

The frequency of written and spoken idioms in the BNC and the development of idiom usage over the years

Introduction

Definition & Examples:

„A set of words, whose respective meaning can't be derived by knowing the meaning of the individual words“

- > Compositeness/fixedness
- > Institutionalization
- > Semantic opacity

3 Types of Idioms (Moon 1998):

- > Transparent 1) swimming with sharks
- > Semi-transparent 2) to throw in the towel
- > Opaque 3) kick the bucket

Focus of my study: Opaque Idioms

Examples:

- 4) a piece of cake (something is very easy)
- 5) break the ice (to relieve shyness especially between strangers)
- 6) when pigs fly (something that is very unlikely to happen)
- 7) getting a taste of your own medicine (being treated the same unpleasant way you have treated others)

Data and methodology

Chosen idioms:

- > 55 opaque Idioms
- > Most of them were taken over from Lynn E. Grant (2005) for example:
 - 8) we 'll have you looking like <the bee 's knees> before they come in (BNC)
 - 9) Though he almost <came a cropper> on one occasion (BNC)
 - 10) I did a few <odds and ends> in the garden on Saturday (BNC)
 - 11) Your mum is going to <do her nut> ! Look at your coat ! (BNC)

Approach:

- > BNC-corpus-search
- > Looking for all syntactic variants of an idiom
- > going through the results to exclude any literally meant phrases such as:
 - 12) lift your other leg up , keeping it straight . Your partner standing behind you , <pulls your leg> towards him gently
 - 13) Serve with slices of <cold turkey> or ham
 - 14) she pushed herself <off the wall> with her hands
 - 15) and I cut it up this morning before you got up and I could <n't cut it> with the scissors

Previous studies:

- > Stamenkoske (2017): Idioms in the EFL Classroom -> biggest problem: failing to notice the figurativeness of an expression
- > Simpson, Mendis (2003): Idioms in academic speech -> 238 idiom types across a wide range of academic speech events and a variety of important pragmatic functions
- > Rafatbakhsh (2019): frequencies of the idioms' categories in the large Contemporary Corpus of American -> in order to simplify their teaching and learning
- > Moon (1998): 6776 commonest British and American English Fixed Expressions including Idioms

Concordances:

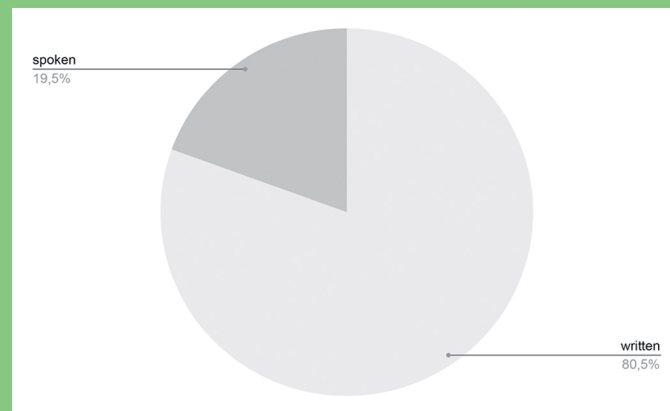
```
[word="the"%c][word="bee"][word="s"][word="knees"]  
[hw="be"%c][word="beside"][pos="PNX"]  
[hw="go"%c][word="by"][word="the"][word="boards?"]  
[hw="come"%c][word="(a|an)"][pos="AJ0"]?[word="cropper"]  
[pos="XX0"%c][hw="cut"][word="it"]  
[hw="do"%c][pos="DPS"][word="nut"]  
[word="odds"%c][word="and"][word="(sods|ends)"]  
[hw="take"%c][pos="PNP"][pos="N.*"]?[word="to"][word="task"]  
[hw="knock"%c][{}0,8}[word="into"][word="a"][word="cocked"][word="hat"]
```

Main part

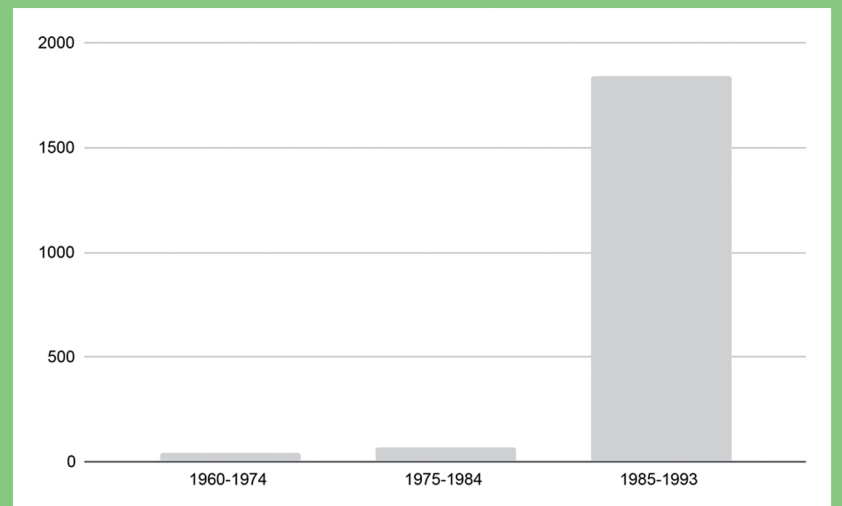
Most frequent idioms:

