Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how idioms help the building of opposing characters in a literary work and also what similarities and differences there are in the usage of idioms between the characters. The material, i.e. the idioms, in this study was manually collected from Othello written by William Shakespeare. The material was analyzed and categorized according to a list of idiomatic properties. The material was also analyzed according to the tone of the idioms. The results showed that there was not any prominent difference in usage of idioms between the two characters; neither in general nor in the tone of the idiom. The results suggested, however, that the idioms were used in a negative sense, regardless of character.

Keywords

Characterization, idiomatic expressions, idioms, Othello, properties of idioms, Shakespeare, tone of the idiom
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1 Introduction

One specific feature of language is that of idioms. They are special in the sense that their meaning cannot be deduced from the literal meaning of their separate constituents – in other words, there is a mismatch between the literal meaning of the sentence and the intended meaning of the same sentence. This mismatch is more commonly known as the principle of semantic compositionality which could be explained as “the meaning of an expression is a function of, and only of, the meanings of its parts together with the method by which those parts are combined” (Pelletier, 1994:1). To make it even easier to differentiate between idioms and conventional expressions, Weinreich (1969) presents two different formulas in order to explain the difference between a non-idiomatic sentence and an idiomatic sentence. One describes the construction of a non-idiomatic (i.e. literal) sentence and the other describes the construction of an idiomatic sentence. The formulas are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

\[
\frac{A}{a} + \frac{B}{b} = \frac{A + B}{a + b}
\]

*Figure 1. The construction of a non-idiomatic sentence*

\[
\frac{C}{c} + \frac{D}{d} = \frac{C + D}{x} \neq \frac{C + D}{c + d}
\]

*Figure 2. The construction of an idiomatic sentence*

Figure 1 represents the construction of a non-idiomatic sentence. Weinreich (1969) claims the capital letters represent morphemes that, in turn, represent a sequence of phonemes. In other words, the capital letters represent the actual words as they are. At the same time, the lowercase letters represent the meaning of the capital letters. The meaning may directly correspond with the actual words, or there may be a mismatch between the two. In the case of Figure 1 (where \(A/a\) and \(B/b\) represent one phrase each) it can be seen that the capital letters (i.e. the actual words) correspond well with the lowercase letters (i.e. the meaning). In this case, the meaning of the sentence can be derived from the meaning of its elements.
Figure 2, on the other hand, represents an idiomatic construction where the meaning of the sentence cannot be derived from the meaning of its elements. In other words, one cannot say a small part of an idiomatic expression and still make oneself understood, because it is the expression as a whole that holds meaning.

To give an example of how the formulas work in practice, a non-idiomatic sentence could be:

(1) *I spilled the beans on the floor*

In example (1), the first part of the sentence, ‘*I spilled the beans*’, represents *A/a* in Figure 1, and the second part of the sentence, ‘*on the floor*’, represents *B/b*. In this case, both parts separately and in combination represent the actual meaning. At the same time, an idiomatic sentence could be:

(2) *I spilled the beans about the surprise*

In example (2), the first part of the sentence, ‘*I spilled the beans*’, represents *C/c* in Figure 2, and the second part of the sentence, ‘*about the surprise*’, represents *D/d*. In this case it can be understood that the two parts alone bear separate meanings which correspond with their literal construction, but when they are combined they form a new meaning. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that in order to distinguish between non-idiomatic sentences and idiomatic sentences in a language, one has to have certain knowledge of said language. The reason for this is that idioms are not self-evident.

Because of the complexity of idioms, it is interesting to look at how they are used in literature, and more specifically, if they help in the building of characters.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how idioms help the building of opposing characters in a literary work. The main research question therefore is:

- How are idioms used in the building of characters in fiction?

With this in mind, the following research question will also be answered:

- What are the general similarities and differences between how idioms are used by opposing characters?
2 Theoretical background

2.1 Idioms

It can be difficult to identify idioms. One reason for that, apart from them being so complex, is the similarity between an idiom and figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, hyperboles and so on. They may appear similar because an idiom often contains some figures of speech (Nunberg et al., 1994). The difference between an idiom and a figure of speech is that a figure of speech can be understood without having heard it before; figures of speech are self-evident whereas, as earlier mentioned, idioms are not. For example, a German idiom and its idiomatic meaning is:

(3) *Tomaten auf den Augen haben*

Tomatoes on the eyes have

‘To not see what everyone else sees’ (blog.ted.com)

An example from French is

(4) *Les carottes sont cuites*

The carrots are cooked

‘The situation cannot be changed’ (blog.ted.com)

If one applies Weinreich’s (1969) formulas to said idiomatic sentences, it can be seen that it is not possible to understand the idiomatic meaning without having it explained.

