An Analytical Study of the Idioms Used in the American Series
"How I Met Your Mother, Season 1"

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Abstract

The study aims to widen understanding of English idiom usage in movies and raise awareness of the importance of idioms by presenting the connections between idioms and social factors. The series "How I Met Your Mother, Season 1" is chosen to be a source due to its modern plot and simple idiom usage. Moreover, this study provides idiom characteristics and types according to their usages and unique properties. Combining with the theory of speech act types, it is also expected to reveal intentions of idiom usages by characters in the series. To perform this qualitative research, 90 idioms were collected manually from the script of the series (11 episodes) by using observation and note taking techniques. Then, the dialogue with idioms were cut out and arranged in the designed analysis form. The analysis started by seeking the idioms' actual meanings and origins through American dictionaries. After that, their types of idioms and types of speech acts were also determined following Fernando (1996) and Searle (1969) in order to reveal each idiom characteristic and reasons of their usages. The last step was to give an explanation to clarify the scene. The results show that compositeness was the most used idiom type in this series with the total of 67 idioms or 74% due to its easy-to-use feature. Supported by the types of speech acts, representative was found to be the most used speech act type which commonly occurs through an explanation, an advice or a complaint.

Keywords: *Idiom, Idiomatic Expressions, Speech Act, Daily Communication, Phrasal Verbs*

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1. Introduction

Apart from speaking skill development, many English learners normally struggle with phrasal interpretation and translation. This issue is mainly caused by culture differences, lifestyles and societies. Lack of experiences can make the English learners confused when communicating with English speakers (native speakers). By learning English as a second language, it is impossible for the learners to gain the same kinds of backgrounds that the native speakers have although they study English for many years. The key to narrow this weakness is to have a real experience abroad or get closer to the native speakers.

The beginning of idiom usage is simple as it is an utterance used in daily life which is normally built from familiar materials with familiar patterns (Hockett, 1958). Robert (1944) also presents that idiom begins in the form of ideas and ends in the form of words. Moreover, geography as well as history is a production of endless idioms. We can see that idioms are used differently in different countries and their meanings also change following the societies in which the idioms are adopted. When we are in a new circumstance, we may produce a new utterance which can only be understood by the listener who confronts the same circumstance with us. It is one kind of phrase most learners find hard to understand due to its opaque meaning and unique properties. In order to deal with idiomatic expression, knowledge on its usages and actual meanings are essential keys to have because it is not a general phrase that you can translate directly. Moreover, one idiom can also have many meanings for using in different situations, so it is not easy for the non-native speaker to interpret it. Many English learners decide to overlook idioms instead of trying to understand them, and that may lead to a communication failure as the messages are misunderstood. The researcher aspires to help encourage the learning of idiomatic expressions as it seems to be ignored by many EFL learners such as Thai students even though they are actually useful for everyday life conversation. Thus, the researcher's aspiration to do this study is to improve understanding of idiom usage and its interpretation through the American series "How I Met Your Mother Season 1". As previously mentioned, the movie is an excellent media for English learning, the series was chosen with the aim to transmit idiomatic expression knowledge and enhance the learners' attention to English phrases. The study also provides several backgrounds on idiom properties, timely usage and ways to interpret them in order to

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help the learners deal with it easier. Apart from watching movies or listening to songs, it is expected to be adapted in everyday communication by coping with issues of idiom comprehension and their opaque meanings. Their English performances will also dramatically increase if they find out the connections and understand how to combine these things together. It also offers ways to help interpreting and translating idioms accurately which is the main problem for most leaners. One thing to note is idioms cannot be interpreted with their literal meanings. Also, it does not function like metaphor although it may compare things. Normally, it implies something that only people with the same background or in the same situation understand. Idiomatic expressions actually connect with the culture and lifestyle of the speaker and the listener. If they are from different cultures and have different backgrounds, the usage of idiom normally leads to confusion and a failure in communication. There is no shortcut to understand all idioms and make us know how to react to the speaker correctly except understanding the culture of the speaker and learn to be familiar with the circumstance one is in with a speaker. Speech act theory is also adapted to the analysis in order to detect the speakers' intentions and reasons why they use idioms in the conversations. However, it will be more interesting if further studies discuss deeper about idiom functions in other kinds of movies, especially idioms that are translated from other languages. It will obviously present idiom matters in a different way which attracts the learners' interests better.

