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# Unusual Phrases in English MLDs: Increasing User Friendliness

Stephen Coffey  
Università di Pisa  
coffey@cli.unipi.it

## Abstract

This paper investigates the presentation of compositionally anomalous phrases in English monolingual learners' dictionaries (MLDs). In particular, it argues that it would be pedagogically useful to explain to the dictionary user, where possible, the reason why certain types of anomaly exist. Two types of phrase are discussed: firstly, idiomatic expressions in which the relationship between phrasal meaning and original meaning may not be clear to the learner (e.g. *run the gauntlet*); secondly, phrases which include particularly unusual word forms or word senses. These include lexical fossils (as in *the whys and wherefores*) and phrases partially motivated by phonological characteristics (as in *bits and bobs*). In order to form an impression of how anomalous phrases are currently treated in MLDs, samples of items were looked for in both print and online editions. It was found that, overall, little attention is paid to the motivation of phrasal composition, and it is suggested that more should be done in this direction. This would involve integrating current description, almost entirely synchronic in nature, with historical data, at least in the case of some types of phrasal unit.

**Keywords:** phraseology; learners' dictionaries; idiomatic expressions; lexical fossils; alliteration; rhyme; etymology

## 1 Introduction

The description of phraseological units has always been an important feature of the English monolingual learner's dictionary (MLD), ever since the publication of Hornby et al's ground-breaking *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* in 1942. In the last few decades, lexicographical description of phraseology has reaped enormous benefits from advances made in the field of information technology: specifically, 1) the availability of large language corpora has allowed the description of phraseology to become more complete and more precise, and 2) the arrival of MLDs in digital form, first as CD-ROMS and later through the internet, has meant that learner's dictionaries are now in a much better position to deal with the composite, and sometimes complex, nature of phraseology.<sup>1</sup>

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1 For an overview of the treatment of phraseology in successive editions of MLDs, from the beginnings till the late 1990s, see Cowie 1999 (52-81, and *passim*).

However, although lexicographical description of phraseological phenomena is now generally of a high standard, there are still aspects which could be improved. In this paper I focus specifically on one, pedagogically defined, sub-category of phrases, those which might appear to the learner to be unusual with respect to their lexico-semantic composition.

## 2 Perceived usualness and unusualness in phrasal composition

### 2.1 Usualness

There are a vast number of phrases in the English lexicon, and in many cases there is no noticeable clash, for the foreign language learner, between form and meaning. Even if the learner has never before come across (or never noticed) a particular item, the meaning may still be relatively clear (and, indeed, the learner may be unaware of the phrase's status as a lexical unit). Examples of such phrases are *bank manager*, *blood pressure*, *reading glasses*, and *road sign*. Some phrases may seem a little more unusual from a lexico-semantic perspective (e.g. *plastic money*, *money laundering*, *bottle bank*, *blood orange*, *full house*, *front office*, *fuel rod*), but the relationship between form and meaning should be relatively clear once a dictionary has been consulted. The phrase *blood orange*, for example, is defined in OALD 8 as “a type of orange with red flesh”, and *bottle bank* (British English) is defined in LDOCE 5 as: “a container in the street that you put empty bottles into, so that the glass can be used again”.<sup>2</sup>

Even phrases consisting wholly of a figurative use of the component words will in many cases cause no problems, at least once a dictionary definition has been read. Cross-cultural metaphor may be involved, or else the relationship between physical and figurative meanings may be very evident. Consider, for example, the following phrases and their dictionary explanations:

- (1) *playing with fire* MEDAL 2: doing something dangerous or risky that could cause lots of problems for you – “He knew he was playing with fire by encouraging her attentions.”
- (2) *Out of the frying pan into the fire* OALD 8: from a bad situation to one that is worse.
- (3) *water under the bridge* CALD 4: problems that someone has had in the past that they do not worry about because they happened a long time ago and cannot now be changed – “Yes, we did have our disagreements but that's water under the bridge now.”
- (4) *to have a frog in your throat* CALD 4: to have difficulty in speaking because your throat feels dry and you want to cough.
- (5) *not have a leg to stand on* OALD 8: to be in a position where you are unable to prove sth or explain why something is reasonable – “Without written evidence, we don't have a leg to stand on”.

