IDIOMATIC EXPRESSION AND THE PROBLEM OF USAGE IN A SECOND LANGUAGE SITUATION

BY

NGWOKE, FESTUS UWAKWE
PG/MA/05/40336

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA,
NSUKKA.

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Dr. Sam Onuigbo
Project Supervisor

Dr. Sam Onuigbo
Head of Department

External Examiner
DEDICATION

To my beloved family and

Almighty father for His

infinite mercies.
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ABSTRACT

Many aspects of the English language pose a lot of problems to most second users of the language. Idiomatic expression is one of these. The level of ignorance displayed by most second language users in the use of English idioms is quite appalling. Most often, this can be seen in our national dailies, student’s class works and essays and other areas of language use. This situation has been caused by the nature/peculiarities of idioms, the neglect of most teachers/researchers and non-appreciation of the relevance of this important linguistic phenomenon. Worse still, the problem in the nature of idioms is very complex in respect to its defiance to grammatical and logical conventions. Attempts by scholars in this area have remained scanty hence the perpetuation of misuse/abuse of idiomatic expression at all levels. To this point, it is the intention of this work to examine the rampant cases of misuse of idiomatic expressions in a second language situation which have continued to wreck serious havoc without many people being perturbed. It is also a call for a serious rethink in the second language user’s approach to this linguistic aspect.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

For almost all ardent users of English, idiomatic expressions pose serious problems in the area of acquisition, usage and interpretation. This situation has made it possible for the problems to continue to rear its ugly head in the entire language usage; for if a problem is identified, it would be halved. And notably, most problems remain unsolved because they are not identified.

So, the greatest reason for the existing problem in the acquisition, use and interpretation of idioms lies in the fact that most second language users of English do not know that many idiomatic expressions are usually misused and misinterpreted. However, this research examines both the present situation as it affects non-recognition of existing problems and the reasons for the lingering problems. These include the peculiarities of idiomatic expressions in terms of idiosyncrasies, structure, background of learners and the general approach of users to this important aspect of linguistic heritage.

Without any doubt, the background of students as learners of English as a second language predisposes them to a lot of inherent problems in the learning of the entire language and idiomatic expression is not an exception. Akindele and Adegbite (1999/2005:141) explain that

the learner of English in Nigeria encounters some problems in terms of language development. Apart from the fact that the agents of exposure are limited, even those agents available as teachers and reinforcers also may have their own weakness in terms of lack of competence, experience and dedication of duty.

This goes a long way to show that there are many inherent problems in language learning. Specifically, learners may be said to be totally deprived of genuine situation that would
enhance the learning of idiomatic expression. This is because most teachers of English are not grounded in the peculiarities of idioms. They, therefore, have little or nothing to offer in this respect.

Critically, one may not wonder much why this situation is deteriorating especially as the teaching of idioms is almost ignored in the entire senior secondary school curriculum. Precisely, in the Enugu State Scheme of Work for Senior Secondary School English, idiomatic expression only appeared for two periods of forty minutes each during the second term of the third year. One actually wonders what two periods would do for three years of basic academic foundation. This is undoubtedly almost the same in the whole country. Obviously, this creates a big vacuum, which contributes generally to the poor acquisition, use and interpretation of this special linguistic device.

On a final note, the approach by second language users of English is far from being encouraging. There is virtually no aspect of the English Language that is meticulously used in Nigeria. ‘Nigerian style’ exists in Spoken English, Syntax, Semantics as well as Idiomatic Expression. Here, the issue of ‘Nigerian style’ brings about immeasurable deviation, misuse and misinterpretation. In other words, there is misplacement of wrong expressions for correct and acceptable one. Our daily newspapers and magazines are not really helping matters as many of such styles are prevalent in most of them. In short, the situation is far from being improved and requires all hands to the pump. Unfortunately, this approach or style is never a way out of the current state rather it worsens the situation especially as it concerns the peculiar nature and difficulty associated with the learning of idioms.

If Americans who use English as a mother tongue find idioms difficult, what would be the fate of second language users like Nigerians? Of course, the problem is even compounded with the peculiar situation in Nigeria where there is nothing like early training in this aspect of language. There is no doubt that there exist some problems to worry about.
These problems, of course, call for detailed examination which this research intends to achieve.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of any research is to identify problems in a particular area of study with a view to solving them - proffering remedies or solutions to the problems so identified. The case here is not different. In this research work, one examines the excruciating problems existing in the use and interpretation of idioms especially in a second language situation like Nigeria.

Part of the objectives of this research is to do an in-depth exposition of the peculiar problems associated with acquisition, use and interpretation of idiomatic expressions. Edgar and Ednar (1951) reflected clearly on this situation: “Another practical problem arises from the fact that preposition is established in many formulas or idioms in combination with other words. There is no logical basis for these combinations”. In the same vein, Bolaji (2004:578) lends credence to this when he opines that

we should mention one special class of collocations which can be particularly difficult for the non-native learner. This is the class known as idioms, or idiomatic expressions [ ]. They can be particularly problematic because they are collocations whose meanings cannot be deduced from the meaning of the individual collocations in them, and so have to be learnt as wholes.

From these observations, it is very obvious that a peculiar problem exists with collocations of idioms generally and that is even more serious with the second language users.

Another area of keen interest in this research is the examination of the problems associated with use and interpretation of idioms especially as it concerns the second language users in Nigeria. This research, therefore, examines one of the perennial problems of poor standard of the English Language.
This work further examines other problems in the use and interpretation of idioms in a second language situation. This includes the inability of most second language users to distinguish between idiomatic and non-idiomatic collocations, inability to appreciate the peculiar nature of idioms which would facilitate appropriateness and effective usage and finally the inability to appreciate the vital essence of idioms in language which Anyachonkeya (2004) elaborates thus: “they are fashionable and exploited in the figurative use of language with a centered emphasis on idiomatic expression.” The solutions are pragmatically designed to give a new face to the very poor approach to language especially as it concerns this peculiar combination of words (idioms).

1.3 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Most Nigerians in their use of English display a level of ignorance in the use and interpretation of English idioms. This has led to the misuse and misinterpretation of this important aspect of language in the students’ class works and essays. The worst of this situation is that the problem is not receiving any significant attention in form of amelioration. Hence, the problem is increasing uncontrollably almost among every second language user in Nigeria.

Another problem that ignited this research bothers on the fact that this area is more or less neglected by many researchers. It is yet to gain much attention of researchers especially in Nigeria. In other words, there is dearth of material in this area with an in-depth exposition on the peculiarities, idiosyncrasies, nature, structure, and so on which makes this area particularly difficult to learners. For these reasons, the problem has continued to linger.

Finally, the non-appreciation of the relevance of idiomatic expression in communication and language as a whole especially by second language users further allows the permeation of misuse and misinterpretation of idioms. It is the existence of these problems that have ignited this research work. The academic programme designers have as well neglected this vital aspect of linguistic heritage. A close look at the senior secondary
school English curriculum and programmes of related departments in universities show a very appalling situation in the area.

1.4 RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

This work, first of all, tries to establish the fact that idiomatic expressions have been misused and misinterpreted by most second language users. And from this perspective would give an in-depth x-ray of the problems that have given rise to the said situation.

Obviously, there is a gradual abuse of language from the aspect of idiomatic expression with almost everyone not being perturbed about the situation. The government through the academic programme designers has almost ignored this aspect entirely in the curriculum at both intermediate and advanced level. Subsequently, researcher/teachers have paid less attention to the existing problems in the use and interpretation of idioms especially as it concerns peculiarities, idiosyncrasies, and structure of this important area of language. And then many users have continued to misuse or misinterpret idioms with little or no recourse to the precepts of appropriate usage.

This work also ensures that the causes of the proliferation of these problems are clearly pinpointed. The factors mentioned above, of course, forms the bedrock upon which the work attempts to proffer as many solutions as possible. The recommendations if adhered to would leave no stone unturned in changing the status-quo. Then, the entire stakeholders in the use of language; the government, teachers/researchers and learners/students would definitely ensure that tremendous improvement is realized in the appreciation of idioms. This, invariably, will show by lips and bound in most second language users’ communication and general language use. In other words, second language users especially in Nigeria can then understand and be understood by native speakers of the language without any distortion. And this will allow this important aspect of language according to Gower (1973) to “perform a necessary function in the domestic economy of speech”.
1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This research is aimed at examining the meaning/nature of idioms, behaviour/peculiarities, use and interpretation, acquisition/identification as well as the importance of idioms in communication. Also examined in this work is the issue of misuse and misinterpretation of idioms in a second language situation. It is also the intention of this research to give an x-ray of the present status quo as it concerns the existence, appreciation and neglect of idiomatic expression. This shall be possible through a critical appraisal of the existing contribution of some scholars in the area. And this would as well throw more light on the roles and expectations of stakeholders which includes government in respect of academic policy makers, teachers/researchers and learners/students. The purpose of this would be to portray clearly the extent of misuse and misinterpretation of idiomatic expression without which there would be lots of breaches and distortions in our communication and use of language.

Another aspect very paramount to this work is the use of pragmatic approach to bring to the fore many examples and situations where this area has been abused by second language users. This shall dwell on the aspect of grammatically, compositionality and substitutability which are the commonest means of the intrusion. A questionnaire shall be the substantiating tool of analysis.

Finally, this work would as a matter of necessity proffer as many solutions as possible which if adhered to would forestall the deteriorating situation on this important area of language. And this shall then make way for the conclusion of this work.
1.6 METHODOLOGY

In this work, more than one approach has been employed to arrive at the set goals. The approaches are textual approach and questionnaire approach. They have been extensively used to arrive at the conclusion.

The textual approach takes precedence in this work. It was employed to give an in-depth explanation of the general situation as it affects the non-appreciation, misuse and misinterpretation of idioms in a second language situation. This was achieved by examining in detail the meaning, nature, structure and peculiarities of idioms. This approach was also very useful in the examination of the contributions of some scholars so far in this area. From this point, a lot of insight was drawn.

