1. An overview of idioms
In this section we attempt to present some aspects regarding the definition, the structure and typology of idiomatic expressions.

1.1. The definition of idioms
Language contains a large number of items represented by types of prefabricated units, called multi-word units, phraseological units, or fixed expressions. Multi-word units are well-established lexical combinations which consist of one or more word forms or lexemes, so common in normal language that they “may well be the basic organizing principle in language production” (McCarthy 1990: 11). These multi-word units raise a variety of formal, syntactic, semantic, situational, and stylistic aspects.

A distinct group of multi-word units is represented by idiomatic expressions which constitute a special category of lexical items presenting a fixed structure, a greater rigidity (represented by ready-made structures with small range for variability), structural complexity, as well as a specific behaviour in language use.

An idiom is usually defined as a sequence of words functioning as a single unit whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meaning of the parts. Thus, according to the Webster Dictionary, an idiom is “an expression established in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in grammatical construction or in having a meaning that cannot be derived as a whole from the conjoined meanings of its elements” (1993: 1123).

1.2. The meaning, structure and types of idiomatic expressions
Idioms pose a number of structural and semantic problems. The meaning of idioms is considered to be one of the most important difficulties, in that the meaning of the whole cannot always be determined from the meaning of their constitutive parts. For example, an idiom, such as spill the beans (“give away information, deliberately or unintentionally”, Cowie et al. 1984: 514), has a special meaning which is attached to the whole expression. There are other cases of ‘semi-idioms’ where one word or constituent may have a common, literal meaning, while the other has a specialized sense which may be difficult to grasp; for example, in foot the bill (“pay someone else’s bill”, Gulland and Hinds-Howell 1986: 103), sink one’s differences (“agree to forget, or suspend, hostility, or disagreements, between two or more people”, Cowie et al. 1984: 503), the first constituent (i.e. to foot, to sink) has a figurative meaning.

The criteria for classifying idioms reflect the enormous structural variety of these multi-word units. The traditional classification involves a division into three types: open combinations and restricted combinations, the latter being further subdivided into idioms and collocations. (i.) Open combinations are considered
productive and compositional (i.e. their constituents contribute their meanings to the meanings of the wholes); (ii.) **Idioms** constitute exceptions since they are neither productive not compositional; (iii.) **Collocations** are often described simply as habitual combinations of words.

A more detailed classification of phraseological units is given in *The Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* (A. P. Cowie, R. Mackin and I.R. McCaig 1984: xii-xiii) where four types of such combinations of lexical items are identified. The authors use the term idiom with reference to all kinds of set expressions and provide a ‘top-down’ approach to idioms: (i.) **pure idioms**, (ii.) **figurative idioms**, (iii.) **restricted collocations**, (iv.) **open collocations**.

(i.) **Pure idioms** represent, historically, the end-point of a process by which word combinations first establish themselves through constant re-use, then undergo figurative extension and finally ‘petrify’ or ‘congeal’. Typical ‘petrified’ phrases resulting from the process of idiomatization of a fixed word group are illustrated by kick the bucket, blow the gaff, spill the beans, carry coals to Newcastle, etc.

(ii.) **Figurative idioms**, which are on the border of idioms, hardly allow any variation, e.g. burn one’s boats, beat one’s breast, go to the dogs, burn the candle at both ends, etc. The literal senses of these expressions do not survive alongside their figurative ones in normal, everyday use.

(iii.) **Restricted collocations**, sometimes referred to as ‘semi-idioms’, represent combinations (i.e. in the case of two word-expressions) of a constituent with a figurative sense not found outside that limited context, and a constituent which appears in a familiar, literal sense. Restricted collocations can be illustrated by jog one’s/ somebody’s memory (verb + noun), a blind alley, a chequered career (adjective + noun).

(iv.) **Open collocations** are represented by combinations such as fill the sink or a broken window. The use of the terms ‘open’ or ‘free’ to refer to ‘open collocations’ reflects the fact that in these examples both constituents (the verb and the noun – object, or the adjective and the noun, respectively) are freely recombinable, since, for example, other verbs such as drain, empty, etc., can substitute for fill in the open collocation fill the sink; similarly, other objects (nouns) such as basin, bucket, etc. can substitute for sink in this combination. Typically also, in open collocations, each element is used in a common literal sense.

