"Time" and idioms[1]

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This paper considers some points about idioms and idiomaticity in English, based on a lexicographical study of data. As an illustration of what can be learnt about the subject from looking at data, here are two passages from written texts. The first is an extract from Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* (1983: 135–6):

> I was glad when we were found and taken to the Mountain Rescue headquarters. Rick Lemon was told off for not having a map or compass. Rick said he knew the hills like the back of his hand. The chief mountain rescuer said that Rick must have been wearing gloves because we were seven miles from our mini-bus and heading in the wrong direction!

The second passage is an interchange from Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967: 49):

> Guildenstern: How do you know?
> Player: I keep my ear to the ground.
> Guildenstern: One day someone will step on your head.

Both passages contain what most people would call idioms: *know something like the back of one's hand* in the first and *keep one's ear to the ground* in the second. Both passages play round with these idioms. They make jokes of them, in effect commenting on the image or metaphor involved. This phenomenon of the deliberate exploitation of idioms is far from rare, and newspaper headlines, for example, are notorious for it. References are made to the stocks of sayings, proverbs, cliches, and collocations deep in the language store of individuals, and it seems cleverer to allude to them than simply use them.

If we now consider another extract from *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* (1983: 136–7), something else emerges:

> Limped all the way to school. Fifteen minutes late. Mr Scruton said it was not setting a good example for the late prefect to be late. It is all right for him to talk! He can ride to school in a Ford Cortina and then all he has to do is be in charge of a school. I have got a lot of problems and no car.

This passage contains no traditional sayings, proverbs, or cliches, and yet there are a number of strings of words that should be considered as units: *set an example, it is all right for X to Y, in charge of,* and *a lot of,* not to mention *all the*

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way. These strings are part of the idiomaticity of English, but they differ from the idioms quoted in the earlier extracts by being much commoner and much less prominent: they are also more significant in relation to language overall.

Terminology

The terminology of idioms has always been problematical. Cowie, in discussing this, points out (1981: 225) that there is no generally accepted term under which both collocation and idiom can be subsumed although many people working in the field would wish to consider them together. Different people use different terms to refer to the phenomenon of a multi-word lexical item, such as "frozen form", "phrase", "expression", "fixed expression", and "idiom", with varying degrees of overlap. A word may be defined as a sequence of characters, bounded by a space at either end. I intend to use "idiom" in this paper as a blanket term to refer to any sequence of two or more words that together function as a unit. Criteria for considering a string of words as a unit have been proposed or recorded by many authorities, such as Makkai in *Idiom Structure in English* (1972) and Fernando and Flavell in *On Idiom* (1981). My own summary of the most significant criteria has developed from work at COBUILD in analyzing quantities of data for lexicographical purposes:

> 1. There must be a mismatch between the semantic values of the individual elements in the string and the semantic value of the string as a whole, or else a mismatch between the individual elements and the overall pragmatic or discourse function of the string. That is, the meaning of the whole is more than or different from the sum of its parts.
> 2. There is normally some syntactic and/or lexical restrictedness within the string: for example, restrictions on the clause positions in which the string can be used, or on whether it can be passivized or made negative, or on what other words, if any, can be substituted for elements within the string.
> 3. The string must show some degree of institutionalization: that is, a string must be widely recognized and used as an idiomatic string within a speech community.

"Idiom", as I use it, is therefore a loose term: it suffers too from ambiguity, since it is used in English to refer both generally to the way in which things are expressed in a given language, and to a specific string of words. The two phenomena are distinct. Idiomatic English is correct, natural-sounding English, not language that is full of proverbs and sayings. In fact, if it *was* full of them, it would be very marked and unnatural. In using the term "idiom", however, I hope to exploit its ambiguity. Ultimately, the *idiom* of a language — its lexical and syntactic patterning — and its *idioms* are interlinked.

Idioms and data

Idioms are used in large-scale corpora, such as the Birmingham Collection of English Text, in much the same ways as in the passages quoted earlier. Classical types of idioms — for example, metaphorical expressions such as *kick the bucket* or *skate on thin ice,* or sayings such as *it never rains but it pours* — occur comparatively rarely. On statistical grounds, this is entirely predictable, and a frequency of one in a million would be unusually high. When such idioms occur, the forms that they appear in often deviate from the classical citation forms. For example, the saying *you can't have your cake and eat it* typically occurs in a positive form, often with the same overall admonitory function that the negative form has, as in:[2]

> There is, in any case, a common human tendency, more pronounced in our time that ever before, to believe that one can "have one's cake and eat it".

but sometimes with a different force, with no idea of reprehensibility at all, as in:

> Look here we want the benefit of both worlds. We want to have our cake and eat it, we want our students, and indeed ourselves at the same time to look at any problem phenomenon from a humanities perspective and from a social science perspective.