The questionnaire was used in this research work to bring to focus the specific areas of defeat. From this, a more accurate analysis and area of emphasis was established. The use of these approaches helped in proffering of solutions.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

It is very pertinent that in a work like this, one cannot make any headway without an appraisal or critical examination of the scholars’ veritable contributions on the particular area and the related areas. It is also important to note that many researchers have not ventured deeply into this area. However, that does not impede the desire for a research in this area. Rather it is a source of inspiration. Because of the complex nature of idiomatic expression, this aspect is discussed under different perspectives as follows:

a. Origin and meaning of idioms
b. Nature of idioms
c. Peculiarity of idioms
d. Structure of idioms
e. Features of idioms

2.1 ORIGIN AND MEANING OF IDIOM

An idiom by origin according to Barnet and Stubbs (1977:241) is from a Greek word meaning ‘peculiar’ which “is a fixed group of words, peculiar to a given language.” This stands as a pointer to the first set of people who started to make use of idioms and the perception for which it was used. This perception, which started with the original denotation of the word ‘peculiar’, has continued till this day. The understanding of this perception has remained the base on which all elaboration or expansion on this area makes it anchor. It is important to note that apart from the trace of the word ‘idiom’ from the Greek, idioms generally have different origins, which to a large extent determine the interpretation of most idioms. Some are traceable from the origin of the component parts with a metaphorical or metonymical association that is basic in human cognitive ability. It is possible that even when a component part is borrowed from another language into the English language it still retains its associated meaning in the making of a particular idiomatic expression. For
instance, the idiom *to get, or give the sack* probably has French origin and stems from the fact that French workmen carried their tools from one job to another in a bag and the French word for the bag is ‘sac’, so it is easy to see how this word would relate to the meaning of this idiom. It is as well noted that many idioms spring from different customs and remarkable incidents that have taken place a long time in history.

Furthermore, we shall examine the meaning of an idiom as it relates to the original denotation of the words from different scholars. Kierzek (1939:271) sees an idiom as “an expression peculiar to a language, not readily analyzable from its grammatical construction or from the meaning of its component parts.” Obviously, the emphasis on peculiarity is made as noted above and this is specific to a particular language. This further emphasizes the non-disposition of its grammatical construction or component parts to analyzability. That is to say that the component parts of idiom seldom accept analyses, rather they are taken as a whole.

In a similar view, Robertson (1986:422) sees an idiom as “a syntactical pattern peculiar to a certain language and hence often untranslatable, in literal equivalents, into another.” The issue of peculiarity is not unconnected here even though he made reference to it as a syntactical pattern. In his explanation, he makes it clear that an idiom is untranslatable in literal equivalents and this is another quality subscribing to the peculiarity of idiom in a particular language.

Many other scholars made viable contribution to the meaning of idiom even though it is not directly centered on peculiarity but indirectly from some other domains of idiom. As a matter of importance, we shall go further to x-ray their views: Loreto and Ian (1986:242) see idioms “as phrases whose meaning cannot be deduced from an understanding of the individual words in the phrase”. The emphasis here is on idiom as a type of expression whose meaning is not deducible from the constituent parts. In other
words, he sees idioms as certain combinations of words that have meaning which differ from the combination of their individual elements.

In the same way, Fowler (1986:410) has this to say:

idioms are expressions in any language whose meanings cannot be determined simply from the words in them or whose component words cannot be predicted by any rule of grammar, often, they violate conventional grammar.

Apart from the aspect of peculiarity in terms of the deduction of meaning of idiom, it is also clear here that the possession of this special feature/peculiarity enables it to sometimes violate the conventional rules of grammar. This goes a long way to say that the peculiarity encoded in the meaning of idioms is indispensable because it would be ready to violate the rules of grammar to live up to its expectations.

Hodges and Whitten (1984:255) see an idiom as “something beyond the simple combination of the definition of its individual words.” This view is very closely related to Leggett (1961:298) view that “an idiom is an expression that does not follow normal pattern of language or that has a total meaning not suggested by its separate words.” At a closer look, one will see that scholars who have made veritable contribution are not at all far apart. They have always one or two things to share in common about idioms. The emphasis of Hodges and Whitten is that an idiom is a special combination with a special (peculiar) meaning different from the constituent part. This, Leggett subscribes to in his emphasis of violation of normal pattern of language with clues of meaning not based on the component words.

Mckernan (1988:648) in his own view asserts that “an idiom is a unique, non-literal expression in a particular language. [ ] An idiom involves a unique phrasing to create a certain meaning.” Emphasis here is on its uniqueness, which is not far apart from peculiarity. Moreso, the focus on a particular language has almost remained general to all contributors/researchers.
2.2 NATURE OF IDIOMS

A closer look at the nature of idioms will show clearly the situations surrounding the existence of idioms. Of course, the business of this chapter will include the behaviour of idioms and reasons for such behaviour via its disposition to other aspects of syntactic constituents especially as x-rayed by different scholars. We shall first examine Wales (1989:51) view thus:

idioms most usually denote phrases or strings of words which are idiosyncratic (idiomatic) in that they are language specific not easily translated into another language and in that their meaning is not easily determined from the meanings of the constitutive parts”.

From his point of view, it becomes obvious that an idiom is characterized by special features which make it behave the way it does. They are untranslatable into another language and meaning is taken as whole not as constitutive parts. This exactly is what Wales emphasizes.

From another perspective, Gibbs and Nayak (1989:305) opines that

idioms vary regarding the extent to which the meaning of their individual constituent contribute to the overall figurative interpretation and [also] vary in their degree of compositionality (analyzability) and people have strong intuitions enabling them to judge an idiom as being decomposable or non-decomposable.

Here, we can observe that all idioms do not display or show themselves in the same way as regards the contribution of individual words to the idiomatic interpretation. Sometimes, some words point as arrows to the figurative meaning but most often are arbitrarily. This situation paves way for the second aspect of Gibbs and Nayak view that idioms vary in their degree of compositionality. And that is why people can make different intuitions about different idioms. Analyzable idioms are easier to acquire, understand and modify. In other words, analyzable idioms are easier for children to acquire and faster for adults to process.
This situation is very typical of idioms because of the verifiable complex nature of their existence.

In a bid to display the varied nature of idioms Villavicencio et al (2005:3) have this to say:

even though some idioms are fixed, and do not present internal variation, such as *adhoc*, there is a large proportion of idioms that allow different degrees of internal variability and with a variable number of elements.

From this view, it is obvious that idioms behave differently, while some allow for internal modifications, passivisation and topicalization and so on while others do not. This has endemically posed a lot of problem to users of English idioms especially second language users. Here, it becomes obvious that the standard belief that idioms are long words with the internal semantics of their constituents playing no role during processing is inconsistent.

Levorato in Gibbs and Nayak (1989:306) posit further that “the relationship between an idioms form and meaning is not completely arbitrary is consistent in general research.” This shows that idioms have a complex nature in terms of form, that is, the structure is not fixed visa vis the meaning which also is not based on the constitutive parts. This implies that the form of an idiom has little or nothing to do with the interpretation or meaning of that idiomatic structure thereby denoting a level of arbitrariness at all times. Also important to note here is the standard belief that idioms are long words with the internal semantics of their constituents playing no role during processing is inconsistent. This goes a long way to reflect the complexity and arbitrariness in idioms.

Conspicuous about the nature of idioms is the fact that it defies logic as is conventional of other levels of linguistic representation. Ifill (2002:2) asserts thus “if natural language had been designed by a logician, idioms would not exist.” For this reason, it has been crying out for explanations as this situation has made it difficult for appreciation or
processing of idioms. However, idioms have continued to exist with many theorist of language seeking an explanation for the behaviour of idioms even though it defies logic.

Ifill (2002:3) notes, that “idioms are fixed expressions to the extent that the elements which make up the idioms are limited in the kinds of variability they are able to demonstrate.” They differ immensely from literal expression and must be taken as a whole for processing of meaning rather than the combination of the meanings of its component parts. However, there is limit to its fixedness and variability. Some idioms are fixed, and do not present internal variations while a large proportion of idioms allow different degrees of internal variability. The degree of fixedness points to some kind of internal structure existing for idioms from where we can see a split in the type of structure. This is the transparent and non-transparent idiom, which are in other words called opaque and non-opaque idioms.

Villavicencio et al (2005:5) give a supportive insight that “idioms are commonly thought as metaphors that have become fixed or fossilized over time while in some cases the metaphor is transparent and can be easily understood even by non-native speakers [ ]”. In such cases where the metaphor is opaque and the idiom is not known by the hearer it can lead to misinterpretation.

Nunberg et al (1974:55) in a similar submission assert that “idioms are a highly heterogeneous kind of multiword expression, ranging from (semi-) fixed cases [] which only allow morphological inflection, to more flexible one [] which can undergo different types of syntactic variation and modification”. This shows that an idiom does not have a steady or fixed behaviour enables idioms to yield to some other features like passivisation, variable structure and so on.

Fowler (1970:73) in his own view about the nature of idioms notes:

grammar and idiom are independent categories, being applicable to the same material; they sometimes agree and sometimes disagree about particular specimens
of it. The most that can be said is that what is idiomatic is far more often grammatical than ungrammatical, but this is worth saying, because grammar and idioms are incompatibles. The fact is that they are distinct but usually in alliance.

Leggett et al (1961:299) supports this when he says, “many idioms have unusual grammatical construction and make little sense if taken literally”. In most situations, idioms are not measured or analyzed by the conventions of grammar. They are seen as distinct components and with peculiarity depending on their situation.

Bolaji (2004: 578) reflects on the nature of idioms in a little different perspective thus: “[ ] the semantic unity of idioms is usually so complete that they typically enter into meaning relations (including collocations) like single lexical items, regardless of their grammatical form or function.” Obviously, the emphasis is centered on the meaning of idiom dependent on the whole rather than the constitutive parts. Also clear in his explanation is the fact that grammatical forms do not affect its corporate existence. In other words, it defies some grammatical conventions as already noted. Swift in Gowers (1973:241) notes that when anything in his book is called ‘good English’, ‘idioms’ or ‘idiomatic’, “what is meant is that usage has established it as correct”. Idiom does not conflict with grammar or logic. It is usually grammatically and logically neutral. From this perspective, it is basic that the nature of idioms requires no judgment or criticism as to its syntactical or compositional structure or status. What is known to be an idiom remains one irrespective of logical or grammatical conflict. In other words, if logic and grammar get in its way, so much the worse for logic and grammar. Logan in Gowers statement of substantiability notes further,

plainly a language which was all idiom and unreason would be impossible as an instrument of thought, but all languages permit the existence of a certain number of illogical expressions: and the fact that, in spite of their vulgar origin and illiterate appearance, they have succeeded in elbowing their way into our prose and poetry,
and even learned lexicons and grammars, is proof that they perform a necessary function in the domestic economy of speech.

This goes a long way to substantiate that naturally idiom has come to be part of language irrespective of its conventionalized situation.

2.3 PECULIARITY OF IDIOMS

Peculiarity according to Longman English Dictionary means “something that is a feature of only one peculiar place, person, situation etc.” To this point, it is obvious that some of the peculiarities of idiomatic expressions have been mentioned in the analysis of the nature of idioms. However, this sub-topic shall be concerned with features that are specific to idioms. We shall now look at the contributions of different scholars in this aspect.

