

**A DICTIONARY
of
ENGLISH IDIOMS**

PART I. VERBAL IDIOMS

By
B. L. K. HENDERSON,

M.A., D.Lit. (London)

*Associate in Arts, King's College, London.
Fellow of the College of Preceptors.
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Author of
THE ENGLISH WAY, MIRROR OF ENGLISH, etc.

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INTRODUCTION.

During a long experience as a lecturer and teacher of the English language, I felt repeatedly the need of a book that would put before my students a comprehensive survey of our English verbal idioms. My hope is that the book now offered to the public will find its way into the hands of those who, like myself, have long desired such a work for their students, and moreover, that it will be widely used by earnest students of our language not only in England but also abroad. There has been no attempt to take every verb we possess. My work has been to deal more especially with those verbs, purely English or otherwise, *which by the addition of adverbs and prepositions, undergo some subtle change of meaning.*

I do not pretend that the book as it stands is complete ; all I claim is that it affords a wide view of the difficulties presented by these verbal idioms. Completion could only come by means of the co-operation of those who may use the book and who will be kind enough to notify the publishers of omissions and shortcomings. This Dictionary of Idioms is intended for English as well as foreign students, for, alas, I have found our English youth lamentably unable to use for the purpose of vivid, powerful expression, the knowledge they undoubtedly possess.

In the past I have had as students young men and women from most of the European countries and from the East in general. One and all have found these puzzling little idioms their main difficulty in learning English. A student would tell me that he had learned the meaning of "bring up" in the sense of train or educate, but in his reading, or in

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conversation, he had met with such sentences as the following :—“ Why are you bringing up all these foolish arguments ? ” ; “ I told the servant to bring up our dinner ” ; “ We were suddenly brought up by a high fence ” ; etc. Over and over again I have been asked :—“ Where can I find a book that will give me help in the use of these peculiar phrases you English people use so freely ? ”

This Dictionary is not a learned attempt to enquire into the growth of these “ peculiar ” phrases. Some of them have existed for over a thousand years ; others came thick and fast into what is termed the middle period of our language ; others, again, are comparatively recent in their use by English people. As a people we seem to have a gift of spontaneous creation of such phrases, an innate command over the logical grouping of verb, preposition and adverb. We seem to pile them up at will. One can imagine a person who sees a friend looking here and there through field glasses, saying “ What are you peering *at round about from out of* your glasses.” Three actual examples come to my mind. A mother promised her child that if he were good he might choose any book he wished for her to read to him. He was good, and, being sent to the shelves for a book, came back with some fusty old volume of theology. The mother looked at it in surprise, then said : “ Why do you choose this book to be read *to out of for* ? ” In a description of a recent Boat Race I saw in a paper this sentence : “ Then the rollers coming *up from down below* the bridge made the water very unpleasant.” In the Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes I read : “ His eyes shone *out from beneath* his cap.” But before a foreigner can acquire such a control over these tricks of expression, he must pass long years among English-speaking people, while, if he begins his study at a period later than early youth his task is all the more arduous. Even Joseph Conrad, who is so often acclaimed as a master of English, failed to show a full control, and, as I have already said, English people themselves, although they may have acquired an oral knowledge of these homely expressions, fail to make good use of them for the purpose of writing.

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We might call these verbal idioms the sinews of our English tongue. Certainly they are the most nervous element in our language and a critical examination of the style of our greatest authors and orators would, first and foremost, reveal a skilful command of these homely utterances. They are spoken by the highest as well as by the lowest of our population. King and coster, duke and dustman, not only understand but also employ them, and through them can meet on equal terms of diction. Scholar, lawyer, merchant, the child at school, the parson in the pulpit, the coalman in his cart, all understand: "He'll *let you down*, unless you are careful." A person who can obtain a mastery over the idioms illustrated in the following pages has gone a very long way in the study of English. It is not the high-sounding word that gives power to our speech; such power lies rather in these simple but elusive terms of utterance. One recalls the oft-quoted story of Charles Lamb, who, when Wordsworth was discussing how much Shakespeare had borrowed from other writers, and had said that other poets might have produced an equally great Hamlet, cried to his friends: "Oh, here's Wordsworth says he could have written *Hamlet*—if he'd the *mind* to."

Consider the following verses:—

" Little Willie from the mirror
Sucked the mercury right off,
Thinking in his childish error
It would cure the whooping cough.

At the funeral, Willie's mother
Smartly said to Mrs. Brown:
'Twas a chilly day for Willie
When the mercury went down.' "

The force of these humorous lines lies where so much of our English wit also lies, namely, in purely English words and phrases. Notice the thoroughness of "right off"; the vigour of that strangely chosen word "smartly"—the last word one would expect to be used in reference to Willie's

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mother at the funeral. Notice especially "went down." *Went down* means so many things. The ship went down; the joke went down; the price of sugar went down. In these verses "went down" has two references—quite clearly the mercury *went down* Willie's throat, and just as clearly the mercury *went down* for cold weather.

