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## 'There is reason in the roasting of eggs': a consideration of fixed expressions in native-speaker dictionaries

*ABSTRACT: Ongoing research into fixed expressions in English is described, together with the character and purpose of an online database of these expressions. In attempting to set up typologies underlying the expressions, it is hoped that insights gained through testing the hypotheses will shed light on questions of importance in dictionary design. For example, an understanding of the grounds for considering a string as a single lexical unit, or the nature of the structure of fixed expressions, will be of value in reaching decisions on type of treatment; an understanding of the discursive functions of fixed expressions will enhance the way in which they are defined and described. Reasons for incorporating encoding information into native-speaker dictionaries are examined.*

The purpose of this paper is to explore ways in which the treatment of fixed expressions in general monolingual L1 English dictionaries can be improved. There has been extensive coverage of the area of fixed expressions in both lexicology and metalexicography, but much of it has focused on such expressions as finished forms, problematic both because they consist of more than one 'word', and because they are syntactically and semantically anomalous. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the dynamics of fixed expressions in real-time discourse, and the extent to which this is relevant to practical lexicography. Ongoing research by the author seeks to establish an online database of several thousand fixed expressions in order to quantify such matters as their distribution in relation to typology (for example, exactly how rare pure idioms are in comparison with other types of fixed collocation) and in relation to a corpus of texts of general English. It also seeks to provide data concerning the lexicosyntactic structure of the expressions, and, most important, their discursive value in terms of the contribution each expression makes to the information and evaluation structure of its co-text. This data will be used to test hypotheses implicit in typologies of both the structures and the discursive values of fixed expressions. It is hoped that the research will lead towards a better understanding of the corpus of the fixed expressions of English, and that this in turn will

lead to better lexicographical descriptions of these units. It will also provide some basis from which to consider the issue of the extent to which the pragmatics of fixed expressions – as indeed of other kinds of lexical unit – can be built into dictionaries.

The set of fixed expressions is heterogeneous, and several distinct types may be observed. First and foremost are 'pure' or 'classical' idioms: multi-word items which are not compositional and consist of an institutionalised utterance which is (historically, at any rate) metaphorical and of which the metaphor may be transparent, completely opaque, or somewhere in between; it may even have no possible literal counterpart: examples include *to fly a kite*, *to have kittens*, *to twist the knife in the wound*, *near the knuckle*, *move heaven and earth*. A second group consists of anomalous collocations: anomalous because they are grammatically ill-formed (*for example, at least, by and large, for once*), because they contain lexically unique items (Makkai's 'cranberry morphs' (Makkai 1972, 43)) (*to put the kibosh on something, in cahoots, go for a burton, kith and kin*), or because they contain semantically depleted items (*as much, much as, may/might as well, to take it as it comes*); in each case, consideration as a unit is the only practicable lexicographical treatment. With this group may be considered a number of phraseological units: mainly combinations of nouns with prepositions that show some sort of paradigmatic regularity or predictability, they are more effectively treated as multi-word lexical items than as realisations of (restricted) prepositional meanings (*from side to side, from day to day, from house to house; in ruins, in pieces, in bits; in a rush, in a hurry, in haste*). A third group consists of formulae such as closed-set turns, proverbs, similes, and catchphrases: typically compositional – they are indeed precisely the sum of their parts – and typically grammatically well-formed, they are nonetheless institutionalised as *gestalts*, with an illocutionary force over and above any denotative value (*you know, even if it kills one, you're kidding!, too many cooks spoil the broth*). A fourth group consists of phrasal verbs, but these are specifically excluded from the study, and are not considered in this paper. This classification is deliberately oversimplified, and much more detailed and extensive models have been set up, for example by Alexander, Amosova, and Makkai. As far as lexicography is concerned, the main purpose of such models is to rationalise and optimise the identification of units and the appropriacy of dictionary treatment. It must be pointed out, however, that all models take as their starting-points a distinction between fixedness and non-fixedness, and a distinction between semantic compositionality and non-compositionality, whereas it is clear that these are continuums. This gives rise to problems in the design of dictionaries and in the descriptions that they contain.