Leggett et al (1961:298) sees idiom as “an expression established by usage and peculiar to a particular language.” The modality of usage of idiom is based on the context of form and existence.

Pulman (1986:3) in his own contribution notes that “the components of idiom have literal meanings but that these are not what is involved in their interpretation as an idiom [especially the idioms] known or characterized (metaphorically) as a frozen or dead metaphor one cannot arrive at an appropriate meaning for it by processing it as a metaphor”. He further asserts that

idioms have several meanings (or one radically under determined one) the correct one which can only be determined in the context of the idiom. And also perhaps the components do not in isolation have a meaning distinct from their occurrence in the idiom.

Gowers (1973:242) asserts that an idiom is defined by the (Oxford English Dictionary) O.E.D as “a peculiarity of phraseology approved by usage and often having meaning other than its logic or grammatical one.” The emphasis on usage is mentioned here
as well which implies that idiom defies other conventions or conditions except the condition of use. Usage remains the core determinant in the existence of idioms. He continues that what is meant by idiomatic is that usage has established it as correct. Of course, an idiom by this situation is not subjected to logic. Rather it is usually grammatically and logically neutral.

Loreto and Ian (1986:413) believe that idiom comprehends the specific characteristics of language, dialect or speech community. Idiom is not based on logic, nor is it the same in two languages or indeed in the same language at different times in its history. It may comprehend the syntactic, lexical and semantic idiosyncrasies of a language and seems to be learnt as we absorb the custom and conventions of our society.

We see clearly from this perspective that idioms adapt to a particular behaviour suitable to it in that language. For them, idioms of English are conventions, habits and idiosyncrasies that allow speakers of English to express their aspirations, fears, ideals, prejudices and occupations in a unique manner. In a further explanation, they make it clear that idioms can be totally opaque (i.e. there is no resemblance whatsoever between the meaning of the idiom and the meaning of the individual word).

Fowler (1970:73) tows the same line of thought when he opines that the most that can be said (about idioms) is that what is idiomatic is far more often grammatical than ungrammatical, but this is worth saying, because grammar and idiom are incompatibles. The fact is that they are distinct but usually in alliance.

In the same way Longman Dictionary of English Idioms notes that “almost all idiomatic phrases fail in one way or another to permit the usual grammatical operations which literal phrases will permit”. To this point, it sees an idiom as any form of expression that has established itself as the particular way preferred by English men (and therefore presumably characteristic of them) over other forms in
which the principle of abstract grammar, if there is such a thing, would have allowed the idea in question to be clothed.

The emphasis has continued to dwell on the fact that an idiom is established by usage and preferred for different purposes of making expression to produce the desired effect.

Bolaji (2004:579) points out that idiom is a special class of collocations which can be particularly difficult for the non-native learners. They can be particularly difficult because they are collocations whose meanings cannot be deduced from the meanings of the individual collocates in them, and so have to be learnt as wholes.

Here emphasis is on its peculiarity (special class) because meaning can only be learnt as a whole rather than the individual collocations or constituents. Also stressed is the fact that an idiom is particularly difficult especially to non-native learners of which the second language users are very much inclusive.

Vivanco (1986:24) sees idioms from the perspective that they “are lexical units bigger than words and are characterized in different ways. Notably there is much support to the view that even idioms are stored as constituents in the mental lexicon.” This actually shows the extent to which idioms should be approached. It should by this situation be acquired as a strange lexical item. As such, it implies that they peculiarly behave like lexicon and may be approached or appreciated in the same way.

Furthermore, Vivanco emphasizes that idioms are not so syntactically independent because they cannot always work as full sentences, but as part of it. They are unlike proverbs which represent a complete piece of information because they can work as sentence. In most cases, idioms are used as words, phrases and clauses but rarely used as sentences. It is far from having a static nature since it can be said that an idiom is peculiarly unstable in form.
2.4 STRUCTURE OF IDIOMS

Structure according to Trask (1993:263) refers to “the set of syntagmatic relations holding among the elements of a sentence or some, in other words, the particular way those elements are put together to make up that sentence or subpart”. In a simpler form, it is the sequence of linguistic units that are in a certain relationship to one another. In examination of the structure of idioms, we take a closer look at the views of scholars as it bothers on the relationship of collocations of idioms to other parts of the sentence or passage.

Gibbs (1993:29) in Ifill 2002 points out that “idiomatic language is remarkably complex and each phrase demands its own analysis in terms of its syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and conceptual properties.” Following this assertion, Ifill (2002) affirms that “this analysis is valuable, as it presents a minimal structure that seems to be common to all idioms”. These lines of thought obviously show that an examination of the study of the structure of idioms is important for the understanding of the nature and behaviour of idiom, figurative language and finally, of language itself.

Ifill (2002:2) argues that idioms are not frozen structureless atoms - they do not have significant internal structure, which is responsible for much of their behaviour. This structure consists of a relationship between the syntax of the idiomatic phrase and the idioms literal meaning (which will then give us a division into two types of idioms) as well as a continuity claim of head to dependent relations within idioms.

Jackendoff (1997) and Gazdar etal (1985) in Ifill (2002:11) support this when they suggested that “some idioms seem to have a more transparent structure than others.” In other words, certain idioms seem to closely resemble their non-idiomatic counterparts syntactically. These transparent idioms can be passivized. The syntax of the non-idiomatic version of the phrase directly maps to the syntax of the idiomatic phrase. They are made up of the same component structure in each phrase.
For example, *spill the beans* - *reveal the secret*

*Lay one’s card on the table* - *making one’s feeling known.*

The two examples show that the idiomatic version corresponds with the non-idiomatic counterpart syntactically.

On the other hand, non-transparent idioms are syntactically opaque, the elements of this form of idioms do not have a one-to-one mapping with the elements of the phrase’s actual non-idiomatic meaning. For example,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idiomatic</th>
<th>non-idiomatic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kick the bucket</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bite the dust</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above example, the idiomatic versions do not have one-to-one corresponding mapping with the non-idiomatic counterpart.

Jackendoff (1997) in Ifill argues further

one consequence of admitting idioms to the lexicon is that it permits them to have internal structure of some kind. If an idiom is a phrasal listeme, it represents a linguistics unit – it will have internal linguistic structure: syntax, semantics, morphology (and) phonology.

From this, he tries to justify that phrasal lexicon is by definition a phrase and will have the same linguistic make up. He tries also to show that examining to what extent idiom is fixed is a straightforward way of showing that idioms are atomic units, which have internal structure. He gave several examples of differences in the conjugation of verbs in idioms as evidence which indicates that idioms must have an internal structure.

Bolaji (2004:577) indirectly supports the above and thinks that

the semantic unity (of idiom) is usually so complete that they typically enter into meaning relations (including collocations) like single lexical items, and are therefore
generally treated as a single lexical items, regardless of their grammatical form or function.

The issue of single lexical item is the same as argued by Jackendoff, which is clearly reflected here.

Makkai (1992) in Ifill (2002:7) worked with a model of idioms which described levels of frozenness, and those idioms which were classified as completely frozen exhibit this kind of behaviour as shown by Jackendoff. This implies that there are some discrepancies in what is regarded as fixed or frozen atomic units. However, it has been widely noted that individual words in an idiom cannot be replaced by synonyms and still retain the idiomatic reading of the phrase and this is what qualifies them as fixed forms. In other words, the fixed quality of idioms is comparable to individual morphemes in words being non-interchangeable.

Zeavat 1995 in Ifill asserts that, “if phrasal idioms are fully lexical, then perhaps it is this same mechanism that keeps them fixed”. This does not support the notion that idioms are frozen atomic linguistic unit; but only goes a long way to establish the fact that the words of the idioms are fixed and this is a criterion that makes them idioms in the first place. However, he clarifies that “if idioms are really listeme, then it makes sense that they will have an analogous structure, in terms of fixedness to their companions in the lexicon, individual words.” And just as words can have internal structure, so can idioms.

Gazdar etal state that “some idioms, it seems, can accommodate interchangeable synonyms (or closely related words with different senses).” He substantiates that “the idea of lexical variability also points to some kind of internal structure if the individual parts of idioms are allowed to behave as individuals.” He further notes that multiple levels of representation are at work with the idioms and with the phonological and semantic levels playing their distinct roles.
Abelle 1995 studied French idioms using Lexicalized Tree Adjoining Grammar, and argued that an idiom’s syntactic structure is not fully predictable from its semantic representation. However, Ifill (2002:3) notes that even when idioms are studied within these theories they still must have structure, and this paper argues for what must be the minimal structural requirements of idioms in any theory of syntax. This obviously, for him, shows that idioms must always have structure irrespective of its form.

Conclusively, the issue of structure of idioms seems to be proved on the basis of its status as lexical, as well with the quality that it can accommodate interchangeable synonyms, exhibit levels of frozenness and that some have more transparent structures than others. Categorically, one would subscribe to the existence of structure in idioms based on the adduced arguments. Pulman (1986:2) elaborates it thus:

the problem is that unlike (most) lexical items, (most) idioms have considerable internal structure which seems to interact with the usual productive syntactic and semantic mechanisms of a language in ways that render a ‘look up’ approach impossible in general case. In other words, for a grammatical theory not to be found wanting in some crucial respect, it must allow for the interaction of the internal structure of idioms. However, it has been a major argument which has always been in favour of interaction of internal structure of the idioms in all theories of grammar.

2.5 FEATURES OF IDIOMS

This sub-topic is closely related to the nature of idioms already treated but for clarity and detail appreciation of idioms’ behaviour we decided to examine further the contribution of scholars in this area.
Pulman (1986:1) asserts that “what idioms have in common with other fixed elements is that their meanings are not deducible from the ordinary meaning of their components by the usual rules of compositional semantics.” This points to the fact that one of the commonest features of idioms is its fixity in terms of deduction of meaning.

Pulman notes again that “idioms are pervasive in all styles of language use.” It is very clear that idioms exist in all language with varied styles. The problem is that, most times, learners especially second language learners cannot recognize them. This, Pulman, pinpoints that

the problem is that unlike (most) lexical items, (most) idioms have considerable internal structure which seems to interact with the usual productive syntactic and semantic mechanisms of language in ways that render a ‘look-up’ approach impossible in the general case.

Many idioms are used in various languages without recognition because of their peculiarity. And this has continued to pose much problem in the appreciation, use and interpretation of idioms.

Another feature emphasized by Loreto and Ian (1986:414) is that idiomatic expressions are peculiarly problematic. They state that “because there are no general rules which we can analogize about idiomatic usages, this area can present particular difficulties for learners of a language.” They emphasize that many fluent users of English especially as second language users are aware of most idiomatic expressions.

