

**A Semantic Study of
Some Food Idioms in English**

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Abstract

Every language has its unique collection of sayings and phrases. These expressions are known as idioms. An Idiom is a widely used saying or expression containing figurative meaning that differs from the phrase literal meaning. Thus, idioms are a type of informal language that has two-fold meanings: denotative and connotative meanings. Denotative meaning is literal whereas connotative meaning is figurative or imaginative. The current research paper aims at figuring out and identifying denotative and connotative meanings of ten food idioms that have been selected from *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (2010). This research paper is based on two theories: Leech's (1974) theory about the basic propositional meaning of denotative meaning and Wardhaugh's (2009) theory about connotative meaning. The research follows a descriptive qualitative method. The researcher himself is used as the instrument in order to get the valid accurate data. It is concluded that denotative meaning is very easy to be figured out and identified whereas connotative meaning is hard to be identified since it carries the emotional, figurative and associative meaning of the given expressions. It is found that the semantic approaches ,notably those used in Leech's theory (1974) and Wardhaugh's theory (2009) that are proved here to be quite suitable models used in analysing the given data.

Keywords: semantic study, denotative and connotative meaning, food idioms, Leech's (1974) theory, Wardhaugh's (2009) theory

1. Introduction

Language, as a system of communication, has literal and figurative meanings. The literal meaning is the direct meaning of words or sentences that imply dictionary meaning, whereas the figurative sense is used for giving an imaginative, descriptive, or special effect , that implies a hidden meaning which cannot be predicted from the meanings of individual words, such meaning that can be found, for instance, in metaphors, similes, proverbs, and idioms.

In this paper, idioms associated with food expressions that are selected from *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (2010) are examined from the semantic approach perspective. The researcher is interested in learning more about meaning. The researcher has used a qualitative descriptive method within the semantic view adopted from Leech's (1974) theory of denotative meaning and Wardhaugh's (2009) theory of connotative meaning.

Idioms are a natural part of language use. An idiom is a colloquial metaphor that requires fundamental knowledge and experience. Idioms are totally different from all forms of language due to the fact that their

meanings cannot be predicted from their individual words and they are not flexible, in that, they do not which do not allow movements or changes in form and meaning of the words forming the idioms. (Crystal, 2003, p.225)

This study is not only of concern to semanticists, but also to readers, writers, researchers, critics, and other individuals.

2. Theoretical Underpinning

This section sheds some light on the main concepts that have been used in the current research paper, including: semantics, idioms, food idioms, denotative meaning, and connotative meaning.

2.1 Semantics

Semantics is defined by different scholars and linguists. First of all, Palmer (1976, p.1) defines semantics as "the technical term used to refer to the study of meaning". Similarly, Lyons (1979) holds that "semantics is the study of meaning".

In the same way, Hurford , Heasley and Smith (1983) state that semantics is the study of meaning in language. Likewise, Frawley (1992) argues that semantics is the study of literal, decontextualized, grammatical meaning. In the same token, Saeed (1997) holds that semantics is the study of meaning, communicated through language. Kreidler (1998) points out that semantics is the study of how languages organize and express meanings. Lobner (2002) views semantics as the part of linguistics that is concerned with meaning.

2.2 Denotative Meaning

Leech (1974, p.40) states that denotative or conceptual meaning covers basic, essential components of meaning which are conveyed by literal usage of word. Some basic components of a word, like *needle*, might include *thin, sharp, steel instrument*. These components of a word are a part of the referential meaning of *needle*. However, *needle* has an associated or connotative meaning to this word which leads us to think of *painful* (Yule, 1995, p. 124).

Accordingly, the aim of denotative meaning is to provide an appropriate semantic representation to a sentence or statement; it also helps to distinguish one meaning from another. Thus, denotative meaning is an essential part of language.

2.3 Connotative Meaning

Wardhaugh (1977, p.159) states that connotative meaning uses words to add further complications to any theorizing about meanings, particularly their uses in metaphoric and poetic language. Connotative meaning is more difficult than denotative meaning. For example, *Please, give him envelop to make his business easier*. The word *envelop* has connotative meaning and it means money or bribe.

Similarly, Leech (1974, p.16) states that connotative meaning is the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to. For example, sentence *The baby sleeps in peace* is the connotation of *The baby sleeps quietly without making any sound*.

2.4 Idioms

An idiom is a term used in grammar and lexicology to refer to a sequence of words which is semantically and often syntactically restricted, so that it functions as a single unit. From a semantic viewpoint, the meaning of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the idioms as a whole. From a syntactic viewpoint, the words often do not permit the usual variability they display in other contexts. For example, *it is raining cats and dogs*, *cats and dogs* means heavily (Crystal, 2003:p.133).

