum (events, objects), or something in the same significance (something displayed belongs to the language). In other word, expression A and expression B are synonymous if their outsides are not the same (form A is different from form B) but their insides are the same (content A = content B). Synonymous units including synonymous words and idioms are the exceptions of the synonymous expressions.

It can be said that Russian linguists have recorded great achievements of synonymy, especially synonymous idioms. In modern Russian, synonymous idioms are considered as idiomatic groups of words which have the same contents but different expressive colours belonging to different functional styles of the language.

Therefore, synonymous idioms are idioms having the same contents but different

structures or having the same structures but different components belonging to different fields of meaning.

Idioms are language units functioning as words; however, they are formed by many lexical words. Therefore, synonymous idioms are more complex than synonyms of words because they are connected with idiomatic variants.

2.3. Criteria for the distinction between idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms

In order to make a clear distinction between idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms, we focus on two criteria: meanings and grammatical structures. Meanings are based on the same or different images. Grammatical structures are based on the same or different structures. For example, to take into one’s head and to take into one’s mind are considered as idiomatic variants. These idioms have the same meaning and grammatical structure. Moreover, their meaning is based on the same image. In other word, head and mind are two components belonging to the same field of meaning. We consider as angry as a bear and as angry as a bull as synonymous idioms because bear and bull belong to different fields of meaning.

The differences between idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms can be shown as follows: (Diagram 1, 2).

Diagram 1. Idiomatic variants

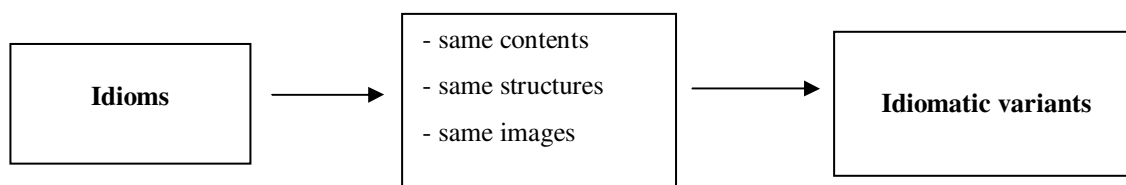
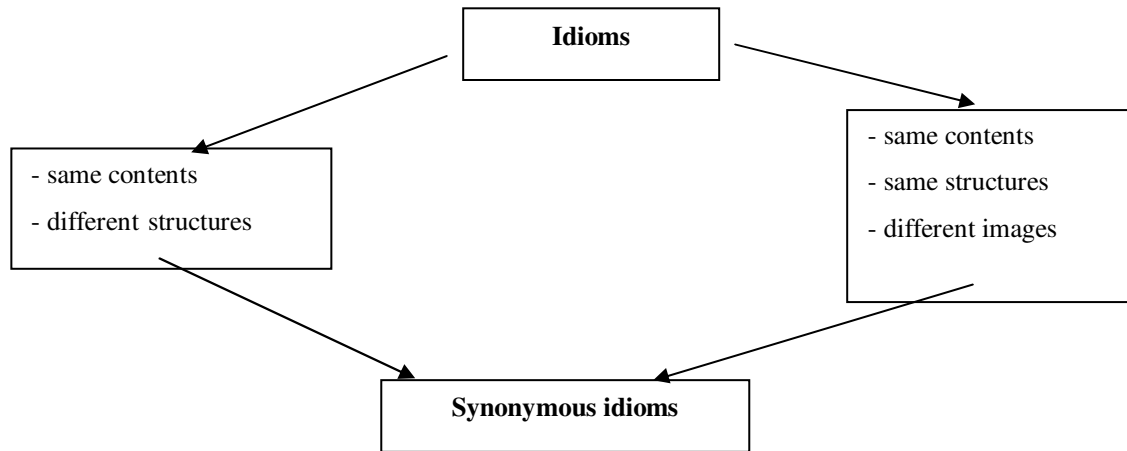


Diagram 2. Synonymous idioms



2.4. Forms of idiomatic variants" and synonymous idioms

2.4.1. Forms of idiomatic variants

Basically, from the criteria for the distinction between idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms, we can refer to the following basis groups:

- Idiomatic variants basing on the change of their component orders (A and B = B and A), e.g. on and off - off and on.

- Idiomatic variants with their components replaced by synonyms, e.g. to come apart - to come asunder.

- Idiomatic variants with their components replaced by words or expressions having the same lexical-semantic field, e.g. to get a share of the cake - to get a slice of the cake.

Basing on the meanings and the forms of idiomatic variants and their base idioms with their components replaced by words or expressions having the same lexical-semantic field, we can consider this kind of idiomatic variants as an intermediary between variation and synonymy.