An American once said to an English lift boy:—"Say, why do you call these 'lifts'?" "What do you call them, sir?" asked the boy. "Wal, in the States we call them elevators." "Well, sir," was the reply, "it's like this. I can lift you up or I can lift you down. Now, I might elevate you up, but I'm hanged if I could elevate you down." That little story illustrates most clearly the freedom, vigour and extraordinary scope of an English verbal idiom. Again, this very year an intelligent German girl was staying for a time with a lady in North Wales. She was watching her hostess make puff pastry, and asked if she herself might learn how to do it. The lady answered: "I'll show you when I make some more." Next day the girl saw the lady making pastry, and said: "Oh! You are making puff pastry." "No," was the reply, "this is not puff pastry, I have some of yesterday's left. You see, it goes a long way." (Meaning that it is very economical in its use.) "Oh!" said the German girl, "Where does it go to?" That little piece of a real conversation illustrates the difficulty this book is trying to meet.

There is one point worthy of a foreign student's notice. When they speak these verbal idioms, the English seem to stress the preposition or adverb, when it is so attached to the verb as to form with it one verbal notion. Thus: "The woman fainted but soon came to." The stress is on the word *to* in "came to." On the other hand, when the preposition or adverb after the verb belongs more to a following noun or phrase, then the verb itself is stressed rather than the preposition or adverb. Thus: "Travelling in their car, we soon came to London." The stress falls on *came*, not on the word *to*. Perhaps the stress may fall on a noun in the phrase that follows the verb. We may almost say that it will fall on the verb or the noun, according to the mental view of the

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speaker. Notice the stress (marked ') in the following sentences :—

" Pull **ú**p," he cried, " we're nearing the wreck."

The oarsmen began to **p**ull up the river.

" Pull up your **s**ocks, you lazy scamp, and **g**ét to work."

" Keep **ó**n, don't stop ! You'll finish soon."

" Keep off the **g**rass."

" Look **ú**p ; don't look **d**ówn, or you'll grow dizzy."

The lawyer was looking **ú**p all the facts of the case.

I saw the man looking **ú**p the **s**treét.

You are sure to get **ó**n.

Be careful how you get on this '**b**ús.

Come **ó**n ! (Meaning : " Hurry " !)

Cóme on the '**b**us. (Meaning : " Don't stand there on the pavement," or perhaps, " Don't go by train.")

Go **tó**. (In the sense of : " Don't talk nonsense " ; or used to exhort or reprove, as in old English.)

I'm **g**óing to London next week.

I'm going to Lóndon next week.

Sometimes the stress is very slight, and a foreign student learning to speak English will be wise to notice carefully how the accent is used by English-speaking people ; or as we say sometimes : " He should hang on every word they utter."

Naturally, by reason of this English instinct for the formation of verbal idiom, the present volume can do no more than offer a generous selection for a student's use. He may, for example, go to the following pages for some enlightenment on some such sentence as :—" The trunk was distinguished with a label," feeling certain that *with* should be *by*, and fail to find an illustrative example. These two prepositions " with " and " by " are so commonly used to denote (1) Instrumentality and (2) Agency that we have to assume that one of the first things an Englishman learns by custom, and a foreigner by instruction, is this distinction between " with " and " by." We say : " That bridge was built *by* those men," indicating that those men were the agents in the operation of building ; whereas we say : " The

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dog was covered *with* a blanket," implying by *with* the instrument in the covering. Again, "by" may show a prevailing circumstance: "We set out *by* night"; and "with" may show an accompanying action: "The lid came off *with* a wrench," or "The dog came out *with* us." As I have shown elsewhere (A Guide to Correspondence, Chapter XII Idiom) published by Macdonald & Evans), the use of "with" and "by" seems at times almost a matter of choice depending on the mental attitude of the speaker or writer. "They amused us *with* their stories" (Instrument), and "They amused us *by* their stories" (Agent): one writer declares that *with* shows a nearer association of the instrument and the result brought about. We shoot a bird *with* a gun; but (as Leigh Hunt shows in his rendering of the story of Ver-Vert, the Parrot of the Nuns), the bird was killed *by* kindness. A foreigner, however, will be wise to notice that in spite of rule or explanation, correct English has an invariable custom: "We pass the evening with cards and music" (not by cards and music). We shake with fear; we are down with influenza; we remain silent with shame; but, we do things by accident; we kiss by favour; we act by right; and we are English by name. We must say: I came by train (or 'bus, or tram)," and we must *not* say: "I came with the train (or 'bus, or tram)"; and we have to say: "People are admitted by ticket," and *not* "People are admitted with a ticket." These subtle distinctions pervade our speech. No Dictionary can cope with them. Custom has to be our guide.

Finally, this Dictionary is but half of the writer's heavy task. A further Dictionary, dealing with idioms of our speech in the form of phrase and sentences is being prepared and will soon be published to serve as a companion volume to the "Dictionary of Verbal Idioms."

B. L. K. HENDERSON.

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London.

PART I. VERBAL IDIOMS

ABIDE.

ABIDE.—*To dwell, stay with.* He abode at the seaside for a month.

To endure, put up with. I cannot abide such conduct.