At the same time, a common German simile is

(5) *Schlau wie ein Fuchs*

Sly as a fox

The same simile can be found in French:

(6) *Astucieux comme le renard*

and in Swedish:
(7) *Slug som en räv*

Examples (5), (6) and (7) literally mean that someone is sly, and also that foxes are typically sly as well. The same figures of speech such as similes commonly appear in many different languages, as opposed to idioms that when translated into other languages often bear a different meaning or simply does not make any sense.

Metaphor is another figure of speech which may be mistaken for an idiom. Again, it is worth emphasizing that idioms often cannot be recognized without knowledge of the language they appear in. Metaphors, on the other hand, much like similes, can. Famous metaphors that are often used in literature are for example fire, which may symbolize either inspiration or hell depending on the context of its use (umich.edu), and the color white, which often symbolizes innocence and purification (umich.edu). When using figures of speech such as metaphors and similes in literature or other kinds of texts, they can often be directly translated into other languages because they hold the same meanings so there is no need to rewrite them. Nevertheless, if a German author included the idiom in example (3), ‘Tomaten auf den Augen haben’, in one of their works, the translator would most likely have to rephrase that sentence in order to get readers of other languages to understand. This proves the statement that understanding idioms requires knowledge of the language they are in, and other figures of speech such as similes and metaphors do not.

When analyzing idioms in this study, a guideline that was taken into consideration was a list of six different properties of idioms presented by Nunberg et al. (1994). Here follows a summary of what the six different properties mean:

1. **Conventionality**

Nunberg et al. (1994:492) say that “[idioms] meaning or use can’t be predicted, or at least entirely predicted, on the basis of a knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another”. This means that in order to understand an idiom, we have to look at the expression as a whole; only reading half of the expression won’t make any sense. An example is that it makes sense to say ‘I killed two birds with one stone’ meaning that two problems or tasks have been solved at one time, whereas ‘I killed two birds’ does not at all carry the same idiomatic meaning.

2. **Inflexibility**
According to Nunberg et al. (1994), inflexibility means that idioms appear only in a limited number of syntactic frames or constructions. For example, there are freely composed expressions such as ‘the breeze was shot’ which can also be said like ‘the breeze was hard to shoot’, which means to chat about unimportant matters. Nevertheless, a famous idiom such as ‘Elvis has left the building’, which means that the show is over, loses its initial meaning or cogency when you change the construction to ‘Elvis chose to leave the building’.

3. Figuration
Nunberg et al. (1994) claim that idioms typically involve figurations such as metaphors, hyperboles and metonymies. They say that speakers might not always understand the precise motive for the figuration; for example, instead of saying ‘chat’ you say, ‘shoot the breeze’ – and it might not be obvious why we say exactly that. Or instead of saying ‘the man died’ you can say ‘the man kicked the bucket’ and you understand what it means but not why it is expressed that way.

4. Proverbiality
Nunberg et al. (1994) talk about proverbiality as a fourth factor. They say that idioms are typically used to describe and explain “a recurrent situation of particular social interest” (Nunberg et al., 1994:493) and that could be for example becoming restless (climbing walls), giving away a secret (spilling beans) or talking informally (chewing fat). In other words, a proverbial expression, according to Nunberg et al. (1994) refers to a concrete and particular situation; however, the meaning of the expression is abstract. One example of a proverbial expression that is presented by Nunberg et al. (1994) is ‘change horses midstream’ where ‘horses’ has the abstract meaning of being the course of action. This idiom means that one changes the course of action while already being in the middle of something else.

5. Informality
A fifth factor is that of informality. Nunberg et al. (1994) claim that idioms are typically used in colloquial, informal and popular speech.

6. Affect
Last but not least, Nunberg et al. (1994) mention the factor of affect; idioms are typically used to make an evaluation of something and also to take an emotional stand towards something. They argue that “a language doesn’t ordinarily use idioms to describe situations that are regarded neutrally – buying tickets, reading a book” (Nunberg et al., 1994:493). Therefore, what can be drawn from this is that idioms are typically either
positive or negative in their nature. This could, in the context of this study, reveal something about the fictional characters – for example if one uses more negative idioms they might appear more negative as a character.

Nunberg et al. (1994) argue, however, that it is not necessary that an idiom includes all these properties – nevertheless, the more of these properties that an expression lacks, the less idiomatic it will appear.

