

Idiomatic expressions in translated manga: A preliminary study

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Abstract

This squib reports the uses of English idiomatic expressions observed in translated manga or comics. Assuming that the conversations in manga are samples of average daily conversations, the current findings may provide implications regarding natural informal English conversations. Idiomatic expressions were collected from four different manga titles (21 volumes) and they were categorized based on the original meanings of the major words in the expressions. Generally speaking, those found in the manga samples in this study have a similar trend to that in Makino's (2008) collection of idioms, i.e., those with human body parts are more frequently used than other types. In addition, fewer expressions with two body parts were found in the manga.

1. Introduction

Learners of English spend a substantial amount of time to learn the language. One area that makes their learning difficult is idioms.¹ This is because idioms do not refer to literal meanings. It is difficult for learners to guess their figurative meanings if they haven't learnt the contextual use of them. There are studies on the learning of English idioms such as Mohk (2005) and Lee (2012) in Korea, and those on English translations and correspondence about idioms in other foreign languages such as Orr (1962), Vitek (1973), Ritchie (1990), Good (1995), and Kelly (1995). The scope of these studies tend to be limited to the written or more formal language. Considering conversations in comics as samples of spoken or informal English, this study investigates the characteristics of English idiomatic expressions, especially the distribution of types of idioms in the comics examined.²

Manga or comics are chosen as the data source in this study for two reasons. First, the idioms appearing in comics are likely to be used often in actual conversations because the conversations in comics are often informal. By studying them, the current findings are likely to have implications for the larger data, including informal English conversations. Second, comics are popular among the youth, and often young learners read them to improve their English. They are useful in achieving active learning (See for instance Gavigan & Tomasevich 2011:1-8), and easily read and understood by most learners because of their "predominantly visual narrative form" (Groensteen 2007:12) and "the visual language" (Cohn 2013:1-7). Therefore, analyzing the conversations in manga may help learners of English, particularly in Korea.

The organization of the paper is as follows. The next section briefly discusses previous studies, and our methodology is described in Section 3. The characteristics of English idioms in comics are reported in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 provides a discussion and concluding remarks.

2. Previous studies

Korean learning circumstances regarding English idioms are discussed in Lee (2005) and Lee (2006). Lee (2005) points out that idioms with verb forms are found most frequently in

¹ Note that there is a range of definitions of idioms such as these below.

Jewell & Abate (eds.) (2005:840)

- ① a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words (e.g., rain cats and dogs, see the light).
- ② a form of expression natural to a language, person or group of people (e.g., he had a feeling for phrase and idiom).
- ③ a characteristic mode of expression in music or art (e.g., they were both of working in a neo-impressionist idiom).

Langlotz (2006:15)

- ① Idioms must be regarded non-compositional, unanalyzable, and unmotivated semantic units. Therefore, idioms have the status of lexical units and they are processed non-compositionally by means of direct lexical retrieval.
- ② A great number of idioms can be attributed an internal semantic structure which make them semantically motivated and/or analyzable. Such idioms do not constitute semantic units and can therefore be processed compositionally.

I use "idiom" as defined in Jewell & Abate's first definition because some expressions are not always analyzable and allow word substitutions.

² This squib is the first installment of the larger comparative project that compares Japanese original manga usages with English and Korean translated counterparts. The idiomatic expressions found in English here will be compared to the original Japanese usages and Korean translations in the future.

Korean high school English textbooks. Lee (2006) reports that Korean middle school students have few opportunities to learn idioms in English classes. Korean learners of English appear to start learning verbal idioms such as (1) first in schools, but they have few opportunities to study other kinds of idioms such as nominal idioms as in (2).