Fowler (1986:410) tows the same line of thought when he opines that “because they are not governed by rules, idioms usually cause particular difficulty for people learning to speak and write a new language.” Specifically, he notes that second language learners find it difficult to choose appropriate prepositions at a particular situation.

There are many other features of idioms which are however manifested in the different forms of idioms. From this angle, Pulman notes that some idioms can appear in
syntactically variant forms while some seem to be a fairly resistant to some particular paraphrase”. Ifill in the same way notes that “we see a division between transparent idioms whose syntactic structure is the same as their counterparts and opaque ones whose syntactic structure is different from their counterparts.” Obviously, this division, to a large extent, dictates how the idioms behave as well as how they are characterized.

Pulman (1986:8) introduces another feature taking cognizance of the said variation when he says that “they are in the main capable of internal modification, that is, the components of the idioms which are being modified.” Ifill (2002:17) also notes that “another way that idioms can show variability from frozen form is through modification.” However, Gazdar 1985 in Ifill (2002:15) points out that “the idioms in which modification works are transparent, so their elements correspond to the elements of the non-idiomatic reading.” In this case, it is remarkable that the modification that work in the idioms make sense with the non-idiomatic paraphrases. Individual words within an idiom can also accept modifications but there are limits as to which ones can. Sometimes when modification occurs, the resultant effect is idiom breaking.

Ifill (2002:18) supports this briefly when he says, “the fixedness of idioms is a quality which not only characterizes them, but can fit in with a view of idioms as internally structural lexical items.” The issue of fixedness is not contestable; hence, it is a feature that depicts idioms as having an internal structure. The point is that, most cases, individual words in an idiom cannot be replaced by synonyms and still retains the idiomatic reading of the phrase fixed forms. It is for these situations that we can rarely find words for substitution, nominalization, comparatives or superlatives and change of number. Examples are shown thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kick the bucket</th>
<th>correct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hit the bucket</td>
<td>wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bite the dust</td>
<td>correct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Biting of the dust       wrong
One in blue moon       correct
Once in a bluer moon   wrong
Raining cats and dogs  correct
Raining a cat and a dog wrong

A portion of idioms allows different degrees of internal variability.
Undoubtedly, many second language users of English find the use of idioms very problematic. There are many reasons that give rise to these perennial problems. These include non-appreciation of this linguistic aspect in the second language learner’s everyday use; difficulty in acquisition because of the peculiarity, hence, its misuse in various situations.

Apart from the above, most second language users do no appreciate the vital need of idiomatic expression in speeches and writings. According to Leggett (1961:298) inexperienced writers sometimes think figurative language [idioms inclusive] is the monopoly of poets and novelists. In fact, it plays an important part in much prose and is one of the most effective ways of making meaning concrete.

This is one of the reasons why most second language learners do not appreciate idiom. They believe that idioms and other figurative languages belong to poets and novelists and therefore, make little or no attempt in using, acquiring or processing idioms. This may continue to worsen if nothing drastic is done in the foundation blocks of second language learners’ education.

The position of idiomatic expression as an aspect of the English Language curriculum in a second language situation like Nigeria is nothing to write home about. Without mincing words, idiomatic expression is one of the most important aspects of language almost forgotten in the secondary school scheme of work where a firm academic foundation is required. As earlier mentioned, the entire secondary education of six years has only two periods of forty minutes each for idiomatic expression in the third term of the sixth year. This situation makes it possible for some students not to have any encounter with this aspect till the end of their stay in secondary school especially with the many surrounding
problems in the entire educational system. The Departments of English and Literary Studies in most Universities and Colleges in Nigeria are nevertheless in a position to salvage the situation. It is this neglect in the scheme of learning of the English language that has brought about the second problem – the non-appreciation of idiomatic expression by second language learners. Obviously, one cannot appreciate what you don’t have deep knowledge of.

Another serious problem confronting the use of idiom by second language users is the difficulty in acquisition because of the peculiarities. Notably, peculiarity is very common and basic in the entire idea of idiomatic expression. In short, it is indispensable to the use and interpretation of idiom. This peculiarity has posed more problems to second language users. Bolaji (2004:577) substantiates that

idiom is a special class of collocation which can be particularly difficult for non-native learners. They can be particularly difficult because they are collocations whose meanings cannot be deduced from the meanings of the individual collocates in them, and have to be learnt as wholes.

From this, it is obvious that idiom takes a special case from where the meaning can be deduced from the whole rather than individual collocates. Another aspect of peculiarity is reflected by Loreto and Ian (1986:413) thus:

because there are no general rules which we can analogize about idiomatic usages, this area can present particular difficulties for learners of a language idioms have, in very many cases, defied conventional grammatical rules.

Even though efforts have been made by different scholars like Chomsky; Katz, Postal and Chafe to explicate the circumstances surrounding the issues of peculiarity, they have remained obvious. A paradigm that meets the criteria of simplicity, consistency and adequacy is yet to be inaugurated – Akwanya (1996:25). The peculiarities of idiom are summarized by Chafe in the following terms;
Ordinarily, idioms pose some difficulty to every user but they are particularly more problematic to second language users because of the inept knowledge about the nature of idioms. Bortfeld (2003:4) makes his own contribution in the same direction that given that idioms are used in virtually every language and because surface representations of similar concepts differ across languages, these phrases pose a particular difficult problem for language learners.

For the fact that idioms do not have a static meaning across languages a second language user is engulfed in another serious hurdle in the use of idiom.

It is important to note that many idioms come from the combination of preposition with adverbs, verbs or adjectives Mc Kernam (1988:648) shows this: “Many idioms arise from the use of preposition. Different preposition used with the same word often lead to completely different meanings.” This, of course, poses another set of problem to both native and non-native speakers (second language users) of the language. Hodges and Whitten (1984:255) note that “Native speakers use idiomatic English naturally and effectively, but once in a while they may have difficulty choosing idiomatic prepositions.” There is no doubt that this problem is even more acute for second language users. Leggett (1961:299) supports this completely when he submits that “for many writers the most troublesome idioms in English are those that require a particular preposition after a given verb or adjective according to the meaning intended.” Ordinarily, the preposition is a very complex and a confusing aspect of the English language especially to learner because idioms are not governed by specific rules. The problem seems to be on the increase. Fowler (1986:410) x-rays this thus:
because they are not governed by rules, idioms usually cause particular difficulty for people learning to speak and write a new language. For instance, those learning English as a second language find it easy to confuse certain prepositions such as *at/in, on, and of e.t.c.*

Finally, it is obvious that many second language users of English have serious problem in the use of idiomatic expression and that may persist especially with the fact that most second learners are not towing the desired steps for improvement. Edgar and Ednah (1951:124) reflect that

> we know these formulars ‘by instinct’ that is, by early training and long familiarity.

But this, which caries us through most difficulties in our languages, does not always protect us here, since the formulars are extremely varied and sometimes not frequently met with. Particularly for Americans who have heard another language spoken often in their childhood, this field presents problems.

From this, one can see that second language users in Nigeria have a long way to go especially with poor training, lack of familiarity and obvious peculiarity associated with this linguistic aspect.

### 3.1 IDENTIFICATION OF IDIOMS

One of the greatest threats to the use of idioms is its identification in speech and written discourse. Undoubtedly, idiomatic expression is affected by improper or poor identification. Obviously, a first encounter with a particular expression can hardly give a clear signal of such an idiom. Eyisi in Onuigbo (ed) 2005:137 reflects on this thus: “it is sometimes difficult to understand whether an expression is literal or idiomatic.” This problem has been traced to the nature and peculiarity of idiom which is quite unconventional to the general situation of literal expression via grammatical conventions. Leggett (1961:299) substantiates this in his definition of idiom thus: “an expression established by usage and peculiar to a particular language. Many idioms have unusual
grammatical construction and make little sense if taken literally.” The peculiarities of idiom make it share different characteristics with other deep structure and, of course, pose a significant problem in the identification of idioms. The peculiarities according to Chafe are as follows:

(a) The meaning of an idiom is not some kind of amalgamation of the meaning of the parts of that structure but the meaning is comparable to the meaning of a single lexical item.

(b) Most idioms exhibit certain transformational deficiencies

(c) There are some idioms which are not syntactically well-formed, which could not be generated by a base component designed to produce well-formed deep structures.

(d) An idiom well-formed will have a literal counterpart, but the text frequency of the later is usually much lower than that of the corresponding idiom.

These peculiarities in one way or the other constitute a breach to the identification of idiom.

Another hitch to the identification of idioms is the different categories or groups of idioms which go a long way to reveal the varied nature. Gibbs and Nayak (1989) depict them as follows:

(1) Normally decomposable or analyzable idioms - the literal and figurative meaning are semantically similar that very little analysis is required to take place between figurative meaning and literary form of the phrase. E.g. loose your temper.

(2) Abnormally decomposable or analyzable idiom - phrases here require more analysis since the metaphorical links between the literal meanings and figurative concepts needs to be mapped out in order for the phrases to make sense.

(3) Non-decomposable or unanalyzable idioms - phrase are often based on some historic occurrence or culturally instantiated linguistic usage that has long since been forgotten, while the phrases themselves have become fixed in the language as single units e.g. Kick the bucket
A flash in the pan

This classification of course, may be seen as another true way through which idioms can easily be understood but it brings complexity that affects the identification of idiom. For instance, it has been clearly observed from the above that people judged both types of decomposable idioms faster than they did non-composable idiom. This is a clear pointer of how easy or difficulty it is to identify these idioms.

The difficulty in identification of idioms also arises from the fact that many idioms have very close alignment with metaphors and allusion. Ogbuehi: (2002:47) states that “a lot of metaphors and allusions are built into idioms.” Metaphor and allusions, of course, are not easily identified in both written and spoken discourse. Allusion requires some cultural knowledge for the understanding of the figurative concepts intended. Second language learners most times are inadequately equipped in this direction.

The issue of distinction between idioms and proverbs as well as other formulaic languages is another problem in identification of idioms. This is because of some peculiarities or features which idioms share together with them. Vivianco (2005:2) subscribes that very often the meaning of proverbs cannot be decided from decomposing each of their constituents. This implies that the meaning may be obscure even for native speakers. Our belief is that the reason for this semantic darkness is that proverbs get their origin from personal anecdotes which become applied to a lot of cases. Idioms also can be very obscure in relation to meaning because of personal experience or anecdotes which have become fixed as a linguistic cliché.

Pulman (1986:1) as well notes that “what idioms have in common with other fixed elements is that their meanings are not deducible from the ordinary meanings of their components but by usual rules of compositional semantics.” These assertions support the position that idioms have one or more things in common with other figurative elements.
which makes it difficult for the second language users to identify these idioms and their semantic import.