There are a number of attempts to define the actual definition of idiom. However, its characteristics and classifications cannot be completely determined with just one definition. Actually, what should be concerned most are idiom functions and its implications. As McCarthy and O'Dell (2010) state in English Idiom in Use, idioms are expressions that cannot be inferred by the individual words. It might be a phrase or sentence, but it has a special meaning of its own. The best way to understand the idiom is to examine its context as it will help make paraphrasing the actual meaning easier. Idioms are sometimes called fixed phrases. Many idiomatic expressions are found in many variations which makes them hard to use and even harder to find in a dictionary (Spears, 2005). Baker (1992) mentions that there are certain things that cannot be done to an idiom including changes in word order, deletion of words, adding other words, replacement of a word with another, or changes in its grammatical structure. Langlotz (2006) also offers that it is impossible to capture the linguistic anatomy of idioms without relying on a set of different definitory dimensions. Many phraseologists understand this fact well so they concern about various aspects of idioms' references. The idiom is also the attitude of mind which is common to all members of a linguistic community. It appears in the structure of the language as an effect of a cause, it alines with the experiences and predilections of the speakers. It can be praised as a part of English cultures as it indicates the lifestyles and history of the natives in each area. Some idioms are created from an event or circumstance that might happen in the past, so the usage of the idiom is only relayed from generation to generation which is a reason why some idioms can be understood among a group of people only. The significant material for the idiom's characteristics must rely on what each nation and each century add to it, not the linguistic tradition (Robert, 1944). It can be defined as a fixed expression that cannot be paraphrased by the individual words due to its opaque semantic feature. Examining the context is the key to help determine the proper definition of the idiom. It must also be accepted among the community and reflect their lifestyle and culture. If the expression is not familiar to the listener, it cannot be classified as idiom. Therefore, the idiom users should understand well the core functions of the used idioms and its background in order to use it correctly and avoid miscommunication.

To analyze the idioms found in this series, an idiomatic classification theory by Fernando (1996) is chosen to be the main approach. It allows the researcher to see differences of collected idiomatic expressions better, other than just the meanings and their origins. It also presents idioms' outstanding characteristics and functions. However, the theory cannot cover part of idiom usage and interpretation, so speech act theory is also applied in this study to help analyze the intention of idiom users (characters in the series) and answer the question of why they choose to use them in each conversation.

1.1 Types of Speech Acts

Speech acts are an essential part of the linguistic field as they occur in our everyday lives. It actually happens in every statement we produce. Because it is an act of speech, it can reflect the intension

of speakers as well as impact on the listeners' responses or even feelings. Therefore, the framework of speech act classification created by John R. Searle is also applied in this study to help analyze the intention of idiom users (characters in the series) and answer the question of why they choose to use them in each conversation. According to John R. Searle (1969), there are five types of speech acts the speaker uses as in the following classifications:

1.1.1 Representatives or Assertives: This type of speech act commits the speaker to something or the truth of the expressed proposition. It represents the speaker's belief about something that can be evaluated to be true or false.

1.1.2 Directives: The directive type occurs when the speaker needs others to do something as a response. Many directive speech acts are not stated as a question but as a request for help.

1.1.3 Commissives: It commits the speaker to some future course of action. Commonly, commissive speech acts are promises and threats. A decision not to do something is also considered as this type of speech act.

1.1.4 Expressives: This speech act expresses a psychological state of the speaker to the listener. It is normally used when the speakers show their anger, thankfulness, apologies, or forgiveness to the listeners.

1.1.5 Declaratives: This kind of speech act brings immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs such as declaring war, or pronouncing someone man and wife.

1.2 Types of Idioms

Another main theory used in the analysis is idiom classification by classifying by Fernando (1996). They are classified by the grammatical structures, background, and semantic paraphrase as follows:

1.2.1 Compositeness: Idiom contains multiple words and cannot be replaced easily or else its meaning may completely change.