2.2 Tone of the idiom

One aspect that will be considered in this investigation is the distinction between the positive and negative aspects of idioms; that is, whether the idioms are associated with positive or negative feelings. The positive and negative aspects of idioms will be determined by investigating both the separate words in the idioms, the intended meaning of the idiom and also the contexts in which they occur. What is important to bear in mind when investigating this feature of idioms is that most idioms may show both positive and negative polarity (Martínez, 1999). For example, a phrase that is positive in its meaning may be syntactically negative: ‘I could not agree more’. On the contrary, a phrase that is negative in its meaning may be syntactically positive: ‘It all turned out very badly’. In other words, even though a phrase may be syntactically negative, it does not mean that the character that utters that phrase is being negative, or the other way around.

Because one cannot rely on syntactic polarity to reveal the tone of the idioms, context, the intended meaning as well as the meaning of the separate and/or combined words are important. The context and the intended meaning of the idioms could be considered to be the most important factors of these three and separate or combined words may enhance, or emphasize, the context and/or the intended meaning of the idioms.

(8) Go with a bang

‘Something very exciting and/or successful’

Knowing the intended meaning of example (8), it can be understood that this idiom would be considered to be positive. The word ‘bang’ further emphasizes the implied excitement or success. At the same time, an example of a negative idiom is:

(9) Kick the bucket

‘Die’
Example (9) illustrates an idiom that would be considered to be negative. Knowing the intended meaning of this idiom, one understands that it has a negative tone as it implies that someone dies or have died.

(10) *Best of both worlds*

‘All the advantages’

Example (10) illustrates an idiom that at first glance would come across as positive in its tone since it is a good thing to have all the advantages. Nevertheless, when put in a specific context, say a conversation between two people talking negatively about a certain topic, the idiom would be perceived as ironic. The context in which the idiom occurs in then would make the tone appear negative. In this way, context is important when defining the tone of the idioms.

2.3 The building of characters

The building of characters, or characterization, could be said to be done in two different ways. Either the author chooses to work with direct characterization, or they formulate characters with the help of indirect characterization. As the names imply, direct characterization is when the character’s traits are mentioned clearly – for example the author may say that a character is angry, tall and old. Indirect characterization, however, is when a character’s traits are implied. By saying for example ‘The man bumped his head in the ceiling’, it is implied that the man is tall. At the same time, ‘She met her first great-grandchild’ implies that the character, ‘she’, is old.

Because *Othello* is a play, it would not come off as very natural for the characters to directly tell people who they are and what they are like in terms of characterization. In that sense, plays are much like real life; what characters are like is first and foremost implied through speech and actions. It is, for example, implied that Iago is a manipulative person, just as he would be understood if he existed in real life. It is also implied that Othello is a very insecure person. Taking this into consideration, one could of course assume that this is what Shakespeare uses to build his characters. Using indirect characterization, Shakespeare could have used idioms to portray his characters. The tone of the idiom, for example, is one matter that goes hand in hand with indirect characterization, as well as the different properties presented by Nunberg et al. (1994).
The property of affect, for example, tells the reader about characters’ preferences which in turn reveal something about the characterization.

2.4 Difficulties of identifying idioms

One predicament that was noticed during this investigation was the difficulty of identifying idioms. There are a number of different theories of identifying idioms, all which cannot be presented in this study, and every one of them seem to have their flaws (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1996).

The biggest difficulty seems to be that some idioms can occur in many different constructions; one can exchange one word for another or even take out words from the construction – it will have the same idiomatic meaning but it is, because of this, difficult to identify the idiom. This means that even though one has a fairly good definition of idioms, they still occur in too many ways to apply one single definition successfully.

3 Material and method

3.1 Material

The selected literary work for this study was Othello by William Shakespeare. The main reason for studying a Shakespeare play is that he is said to have coined and popularized many idioms (ccbatlanta.edu). A few examples of idioms that Shakespeare has coined and popularized are “Greek to me” (Shakespeare, 1972, 1.2:22), as in ‘It’s all Greek to me’ which expresses something that is not understandable, which traces back to the play Julius Caesar from 1599, and “Forever and a day” (Shakespeare, 1981, 4.4:274), meaning always or forever, which he coined and used in The Taming of the Shrew from 1596 (ccbatlanta.edu).

More specifically, the characters of Othello and Iago are the ones that are investigated. Because of the fact that Othello is the protagonist of the story and Iago is the antagonist, the possibility of finding differences in Shakespeare’s use of idioms will be greater than if the comparison was made between two other, perhaps more similar, characters.

The use of language is under constant development. Nowadays, informality would be considered to entail for example abbreviations, slang or contractions. However, because Othello is a play, all sentences are meant to be spoken. Therefore no abbreviations or contractions occur. There could, of course, be some sort of slang involved in the play,
however out of all 53 idioms that were collected, no words appeared as being slang words. Because of this, the property of informality was not included in this investigation.