Apart from these, second language users most often mistake clichés for idioms especially when they are popularly used by public speakers or orators and also because they are imaginative. Guth (1989:350) explains that “when you first encounter a cliché, it may seem vivid or imaginative, but you have to remember that everyone has used it before you.” Even though he rightly advised that writers should avoid this, it is obvious it constitutes a hitch to mostly second language users in terms of identification.

3.2 Limitations of Idioms

The fact that there are some limitations of meaning in idiomatic expression which is another problem revolving within the use of idioms. Idioms most often have distinct meaning from other languages. Bortfeld (2003:6) reflects on this when he notes that because surface representations of similar concepts differ across languages, these phrases pose a particularly difficult problem for language learners. Even native speakers can be convinced that the figurative meaning of certain idiomatic phrases in their language mean the opposite of what they actually mean, indicating that analysis would not lead them to think otherwise. [ ] Just as idioms from ones language are variably analyzable, varying degrees of analyzability must be a characteristic of idioms from other languages as well.

Second language users in processing English idioms most often take no consideration of this hence the intrusion of meaning from their mother tongue. Wales (1989:51) account of idioms points at this: “idioms most usually denote phrases or strings of words which are idiosyncratic (idiomatic) in that they are language - specific; not easily translated into another language.” This problem is very conspicuous in idioms which have the origin from English Culture. Second language users most often are not abreast with this, hence the imposition of the cultural knowledge from their mother tongue. Longman Dictionary of
English Idioms reiterates that “a number of idioms which refer to actions that have a specified meaning in English Culture may be misunderstood if one is just starting to learn English”.

Some phrases have no literal meaning at all and may be used as idioms. For instance, “till kingdom come” is another surprise to a second language user who would always believe that every idiomatic expression has literal and idiomatic meaning. This, of course, is another source of discrepancy in the use of idiomatic expression as second language users at times, may attempt to use such expression in the literal sense without recourse to the exclusiveness of the expression.

Another serious confusion placed before the second language learner is the case of contradiction existing amongst some scholars. While some will categorize some expressions as non-idiomatic others would completely accept such expressions as idiomatic. This has led to several categorization or classification like sayings, metaphorical proverbs, similes, allusions, conversational phrases etc that would be better discussed as types of idioms. Some examples are as follows:

- you can’t take it with you
- there is always (a) next time
- a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush
- a rolling stone gathers no moss.
- all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

Critically, this shows that the problem of idioms does not remain with the second language learners alone. Longman Dictionary of English Idioms acknowledged them as idioms but gave them different classification. They reflect the ideal natural peculiarities of ‘traditional idioms’ and are established and acceptable by usage.

The issue of appropriateness is another problem in the use of idiom in a second language situation. Because of the complex and varied nature of idioms, many second
language learners are inept with the appropriate usage hence the misappropriation of idioms. This has further led to misinterpretation of many idioms. (Elizabeth 1984:78) has this to say:

> it is commonly known that public speakers like to use metaphors to impress their listeners but again the same rate applies [to idiom]. If metaphors are to have any real effect, they should be used occasionally and only after much thought as to whether they are appropriate or not. A great many of our everyday idioms are real metaphor. The use of idiom calls for caution and much thought to ensure correctness and appropriateness which has always been lacking in most second language users because of limited knowledge of idiomatic behaviour, poor attitude and poor approach to it.

The inability of second language users to distinguish between the current and outdated forms of idiom is another obstacle in the use of idiomatic expressions. This has brought about inappropriateness in the use of the different forms or rather the interchanging of informal ones for formal ones. Some idioms are staled and, therefore, can only be used in the informal situation while current forms should be maintained in all formal situations.

E.g. all hands on deck

there is always a next time

The above examples are supposed to be used informally but unfortunately most second language users use them and the likes formally. The pages of most of our dailies show a host of inappropriateness. Bolaji (2004:577) supports that “it is very necessary to be able to distinguish between the current and the outdated ones and to be able to use them in the appropriate situations (formal, informal situations etc).” Apparently, second language situation requires more to be done in this direction.

**3.3 MODIFICATION OF IDIOMS**

Modification of idioms is another sensitive aspect that poses some problem in the use of English idioms. Ordinarily, one can say that idioms abhor modification especially at
the level of lexical synonymity, nominalization, change in number, and comparative/superlative adherence. Idioms should resist replacement since in strict sense each idiom is a “semantic unit”. Pulman (1986:6) states that “modification of idioms sometimes brings about misuse of idioms especially by second language users because they use it in something of a stylistically marked way.”

E.g. (a) that’s a case of counting your chickens

(b) This is just smoke without fire.

‘Chickens’ in example (a) is an outcome of a modification of ‘chick’ which is unacceptable. In the same way, ‘no’ is omitted in the second example rendering the idiomatic expression non-idiomatic. Other examples are

- *kick the pail.*
- *hit the bucket with foot.*

It has been widely noted that the individual words in an idiom can not be replaced by synonyms and still retain the idiomatic reading of the phrase because this is what qualified them as fixed forms. Barnet and Stubbs (1977:242) vividly elaborates that if someone who is not a native-speaker of English tells us that he thought ‘catch’ and ‘seize’ are synonymous, we may sympathize with his problem but we can only insist that in English one cannot seize a cold. Anyone who says or writes, ‘I seized a cold’ is using unidiomatic English, just as anyone who says he knows a poem ‘at heart’ instead of ‘by heart’ is using unidiomatic English.

Another aspect of modification of idiom especially used by second language users is nominalization. Out of inexperience, most second language users nominalize words possibly for flay of variety or limited knowledge. Be that is it may, nominalization of words in an idiomatic string affects the semantic unit and renders it unidiomatic. Examples are as follows:

- *Bite the dust – die (idiomatic)*
The biting of the dust – unidiomatic (unacceptable)

Kick the bucket – die ‘idiomatic

The kicking of the bucket – Unidiomatic (unacceptable)

The idea of adjectives attracting comparatives or superlatives is also a way of modification of idioms which is very popular with the second language users. They tend to use this approach for the sake of emphasis or clarity with little or no knowledge that the meaning of the said expression is already at stake. In short, that will automatically render the expression no –idiomatic. Some examples are listed below:

Once in blue moon – correct

Once in a bluer moon – wrong

In hot water – correct

In hotter water – wrong

Between the devil and the deep blue sea – correct

Between the devil and the deeper blue sea – wrong

An old flame – correct

An older flame – wrong

To turn a new leaf – correct

To turn a newer leaf – wrong

To leave a bad taste in the mouth – correct

To leave a worse taste in the mouth – wrong

The list is endless.

It is important to note that some idiomatic expressions conventionally go with comparatives or superlatives but do not accept further modification in any form. And this is different from the modifications shown in the above examples.

Lastly, change in number or pluralization is another aspect of modification of idiom which can change the idiomatic meaning of an expression. Most often, plural subjects defy
singularity for whatever reason. This is part of the idioms’ inclination to maintain its fixity.

As earlier stated, change in number from either angle distorts the acceptable semantic output in a particular idiomatic collocates. Examples are as follows:

Raining cats and dogs cannot be raining a cat and a dog.

A rolling stone gathers no moss cannot be rolling stones gathers no mosses

Apple of your eye can’t be - apple of your eyes

Ants in your pants cannot be - Ant in your pant.

At the drop of a hat cannot be - At the drop of hats

However, it is necessary to note that there are few exceptions to this kind of fixed behaviour. Some idioms seem to accommodate interchangeable synonyms (or closely related words with different sense. For instance, Gazadar et al in Ifill: e.g. offered the following:

(a) Hit the sack / hay
(b) Pack a punch/wallop
(c) Stretch/strain a point
(d) Stop/turn on a dime
(e) Puck/punch/poke/short holes in an argument
(f) Lay, throw/place/put/one’s cards on the table.

Obviously, with this level of exceptions idioms can show some level of variability which is determined by the form of idiom – transparency and opaqueness of idiom.

3.4 IMPORTANCE OF IDIOMS

One of the setbacks to the study of idiomatic expressions is the non-appreciation of their importance in language use. Most second language users find little or no relevance in using idioms in their day-to-day activities. They attach no relevance to it in the sense that language use for them is the same with or without idiomatic expressions.
However, it is pertinent to note, at this point, that idioms perform very significant roles in communication. As a matter of fact, idioms are significantly desired for countless purposes in language. Chafe in Moris and Benson (ed) (1968:108-127) emphasizes that “the importance of idioms in language cannot be doubted. Their ubiquity makes them anything but a marginal phenomenon, and surely a linguistic theory has an obligation to explain them in a natural way”. Idiom is of interest precisely because it is so prominent and in diverse forms across languages irrespective of the less attention given to it by most second language users – Bortfeld (2003:5).

In their x-ray of the importance of idioms, Villanvicencio (2005) has this to say: “idioms are usually employed in everyday language precisely to express ideas and concepts that cannot be compressed into a single word.” From this perspective, idiomatic expressions assume a very key role in communication, that is, a fertile disposition for the expression of ideas and concept which cannot be easily reflected through other ways. In other words, idioms make a certain aspect of impossibility in communication to be explicitly possible. Vega-Moremo (2004:320) gives credence to this by saying that “idiom is used to communicate a concept which we use in our thought but for which we have no word in our language.” From the same perspective, Ogbuehi (2002:47) opines that “idioms, therefore, permit us to express and infer hidden motives and to enrich our expressions of ideas and events. They help to generate a variety of responses when used in speech and writing.” From every indication, it is very obvious that the pivotal role of idiom in language and communication cannot be in any way compromised.

Another crucial relevance of idiom is that it makes language colourful and unique. And notably human being enjoys using colourful and unique language.

We also discover that idioms pose some imperative challenges to learners and this makes them to be properly disposed to interact with native speakers which could be said to be a fascinating new source of insight about language. In Geromina lesson plan guide, it is
reflected that “idioms challenge students to collect their ‘wits’, put on their ‘thinking cap’, and keep their ‘nose to the grindstone’.” Insightfully, idiom selects the category of people that make use of it, that is, learners who are ready to accept challenges to think, create or reason as well as persevere in the use of language beyond amateur level. It requires a high amount of dexterity. Bortfeld (2003:6) in his own perspective adds to this: “fluency in a language is often inferred based on how flexible a speaker understands and produces figurative speech”. In other words, idioms classify the status of speakers – competent and non-competent speakers.

Idioms play a vital role in communication as it helps the language user to avoid the usual dullness often associated with the commonplace use of single words. In other words, it makes one’s communication more attractive and depicts a standard of creativity and innovativeness.