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2 Most of the dictionaries cited in the present study are referred to in initialized form (e.g. OALD 8); full bibliographic details may be found in the References.

In cases such as these, it should not be difficult for most learners to connect the literal and lexicalized metaphorical meaning (though with some figurative expressions, recognizing this connection may depend on the linguistic and cultural background of the individual learner).

## 2.2 Unusualness

Alongside phrases such as those mentioned in Section 2.1, there are also phrases which may give rise, *even after* dictionary consultation, to a perception of discrepancy between form and meaning. Some lexicalized figurative phrases are of this sort, for example:

(6) *throw in the towel* COB 5: If you **throw in the towel**, you stop trying to do something because you realize that you cannot succeed – “It seemed as if the police had thrown in the towel and were abandoning the investigation”.

The learner who can appreciate why we say *play with fire* and *water under the bridge*, may well be confused by the phrase *throw in the towel*.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of phrasal verbs could also be described as being compositionally anomalous, especially those in which the verb itself is highly delexicalized, for example *put up with*, *get round sb*, and *take off* (in the sense of “imitate”). A further set of phrases which may appear to the learner as unusual in their form are those which have been called “cranberry collocations” (Moon 1998: 21). This set of phrases is very disparate in nature as regards both form and meaning, but may be grouped together by virtue of the fact that they all include “items that are unique to the string and not found in other collocations” (*ibid*). Many of these items, as Moon points out, “are rare fossil words, or have been borrowed from other languages or varieties” (*ibid*: 78); some of the author’s examples are *run AMOK*, *to and FRO*, and *SLEIGHT of hand*. Another set of anomalous items described in Moon’s study are those which, for one reason or another, are *grammatically* ill-formed. Examples are *be seeing you*, *by and large*, *in brief*, and *put pen to paper*. Moon also mentions phrases which are highly anomalous from a collocational point of view (e.g. *look daggers at sb*).

## 2.3 Which ‘unusual’ phrases to annotate in the MLD

It would be counter-productive to comment on every phrase in which the form-meaning relationship of its component words was notably distant from what would be expected to be a normal juxtaposition of single-word lexical items in modern English. There would be a very large number of items involved, and each explanation would take up space, on the page or on the screen, and perhaps distract from more important information. Furthermore, what is anomalous may go largely or wholly un-

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3 In the case of figurative phrases such as *throw in the towel*, learners will have an advantage if there is an analogous phrase in their own mother tongue. For examples and discussion of such cross-language phrasal pairs and sets, see Piirainen (2012) and, from the perspective of pedagogical lexicography, Coffey (2002).

noticed by the language learner, especially where relatively frequent words are concerned and intuitable meanings. There would be little point in drawing attention, for example, to the fact that, phrases such as *in brief*, *in general* and *at last* are, in effect, PREPOSITION + ADJECTIVE sequences, or that in the phrase *in question* there is no article before the noun. Nor would it be necessary to comment on phrases such as the above-mentioned *blood orange* and *playing with fire*.

Exactly which phrases (or which types of phrase) it would be useful to comment on from the point of view of their composition may be best ascertained through specifically designed dictionary-user studies. However, it is perhaps not unreasonable to suppose that the following two general types of phrase would be strong candidates. Firstly, idiomatic expressions, of one sort or another, in which the motivation behind the idiom's form is wholly or partially hidden from the learner. Examples are the already mentioned *throw in the towel* and the phrase (*as*) *mad as a hatter*. Secondly, phrases which include a word not normally used as a single-word lexical item in present-day English, for example the word form "sleight" in the phrase *sleight of hand*. In actual fact, some phraseological items would fit perfectly well into both categories, since idiomatic phrases sometimes include fossilized word forms or word meanings. An example is the phrase (*to buy*) *a pig in a poke* which is both a semantically obscure idiomatic phrase and includes the lexical fossil *poke*.<sup>4</sup>

With both types of phrase, some sort of explanation of unusual form will address the learner's curiosity (even if it will not always be possible to fully satisfy that curiosity). In addition, in the case of idiomatic phrases, an explanation of origin (and therefore of phrasal composition) may help the learner to remember a given expression. In the case of lexical fossils, explicit comments on unusual words will help ensure that learners realize that the words in question are (virtually) phrase-bound and cannot normally be used in other ways.