(1) *come up with, carry out, get over, give up, go through, etc.*

(2) *cost an arm and a leg, cut the corner, kick one's ass, etc.*

Mohk (2005) analyzes high school and college English textbooks and compares his results to the idiom lists of the Simpson & Mendis (2003) and Liu (2003). Those textbooks rarely deal with idioms explicitly or systematically. Note that Simpson & Mendis's and Liu's lists were based on those from academic and professional sources: Simpson & Mendis (2003: 435) suggest that the list is for "curricula for academic purposes" while Liu (2003:677) made his list from "professional", "media", and "MICASE"³ sources. Therefore, their findings might be different from what we would find in 'daily conversations'. Because idioms are used frequently in spoken colloquial English, it is important to understand the characteristics of idioms in informal conversations. Assuming that the speech acts portrayed in manga are natural ordinary conversations, the characteristics of idioms were identified.

3. Methodology

One hundred four examples of English idioms were collected from the speech balloons of the following 22 comic books:

Ariyoshi, K. *Swan* (2)~(4)(6)~(12)(14)(15).

Hasegawa, M. *Wonderful World of Sasase-san* (12).

Ueda, M. *Kobo the Li'l Rascal*(1).

Yaginuma, K. *Twin Spica* (1)~(7).

These books were originally written in Japanese and translated into English by native speakers of English. They were selected because they were readily available in English and Korean.⁴ The translations reflect natural informal conversations among friends.

All idiomatic expressions were identified and categorized based on some similar characteristics of the major words in them. For instance, 26 instances of idioms related to human body parts were recognized.

4. Results

The following tables show the results of the idioms found in the comics. Table 1 shows the types and number of idioms identified. The numbers are not token numbers, i.e., no duplicates. As seen in the table, idioms were divided into 6 categories (Activities/State, Human Body, Life/Living, Animals, Family/Home, and Colors). Idioms of activities/state (e.g., *have a crush on X*) are found the most, almost half of all idioms used fall in this category. They are verb-based idiomatic expressions. Those in the Animal category (e.g., *chicken out*) are also verb-based.⁵ The idiomatic expressions with body parts have the second highest frequency and

³ MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English) is the corpus of Simpson & Mendis (2003).

⁴ For instance, *Twin Spica* has been translated into Korean.

⁵ It may not be strange to study verbal idioms first in school, as they make up the majority of idiomatic expressions

contain many nominal forms. There were 26 different expressions and 6 occurrences of the second appearances of the same idioms.

Table 1. Classification of idioms in manga

Categories	# of idioms	Percentages
Activities/State	51	52%
Human Body	26	27%
Life/Living	14	14%
Animals	4	4%
Family/Home	2	2%
Colors	1	1%
Total	98	100%

Examples are listed below.

- (3) a. activities: *catch X out*
 b. body part: *pain in the neck*
 c. living: *cut corners*
 d. animal: *chicken out*
 e. family: *run in the family*
 f. color: *red cent*

Table 2 shows the numbers of nominal and noun-originated expressions. Human body part expressions (60%) account for nearly two-thirds of idiom usage.

Table 2. Classification of nominal idioms in comics

Categories	# of idioms	Percentages
Human Body	26	60%
Life/Living	14	33%
Family/Home	2	5%
Colors	1	2%
Total	43	100%

Table 3 lists 26 idiomatic expressions with body parts. Under Frequency, * indicates parts of one's "Head", and the numbers in the parentheses under Frequency indicate the number of multiple occurrences.

Table 3. Examples of idioms with body parts

Idioms of human body parts	Frequency (* = Head related)
<i>get back on one's feet</i>	2
<i>have a hand in</i>	1
<i>head back</i>	1*
<i>head on</i>	1*

as seen here (cf. H.W. Lee 2005, H.M. Lee 2006).

