



Idiomatics — Much Ado About Nothing? An Open Invitation to All *Reading Matrix* Readers¹

John I. Liontas

University of South Florida

Friends, TESOLers, colleagues, lend me your ears. I come to invite you to join the field of *Idiomatics*. John Liontas is my name, id·i·o·mat·ics the claim I here so proclaim. So read this invitation without annotation, from beginning to end, soon you'll apprehend what I recommend, in full gear, that much is clear, far and near.

Now think on this: *Idiomatics—much ado about nothing?* Au contraire, I say! Idiomatics is much ado about something. About the naturalness of language. The fluency of it. About cultural norms and practices. The peculiarities of verbal and non-verbal conventions. About values, beliefs, and principles. The human story since time immemorial. The story of us all. Echoes from the past. Voices not heard. Memories lived. Imagined. Expressed in single words, phrases, formulas, sayings, and truisms, short and long alike, in literal and formulaic ways, tomorrow's headlines today. Hiding in plain sight. Reading between the lines, a skill not soon learned.

But learning it we can. Developing it we must. Controlling it we should. The earlier the better. Resorting to polemics need not occur so long as eyes can hear and ears see—figuratively, metaphorically. Accurately and appropriately. In spades. One expression at a time. Another one to follow soon. And still another after that. Enough said.

To state the obvious now, *Idiomatics* is the scientific study of idiomatic language and figurative language, bar none (Liontas, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). It is part and parcel of human languages and cultures worldwide. It is what makes language whole. Complete. Perfect. Warts and all. The whole is greater than the sum of its linguacultural parts. Without exception. Without excuses. Without exaggeration. And yes, without rhetorical hyperbole or hyperbolic rhetoric—that much is certain.

In more ways than one, axiomatic truths aside, idiomatics is the seeds planters use to grow fertile crops, the building material architects employ to erect sky-piercing towers, the marble blocks artisans sculpt to liberate figures already existent in the stone—the ideal form within. Over time, crops are harvested, building material is enriched, and Michelangelo's David stands a Giant, *il gigante*. Head and shoulders above the rest. Alone. A masterpiece of Italian Renaissance sculpture unlike any other. Need I say more?

Synchronically and diachronically, idiomatics is omnipresent in an array of topics involving language, literature, linguistics, applied linguistics, language teaching, and language technology, among many (Li & Liontas, 2023; Liontas & Raafat, 2024; Liontas, 2009, 2023;

¹ The inaugural condensed version of this Open Invitation, encompassing 842 words (excluding references) and presently expanded to 1590 words (excluding references), made its debut in January 2024 within the pages of *TESOL TÜRKIYE, Professional ELT Magazine Online*, Issue 12, spanning pages 21-24.

Liontas et al., 2019). Said simply, idiomatics is the glue that holds it all together, the foundation upon which human communication rests, breaths, evolves, pulsating rhythmically as ever across time and space. Always in context. Never in isolation. With a purpose. For a purpose. Anything less than that and language proper idiomatics would be no more. Technical yes. Natural no. Artificial maybe so.

Yet still, how to problematize idiomatics per se, how to address the challenges associated with teaching and learning idiomatics, and, more importantly, perhaps, how to assess and evaluate idiomatic-figurative language development among second and foreign language learners remains a call for action. A call not yet answered. Not yet understood. Not yet realized. Across the curriculum that is (Liontas, 2018a, 2019)!

Consistently so portrayed in study after study, barring a few exceptions (Liontas, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2003, 2007, 2013, 2015b), this open invitation to all *Reading Matrix* readers (and everyone else around the world wishing to help me advance the field of idiomatics) confronts these issues head-on, unapologetically. It calls upon invitees to contemplate the multidimensional nature the nomenclature of idiomatics presently occupies in human communication the world over, from simplest to most complex. This must be done first in order to establish a baseline understanding between and among the many terms and concepts proliferating in the extant literature (Liontas, 2019), thereby ensuring the viability of the system itself irrespective of contexts where it is utilized in conventional, institutional, or creative ways. The domain areas and fields of inquiry to which idiomatics teaching and learning is systematically situated, along with prime examples epitomizing effective and efficient application of idiomatics knowledge, must follow the exposition of idiomatics nomenclature proper (Liontas, 2002e, 2008, 2015a, 2018e). Finally, research-based practices resulting from ‘theorizing practice’ and ‘practicing theory’ must be offered to underpin the pedagogical structure envisaged herein today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow (Liontas, 2017, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d). Three steps to ponder, three steps to take, one call to answer.