In order to obtain an overall picture of current practice in MLDS, the following dictionaries were examined: a) print dictionaries: CALD 4, COB 5, LDOCE 5, MEDAL 2, MW, OALD 8; b) online dictionaries: e-CALD, e-LDOCE, e-MEDAL, e-MW, e-OALD. In actual fact, virtually no differences in content were found between the print and online versions of the dictionaries examined, and below I will often cite from, or refer to, the print dictionaries.

### 3 Idiomatic expressions

The phraseology of English, as is well known, is very complex to describe, and specific categories that we identify (or create) can themselves be very varied in nature. The examples of "idioms" described in this section are no exception to this; there are differences in grammatical role, type of meaning, and the relationship between phrasal meaning and the meaning of individual parts.

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4 For the sake of precision, it should be noted that the word *poke*, which here has the sense of "bag", is still used in some regional varieties.

In order to see whether dictionaries offer the learner any extra guidance with regard to the composition of partially or wholly idiomatic phrases, a total of 37 items were looked for, consisting of two different (pedagogically speaking) groups. The first group was composed of phrases which, it was considered, would definitely benefit from some explicit comment. The second group consisted of items which would not necessarily need any explanation, assuming they were located at the right headword or the appropriate sense of a given headword. The actual composition of these two groups was adjusted slightly once dictionaries had been consulted and current lexicographical data observed.

With regard to the inclusion of the phrases in the dictionaries examined in the present study, 25 out of the 37 phrases were present in all MLDS, and 34 in all dictionaries but one. One dictionary (COB 5) had significantly fewer phrases than the others, with eleven of the phrases being absent.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.1 Opaque idiomatic phrases

The following are the phrases in the first group (27 items):

*a red herring; a feather in your cap; an ivory tower; a gravy train; a fifth column; Bob's your uncle; Coals to Newcastle; the penny dropped; the gloves are off; be the bee's knees; send sb to Coventry; kick the bucket; be grist to/for the mill; play gooseberry; pass the buck; face the music; run the gauntlet; throw down the gauntlet; give sb a wide berth; throw in the towel; pull someone's leg; know etc the ropes; draw/get the short straw; live the life of Riley; lock, stock and barrel; hook, line and sinker; as mad as a hatter.*

As regards the form-meaning relationship of these phrases, it was found that, overall, there was very little comment in the dictionaries examined, and that some MLDS had no comment at all. This comes as no surprise, since explanation of this sort would involve introducing the historical dimension to language and the latter has never been a priority in the MLD; indeed, it has usually been completely absent.

As far as I am aware, few writers dealing with pedagogical lexicography have discussed or commented on the absence of historical in data in MLDS. One exception is Ilson (1983), who points out the potential usefulness of providing at least some etymological information, and includes mention of its relevance to phraseology. Much more recently, Boers (2007) points out the usefulness, for comprehension, of being made aware of the origin of idioms. Exemplifying with the expression *show sb the ropes*, he points out that, "It would help if you knew that the expression was originally used in the context of sailing, where an experienced sailor had to show a novice how to handle the ropes on a boat". In the context of the present article, this quotation has added significance since it comes from a short artic-

5 It might also be mentioned here that all items but two are recorded in the *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms* (1995) – the exceptions are *fifth column* and *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. The latter is not actually an archetypal "idiom", since it is fairly transparent in nature. However, I have included it because the word *beholder* will render the phrase partially opaque to many learners and also because of the relatively unusual phrase "in the eye of".

le entitled *Understanding Idioms*, which is part of the Language Awareness section of MEDAL 2 (pp. LA2-3).<sup>6</sup>

Of the dictionaries investigated in the present study, the only one which has at least a few explanations of idioms is OALD 8. Two examples are:<sup>7</sup>

- (7) OALD 8 **COAL** [...] **carry, take, etc. coals to Newcastle** [UK] to take goods to a place where there are already plenty of them; to supply sth where it is not needed. ORIGIN: Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in the north of England, was once an important coal-mining centre.
- (8) OALD 8 **RED HERRING** an unimportant fact, idea, event, etc, that takes people's attention away from the important ones. ORIGIN: From the custom of using the smell of a smoked, dried herring (which was red) to train dogs to hunt.