The total number of idioms that were investigated was 53.

3.2 Method

All non-literal phrases were manually collected. The non-literal phrases in the primary material were identified and determined primarily based on the context of the phrase but also judging from the explanatory notes of the play. For example, if one line says ‘Desdemona dropped the handkerchief’ and one has some previous knowledge of the play, one may assume that the phrase has a literal meaning and that it is not symbolizing something else. At some instances the explanatory notes say a phrase is proverbial, and in those cases the phrase has been collected because it is not literal.

As mentioned in section two, according to Nunberg et al. (1994), the fewer of their six properties of idioms that an expression holds, the less idiomatic it appears and the other way around. Because of this, those properties were used when deciding which of the collected expressions could be considered to be idiomatic. The expressions that were considered to be idiomatic were then categorized according to the five properties, and those results were then used to compare the characters’ idiomatic utterances.

Apart from comparing the characters’ idiomatic utterances according to Nunberg et al.’s (1994) properties, the tone of the idiom is also considered. The tone of the idiom was interpreted based on the context of the idiom, its intended meaning and also the separate and/or combination of words.

4 Results and analysis

4.1 General differences

Out of all non-literal phrases that were collected, 53 ended up being classified as idiomatic. One example of an expression that was not classified as idiomatic was “put money in thy purse” (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.3:382). It was not classified as idiomatic because even though it initially appeared as being non-literal, the context showed that it was not. Also, the expression does not contain any figuration which also points at it being literal. Furthermore, the expression is repeated several times in several constructions: “Put money in thy purse” (1.2:382), “make all the money thou canst” (397), “therefore make money” (401), “go, make money” (407), “provide thy money” (414) and “put
money enough in your purse” (423). This reveals that the expression does not follow the ‘rules’ of neither Nunberg et al.’s (1994) properties of conventionality nor inflexibility in the sense that the expression can be formed in several ways and also the whole expression is not needed to be understood. The expression does not show affect either because the speaker does not take an emotional stand towards something. Nevertheless, one could claim the expression goes under the property of proverbiality seeing as it refers to a ‘concrete situation’ as Nunberg et al. (1994) put it, however it does not describe an abstract situation and therefore it was not considered to be an idiom. To clarify, a single metaphor (for example) only goes under the property of figuration. It is still, however, only a metaphor and not an idiom.

In this section follows a presentation of how Nunberg et al.’s (1994) five properties of idioms that could be applied to the material were distributed over Iago and Othello, i.e., it can here be seen what the difference is between the uses. The example idioms are followed by a short explanation of the idiomatic meaning. In some cases the explanation is formulated based on the explanatory notes of the play and also the context in which the idiom was found.

The total number of lines uttered by Iago was 262. The total number of lines uttered by Othello was 281. Yet, Iago uttered more idioms than Othello. The number of idioms uttered was 32 by Iago and 21 by Othello. Converting those numbers into percentage and putting them in diagrams resulted in Figure 3 and 4.

Figure 3. Distribution of idiomatic properties of Iago

Figure 4. Distribution of idiomatic properties of Othello
4.1.1 Conventionality

Conventionality is, for both Iago and Othello, an often occurring property. This can be seen in Figure 3 and 4. As stated earlier, conventionality in the case of idioms means according to Nunberg et al. (1994) that the idiom cannot be understood without taking the whole idiom into consideration. Two examples of lines that show conventionality are:

(11) *Hold your peace* (Shakespeare, 1993, 5.2:259)

‘”To keep quiet and not raise objections”’ (Collins, 1960:105)

(12) *[…] with all my heart* (Shakespeare, 1993, 5.2:41)

‘“to do or agree about something enthusiastically, or with deep, absorbed, unreserved, intense, concentrated, emotion.”’ (Collins, 1960:99)

Examples (11) and (12) have to be viewed in their whole in order to be understood and that goes for many of the idiomatic utterances made by both Iago and Othello. The main reason for having to view examples (11) and (12) in their whole in order to understand them would be the length of the idiom. They are simply too short to divide into sections and still maintain their meaning. For example, just saying ‘hold’, ‘hold your’, ‘your peace’ or simply ‘peace’ does not make up the same idiomatic meaning as the whole expression presented in example (11). The same goes with example (12). It is simply too short of an expression to make any sense when dividing it. Also, as Nunberg et al. (1994) explain, *your peace* in example (11) can be used metaphorically to refer to quietness or stillness when it is the object of *hold*, at the same time as *hold* can be used metaphorically to refer to the action of being quiet when its object is *your peace* (Nunberg et al., 1994).