Those that answer the call for action here outlined are counseled to begin *de novo* to contemplate probable answers to questions not yet asked by either researchers or language practitioners, entertain pedagogical constructs befitting a range of linguacultural contexts, and, as often required, at times imagined, or even lived, implement across the curriculum ocean islands of idiomatics teaching and learning students can explore to discover their own treasure troves of idiomatic language and figurative language amidst a rising sea of troubles under the starry night sky.

Don’t delay! Let the voyage of discovery begin today. Let idiomatics be your Stella Polaris. And let Polaris be the peg that holds the idiomatic-figurative world together. It is all you need to say before you sail the seas less charted. Hoist the flag, I say, and the world by the tail you shall have. That’s no tall tale, a fabulist I am not, I have you know.

Time’s a-wastin, let’s practice what we preach, let’s blaze a trail, let’s unite as one, idiomatists one and all. Together we can change the world—the world of idiomatics. After all, idiomatics is much ado about something. Something idiomatic. Something figurative. Where nothing is everything. And everything is nothing. Nothing more, nothing less.

So I ask you again: *Idiomatics—much ado about nothing?* Au contraire mon amis! Idiomatics is much ado about learning. About learning language. Linguaculture proper. Naturally. Natively. In context. In the sands of time. In generation after generation. With urgency but not with haste. Without fail. Without fear. With an eye towards a future full of promise and untapped potential. A future beckoning all comers. Seasoned and novice researchers alike. An argosy of

insights awaiting exploration still. In full kaleidoscopic glory. At the end of the rainbow. Beyond the horizon. Where the sky the land kisses. Where idiomatic zeitgeist meets and greets figurative Weltanschauung. A hug for some. An embrace for others. Both defined and refined. A synergistic confluence of institutionalized phrasing and creative style. From A to Z and everything in between. Every word weighted, every phrase measured. Time and again. The sky is the limit and the sky is limitless. Cloud nine dead ahead. Make way, here we come!

From afar, time marches on. On and on. Destiny is at hand, past is prologue. And every journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, Lao Tzu counsels us so. Today is the day. At this very moment. One step at a time, one foot in front of the other. Literally. Figuratively. The rest is history. His story. Your story. Our human story. One collective voice. One single call. A call to action. A call for action. For “action speaks louder than words but not nearly as often,” Mark Twain tells us, especially when freedom of action is treated as a tabula rasa, carte blanche, or as Benjamin Franklin puts it, “A well done is better than well said.”

Remember always and forever: If you talk the talk, you have to walk the walk, to walk the talk in all its splendor. In the end, when all is said that can be said, idiomatics is about the journey, *not* the destination. About taking action for a better tomorrow today. Action lived. Action experienced. Action taken. Put plainly, Action-Reaction-Interaction. Present always in our collective Ethos-Pathos-Logos—the art of persuasion. Plain. Simple. Untamed. One field, one vision, one mission.

One field worth embracing. Where the implications for the field of idiomatics are the norm and not the exception for the development of learning and innovation. Where challenges test our mettle in the freedom of practice. Where overcoming challenges cultivates open and honest expectations about teaching-and-learning idiomatics in context.

One vision worth having. Where sublime aspirations are embodied, rather than imagined in isolation. Where quiet disruption stimulates active learning. Where conquering fear brings into sharp focus a clear sense of fulfillment, energy, and passion.

