COLLOQUIAL IDIOMS IN SEMIFORMAL PROSE

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Colloquial idioms, like jargon, represent an inexhaustible source of new sayings--every generation develops new ones, and some of the old ones linger for years. The name *idioms* refers to their origin as *idiomatic words and phrases* and to the fact that the literal meanings of the individual words do not combine to create the actual meaning of the idiom itself. Saying, for example that "someone is *out to lunch*" can mean that someone has stepped out to eat during the *noon break* or that someone is *crazy, silly,* or *weird.* Idioms belong to the same family as slang and often border on the vulgar or express black humor: *to be a pain in the rear, to put on the dog, dressed to kill, to be a turkey, to be chicken, nobody home upstairs, to kick the bucket,* and thousands more. According to standard usage in American English, these colloquial idioms ("speech idioms") belong to the domain of casual conversation and should be avoided in semiformal writing. Yet both native and non-native writers often include them in their semiformal papers, essays, reports, letters, and other manuscripts, creating a variety of effects, ranging from the obscure to the comic.

Idioms represent a kind of secret code for native speakers and may prove to be as difficult for others as dialects are. Imagine what happens when non-native speakers with minimal English hear, *poor old Jim: he bought the farm; Katherine hatched a great idea yesterday; Charlie jumped onto the project like a storm trooper; the company must buckle down.* Or worse yet, they sometimes receive letters full of these insider sayings intermingled with slang expressions:

Dear Mr. Yamamoto,

I am sorry that the manager did not get in touch with you prior to last week's fax. But a lot of the lines are down here. he was trying to get a hold of his secretary when the lights went out. The electric company said its hands were tied until Thursday because of recent storms. But do not worry. We have all our ducks lined up for the meeting on the 14th of November. As you may have heard, Mr. Johnson is now out of the loop, and we hired Pamela Simpson to now represent us–she is in the know concerning Protec products. You will no doubt freak out when you see Higgins. He has copped an attitude and now wears hoity doity, custom-made digs that he claims knocked ten years off of his life. Be cool. Tell the whole gang we said hello. We'll give you a jingle when the big turkey lands. P.S. we can't meet you at 7:00 because we must rent a car first. Maybe we will run into you later in route to the meeting.

For sure, this letter exaggerates the use of the idiom, and even some native speakers of American English would struggle to understand the entire contents. While the slang terms *hoity doity* and *be cool* were used fifty years ago, some of the others, like *to line your ducks up* and *to cop an attitude,* appeared sometime in the 1980's and may pose some difficulties of understanding to different age groups.

Since many idioms use metaphors to make powerful statements, the inclusion of them in semiformal writing will often produce an exaggerated or extreme prose style. A metaphor expresses a comparison or connection between two concepts, usually nouns unrelated in meaning and usually connected by the weak verb *to be* . In the statement *Bob is a rat,* Bob is being compared to a *rat,* which, no doubt, carries a negative connotation. Now consider the effects of this metaphor when incorporated into a colloquial idiom: *Bob sneaks around like a rat.* No doubt, in the world of night clubs, prickling humor, casual conversation, and witty sayings, *everything goes.* But writers should exercise caution when selecting idioms for their semiformal prose. In fact, most teachers of composition forbid them in semiformal writing–of course barring situations when such idioms help achieve certain goals of humor or baroque style.

Most authorities on English prose style recommend that writers select their metaphors carefully, for their powerful images and subtle overtones may distract the reader. Think about the literal meanings of *Franchelli gunned his engine; Lisa ran a red light; Jose flipped a u turn.* Analyze the literal meanings of the following idioms:

. *Bob fumed over being fired*
. *Jessica and I painted the town last night*
. *The reckless teens had money to burn*
. *George rocked the boat at dinner last night*
. *Mary always makes waves at the meeting*
. *Jerry got shot down at the promotion meeting*
. *Jane' s world exploded when Ted stepped out on her*
. *Harry foamed at the mouth all day*
. *Pete' s singing a different tune since he got punched in the kisser*

Now, observe how one idiom can create different meanings, depending on the object.