Baker (1992, p.63) states that idioms are frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components. For example, *a piece of cake* means very easy and it does not have anything with a slice of cake. Moreover, Richards (2002, p.188) defines idioms as "non-literal phrases whose figurative interpretations cannot be derived from their literal meanings". Further, Laval (2003, p.203) defines an idiom as "an expression whose overall figurative meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of its parts".

2.5 Food Idioms

Food Idioms are those expressions that are concerned with food. They help students distinguish between the literal and figurative meanings of food –themed idioms and illustrations will help reinforce students' understanding of the literal and figurative meanings of the included expression

3. Research Methodology

The current section presents research methodology which includes research method, data source, research instrument, data collection procedures, and data analysis technique.

3.1. Research method

The researcher employed the descriptive qualitative method to describe food idioms under study in order to identify and figure out the denotative and connotative meaning of these idioms.

3.2. Data

The data was selected from *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms (2010)* by John Ayto ,Oxford University Press. There are ten food idioms that the researcher has analysed due to the fact that they are the most commonly used in English as well as they are very simple and popular as regards learners of English. These idioms are as follows: 1. *A piece of cake*, 2. *Apples of one's eyes*, 3. *Big cheese*, 4. *Hot potato*, 5. *To go bananas*, 6.

Sour grapes, 7. Hard nut to crack, 8. In a pickle, 9. Spill the beans, 10. Have bigger fish to fry.

3.3 Research Instrument

Moleng (2008, p.9) states that the best instrument in doing qualitative research is the researcher himself /herself; and a human is a suitable main instrument for qualitative research due to the fact that he/she will be able to adopt, understand, evaluate, recognize, and oversee the reality of society. Thus, the primary instrument was the researcher himself. As the main instrument, the researcher has the role of planning, collecting, analyzing, and reporting the research findings.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The main techniques in collecting qualitative data carried out by means of observation in order to produce a lot of data. The data from this study are idioms selected from the *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (2010).

Observational research is a qualitative research method where the target subject is observed and analyzed in real world setting. Observation involves three processes, namely, *sensation* which depends upon the physical alertness of the observer, *attention* which depends upon the observer's concentration and *perception* which depends upon the observer's interpretation.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed based on definitions of qualitative descriptive method. Ten Food Idioms were analyzed from each English sentence. Each English sentence is classified according to denotative and connotative meaning.

4. Data Analysis

This section is dedicated to analyzing ten food idioms according to semantic study and the method employed is qualitative descriptive method. The analysis is based on Leech's (1974) denotative meaning and Wardhaugh's (2009) connotative meaning.

Food idiom (1): piece of cake

e.g. The exam was a piece of cake.

The denotative meaning of food idiom 'a piece of cake' is that the exam was just like a slice of cake (i.e. an item of soft sweet food made from a mixture of flour, fat, eggs, sugar, and other ingredients), whereas the connotative meaning of food idiom *a piece of cake* is that the exam is very easy and simple.

Food idiom (2): big cheese

e.g. He left business school and became a big cheese in the city.

The denotative meaning of *big cheese* is that a food made from the pressed curds of milk, firm and elastic or soft and semi-liquid in texture

grated cheese. The connotative meaning of *big cheese* signifies an important person in company or an organization with a lot of influence.

Food idiom (3): *hot potato*

The idiomatic phrase *Hot potato* has a denotative meaning which refers to a starchy plant tuber that is one of the most important food crops, cooked and eaten as a vegetable, whereas *hot potato* has a connotative meaning which indicates a very important person (vip).

Food idiom (4): *in a pickle*

e.g. I am going to be in a pickle if I do not get paid on Friday.

The phrase *in a pickle* has denotative meaning refers to a thick cold sauce that is made from pieces of vegetables preserved in vinegar. It is usually eaten with cold meat or cheese, whereas the connotative meaning denotes to be in a difficult situation.

Food idiom (5): *sour grapes*

e.g. Governments officials dismissed many of the complaints as sour grapes.

The phrase *sour grapes* has a denotative meaning denoting a small, round, purple or pale green fruit that people can eat or make into wine, whereas the phrase has a connotative meaning that used to refer to an attitude in which someone adopts a negative attitude to something because they cannot have it themselves.

Food idiom (6): *spill the beans*

e.g. I am going to spill the beans about travel plans.

The phrase *spill the beans* has a denotative meaning signifying an edible seed, typically kidney shaped growing in long pods on certain leguminous plants, whereas connotative meaning denoting *reveal the truth* or reveal information that was meant to be private.

Food idiom (7): *have bigger fish*

e.g. He has got much bigger fish to fry.

The denotative meaning of this idiom is that fish are aquatic vertebrates' animals which have gills paired fins and a long body covered with scales and tend to be cold-blooded, whereas the connotative meaning of this idiom is that he has more important or useful thing to do.

Food idiom (8): *as cool as cucumber*

e.g. My boss looks efficient and as cool as cucumber.