There is evidence, too, of the exploitation of idioms: for example, "He wanted to see how far below the table the new broom was liable to sweep" and "A long spoon to sup with the Devil was in his briefcase, and the Devil was wise enough to use the same cutlery" exploit the sayings *New brooms sweep clean* and *He who sups with the Devil should have a long spoon.*

In contrast to the highly evocative and uncommon strings mentioned so far, other kinds of string are common, non-prominent, and more significant in relation to the overall text. For example, there is a plethora of multi-word grammatical items, emphasizers, linkers, hedges, quantifiers, and so on, such as *in spite of, at all, on the other hand, sort of,* and *a good deal* (cf. Gates, in this volume). Of course, many "classical" idioms have similar functions: for example, *rain cats and dogs* or *as red as a beetroot* have an emphasizing function. But the way in which they produce emphasis is restricted and they seem qualitatively different from emphasizers such as *at all* or *of course.* Also extremely common are strings including delexical verbs such as *take, hit,* or *give,* and restricted or strong structures such as those which are described by Makkai as "idioms of encoding" (1972: 57): strings where the *structure,* for example co-occurrence with a particular preposition, is unpredictable, rather than the meaning. These types of string tend to include only one lexically or semantically strong component that is fixed.

Such strings leap out of the data for a given word, in spite of the fact that in normal writing or speech they pass virtually unnoticed. For example, in the 7.3 million-word Birmingham corpus, something like 85% of the 1800-odd examples

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[2] The examples quoted in this paragraph are taken from the Birmingham Collection of English Text.

of *least* are for the string *at least,* and much of the remaining 15% consists of strings such as *in the least, to say the least,* and *least of all.* The commonest use of *deal* is in the quantifiers *a good deal* and *a great deal*: the commonest use of *course* is in *of course.* Now, most dictionaries will pick up these strings and treat them as idioms: it is relatively simple to find — or generate or externalize — evidence and to explain their meanings and functions. We all know that they exist. But the interesting strings are those that show up very strongly in the data for a word and are frequently not included at all in monolingual dictionaries, not even in examples, although bilingual dictionaries tend to be more successful at picking them up. By far the commonest use found in the 500 or so corpus examples of the form *cases* is in the pattern *in some cases, in many cases, in a few cases, in most cases,* etc. Is this just a pattern? Something similar certainly happens with the synonymous but much rarer word *instances,* and the meaning of the string may be derivable from an understanding of the meaning of the individual elements. Yet it seems to have acquired some status or institutionalization as a string, it has developed a specific function: a way of expressing frequency in a slightly more authoritative or formal way than *sometimes, often, occasionally,* and *usually.* There are many other such strings that could be cited. When a word or a sense of a word appears so commonly in a restricted structure and with so distinct a discourse function, are there not grounds for regarding it as some sort of idiom and registering it as such in a dictionary?

The word "time"

To illustrate some of these points in more detail, I should like to concentrate on a single word, the noun *time.* Foremost amongst my reasons for picking on this word is its high frequency: it is one of the commonest lexical words in English, with an average frequency of between one and two occurrences per thousand words. The only words that are commoner in the Birmingham corpora, other than closed-system grammatical words such as prepositions and determiners, are *said, think, well,* and *know,* of which the high frequency of *said* is a result of its function in fictional narrative, that of *think, well,* and *know* their discourse functions in speech. In the LOB and Brown corpora, *time* is the second commonest lexical word after *said.* Nearly all examples in the Birmingham corpora for *time* and *times* are nominal rather than verbal.[3] A second reason for concen-

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[3] In the 7.3 million-word Birmingham corpus, the form *time* has a frequency of 9481; *times* 1957; *timed* 13; and *timing* 42. The rank orderings in the corpus of the forms *said, think, well, know,* and *time* are respectively 47th, 67th, 68th, 69th, and 70th. It is significant that the next commonest noun in the corpus is *people* with 9083 occurrences (*person* has 1454): this is followed by *man/men* with 8795 total occurrences, *thing/things* (8714), *year/years* (7911), and *way/ways* (7712). With the exception of *year/years,* all these nouns clearly fit into the class of general nouns described by Halliday and Hasan in *Cohesion in English* as having cohesive functions in English (1976: 274 ff.): the high frequency of *year/years* perhaps demonstrates the importance of the temporal dimension in discourse. The interpretation of concordance evidence is discussed by Sinclair (1985).

trating on *time* is simply that it occurs in a large number of idioms, with the second volume of THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF CURRENT IDIOMATIC ENGLISH, for example, listing over 100. A third reason is that the polysemy of *time* is far from straightforward, and it may be argued that the fuzzy boundaries which exist between some senses are in part responsible for the large number of idiomatic strings that include *time*.