At the same time, an example of an expression that did not show conventionality was:

(13) *To change the cod’s head for the salmon’s tail* (Shakespeare, 1993, 2.1:170)

‘To exchange something worthless for something else equally worthless’

If one is familiar with the idiomatic meaning, it would be easy to simply say:

(14) *To change the cod’s head...*
One would still be able to imagine the rest of the expression in example (14), or at least understand that one would not change the cod’s head for anything since it is worthless – hence a worthless action to perform. Comparing the idioms that show conventionality and those who do not, one can also see that the ones which does not show it are usually made up by two clauses. In Nunberg et al.’s (1994) sense, then, conventionality as a property of idioms means that idioms are somewhat short in their construction – maybe made up by only one clause such as in examples (11) and (12).

When it comes to the property of conventionality, one can see, as displayed in Figure 3 and 4, that 22% of Iago’s utterances show conventionality. At the same time, 27% of Othello’s utterances show conventionality. In other words, Othello is more prone to use conventionality than Iago; there is a difference of five percent units. Conventionality is along with figuration the most commonly used property by both characters.

4.1.2 Inflexibility

Out of all the properties investigated, inflexibility was the rarest one identified in both cases. That means that the idioms uttered by both Iago and Othello were to a large extent inflexible in their structures, which is typical for idioms. Two examples of lines that show inflexibility are:

(15) [...] a salt and sorry rheum [...] (Shakespeare, 1993, 3.4:58)
  ‘A cold’

(16) [...] the vale of years [...] (Shakespeare, 1993, 3.3:307)
  ‘The coming of old age’

The presented examples, i.e. (15) and (16), are expressions that are restricted in their syntactic frames. The main reason for example (15) and (16) being inflexible would be that they do not contain any verbs, which means that it is not possible to rephrase the expressions and put them in another syntactic frame. For the reader to understand them, their constructions cannot be much changed as opposed to a line that does not show inflexibility:

(17) [...] wakened death [...] (Shakespeare, 1993, 2.1:202)
  ‘To have conjured death’
The idiom in example (17) can be constructed in a number of different ways and still be understood. For example one can say

(18) Death was awakened […]

and

(19) Awake death!

Because example (17) can be constructed in different ways, such as in examples (18) and (19), it would not be considered to be inflexible.

As seen in Figure 3 and 4, there is not any big difference in the usage of inflexibility between Iago and Othello; merely three percent units. 12% of Iago’s utterances show this property and so does 9% of Othello’s. Even though there is such a small difference, one can still see that Iago is more prone to use phrases that are inflexible in their nature. This property is the least used property of all properties investigated.

4.1.3 Figuration

Because the collected material was based on non-literal phrases, most of the phrases of both Iago and Othello contained some figuration in terms of figures of speech such as metaphors, similes and the like. One example of a phrase that does not hold any figuration is

(20) [...] take thy stand (Shakespeare, 1993, 5.1:8)

'Stand your ground. Maintain one’s ground against attack or opposition’ (Collins, 1958b:114)

Of course, it is a figurative phrase in the sense that one does not actually take a stand. Nevertheless, it does not hold any figures of speech and because of that it has not been considered to contain figuration. One can compare this to phrases that have been considered to contain figuration:

(21) [...] the green-eyed monster (Shakespeare, 1993, 3.3:196)
‘Jealousy’

(22) *Our bodies are our gardens* (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.3:362)

‘Our bodies should be taken care of’

Example (21) and (22) contain figuration as in Nunberg et al.’s (1994) sense. The phrase in example (21) symbolizes jealousy, and the word *gardens* in example (22) symbolizes *our bodies* and ultimately that they should be taken care of and cherished. Of course, *gardens* hence is a metaphor – however, it is the whole sentence that has been taken into consideration and found to be idiomatic. This is because the intended meaning of the sentence cannot be understood when simply looking at its separate units; the whole sentence has to be viewed in order to understand its intended meaning.

The percental values of figuration occurring in the idioms of Iago and Othello is also displayed in Figure 3 and 4. Othello was evidently a bit more prone to use figuration than Iago, but the values differ by merely two percent units. 25% of Iago’s utterances showed figuration, and so did 27% of Othello’s.