Interim findings from the research show the following with regard to frequency.<sup>1</sup> Most fixed expressions in English (of all kinds) occur less than once, often much less, in every million words of the corpus text. The average frequency or type/token ratio is between two and three occurrences per million words, but this is explained by the fact that a few common expressions make up the bulk of the total number of instances of all units: something that is in line with most distributional studies of corpora. Looking at the typology distribution, the commonest type found is the metaphor: around 45% of individual expressions are metaphorical in nature. Around 40% of expressions are anomalous collocations, and at least half of these would only be regarded as *gestalts* of any kind because of the sheer difficulties involved in accounting for the behaviour of the compo-

nent words in a dictionary context. Around 15% of expressions are formulae of various kinds. Looking further at the metaphors, over half of them are transparent (such as *to rock the boat*, *to put down roots*), and most of the rest are semi-transparent, requiring some extra cultural or real-world knowledge to be decoded (*on an even keel*, *the black sheep of the family*): very few are completely opaque (*to kick the bucket*, *a different kettle of fish*). This is important: it means that the majority of fixed expressions given in dictionaries are semantically compositional, and do not conform to the idiom-archetype of semantic opacity. It has repercussions with respect to dictionary design as it is simply inappropriate as well as inadvisable to say blithely that the test for 'idioms' is that they are 'not the sum of their parts'. Clearly it is in this area that there is most overlap between word-meaning and unit-meaning, and the overlap has to be carefully policed and monitored during the design and implementation processes. When it comes to looking at the correlation between frequencies of expressions and frequencies of types, the picture changes. In the study to date, no metaphorical fixed expression occurs more than five times per million words, and most occur less than once. The very commonest expressions are all anomalous or restricted collocations or formulae: that is, the least lexically marked and least discursively prominent of fixed expressions. Other interim findings that can be reported concern syntactic structure. The commonest structure for an expression is that of a predicator with object and/or adjunct: around 40% of individual expressions are of this type. Around 20% are adverbial groups of different kinds, and around 15% are adjectival complements. Again, this is significant with respect to the designing of entries for fixed expressions in dictionaries and the sorts of technique that need to be developed. Looking at the correlation between frequencies and structures, the commonest expressions tend not to be of the predicator or complement type, rhemes that convey propositional information, or even of the adjunct type, conveying circumstances: instead they are rather functional – conjuncts, disjuncts, and so on. The tendency is obvious: looking at TYPES of expressions, metaphorical rhematics predominate, whereas looking at TOKENS, collocationally anomalous 'grammatical' items predominate. In just the same way, the general lexicon contains far more lexical or content words than grammatical or function words, but it is the latter that make up the bulk of text and have the highest frequencies.

Interim findings concerning the functions of fixed expressions are in line with this. The discursual function of a fixed expression may be defined as the contribution it makes to the information structure of a text. While the precise value of such a contribution is clearly instantial, it is nevertheless possible to generalise about the predictable and typical contribution made. Functions are classified in five categories: informational, evaluative, situational, modalising, and organisational, according to whether they communicate information, whether they convey evaluations, whether they are phenomena of the contextual (extralinguistic) situation, whether they modalise the discourse, or whether they organise the discourse. They can be characterised in the following way:

category	function	examples
informational	states proposition, conveys information	<i>to rub shoulders with in the running to catch sight of something for sale</i>
evaluative	conveys speaker's evaluation and attitude	<i>kid's stuff a different/fine kettle of fish near the knuckle It's an ill wind (that blows nobody any good)</i>
situational	reflects context, responds to situation	<i>excuse me! Long time no see Knock it off! Talk of the devil</i>
modalising	conveys truth values	<i>I kid you not you know what I mean to all intents and purposes in any shape or form</i>
organisational	organises text, signals discourse structure	<i>by the way for instance talking of — for a kick-off</i>

To illustrate these<sup>2</sup>: *for sale* denotes availability, describing a state of affairs, and is informational:

The telephone reverberated across the room: another call asking about houses **for sale** in Hanwell.

