# A semiotic Approach to Introducing English idioms to Nonnatives

نهج سيميائي لعرض  التعابير الاصطلاحية الإنجليزية لغير الناطقين بها

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## Abstract

Idioms are difficult for nonnatives to understand as they are arbitrary and nonliteral. The traditional methods of idiom acquisition are inefficient as nonnatives are still unable to use them efficiently. Thus, the aim of this research is to investigate the effectiveness of the semiotic approach to introduce idioms to nonnatives. For the purpose of this research, a pre-test and a post-test were designed and administered to a sample of 20 students enrolled in the first year at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Suez Canal University. Firstly, the students were asked to complete a multiple-choice pre-test to check their knowledge of the 15 selected idioms for this study. Secondly, the students were exposed to a Power Point presentation in which designed pictures depicted both the

literal and the metaphorical meanings of the idioms. Thirdly, the students were asked to complete a post-test to notice the effect of the visual pictures on the acquisition of idioms by the students. The results reveal that using the semiotic approach has positive effect on the participants as the correct answers increased by 58.2% percentage jumping from 38.7% correct answers in the pre-test to 96.7% correct answers in the post-test.

Keywords: nonnatives, semiotics, idioms.

## الملخص

تشكل التعابير الاصطلاحية صعوبة كبيرة في فهمها واستخدامها بالنسبة إلى غير الناطقين باللغة الإنجليزية وذلك كونها تعطي معنى خاصاً بها مغايراً للمعنى الحرفي لترجمة كلماتها وقد أثبتت الطرق التقليدية لإكتساب تلك المصطلحات عدم فاعليتها حيث أنهم مازالوا غير قادرين علي استخدام تلك المصطلحات بكفاءة لذا فإن هدف هذا البحث هو التحقق من قابلية تطبيق النهج السيميائي في تقديم تلك المصطلحات لغير الناطقين باللغة الإنجليزية وتقييم فاعليته. لتحقيق غرض هذا البحث فقد تم إجراء اختبار قبلي واختبار بعدي لعينه مكونه من 20طالباً مسجلين بالسنة الدراسية الأولى بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة قناة السويس. أولاً، طُلب من الطلاب إكمال اختبار قبلي متعدد الخيارات ولقد تم استخدام هذا الاختبار القبلي للتحقق من معرفة الطلاب بالتعابير الخمسة عشر المختارة لهذه الدراسة. ثانيًا ، شاهد الطلاب عرض باور بوينت حيث صورت الصور المصممة كلاً من المعاني الحرفية والحقيقية للتعابير الخمسة عشر المختارة. ثالثًا ، طُلب من الطلاب إكمال اختباربعدي لملاحظة تأثير الصور المرئية على

اكتساب الطلاب للتعابير. ولقد أظهرت النتائج أن استخدام النهج السيميائي له تأثير إيجابي على المشاركين حيث زادت الإجابات الصحيحة بنسبة 58.2٪ حيث كانت الإجابات الصحيحة 38.7٪ في الاختبار القبلي بينما كانت الإجابات الصحيحة 96.7٪ في الاختبار البعدي.

الكلمات الدالة: الغير ناطقين باللغة ، التعابير الإصطلاحية، السيميائيه.

## 1.Introduction

Idioms are a part of fixed expressions like compounds, clichés, quotes and names. They are found in formal and informal speeches. Novels, television programs, political speeches, radio broadcasts, magazines, and academic researches abound with idiomatic expressions. Idioms are also used for humour and people sometimes use them to "comment on themselves, other people or situations" (O'Dell & McCarthy,2010, p.6). Native speakers of English use idioms easily, automatically and daily. They use them spontaneously without even thinking about their figurative nature. cooper (1998) recorded three hours of different American television programs then he transcribed the idioms mentioned during these hours. The results showed that " idioms occurred at the rate of about three per minute" (p. 256).