According to C. Fernando and R. Flavell (1981: 19), idioms can be classified on the basis of their degree of motivation, therefore on semantic intelligibility. This criterion leads to a distinction of four categories of idioms: (i.) **transparent expressions**, ii. **semi-transparent phrases**, iii. **semi-opaque phrases**, iv. **opaque phrases**.

(i.) **Transparent expressions**, such as cut wood, break eggs, a pink shirt, bring in, are not idioms, but free collocations with a literal meaning derived from the meanings of the constituent words;
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(ii.) Semi-transparent phrases, such as skate on thin ice, kill two birds with one stone, add fuel to the fire, can be regarded as metaphors having a counterpart with a literal meaning.

(iii.) Semi-opaque phrases, such as burn one’s boats, tarred with the same brush, the boot/shoe is on the other foot, jump down someone’s throat, are regarded as metaphor idioms which are not completely intelligible.

(iv.) Opaque phrases, such as pull somebody’s leg, pass the buck, off the top of one’s head, are full idioms whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of the component words.

Another criterion for classifying idioms takes into account the extensive range of construction types represented by various grammatical patterns. From the grammatical point of view, idioms can be classified under two general headings: (i.) phrase idioms and (ii.) clause idioms, each of these major groupings comprising several sub-categories.

(i.) Phrase idioms: the most commonly occurring phrase idiomatic patterns are represented by four types: (a.) Noun Phrases (containing a determiner, an adjective and a noun, e.g. an eager beaver, a checkered career, a blind alley, easy terms); (b.) Adjective Phrases (containing an adverbial modifier, an adjective and a prepositional phrase, e.g. easy on the eye, as big as saucers, free with one’s money); (c.) Prepositional Phrases (containing a preposition and an object of the preposition, e.g. in the nick of time, over my dead body, at bottom, in agreement); (d.) Adverbial Phrases (containing an adverbial modifier and an adverb, e.g. as often as not, far afield, none too soon).

(ii.) Clause idioms: the most commonly occurring clause patterns spanned by idioms are represented by five types: (a.) Verb + Complement (the complement being expressed by an adjective phrase, e.g. go berserk, come clean, get even (with somebody)); (b.) Verb + Direct Object (e.g. make the grade, take pains, blow the gaff, foot the bill, catch somebody’s imagination); (c.) Verb + Direct Object + Complement (e.g. paint the town red, bleed somebody white, drive somebody mad, catch somebody napping); (d.) Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object (e.g. do somebody credit, pay somebody a compliment, sell somebody a pup); (e.) Verb + Direct Object + Adjunct (the Adjunct being expressed by an adjective or an adverb, e.g. take something amiss, play one’s cards well, play it straight, take something hard/lightly).

2. Pragmatic and functional aspects of idioms

2.1. Varieties of the language

Language varies according to several factors. One type of variation is related primarily to the language user, being represented by regional variety, social variety (the speakers’ affiliation with a social group), also, by age and sex. A second type of variation relates to the language use. People select the language varieties according to the situation and the purpose of the communication, represented by such factors as attitude (or tenor, expressed through language, being conditioned by the relationship of the participants in the particular situation), medium (or mode
which may be spoken or written, generally depending on the proximity of the participants in the communication), field of discourse (or domain relating to the activity in which the participants in the communication are engaged) (G. Leech et al. 2006: 7-10). This means that language varies not only according to the social characteristics of its users, but also according to the socio-cultural context in which they find themselves. As Mitchell puts it: “an individual presents himself to his interlocutor/s in a variety of guises, largely translatable into terms of the relative roles and statuses of language users. The same speaker may use different linguistic varieties in different situations and for different purposes” (1971: 39).

2.2. The pragmatic and functional aspect of idioms

When discussing idiomaticity, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of language use need to be considered. Numerous researchers, who have been concerned with the sociolinguistic, pragmatic and psycholinguistic views of idiomaticity, have attempted to answer two questions: (i.) What can be said appropriately; and (ii.) How it is to be said. These two parameters were analysed in some detail by Ch. Fillmore, P. Kay and J. O’Conner in the article Regularity and idiomaticity in grammatical constructions: the case of ‘let alone’ (1988: 521-538). The former aspect referring to ‘What can be said appropriately’ reflects the pragmatic sense, while the latter aspect referring to ‘How it is to be said’ concerns form.

