

# On Nonce Variant of English Idioms

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English idiom variant refers to the form of idiom created by means of altering some original components, structures, or meanings of the former idioms. The nonce variant of English idioms can be analyzed from the following three aspects: reasons for formation of nonce variant, types into which it could be divided, and rhetorical functions it is capable of producing. Through the analysis of these three aspects, it is almost likely for language-users to realize the importance and modes of idiom's renovation, get a better understanding of English idioms, and thus utilize English idioms more skillfully.

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## Introduction

As an essential component in English lexicon, English idioms are set phrases or short sentences abstracted from English in the long-term process of the language development. There are two most obvious characteristics of idioms. One is semantic unity, which connotes that idiom is an inseparable semantic unity. Usually an idiom's meaning could not be inferred from each part. The other one is structural stability. That is, the arrangement and collocation of an idiom are fixed. Sentence structures are not flexible.

The viewpoint of its semantic unity and structural unity has played a dominant role in the researches of English idioms. Until the 1950s, Chomsky proposed the transformational-generative grammar, under which a linguist B. Fraser (1970) went to develop the transformational potential of idioms. In *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* compiled by English scholars, A. P. Cowie, R. Mackin, and I. R. McCaig (1985) confirmed the existence of one-off variation. They held that English idiom's stability in structure and overall meaning is not so absolute. That is, idioms can be varied in specific contexts. Furthermore, we can also find out a great deal of idiom variations in the process of using English.

English idiom variant refers to the form of idiom created by means of altering some original components, structures, or meanings of the former idioms. As far as the types of idiom variant are concerned, two broad types of variation are classified: normal variant and nonce variant. Normal variant refers to the institutionalized variation, which aims at producing correct forms of idioms. Nonce variant refers to the temporary manipulation or exploitation of idioms, which may change an idiom's form and meaning (Zhang, 1980, p. 15).

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the analysis of these three aspects, it is almost likely for language-users to realize the importance and modes of idiom's renovation, get a better understanding of English idioms, and thus utilize English idioms more skillfully.

### **Reasons for the Formation of Nonce Variant**

#### **A Special Feature of Language—Creativity**

The creativity of language, endowing English idioms with potential for development, refers to the potential possibility that language holds to create endless sentences (Wang & Luo, 2007, p. 29).

Idioms, whose structures are fixed relatively, can be divided, deleted, reconstructed, etc. New forms of expression are produced; more appropriate sentences appear for temporary uses. For example:

1. While marrying the girl he “married a bit more than he could chew”.

In this example, the original form of “married a bit more than he could chew” is “the bit off a bit more than one could chew”. The word has been changed, but the meaning becomes fitter for the context.

#### **Association Between Language and Society**

As a part of social culture, language finds its expression in the renewing of existing forms of language for development. Idioms complicated in meaning have been knocked out in the use of language. In the process of using idioms, people enrich the connotation and border of idioms continuously, both endowing idioms with vigor, and augmenting the ability in expressing idioms by innovating the existing idioms.

#### **Economic Principle and Other Circumstances Confining Language**

To describe the present situation, to express one's emotion, or to communicate with each other, people usually tend to use the simplest words and sentences. So idioms are always considered as the first choice. However, it is always impossible to use the formulaic idioms directly due to the limitation of place, topic, background knowledge, purpose, and method of communication in concrete occasions. To make some changes conforming to specific communicative circumstances will achieve twice the result with half the effort, which can express one's emotion or ideas appropriately by arousing people's memory of original idioms. For example:

2. One non-linguistic explanation of failure at school is that “you can take a child to Euclid but you can't make him think”.

In this sentence, “you can take a child to Euclid but you can't make him think” is the nonce variant of “you can take a horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink”.

Corresponding to the context of school education, this sentence not only enables people to realize the similarity between school education and “making him think”, but also highlights vividly the failure in school education in some places.

### **Major Types of Nonce Variants**

#### **Reversion**

Reversion denotes the original metaphor in the idiom is reversed or inverted, so as to create humorous effect. It is often used to create their own creative expressions. Examples are as follows:

3. He turns out to be considerably less pessimistic than most writers whom we think of as “serious”, for whom “every silver lining has a cloud” (Miu, 2006, p. 128).

4. They were contacted personally by telephone at their home by the New Zealand police minister, who promised “no stone would be left unturned” in the hunt for the killer (SincLair, 1995).

In these two examples, the metaphors in the original idioms “every cloud has a silver lining” and “leave no stone unturned” are reversed, resulting in the change in the meanings of the idioms. In the meantime, humor is created to catch the readers’ attention and appeal to their interest.

### **Substitution**

Substitution refers to substituting or changing one or more of the components of an idiom for stylistic effect. Let’s look at the following examples:

5. We thought our “cat” would be killed when he fell from the roof of the house. He was not, but he used up one of “his lives” (Makkai, 1995).

6. He intended to take an opportunity this afternoon of speaking to Irene. “A word in time saves nine” (Galsworthy, 2001).