Idioms usually indicate proficiency. A non-native speaker seems fluent and his/her conversation sounds more natural when he uses idioms. Nonnatives need to expose to idioms for better comprehension and production of the second language. Despite the necessity of acquiring idioms, it seems an uphill task for nonnative speakers to use idioms efficiently. Non-native speakers face difficulty in realizing the metaphorical meaning of the idiomatic expressions. They are incapable of using them when communicating in English and do not have the ability to understand their meanings simultaneously. Idioms are a challenge for nonnative speakers. They are frozen phrases whose meanings cannot be derived from the meanings of their words. The meaning of an idiom cannot be derived logically from the combination of the meaning of its constituents. There are many traditional methods used to introduce idioms, but these methods are insufficient as non-natives still have a problem while dealing with the theme of idioms. Thus, this thesis aims to present empirical data verifying the assumption that the semiotic approach is an effective way in introducing idioms to non- natives.

## 2. Literature Review

## 2.1 Previous Studies

Since idioms are so frequent in spoken and written discourse, there are numerous studies on idioms. Some of these studies are listed below in chronological order.

Antonsson (2012) made a qualitative research to study how Swedish university students understood idiomatic expressions in famous English song lyrics and out of them. The researcher chose thirteen idiomatic expressions in three different songs for her study. She selected twelve Swedish university students studying different subjects in different levels for her survey. Firstly, the participants were asked in an interview to explain the meanings of the chosen expression out of the songs. Secondly, the songs were played, and their transcription were showed. The participants then were asked to explain the meanings of the expressions in the songs. The results showed that the participants understood most of the expressions out of the context but their understanding of the expressions in the songs was deeper and better. It showed also that some expressions were completely strange as the student could not understand them in or out of the song lyrics.

Asschier (2014) sought to investigate the difference between acquiring idioms through written context and audio-visual context. To verify his assumption, he made an experiment on students from a Swedish upper secondary school. He used two groups of students studying their second year at the chosen upper secondary school. The first group consisted of 21 students while the second consisted of 26 students. The researcher chose nine idioms for the experiment selected from four variant television shows. These idioms were divided into three categories: transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque. Both groups were given a pre-test to know if they were aware of the idioms used. Then, the first group was exposed to the audio-visual context. After each idiom, the show was paused, and the students were asked to answer the questions which asked about their understanding of the idiom and to what extent the context helped them. On the contrary, the second group were shown the transcription of the audio-visual context and then asked to answer also the same questions. The experiment was conducted through 7 minutes and 29 seconds. The results indicated that the audio-visual context was more effective than the written one and would enhance the comprehension of idioms. The findings showed also that

the transparent idioms were easier to comprehend than the opaque ones.

Alkarazoun (2015) examined the errors made by Jordanian EFL undergraduate students in English idioms. Her study included 60 fourth- year students in the Department of English, College of Education, UNRWA University. To detect the errors, the researcher set a test composed of 20 items of multiple choice covering various areas of idiomatic expressions that were chosen from Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms (2003). The results showed low standard of idiom understanding as the correct answers were only 490 out of 1200 representing (40.7%). The students got high score in understanding idioms with noun phrases, idioms about food and idioms of comparison while they got low score in idioms of animals, idioms about body parts and idioms of pairs of nouns. The researcher attributed such failure to the negligence of teaching idioms in classrooms and recommended inclusion of more idiomatic expressions in pedagogical materials.

## 2.2 Idioms

### 2.2.1 Definition of Idiom

The word idiom comes from the Greek idiōma which means one's own, peculiar, or strange. The term idiom is ambiguous and its definition is very elusive. Scholars have different views on what should be considered as an idiom and what should not be. Some scholars had a broad view of idioms while others were in favor of a narrow view. Hockett (1958) adopted a broad definition of idiom as he considered any element in the language whose meaning cannot be deduced from its structure is an idiom including morphemes like -ed. He considered that the meanings of these morphemes cannot be derived from their structure. Makkai (1972) considered any polymorphemic word that consists of at least two free morphemes as an idiom. So, the word "greenhouse" for instance is an idiom according to his definition.

