Coals to Newcastle or *glittering gold*?
Which idioms need to be included in an English learner's dictionary in Australia?

Julia Miller
Centre for Learning and Professional Development, University of Adelaide, Australia

English idioms and figurative expressions are used by native English speakers of all ages and from many different English speaking countries. The non-literal nature of idioms can pose a problem for non-native speakers, however, who wonder why taking coals to Newcastle should be a significant action, or where the back of Bourke might possibly be. Many non-native speakers of English in Australia are university-age students, aged between 16 and 22, whose first point of departure in finding the meaning of unfamiliar expressions is likely to be a monolingual English learner's dictionary (MELD). Since the MELDs available in Australia are mainly of British origin, learners of English may therefore not find in them the Australian expressions that are used in general conversation and in the media. Moreover, Australian native speakers of English who belong to different generations may not know or use the same idioms. Students who do learn the meaning of an idiom need to know with whom it is appropriate to use such an expression, and this information is often not available in a MELD.

This paper addresses five idioms and expressions taken from a larger study of 84 idioms in order to examine which of these expressions are known and used by different age groups in Australia and the UK. Native English speakers in Australia and the UK completed 2085 surveys indicating where they had first encountered the 84 idioms and where they would use them. The findings indicate that not all expressions given in the British MELDs are known and used by native speakers in the 16-22 age range in either the UK or Australia, and that Australians use idioms which are often not included in the British MELDs. It is therefore suggested that MELDs used in Australia include more Australian material, perhaps online or via a CD-ROM, and that a more appropriate labelling system be introduced to indicate age as a factor in usage.

1. Introduction

The knowledge of figurative language in the form of idioms is one way in which a native speaker of English can understand and communicate with those around them, even extending to visual images based on these idioms. (Many umbrellas, for instance, carry pictures reflecting the idiom *raining cats and dogs*, though the words themselves are unstated.) Such idioms, however, may not be readily understood by non-native speakers, or even by native speakers of a different generation or on a different continent. Many idioms are included in monolingual English learner's dictionaries (MELDs), but their inclusion does not necessarily mean that they are used by all members of the English-speaking country in which a dictionary is sold. Australia and the UK, for example, despite a degree of overlap, may use different idioms, and those idioms used by older speakers may not be known by younger speakers.

The background to this study is a larger research project, still in progress, on the inclusion and treatment of idioms in MELDs relative to the needs of a target group of university-age learners of English (aged approximately 16 - 22) in Australia. The project aims to discover which idioms from a selected list of 84 are used by which age groups in the UK and Australia and whether, according to the findings, MELDs need to reflect age and country usage more accurately in their inclusion of idioms and in their labelling systems.

In Australia, the Macquarie Learner's Dictionary (MLD) of 1999 is now out of print, and so the only advanced learner's dictionaries of English available are those produced in the UK or the US. The dictionaries and editions listed here are those which were available to this researcher in September 2009: *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 3rd edition (CALD 3); *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*, 4th edition (Cobuild4); *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 5th edition (LDOCE5); *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, 2nd edition (MEDAL2); and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*,

7th edition (OALD7). These dictionaries are sometimes referred to as the Big 5. The online versions of CALD, LDOCE, MEDAL and OALD were also consulted in January 2010. Although these dictionaries include American and British variants, they obviously cannot cover all English-speaking countries in depth. Many Australian expressions are therefore excluded, and many British expressions are given which may not be used either in Australia, or by the younger generation in Australia or the UK with whom most students are peers (Nesi 2000). There are of course dictionaries explicitly for idioms, but a student who comes across an expression such as *a wolf in sheep's clothing* may not recognise this immediately as an idiom and will therefore look up individual words first in a MELD. It is perhaps not possible to know what all users want from a dictionary, but Atkins and Rundell (2008: 32) suggest that 'a realistic goal is to meet the needs of most users most of the time.' This means that the Big 5 listed above, in attempting to meet user needs, all contain idioms, to a greater or lesser degree.

This paper examines five sample idioms which are representative of the total list of 84 used in the wider study, and addresses the questions of which native English speakers in Australia know these idioms, where they first heard them, and where they and older native speakers would use them. The answers to these questions help to indicate where a university-age student from the target group in Australia is likely to encounter these and similar idioms. The sample of participants on which the study is based was a non-random sample, and so the results are not directly generalisable. They do, however, present data suggestive of certain trends which it would be valuable to follow up in a subsequent study.