The cheerleaders picked up
. *some lunch*
. *an elephant*
. *some boys*
. *the flu*
. *a tip on the races*

Finally, note how the context of a sentence can create unintended meanings as illustrated in the chilling example provided by Montana Jack, a cowboy who faces the harshest conditions imaginable every winter.

Fighting a wind chill of -60f roaring across the plains of Montana, Jack began to panic as the force of the blizzard increased; the highway being iced over, he cautiously drove his old pickup down the middle of the road; trembling uncontrollably, he made every effort to keep the vehicle from veering to the left or right. Suddenly, his car slid off of the road and halted into a 30 foot snow bank. But later he chilled out completely.

In the early 1980' s, a movement in America to " write as you speak" attracted some interest

among writing teachers, especially in high schools where overcrowded conditions and various levels of literacy have reached an alarming level. Students were encouraged to write whatever *popped in their* minds, regardless of the effect on the reader or on the writing style. This movement represented the *no holes-barred* approach in which students were suddenly free to express themselves in casual–even vulgar–idioms in their research papers and semiformal reports. But, finally, the theory failed to improve writing skills essentially because the write-as-you-speak bandwagon failed to account for the fact that speaking involves the whole person- -facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, flashes of the eyes , and quips of irony and innuendo conveyed by smiling, frowning, grimacing, shrugging the shoulders, crossing the eyes, and many more sources of communication which cannot exist in writing. This bizarre experiment confirmed the necessity of restricting idioms to casual speech and not to use them in semiformal writing. Alas, the system of speaking and the system of semiformal writing are at opposite poles, forever incompatible in serious written communication.

For one thing, written communication requires a higher level of formality than casual talking. Note the differences between ordinary conversation and semiformal writing.

CONVERSATION	WRITING
house	*home*
gun	*pistol*
deal	*agreement/ contract*
fun	*enjoyment*
[a1]car	*automobile*

You may also want to limit the number of "universal" verbs, another classification of speech forms; they often combine with other words to form idioms and include the following infinitive forms: *to get, to make, to take, to let* among others These expressions are often ambiguous and can convey a number of possible meanings. Some typical examples include:

to get mad, to get down, to get around, to get by, to get uptight to make up, to make out, to make it, to make merry, to make love, to take it out on, to take charge, take care, take it hard, take it cool, to let it out, to let someone have it, to let loose, to let it slide.

In fact, a typical joke in slap-stick movies plays off of this type of misunderstanding. *"The boss said "let him have it* (referring to *money*), *so mugsy shot him."* (*Let someone have it* can also mean to shoot or kill someone in addition *to give someone something*). All of the following examples include ambiguous idioms; most sentences have a least two interpretations.

1. *Not being afraid of hard work, Dr. Allende dug through the library in search of anthropological evidence to substantiate her views.*
2. *On the morning of August 10, 1979, the renowned pianist opened his eyes, looked around the room at his friends and family, and then slipped away.*
3. *During the hearings on the limitation of nuclear weapons, Senator Campbell's high powered speech blew the antinuclear faction away.*

4. Insisting that he would never retire, the CEO came out swinging during the meeting and declared that the failed company could fight over the crumbs left by the conglomeration.

5. A news release stated that Charlie Lopez was bent out of shape over the accident despite the fact that the trial had cleared him of wrong doing.

6. The normally shy starlet shocked her audience when she talked about sex out in the open.

7. Later that day at the hearing, the whiplash victim's lawyer laid it on thick, maintaining that his client had never had back surgery.

Finally, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate, colloquial idioms function well within the confines of causal speech but rarely fit well into semiformal prose. They are too ambiguous and often suggest other meanings than those intended by the user. Those who want to improve the style and clarity of their semi-formal writing are encouraged to improve their standard English vocabulary and reserve colloquial idioms for casual speech where they serve an important function in communication.