The noun *time/times* has some clearly differentiated senses: these include senses relating to frequency (as in "how many times have you . . .? and "three times") and eras (as in "the life and times of William Shakespeare"): also some fairly technical senses relating to sport ("half-time"), music ("keep time", "in three-four time") and work or work and pay ("part-time", "time and a half"). It is worth noting that all of these senses are fairly restricted in terms of collocation and syntax. However, when *time* is used to refer to the temporal aspect of existence, meaning start to overlap. There are several broad bands of meaning which account for distinctions between the precise semantic values of the word in such uses as "a period of time", "what's the time?", "we've run out of time", and "a long time ago", and which parallel in part the spatial concepts expressed in English by a variety of words – *space, place, area,* and *distance.*

In order to show some of these distinctions, together with the part played by idiomaticity, I want to consider a sample of 55 lines for the singular form *time,* a single page of concordanced lines from the 7.3 million-word Birmingham corpus (in the region of 0.5% of the total tokens of the type *time*): these lines appear in Figure 1. I am not claiming that this is an average sample of lines, only that it is not atypical; however, there is some support for my findings in data from the FREQSUCON project at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.[4] There are, of course, no examples in this sample of the very common uses of the plural in expressing frequency ("four times") or referring to eras ("the life and times"). Following these lines is a rough breakdown into meanings or uses, such as might be represented in a dictionary. In arriving at this breakdown, I made use of a variety of techniques for establishing sense distinctions: these include examining the syntax, collocation, and discourse functions of the word. The commonest use of *time* in this selection is in idioms, but it is also true that most other instances of *time* here appear in some kind of idiomatic structure. Even lines that belong quite clearly to one or other meaning seem to occur in apparently restricted sets of structures. For example, the "duration" uses tend to be preceded by a quantifying adjective and to occur in prepositional phrases headed by *for* or *in.* The "occasion" uses collocate strongly with *first* (and *last, next,* and ordinals

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[4] This follows from a private communication from Ms Nina Devons of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: the FREQSUCON project is based on the 1 million word Brown corpus, and produces statistics for common words concerning their meanings, collocations, and usage.

as well): they also occur commonly in prepositional phrases headed by *for*.[5] Near-
ly as common as the use of *time* in various idioms is what I have called the deictic
use — *time* used typically in structures such as *by the time . . .* or *at the time,*
where *time* is used to relate or link temporally two events or to refer to a point
in time in terms of what is happening then, and where the exact identity of that
point in time is either stated in the surrounding discourse or is clear from the si-
tuational context. Other structures associated with this use are *from the time . . .*
or *all the time . . .* (both followed by a relative clause), and *up until that time.*
While a variety of structures are possible, there is evidence here again of some re-
strictedness.