The pragmatic dimension has been applied to the classification and analysis of idiomatic expressions, leading to a division into those which are used in set social situations and those which are not. Pragmatic idioms (also referred to as routines, social formulas or gambits) can be defined as lexical items and expressions whose occurrence is determined by a particular social situation (S. Gramley and K.M. Patzold 1992: 55).

Another linguist, Jürg Strässler, discussed the pragmatic aspect of idioms in his study Idioms in English. A Pragmatic Analysis (1982). Considering the pragmatic route as an intermediate step in the sociolinguistic direction, he defined the idiom as a functional element of language, namely, as a pragmatic phenomenon, i.e. something that is judged from the point of view of the language user.

A significant contribution to the analysis of routine formulas was made by Florian Coulmas (1979, 1981) who elaborated this concept as initially proposed by W. Chafe (1968). According to Coulmas, an adequate description of a community’s sociolinguistic behaviour must include: (i.) idiomaticity, (ii.) routine (formulas), and (iii.) collocability, which are considered to be significant properties of expression.

The language variation which depends on a number of factors, such as, the situation, the topic, the subject or the activity (register) is also reflected in the use of idioms.

Numerous idioms are restricted to particular groups of users, to particular occasions of use, or they indicate the speaker’s attitude to the persons or events denoted, or are used to perform special functions (for example, greetings or
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warnings). Taking into account the sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimension characterising idioms, important information should be given in dictionaries not only about their meaning and structure but also about important aspects of their use and function (cf. A.P. Cowie’s article “The Treatment of Collocations and Idioms in Learners’ Dictionaries”, 1981).

These variable factors help us to identify several categories of idioms:

(i.) Idioms which indicate the **social relationship** as well as the **attitude (tenor)** between the participants in the communication:

Idioms differ along a scale of **formality**, from **formal** (cold, polite, impersonal) to **informal** (relaxed, warm, casual, friendly). Nevertheless, most idioms are stylistically **neutral** in the sense that they fall somewhere between the limits represented by the scale of formality, assigned in the dictionaries by the labels ‘formal’ and ‘informal’.

(a.) Idioms which are considered **formal** tend to reflect a distant rather than a close relationship between the speakers/participants. They are more likely to be associated with an official occasion, setting, and tend to suggest a serious or elevated tone. For example, *make answer / reply* is a formal idiom used instead of “to answer”, “to reply”, as in the example in (1), which is part of an account of the State Opening of Parliament:

(1) He presented an address from the House of Commons to which Her Majesty was graciously pleased to *make reply*. (Cowie et al. 1984: 370)

Other formal idioms are the object of one’s affection(s) referring to “a person with whom one has fallen in love”; *leave much to be desired*, meaning “to be unsatisfactory, inadequate, be less than, fall short of, a required standard”.

(b.) Idioms which are considered **informal** reflect an intimate, close rather than a distant relationship between the speakers, implying a domestic rather than an official occasion, and suggesting an easy, relaxed attitude, tone. Thus, *Take it easy* is used for telling someone to be calm when they are upset or annoyed. Also, *easy on the eye* is an informal idiom having the meaning of “quite pretty, good-looking (in the opinion of the observer or speaker)”. Other idiomatic expressions such as *drive somebody crazy*, *be no great shakes* (“only averagely or less than averagely good, efficient, suitable, adequate”), *a queer fish* (an informal expression for “a strange, odd person, a misfit”), *give somebody / get the boot* (used informally to express “dismiss, or reject, somebody from one’s employment, company, favour”), *take a back seat* (“change to, or be relegated to, a less important role or function”) are more likely to crop up during relaxed conversation between friends than in an official document or a formal essay.