1.2.2 Institutionalization: This type of idiom must be accepted and recognized among the communities of native speakers. The expression must be well-established and conventionally fixed in order to qualify as an institutionalization. It is also used in specific fields or events which can be understood among people from the same circumstance, and background.

1.2.3 Semantic opacity: The meaning of this type of idiom is not transparent, and normally has no clues on their composites. This notion points to the fact that the meaning of these constructions is not the derivational sum of the meanings of their constituents. It is an essential feature of the idiom.

2. Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to answer the following questions involving idiom functions in the series "How I Met Your Mother Season 1":

1.2.1 To widen understanding on American idioms by analyzing the meanings of idioms used in the series "How I Met Your Mother Season 1".

1.2.2 To study types of idioms and their characteristics as well as situations in which they can be used.

1.2.3 To seek the actual intentions behind idiom usages by characters in the series "How I Met Your Mother Season 1".

3. Materials and Methods

The idioms were collected from a famous comedy series "How I Met Your Mother Season 1", created by Carter Bays and Craig Thomas. Among 9 seasons, season 1 is chosen to be the source of this study as it provides the introduction of the main characters with the beginning of the long-running storyline which widens the understanding of the plot and allows the researcher to analyze the scenes accurately. This American sitcom premiered in 2005 with 22 episodes with a running time of approximately 22 minutes each. Due to its reputation, the show was nominated for four awards from the 58th Primetime Emmy Awards and won two of them. It was also nominated for the People's Choice Awards for Favorite New

Television Comedy. The story of this season started with the conversation between Ted Mosby (the main character) and his child in 2030. The whole story played along with this scene as he told his child how he met their mother when he was a 27-year-old architect living in Manhattan. Back to 2005, young Ted always experienced something exciting with his friends: Robin Scherbatsky, Barney Stinson, Marshall Eriksen, and Lily Aldrin.

Because this study is a qualitative research to analyze the idiomatic expressions showed in the script of the series, the data was collected manually by observation and note-taking techniques. Due to the time limit, the researcher decided to perform the analysis through just half of the season. As there were 22 episodes in this season, episode 1 to 11 were selected to be a source data because they gave a continual story and scene that promoted a better understanding of the plot and more accurate analysis. For the research methodology, there were two steps to perform this analysis. First, all idiomatic expressions used in the series (11 episodes) were noted out after reading the whole script. This method only focused on American idioms used by all characters in the series. Then, the dialogues with idioms were cut out and arranged in the designed analysis form following episode numbers. Third, the analysis was performed based on the theories by Fernando (1996) and Searle (1969).

First, each dialogue with an idiom were arranged in the analysis form which contained: Idiom (showing what idiom found in the dialogue), Type of idiom, Reason (reason why the idiom was categorized in that idiom type), Meaning, Origin, Type of speech act and Explanation. The analysis started by seeking idioms' actual meanings and origins through American dictionaries. Although there were many definitions of the idioms showed in the dictionaries, the researcher has selected the most proper one for each dialogue concerning the context and speakers' intentions. The meanings were later rechecked and confirmed by the advisor of the research who is a native speaker. This process was to ensure that the chosen meanings were matched with the analyzed idioms accurately to prevent confusion and misunderstanding. In the second step, their types of idioms and types of speech acts were also determined following Fernando (1996) and Searle (1969) in order to reveal idioms' characteristics and reasons of their usages in each dialogue. The third step was to give an explanation of each selected dialogue to clarify the scene and express the characters' emotions. This would help widen understanding of the dialogues and give background of the situation for that scene as the quoted dialogue might cause some confusion. It also helped indicate the reason of idiom usage by each character in the scene. Finally, the results of idiom types and speech act types were concluded in the form of tables. The circle graphs were later created to present the total amount of each classification in different colors in order to present the most used type of idioms and speech acts in this series. It also helped the researcher analyze the idiom usage in this series easier as well as find out the connections between idioms and speakers' intentions.