2. Literature review

The definition of the term 'idiom' is problematic. Weinreich (1969: 42) defines an idiom as a phraseological unit with 'at least two polysemous constituents', and refers to the 'common understanding' that the 'meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of its elements' (Weinreich 1969: 26). There are writers who claim that only opaque metaphors are idioms (e.g. Gläser 1998; Deignan 1999; Čermák 2001). Others (e.g. Moon 1998) maintain that a degree of transparency is possible. Yet others (e.g. Cowie 1981, Zgusta 1971 in Howarth, 1996) distinguish between pure and figurative idioms. Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor (1988: 504) say that 'an idiomatic expression or construction is something a language user could fail to know while knowing everything else in the language'. This perhaps explains why idioms were selected for the Macquarie Learners' Dictionary, for example, based on the editors' judgement of whether 'a learner would have trouble understanding it' (Ann Atkinson, Senior Editor, Macquarie Dictionary, personal communication, 9 November 2006). For the purposes of this study, 'idiom' is used to refer to a figurative expression of at least two words, whose meaning is non-literal and therefore may be opaque to those who hear it for the first time, although some idioms may be transparent to certain native speakers. Some expressions that carry a more proverbial usage, such as *all that glitters is not gold*, are also included, since these are also labelled as 'idioms' in most MELDs.

Institutionalisation is seen as central to idiomaticity (Hanks 2004: 256), meaning that an idiom is 'recognized and accepted as a lexical item of the language' (Bauer 1983: 48 in Moon, 1998: 7). However, institutionalisation does not necessarily imply frequent use. Moon (1998: 56) calls a frequency of 0.55 per million 'high' when referring to fixed expressions and idioms (FEIs) in the Oxford Hector Pilot Corpus. The Macquarie Learners' Dictionary editors gave 'common use' as a criterion for inclusion (Ann Atkinson, pers. comm., 2006). 'Common use' may be a relative term, but it implies a degree of familiarity in the general population. It is hoped that my own larger study, when complete, will give an indication of how frequently

certain age groups in the UK and Australia use certain categories of idioms, and, therefore, whether these idioms can still be said to be institutionalised.

Stein wrote in 1999 that the principal MELDs used a British framework to express social and cultural items. Algeo (1995) had previously spoken against such national bias, particularly with regard to variations between American and British English and the choice of lexical items in a dictionary. Leech and Nesi also claimed in 1999 (Leech and Nesi 1999: 300) that MELDs did not do enough to include varieties other than British or American. This may still be the case, as the Australian market, for example, is much smaller than the American or British market, and may not be fully represented. The Big 5 may therefore reflect a British bias in their inclusion of items, including idioms.

The use of idioms may also vary between countries and age groups. Low and Littlemore (2009) suggest that more research needs to be done on regional variations in metaphoric language. Their study refers to classroom management, but this finding could be more broadly applied. Curtain's study (2001), meanwhile, reveals that speakers of English in Australia in the over 50 age group knew more colloquial expressions than those in the 18-28 age group. Age and location are central to this paper, which seeks to determine how these two factors influence idiom use. It is understandable, given publishing costs, that not all varieties of English can be comprehensively treated in a MELD. Their coverage could, however, be extended by an appendix or online version designed for a particular country. Age could also be applied more effectively in dictionary labelling systems, so that learners use idioms and other vocabulary appropriate to their peer groups and do not, as some apocryphal stories suggest, talk in King James Bible seventeenth century English.

3. Study

The overall aim of the larger study was, first, to elicit as many idioms as possible from different age groups in the UK and Australia, using a given list of 84 idioms as a prompt, and secondly, to compare knowledge and use of these given idioms according to country and age group. The elicitation technique was used because it draws on what participants actually know and use, rather than what they recognise from a list or can complete from a gap-fill exercise. It also explores what is in current use by different ages and in different locations, rather than what is simply listed in a dictionary.