2.4.2. Forms of synonymous idioms

Idioms are said to be synonymous when they have the same contents but different

structures or have the same structures but different components belonging to different fields of meaning. Basing on the two criteria (meanings and structures), we can refer to the following groups:

- Synonymous idioms having different structures (Form A \neq Form B; Content A = Content B), e.g. to have a head on one's shoulders - to have one's head screwed on the right way.

- Synonymous idioms having the same figurative contents basing on different images, e.g. as busy as a heaver - as busy as a bee.

2.5. Signs of idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms

2.5.1. Signs of idiomatic variants

It is easy to realize that the components, especially verbs and nouns, of an English idiom can be replaced by units which are synonymous or belong to the same field of meaning. For example, the verb scream in the idiom to scream blue murder can be replaced by the verb cry, but the meaning of the idiom is still the same. We can see this in a lot of idioms such as to get one's blood up - to have one's blood up, to welcome with open arms - to greet with open

arms, and to find the length of someone's feet - to know the length of someone's feet which are idiomatic variants.

The idiomatic variants in English are the other forms of idioms whose meanings are the same as the original idioms. In other word, when one (or more components) of the original idiom is (are) replaced by another (other components) belonging to the same field of meaning, we consider this the idiomatic variant. These can be concretized as follows:

- A verb (a verb phrase) replaced by another belonging to the same field of meaning, e.g. to get one's back up - to set one's back up - to put one's back up.

- A noun (a noun phrase) replaced by another belonging to the same field of meaning, e.g. to take into one's head - to take into one's mind.

- An adverb replaced by another belonging to the same field of meaning, e.g. to come apart - to come asunder.

- A conjunction replaced by another belonging to the same field of meaning, e.g. to make as if - to make as though.

- An adjective replaced by another belonging to the same field of meaning, e.g. to have a great mind to - to have a good mind to.

- A preposition replaced by another, e.g. to escape by the skin of one's teeth - to escape with the skin of one's teeth.

In addition, like words, English idioms can form sentences; therefore, some components of the idioms such as possessive adjectives, objects of personal pronouns can themselves change in order to keep the agreement among the components in the sentences.

2.5.2. Signs of synonymous idioms

It can be said that synonyms are different words with identical or at least similar meanings. Words that are synonyms are said to be synonymous and the state of being a synonym is called synonymy. In the figurative sense, two words are often said to be synonymous if they have the same connotation.

Synonyms can be any parts of speech (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, or prepositions), as long as both members of the pair are same part of speech.

In English many synonyms evolved from a mixture of Norman French and English words, often with some words associated with the Saxon countryside ("folk", "freedom") and synonyms with the Norman nobility ("people", "liberty").

Two idioms are said to be synonymous if they have different structures but the same contents. not to turn a hair (verbal phrase) and without turning a hair (prepositional phrase) are synonymous idioms. This kind of synonymous idioms is not very common in English.

As we know, idioms are the language units which are about the same as words. Therefore, they are able to be synonymous with words. Two idioms are also said to be synonymous idioms if they have different components belonging to different fields of meaning, but their contents are the same. For example, the following idioms are synonymous with each other although they have different meaning colours:

Bases	Synonymous idioms
	as drunk as a fish
as drunk as	as drunk as a lord
	as drunk as a skunk
	to swear like a trooper
to swear like	to swear like a bargee
	as busy as a heaver
as busy as	as busy as a bee

3. Conclusion

- Idioms are considered as variants of each other when they have the same contents and grammatical structures or have different components belonging to the same field of meaning.

- Idioms are said to be synonymous when they have the same contents but different structures or have the same structures but different components belonging to different fields of meaning.

- Forms and signs of idiomatic variants and synonymous idioms in English can be summarized as follows:

Idiomatic variants	
Forms	Signs
Idiomatic variants basing on the change of their component orders	A and B = B and A
Idiomatic variants with their components replaced by synonyms	a verb (a verb phrase), a noun (a noun phrase), an adverb, a conjunction, an adjective
Idiomatic variants with their components replaced by words or expressions having the same lexical-	a verb (a verb phrase), a noun (a noun phrase), an adverb, an adjective,

Synonymous idioms		a preposition
Forms	Signs	
Synonymous idioms having different structures	B	Form A \neq Form B Content A = Content B
Synonymous idioms having the same figurative contents basing on different images	a verb phrase, a noun (a noun phrase)	

References

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- [3] *The American heritage dictionary of the English language*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 2000.
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Biến thể đặc ngữ và thành ngữ đồng nghĩa trong tiếng Anh

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- Khái niệm “biến thể đặc ngữ” và “thành ngữ đồng nghĩa”
- Tiêu chí phân biệt các biến thể đặc ngữ và thành ngữ đồng nghĩa
- Hình thái và dấu hiệu của các biến thể đặc ngữ và thành ngữ đồng nghĩa