4. Results and Discussion

To analyze the actual meaning of each idiom and understand the purpose of its usage, the researcher has collected some outstanding idioms found in season 1 of this series and categorized them by following the three types of idioms and speech act theory. Among all collected 90 idioms, samples of their analysis are as follows:

Dialogue 1:

> **Ted**: Alright, so what's this legendary plan.
> **Barney**: First we got to ***pick someone up*** at the airport.
> **Ted:** Okay, I'm outta here.
> **Barney:** (To cabdriver) Estaban, doors! (Cab doors lock)
> (The Airport - Barney/Ted)
> (Ted walks alongside Barney who is carrying two suitcases, one in each hand)
> **Barney:** Just this one little thing and the rest of the night is ours.
> **Ted:** Why do you have those suitcases, and who are we picking up?
> **Barney:** I don't know. Maybe her? Or her.
> **Ted:** Wait so when you said you were going to "pick someone up at the airport". You meant you were going to "pick someone up at the airport".
> **Barney:** (winks) Scenario. Couple of girls fly into town, looking for a fun weekend in NYC when they meet two handsome international business men just back from a lucrative trip to Japan. Sample dialogue, "You have a wheelie bag? Wh... I have a wheelie bag".
> **Ted:** You've gotta be kidding me.

Idiom: pick someone up
Type of idiom: Compositeness
Reason: It contains multiple words which cannot be replaced easily or else its meaning might change.
Meaning: There are two meaning here: to go pick-up someone and to attempt to become acquainted with someone for romantic or sexual purposes. However, the actual meaning of the idiom use in this dialogue is the second one (Informal).
Origin: Its usage started in late 1800s.
Type of speech act: Directives (Barney wanted Ted to go pick a girl up at the airport with him)
Explanation: To do something fun, Barney asked Ted out to flirt with some girls at the airport which he used the idiom "pick someone up" here.

Dialogue 2:

> **Ted:** So, uh, where's Thurston Howell taking you?
> **Robin:** A charity dinner.
> **Lily:** Yeah, $2000 a plate.
> **Robin:** $1500, Stop rounding up. And it's for ***third world*** hunger.

Idiom: third world
Type of idiom: Institutionalization
Reason: This type of idiom is conventionally fixed and accepted among communities of native speakers. It is used in specific fields, particular events or novels.
Meaning: Underdeveloped or developing countries.
Origin: This expression originated in the middle of 1900s, at first denoting countries in Asia and Africa that were not aligned with either the Communist bloc nations or the Non-Communist Western nations. Because they were for the most part poor and underdeveloped, the term was transferred to all countries with those characteristics, and later still to poorer groups within a larger prevailing culture.
Type of speech act: Representatives (Robin tried to explain that her dinner with a billionaire wasn't too expensive and was actually held for helping people)
Explanation: Robin's new boyfriend was a billionaire. He took Robin to an expensive dinner which donated money to help poor people in undeveloped countries; third world. Everyone seemed to be amazed at how rich he was.

Dialogue 3:

Ted: You *set me on fire*. And who's the girl in my bed?
(Barney looks at Lily and Marshall and Ted, stumbles over to Ted's room and peeks in, closes door and stumbles back to living room)
Barney: There's a girl in your bed.

Idiom: set me on fire
Type of idiom: Semantic opacity
Reason: Its meaning is not transparent and has no clue on each composite. This type of idiom cannot be translated literally.
Meaning: The idiom "set someone or something on fire" means to ignite someone or something; to put someone or something to flames.
Origin: This usage was dated in the 1400s.
Type of speech act: Expressives (Ted was mad at Barney as he hadn't stopped him from calling Robin when he was drunk, he also didn't know who was the girl in his bed)
Explanation: In this scene, the idiom "set someone on fire" actually means to cause someone trouble. Ted used it with Barney because he got him very drunk, and he didn't know why there was a woman in his bed.

