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**A Corpus-based Study of English Idioms in Different Registers**

**基于语料库的不同语域中英语习语的研究**

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## Synopsis

Idiom is a unit of a language constituted by words. It is usually bigger than words in size and has a special different meaning from the meanings of the separate words. Idioms exist in a great number and play an important role because they are vivid and colorful. The importance of idioms in a language makes it a necessary part both in the research of the language and in the teaching of the language. This thesis discusses the definition, classifications, origins and characteristics of English idioms, then analyses the relevant theories of idioms from different aspects. With these foundations explored, the thesis adopts a corpus-based method to analyze the frequency of idioms in different registers. Through the comparative study we can draw a conclusion that idioms are used most frequently in literary works, somewhat frequently in everyday verbal communication, and least in formal writing. This is because that the literature works are complicate and lively, and in order to make them more readable and attractive, the writers may use large number of idioms. As to the conversation, because it is an offhand communication, it has many non-verbal factors and does not depend too much on language to enhance its effect; it uses a smaller size of idioms. Among the three registers investigated in the thesis, ideas to be conveyed are supposed to represent the object or the event as it is, and in formal writing, the language is more precise, accurate, rigid and heavy. There can be many learned words and technical terms occurring in written texts. It uses fewer simple words, slang phrasal verbs and idioms etc. and it has the lowest frequency of idioms. It is hoped that the finding may modify the view that idioms are colloquial and used most frequently in spoken language. The distribution of idioms across registers may be more significant than we expect. Besides, the variation of idioms also seems to be connected with the context in which idioms are used.

This thesis consists of five parts:

- (1) Chapter 1 is the introduction part, which makes an overview of the whole thesis.
- (2) Chapter 2 focuses on the definition, classifications, origins and the characteristics of English idioms. It makes an overview of the English idioms, including several versions of the definition, typical classifications, origins

and characteristics.

- (3) Chapter 3 introduces the relevant theories of English idioms. It analyzes the relevant theories of idioms from different aspects. The relevant theories are the relationship with language and culture, cognitive linguistics, different characters of registers and lexicology.
- (4) Chapter 4 dwells on using corpus-based method to analyze the frequency of using idioms in different registers and the characteristics of idioms. It introduces the corpus-based method, design the research, the analytical tool and the data source. Finally it analyzes the data to find out the solution according with the relevant theory.
- (5) Chapter 5 is the conclusion part. In the conclusion, I will summarize this paper, address its limitations and give some suggestions.

**Key words:** Idiom; Corpus; Register



## 摘要

习语是由单词组成的一个语言单位，它通常是比单词大的固定短语，有着不同于各个词汇字面意义的特殊含义。习语因其形象生动而广泛存在于语言中，并起着重要的作用，习语在语言中的重要性使之成为在语言学和语言教学中不可缺少的一部分。本文从语言学和语料库语言学角度出发，探讨了英语习语的定义、分类、特征和来源等有关习语各方面的因素，然后从语体学、认知语言学、词汇学等不同角度分析了习语的相关理论，基于以上理论，本文采用语料库来分析，通过比较研究，我们得出结论：习语在不同语域中的使用频率不同，文学语言中使用频率最高，口语次之，而在书面语最少。这种现象主要是由于作家为了使其作品突出文学效果，他们倾向于使用较复杂、生动的语言，因此文学作品中会出现大量的习语。就日常口语而言，由于其具有即时性，且受到许多非语言因素的影响，因此并不过多依赖于语言来加强其效果，习语的使用频率相对较低。在本文探讨的三种语域中，为了准确表达概念或描述事件，正式语体的语言往往比较严谨、精确，典雅、庄重，书面语中往往就有大量的偏理论型的词和术语。它较少使用简单词汇，俚语和习语等，因此习语的使用频率最低。希望这个发现能改变人们的观点：习语是口语化的语言，在口语中最常见。习语在不同语域的分布比我们想象的更重要。此外，习语的变体与其所处的语境息息相关。

本文分为五个部分：

- (1) 第一章为引言部分。本部分对全文进行了概述。
- (2) 第二章重点介绍英语习语的定义、分类、来源和特征。概述了英语习语的几种不同的定义，典型的分类方法和特征来源并进行归纳总结。
- (3) 第三章介绍英语习语的相关理论，本部分从语言和文化的关系，认知语言学理论，不同语域的特征和词汇学等不同角度阐述了习语的相关理论。
- (4) 第四章主要用语料库进行研究。分析了不同语域的习语的使用频率，习语的特征。并介绍了语料库的使用方法，研究方法的设计，数据分析工具和数据来源。最后通过数据分析找出与相关理论相符的结论。