Examples of definitions with no explanation of phrasal composition are the following:

- (9) CALD 4 **MAD** [...] (as) *mad as a hatter / March hare* extremely silly or stupid.
- (10) COB 5 **GAUNTLET** [...] PHRASE If you **run the gauntlet**, you go through an unpleasant experience in which a lot of people criticize or attack you – "The trucks tried to drive to the British base, running the gauntlet of marauding bands of gunmen."

There are differing degrees of difficulty in understanding the connection between form and meaning. For example, whereas *run the gauntlet* will be highly obscure to the uninitiated learner, form and meaning should be much more connectable in the case of the following phrase description, even though there is no explicit explanation of the type seen previously in example (7):

- (11) CALD 4 **COAL** [...] **carry / take coals to Newcastle** [UK] to supply something to a place or person that already has a lot of that particular thing – "Exporting pine to Scandinavia seems a bit like carrying coals to Newcastle."

The phrase *ivory tower* may also be relatively clear after reading definition and example, and may not attract too much curiosity on the part of the dictionary user. However, since the phrase has a well documented origin, it might be useful to include it.

Another situation worth commenting on is that wherein a phrase is located at the entry for a single-word headword, but the headword itself has no description. This happens in all dictionaries, for example, with the word *grist*, found in the phrase *be grist to/for the mill*. The following is one such entry:

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6 Data regarding phrase origin is found, by contrast, in some dictionaries devoted to idioms, notably ODCIE (1983) and LDEI (1979), (whereas the previously mentioned *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms* does not include explanatory data of this sort). Mainstream language teaching publications have also shown little interest in the historical dimension of phraseology, though there are some applied linguists who recognize the potential of etymological explanation; see, for example, Boers et al (2004) and Boers et al (2007).

7 From this point of the text onwards, in numbered examples I will use **bold SMALL CAPS** to indicate the headwords. The square brackets which sometimes follow this (...) indicate that there is other lexical description before that of the phrase I am discussing.

(12) COB **GRIST** PHRASE If you say that something is **grist to the mill**, you mean that it is useful for a particular purpose or helps support someone's point of view.

The “problem” with *grist* is that it is not commonly found in modern English outside of this phrase. This does not mean, however, that it has become a lexical fossil (except, perhaps, from a language teaching point of view). A short explanation of its meaning (in relation to this phrase) would be useful, together with an indication that it is usually only found in this phrase and variants thereof. The same happens with *hook, line and sinker* in COB 5, which is listed at the headword *sinker*, which, however, has no single-word explanation.

The phrase *Bob's your uncle*, present in five MLDs, is a similar case, with the expression being recorded in all dictionaries at the unexplained headword *Bob* (with a capital letter, and thus distinguished from entries with the headword *bob*). Actually, since *Bob's your uncle* is the only phrase at the headword *Bob* in the various dictionaries, it might be simpler and neater to have the saying itself as the headword, in the same way as many noun phrases and other multiword items regularly constitute headwords.

Another phrase worth commenting on is the *bee's knees*. The five dictionaries which record this phrase give no explanation for its form. If they did, regardless of whether or not they were in a position to explain its meaning from the point of view of its composition, it would be useful to underline the rhyme in the phrase, which is almost certainly at least part of the motivation behind its form. It is worth noting in this respect that sound repetition might well help memorization, and the very act of pointing out the (in this case) rhyme, may be of added benefit to learners (For discussion of this topic, see Boers & Lindstromberg 2005 and Lindstromberg & Boers 2008).