7. “Yes, you must take everything”, said Magdalen. “I’ll pay for the taxi if you like”. Now she was “as cool as a lettuce” (Murdoch, 1997).

In these three examples, there are three idioms that are manipulated: “a cat has nine lives”, “a stitch in time saves nine”, and “as cool as a cucumber”. In all these instances, only an attempt has come into existence, so as to make it more accurately proper to a specific situation by using suitable replacement; there is no change in meaning.

### **Modification**

The modification of idioms is another common form of nonce variation, in which some adjectives, intensifiers or evaluative and relative clauses are put in. This paper claims three kinds of treatment: semantically external modification, semantically internal modification, and conjunction modification. For semantically external modification, it is to indicate author’s viewpoint by modification. For instances:

8. Mrs. Thatcher “came a political cropper” over Europe (Nicholas, 1995).

9. In the fifties, several big stars were “in the studio doghouses” because of their political affiliations (Xu, 1985).

In Example 8, the adjective “political” modifies the idiom “come a cropper” as a whole, not just the noun. It can be interpreted as “from a political point of view”. In Example 9, “studio” can be interpreted as “from the studio”.

For the semantically internal treatment, it is to strengthen or diversify the literally lexical level, but it is thoroughly accountable at the metaphorical level, as in:

10. Many people were anxious to “jump on the horse-drawn Reagan bandwagon” (Nicolas, 1995).

11. It is very simple for those academics to look out of their “carpeted ivory towers” across the marsh of business depression.

In these two examples, the inserted adjectives (horse-drawn and carpeted) are used to invigorate the metaphorical images of the original idioms. They coordinate either with the surface lexis or with the meaning of the idioms.

Conjunction modification also changes the literally lexical level, but it cannot be undeviatingly construed at the metaphorical level, unless it is done for its pragmatic or stylistic effect. For example:

12. Bruce, a shark, found it a part he could really “sink his three rows of teeth into” (Nicolas, 1995).

In Example 12, “the shark’s three rows of teeth” are literal. Either the idiom “sink one’s teeth into something” is irrelevant to the shark’s teeth literally or metaphorically, so the two parts of the expression are explained individually as a combination.

### **Distribution**

On some occasions, an idiom can be segregated so that the component parts occur in two clauses. That is to dispense one idiom in different clauses. For example:

13. They are all snobs, even Julie who’s only ten years old. You never saw such “airs” as that child “gives herself” (Clarence & Robert, 1981).

In this example, the original idiom is separated by distribution. The original idiom, which is allotted two clauses, is “give oneself airs”.

### **Conjunction of Different Idioms**

Combining two different idioms into one particular usage also can be found in authentic language materials. It is logically more suitable to the particular context as in the following case.

14. But it is hard to overstate the damage done by Mr. Clinton’s unwillingness to acknowledge “not all foreign-policy purposes are born equal” (Edwards, 1993, p. 343).

In Example 14, we can find the resemblances of these two idioms: “not all that glitters is gold” and “all men are created equal”. As a result, a thoroughly new expression is invented to conform to this particular context.

## **Rhetorical Effects**

Nonce variant of English idioms appears frequently in daily communication, news English, and literary works, etc. Every nonce variant reflects directly or indirectly everyday social life, corresponding to particular contexts. As long as it is used properly, it will contrive powerful rhetorical effects. Two kinds of rhetorical effects of nonce variant are shown in the following.

### **To Make the Sentence Vivid and Witty**

15. “Where there is suffering, there is duty”.

Example 15 is extracted from the inaugural speech of American President W. Bush. The original form is “where there is will, there is a way or where there is life, and there is hope”.

### **To Make the Sentence Sarcastic and Humorous**

Attention has been paid to lunchtime nourishment. However, “the law moves in mysterious ways”, “its function to perform”, and the only people who can be sure of a square meal are the judge, jury, and prisoner.

The original form of “the law moves in mysterious ways, its function to perform” is “God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform”. With enough wit and humor, the sentence satirizes sharply the law system of the society.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the nonce variant of English idioms can be labeled as a special phenomenon. As a special phenomenon in English idiom variant, the nonce variant refers to the operation or utilization of an idiom, during which the form and/or meaning of the original idiom may be changed. It involves all the reformatory and rule-breaking operations of idioms. In addition, at the same time, we must be clear that it occurs only in certain contexts. In another way, English idiom variant, commonly seen in English, refers to the form of idiom created by means of altering some original components, structures, or meanings of the former idioms.

It goes without saying that, the nonce variant of English idioms reflects not only the changes on modern people's thinking mode which impetus them to strive for changes, innovations, and practicality, but also the constant changes and development of the society. Moreover, in many occasions, it is necessary to produce a nonce variant, so as to conform to the particular contexts. In this way, nonce variant not only reflects people's state of mind to seek novelty and difference, but also produces unique rhetorical effect together with sound communicative effect. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis on the causes of nonce variant, its types, and its function enables learners to be fully aware of the thinking modes and characteristics of idioms' renewal, and to comprehend the precise meanings and pragmatic functions of idiom variant. It is also significant in mastering and comprehending the developing rules of language.

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