A list of 84 prompt idioms was drawn up in 2005 based on the list at the back of the 2003 edition of CALD. Each idiom had to appear in at least two of the Big 5, or, in the case of Australian idioms, which were less well represented, in at least one. These idioms represented the categories of Biblical, literary/historical, British, Australian and older reference (e.g. referring to steam-powered vehicles). The five categories were chosen as being readily identifiable and containing a manageable number of idioms for the scope of the investigation. The idioms were separated into six smaller online surveys, each containing 14 idiom prompts. Each prompt presented a picture and an accompanying question using one of the words from the idiom. For example, a picture of a wolf dressed as a sheep was followed by the question, 'What idioms containing the word 'wolf' do you know?' A suggested answer was given on the next page of the survey (in this case it was *wolf in sheep's clothing*), and further questions were asked about where the idiom had first been heard; what it meant (from a choice of one correct, one opposite, one alternative answer, or the response 'None of these'); how often the respondent would use the idiom; where they would use it; and a request to list any idioms that sprang to mind from the prompt. In this way it was hoped to elicit as large a number of idioms

as possible, and to build up a picture of idiom use by age group and location for the five categories in the survey.

Participation was invited online, mainly through Australian Style and Michael Quinion's World Wide Words website, and through contact with schools in Australia and the UK. Participation was thus non-random, as the older people who took part were already interested in language and the younger ones were often required to participate by their school teachers. Nevertheless, the large number of completed surveys (2085) does provide an insight into idiom use by different age groups in both locations. Participation was restricted to native speakers of English aged 16 or over who had spent most of their lives in either the UK or Australia. The number of surveys completed does not equal the total number of participants, as some people completed more than one questionnaire. This was deliberately allowed in order to elicit as many idioms as possible from the 84 original prompts.

This paper is based on the findings from five of the idioms in the first survey, one from each of the five categories: (1) *a wolf in sheep's clothing*, referring to someone who is deceptive underneath an innocent exterior (Biblical, then popularised in Townsend's nineteenth century translation of Aesop's fables); (2) *all that glitters is not gold*, meaning that outward show does not always denote something valuable (Shakespeare - literary); (3) *back of Bourke*, meaning that somewhere is very isolated (Australian); 4) *carry/take coals to Newcastle*, denoting a superfluous action (UK); and (5) *full steam ahead*, meaning that someone is going ahead quickly and energetically (older reference). The popular forms of these idioms, as given in the Big 5, were used in the survey, so that *glitters* was used rather than the original *glisters*, for example. The age groups have been divided into three in this paper: 16 – 22 (81 participants); 23 – 40 (36 participants); and 41+ (133 participants). (The complete study, with an anticipated completion date in 2011, will address in greater detail the findings from 6 narrower age group ranges in both the UK and Australia.) The results of participants' responses are discussed below.

4. Findings

In this paper, four questions are relevant from the survey findings. First, do Australians in the age range of the target group (approximately 16-22) know these particular idioms? Secondly, if they know the idioms, where did they first encounter them? Thirdly, where would they, and older people who might address them, use these idioms? Fourthly, what idioms were commonly elicited from the 16-22 year olds? The answers to these questions give an indication of how useful it is for the target group of university-aged international students to know these and other idioms in the same categories, and thus, how important it is to include them in a MELD used in Australia or to label them according to age usage.

These particular idioms were not all familiar to the 81 native speakers in the Australian 16-22 age range. Over half knew *full steam ahead* (69%), roughly half had heard *wolf in sheep's clothing* (52%), and under half had heard *all that glitters is not gold* (44%). Hardly any knew the Australian idiom *back of Bourke* (2%) or the British idiom *carry/take coals to Newcastle* (4%). These idioms are represented in all of the Big 5 to a greater or lesser extent (see Table 1).

	CALD3	COBUILD4	LDOCE5	MEDAL2	OALD7	Percentage of Australian participants aged 16-22 who had heard the expression
Wolf in sheep's clothing	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	52%
All that glitters is not gold	✓	-	-	-	✓	44%
Back of Bourke	-	-	-	✓	✓	2%
Carry/take coals to Newcastle	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	4%
Full steam ahead	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	69%

Table 1. Details of recognition of the idioms by 81 respondents in the Australian 16-22 age group, and the dictionaries in which these idioms appear

Full steam ahead was obviously the most widely recognised, and this is reflected in its appearance in all the dictionaries. *Wolf in sheep's clothing* was the next most familiar, and appears in four of the Big 5. *All that glitters is not gold*, although familiar to almost half of the age group, appears in only two of the dictionaries. *Carry/take coals to Newcastle* was known to only 4% of the Australian participants in this age range. Information on older speakers which is part of the larger survey, however, reveals that it was known to 73% of those aged 23 and above, so it is likely to be heard from older speakers if not from peers, justifying its appearance in four of the dictionaries. *Back of Bourke* was known by only 2% of the youngest Australian participants. It was, however, familiar to an average 83% of those aged 23 or over, which means that the target group are likely to encounter it in various situations. It might be argued that this is a classic case where an idiom could appear only in an online or Australian edition of a MELD.