4.1.4 Proverbiality

As mentioned in section 2, proverbiality is a property of idioms that express particular situations, often of a ‘homey’ and concrete nature. Examples of this property are:

(23) *The wine she drinks is made of grapes* (Shakespeare, 1993, 2.1:273-4)

‘She is just like the rest of us’

grapes = something of an average value

(24) *To change the cod’s head for the salmon’s tail* (Shakespeare, 1993, 2.1:170)

‘To exchange something worthless for something else equally worthless’

cod’s head/salmon’s tail = something that is not worth anything

The key words in both examples are representing very concrete things: *grapes* in example (23) represents something of an average value, and *cod’s head/salmon’s tail* in example (24) represent something that is not worth anything. Because of these concrete matters, the expressions were categorized as proverbial. An example of an idiom that does not show proverbiality is:
(25) [...] eaten up with passion (Shakespeare, 1993, 3.3:446)

‘Passion has made one lose rationality’

Example (25) does not show proverbiality because it is overall both a very abstract saying – and meaning; that an abstract thing such as a feeling consumes you.

The percental values of the property of proverbiality are displayed in Figure 3 and 4. As can be seen, the difference is virtually nonexistent; there is only a difference of one percent unit in the occurrence of proverbiality. 20% of Iago’s utterances showed this property, and so did 21% of Othello’s.

4.1.5 Affect

The property of affect, along with conventionality, was the one that showed the greatest difference in occurrence comparing Iago and Othello. Affect, as explained in section 2, is used to make an evaluation of something and/or take an emotional stand against something. Examples of non-literal phrases displaying the property of affect are:

(26) [...] with all my heart (Shakespeare, 1993, 5.2:41)

‘“to do or agree about something enthusiastically, or with deep, absorbed, unreserved, intense, concentrated, emotion.”’ (Collins. 1960:99)

(27) I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear (Shakespeare, 1993, 2.3:376)

‘I will manipulate him’

These examples clearly show affect. First of all, example (26) takes an emotional stand in the sense that, as the idiomatic explanation says, it does or agrees about something very enthusiastically and with strong emotion. At the same time, example (27) is in this case Iago taking an emotional stand against Othello; it is implied that he is not very fond of Othello seeing as one would not want to manipulate someone you like.

In contrast to that, an example of a phrase not displaying the property of affect is:

(28) [...] lined their coats (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.1:57)

‘Made a lot of money/got rich’
The idiom in example (28) does not show affect in the sense that the speaker, who in this case is Iago, does not take an emotional stand which is Nunberg et al.’s (1994) view on affect, but is merely making a statement.

In Figure 3 and 4, the percental values of affect shows that 21% of Iago’s utterances show this property, and so does 16% of Othello’s. The difference between Iago and Othello is five percent units – Iago is, judging from these numbers, more prone to use the property of affect than Othello.

4.2 Tone of the idioms

When looking at the syntactic polarity of the phrases, it can be seen that 52 out of the 53 collected idioms are syntactically positive. Only one is syntactically negative and that is an utterance made by Iago:

(29) *Touch me not so near* (Shakespeare, 1993, 2.3:235)

‘Do not take it too far/this is too personal’

Looking at the context of example (29), one may assume that the tone of the idiom is not as negative as it might appear when presented alone. To clarify; Montano tells Iago that he (Iago) is not a soldier, and this seems to be a sensitive subject to Iago as he answers Montano with the sentence ”touch me not so near”, alluding that his soldiership is not something that is up for discussion.

The other 52 idioms are all syntactically positive but holds either a positive or a negative tone, or meaning. One example of a positive meaning would be:

(30) *I know my price* (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.1:12)

‘Knowing one’s (high) value’

Example (30) implies that the speaker’s (Iago in this case) value is high and that he is aware of it, and in extension, will not settle for less than he is worth. This expression holds a positive meaning, hence it is positive in its tone. Another example is:

(31) *Iago keeps his word* (Shakespeare, 1993, 5.1:30)

‘He does what he has promised’
Example (31) also shows an expression that holds a positive idiomatic meaning; it is a good thing that Iago does what he has promised.

To contrast this, there is of course also expressions that hold negative idiomatic meanings. Iago says for example:

(32) [...] *beat this offenseless dog to affright an imperious lion* (Shakespeare, 1993, 2.3:294)

‘Harm the weak to scare the strong’

Example (32) is uttered when talking to Cassio about his (Cassio’s) relationship with Othello and it refers to Othello’s actions towards Cassio. The idiomatic meaning is negative because of course, neither harming nor scaring others are positive acts. Another example of when Iago is uttering idioms that are negative in their tone is:

(33) *With as little as web as this I will ensnare a great a fly as Cassio* (Shakespeare, 1993, 2.1:183)

‘With few tricks I will lead Cassio to his downfall’

One need not know much about the context in order to apprehend the negative tone of the idiom when looking at example (30); Iago is referring to himself as a spider and to Cassio as a fly and because spiders eat flies, Iago’s negative attitude towards Cassio becomes obvious.