If a dictionary does adopt the policy of commenting on phrases of the type being considered here, it will sometimes be necessary to say that the phrase is of “unknown” or “uncertain” origin. In the current state of our knowledge of phrasal origins, this would happen, for example, with *kick the bucket*, *Bob's your uncle*, *face the music*, and *pull someone's leg*. Where there are several contesting theories as to the origin of a phrase, it would probably make little sense to go into details, and be best to label the phrase as being “of uncertain origin”. It could be argued that it is of little help to the learner to read that the origin of a phrase is “unknown”, but I think that this is more user-friendly than keeping silent.

### 3.2 Potentially comprehensible idiomatic phrases

The following are the phrases in the second group (10 items):

*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder; go against the grain; jump the gun; bury the hatchet; play second fiddle; pull out the stops; make a mountain out of a molehill; green about the gills; cheek by jowl; like a bolt from the blue.*<sup>8</sup>

In each of these phrases, there is a word which may present problems for an understanding of the motivation behind the form of the phrase; of course, whether or not this is actually a problem will depend on the individual learner. The words in question are: *beholder, grain, jump/gun, hatchet, fiddle, stops, molehill, gills, jowl, and bolt*. In the case of *beholder, hatchet, molehill* and *jowl*, dictionaries only record one sense for each of the words, and if the phrase was explained at the same point of the dictionary at which the single word is explained, then the learner should be in a position to appreciate the motivation of phrasal form. This is what happens, for example, in the case of the following definition:

(13) COB5 **MOLEHILL** (1) A **molehill** is a small pile of earth made by a mole digging a tunnel; (2) If you say that someone is **making a mountain out of a molehill**, you are critical of them for making an unimportant fact or difficulty seem like a serious one.

It is to be noted also that the entry for the word *mole* itself is very close by in the text. So, we have *making a molehill* defined very close to *molehill*, which is itself defined very close to *mole*. And the relationship between the physical and figurative meanings should also be fairly clear to learners. Whereas this may seem a fairly easy case, and the COBUILD treatment of the phrase a useful one for learners, only one other dictionary locates this phrase at the headword **molehill**, the other four placing it at **mountain**. A similar situation is found with the phrase *cheek by jowl*, present in two dictionaries at **jowl**, and in four at **cheek**. We may contrast the following two descriptions:

(14) MEDAL 2 **JOWL** The lower part of your cheek, especially if the skin hangs down and covers your jaw. PHRASE **cheek by jowl** If two or more people or things are cheek by jowl, they are very close to each other.

(15) LDOCE 5 **CHEEK** [...] **cheek by jowl (with sb/sth)** very close to someone or something else – “An expensive French restaurant cheek by jowl with a cheap clothes shop.”

One of the reasons that we find dictionary explanations such as that in (15), is the fact that in some MLDS there is a standard rule whereby a phrase should be placed at the headword for the first content word in a phrase. I believe that there are pros and cons to having rules of this type. One important factor which is sometimes overlooked, is that while lexicographers and language teachers have a clear idea (most of the time) about what is, and what is not, a lexical phrase, the average language learner is not as linguistically sophisticated. A learner who reads, for example, of “An expensive French restaurant cheek by jowl with a cheap clothes shop” may view any eventual comprehension problem

<sup>8</sup> The verbal idiom *pull out (all) the stops* is also an example given by van der Meer (1996) in an article dealing with the MLD treatment of figurative meaning more generally (i.e. not just with reference to phraseology).

only in terms of not knowing the word *jowl* – everything else has a familiar look to it, so the problem must be with this word in particular.

Let us turn now to cases where the problem lies not with a possibly unknown word form, but with knowing which meaning of a word is involved (which may or may not be one that is known to the learner). Consider, for example, the phrase *go against the grain*. The relevant sense of the word *grain* is explained in CALD 4 in the following way:

(16) CALD 4 **GRAIN** [...] **the grain** the natural patterns of lines in the surface of wood or cloth – “to cut something along/against the grain”.