From a different perspective, English idiom form part of the vocabulary of English by providing users with an increased number from where they can make their selections. By this, users are provided with a variety of suitably preferred ways of expressing ideas, emotions feeling, values and this brings about increased spices of variety.

Learning idioms is a very sure way of mastering the culture of the native speakers of the language because most idioms as well as their meaning originated from the culture of the native speakers of the language. That is to say that idioms reflect, in some way, the language inclination to master the culture of a given speech community.

Finally, it is important to observe that idioms classify humans distinctively with a high cognitive ability different from other species on earth. Clark (2002:2) comprehensively captures the situation thus:

we use idiom because we can. The way that we use our language is what separates us form all the other species on this planet. We can say words and phrases that have no outward or direct relationship to the words being spoken and can be understood
quickly and without reservation. I think that human beings enjoy using language that is colourful and unique. Idioms certainly have both of these traits and they are universal. They are found in all languages being spoken today. Idioms can reflect how a culture feels about its language and how language reflects its culture.

The above excerpt reflects the position which idiom occupies in human relation as well as communication. However, it is very clear that most second language learners do not appreciate the place of idiom as well as the accompanying relevance in language use. This is one of the key reasons why the misuse of idioms has remained on the increase.

3.5 IDIOMATICITY AND GRAMMATICALITY

Idiomaticity simply put is the quality of being idiomatic. And to be idiomatic means to posses the qualities of idioms. On the other hand, grammaticality is a term coined by Chomsky (1965) “to indicate the well-formedness of expressions of natural languages.” The purpose of this sub-topic is to examine the qualities of idioms in close relation to grammar. In other words, what is the position of grammar as it affects its existence? Do the rules by which words change their forms and are combined into sentences work in the same way with idiomatic expression?

It is an attempt to provide answers to these questions that provoked this sub-topic. Chafe in Moris and Benson (ed) (1968:108-126) notes that “idiomatization can be seen as a kind of semantic arrangement (those directly manifested in meaning, concepts, ideas or whatever the phenomena may be called) and those ‘post-semantic’ directly in symbolization.” That is why, in the first instance, idioms behave differently from other non-idiomatic expressions. Apart from the fact that idioms have special meaning different from the meaning of the individual words that make them up, most idioms display a conspicuous level of peculiarity especially as it concerns adherence to the rules of grammar (grammaticality).
Fowler (1970:73) shows that “Grammar and idiom are independent categories; being applicable to the same material. They sometimes agree and sometimes disagree about particular specimens of it.” This is very much obvious and applicable to the second and third peculiarities of idiom as enumerated by Chafe: (a) Their transformational deficiencies (b) The illformedness of some of them. These two peculiarities have been established by the quality of fixity.

The transformational deficiencies of idioms are manifested mostly in grammar. In ordinary conventions of grammatical operation passivization, change in number, pluralization, nominalization, change of words are applicable in general possible syntactic arrangement. But with idioms, the situation is different. Some idioms cannot accept any alteration from the grammatical aspects listed above. Instead, they maintain a fixed disposition. Various attempts have been made by reputable scholars for a grammatical analysis of idioms in respect to grammatical attributes. Examples are as follow:

Raining cats and dogs – correct
Raining a cat and a dog – wrong
Cats and dogs were bitten by the rain – wrong.
He always delivers the goods – correct
The goods are always delivered on time – wrong.
He always brings the good’s to his customer’s house – wrong.
Kick the bucket – correct
Kick the pail – wrong
The bucket was kicked by the man - wrong.
The list of examples is endless. They vividly depict some levels of transformational deficiency in one way or the other.

The issue of illformedness of some idioms is another peculiarity which defies grammatical stipulations. These are situations which ordinarily would be unacceptable
because of their ungrammaticality but for the fact that they are acceptable as idiom. They defy the basic tenets of grammatical rules hence they are ungrammatical. However, the number is not on the high side. Examples are as follows;

It was not me.
Who do you take me for?
There is heaps of material
To fish in troubled waters

The above expressions have come to stay as acceptable idiomatic expressions irrespective of their ungrammaticality.

3.5.1 SELECTIONAL RESTRICTION RULES

This is another regular aspect of grammatical analysis. Trask (1993.248) sees it as “any of various semantic constraints reflected in the ability of lexical items to combine in syntactic structures.” The use of idiomatic expression sometimes gives way to the violation of this semantic constraint and also goes a long way to bring about the intrusion of illogical expressions, even though, it has perfectly come to stay. To relax muscles, Gowers (1973) explains that “if logic and grammar get in its way [the way of idioms] so much the worse for logic and grammar.” Obviously, idiomatic expressions operate sometimes without any agreement logically and grammatically.

Gowers reflection on this goes further to substantiate thus: “but all languages permit the existence of a certain number of illogical expressions and the fact that in spite of their vulgar origin and illiterate appearance, they have succeeded in elbowing their way into our prose and poetry.” Pertinently, it is established that some idioms can functionally exist when it is not in alliance with grammar or logic.

Selectional restriction rule is part of the factor that helps to determine the choice of grammatical element in a sentence. Basically, in selectional restriction rules, one element projects a feature which determines the other element(s) to be selected. For example:
(1) The flower waved to everybody that passed its way.

(2) Stone speaks at times

(3) Birds breast feeds their children

The above sentences are all grammatically correct but unacceptable because of their violation of selectional restriction rules.

Flower cannot select animate feature ‘waved’ - inanimate + animate are not acceptable.

Birds cannot select non-human feature ‘breast’ – non human + human are not acceptable.

This is applicable to many other situations. In idiomatic expression, this rule is entirely relaxed. In other words, it most often violates this choice of grammatical elements and selection. Whether one element projects a suitable element or not is irrelevant most especially as idiomatic meaning is not based on the meaning of the individual words but as a whole.
CHAPTER FOUR

MISUSE AND MISINTERPRETATION OF IDIOMS BY SECOND
LANGUAGE USERS

Many things are responsible for the misuse of idioms by many second language users. They include the complex nature and peculiarities of idiom, poor attitude and approach of learners to idiom and modification of various forms. It is important that learners especially second language users realize the vital need of appropriateness in the use of different aspects of language to promote uniformity of meaning and standard in order to reduce breaches in communication. It is for this reason that Barnet and Stubbs’s (1997) opines that “some things are said or written and some are not. More precisely, anything can be said or written but only some things are acceptable to the ears and minds of many readers.” In other words, it is obvious that many things said are not acceptable especially as it affects idiomatic expressions. And when what is said is not acceptable, it is as good as having said nothing because it brings confusion in the use of language.

Barnet and Stubbs go further to encourage writers/users to use language appropriately in this way. “If our essays are thoughtful, they will provide challenges to the reader. We should not use constructions that will arouse antagonism or that will allow the reader to brush us off as ignoramuses.” From this indication, misuse of idiom makes our essays thoughtless and provides no challenges. It also shows the level of ignorance of users in the use of this linguistic aspect. This easily classifies the user as a non-competent one. Notably, this is what is prevalent in the language of most second language users of English.

At this point, we shall examine the issue of misuse of idioms pragmatically. A list of idioms misused variously shall be examined to reflect the extent of misuse of such English idioms by most second language users. For clarity, we shall group the idioms according to the nature of misuse:
(1) **Some idioms misused because of wrong insertion of adjectives:**

Two heads are better than one – correct

Two good heads are better than one - wrong

The straw that breaks the camel’s back – correct

The last straw that breaks the camel’s back – wrong

A feather in someone’s cap - correct

A beautiful feather in someone’s cap - wrong

(2) **Some idioms misused because of interchange of homophones or synonyms**

It takes two to tango - correct

It takes two to tangle – wrong

A rolling stone gathers no moss – correct

A running stone gathers no moss - wrong

I racked my brain to remember the answer – correct

I cracked my brain to remember the answer – wrong

A rolling stone gathers no moss – correct

A rolling stone gathers no mud – wrong

To mince words – correct

To mix words – wrong

Bell the cat – correct

Bury the cat – wrong.

Ride a winning horse to death – correct

Ride a willing horse to death – wrong

Add insult to injury – correct (misinterpreted)

Add salt to injury – wrong.

Rub salt into someone’s wounds – (informal) to increase someone’s feeling of injury or shame.
Make hay while the sun shines – correct
Make haste while the sun shines – wrong
To beat about the bush – correct
To beat around the bush – wrong
Action speaks louder than words – correct
Action speaks louder than voice – wrong.
To pass the buck – correct
To pass bulk – wrong
Level playing fields – correct
Level playing ground – wrong
To keep up appearances – correct
To put up appearances – wrong

(3) Some idioms are misused because of the insertion of extraneous words or omission of component words:

To read between the lines – correct
To read in between lines – wrong.
To butter someone up – correct
To butter bread for someone – wrong
A little learning is a dangerous thing – correct
A little learning is dangerous – wrong
Across the board – correct
Across board – wrong.

(4) Some idioms are misused because they are reconstructed

Have one’s cake and eat it – correct
Eat one’s cake and have it – wrong
The devil finds work for idle hands – correct
An idle mind is a devil’s workshop – wrong.
The devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know – correct
The devil you know is better than the angel you don’t know – wrong.
What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander – correct
What is good for the goose is also good for the gander – wrong.
To bite the hand that feeds you – correct
To bite the person that feeds you – wrong
Burning the midnight oil – correct
Burning the midnight candle – wrong
A problem shared is a problem halved – correct
A problem shared is a problem half solved – wrong
To cut one’s coat according to one’s cloth – correct
To cut one’s coat according to one’s size – wrong
Something to be meat and drink to somebody – correct
Something to be food and drink – wrong.
To play to the gallery – correct
To dance to the gallery – wrong
To have much meat on one – correct
To have enough meat on one - wrong
Meet minds with – correct
Rub minds with – wrong.

(4) Some idioms are misused because of wrong use of prepositions:
All advice given to her mother fell on deaf ears – correct
All advice given to her mother fell to deaf ears – wrong
To tell somebody something to one’s face – correct
To tell somebody something on one’s face – wrong
To stab somebody in the back – correct
To stab somebody at the back – wrong.
To be the meat in the sandwich – correct
To be the meat of the sandwich – wrong
The real meat of the discussion – correct
The real meat in the discussion – wrong
At the top of your voice – correct
On the top of your voice – wrong

(5) Some idioms are misused because of omission of articles and apostrophe:
Somebody is the apple of one’s eye – correct
Somebody is apple of one’s eyes – wrong
A stone’s throw – correct
A stone throw – wrong
To read between the lines – correct
To read between lines – wrong.

Some idioms are misused because they are entirely given a different interpretation. Examples are as follows:

To be a wet blanket – means to be someone who discourages while many second language users take it to mean a good for nothing person.