Weinreich (1969) introduced a narrower definition of idioms as he argued that only multiword expressions that have literal interpretation and idiomatic one can be regarded as idioms like pull someone's leg. According to his definition idioms like by and large does not belong to the category of idioms. Wood (1981) viewed a restricted

definition of idiom as she argued that an idiom should be wholly non-compositional semantically and wholly non-productive syntactically. Fernando (1996) also offered a narrow definition of the term as she believed that idioms should not allow variance in structure, but they may show degrees of transparency. Grant and Bauer (2004) had a very narrow definition of the concept. For them, idioms or core idioms as they called them are non-figurative besides being non-compositional. The meanings of that core idioms cannot be deduced literally or figuratively when they are compositionally analyzed.

The various reviews show to what extent it is difficult to categorize a chunk of the language as an idiom. However, there are similarities and agreements on few points:

(1) idioms are often but not always non-literal or semi-literal in meaning-that is, their meaning is not completely derivable from the interpretation of their components. (2) they are generally rigid in structure, with some being completely invariant and some allowed some restricted variance. (3) idioms are multiword expressions consisting

minimally of two words, including compound words. (Liu, 2008, p.22)

### 2.2.2 Characteristics

The aforementioned views show that idiom is a linguistic entity which has its own characteristics. The properties they seem to agree upon are the degrees of compositionality and frozenness of structure. These concepts will be briefly outlined in what follows.

### 2.2.2.1 Compositionality

The concept compositionality is a semantic criterion. It means that the meaning of a chunk can be derived from the meanings of its constituents. There are two approaches related to the compositionality of idioms: the non-compositional approach and the compositional approach. Moon (1998) stated that "The non-compositionality of a string must be considered when assessing its holism" (p.8). The non-compositional approach considered idioms as semantically and syntactically long words whose meanings are arbitrary like lexical entries. The meaning of an idiom cannot be inferred from the meanings of its words. The relationship between the literal meaning and the figurative

meaning of non-compositional idioms is obscure. The non-compositional approach considers idiomatic expressions as homogenous class. For example, the idiom by and large is non-compositional and its meaning is arbitrary: it is specified to mean generally. This approach has been adopted by some linguistics like "Chomsky ,1980, Fraser, 1970 and Van der Linden 1992" (Titone & connine,1999, p.2). However, this approach fails to account for the fact that the constituents of some idioms can be modified in various ways without affecting the figurative meaning like he does not spill one bean. In addition, the figurative meanings of some idioms have strong relationship with the meanings of their individual constituents like the idiom in hot water which means someone faces a problem.

The compositional approach, on the other hand, depends on "the notion that idiomatic meanings are built simultaneously out of literal word meanings and the specific interpretation of these word meanings within a particular context" ((Titone & connine,1999, p.7). This approach argues that the idiomatic word is semantically analyzable, and the figurative meanings of some idioms may be derived

from the meanings of its words. For example, the idiom lay down the law: the word law means the rules and the phrasal verb lay down is used to refer to the act of invoking something. It also proposed that the linguistic meanings of idiom's constituents may contribute to its syntactic flexibility. The idiom lay down the law can be used in various syntactic models without losing its figurative meaning while the non-decomposable idiom kick the bucket is syntactically frozen as it cannot be altered syntactically without distribution of its figurative meaning. Linguists believed in this approach showed how idioms vary greatly in their compositionality. Fernando (1996), for example, indicates that idioms fall into "three categories semantically: " pure (non-literal)", "semi-literal", and " literal idioms "" (p.36).

### 2.2.2.2 Structure of Idiom

Idioms consist of phrases and behave like phrases. They differ greatly in their syntactic composition. They may take the form of verb plus noun like take the biscuits, prepositional phrase like in the long run, or noun phase like couch potato. They are exceptions to syntactic rules. There is "no idiom that does not have some syntactic defect, that

fails to undergo some grammatical operation that its syntactic structure would suggest is appropriate"(Flavell & Flavell ,2006, p.14). They are non-productive as they cannot be generated freely. Everaert, linden, Schenk and Schreuder (1995) argued that "the reluctance of some idioms parts to undergo certain syntactic operations follows from the fact that idioms are not built up in a compositional manner" (p.253).

