

What's in a Phrase?

By Brad Connatser

“Sixty zippers were quickly picked from the woven jute bag” is a *pan-gram* or holoalphabetic sentence (contains all letters of the alphabet). “Some men interpret nine memos” is a *palindrome* (reads the same backward as forward). *Schott's Original Miscellany*; see the review by Michael Brady on page 16.

Information for Authors

One thousand words makes a nice page-and-a-half article, though longer and shorter articles may be appropriate. Proposals for periodic columns are also welcome. Write about what you know, things that you're familiar with. If you live outside North America, consider writing about technical communication in your country. *You needn't be a PCS member to contribute.*

If you use a wp program, **keep your formatting simple**; multiple fonts and sizes, customized paragraphing and line spacing, personalized styles, etc. have to be filtered out before being recoded in *Newsletter* style. Headers, footers, and tables lead the casualty list. Embed only enough formatting and highlighting (bold-face, italics, bullets) to show me your preferences.

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An idiom is “an expression of a given language that is peculiar to itself grammatically or cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements, as in ‘keep tabs on’”

(<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=idiom>).

The meaning of an idiom is derived from the entire phrase, which contains words that we may or may not know. For example,

when we say, “warm the cockles of your heart,” “tit for tat,” or “vested interest,” we may not know the words “cockles,” “tit,” “tat,” or “vested” but still understand the complete phrases that contain them.

Some books on technical communication issue a blanket warning to writers to steer clear of idioms, especially clichés. Why? Because, according to the authors, relying on idioms

indicates a lack of creativity. It is true that in some cases (writing for people who do not speak English very well, for example) idioms should be avoided, but in many cases a judicious

application of idioms is perfectly acceptable. For example, when the goal of writing is to communicate information—and not to impress the reader with creative language—idioms

have a way of relaxing the formality of language. Informal language, such as idioms and sayings, has a way of adding spirit to the lifeless language we commonly use to present facts.

Some idioms are evolving into an even less formal configuration. For example, consider the idiom “as far as *x* is concerned.” I've noticed that the media are prone to leaving off the second part of the idiom, “is con-

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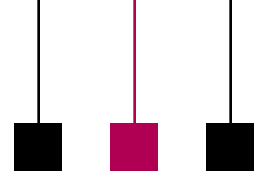
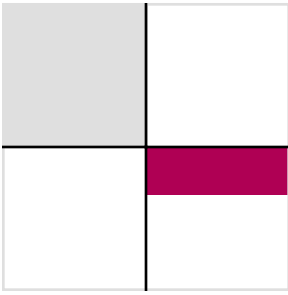
The *Newsletter* issues on our Web site (http://www.ieeepcs.org/activities_publications_newsletter.php) can be used as examples. Issues are posted about one month after distribution of the print version and now have active e-mail, Web, and table-of-contents links.

I prefer to receive articles by e-mail; most WordPerfect, Word, RTF (rich text format), and ASCII files are acceptable. My addresses are in the

boilerplate at the bottom of p. 2 along with our copyright notice.

Deadlines

The 15th day of each odd-number month is the deadline for publication in the succeeding odd-number month. For example, the deadline is 15 May for the July/August issue, 15 July for the September/October issue, etc. You won't be far off (and never late) if you observe the Ides of May, July, September, and so on.



tion that cultural differences can affect communication expectations and then allow students to explore those differences on their own. As a result, COACS can be easily integrated into a variety of technical communication classes or professional training sessions.

Second, instructors can use this COAC approach to develop more advanced exercises. In my classes on intercultural communication, students examine five Web sites designed for the same cultural audience. They next use their observations to develop a localization checklist for reconfiguring a U.S. site for an audience from that particular culture. Students then use their checklists to analyze a U.S. site to determine what aspects need to be changed to meet the expectations of a particular culture. In this assignment students also note additional kinds of materials (e.g., images) localizers would need to revise the site for that cultural audience.

Through such exercises students gain a greater understanding of how culture can affect communication expectations and learn that:

- Cultural expectations are not linked exclusively to language or verbal displays
- Localization processes can be quite complicated and involve several aspects

One more benefit of COACS is that they allow for a great deal of versatility in how they are applied. For indi-

viduals teaching in computer labs, COACS can serve as ideal in-class activities. For instructors in conventional classrooms, they can serve as the foundation for homework assignments or out-of-class projects. The key factor is that the required materials are free and available to anyone with Internet access. Thus students can perform such activities in a variety of settings, allowing for greater freedom in how and when COACS are integrated into the teaching process.

Today's technical communication students will graduate into an increasingly international workplace. For this reason they need to understand how culture can affect communica-

tion expectations. By using COAC-based exercises instructors can heighten student awareness of cultural communication issues and help them realize how cultural expectations affect information design.

The author is an assistant professor with the Institute of Technical and Scientific Communication at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. He has a background in anthropology, international government, and technical communication, and his research interests include intercultural communication, online communication, and international e-commerce. He can be reached at stamankr@jmu.edu.

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cerned." For example, "As far as snow, we expect very little accumulation," which sounds strange to me. And we all know about the forced movement toward shortening "In order to" to just "to." However, I find that using the entire idiom is more pleasing to my ear, so I tend to write out the entire idiom, meeting the reader's expectations as well.

On the other hand, what about documents that are going to be translated into a different language or be read by a sizable population of people whose first language is not English? In those cases, avoiding idioms is a must because the meaning of an idiom can be lost in translation.

So what's the bottom line? If your intended audience is native English speakers, then forget the hassle of far-fetched warnings about using idioms. Ignore the know-it-alls who make mountains out of molehills. Keep your chin up and your nose to the grindstone, and you'll make out like a bandit.

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