Due to several uses of idioms and its modern plot which can link with the lives of people today, How I Met Your Mother was a suitable series for this idiomatic analysis. As previously mentioned, idiomatic expressions are quite complicated to understand and their meanings mostly seem to be unpredictable. Thus, knowledge on idiom classifications, its unique properties, usages and idiomatic interpretation were needed for analyzing idioms. It was also important to note that the selected series was from America, so the collected idioms can only reflect American cultures and lifestyles. In order to differentiate idiomatic expressions, found in the series and seek their functions with outstanding characteristics, 90 collected idioms from 11 episodes (How I Met Your Mother Season 1) were analyzed and classified following the frameworks of idiom types by Fernando (1996), and speech act types by Searle (1969). The findings not only answer the question of the types of idioms, but also revealed the reasons behind idiom usage by the American characters in this series. According to the analysis, the number of idioms in each table also presented how easy it can be interpreted by the listeners. It can be seen in the results that what has been used most which was the composite idiom. It was also the easiest one to understand, or caused the least confusion.

Table 1 Types of Speech Acts

Types of Speech Acts	Idioms
Representatives	screw the whole thing up, had a thing for, think on his feet, slip out, happily ever after, get high, hang out, hit on, wasn't into it, hold up, break up, cry her eyes out, in person, take pride in, chase after someone, out of nowhere, turn out, strike out, make it up to, take off, break down, done with, plenty of fish in the sea, play it cool, make this up, edge you out, be used to it, give up, let him have this one, work on, light up, suck me into, fit in, third world, go out with, fill me in, take it slow, down the road, move on, stand me up, meant to be, jack it up, head out, no big deal, give it a rest, catch up with
Directives	chicken out, get it on, come on, make it work, ran into, ask her out, throw a party, make out, pick someone up, check it out, save it, hold on, miss out on, call it a day, back off, behind your back, can't stand, let you in on, in need, put out, get in the way, sleep it off, pass out, behind schedule, on schedule, chase down
Commissives	take them off your hands, bump into, in a rut, stick with, give it a shot, get back to, turn your back on her
Expressives	settle down, freak out, till the break of dawn, get it, take away, for God's sake, mess with, throw up, set me on fire, no kidding, ask me out
Declaratives	-

As presented in Table 1, 90 collected idioms were categorized following Searle's theory on speech act types: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives in order to find out the characters' intentions with their idiom usage. This method was a key to discover the actual reason why each idiom was used in each situation and how close the relationship was between characters in each scene. The researcher also noticed that the idioms would normally be used among friends as they could easily understand each other.
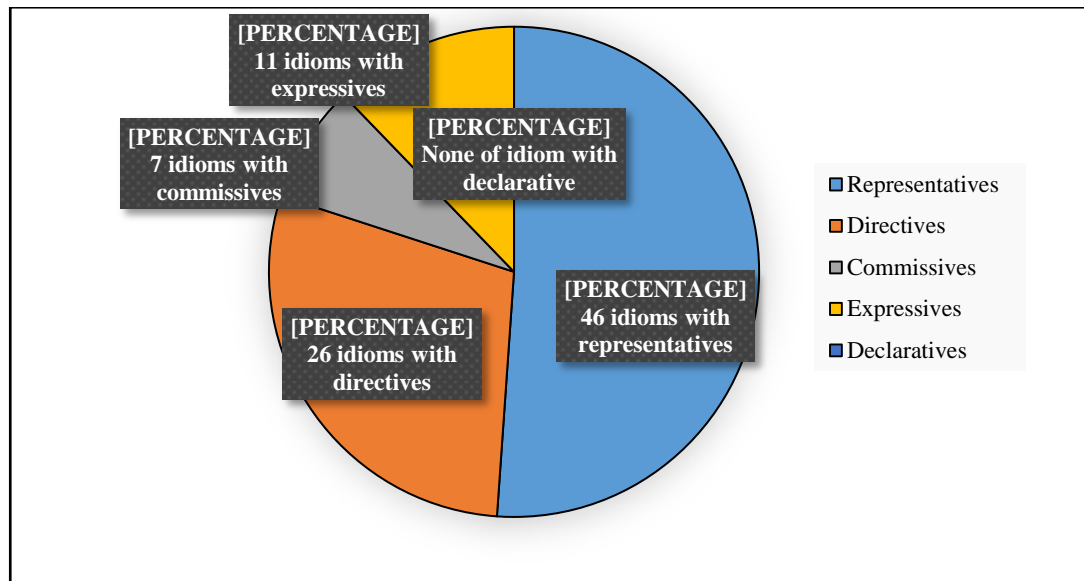
Figure 1 Types of Speech Acts