Like compositionality, idioms differ in the degree of their lexical flexibility; some idioms are syntactically flexible, and some are not. Fernando (1996) states that idioms are" divided structurally into two types: "invariant idioms" and " idioms of restricted variance "" (p.36). For example, the verb button in the idiom button your lips can be changed with the verb fasten without affecting the figurative meaning while the verb kick in the idiom kick the bucket cannot be changed without losing the figurative meaning. Moreover, the tense of some idioms can be changed such as the word "give" in give up the ship can be used in the past tense. Some idioms also can be used in passive tense like the idiom lay down the law while some

others cannot undergo such change without losing their idiomatic sense like the idiom kick the bucket. Gibbs et al (1989b) suggested that the syntactic productivity of idioms is not an arbitrary phenomenon and it depends on the degree to which the individual components of the idiom contribute to the overall figurative meaning. They stated that " the more decomposable an idiom was, the more likely it was that the idiom would be syntactically productive"(p.59).

## 2.3 semiotics

### 2.3.1What is semiotics?

contemporary semiotics began in the early twentieth century in the writings of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.The term semiotics is derived from the Greek word semeion which means sign and signal. Semiotics has a multi-disciplinary nature and it "is not widely institutionalized as an academic discipline" (Chandler, 2017, p.4). It is a field of study involves a range of sciences like art, literature, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and linguistics.

### 2.3.2 Definitions of sign

Saussure coined the term semiology to refer to the science of signs. He adopted a dyadic view of the sign in which a sign consists of a 'signifier' which is the sound pattern and a 'signified' that is the concept. The signifier does not stand for something in the material world, but it is something abstract in the mind. Saussure's signified" is not to be identified directly with such a referent but is a concept in the mind – not a thing but the notion of a thing"(Chandler, 2017, p.35). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is called signification. This relation is arbitrary one as there is no inevitable relationship between the signifier and the signified. There is no one-to-one connection between the signifier and its signified as a signified may stands for many signifiers like synonyms.

Peirce's scheme differs from Saussure's view of sign. He expressed his ideas on semiotics in " the eight volumes of his *Collected Papers* as well

as in a considerable body of unpublished material" (Silverman, 1983, P.27). He used the term 'semeiotic [*sic*]'to refer to semiotics. He offered triadic model of sign consisting of representamen, interpretant, and object. The

representamen is similar to Saussure's signifier as it is the form of the sign while the interpretant which is the sense made of the sign is different slightly from the signified as it is a sign in the interpreter's mind. The third element that has no equivalent in Saussure's model is the object. The object is something beyond the sign as it is what is represented by the sign. This object may be physical things or abstract concepts so the Peircean model "allocates a place for materiality and for reality outside the sign system which Saussure's model did not directly feature"(Chandler, 2017, p.52).

### 2.3.3 Edusemiotics

The use of semiotics in education is not completely new. This concept can be traced back to "several special issues of *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (in 2004 and 2005) and *Studies in Philosophy of Education* (in 2007)" (Deely& Semetsky, 2017, p.3). In 2008, a group of European researchers who were concerned with education organized an informal online community named Network for Semiotics and Education. However, the emergence of a novel branch that combines the science of signs with

education has never crystallized until recently. Edusemiotics is a new term that was coined by Marcel Danesi in 2010 as a subtitle in his foreword of Semetsky's book *Semiotics Education Experience*. Stables and Semetsky (2014) defines edusemiotics as "a study of signs in the context of education broadly understood as encompassing the whole of human, and perhaps beyond human, experience which can never be taken in isolation from environing, sociocultural or natural world" (p.20).

Edusemiotics presents novel direction in the educational philosophy as it offers new ways of meaning-making by exploiting different kinds of signs. This new branch aims to use semiotics as its basis to discover new frameworks in education and enrich the theory of learning with new approaches. Deely and Semetsky (2017) thought that edusemiotics tried to" explore alternative research methodologies in education, including but not limited to phenomenology and hermeneutics with a future-oriented task of presenting recommendations derived from its foundational principles" (p.3).  semiotics leads education out of the resistant and rigid habits that still prevails in the

educational research. Pedagogy "in the spirit of edusemiotics is not reducible to teaching "true" facts but aims to enrich experience with meaning and significance"(Deely& Semetsky, 2017, p.11).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

The study included twenty students enrolled in the first year at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Suez Canal University. The mother tongue of the students was Arabic, and they learned English as a second language. The participants voluntarily took part in the study; they received neither pay nor credit for the experiment.