Idiomatic expressions may also express the speaker’s attitude, his own emotional state, such as his irritation, anger; they may convey an unfavourable or a contemptuous attitude towards the person or thing denoted or even a frivolous attitude, a lightly humorous or quietly mocking view of the person or thing referred to (Cowie et al. 1984: xl). We shall illustrate these variable factors in the sections (c.) to (e.):
(c.) Idioms expressing the speaker’s own irritation, anger and a violently abusive or dismissive attitude to others are regarded as ‘taboo’ by some speakers because they include a reference to God, or to sexual organs and functions. For this reason, such idioms as *God damn (it)*, *Damn (it)*, *Blast (it)*, *Get stuffed* (“used to tell someone very rudely and angrily that you do not want to talk to them or accept their offer” (Longman Dictionary 2003: 1651), are generally avoided by educated speakers.

Some idioms have developed several meanings, as in the case of *do you mind?:* it has a literal meaning in current use, i.e. an enquiry as to whether somebody objects to some action or event; a second use is “as an expression of objection, often aggressive, to something which is occurring; according to the context, it could be the equivalent of ‘get out of my way’, ‘stop interrupting’, ‘you’re sitting in my seat’, etc.” (Cowie et al. 1984: 151)

(d.) Some idioms connote a disparaging, or contemptuous attitude towards the person or thing denoted. For example, *a flea pit* is a derogatory reference to a cheap theatre or cinema; *a banana republic* is used as a derogatory term to refer to “a state that is considered to be dependent on primary, agricultural products and that is, therefore, backward economically and politically, and subject to internal disorder” (Cowie et al. 1984: 44).

Quite frequently, indications regarding the use and function of idioms usually supplement a definition in the dictionary, as in the idiomatic expression *my foot (!) used in informal style to express the meaning of “rubbish” or “nonsense*, the idiom functioning as a scornful rejection of what another person has said. Variations on the noun *foot*, in (2a.) are also *eye*, in (2b.), *aunt Fanny*, or *arse* (impolite, taboo)

(2.) a. ‘Paul’s too weak to carry his suitcase upstairs!’ ‘Too weak, *my foot! He’s twice as strong as I was at his age.’
   
   b. *Everything that was said this afternoon was plain, sober fact.* ‘*Sober fact, my eye.*’

(e.) Some idioms used to make comments may also indicate various attitudes (ironic, mocking, etc.) on the part of the speaker. They convey a lightly humorous or quietly mocking view of the persons or the things they refer to. For example, *a shrinking violet* is a facetious way of referring to a timid, shy, unassertive person. Also, the idiom *Once seen not/never forgotten*, (with the variants *heard, read*) (saying) expresses the meaning of something memorable because of beauty, ugliness, strangeness, etc., being often used to remark ironically on the striking qualities of somebody or of something, as illustrated by (3).

(3) Bellamy has a very strong idiosyncratic personality that excites powerful likes and dislikes. His voice, *once heard, will not quickly be forgotten.*

(ii.) Idioms in social interaction

A special group is represented by idiomatic expressions in social interaction, such as *excuse me, can I help you?, many happy returns of the day, (I am) sorry, (I beg your) pardon*, and many more. These phrases are performative in that they are not used about particular situations but in particular situations. Some of these
Idiomatic expressions are one-item phrases (although originally probably derived from clauses), as in *Cheers* (“used when you lift a glass of alcohol before you drink it, in order to say that you hope the people you are drinking with will be happy and have good health” *Longman Dictionary* 2003: 253).

Among the many situations in which stereotypic, or routinized, language is used are the beginnings (greetings, introductions) and endings (leave-takings) of various social encounters, also idioms associated with eating, drinking, as well as in all sorts of business transactions, as for example at a (railway) ticket counter (e.g. *Single or return?*), in a shop (e.g. *Can I help you*?), in a café (e.g. *Black or white*?) or in a wine bar (White or red?).

There are situations where speakers/participants have various options open to them, as in beginnings of social encounters (greetings). When one first meets people and introductions are made one can use *How do you do?*, *Hello, Hi (there)*, *Nice/pleased to meet you* and *I have been looking forward to meeting you (for some time)*. As linguists point out (Blundell *et al.* 1982; Lee 1983), the expressions listed differ from one another in several respects, such as personal tenor, social class/social dialect, regional dialect.