It is interesting to note that the example phrase includes the phrase “against the grain”. However, the meaning is the physical one, not that of the figurative idiom. From the point of view of understanding the motivation behind the idiomatic phrase, this would have been the ideal place to record the figurative expression *go against the grain*; however, it is not recorded at this point in the dictionary. In CALD 4, as in all the other dictionaries, the phrase is presented at the entry for *grain*, but as a phrase with no direct connection to any of the single-word senses of *grain*. A similar situation was found for the phrase *pull out all the stops*, (which comes from the idea of an organist pulling out all the organ stops in order to increase the volume). This use of the word *stop* is present in all the dictionaries, but none of them makes a direct association between word meaning and phrasal meaning. Also, three dictionaries place the phrase at the headword *stop* and three at *pull*.

An example of good dictionary treatment is the explanation of *like a bolt from the blue* in MW:

(17) MW **BOLT** a bright line of light that appears in the sky during a storm; a flash of lightning *a bolt of lightning = a lightning bolt* — often used figuratively in the phrases **a bolt from the blue** and **a bolt out of the blue** – “The news of his firing came as/like a bolt from the blue.” [= like a bolt of lightning from the sky; it was surprising and unexpected]

The phrase *green about the gills* creates particular problems, since, in order to appreciate the form of the phrase, it may be necessary to see both a definition of *gills* and to understand which sense of *green* is involved. MW satisfies the second need very well:

(18) MW **GREEN** 5. [informal] having a pale or sick appearance – “Our flight hit some turbulence, and half the passengers started turning green.” — often used in the phrase **green around/about the gills** – “The passengers were looking green around the gills.”

Here, we not only find the phrase at the right sense of *green*, but also see the specification “often used in the phrase ...”. The problem still remains, however, of the basic meaning of *gills*, which the learner would have to look up separately.

As has been argued, from the point of view of appreciating the original logic of the phrases, it would make sense (wherever phrases are explained at the entry for one of the component words, as opposed to having an entry of their own), for the phrase to be explained close by the less commonly known

word. However, overall it was found that there were few dictionary entries in which the phrases examined were placed at an entry or subsense which would allow motivation of phrasal form to be understood (without explicit commentary). In all, 56 out of the 60 possible phrasal entries were present in the MLDS (10 entries x 6 dictionaries), but in only 12 cases were phrases explained at the appropriate point in the text. In the case of the e-dictionaries, and where a phrase is explained at the “wrong” entry, there is slightly less of a problem, since the reader can go quickly from one entry to another. But it is still a problem, in that the two definitions (of the single word and the phrase) do not appear on the screen together.

## 4 Other phrases which include unusual word forms or word senses

The second general phrase type for which I suggest it would be useful to have comment on phrasal composition are phrases which include a word not normally used on its own in modern English. In this case, there are two main types of information which the dictionary could provide. The first is, quite simply, the fact that the word in question (or that particular meaning, where homonymy is involved) is normally found just in the phrase indicated. The second data type is the explanation of the unusual word (what sort of word it is, and why it isn’t used elsewhere).

There are a number of different reasons for the presence of phraseologically-bound word forms and meanings, and the specific reason will at least in part determine what the dictionary should say about the phrase. From an investigation of many different dictionary entries for lexical phrases, it would appear that the majority of such words are lexical fossils of one sort or another, and it is these that I will look at first.<sup>9</sup>

### 4.1 Lexical fossils

There are word forms which used to be freer lexical items but which are now found above all “fossilized” in lexical phrases. Some are found in the types of phrase discussed in Section 3. The word *poke* as in (*to buy*) *pig in a poke* has already been mentioned in this respect; other examples are the words *lurch* and *truck* found in, respectively, *leave sb in the lurch*, and *have no truck with sb/sth*. Examples in phrases which are less likely to be referred to as “idioms” are the already mentioned “fro” (*to and fro*) and “sleight” (*sleight of hand*), and further examples can be seen in the following phrases: *take UMBRAGE*, *the whys and WHEREFORES*, *a DAB hand*, *by DINT of*, and *in fine FETTL*.

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9 The term “fossil”, in a linguistic sense, is defined in the OED (3rd edn) as “A word or other linguistic form which has become obsolete except in isolated regions or in set phrases, idioms, or collocations”. For a discussion of the notion of “lexical fossil”, see Coffey 2013.