### 3.2 Material

#### 3.2.1 Idioms

Fifteen idioms were chosen from different categories in Leaney's dictionary; these categories were animals, easy and difficulty, feelings, water, Knowledge, making decisions, personality and character, relationships, risks and opportunities, and health. Since the aim of this research is to investigate the effect of visual pictures on idioms'

acquisition, the idioms were chosen carefully from different categories to detect the effect of this semiotic approach on various types of idioms.

### 3.2.2 Pictures

The pictures were designed especially for this study. The idea of pictures based on idioms is novel and unusual so the pictures were chosen carefully. For each idiom, two pictures were designed; one indicated the literal meanings of the idiom's words and the other showed the figurative meaning of the idiom. There is a denotative relationship between the signifier and the signified of every still image as every picture depicted the permanent and basic meaning that is universally agreed upon without any subjective interpretation.

Example:

In the picture below, there is a woman in a bride's dress and a man wearing the suit of a groom. This indicates that this is a wedding and they are just married. This picture is used to indicate the meaning of " tie the Knot" which means to get married.

### 3.3 procedure

The experiment was conducted during one of the lectures of the first- year on 13th October 2019. Before starting, the researcher gave the students the necessary information about the steps of the experiment. As a first step, the students were asked to complete a multiple-choice pre-test in five minutes to evaluate the participants' Knowledge of the fifteen idioms used and appointed for this experiment. The pre-test consisted of fifteen sentences. Each sentence contained an idiom that should have been completed by the correct answer from four choices.

The second step was a Power Point presentation. The aim of the presentation was to notice the effect of visual pictures on the students' acquisition of idioms. Each slide

contained two pictures; the picture represented the literal meanings of the idiom's constituent words appeared to the left of the slide and the right of the slide was dedicated to the picture clarifying the figurative meaning of the idiom. Each slide was showed during thirty seconds and the overall presentation time was 7.5 minutes.

After the Power Point presentation, as a third step, the post-test began. In that test, the students were asked to choose the correct word from the box and fitting it into the gap to complete the idiom within the sentence. There were fifteen sentences in the test that were different from those in the pre-test, but the idioms therein were the same. The students in focus completed the tests at the same lecture on the same day. The time for both tests was the same. Each test continued for 5 minutes. The purpose of these two tests was to compare their results to detect the effect of using pictures on the acquisition of idioms.

## 4. Results

In this section, the results of the two different tests described above will be presented and briefly discussed. Each subsection will present the results of one test and then

will followed by a discussion for the results of each table. In order to analyze the results, the answers of the pre-test and the post-test are coded in Microsoft Excel. The answers are given values as the correct answer is 1 and the wrong answer is 0. Automatically, each empty gap is 0 also like the wrong answer.

### 4.1 Results of the pre-test

The first task of the experiment was the pre-test, where the students had to choose from the given options the correct part to complete the idiom. The effectiveness of this task was measured according to the number of correct responses to the 15 sentences. The students did not do well in this test as the majority of the students knew 5 or 6 idioms only out of 15 idioms. The percentage of the correct responses was nearly 39% while the percentage of the wrong ones was 61%.

| Student | Questions | Correct answers | Wrong answers |
|---------|-----------|-----------------|---------------|
| 1 | 15 | 6 | 9 |
| 2 | 15 | 7 | 8 |
| 3 | 15 | 3 | 12 |
| 4 | 15 | 3 | 12 |
| 5 | 15 | 7 | 8 |
| 6 | 15 | 9 | 6 |
| 7 | 15 | 6 | 9 |

| 8 | 15 | 5 | 10 |
| 9 | 15 | 7 | 8 |
| 10 | 15 | 3 | 12 |
| 11 | 15 | 2 | 13 |
| 12 | 15 | 3 | 12 |
| 13 | 15 | 4 | 11 |
| 14 | 15 | 5 | 10 |
| 15 | 15 | 9 | 6 |
| 16 | 15 | 9 | 6 |
| 17 | 15 | 7 | 8 |
| 18 | 15 | 4 | 11 |
| 19 | 15 | 7 | 8 |
| 20 | 15 | 3 | 12 |
|  |  | 38.77% | 61.23% |