*Kid's stuff* is used to convey a judgement and evaluation (note the co-occurrence with 'all in all', a signal of a summary):

It sometimes seemed less like a current affairs report than an enquiry into a fundamental shift in Western attitudes to nature. All in all, very far from **kid's stuff**.

*Excuse me* has several functions, all limited to spoken interaction: here it is used apologetically as a conventional appeal to the hearer for support in the context of a false start:

And he stated that he had in essence agreed with the rationale of Mr. Mulloy, but however he did not want MTI to be recommending or to indicate that they would not — **excuse me**, let me start again.

*I kid you not* is used to indicate or reinforce the speaker's commitment to the truth of what he/she is saying:

The favourite means of breaking the ice are a 14lb weight, a pick-axe or an anchor, but the latest method is a chainsaw. **I kid you not**.

*By the way* is used as a boundary marker, to introduce a new topic tangentially related to the preceding discursial topic:

When you consider the price, the Samara is obvious value for money, and its eccentricities simply add to its character. **By the way**, I never did find out the role of the knob which fell on the floor.

Interim findings concerning these functions show that over 50% of fixed expressions are primarily informative, and just over 25% are primarily evaluative. Around 10% are modalisers, around 5% are organisational, and another 5% are situational. Not surprisingly, the individual expressions that occur most frequently are the most functional or grammatical – the modalising or organisational expressions. With respect to lexicography, the prototypical definition decodes or recodes in terms of semantic content, and this is fine for informational expressions: less so for the near-50% that communicate other kinds of information such as evaluations or discourse structure. The consequences of this need to be considered during the process of dictionary design.

The examples above demonstrate crudely the classifications of discourse functions of fixed expressions. While there is not time or space to go into a great deal of detailed exemplification, it is perhaps useful to consider the extent of the phenomenon by further examination of a few expressions. For example, an expression like *snail's pace*, refers to very slow movement or progress. This could appear to be informational, a description of speed, but is in fact evaluative, negatively assessing the slowness as less than adequate. The evaluation is overt in some cases:

What was even more devastating than the acting was the dismal **snail's pace** of Badacsonyi's conducting and the lack of consistent performance energy.

Mr Gorbachev had become exasperated with his own bureaucratic machine and the **snail's pace** of the Geneva arms control talks.

Financial markets are already nervous about Margaret Thatcher's political problems and alarmed at the **snail's pace** reduction in inflation — despite high interest rates — from a peak of 8.3 per cent in May.

but even at the most 'informational' realisation of the expression, typically in the form *at a snail's pace* and describing physical movement, there is an implicit evaluation of the speed as not fast enough and therefore inconvenient:

They joined the queue of vehicles proceeding at a **snail's pace** across the scorched park around King's House, and eventually alighted between the royal palms at the grand entrance.

Similarly, with the expression *to rock the boat*: this could be glossed along the lines of 'to disturb the status quo; to threaten the existing equilibrium in a situation'. But it does not merely communicate the information that something or someone is disturbing the situation already mentioned or evident in the discourse. Individual examples of the expression demonstrate the importance (discoursally speaking) of the evaluation implicit in the expression. This evaluation may appear in the statement of an opinion, and reinforced by the syntax and lexis of the co-text, or it may be implied. In either case it indicates the speaker's/writer's ideological stance by virtue of his/her selection of an expression that invokes a whole cultural schema – shared attitudes, beliefs, and experiences – of what happens when literal 'boats are rocked': the endangering of a craft and its passengers by

unusual or forceful behaviour. This is typically evaluated as irresponsible and therefore bad, but just occasionally it is viewed as a positive and interpreted as the welcome subversive attempt to radicalise an existing stagnant state of affairs:

The likeliest explanation of his defeat in the executive's constituency section vote is that party activists wanted to rebuke him for publicly **rocking the boat** during the passage of the policy review.

Everything may depend on the final individual time-trial from Versailles to the Champs-Élysées on Sunday. You pay your money and take your choice. What did become obvious, amid all the bluff and counter-bluff, was that Fignon, Mottet and LeMond are worried what the Dutch PDM team might do in the Alps. Steven Rooks and Gert-Jan Theunisse, together with Mexico's Raul Alcala and Ireland's Sean Kelly, could certainly **rock the boat**. 'The trouble is they do not ride like us,' said Mottet. 'They are unpredictable.'