<i>lend(give) a hand</i>	2
<i>long face</i>	1*
<i>lose face</i>	2*
<i>lose one's footing</i>	1
<i>mouth off</i>	2*
<i>neck and neck</i>	1*
<i>pain in the neck</i>	2*
<i>put one's money where one's mouth is</i>	1*
<i>stick one's nose in</i>	1*
<i>wear one's heart on one's sleeve</i>	1
<i>wrap around one's finger</i>	1
<i>watch your back</i>	1
<i>break one's heart</i>	2
<i>lazy bones</i>	1
<i>work (one's fingers) to the bone</i>	1
<i>bone dry</i>	1
<i>break out in a cold sweat</i>	1
<i>cold blood</i>	1
<i>make one's blood curdle</i>	1
<i>feel blood rush to my head</i>	1
<i>(have a rush of blood to the head)</i>	
<i>make up one's mind</i>	1
<i>save one's breath</i>	1
Total	32(6)

The majority of the 26 idioms (84.6%) belong to visible and countable nouns that are related to the internal body. Among the idioms of the former type, there were 13 occurrences (10 expressions or 62.5%) of those related to “Head” (*marked), which ranks first in the number of occurrences. Those internal body parts mostly consisted of *bone* and *blood*. Nineteen expressions out of 26 (73%) are those with external body parts (24 occurrences or 75%). Only two expressions out of 26 idioms included more than one body part.

5. Discussion

The distribution of types of idiomatic expressions found in manga is very similar to that in Makino (2008) except the Animals/insects category. Remember that Makino is a general English idiom textbook. Table 4 shows that 1114 English nominal or noun-originated idioms listed in Makino could be classified into 9 categories like the ones in Table 2. Those classified into the Animals/insects category (e.g., *have ants in one's pants*) have the most expressions, followed by Human body related idioms in terms of the variation frequency. The percentage of body related expressions here is not as large as the one we saw in manga, but still the actual example number of the body related expressions is quite high.

Table 4. Classification of nominal and noun-originated idioms in Makino (2008)

Categories	# of idiom examples	Percentages
Animals/Insects	298	27%
Human Body	259	23%
Nature	142	13%
Food	119	11%
Life/Living	98	9%
Family/Home	60	5%
Colors	58	5%
Time/Season	51	4%
Plants	29	3%
Total	1114	100%

Four ESL teachers from Ohio Dominican University, Columbus, Ohio, were asked about their perceived frequency of the 259 body part idioms identified in Makino. This is a very small sample size and only represents a very specific subset of the native English speaking population. Nonetheless, it is interesting to observe what they use daily. For instance, they were asked how often they use “cost an arm and a leg” in daily conversations and instructed to mark one of “less”, “often”, and “frequent”. The results show that only 164 idioms (63%) are said to be used in daily conversations. The following are examples of idiomatic expressions with body related words which they rated frequently used.

- (4) *cost an arm and a leg*
twist someone's arm
kick someone's ass
pain in the ass
break the back of something
get on someone's back (about something)
have one's back to the wall
scratch my back and I'll scratch your back
see the back of
go belly up,
make someone's blood run cold, etc.

Furthermore, only 8.5% (14/164 items) of the idioms from Makino were used in these comics, suggesting that Makino's list does not cover many idiomatic expressions used in casual speech. These 14 idioms are listed in (5) below.

- (5) *get back on one's feet*
lend (give) a hand
long face
lose face
neck and neck
pain in the neck
stick one's nose in
break one's heart

lazy bones, bone dry
work (one's fingers) to the bone
cold blood, make one's blood curdle
save one's breath

These idioms are different from those of Simpson & Mendis (2003) and Liu (2003). Only a few idioms overlap due to their data from more formal sources as mentioned above. Idioms in manga are used in an informal setting. Or perhaps, because the conversations in the comics were translations from Japanese, it was by chance that none of the 'more formal' idioms were used, and thus the discrepancy was observed. It is, however, still important to understand that these idioms are commonly employed in daily conversations.

Although this preliminary study was based on conversations in comics, it is important to carry out comparative studies between the current findings and English original comics as well as different media (movies, novels, etc.) in order to have a more comprehensive picture of the use of idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, as mentioned in the second footnote, the current results should be compared with the original manga and Korean translations so that we can see how much of what we found is specific to the English translation. That is to say, these expressions were used because they are common in English. It is also possible that Korean translations would have different results as well, though these translations are somewhat constrained by the originals (such as the contents of the conversations). A verification of these suppositions awaits more rigorous future research.

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Example Source

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