Othello is also used to speaking with a negative idiomatic tone:

(34) *No, my heart is turned to stone* (Shakespeare, 1993, 4.1:201-2)

‘I am emotionless’

This phrase is uttered when Othello has decided he shall kill his wife, Desdemona. It is not typically ‘good’ to become emotionless and therefore this phrase is also considered to hold a negative idiomatic tone.

(35) [...] *wakened death* (Shakespeare, 1993, 2.1:202)

‘To have conjured death’
Example (35) is also an example of a idiomatically negative expression.

The 53 collected idioms were gathered in a table in order to examine whether it was Iago or Othello who was more prone to use phrases that are idiomatically negative.

As can be seen in Figure 5 and 6, the difference between Iago and Othello and how they are using positive and negative idiomatic meanings is very small. Nevertheless, the difference of two percent units demonstrates that Othello is showing a little bit more positivity than Iago, hence Iago is more negative than Othello. What can also be seen is that the idioms that both characters use tend to be more negative than positive.

5 Discussion

After investigating the different properties and how they apply to the collected material, the broad picture of the result is that there is not any prominent difference between the utterances of Iago and Othello. The most prominent difference in this investigation seems to be between the occurrence of positive and negative idioms, regardless of character. No previous research on whether idioms are more commonly used in a positive or negative sense has been found. In this study, however, almost 70% of each of the characters’ utterances are negative, and this could be said to say more about Shakespeare’s style of writing or the plot rather than of the building of characters. Nevertheless, it could also be that the characters of Iago and Othello are more alike than one might think, and that Shakespeare thus has used idioms, through indirect characterization, to portray both characters as being negative. This is how idioms in Othello showed to be used the most; in a negative sense. A reasonable explanation for this is that the genre of Shakespeare’s Othello is tragedy which of course could affect the use of negative and positive idioms. It
showed that Iago uttered the biggest amount of idioms, 32, whereas Othello uttered a number of 21 idioms.

Out of Nunberg et al.’s (1994) five properties that generated results, Othello was more prone to using three of them than Iago was, and Iago was more prone to using the two remaining. The ones that Othello was more prone to using were proverbiality (difference of one percent unit), figuration (difference of five percent units) and conventionality (difference of five percent units). Iago was more prone to using inflexibility (difference of three percent units) and affect (difference of five percent units). The small difference between the two characters could mean that Shakespeare in fact did not use idioms in order to formulate the characters of Iago and Othello – at least not when investigating the matter using these properties. Nevertheless, there is still a difference, and that small difference could also mean, or strengthen, other differences between the characters. When reading the play, one quickly understands that Iago, being the villain of the play, is very manipulative. Because Othello is a very insecure character, it is easy for Iago to use a persuasive language in order to manipulate him into his downfall (Gilbert, 1997:311). One could claim that in order to manipulate, one has to also use Nunberg et al.’s (1994) property of affect due to that one supposedly, as according to Nunberg et al., wants to affect someone’s attitude towards something. This could explain why Iago use more affect compared to Othello.

Iago’s use of idioms also shows more inflexibility than Othello’s. This could be because of that Iago needs to be persuasive in order to manipulate; it is more beneficial for him to use idioms that are ‘spot on’. Therefore Iago primarily uses inflexible idioms, so that the people that he is talking to may immediately get the message, whatever message it may be. Nevertheless, one may also say that if one wants to get a message across, idioms might not be the way to go. The conclusion of that may be that using idioms, Shakespeare wants Iago to be clear despite his obscurity.

One can claim that Othello’s most prominent flaw is jealousy, or as Iago puts it, ”the green-eyed monster”. The trait of jealousy understandably gives Othello a rich imagination and ultimately a rich language to describe his most inner thoughts and feelings. This could be claimed to be the reason for why Othello is more prone to using figuration than Iago – Shakespeare wants Othello, unlike Iago, to be a bit obscure in order to describe his feelings and his view of the world. It could also be said to be a product of his insecurities of being an outsider; he simply does not know how to be straight forward in his language and he turns to figuration.
Conventionality is also a property that Othello is more prone to using than Iago. One reason for this could be that considering his insecurities, Othello needs to be as straightforward as he possibly can in order to make sure that people understand what he means, as contradictory as that might be to the active use of figuration. Iago, on the other hand, has a need to be more persuasive and manipulative and therefore he can use expressions that could leave out details. This would in extension mean that the listener would think that they themselves had come up with certain ideas, even though Iago might have been the one who planted the ideas in their heads.