The second question is where the idioms were first encountered. From the 17 sources the target age participants gave, the most common were conversation, literature, parents and television (see Table 2). (As it was hard for participants to remember where they had first heard an expression, some people gave no response, while others gave more than one source. The figures in Table 2 therefore do not add up to 100% for each idiom.)

	Wolf in sheep's clothing (no. who had heard before = 42)	*All that glitters is not gold* (no. who had heard before = 36)	*Back of Bourke* (no. who had heard before = 2)	*Carry/take coals to Newcastle* (no. who had heard before = 3)	*Full steam ahead* (no. who had heard before = 56)
Bible/church	2%	0	0	0	0
Childhood	12 %	0	0	0	0
Conversation	33%	0	0	0	3%
Friends	14%	5%	0	0	5%
General use	26%	0	0	0	3%
Internet	2%	3%	0	0	0
Literature	26%	22%	0	33%	9%
Media (other – eg film, radio)	14%	5%	0	0	9%
Older people	5%	3%	0	0	0

Parents	21%	22%	50%	0	14%
Relatives (other)	14%	17%	0	0	7%
School	17%	5%	0	0	7%
Shakespeare	0	11%	0	0	0
Song/music	2%	11%	0	0	0
Television	14%	17%	50%	0	12%
Travelling	0	0	50%	0	2%
Work	0	0	0	0	2%

Table 2: The sources in which each idiom was first encountered by Australians in the 16-22 age range

All that glitters is not gold was encountered by at least one participant, and possibly all four who gave song/music as their source, in Led Zeppelin's song *Stairway to heaven*. Another gave *Lord of the Rings* as her source, though she did not specify if this was the book or the film. *Wolf in sheep's clothing* was heard in 'the song by the same name'. *Full steam ahead* was heard in *Thomas the tank engine*. Again it was not clear if this was the book or the television series. These findings indicate that idioms are likely to be seen or heard in popular culture. This is important, as although it might be assumed that idioms are first heard in the home, this was not always the case. Learners of English in Australia are therefore likely to encounter idioms in many situations, especially in their general reading, conversation with native speakers, and on television.

The third question is whether the target group will hear these five idioms in Australia. Table 3 indicates the places in which native English speakers of three different age groups would use them.

	Age 16 – 22 (no. = 81)	Age 23 – 40 (no. = 36)	Age 41 + (no. = 133)
Talking to older people	1st	3rd	2nd
Talking to parents	2nd =	2nd	5th =
Talking to friends one's own age	2nd =	1st	1st
Talking to siblings	4th	4th =	3rd
Writing a text message	5th	12th	9th
Talking to colleagues at work	6th =	4th =	5th =
Talking to one's boss	6th =	7th =	8th
Talking to children	8th	7th =	7th
Writing an essay	9th	11th	12th
Talking to younger people	10th	6th	4th
Talking in formal situations	11th	9th	10th
Chatting on the Internet	12th	10th	11th

Table 3: Situations in which Australian participants would use each idiom, by age range, ranked in order of use

Although the younger group gave 'talking to older people' as the most likely place for them to use the five idioms, and 'talking to parents' in second place, they also gave 'talking to friends one's own age' in equal second place and 'writing a text message' in fifth place. The target group are therefore likely to hear various idioms from their peers. The older groups gave 'talking to colleagues at work' in fourth/fifth place and 'talking to younger people' in sixth/fourth place. This indicates that many of the target group would encounter these idioms

and, through extension, other idioms, through interaction with friends, work colleagues or lecturers, of many different ages.

The only expression commonly elicited from this age group was the simile *as good as gold* (3 tokens). *Heart of gold, worth its weight in gold* and *silence is golden* had one token each. Dictionary coverage of these elicited expressions varied, from inclusion in all the Big 5 for *as good as gold* and *heart of gold;* coverage by all except LDOCE for *worth its weight in gold*; and inclusion by only *CALD* and *OALD* for *silence is golden*. (All the dictionaries cited here, except for Cobuild4, are the on-line versions, consulted on 1 February 2010.) The 16-22 age group proved to be much less forthcoming than the older groups with respect to suggesting different idioms and expressions, which was a disappointing finding from the study, as although I had hoped to find newly emerging idioms this was rarely the case.