The impression created by Topol is that anything is fair game, in or out of government, Civic Forum or not. It is better, he believes, to **rock the boat** than keep it on an even keel.

And then Robson's assistant, Don Howe, chose to **rock the boat**. He did the game a service. The country had seen England in Poland: a stereotyped team, hardly equipped to do anything more positive in Italy than in the European Championship last year. It sensed that Robson, consumed by the understandable satisfaction of routing his less constructive critics, was sliding into complacency. Enter Howe, speaking for England: 'I have told Bobby that we can't go into the World Cup finals doing the same old things. If we don't adapt, we'll finish up doing nothing as before. The situation is that serious.'

Finally, an expression such as *at first sight* could be glossed as 'on first glimpse or impression', as COD8 defines it, but it is clear that it functions mainly as a discourse marker, signalling that the truth of the proposition it is attached to is shortly to be contradicted or denied: it is therefore both an organiser and a modaliser. The only examples where this is not so occur with the collocation *love at first sight*, and there is a case to be made for treating this collocation as a lexical item in its own right.

Although the move was hailed as sensational **at first sight**, the vagueness of the language used to promise 'travel opportunities' and 'media that are close to life' failed to convince observers that the leadership had significantly softened its attitude.

**At first sight**, the average volcano looks anything but an economic prospect — it's just a heap of rather drab, barren lavas and pyroclastic rocks that any prospector worth his grubstake would ignore. Few young volcanoes are ever likely to be economically useful, but many old ones are just the opposite.

**At first sight** it might seem that the higher price of international calls is justified by the cost of installing an international infrastructure stretching thousands of miles often on the sea bed. It is not. The explanation is much more straightforward.

I do not want to stretch these points too far, but it is evident that the importance of these expressions lies in what they are contributing to the text: there are identifiable patterns of use going on which should be explained and recorded. Very many fixed expressions — nearly half of those in common use! — have functions that are not purely to do with the communicating of new information, and these functions have an important role with respect to the motivation for the selection of the expression in the first place.

I have described elsewhere the textual functions of fixed expressions (Moon 1992), discussing the functioning of fixed expressions of all sorts as discourse signals, both canonically and instantially, and I argued that the motivation for a speaker's selection of a fixed

expression – in particular of a metaphorical idiom – is closely tied in with the ideological choices made in the discourse. I further argued that an analysis and understanding of the functions of fixed expressions should be incorporated into entries for them in L2 dictionaries (which are encoding dictionaries) in order to avoid discursively ill-formed texts. It is not simply a matter of register or genre, nor even of correctness of collocation. Many fixed expressions are vastly more restricted in context than is ever hinted at in dictionaries, and the evaluation that they express or the function that they serve should be stated explicitly. In addition, those fixed expressions which typically have signalling functions set up expectations as to the contents of the surrounding text, and if those expectations are not fulfilled, then the text is ill-formed. The position for bilingual dictionaries is yet more complicated: there are the dangers of 'faux amis', such as French 'au contraire' and English 'on the contrary' – apparently parallel expressions that nonetheless have widely different distributions or connotations, as well as different functions.

The encoding functions of L2 dictionaries are critical, but the situation is different when it comes to monolingual dictionaries for native speakers. This subset of dictionaries is not homogeneous. However, the primary function of its members is decoding; encoding information, other than spelling, pronunciation, and grammar, is largely confined to prescriptivist usage notes. The largest English dictionaries are typically historically-based and concerned with describing or providing an inventory of a language, or a literary or sociolectal section of it, and encoding would never be part of the brief; the smallest 'pocket' or 'vest pocket' dictionaries (Landau 1989, 19) have too little room to do much more than provide limited guidance for encoding in the commonest problem areas. It is only in the larger synchronic dictionaries, those of the 'college' or 'desk' or even 'unabridged' size (*ibid.*) that there can be sufficient space and scope for more thorough encoding information. It is here, more than anywhere else amongst monolingual L1 dictionaries of English, that there is an opportunity for innovation, and pressure may be brought to take account of linguistic thinking and to incorporate encoding information, in much the same way that monolingual L2 dictionaries have already done, or that L1 dictionaries in countries other than Britain have done. Attention has been drawn in recent years to the need for greater sociocultural awareness in dictionaries; compare also arguments by Sharpe (1989) and Zgusta (1988) in favour of the incorporation of higher-level explanations of words and units, and the concepts underlying them in bilingual and learners' dictionaries. The case for the provision of a rudimentary apparatus for encoding IS being made, and there is every reason to include such a thing in L1 dictionaries.

