

Food and Drink Idioms in English

Laura Pinnavaia (2018)

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The revised and renamed edition of Laura Pinnavaia's previous book "Sugar and Spice'...Exploring food and drink idioms in English" expands on what she had originally presented in 2010, with updates made to chapter four and three. In all, 276 food and drink idioms were identified, dissected, and categorised over six chapters, to provide further analyses for future research in the field of lexicography and beyond. Currently a Full Professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Milan, Italy, Pinnavaia's field of expertise is firmly in lexicology and lexicography where she has published one edited volume and four other books on the topic – "Food and Drink Idioms in English" is her latest. It comes at no surprise that a need as basic (per Maslow's hierarchy of needs) and primal as eating and drinking/food and drink has created such integral linguistic elements in this language (or any language, in fact). English specifically has roots in Anglo-Saxon and some traces of French, but as the influence from the surrounding European countries increased and as the Empire expanded, so did the eating habits as well as the English language, which has created a very rich repertoire of idioms (and evolved into metaphors) in the present-day language.

Drawing from 12 monolingual dictionaries spanning across four centuries (1755-2009) Pinnavaia identifies the degree of idiomaticity, level of intelligibility, as well as the dates and sources of the first attestations. She identifies the idioms using Barkema's (1996) multi-dimensional model, dividing them into compositional (a result of basic and derived senses), partially-compositional (derived senses that combine with extended senses), non-compositional (not inferred from the senses, i.e. fully metaphoric or opaque structures), and pseudo-compositional idioms (where the meaning of literal structures encompass more than the combined results of the senses). Further, Pinnavaia reveals the literal and non-literal structures by breaking them down to the decomposable idiom (where each constituent has an individual meaning with a literal and non-literal interpretation), partly-decomposable idiom (where correspondence can occur between the literal meaning of the whole idiom and its message), and non-decomposable idiom (non-literal meanings seem to have no relationship at all with the literal ones). Overall, Pinnavaia concludes that from this selection of food and drink idioms they are largely decomposable, purely by this method of classification.

The chapter on methodological pursuit justifies the use of varied lexicographical sources comprising monolingual native speaker and Learner dictionaries as well as corpus banks (BNC and BoE). It is perhaps safe to say that the selected dictionaries are largely prescriptive (CED, COED3 etc). It is therefore wise to complement the sources with corpus banks which are descriptive in nature and covers usage of idioms in real life. In principle, this is methodologically sound. However, the BNC and BoE are dated corpus banks and may not accurately reflect new and exciting idioms that arose from the necessity to communicate in a different way through a different medium in a different context - the case of innovative ways

of drinking and eating ‘bizarre’ food in non-conventional restaurants and these are extended and metaphorically used in different contexts.

It would have been more refreshing to see Pinnavaia take on the language from the current decade in this revised edition, with vernacular now featuring some changes since 2009 – to suggest an example: the phrase ‘spill the beans’, which was referenced many times in this book, has evolved to become ‘spill the tea’ in certain circles and is now a heavily used pop cultural reference in the media. Building on that, there is also potential to examine the role of online media in the use (or misuse) of idiomatic expressions. Perhaps this leaves more room for Pinnavaia to explore in future revisions of this research.

In the following chapter Pinnavaia shares first attestations from secondary sources. As the centuries progressed, there were increased numbers of recorded idioms, from six in the 14th Century, two in the 15th, 37 in the 16th, 43 in the 17th – it’s noted that Shakespeare was responsible for introducing 15 idioms to the English language, including ‘be caviare to someone’, ‘the world is one’s oyster’, and ‘the milk of human kindness’ – 21 in the 18th, 66 in the 19th, and 56 in the 20th. The latter two centuries accounted for 76% of the total and was contributed through fiction or journalistic prose (as opposed to lived, literal experiences of the olden days) – for example, the term ‘couch potato’ was coined by the Los Angeles Times newspaper in 1979. Here, she pinpoints that idioms that stand the test of time have a close bond between the phonic chain and semantic meaning.

This was a good segue to referencing the 12 chosen dictionaries from the 18th-20th Century and identifying idioms which have fallen out of favour (or even evolved) over the years – things like ‘laced mutton’ and ‘tickle someone like a trout’ have all but disappeared from contemporary speech and writing, while a phrase like ‘flat as a flan’ morphed into ‘flat as a pancake’, adapting along the way to an image that was more commonly understandable. Pinnavaia’s main critique through this investigation was on the lack of homogeneity in the categorisation of long and short idioms across all dictionaries used (as well as within individual ones); placement of idioms in the dictionary, as well as identifying the key word is as yet not a standardised procedure, even after 250 years.

Pinnavaia’s research comes to a satisfying conclusion where exploration has revealed that idioms follow clear patterns in form and function, and endorses the notion that “idioms are not merely appendages of language, but central and effective instruments of communications” put forward by phraseology research of the last few decades.. This is a collection that is by no means exhaustive, and she suggests further research to be done on earlier bilingual dictionaries to gain greater perspective and a richer historical understanding. This book, however, provides useful referencing material for scholars particularly academicians in the field of lexicography and corpus linguistics.

Food and Drink Idioms in English ‘A Little Bit More Sugar and Lots of Spice’ is an intensely in-depth exploration into the linguistic history of idioms that we often take for granted and use without a thought, and a fascinating examination of the evolution of language through exposures to different cultures and diets that demonstrate in the most basic of terms ‘we are what we eat’.