## 4.2 Results of the post-test

The second task of the experiment was the post-test. It was a gap-filling test where the students ought to have chosen the correct answer from the given box. The students did well in this test as the majority of the students succeeded in choosing all the fifteen idioms correctly. The percentage of the correct responses was nearly 97% while the percentage of the wrong ones was 3%.

| Student | Questions | Correct answers | Wrong answers |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 15 | 14 | 1 |
| 2 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 3 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 4 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 5 | 15 | 14 | 1 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 6 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 7 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 8 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 9 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 10 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 11 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 12 | 15 | 13 | 2 |
| 13 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 14 | 15 | 13 | 2 |
| 15 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 16 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 17 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 18 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| 19 | 15 | 14 | 1 |
| 20 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| | | 96.72% | 3.28% |

## 4.3 Comparison between the pre-test and the post-test

A comparison was held between the students' scores in the pre-test and their scores in the post-test to determine whether or not there is statistically significant difference between them and to determine if using pictures has a considerable effect on idiom acquisition. To do this, a quantitative analysis of the data was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) program version 26 as it gives descriptive statistics. A paired-sample t-test was conducted because the purpose is detecting the difference between the means of two dependent variables

which were the scores of the same group subjected to two different tests.

Paired Samples Statistics

|  |  | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Pre-test | 5.82 | 65 | 2.076 | .257 |
|  | Post-test | 14.51 | 65 | 1.437 | .178 |

The students were able to know more idioms in the post-test (mean=14.51, SD=1.4) than they did in the pre-test (mean=5.82, SD= 2.076). The results of the paired-samples t-test indicate that the above-mentioned difference between the mean scores of the two tests is statistically significant (t (64) = -32.26, p < 0.001). The p-value is less than 0.05 so the null-hypothesis that using pictures will not have any statistically significant effect on idiom learning is rejected.

## 5.conclusion

Idioms are part and parcel of English language lexicon as the vocabulary of the language is much more than a group of individual words. They are a category of nonliteral expressions that are frequently encountered in TV shows, books, movies, news, magazines and so on. Native speakers use them so frequently in informal and formal conversations. However, learning idioms is an uphill and arduous task for non-native speakers. They do not have the ability to use idioms accurately or understand their meaning appropriately in their writings and conversations. The nonnatives apply a great diversity of rigid methods to process idioms but these methods seemed to be insufficient and ineffective as the non-native speakers are still unable to use idioms easily and spontaneously without thinking in their figurative meanings. Thus, the present study sets out to investigate the effectiveness of the semiotic approach in introducing idioms to nonnatives.

In order to see whether or not the semiotic approach is suitable for introducing idioms to nonnatives, an experiment was conducted. First of all, students were instructed to complete the gap filling pre-test. The Power Point

presentation then was presented. Finally, the students were asked to complete the post-test. The findings show that using a semiotic approach, which is still pictures, to introduce idioms to nonnatives is an effective method as the students were able to recognize more idioms in the gap filling post-test, which they completed after the pictures' presentation, than they did in the pre-test. The correct answers were 38.7% in the pre-test while they became 96.7% in the post-test. The correct answers increased by 58.2% percentage. The semiotic approach is also suitable for application on all kinds of idioms as the majority of the students in the post-test could know all the idioms regardless of their category.

This study is quite small as it was conducted on a limited number of students ,20 students, and all the parts of the experiment were done during one session. Further studies could investigate this study over a greater span of time and conduct it on a greater number of participants. Similar studies should be conducted to investigate if the results of this research can be replicated. Since this study covered only 15 English idioms chosen from different

topics; a more comprehensive study can be done on specific type of idioms like compositional idioms, transparent idioms or opaque idioms.

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