- (5) 第五章为结语部分。本部分对该论文进行了总结并指出其存在的不足及提出建议。

**关键词：**习语；语料库；语域

厦门大学博硕士论文摘要库

<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter 2 An Overview on English Idioms</b> .....	4
<b>2.1 Definition of English Idiom</b> .....	4
<b>2.2 Classification of English Idioms</b> .....	6
2.2.1 Idiomatic Phrases .....	6
2.2.2 Proverbs .....	7
2.2.3 Slang .....	7
<b>2.3 Sources of English Idioms</b> .....	7
2.3.1 Idioms from Daily Life .....	8
2.3.2 Idioms of Ancient Myths, Legends or Fables .....	8
2.3.3 Idioms from Historical Events .....	9
2.3.4 Idioms from Religion .....	9
2.3.5 Idioms from Classical Works .....	9
2.3.6 Idioms from Foreign Languages .....	10
<b>2.4 Characteristic Features of English Idioms</b> .....	10
2.4.1 Conciseness and Comprehensiveness .....	10
2.4.2 Implied Meanings .....	11
2.4.3 Synonyms and Antonyms .....	13
<b>Chapter 3 Relevant Theories</b> .....	14
<b>3.1 Language and Culture</b> .....	14
3.1.1 Definition of Culture .....	14
3.1.2 Culture and Language .....	14
<b>3.2 Figures of Speech, Phonological and Stylistic Features in Idioms</b> .....	16
3.2.1 Simile .....	16
3.2.2 Metaphor .....	17
3.2.3 Metonymy .....	18
3.2.4 Explanation of the Existence of Simile, Metaphor and Metonymy in	

Language .....	19
<b>3.3 Register</b> .....	22
3.3.1 What is Register .....	22
3.3.2 Characteristics of Register .....	23
<b>3.4 Lexicology</b> .....	25
<b>Chapter 4 Corpus-based Research of Idioms</b> .....	26
<b>4.1 Corpus for Idioms Research</b> .....	26
4.1.1 What Is Corpus .....	26
4.1.2 Advantage of Using a Corpus for Language Research .....	27
<b>4.2 Research Methodology</b> .....	29
4.2.1 Research Questions .....	29
4.2.2 Research Design .....	30
4.2.3 Analytical Tool .....	31
<b>4.3 Corpus</b> .....	31
4.3.1 Corpus Source .....	31
4.3.2 Procedures .....	33
<b>4.4 Data Analysis and Results</b> .....	34
4.4.1 Idioms Used in Different Registers .....	34
4.4.2 Frequency of Idioms in Different Registers .....	36
<b>Chapter 5 Conclusion</b> .....	40
<b>5.1 Concluding Remarks</b> .....	40
<b>5.2 Limitation of This Study</b> .....	41
<b>5.3 Suggestions for further Research</b> .....	42
<b>Appendix I</b> .....	44
<b>Appendix II</b> .....	48
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	53
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	57

第一章 绪论.....	1
第二章 英语习语综述.....	4
2.1 英语习语的定义.....	4
2.2 英语习语的分类.....	6
2.2.1 成语.....	6
2.2.2 谚语.....	7
2.2.3 俚语.....	7
2.3 英语习语的来源.....	7
2.3.1 日常生活.....	8
2.3.2 古代寓言、神话、传说.....	8
2.3.3 历史事件.....	9
2.3.4 宗教.....	9
2.3.5 古典著作.....	9
2.3.6 外来语.....	10
2.4 英语习语的特征.....	10
2.4.1 简明扼要.....	10
2.4.2 隐含意义.....	11
2.4.3 同义、反义.....	13
第三章 相关理论.....	14
3.1 语言与文化.....	14
3.1.1 文化的定义.....	14
3.1.2 语言与文化的关系.....	14
3.2 习语的修辞、音韵特征.....	16
3.2.1 明喻.....	16
3.2.2 暗喻.....	17
3.2.3 借代.....	18