Put off – means to postpone or to be upset but most people take it to mean extinguish.

Round up – means to catch (criminal) or to gather together what has been scattered or to change (to an exact figure) to the nearest whole number above it but most people take it to mean finish.

The die is cast – means to take an irrevocable step but most second language users take this expression to mean war is declared.
**Be a good audience** - means to be sympathetic but most second language users misunderstand it to mean to be attentive.

**A rolling stone gathers no moss** – means that a person who frequently changes his job, place of living etc will not become successful or wealthy but most second language users understand it to mean one who does not specialize on something does not achieve much.

**People who live in glass houses should not throw stones** means people with faults of their own should take care not to attack the faults of others but most second language users understand it to mean that one should be careful when one is living in a glass house

**It’s an ill wind that blows nobody (any) good** means that in every misfortune there is something that is of advantage to someone but most second language users misunderstand this to mean something that affects everybody negatively.

**A little learning is a dangerous thing** means that a small amount of knowledge can cause people to think they are more expert than they really are while many people ordinarily think otherwise. They take it to mean that half education is dangerous.

### 4.1 Reasons for Misuse of English Idioms

There are many reasons that give rise to the misuse of English idioms in a second language situation. One of such reasons is the nature of English idioms. The peculiarities include:

(a) The anomalous meaning of English idioms  
(b) The transformational deficiencies of English idioms  
(c) The ill formedness of some of them and  
(d) The greater text frequency of well-formed idioms relative to their literal counterparts.

These peculiarities show why second language users very often misuse English idioms. This can be seen from the anomalous behaviour of the idioms especially as it affects these peculiarities which the second language user is most often quite unfamiliar with. These
peculiarities stand very much apart from most grammatical rules and conventions which the second language users are acquainted with early in language learning. English idioms reflect serious complexity before the second language learner who finds it very difficult to understand the complicated and complex nature of this linguistic phenomenon which is quite different from other well-formed deep structure.

Another reason for the misuse of English idioms is the general attitude of second language users. Many people have decried the poor attitude of learners to the general learning of the English Language. This may have given rise to the promotion of Pidgin. This goes a long way to depict that most second language learners see language only as a means of communication and that whichever way it is achieved they do not bother.

Language is used for different categories of expression other than means of conveying information and it also requires structural regularities as well as regularities of usage which this situation has left us without. This attitude of course, has very much been transferred to the use of idiomatic expression. Most often, this scenario gives room for serious misconception and misinterpretation of people’s utterances. Nigerians for this reason have failed to acknowledge the need to communicate effectively with other users and native speakers alike. And generally, the issue of misuse of English idioms has continued to be perpetrated.

The use of literal meaning of collocates as clues to the interpretation of English idioms constitute another reason for the misuse of English idioms by second language learners. Coupled with the poor reading habit of most Nigerians - the neglect of idiomatic expression in the scheme of learning and so on, most second language learners resort to the use of literal meaning of idiomatic strings for decoding the semantic output of the idiomatic expression. The result of this action has always been the misuse of English idioms in various aspects. The decoding of the meaning of any idiomatic expression cannot be achieved by exploiting literal meaning.
In the words of Alexander Pope:

A little learning is a dangerous thing

Drink deep, or taste no the Pierian Spring

There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain

And drinking largely sobers us again

It seems obvious that most Nigerians for want of knowledge use English idioms with the intention of creating variety without recourse to the fixed nature of idiom. The variety so created only brings about misuse or abuse of the idiomatic expression. Worst still, these have been popularize and imbibed by many young learners of the language. They deliberately interchange words, add or omit articles, reconstruct, nominalize, passivize in attempt to achieve variety. It is obvious that unless something is done the situation may continue to deteriorate.
4.2 Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Preliminary Questionnaire Items.

Table A:
Age and Level of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Items and Options</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 18 years</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 – 25</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 – above</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level: O’ Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Divisible by 2 Categories</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey.

From the above table, it is obvious that 40 respondents were between the ages of 18 – 25 representing 20% while 25 – and above has 160 respondents representing 80% of the total number. There was no respondent below 18 years as indicated by - zero score. This confirms the fact that our respondents are adult speakers who are expected to be at the peak in the use of language. But their performance is entirely different from this expectation showing the magnitude of problem in this area.

On their level of education, 16 respondents out the total of 200 are O’ level students representing 8%, 32 respondents are undergraduates representing 16%, 36 are graduates representing 18% and 116 respondents are postgraduates representing 58% of the total number. The result shows that postgraduate students are more in number and more
experienced than all the others. Yet, their performance was poor and one wonders what the performance of the less experienced will be.

**Table B:** Whether idiomatic expression has been taught or not and at what level it was first taught.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Options</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have been taught</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haven’t been taught</td>
<td>00</td>
<td>00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t remember.</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1st taught at:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary Institution</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total divisible by two categories of questions</strong></td>
<td><strong>400</strong></td>
<td><strong>200</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that 192 respondents have been taught idiomatic expression representing 96%. In the second category, primary school has 56 respondents representing 28%, secondary school has 120 respondents representing 60%. Only 24 respondents were taught at tertiary institution representing 12%. Obviously, almost every respondent has been taught and are first, mostly, taught at secondary school.
Table C:

How regularly is English idiom taught and what is the performance of teachers in it?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and options</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regularity in teaching English idioms:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularly</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>00</td>
<td>00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Performance in English idioms:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>00</td>
<td>00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total divisible by 2 categories of questions</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in the above table shows that 156 respondents were rarely taught idiomatic expression representing 78% of the total number while 44 respondents were regularly taught representing 22%. No respondent indicated entirely on the negative. In the second category, no respondent assessed the teachers’ performance on idiomatic expression to be excellent. 40 respondents assessed the teachers’ performance to be good representing 20%, 104 respondents assessed the teachers’ performance to be fair representing 52%, 52 respondents assessed the teachers’ performance to be poor representing 26% and finally 4 respondents assessed the teachers’ performance to be very poor representing 2%. Summarily, a greater percentage goes for fair and poor performance of teachers in the said area while only 20% accounts for good performance irrespective of the fact that 76% of the
total respondents are postgraduate and graduate students who are mostly teachers that must have assessed themselves positively. This situation clearly calls for urgent attention.

**Table I**

Examples of Idioms misused because of interchange of homophones or synonym.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No.</th>
<th>Questionnaire Options</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a)</td>
<td>Level playing grounds (wrong)</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level playing field (correct)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>To make haste while the sun shines (wrong)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To make hay while the sun shines (correct)</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c)</td>
<td>To dance to the gallery (wrong)</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To play to the gallery (correct)</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d)</td>
<td>I racked my brain to remember the answer (correct)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I cracked my brain to remember the answer (wrong)</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e)</td>
<td>It takes two to tango (correct)</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It takes two to tangle (wrong)</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total divisible by 5 questions</strong></td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source: Field Survey**

In the above table, five different categories of questions were used. Two hundred questionnaires were sent out and all later returned. The number of respondents that ticked the wrong answers are (a) 160 (b) 84 (c) 108 (d) 120 (e) 104 and that represents 57.6% while the number of respondents that ticked correctly are (a) 40 (b) 116 (c) 92 (d) 80 (e) 96 representing 42.4%. From the above, it is obvious that the percentage of people (second language learners) who can use idioms correctly less than those that cannot use it correctly.
### Table II

Example of idioms misused because they are reconstructed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/NO</th>
<th>Questionaire Options</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a)</td>
<td>The devil you know is better than the angel you don’t known (wrong)</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The devil you known is better than the devil you don’t know (correct)</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>To have one’s cake and eat it (correct)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To eat one’s cake and have it (wrong)</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>To cut one’s coat according to one’s size (wrong)</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To cut one’s coat according to one’s size of cloth (wrong)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To cut one’s coat according to one’s cloth (correct)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total divisible by 3 questions.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>600</th>
<th>300</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Total respondents that answered wrongly      | 464 | 77.3% |
| Total respondents that answered correctly    | 136 | 22.6% |

**Source: Field Survey.**

The table above shows that the total number of respondents that answered wrongly is 464, representing 77.3% while the total number that answered correctly is 136, representing 22.6%. The revelation from this table shows clearly the enormous problem in the use of idiomatic expression.
Table III

Example of idioms misused because of insertion of extraneous words or omission of component words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/NO</th>
<th>Questionnaire Options</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a)</td>
<td>It was a free for all fight (wrong)</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It was a free for all (correct)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>The handwriting on the wall (wrong)</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The writing on the wall (correct)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total divisible by 2 questions</strong></td>
<td>400</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total respondents that answered wrongly</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total respondents that answered correctly</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey.

From the above table, the number of respondents that answered wrongly is (a) 140 (b) 156 and that represents 74% of the entire number while the number of respondents that answered correctly is (a) 60 (b) 44 and that represents 26% of the number. This goes a long way to substantiate the fact that second language users misuse idiomatic expressions a great deal.
Table IV
Example of idioms misused because of wrong preposition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/NO</th>
<th>Questionnaire Options</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a)</td>
<td>All advice given to her mother fell on deaf ears (correct)</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All advice given to her mother fell to deaf ears (wrong)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>I was stabbed to my back by my best friend (wrong)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I was stabbed on my back by my best friend (wrong)</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I was stabbed in my back by my best friend (correct)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total divisible by 2 questions</strong></td>
<td><strong>400</strong></td>
<td><strong>200</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total number of respondents that answered wrongly</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total number of respondents that answered correctly</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey.

In the above table, the number of respondents that answered wrongly is (a) 76 (b) 52 and 92 representing 56% of the total number while the number of respondents that answered correctly is (a) 124 (b) 52 representing a total of 44% of the total number. It is important to note that in the first category, the number that answered correctly is 124 which is more than 76 that answered wrongly. However, in the second category the reverse is the case. The summary of both categories shows clearly the overwhelming number of respondents that answered wrongly. This indicates further that a greater number of second language users misuse idiomatic expression.
Table V
Example of idioms misused because they are entirely given a different interpretation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/NO</th>
<th>Questionnaire Options</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a.)</td>
<td>The die is cast:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>War is declared (wrong)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is time for serious battle (wrong)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To take an irrevocable step (correct)</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>It is an ill wind that blows no one any good:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Something that does not benefit anybody (wrong)</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Something that affect people with bad luck (wrong)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Something that shows that every problem brings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>advantage to someone (correct)</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c)</td>
<td>Asleep at the wheel:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sleeping when one is using the wheel (wrong)</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sleeping when driving (wrong)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not taking ones responsibilities very carefully</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(correct)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d)</td>
<td>To be a good audience:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To be a good listener (wrong)</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To have a listening ear (wrong)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To be sympathetic (correct)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total divisible by 4 questions</strong></td>
<td><strong>800</strong></td>
<td><strong>400</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total number of respondent that answered wrongly</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total number of respondents that answered correctly</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey.