First, the greetings belong to different levels of personal tenor (i.e. concerned with the nature of the relationship among the people involved), *How do you do?* being very formal, *Hi (there)* quite informal, and *Hello, Nice/pleased to meet you* and *I have been looking forward to meeting you (for some time)*, being used somewhere in between. According to Blundell *et al.* (1982) and Lee (1983), *How do you do?* is becoming increasingly rare, especially because of the growing informality of English. When it is used, speakers often try to make it less distant and formal by combining it with *Hello* or *Pleased to meet you*.

Secondly, the greetings are also felt to be typical of a certain social class or social dialect. Thus, *How do you do?* is typical of the middle to upper class, while *Pleased to meet you is perhaps* more often used by lower middle and upper-working class people. There are also regional dialect associations: *Pleased to meet you* and *Hi* are still felt by some British speakers to be especially typical of Americans.

A characteristic feature of pragmatic idioms is the fact that they are sometimes just conventional tokens without any real meaning: it is not their meaning which is of primary importance; rather, it is their *function* they serve. The greeting *How do you do?* is a typical example in this respect, since it is rather difficult to state what meaning it has. Thus, in the Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary (1991), it is defined as “a polite way of greeting someone when you meet them for the first time” (1993: 708): in other words, the dictionary does not define its meaning, but instead it describes its function. The *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* defines the idiom as “a phrase used to someone you have just met for the first time; this person replies with the same phrase. They usually shake hands at the same time.” (1992: 646). The definition given in this dictionary points out the socially appropriate context in a sequence - the two persons being introduced to each other; moreover, it also points out the fact
that linguistic behaviour is accompanied by non-linguistic behaviour in this case (the hand shake). According to Gramley and Patzold, the definition given in The Longman Dictionary is not completely correct since people these days often do not shake hands when they are introduced; secondly, a person, as a social superior with higher status, may select a less formal reply in order to make the encounter less formal, e.g. *Hello* (1992: 60).

In contrast to the other types of fixed expressions, pragmatic idioms often need the context of situation to be understood correctly. Compare, in this respect, the expression *Black or white?* used in a café (of coffee, ‘black’ that is, “without milk or cream”)“, with the same expression used in a different context (e.g. *Was the waiter black or white?*), which would have a completely different meaning.

The semantic opaqueness of pragmatic idioms results in many cases from ellipsis: *Say when* is presumably shortened from *Say when I am to stop pouring* or *Say when you have enough*.

(iii.) Idiomatic expressions used to perform communicative functions

There are some idiomatic expressions (usually represented by clichés, sayings, catch-phrases), of sentence length, often long established in usage, being used to perform communicative functions (speech acts) of various kinds, such as making a comment, a complaint, issuing a warning, a prohibition, etc.

In much of everyday life, clichés are not only unavoidable but can actually be assigned a positive role, since they fulfil in many situations an important social function. In this respect, Redfern lists funerals, disasters, the writing of references and testimonials, or letters of protest where clichéd language is quite appropriate (Redfern 1989: 20).

*Sayings* (expressions whose form is often made striking and memorable by rhythm, assonance, etc.) are frequently used to make comments and recommendations, or issue warnings and prohibitions, which enshrine traditional values and sanctions (Cowie, *et al.* 1984: xi), as, for example, the sayings *Practice makes perfect, Better late than never.*

Thus, the saying *out of sight, out of mind,* illustrated in (4.a.), is usually a comment on somebody or something that can easily be forgotten, or on somebody of a forgetful nature. Also, *I don’t know what the world’s coming to* (with the variant *what’s the world coming to?*), in (4.b.), is used as “a complaint, serious or humorous, about (changes in) present-day conditions, morals, etc” (Cowie *et al.* 1983: 293). The idiomatic expression in (4.c.) *just what the doctor ordered,* expressing the meaning of “exactly what is needed” can be used as a welcoming comment:

(4) a. Her boy friend went into the army, and in a few months she married someone else. *Out of sight, out of mind*

   b. *What with strikes and rising prices everywhere I don’t know what the world’s coming to.*

   c. ‘A glass of iced lemonade? After two hours of tennis in the hot sun, that’s *just what the doctor ordered!*’
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Catchphrases (expressions often originating with a person prominent in public life or in the world of entertainment, etc.), on passing into more general currency acquire other functions or are used with reference to other events. For example, the idiomatic expression *let them eat cake* is used as an “unrealistic or flippant suggestion for remedying the lack of a basic necessity, e.g. by suggesting something still harder to get (Often attributed to Queen Marie-Antoinette, 18th c., when told that her subjects had not enough bread, but actually an older saying)” (Cowie et al. 1984: 349).