3.2.4 对习语中存在的明喻、暗喻和借代的解释.....	19
3.3 语域.....	22
3.3.1 语域的定义.....	22
3.3.2 语域的特征.....	23
3.4 词汇学.....	25
<b>第四章 基于语料库的习语的研究.....</b>	<b>26</b>
4.1 使用语料库对习语进行研究.....	26
4.1.1 什么是语料库.....	26
4.1.2 使用语料库研究语言的益处.....	27
4.2 研究方法.....	29
4.2.1 研究问题.....	29
4.2.2 研究设计.....	30
4.2.3 分析工具.....	31
4.3 语料库.....	31
4.3.1 语料库来源.....	31
4.3.2 程序.....	33
4.4 数据分析与结果.....	34
4.4.1 不同语域的习语使用情况.....	34
4.4.2 不同语域的习语使用频率.....	36
<b>第五章 结论.....</b>	<b>40</b>
5.1 结束语.....	40
5.2 存在的不足.....	41
5.3 建议.....	42
附录 I.....	44
附录 II.....	48
参考文献.....	53
致谢.....	57

## Chapter 1 Introduction

English is the most widely used language, which is rich in expressive devices with glory of culture. English idioms glitter with its artistic quality of English language, sparking with the wisdom of the English speaking countries. Idioms are profound in meaning and vivid in image. According to Fernando, “only those expressions which become conventionally fixed in a specific order and lexical form, or have only a restricted set of variants, acquire the status of idioms.” (Fernando, 1996: 31)

Idiom is a unit of a language constituted by words. It usually is bigger than words in size and has a special different meaning from the meanings of the separate words. “An idiom usually has an implied meaning. It cannot be interpreted only according to its literal meaning.” (郁福敏, 1999: 9) It has relatively fixed expressions and forms an important part of the English vocabulary. “Idioms consist of set phrases and short sentences, which are peculiar to the language in question and loaded with the native cultures and ideas. Therefore, idioms are colorful, forcible and thought-provoking.” (张维友, 2004: 162) Idioms have been described as the crystallization of language. First, most idioms contain an extremely profound and rich meaning though they are composed of few words. Second, most idioms carry a vivid image. “Without idioms our language would become dull and dry, whereas an appropriate use of them in our speech and writing will add to the strength and vividness of our language.” (郁福敏, 1999: 10) Idioms are concise and comprehensive, and can convey more philosophic meaning in life than the few words carry in themselves. Some idioms convey their ideas by means of image and figures of speech, for example, *a fly in the ointment*, *in the same boat*. In these examples the images and figures of speech play an important role in defining the meaning of these idioms because of their rich association.

The English language abounds in idioms in different registers: in literary creations, daily communications and other kinds of written communication. The three registers well represent basic English use in modern time. A further analysis reveals different conditions of these registers which can lead to different extent to which idioms are used in these fields. In literary creations and verbal communication, “most

of which are used in a colloquial situation”, (许朝阳, 2002) an environment that is felt to be relatively informal and interactive rather than content-focused, whereas the written styles are relatively formal and content-focused. In literary creations, the words of the literary creations are well prepared by the writers. In order to emphasize the characters and reach the literary effect, the writer may use large numbers of idioms to make his work more abstractive and colorful. Literary works seem to be most favorable for the use of idioms. And as to the spoken language, “face-to-face conversation is directly interactive, with participants talking a lot about themselves and each other.” (Biber, 2000: 15) In addition, “the interlocutors share the same physical and temporal context, and often share extensive personal background knowledge.” (Biber, 2000: 16) The communication may be pushed forward by other non-verbal factors such as tone, intonation, body language and environmental language etc. In spite of the fact that literary creations and conversations both depend heavily on spoken English environment, they are still distinct from each other by other elements in their production. It does not depend as much as literature language on words. Written English, on the other hand, distinguishes itself from the other two registers in terms of basic language production environment, the latter being in spoken English environment. Again various elements in the process of production, such as preparation and sociolinguistic considerations, help generate the text as it is. Idioms, with their liability to be used in speaking environment, are expected to be less common in written English.

Idioms add much to the expressive and emotional power of a language. Men of letters, in modern or ancient times, in England or elsewhere, all excel in using idioms. In the literary works of famous English writers such as Swift, Lamb, Shakespeare, Dryden and Addison, etc, there are many of idiomatic expressions. Idioms are also widely used in scientific and political articles and other kinds of writings as well. They reflect the homely philosophy, humor and character of the people, and also show how the wit and wisdom of the poets and other writers have passed into the thought of their people. Since idioms are used more in literature creations, colloquial than in written, and then what kinds of idioms are used in different registers of English? How frequently are English idioms used? What the distribution of idioms? It is the question this thesis wants to analyze. And corpus-based investigations of idioms are the areas



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