When considering the tone of the idioms, the difference is very little when comparing the characters to each other. However, as mentioned before, the difference between the occurrence of positive and negative tones of idioms is all the more prominent. Looking at the result, it shows that Othello appears a little bit more positive in his idiomatic tone than Iago. It is however important to mention that the difference is merely two percent units between the two characters. Nevertheless, considering that Othello is the protagonist of the play and Iago is the antagonist, the small difference in the tone of the idioms still confirms the characters’ roles of the play. Iago, being the villain, should probably come across as more negative than the protagonist of the story.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate how idioms help the building of characters (more specifically Othello and Iago) in William Shakespeare’s Othello. The main research questions of this paper therefore were:

- How are idioms used in the building of characters in fiction?
- What are the general similarities and differences between how idioms are used by opposing characters?

After applying five properties of Nunberg et al.’s (1994) six properties of idioms, the results showed that there was no prominent difference between the use of idioms between the characters. Idioms were used in very similar ways by both Iago and Othello. This could mean either that the characters are more alike than one might have thought, that idioms were not used to build the characters, or it could be because the genre of the play is tragedy which naturally carries a great deal of negativity.

What can also be deduced from this investigation is that idioms are used primarily to convey negative messages in a negative idiomatic tone. It could be assumed that
Shakespeare used idioms through indirect characterization to build the two characters of Iago and Othello and making them appear negative.

The results of this investigation showed that the tone of the idioms was generally more negative than positive. In future research it would be interesting to investigate only the tone of the idioms using broader material that contains several different genres to see if idioms, as shown in this study, generally are used in a more negative than positive sense.
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Appendices
Appendix A: Collected material

Idioms uttered by Iago

Act 1, Scene 1
Line 12 “I know my price”
Line 57 “[...] lined their coats”
Line 70 “[...] wear my heart upon my sleeve [...]”

Act 1 Scene 3
Line 344 “[...] noble heart”
Line 362 “Our bodies are our gardens”
Line 446-447 “[...] the world’s light”

Act 2 Scene 1
Line 170 “To change the cod’s head for the salmon’s tail”
Line 175 “To suckle fools and chronicle small beer”
Line 183 “With as little as web as this will I ensnare a great a fly as Cassio”
Line 219 “[...] I’ll set down the pegs that make this music”
Line 246 “Her eye must be fed”
Line 273-274 “The wine she drinks is made of grapes”
Line 327 “[...] I’ll have our Michael Cassio on the hip”

Act 2 Scene 3
Line 19 “[...] she is sport for Jove”
Line 235 “Touch me not so near”
Line 294 “[...] beat this offenselese dog to affright an imperious lion”
Line 344-345 “This broken joint [...]”
Line 376 “I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear”
Line 397 “[...] fruits that blossom first will first be ripe”

Act 3 Scene 3
Line 172 “[...] my nature’s plague”
Line 182 “[...] the immediate jewel of their souls”
Line 196 “[...] the green-eyed monster [...]”
Line 370 “[...] light as air”
Line 446 “[...] eaten up with passion”

Act 4 Scene 2
Line 263 “[...] knocking out his brains”
Line 271 “[...] he shall fall between us”
Line 275 “[...] the night grows to waste”

Act 5 Scene 1
Line 8 “[...] take thy stand”
Line 12 “[...] young quat [...]”
Line 129-130 “[...] tongues were out of use”

Act 5 Scene 2
Line 219 “Charm your tongue”
Line 259 “Hold your peace!”

**Idioms uttered by Othello**

*Act 1 Scene 3*
Line 295 “Let her have your voice”

*Act 2 Scene 1*
Line 200 “O my soul’s joy!”
Line 202 “[…] wakened death […]”

*Act 2 Scene 3*
Line 11-12 “The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue […]”
Line 186 “Holds his soul light […]”
Line 219 “My blood begins my safer guide to rule […]”

*Act 3 Scene 3*
Line 100 “Perdition catch my soul”
Line 211-212 “Exchange me for a goat […]”
Line 307 “Into the vale of years […]”
Line 423 “On horror’s head horrors accumulate”
”Line 510 “[…] For ’tis of aspics’ tongues!”

*Act 3 Scene 4*
Line 58 “I have a salt and sorry rheum […]”
Line 77 “Make it a darling like your precious eye.”

*Act 4 Scene 1*
Line 47 “To confess and be hanged […]”
Line 201-202 “No, my heart is turned to stone.”
Line 240 “I kiss the instrument of their pleasures.”

*Act 4 Scene 2*
Line 107 “And keeps the gate of hell […]”

*Act 5 Scene 1*
Line 30 “Iago keeps his word.”

*Act 5 Scene 2*
Line 10 “[…] put out thy light […]”
Line 41 “Amen, with all my heart.”
Line 78 “[…] thou dost stone my heart […]”