One mission worth pursuing. Where transformational change and impermanence unleash the power of purpose, the raison d'être, the edification of idiomatics etiology. Where the constant play between logic and creativity is the reason for our actions, hopes, and desires. Where theory examined, perceived or otherwise, is grounded in experience, meaning, and completeness. An uncommon common thread. Unbroken still. Heard loud and clear. Across space. Across time.

Not wishing to prolong my stay, let me gracefully bring this open letter to a close with an aphorism I have previously imparted but find worth repeating: “Never mince words. Always weigh your words. Actions speak louder than words.”

And that’s that. Period. Full stop.

John I. Liontas

PS: To join the *International Society of Idiomatics*, please email expressions of interest to liontas@usf.edu. Your participation and contributions are always welcome. Onwards we go to the world of idiomatics, where the sun never sets on so glorious a human evolution: Language, the greatest achievement of humankind. Idiomatics, the grandest natural selection of words used in a structured, conventional, or creative way and conveyed by speech, writing, or gesture—a human system of cognitive language communication reflecting unique symbolic and sociocultural behavior, often defying literal explanation or understanding.

REFERENCES

- Li, Z., & Lontas, J. I. (2023). English VP idiom learning and WeChat: Developing idiomatic competence among Chinese EFL learners. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research, 11*(2), 95–117. doi:10.30466/ijltr.2023.121332
- Lontas, J. I. (2001). That's all Greek to me! The comprehension and interpretation of modern Greek phrasal idioms. *The Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal, 1*(1), 1–32. www.readingmatrix.com/articles/john_lontas/article.pdf.
- Lontas, J. I. (2002a). Context and idiom understanding in second languages (Proceedings of the 2002 annual conference of the European second language association). In S. Foster-Cohen, T. Ruthenberg, & M. Poschen (Eds.), *EUROSLA Yearbook: Annual Conference of the European Second Language Association. Vol. 2* (pp. 155–185). John Benjamin Publishing Company.
- Lontas, J. I. (2002b). Exploring second language learners' notions of idiomaticity. *System: An International Journal of Educational Technology and Applied Linguistics, 30*(3), 289–313.
- Lontas, J. I. (2002c). Reading between the lines: Detecting, decoding, and understanding idioms in second languages. In J. H. Sullivan (Ed.), *Literacy and the second language learner: Vol. 1. Research in second language learning* (pp. 177–216). Information Age Publishing Inc.
- Lontas, J. I. (2002d). Transactional idiom analysis: Theory and practice. *Journal of Language and Linguistics, 1*(1), 17–53. www.jllonline.net.
- Lontas, J. I. (2002e). Vivid phrasal idioms and the lexical-image continuum. *Issues in Applied Linguistics, 13*(1), 71–109.
- Lontas, J. I. (2003). Killing two birds with one stone: Understanding Spanish VP idioms in and out of context. *Hispania, 86*(2), 289–301.
- Lontas, J. I. (2007). The eye never sees what the brain understands: Making sense of idioms in second languages. *Lingua et Linguistica, 1*(2), 25–44.
- Lontas, J. I. (2008). Toward a critical pedagogy of idiomaticity. *Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics (IJOAL)*, Special issue on *Strategies in learning and using English as a foreign/second language, 34*(1–2), 11–30.
- Lontas, J. I. (2009). Artificial intelligence and idiomaticity. *The APAMALL Higher Education Journal, Language Learning Technologies, 1*(1), 1–33.
- Lontas, J. I. (2013). Educating educators about SL idiomaticity through action research. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research, 1*(2), 1–35.
- Lontas, J. I. (2015a). Developing idiomatic competence in the ESOL classroom: A pragmatic account. *TESOL Journal, 6*(4), 621–658.
- Lontas, J. I. (2015b). Straight from the horse's mouth: Idiomaticity revisited. In R. R. Heredia & A. B. Cieřlicka (Eds.), *Bilingual figurative language processing* (pp. 301–340). Cambridge University Press.
- Lontas, J. I. (2017). Why teach idioms? A challenge to the profession. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research (Special issue on Idiomaticity and Language Teaching Research), 5*(3), 5–25. http://ijltr.urmia.ac.ir/article_20302_1628e63cd2b6f974d6176438f9d9ac0a.pdf
- Lontas, J. I. (2018a). Exploring figurative language across the curriculum. In J. I. Lontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*, First edition. K. T. Reynolds (Ed.), *Teaching vocabulary*, Vol. V (pp. 3020–3028). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