Here, the situation is very clear as the number of respondents that answered wrongly is shown as (a) 48 and 36 (b) 132 and 60 (c) 64 and 32 (d) 140 and 28 as against the number that answered correctly thus: (a) 116 (b) 08 (c) 104 (d) 32. This continues to show that
English idioms are greatly misused irrespective of the few cases where they are used correctly.

**TABLE VI**

Example of idioms misused because of wrong pluralization or singularity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/NO</th>
<th>Questionnaire Options</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a)</td>
<td>To have something up your sleeves (wrong)</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To have something up your sleeve (correct)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>To fish in trouble water (wrong)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To fish in trouble waters (wrong)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To fish in troubled waters (correct)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c)</td>
<td>To take the bull by the horn (wrong)</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To take the bull by the horns (correct)</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d)</td>
<td>To have it at one’s finger’s tip (wrong)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To have it at one’s finger tip (wrong)</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To have it at one’s finger’s end. (correct but old use)</td>
<td>00</td>
<td>00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To have it at one’s fingertips (correct)</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total divisible by 4 questions</th>
<th>800</th>
<th>400</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of respondents that answered wrongly</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of respondents that answered correctly</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source: Field Survey.**

The table above, just like others, reveals that the number of respondents that answered wrongly is (a) 132 (b) 100 and 16 (c) 128 (d) 60 and 132 representing 71% of the total number while the number of respondent that answered correctly is (a) 68 (b) 84 (c) 72 (d) 0 and 08 representing 29% of the total number. Obviously also, it goes a long way to show the extent to which idiomatic expressions are misused. In this table, it is important to
note that it has two possible correct answers. Nevertheless, it did not bring about any change in the number of errors.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In this project, we have painstakingly tried to reflect on the enormous problem existing in the use and interpretation of idiomatic expression among second language users. Many reasons were identified for this ugly scenario which includes but not limited to these, non-recognition of the existing problems in this area, non-appreciation of its role to everyday language use, the complex nature/peculiarities of idioms and a host of others. These problems have eaten deep into the standard of idiomatic expression with particular reference to the vital role in language use. It becomes obvious that there is a serious need for a rethink in the second language users’ approach of this linguistic aspect.

The data collected in the course of this work is an eye opener to the level or extent of misuse and misinterpretation of idiomatic expressions. The worst of all is that the issue of misuse and misinterpretation of idioms are very rampant among teachers (graduates and postgraduate students). Of course, that remains the climax because no one seems to be leading the other.

It is for the alarming state of this area that we have decided to pry into the situation for a problem identified is a problem halved. And more importantly, second language users shall embrace in totality the recommendations above for a positive change and result.

5.1 RECOMMENDATION

Having examined the various situations and problems surrounding the use of idioms, we are left with no option than to look at the ways forward. This is very important to create a conducive environment for a total re-appraisal of the second language learners’ use of idiomatic expression for a tremendous improvement in this problematic area.

At this point, second language users should, in the first instance, note that for one to thrive very well in this linguistic aspect, one must cultivate a change of attitude from what is previously obtainable to the habit of curiosity and understanding. Kierzek (1939) lends
credence to this when he says that “you cannot memorize all the idioms in the English language. At best you can cultivate a different attitude of curiosity and understanding.” Second language users/learners have used the idiomatic expression with serious levy hence the general misuse resulting from inadequate knowledge or understanding of this linguistic heritage. This change will go a long way in exposing users to the nature as well as the current situations in the use of idioms.

Another vital recommendation to the use of idiom is the serious need for the appreciation of the relevance and values of idiomatic expressions. One of such relevance is the creation of new vocabulary. Leggett (1961:298) in this direction explains that idiomatic expressions are part of the vocabulary of native speakers. And it should be learnt as if they are new words or as new vocabulary. In fact, we learn them in the same way we learn new words – by hearing them in the speech around us and by reading them in context. For the most part, they give no more, and no less, difficulty than vocabulary itself gives us.

From this, it is obvious that idioms form a basic component of the linguistic units and cannot be seen or approached with less vigour. Any conscious language users should know that the increase of vocabulary in any language equips such language with the ability of sustaining the increasing daily needs and challenges of effective writing and communication. The approach of idiomatic expression as new vocabulary as recommended by Leggett would definitely be a spring board to the appropriate and effective use of idioms.

In appreciation of value, Ogbuehi (2002:48) asserts that “as a second language user of English you should study many idiomatic expressions and use them to invigorate your writing tasks.” This is a pointer to the fact that idiomatic expression is of very high value to our various writings and should be imbibed vigorously in our study of this linguistic aspect which shall effectively manifest in our writings. It is only the effective use of idiomatic expression that can empower and create the desired value and effect in our speech and
writing. Elizabeth (1985:78) reflects, in a little similar way that “it is commonly known that public speakers like to use metaphor to impress their listeners but again the same rule applies. A great many of our everyday idioms are real metaphors.” In other words, idioms like metaphors invigorate the skills of public speakers as well as everyone who appreciates this rare quality. This makes it very obvious that using idiom effectively makes us become potential public speakers and writers.

To conquer the enormous problems associated with idiomatic expressions, we shall make regular use of a good dictionary to enable us to have a formidable base and firm grip of this linguistic aspect as well as the entire language usage. Kallsen (1995) asserts that “when you are not sure of the idiom (that is, what the right combination of words is or whether it is idiom or colloquial, etc) consult your dictionary.” Hodges and Whitten (1984:255) in a similar way supports that “the role of dictionary should not be neglected when one is in doubt about what preposition to use after a given word.” Bolaji (2004:577) in the same direction asserts that “a good dictionary will contain many idiomatic and non–idiomatic collocations entered and explained under one or other of the components.” These assertions go a long way to show that a good dictionary is inevitable to any second language learner who wants to make genuine headway in the study and use of idioms.

Another important recommendation for appropriate and effective use of idioms is to be in contact with competent speakers of the language. Mckernam (1988:648) submits that “people who experience problems with idiomatic expressions should listen, as often as possible, to intelligent programmes on American Television and Radio. The only way to learn the idioms of a language is by learning the peculiar way unique expressions convey meaning through context.” Much more obviously, second language learners of idiomatic expression would make positive impact when they adhere to the submission above because such programmes reflect appropriate and impeccable use of idiomatic expressions unlike
what is obtainable in most second language situation. That is to say that bad teaching and wrong imitation have perpetrated much of the misuse of idioms. Bolaji (2004:577) lends credence to this when he says that “what this means is, again, that the learner will require a great deal of contact with both spoken and written utterances of native and competent non-native users of the language in everyday situation.”

Finally, it should be noted that this aspect of language under study is never relegated nor approached with levity by native and competent speakers. In the words of Fowler (1968:261), “idiom is any form of expression that has established itself as the particular way preferred by Englishmen.” Of course, this preference should be of paramount importance to any potential second language user who wants to attain greater heights in this language.

There is a tremendous increase in the willingness of people (native speakers) who acknowledge the inevitable role of idiomatic expression in their everyday use of the language. Bortfeld (2003:217-230) substantiates more clearly that “in their original (1975) Dictionary of American idioms, Boatner, Gates and Makkai presented over 4,000 expression occurring in English alone. A more recent edition of this same dictionary contains over 8,000 English Language idioms. This is not to say that idioms have increased in number in recent years, rather it shows that people are increasingly willing to acknowledge these phrases for the major role they play in daily language use.” Apparently, one doubts if much is needed to be said about the vital role of idiomatic expression in our language.
Works Cited


*Longman Dictionary of English Idioms.*


Dear Respondent,

**Letter of Introduction**

The bearer is a post graduate student of the above department with Reg. No. PG/MA/05/40336. He needs your assistance/response to the under listed questions to enable him conclude his research work. Your responses or answers shall be purely used for academic purposes and with utmost confidentiality.

Yours faithfully

Dr. Sam. Onuigbo  
Project Supervisor.
Questionnaire

**Age:**  Below 18 yrs   □  18 – 25 and above   □

**Academic Level:**  O’ Level   □  Undergraduate   □  
Graduate   □  Post graduate   □

Have your been taught idiomatic expression  Yes   □  No   □  Cant’s remember?   □

If yes at what level of academic pursuit were you first taught idiomatic expression?
Primary school   □  Secondary school   □  tertiary institution   □

How regularly were taught English Idioms?
Rarely   □  regularly   □  No at all   □

How do you assess the performance of teachers in idiomatic expression?
Excellent -   □  Good -   □  Fair -   □  Poor -   □  Very poor -   □

Tick the correct answer from the boxes listed for each number

1. Level playing grounds   □
Level playing fields   □

2. To make haste while the sun shines   □
To make hay while the sun shines   □
3. To dance to the gallery
   To play to the gallery
4. It was a free for all fight
   It was a free for all
5. The handwriting on the wall
   The writing on the wall
6. The devil you know is better than the angel you don’t know
   The devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know
7. To have one’s cake and eat it
   To eat one’s cake and have it
8. All advice given to her mother fell to deaf ears
   All advice given to her mother fell to deaf ears
9. I was stabbed at my back by my best friend
   I was stabbed on my back by my best friend
   I was stabbed in my back by my best friend
10. To have something up your sleeves
    To have something up your sleeve
11. I racked my brain to remember the answer
    I cracked my brain to remember the answer
Tick the correct interpretation of the following English Idioms from the options below:
12. The die is cast:
    (a) War is declared
    (b) It is time for serious battle
    (c) To take an irrevocable step
13. It is an ill wind that blows no one any good:
    (a) Something that does not benefit anybody
    (b) Something that affect people with bad luck
    (c) Something that shows that every problem brings advantage to someone
14. Asleep at the wheel:
    (a) Sleeping when one is using the wheel
    (b) Sleeping when driving
    (c) Not taking ones responsibilities very carefully
15. To be a good audience:
    (a) To be a good listener
(b) To have a listening ear
(c) To be sympathetic

16. To fish in trouble water -
   To fish in troubled waters
   To fish in trouble waters

17. To cut one’s coat according one’s size -
   To cut one’s coat according to one’s size of cloth
   To cut one’s coat according to one’s size of cloth

18. It takes two to tango -
   It takes two to tango

19. To take the bull by the horn –
   To take the bull by the horns -

20. To have it at one’s finger’s tip -
   To have it at one’s finger’s tip –
   To have it at one’s finger tip –
   To have it at one’s finger tips –