Literature has been an inexhaustible source for idiomatic expressions through the Bible, tales, fables, etc. Thus, the idiom *a dog in the manger*, meaning “one who denies to others the pleasures he can’t enjoy himself” (Gulland and Hinds-Howell 1986: 53), originates from Aesop’s Fables, in which the dog prevented the cows from eating the hay in the manger by lying in it and snarling at them, while not wanting the hay himself.

Another idiom, *to bell the cat*, expressing the meaning of “to attack a common enemy at great personal risk to oneself for the sake of others” (Gulland and Hinds-Howell 1986: 55), is actually a phrase taken from Piers Plowman’s fable of the mice who wanted to hang a bell around the neck of a cat - but could not find a single mouse willing to do this.

(iv.) Idioms used in structuring exchanges between speakers

There are numerous idioms used in structuring discourse: they can be used to link together sentences, or exchanges between speakers; they may refer back to a preceding statement or anticipate a following one, but in either case they also indicate the speaker’s attitude to what has been, or is to be said. Because of their function in the discourse, they are usually referred to as functional idioms.

There are some functional idioms that anticipate a following statement: thus, the exclamatory expression *do you know* is a comment or exclamation, introducing a statement, especially one which may cause some surprise.

There are numerous functional idioms that refer back to a preceding statement: idiomatic expressions that fall into this category are illustrated by *You can say that again*, used to express emphatic, and often ironic, agreement; also, *You could have fooled me*, used to indicate mocking dissent from a preceding assertion or judgement. Another idiom, *doesn’t one know it (don’t I know it)*, illustrated by the example in (5), is used as “an added comment to the effect that somebody is very well aware, or too much aware, of something previously mentioned” (Cowie et al.1984: 151).

(5) Sarah: He knows he can go to her – she’ll feed him.
Cissie: He’s her son for God’s sake.
Sarah: *Don’t I know it.* (Arnold Wesker)

3. Conclusions

Besides the structural and semantic aspects of idiomatic expressions, one should also take into account the sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimension characterising them, which give important information about their *use* and *function*.
Many idioms are restricted to particular groups of users or to particular occasions of use; others indicate the speaker’s attitude (tenor) to the persons or events denoted.

Pragmatic idioms (also termed routines, social formulas or gambits) are represented by lexical items and expressions whose occurrence is determined by a particular social situation.

An adequate description and treatment of pragmatic idioms has to take into account not only their syntax and semantics but also the linguistic context in which they occur. Semantically, pragmatic idioms often need the context of situation to be fully and correctly understood, these ranging from expressions which have full meaning to expressions which do not have any meaning, but only function.

Some idiomatic expressions are used to perform communicative functions (speech acts) of various kinds, such as greetings, making comments, recommendations, or issuing warnings, prohibitions, etc. Functional idioms require a correct understanding of the exact functions, also the role of such expressions in exchanges between speakers or participants.

Idiomatic expressions are complex constructions which reflect the extensive range of information – structural, semantic, pragmatic, functional, which the learner must capture in order to master their usage. The accurate and appropriate use of idiomatic expressions presupposes a competence which is not only linguistic but also cultural.

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses some characteristics of idiomatic expressions, considered a subtype of multi-word units or phraseological units. The paper is structured in two parts: the first part gives a brief overview of the definition, meaning, structure and typology of idioms, while the second part deals with some of their pragmatic and functional aspects. The analysis of pragmatic idioms points out a few salient features, such as: their occurrence is determined by a particular social situation, the importance of the context of situation for their correct interpretation, their function sometimes overrides their meaning. Some idiomatic expressions are used to perform communicative functions (speech acts) of various kinds, such as greetings, making comments, recommendations, or issuing warnings, prohibitions, etc.
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Key words: idiomatic expressions, pragmatic use, function