1	by and large	485
2	(a)round the clock	147
3	under fire	147
4	take the piss	124
5	and what have you	89
6	in a nutshell	74
7	set the stage for	71
8	odds and sods/ends	63
9	take the mickey	61
10	break the ice	55
11	hit the road	48
12	come a cropper	42
13	spill the beans	40
14	make no bones about sth	38
15	(be) beside yourself	37
16	go by the board(s)	31
17	pull sb's leg	28

Percentage of written and spoken idioms:



Development of idiom usage:



Results and conclusion

- > idioms seem to be a phenomenon mostly occurring/used in written language
- > the significance/usage of idioms has increased rapidly from the 1960s to the end of the century, which could indicate, that idioms have become an important part in our register and therefore relevant for teaching and learning

Problems:

- > idioms are often very regional
- > it is difficult to find a corpus that is truly representative
- > zero-frequency does not mean non-occurrence
- > It is impossible to investigate all existing idioms
- > what frequency is high enough to be relevant for teaching
- > written and spoken data in the BNC may not be equally represented
- > context of occurrence may also be important
- > comparison between frequencies in different corpora

My further tasks:

- > calculation of p-value
- > count frequencies by 1 per million words
- > compare frequency of idioms with the most frequent words of English
- > maybe search the corpus for some more idioms
- > read some more studies
- > write the term paper!

References

- Alavi, Sepideh & Aboozar Rajabpoor. 2015. Analyzing Idioms and Their Frequency in Three Advanced ILI Textbooks: A Corpus-Based Study. In English Language Teaching Vol. 8, No. 1. p. 170-179. Toronto: Canadian Center of Science and Education. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1075197> (30.06.2020)
- Alexander, Richard J. 1992. Fixed expressions, idioms and phraseology in recent English learner's dictionaries. In EURALEX '92 Proceedings, I-II. Tampere. http://www.euralex.org/elix_proceedings/Eura-lex1992_1/009_Richard%20J.%20Alexander%20-Fixed%20expressions,%20idioms%20and%20phraseology%20in%20recent%20English%20learners%20d.pdf (accessed: 03.07.2020)
- Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, Finegan. 1999. Grammar of Spoken and Written English. Harlow: Pearson Education
- Chen, Yu-Hua. 2016. Opening Pandora's Box: A Corpus-Based Study of Idioms in ELT Materials. In Journal of Asia TEFL 13(4): 381-390. DOI: 10.18823/asiatefl.2016.13.4.10.381
- Dilin Liu. 2003. The Most Frequently Used Spoken American English Idioms: A Corpus Analysis and Its Implications. In Tesol Quarterly Vol. 37(4). 671-700. Oklahoma: Oklahoma City University. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588217> (accessed 30.06.2020)
- Grant, Lynn E. 2005. Frequency of 'Core Idioms' in the British National Corpus (BNC). In International Journal of Corpus Linguistics 10(4): 429-451. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233568127_Frequency_of_core_idioms_in_the_British_National_Corpus_BNC (accessed: 07.07.2020)
- Moon, Rosamund. 1998. Fixed Expressions and Idioms in English. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Rafatbakhsh, E., Ahmadi, A. 2019. A thematic corpus-based study of idioms in the Corpus of Contemporary American English. In Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education 4(11). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-019-0076-4>
- Rose, H. James. 1978. Types of Idioms. In Linguistics 16(203), 55-62. De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling.1978.16.203.55> (20.11.2009)
- Simpson, Rita & Dushyanthi Mendis. 2003. A Corpus-Based Study of Idioms in Academic Speech. In TESOL Quarterly. Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 419-441. Virginia USA: TESOL. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588398> (accessed 30.06.2020)
- Stamenkoska, Iskra. 2017. Idioms in the EFL classroom. In Horizon Series A. Vol. 21. 85-94. Skopje: FON University. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=2927366e-35e6-4615-a9fe-838d80c93015%40sdc-v-sessmgr03&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=128933774&db=asn> (30.06.2020)