Title: Idioms Unlimited. A study of non-canonical forms of English verbal idioms in the British National Corpus

Language: English

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Abstract

The study is a corpus-based investigation of the semantic, lexical, and grammatical flexibility of English verbal idioms, focusing on qualitative analyses of examples of current British English usage. 300 verbal idioms – i.e. idioms that consist of a verb and a complement, e.g. spill the beans – were selected from dictionaries. Queries were run in the British National Corpus, a 100-million-word corpus of present-day British English. More than 7,000 corpus instances were categorized. Nearly 1,500 of the instances contained variants of the forms listed in dictionaries. Such non-canonical forms range from semantically and syntactically rather simple ellipses such as midnight oil used without its canonical verb burn, via substitutions such as call a spade a manually powered entrenching instrument, modifications such as swim against the political tide, derivations such as knitting-stickers and fence-mending, and passives such as humble pie had to be eaten, to semantically and syntactically complex permutations such as you must let people see the cat before you let it out of the bag. A model of transparency is proposed, including a distinction between compatible and incompatible modifiers in order to explain how modification of idioms works, for example puns like the surgeon finds the operating tables turned. For each type of variation, there is a discussion of factors facilitating and obstructing the creation of non-canonical forms.

Key words: English, idiom, corpus, transparency, isomorphicicity, modification, derivation, permutation, non-canonical, figurative