5. Limitations

A limitation of the study was the non-random nature of the sample, as school students were required to participate by their teachers, and adults were likely to be already interested in language. Given the difficulty of gaining participants, however, this limitation was unavoidable, and while the results are therefore not generalisable to the wider populations of Australia and the UK, they are at least indicative of language used by different age groups in these two locations, and could provide the basis for a much larger study.

6. Conclusion

The implications of these results for dictionaries are that many idioms are likely to be encountered by the target group in Australia, either from friends, in conversation and writing, or on television. If Atkins and Rundell's (2008: 32) desideratum is to be met, therefore, such idioms need to be included in a MELD used in Australia. Some idioms, however, may rarely be heard by younger people in Australia, and so are less likely to be needed in a learner's dictionary sold in that country. While it might be costly to provide a separate list of expressions used in Australia, an appendix or online version of a MELD could indicate which idioms are more likely to be used there, and by which age groups. This would enable learners to participate more fully in the local culture, confident that even when they cannot understand an expression they would know where to find its meaning and when to use it appropriately.

Bibliography

Algeo, J. (1995). 'British and American biases in English dictionaries'. In Kachru, B. B.; Kahane, H. (eds.). *Cultures, Ideologies and the Dictionary*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag. 205-212.

Atkins, B. T. S.; Rundell, M. (2008). *The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary. [3rd ed.]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary [on line; access date: 1 February 2010]. http://dictionary.cambridge.org/.

Čermák, F. (2001). 'Substance of idioms: Perennial problems, lack of data or theory?'. In *International Journal of Lexicography* 14 (1). 1-20.

Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary. [4th ed.]. Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers.

Cowie, A. P. (1981). 'The treatment of collocations and idioms in learners' dictionaries'. In *Applied Linguistics* 2 (3). 223-235.

Curtain, J. M. (2001). 'The acquisition of colloquialisms by non-native speakers'. In Blair, D.; Collins, P. (eds.). *English in Australia.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 259-270.

Deignan, A. (1999). 'Corpus-based research into metaphor'. In Cameron, L; Low, G. (eds.). *Researching and Applying Metaphor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 177-199.

Fillmore, C. J.; Kay, P.; O'Connor, M. C. (1988). 'Regularity and idiomaticity in grammatical constructions: The case of let alone'. In *Language* 64 (3). 501-538.

Gläser, M. (1998). 'The stylistic potential of phraseological units in the light of genre analysis'. In Cowie, A. (ed.). *Phraseology: Theory, Analysis and Applications*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 125-143.

Hanks, P. (2004). 'The syntagmatics of metaphor and idiom'. In *International Journal of Lexicography* 17 (3). 245-274.

Howarth, P. (1996). *Phraseology in English Academic Writing: Some Implications for Language Learning and Dictionary Making*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag,.

Leech, G.; Nesi, H. (1999). 'Moving towards perfection: The learners' (electronic) dictionary of the future'. In Herbst, T.; Popp, K. (eds.). *The Perfect Learners' Dictionary (?).* Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag. 295-306.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. [4th ed.]. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2003.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English [on line; access date: 1 February 2010]. http://www.ldoceonline.com.

Low, G.; Littlemore, J. (2009). 'The relationship between conceptual metaphors and classroom management language: Reactions by native and non-native speakers of English'. In *Ibérica* 17. 25-44.

Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners. Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc; Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 2002.

Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners [on line; access date: 1 February 2010]. http://www.macmillandictionary.com.

Moon, R. (1998). *Fixed Expressions and Idioms in English*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Nesi, H. (2000). *The Use and Abuse of EFL Dictionaries*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. [7th ed.]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary [on line; access date: 1 February 2010]. http://www.oup.com/elt/catalogue/teachersites/oald7/?cc=global.

Stein, G. (1999). 'Exemplification in EFL dictionaries'. In Herbst, T.; Popp, K. (eds.). *The Perfect Learners' Dictionary (?)*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag. 45-70.

Weinreich, U. (1969). 'Problems in the analysis of idioms'. In Puhvel, J. (ed.). *Substance and Structure of Language*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 23-81.