Some fossils are close in form to related words in modern English; an example is *afield*, used in phrases such as *far afield* and *farther afield*. Fossils may also have exactly the same form as a modern word, and thus be less noticeable. This applies to the already mentioned *poke* and *truck*. Other examples are the word forms “let” and “hue”, as found in *without let or hindrance* and *hue and cry*. Grammatical word category may also be of relevance: the word *pale* is not usually found as a noun in modern English, but this usage (and relevant meaning) can still be seen in the phrase *beyond the pale*.

The fact that the words or word forms are not normally used in modern English as single-word lexical items has a number of consequences for language learners. Firstly, the learner may be puzzled as to the presence of a word in a phrase – why do we say *a pig in a poke*: what is a “poke” in this case? Secondly, the learner may feel a sense of frustration at not knowing anything about a word. The phrase *in high dudgeon*, for example, appears most frequently in MLDS under the headword **dudgeon**, implying, therefore, that the latter exists as a free-standing word, which, however, it doesn't. Thirdly, the learner may remember the unusual word (precisely because it is unusual), and later use it in an inappropriate way, for example by taking the word “umbrage” out of its usual phrasal environment (*take umbrage*).

Taken as a whole, the MLDS examined do not have much to say about the composition of items such as the above. The following are some examples of presentation:

- (19) MEDAL 2 **POKE** a quick push with your finger or a pointed object. [...] **a pig in a poke** something that you have bought without seeing it first.
- (20) OALD 4 **WHY** [...] *noun* **the whys and (the) wherefores** the reasons for sth – “I had no intention of going into the whys and the wherefores of the situation.”
- (21) E-LDOCE **FETTLE** *noun* **in fine/good fettle** [old-fashioned] healthy or working properly.
- (22) CALD 4 **DINT** *noun* **by dint of sth** [formal] as a result of sth – “She got what she wanted by dint of pleading and threatening.”
- (23) COB 5 **WEND** PHRASE If you **wend** your **way** in a particular direction, you walk, especially slowly, casually, or carefully, in that direction [LITERARY] – “Sleepy-eyed commuters were wending their way to work.”
- (24) MW **PALE** *noun* **beyond the pale** offensive or unacceptable – “conduct that was beyond the pale”.

With regard to the lexical fossils within phrases, the most useful feature I have found in the dictionaries examined is wording which is used sometimes in MW, and an example of which involves the word *umbrage*:

- (25) MW **UMBRAGE** a feeling of being offended by what someone has said or done — usually used in the phrase **take umbrage** – “I imagine some people will take umbrage [= will be offended] when they hear the quote.”

The important words here are “usually used in the phrase ...”. This type of comment is not found for all fossils in MW (nor is it found only for fossils), but it is a step in the right direction.<sup>10</sup>

How much information should be given for a fossilized phrase will depend on the word in question. Often, it will be enough to indicate that it is a fossil and therefore probably only found in that particular phrase, but sometimes other information could be useful. For example, in the case of *WEND one's way*, it may be of interest to the learner to know that the verb *wend* is historically related to the word form *went*, now considered to be part of the verb *go*; and in the case of *without further/more ADO*, reference could be made to the play title *Much ado about nothing*.

## 4.2 Other unusual words in phrases

I will now briefly mention other types of phrase which may strike the learner because of one or more unusual word forms. First, I list a number of example descriptions in MLDS, and thereafter I comment on the features I wish to point out.

(26) COB 5 **BOB** [...] PHRASE **Bits and bobs** are small objects or parts of something [mainly British, informal] - “The microscope contains a few hundred dollars-worth of electronic bits and bobs.”

(27) MW **ODDS AND SODS** [UK, informal] = **odds and ends** - “The store sells art supplies and other odds and sods.”

(28) e-LDOCE **KITH AND KIN** *noun* [old-fashioned] family and friends.

(29) e-LDOCE **LOVEY-DOVEY** *adj* [informal] behaviour that is lovey-dovey is too romantic - “a lovey-dovey phone call”.

(30) MEDAL 2 **CHIT-CHAT** *noun* [informal] friendly conversation about things that are not very important.