- doi:10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0755
- Liontas, J. I. (2018b). Idiomaticity: A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. In J. I. Liontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*, First edition. J. I. Liontas (Ed., *Current trends and future directions in English language teaching*, Vol. VIII). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. doi:10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0947
- Liontas, J. I. (2018c). Proverbs and idioms in raising cultural awareness. In J. I. Liontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*, First edition. S. Nero (Ed., *Sociocultural aspects of English language teaching*, Vol. V) (pp. 3641–3650). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. doi:10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0294
- Liontas, J. I. (2018d). Teaching idiomatic language in context. In J. I. Liontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*, First edition. K. T. Reynolds (Ed., *Teaching vocabulary*, Vol. V) (pp. 3247–3256). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. doi:10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0723
- Liontas, J. I. (2018e). Reflective and effective teaching of idioms through a pragmatic perspective. In M. Zeraatpishe, A. Faravani, H. R. Kargozari, & M. Azarnoosh (Eds.), *Issues in applying SLA theories toward creative teaching* (pp. 127–153). Koninklijke Brill NV.
- Liontas, J. I. (2019). Teaching idioms and idiomatic expressions across the second language curriculum. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Teaching essential units of language: Beyond single-word vocabulary* (pp. 55–105). Routledge.
- Liontas, J. I. (2021a). Attaining knowledge of idiomatics in the age of Corona and beyond. In K. Kelch, P. Byun, S. Safavi, & S. Cervantes (Eds.), *CALL theory applications for online TESOL education* (pp. 1–34). IGI Global Publishing. doi:10.4018/978-1-7998-6609-1.ch001
- Liontas, J. I. (2021b). Figures of speech? Go figure! A baker's dozen should do it: Imagining figurative language. In I. Galantomos (Ed.), *L2 figurative language teaching: Theory and practice* (pp. 28–64). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Liontas, J. I. (2021c). A baker's dozen plus one for the road: Reimagining figurative language. In I. Galantomos (Ed.), *L2 figurative language teaching: Theory and practice* (pp. 65–84). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Liontas, J. I. (2023). Idiomatics, technology, and teacher education: Digital proposals for enhancing instruction in the digital era. In R. E. Ferdig, R. Hartshorne, E. Baumgartner, R. Kaplan-Rakowski, & C. Mouza (Eds.), *What PreK-12 teachers should know about educational technology in 2023: A research-to-practice anthology* (pp. 205–220). Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE). <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/222690/>
- Liontas, J. I., Li, S., & Bangun, I. (2019). Collocational competence and electronic corpora: Implications for English language teaching. In J. I. Liontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. doi:10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0982
- Liontas, J. I., & Raafat, F. (2024). Memes that meme idiomatics: Cultivating critical memetic literacy and authentic communication. In J. I. Liontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



Dr. John I. Liontas is a tenured associate professor of ESOL and FL education. He served as the director of the **Technology in Education and Second Language Acquisition (TESLA)** doctoral program at the University of South Florida from 2014 to 2021 and held the position of **Coordinator of TESOL and Foreign Language Education** from 2023 to 2024. Dr. Liontas is an active member of (inter)national learned societies and is widely recognized as a thought leader in the fields of idiomatics, digital technologies, applied linguistics, and second language acquisition. He has received numerous teaching and research awards and honors, totaling over four dozen at the local, state, regional, national, and international levels. Additionally, Dr. Liontas is the editor-in-chief of the award-winning encyclopedia, **The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching (Wiley, 2018)**, which is the first print and online encyclopedia for TESOL International Association since its founding in 1966.

Email: liontas@usf.edu