

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, isomorphism, modification, derivation, permutation, non-canonical, figurative