The findings illustrate in Figure 1 that representative was the most used type of speech act with idioms in this series. There were 46 idioms which were categorized in this type of speech act or around 51% when compared with others. In many conversations, the characters used these idioms to give an explanation or advice about something. The researcher also noticed that making a complaint is another source for this speech act type. The second speech act type was directive which had 26 idioms or 29%. It seemed to be found a lot in this series as the characters normally requested the others to do something for them. Because they were friends, they asked each other for help frequently. Following this, expressive was the third used type of speech act with the total of 11 idioms or 12%. As this is a comedy series, there were not many scenes to express the characters' emotions or feelings, so the expressive use of idioms didn't occur much. Commissive was the next one to identify with 7 idioms or 8% which was much less as the characters did not talk much about their future plans or make promises via idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, it was interesting to see that no idiom fit the category of declarative type in these selected dialogues. Due to the friendship of the characters, the conversations in the series were quite casual, so, it can be inferred that the reason why declarative was not found here was its more formal feature. The plot seemed to not support this kind of speech act usage. It also reflected that situations and a relationship between the speaker and the listener had a large effect on idiom usage. This fulfilled the objective of the study in the aspect of idiom usages and proper situations.

Table 2 Types of Idioms

Types of Idioms	Idioms
Compositeness	screw the whole thing up, had a thing for, settle down, slip out, freak out, take them off your hands, till the break of dawn, get it on, come on, make it work, ask her out, bump into, throw a party, make out, hang out, in a rut, pick someone up, check it out, save it, hold on, miss out on, hold up, cry her eyes out, in person, get it, take away, back off, chase after someone, behind your back, out of nowhere, stick with, make it up to, break down, done with, play it cool, mess with, edge you out, be used to it, give up, let him have this one, let you in on, work on, light up, suck me into, fit in, in need, go out with, put out, throw up, get back to, fill me in, take it slow, sleep it off, pass out, down the road, no kidding, move on, turn your back on her, ask me out, meant to be, behind schedule, on schedule, jack it up, no big deal, give it a rest, chase down, catch up with
Institutionalization	happily ever after, take pride in, for God's sake, strike out, plenty of fish in the sea, third world
Semantic Opacity	think on his feet, chicken out, ran into, get high, hit on, wasn't into it, break up, call it a day, turn out, can't stand, take off, give it a shot, make this up, get in the way, set me on fire, stand me up, head out

Based on Fernando's theory of idiom types, the 90 collected idioms were also categorized into three main sections following their usages and interpretations as follows: compositeness, institutionalization and semantic opacity (as shown in table 2). By doing this, the researcher was able to differentiate idiom characteristics and their usages. Their unique properties were clearly presented here. In addition, this classification also reflected how specific idioms were used in different situations.
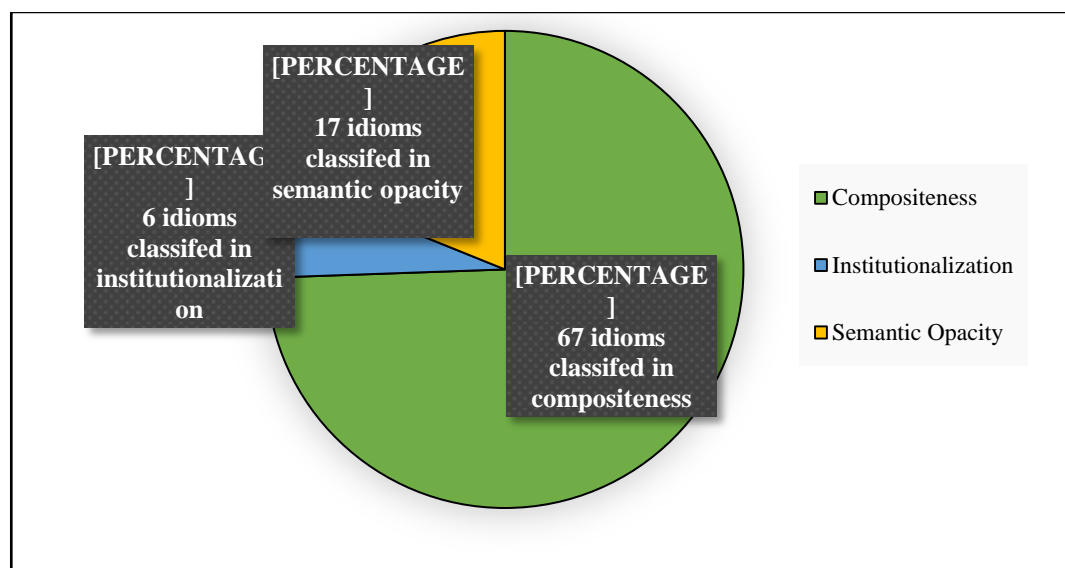