(31) CALD 4 **BUTCHER** *noun* [...] **have a butcher's** [UK, old-fashioned, slang] to look at something - “Let's have a butcher's at your present then.”

In (26) can be seen an example of a word (*bob*, or rather *bobs*) which does not exist on its own with this type of meaning. Nor is it known to be a lexical fossil. The phrase is recorded in the oed (2nd edn) at the entry for *bit*, and there is no meaning of *bob* which might relate to this phrase. It may be presumed, therefore, that the phrase was coined for its alliterative effect. Example (27) is similar but involves rhyme rather than alliteration. The second phrase indicated, *odds and ends*, also involves sound repetition, since the two parts of the binomial are both monosyllabic, begin with a vowel, and end with the spelling/sound *-ds*. In (28), the phrase *kith and kin* combines alliteration with the presence of a lexical fossil (*kith*). Examples (29) and (30) also exhibit, respectively, rhyme and alliteration. However,

10 Information about some lexical fossils may also be found in the brief etymological notes on individual words (“word origin”) in e-LDOCE and the CD-ROM version of OALD 8; however, there is no explicit statement about the fact that the words in question are fossils nor that they are only usually found in the phrases indicated.

they are formally different from the preceding examples, in that they are reduplicatives, and are written, usually, as single, hyphenated words. In the case of *lovey-dovey*, both morphological parts are easily associated with other words (*love* and *dove*), though the word *lovey* also exists. The word *chit-chat* is different, in that only *chat* exists with a relevant meaning.

Examples (26) to (30), then, all involve sound repetition of some sort, in addition to the presence of unusual words or morphemes. Example (31) is a little different, in that there is no apparent sound repetition, just a word sense which seems unconnected to any of the various meanings of the headword *butcher*. However, rhyme is involved, indirectly, as can be seen in the explanation of the same phrase in MEDAL:

(32) MEDAL 2 **BUTCHER** *noun* [...] **have/take a butcher's** [UK, informal] to have a look at something -  
 From *butcher's hook*, rhyming slang for 'look'.

Generally speaking, there is little comment in current MLDS on the types of phrase mentioned in this section. And whereas there are no more than a handful of word usages dependent on rhyming slang, there are many more items in which sound repetition has a fundamental role to play. It would not be difficult to point this out in the dictionary, and may help to satisfy the reader's curiosity as to the origin of the phrase.

### 4.3 Grouping phrases which share certain features

As part of the process of improving learners' general knowledge of the English lexicon, it would be useful if phrases which share a certain feature or features were brought together. This would be much easier in the e-dictionary, where space is not a problem and where the user could click on a link to find other examples of the phenomenon being looked at in a particular entry. Some of the phrasal types mentioned in 4.1 and 4.2 could be brought together in this way. In the case of fossils, since there are quite a large number involved, those with a further common characteristic could be brought together, for example those in coordinated phrases involving sound repetition (e.g. *kith and kin*, *the whys and wherefores*). Some idiomatic phrases could also be interlinked, for example with reference to the area of "original" meaning of phrases (e.g. "SHIPS AND THE SEA") or through the form of the phrases (e.g. *as [mad] as a [hatter]*).

Using the terminology employed by Apresjan (1993: 80), interconnections of this type would allow the dictionary to enhance its information on "lexicographic types", while at the same time, the improvement of data regarding phrasal composition would also allow each individual "lexicographic portrait" (*ibid*: 86) to be enriched.

## 5 Conclusions

English lexical phrases come in many shapes and sizes, and some of these shapes and sizes are dependent on factors which are not obvious to many present-day native speakers, let alone learners of English as a foreign language. However, whereas lexico-phraseological oddities cause no problems for native speakers and also usually go largely unnoticed, the same cannot be said for language learners, who tend to be more aware of form and have to reconcile it with meaning. Whereas I believe it is generally a positive asset that learners' dictionaries do not dwell too much on the compositional nature of lexical phrases, I think that they should do so when appropriate. In the types of phrase described in the present paper, this also involves bringing in the historical dimension of language, which has perhaps been left out in the cold too long. Given, especially, the enormous potential of web-based dictionaries, this should be perfectly possible.

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