Figure 1

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     oving trips around Europe. They'd look around, in  time  they'd pick their Shangri-la and have their
     messages to get across the Atlantic. And by the   time  they'd got there, the situation had been tr
     ome husbands who of  course can't choose how much  time  they'll give to the home  because of the de
     o London. I mean, you can see how in a few years   time  they'll be nothing  for a teenager. If he w
  5  I know its simple-minded, but you can see all the  time  they're up on a stage. I prefer television
     ave seen these marshes a thousand times, yet each  time  they're now. It's wrong to call them benign
     n stuck to the back of the next class, and by the  time  they're thirteen it's too late anyway, and
     re at .... the moment, the fees are going  by the  time  they're 16-18 you can imagine what they'll
     ort Powell as Alec, Jim Horton as Jerry and in no  time  they're  both in France with the Royal Iris
 10  on ((A)) yes ((B)) Beautiful views. And the first  time  they've ever tried  to do it in this countr
     they leave the education system but at the same   time  they've also  got something to contribute t
     er the impression that she was going forwards; in  time  things grow even worse, and she began to lo
     ught to have the same visions as you. And all the  time  things are changing: the children's demands
     for the first  —  and let us hope for the last —  time  thinking about having an empire, the Marine
 15  . He was, after all, sixty. And I remember at the  time  thinking that he'd made his decision none t
     k in his mother's hut, Kunta lay awake for a long  time, thinking of the things Grandma Yaiso had t
     urst. <P 36> Heaven forbid I lay there for a long  time  thinking these horrid thoughts. Then quite
     ed to be myself on television; I had spent a long  time  thinking about what that self was, and fina
     to the money, though he had spent a good deal of   time  thinking about it. Listening to Rose descri
 20  osed a second meeting with Khieu Samphon for some  time  this month, and has invited Son Sann to tal
     and start the whole cycle into a skid. The first  time  this one seized, my head was pitched over t
     to work. Had this knowledge been available at the  time, this particular experiment would probably
     ling when I went to meet my classes for the first  time  this week. The system is so different, and
     ew minutes of rest would blot out for that long a  time  this seemingly unending horror, which for w
 25  chom as part of a tour of the United States. Each  time  this man finally understood something, his
     I was desperate for the money at the time. At the  time  this five pounds meant everything to me and
     g back. Now if he wanted to come back at festival  time  this is most likely I should imagine that t
     must deal (YES) we have noticed  that at the same  time, this causes comment in the west and upset
     onto a chip, and may well be on the market by the time  this book is published. On the horizon, I
 30  I shortly be on the market and may well be by the  time  this book is published. Another gimmick! Po
     ust bear my woes. No, guess what I did to pass my  time  this evening.' "I can't imagine,' says Howe
     one to be able to discus? s them with her. In her  time  this castle had been filled with writers, a
     s victim. I could not bear to read, for the first  time, this part of the work of the greatest writ
 35  s sufficiently elastic to accommodate at the same  time  those who wanted a more right-wing Governme
     the grave-digger says — or of the actual lapse of  time, though it is obvious in Hamlet that a con:
     carns no one but the student himself. At the same  time, though, it cannot help operating as a gest
     e the full facts of the case. It'll take a little  time; though." "I can see that if you do that, w
     en. I think, and I understood that she had at one  time  thought she was engaged, or was going to be
 40  reached its apogee. But it seems that in all that  time, though practical inventions flourished, no
     a day's work, and I do not feel any strain at the  time, though we have no real private life, part
     balance of87m pounds and many commentators at the time  thought this was chiefly due to the Governe
     rom Boston, New York and Washington. Jonny at one  time  thought D.C. might be good ("You could choo
     en. ((O)) Golf's been round as a sport for a long  time  though.  Surely it's not just the province
 45  of recording information. (Mm) It was once upon a  time  thought that (um) microfilms would...would
     ide away. Nobody wants to be   — Aye, at the same  time  though ...  — Especially when you're young,
     you don't want to be  conspicuous  — At the same  time  though, you're looking back on your youth,
     at Bayreuth brought more  jeers than cheers. This  time  though, he has a triumph, and we'll  be he
     now is the time to do it. It might have been the  time  though I think the arguments were against
 50  cal thriller, which we called The Intruder at the  time, though it was released as Fana in the Win
     Britain have been aware  of the problem for some  time, though apart from such  observatories as t
     revolted against the civil government and at one  time  threatened the metropolis itself. The soci
     . He well might feel for Chris:opher Vas- aillou. Time  throw up some amusing patterns, though, in
     ly royal, for all the civil servants who at lunch  time  throng its walks and eat sandwiches on its
 55  aught himself how to read and absorbed in a short  time  through self-study all the technical knowl
     her while shedding our j.ngoes, and for the first time, through the remarkable Helen Suzman, gain
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[5] Interestingly enough, this is an idiomatic use of *for*. That is, *for* with this meaning/use
occurs only with the word *time* or in the string *for once*, which would normally be con-
sidered an idiom in its own right.

Breakdown into meanings/uses

		Total Occurrences	Line Numbers
A	In Idioms:	15	
	at the same time	6	11, 28, 34, 36, 45, 46
	at one time	3	38, 42, 51
	in time	2	1, 12
	in (a few years/weeks etc) time	1	4
	in (next to) no time	1	9
	once upon a time	1	44
	pass one's/the time	1	31
B	Deictic use	14	2, 5, 7, 8, 13, 15, 22, 26, 29, 30, 39, 40, 41, 49
C	Duration	10	3, 16, 17, 18, 19, 24, 37, 43, 50, 54
D	Occasion	9	6, 10, 14, 21, 23, 25, 33, 47, 55
E	Point in time	2	20, 48
F	Continuum	2	35, 52
G	In compounds (= season, point in time)	2	27, 53
H	Era, day, heyday	1	32

Time is used in English to refer to the temporal aspect of existence in any of various contexts and with any of various actual referents. As a result, its precise meaning is heavily context-dependent, and some structures with *time* need to be considered as idioms, whereas if another item, a hyponym, is substituted, they do not. Consider the following:

1.1 Things will be different in five years.
1.2 Things will be different in a few days.

Any one of a small set of items can follow the preposition *in*: various numbers or quantifiers, combined fairly freely with various nouns expressing periods of time. *In* has a particular meaning or function in this and similar structures. Consider now:

1.3 Things will be different in time.

Time is a superordinate of *years, days,* and other periods of time, but the paradigm has broken down. Understanding the meaning of *in* in 1.1 and 1.2, and knowing the word *time* will not necessarily lead to an understanding of 1.3. A further sequence of examples:

2.1 She stayed there for a year.
2.2 She stayed there for a day.
2.3 She stayed there for a time.

The weighted use of the indefinite article that occurs in 2.3, with the implied meaning "quite a" or "a considerable", can also occur with many other items, but I suggest that the combination here poses the question "what sort of time?"

— a good time? a point in time? a length of time? Whereas a word or group with a more precise referent — or at least a less ambiguous one — can be slotted into such a standard syntactic structure, *time* cannot. If the only other constituents of a string besides *time* are grammatical words, there may not be enough meaning accruing to any of the individual elements in the string for the whole to be transparent.

Only one or two lines belong to what we might assume to be the core meaning of *time* — the abstract continuum that clocks and watches register. One such line in the sample is "Time threw up some amusing patterns", with a possible second being "lapse of time". It is striking how comparatively infrequent this central sense of time is, and how often, when it does occur, it occurs in structures such as "a period of time" or "amount of time" — where the overall semantics are clearly linked with *time* referring to duration (as in "a long time"). It also often occurs in the context of time passing and things changing — "More time passed . . .", "They get more powerful with time", or of the personification of time, as in line 52 of the sample. The connotations of this meaning of time seem of crucial importance, and one consequence is the number of idioms which pick up on these connotations: *time is a great healer, time and tide wait for no man, time will tell,* and *it is only a matter* (or *question*) *of time.*

The scope of this paper does not permit a detailed discussion of the examples which, in my crude breakdown of senses, I have labelled as idioms. However, *at the same time* is by far the commonest idiom with *time,* occurring overall in nearly 5% of all examples of the singular form. (I am not distinguishing here between its different meanings or uses.) Of the other idioms found in this sample, only one contains a second lexical item — *pass one's time* — and this could perhaps be seen as a collocation of *time* with a specific sense of the word *pass. In no time,* with its variant *in next to no time,* could be seen as merely reflecting a regular use of *no.* I do not think it should be, but here again there is a very fine dividing-line between strong syntactic pattern and idiom. *At one time,* too, is on the borderline between idiom and non-idiom, and yet what other words could be substituted for *time* in the string paradigmatically? *At one point, at one stage, at one juncture* are similar, but they do not mean quite the same as *at one time.* Finally, it is significant that when *once upon a time* occurs in this selection, it is not a preface to a fairy story, rather in allusion to it: yet another example of the way in which idioms are actually *used.*

Time is just one word in the lexicon, and some of its problems may be unique, yet in looking at data for other words, there is a wealth of evidence for similar phenomena: few examples of classical idioms, and these often failing to appear in their classical citation forms; large numbers of idiomatic strings in highly restricted structures or collocations; a lack of clear division between sense and idiom. The fact that there is a continuum between idiom and non-idiom is well-

known; the problems besetting lexicographers stem from this continuum and the difficulty of knowing where to draw lines. Idioms are highly complex. As Cowie remarks (1981: 233), their analysis:

> . . . must leave the lexicographer with the profound conviction that lexical units are *complexes* of various kinds more often than the traditional organization of the dictionary has prepared us to believe or reductionist images of the lexicon encourage us to suppose.

There is no clearly identifiable set of idioms that is separate from the set of words, although dictionaries may sometimes give the contrary impression. It therefore seems worth looking hard at what lexicographers are calling idioms, and why, and worth considering whether the almost traditional sequences of sayings, similes, and metaphorical expressions that are included in many dictionaries are representative, useful, and appropriate or whether they are not perhaps arbitrary as well as sometimes antiquated.

In the end it is the idioms such as *in the end* or even *such as* that are most important for lexicographers to deal with in constructing an accurate description of the language: these are the ones that are most vital to language competence or to an understanding of the working of language. As for more classical types of idioms, we need to recognize – and perhaps to record more explicitly and more frequently – that they are rare and restricted, yet exploited and alluded to, if we are really trying to show how the language is used.

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