There is a strong 'hard words' tradition in these dictionaries, and fixed expressions, especially idioms, generally fall into the category of 'hard words': that proportion of the headword list of a dictionary which consists of specialist, varietal and rare items that are barely attested in general corpora of English. Something like a third of all the lexical items in a comparatively modest dictionary such as COD8 have frequencies of one in twenty million or less, and, as stated above, it is typical of many idioms that they have distributions in this range.<sup>3</sup> The situation is further complicated because even expressions that are obsolescent are perpetuated beyond their natural life: firstly by being enshrined as ghost-words in dictionaries, but secondly – and more significantly – by being enshrined in the cultural and linguistic heritage of the speech community as artefacts. For example, the expression 'to rain cats and dogs', though beloved by dictionaries of linguistic curio-

sities, is now infrequent. The Oxford-Hector Pilot Corpus has two examples, but both are from the same source and one explicitly cites the idiom (in variant form) as an example of something only non-native speakers would say (the second is an instance of him saying it):

“Mustapha was a plump, middle-aged Palestinian functionary with a brown moustache and an irritating habit of using outdated English expressions to show his familiarity with the language. Anything to be stated with emphasis would naturally acquire the accretion ‘by golly’. When it rained, it always ‘poured cats and dogs’.”

As an active item in the English lexicon, the idiom is disappearing, yet it is nonetheless widely known. A recent catalogue of novelties and souvenirs in Britain includes an umbrella decorated with running cats and dogs; a recent British TV commercial showed someone standing in the rain and catching a falling cat; a ceramics artist in California makes sets of buttons decorated with rainclouds and cat and dog faces. The image has become institutionalised in a different semiotic system. The frequency or currency of an item is not the only reason for entering it in the inventory that is the headword list of a dictionary.

‘Hard words’ – especially terminological items – typically have only denotative functions, but the notion that these are the only functions that should or need ever be described in a dictionary, is a very weak notion. Underlying it is an assumption that native speakers do not need or want any information other than the simple denotation of an item, that any ancillary information is redundant because it is already known, or is too bound by context. But it is not possible to isolate words – especially the words that form the heart of the English vocabulary – MEANINGFULLY from their context, and when that context is typically associated with particular collocations, syntactic structures, or situations, then the ‘meaning’ of the item needs to be expressed in terms of that context (cf. Sinclair’s discussion of ‘Naturalness in language’ 1984). If words are described in the light of their functions, their descriptions will not only be more accurate but more useful than the arbitrarily fitted straitjacket of some idealised, purist, isolationist view of ‘meaning’, and the provision of equivalences, as if in a bilingual dictionary, rather than explanation. And fixed expressions, including idioms, are not of course merely denotative.

A final point: in theory at least, a database of lexical information has the advantage of being focus-neutral. Since retrieval can be effected from any one of the fields recorded in it, organisation may be either onomasiological or semasiological, depending on the nature of the enquiry. Paper dictionaries or other inventories of fixed expressions are not in that fortunate position, and one or other aspect has to be selected in order to provide a basis for the presentation of information. Makkai (1972), for example, organises his survey of the structure of fixed expressions around structures such as ‘phrasal verb idioms’ or ‘irreversible binomial idioms’, and Fraser’s typology (1970) is based on a hierarchy according to the frozenness of the unit. Lattey (1986) begins with situations, semantic and sociocultural functions such as the relationship between an individual and the world, or interaction between individuals, and this insight informs and governs the organisation of her workbook on fixed expressions (Lattey and Heike 1990). While the main part of Manser’s dictionary (1983) is organised lexically, he incorporates an index where fixed expressions are grouped according to their pragmatic function such as ‘complaints and