Figure 2 Types of Idioms

Figure 2 iluustrates the type of idioms. It was found that compositeness was the most used idiom type in this series with the total of 67 idioms or 74% of all analyzed idioms. This kind of idiom is easy to recognize, so people can easily understand each other when using the idioms in the conversation. It normally came with 2 or 3 words and its meaning could be guessed from the compositions. Semantic opacity was a second type which covered 17 idioms or 19%. As previously mentioned in Types of Idioms (2.6), semantic opacity is quite hard to interpret due to its opaque meaning. To understand it, the speaker and the listener should have the same backgrounds or come from the same circumstance or else the message could be misunderstood. Even though there was no clue of its meaning, it still was easy for the native or

English speakers to interpret as they were familiar with these. The rest, 6 idioms or around 7%, were arranged in the last type which is institutionalization. It is necessary to note that one outstanding feature of this type is its usage in very specific fields. Listeners from different fields may not understand this type of idiom and may get confused. Also, it normally is an old idiom that might not be used at present. Furthermore, it was noticed that these idioms were also be categorized following how easy the idiom could be interpreted which compositeness was the easiest, followed by institutionalization and semantic opacity.

5. Conclusion

The findings showed that compositeness was the most used type of idiom due to its easy-to-use feature and the fact that it was the easiest one to understand, when compared to other types of idioms. Supported by the types of speech acts, the hidden intentions of idiom usages in each dialogue were also revealed. Representative was found to be the most used speech act type in this series. Commonly, the characters' intentions of idiom usages in the form of representative were to give an explanation, advice or detail about something, as well as to make a complaint. Another finding involved the origins of idioms, most of the collected idioms were first used in the 1800s and 1900s. When idioms are created, their usages are normally passed from generation to generation so it is not surprising to see some idioms' origins to be very old. The oldest idioms found in the analysis were primarily recorded in the 1300s.

Apart from the results in aspects of idiom types and speech act types, it was found that idiom production and usage were affected by people's lives. It should be noted that idiomatic expressions were not only reflected in the cultures of people who use it, but also their lifestyles, relationships, ages, genders, occupations, and beliefs. People who had the same experience or came from the same circumstance would understand each other when the interlocutor used an idiom in the conversation. In the series, many idioms were used without causing any confusion due to their friendship and the fact that they are all American. They immediately knew what idiom would work in which situation. Appropriateness was not a concern as they would automatically know what idiom to pick when the time came. Furthermore, the story took place in 2005 when the main character (Ted Mosby) was 27-years-old. It should be noted that things like norms, lifestyle, fashion, foods, beverages, society, or communication might change a lot from past to present. Another fact to consider is the age of other characters. They were all working adults, so their activities and the ways they spoke were different from younger people at that time as well as older people of the present.

Due to the limited time, the analysis of idioms used in this American series was conducted on a small sample of only 11 episodes of one season (there are 9 seasons of How I Met Your Mother). Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized. Further studies of idiom usages on larger samples are recommended in order to see the bigger picture of idiom classifications and its different usages. More theories on idioms and speech acts should also be applied to extend the frameworks for more insightful findings. Besides, more information on idiom interpretation and translation strategies are beneficial for providing a better analyzing tool. It would also be immensely interesting to study idiomatic expressions along with slang in other kinds of American series which will obviously offer different results.

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