The denotative meaning of this idiom *as cool as cucumber* means a long green skinned fruit with watery flesh usually eaten raw in salads or pickled , whereas the connotative meaning of this idiom indicates that my boss is very relaxed.

Food idiom (9): *bad apple*

e.g. You should stay away from that man, he is a bad apple.

The denotative meaning of this idiom is that the round fruit of a tree of the rose family, which typically has thin green or red skin and crisp flesh,

whereas the connotative meaning of this idiom is that this man is a bad man.

Food idiom (10): **to go bananas**

e.g. *The crowd went bananas when the concert began.*

The denotative meaning of this idiom is that bananas are long curved fruit which grows in clusters and have soft pulpy flesh and yellow skin when ripe, whereas the connotative meaning of this idiom is that the crowd became extremely angry or excited.

The following table sums up the distribution of the ten food idioms together with their denotative and connotative meaning:

SN.	Food Idioms	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
1.	A piece of cake	A slice of cake	Very easy
2.	A big cheese	A daily product made from pressed Curds of milk	Important person with a lot of influence
3.	Hot potato	Plant tuber cooked and eaten as a vegetable	VIP
4.	In a pickle	Thick cold sauce made from vegetables	In a difficult situation
5.	Sour grapes	Small, round, purple or pale green fruit	Negative attitude to something because people cannot have it
6.	Spill the beans	Edible seeds	Reveal information meant to be private
7.	Have bigger fish	Aquatic vertebrates animals having gills and fins	Having more important thing to do
8.	As cool as cucumber	Green skinned fruit	Very relaxed
9.	Bad apple	Round fruit of tree	A bad man
10.	To go banana	Long, curved fruit growing in clusters	Becoming extremely angry or excited

Conclusion

In the light of the previous semantic analysis of food idioms, the researcher has come up with the following concluding points:

1. Connotative meaning of food idioms carries the colloquial meaning or associative or figurative meaning, which is very different from formal one.
2. It is found that denotative meaning is very easy to be figured out whereas it is hard to understand connotative meaning of these food idioms because they have different meaning with different contexts.

3. It is found that a semantic approach of food idioms is very effective and persuasive with a positive impact on the readers.
4. Applying Leech's (1974) theory of denotative meaning and Wardhaugh's (2009) connotative meaning is very satisfactory and suitable for the analysis of food idioms.
5. The qualitative descriptive method is very authentic in interpreting the denotative and connotative meaning as well as it expresses thoughts and views freely without any pre-set constraints and it is naturalistic method to its subject matter.

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دراسة دلالية لبعض المصطلحات الخاصة بالاطعمة في اللغة الانكليزية

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المستخلص

ان كل لغة تتمتع بمجموعة من الاقوال والعبارات الفريدة التي تميزها عن باقي اللغات حيث ان هذه الاقوال والتعابير تُعرف بالمصطلحات (idioms) ويعرف المصطلح على انه قول يستخدم على نطاق واسع ويحتوي على معنى مجازي يختلف عن المعنى الصرفي وعليه فان المصطلحات ما هي الا لغة غير رسمية تتكون من معنى ذو جهين يعرف الاول بالمعنى الدلالي الحرفي (denotative meaning) ويعرف الاخر بالمعنى الضمني التلمحي (connotative meaning) وعلى هذا الاساس يهدف البحث الحالي الى التعرف على المعنيين الدلالي الحرفي والضمني في عشرة مصطلحات دالة على الاطعمة في بعض الجمل الانكليزية المختارة التي تم اختيارها من قاموس اكسفورد للمصطلحات الانكليزية Oxford Dictionary of English (Idioms (2010) وان المنهج الذي اتبعته الباحثة في هذا البحث هو نظرية Leech (1974) للمعنى الدلالي الحرفي ونظرية Wardhaugh للمعنى الضمني التلمحي (2009) وان الطريقة المتبعة في هذا البحث هي الطريقة الوصفية النوعية (descriptive qualitative method) وان الاداة المستخدمة في هذا البحث (instrument) هو الباحث نفسه وذلك من اجل الحصول على بيانات صحيحة ودقيقة ومن خلال التحليل توصل الباحث الى ان المعنى الحرفي يمكن فهمه والتعرف عليه بسهولة بينما من الصعب التعرف على المعنى الضمني التلمحي لانه يحمل معاني بلاغية وعاطفية تلمحية ومرتبطة به ووجد كذلك بان المنهج الدلالي (semantic approach) هو منهج مؤثر ومقنع وان نظرية Leech مع Wardhaugh هي مناهج ملائمة جدا في تحليل البيانات قيد الدراسة .

الكلمات المفتاحية : دراسة دلالية , المعنى الحرفي والضمني , مصطلحات خاصة بالاطعمة ,

نظرية Leech , نظرية Wardhaugh