criticism' or 'impatience' or 'stating or introducing opinions'. General dictionaries do not even have the privilege of selecting focus: alphabetical organisation obliges them to be lexically oriented and to deal with fixed expressions under one of the component words, with no opportunity to make greater generalisations or linkages than are implied by proximity. It is of course possible to hypothesise a 'meaning' or institutionalised metaphor of, say *boat* to denote a situation or status quo, as realised in expressions such as *to rock the boat* or *to be in the same boat*; or of *mud* to denote slanderous or defamatory remarks and unpleasantness, as in expressions such as *to sling mud*, *mud sticks*, or *to drag someone through the mud*. Doing this may appear to bring together heterogeneous expressions, thus making diachronic sense of them. It is also a foregrounding of the latent metaphoricality of an individual item, drawing attention to its denotative and connotative elements and their potential applications, and perhaps showing the motivation (in Lakoff's terms: see Lakoff 1987, *passim*) for the institutionalisation of the metaphor. The procedure contributes nothing to two fundamental characteristics of a fixed expression – its fossilisation, and the motivation for its use. This sort of treatment may fall between two stools. It is unsatisfactory as a technique for explaining or indicating the frames and collocations in which the 'proto-metaphor' occurs, the fixedness, and it only partly satisfies the ultimate arbitrariness of the need for general dictionaries to embed fixed expressions in the entry for one of their constituent words.

If there is a forum for working out fully methodologies and techniques for handling fixed expressions in dictionaries, then it is properly constituted by those responsible for individual dictionary projects. A detailed critique of existing techniques would be another paper. I will only say that in glancing at any of the standard British dictionaries of desk size and up, fixed expressions are shown to receive scanty treatment. The main points of neglect are definitions – largely formulated in denotative terms – and the lack of indication of co-textual and contextual restrictedness. Placement and ordering, another fraught issue, is also neglected: recent studies, such as those by Paul Bogaards, may do much to help correct this.

I sketched out above a model of the discursive functions of fixed expressions, but these of course parallel the functions of simple words – which can inform, evaluate, respond/effect, or organise. Fixed expressions constitute a minor part of the headword list of a dictionary: in COD8, for example, approximately only 6% of references are fixed expressions. In a number of printed dictionaries, no overt distinction is made between noun or adjective compounds, phrasal verbs, idioms, and the rather messy frozen collocations embedded in entries for function words. This may be desirable for the end-user who sees only multi-word-ness, but it has not been proven. It does not seem at all desirable for lexicographers, who need to have a systematic and rigorous understanding of the nature of the units that they are dealing with. Fixed expressions are always going to be an untidy set of items, and without that understanding it is difficult to impose consistency and a measure of order and elegance on such chaos. The danger is that in the relentless search for order, something will get lost. The argument that valuable space should not be devoted to fuller accounts of discursive meaning can be countered by asking why dictionaries should go on pretending that meaning only consists of bland denotation – no connotation and no function. *There is reason in the roasting of eggs* – the jocular title of this paper – is a rare proverb that no current British desk dictionary covers,

as far as I know. I chose it not simply in order to cite or resurrect a long obsolescent item but because it represents something that seems vital: I chose it to refer to the motivation that underlies the selection of fixed expression, however bizarre; to function as a signal, a preface to and summary of the following argument; and to appeal, as a preemptive, to shared ideologies, attitudes, and experience.

## Endnotes

- 1 The corpus in use, the Oxford-Hector Pilot Corpus of c. 18 million words, consists mainly of written texts, with a substantial component of journalism: the journalism provides many examples of idioms not found so much in more formal or more literary writing, but there is no doubt that results are skewed because of the paucity of spoken data. What can be said for figures derived from this corpus data is that they demonstrate tendencies that should be true of written English, that may well hold true for all modes of English, and that may be tested against spoken data as and when that becomes available.
- 2 All examples are taken from the Oxford-Hector Pilot Corpus
- 3 See, however, the caveat in endnote 1.

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