ABIDE BY.—*To support.* "See that you abide by your word."

ABIDE ON.—*To stand near for support.* "I will abide on thy left side," said Herminius.

ABIDE WITH.—*To accompany for support.* "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide."

ABOUND.

ABOUND (IN/WITH).—*To exist in plenty.* At Easter time, dried cod abounds.

To be plentifully supplied. The river Severn abounds with salmon.

ABSOLVE.

ABSOLVE (FROM/OF). *To proclaim as free from penalty.* The priest absolved the penitent.

Thank God, I am absolved from my promise.

None of us can be absolved wholly of wrongdoing.

ABSORB.

ABSORB.—*To drink in, to swallow, to engross.* The study of languages absorbs all his attention.

ABSORB BY.—*To be engrossed by or interested in.* The boy was completely absorbed by the building of the new shed.

ABUT.

ABUT (ON/AGAINST/UPON). *To border on.* This shed abuts on my house.

The house abuts against the mountain side.

His field abuts upon my orchard.

ACCEPT.

ACCEPT.—*To take or receive.* Will you accept this little present from me?

I really cannot accept all your remarks as true.

ACCEPT OF.—*To agree to.* The envoys accepted willingly of the terms offered.

ACCOMMODATE.

ACCOMMODATE.—*To house.* We can accommodate your party for the night.

Accommodate

ACCOMMODATE BY.—*To be suited by.* We were well accommodated by the host of that inn.

ACCOMMODATE TO.—*To suit oneself to.* He accommodated himself to his new surroundings.

ACCOMMODATE WITH.—*To oblige.* Can you accommodate me with the loan of a pound?

ACCOUNT.

ACCOUNT.—*To deem.* We account our leader an honourable man.

To hold as. His loyalty has been proved. We account him to be faithful.

ACCOUNT FOR.—*To explain.* How do you account for the difference?
To be responsible for. You will have to account for the disappearance of the stock.

To render a reckoning. The Judge asked him to account for the deficit of £500.

ACCOUNT OF.—*To regard.* The gardener is lazy. I account him of little worth.

ACCOUNT TO.—*To explain to the person who is to receive the reckoning.*
You must account to the schoolmaster for what you have done.

ACQUAINT.

ACQUAINT OF/WITH.—*To make known.* I am acquainted of those facts.

ACQUAINT WITH.—*To be known to.* Mr Jones is a friend of mine.
Are you acquainted with him?

ACQUIT.

ACQUIT (OF).—*To discharge of supposed wrong.* The Judge acquitted the prisoner.

He was acquitted of the charge of arson.

ACQUIT ONESELF (OF).—*To clear one's character.* He acquitted himself of the charge.

To conduct oneself in any manner. He acquitted himself well in battle.

ACT.

ACT.—*To do or perform.* When in a temper he acts like a madman.

To play a part. Irving acted the part of Hamlet many times

Don't act the fool so often.

To work. The machine is acting perfectly.

To carry out intention. He has acted as he made up his mind to do.

ACT FOR.—*To serve as agent.* My solicitor will act for me in this matter.

ACT ON.—*To do in accordance with.* The lawyer will act on your instructions.

To work upon. The drug acted on his nerves like magic.

Allow

ACT ON/UPON.—*To carry out.* The secretary acted strictly upon instructions.

ACT UP TO.—*To follow advice.* The boy acted up to his mother's advice.

ADAPT.

ADAPT FOR.—*To be fit.* He is well adapted for the position.

ADAPT TO.—*To make suitable.* Let us try to adapt this old play to our needs.

ADD.

ADD.—*To sum up into a total.* Add these figures and see what they make.

Add joy and sorrow and you have life.

To make an additional statement. He added that he was weary.

ADD UP.—*To total.* Adding it all up we find the answer.

ADD UP TO.—*To reach a total or result.* It all adds up to this—he is a fool.

ADMIT.

ADMIT.—*To allow to enter.* Only ticket-holders are admitted.

To acknowledge. I admit my fault.

ADMIT OF.—*To be capable of.* This building will not admit of more alterations.

AGREE.

AGREE.—*To have similar opinions.* As you agree, I shall start to-morrow for France.

To coincide, harmonize. These two shades do not agree.

To correspond in grammatical terms. Verb and Subject must agree in person.

AGREE TO.—*To consent.* I agree to what you say.

AGREE UPON.—*To come to an agreement.* They agreed upon the terms of the contract.

AGREE WITH.—*To concur, harmonize, suit.* Hard work does not agree with him.

AIM.

AIM AT/ABOVE.—*To direct a blow or a shot.* Aim straight, the wind is very still.

Aim at the head, the bird is almost above us.

Aim above the bull; your rifle is not sighted accurately.

ALLOW.

ALLOW.—*To grant.* His father allows him £100 a year.

To permit. I cannot allow those games in this house.

To admit. I allow that he has been getting a good salary.

ALLOW FOR.—*To make an abatement.* We shall allow 5/- for the wear and tear.

Answer

ANSWER.

ANSWER.—*To reply to.* I shall answer his letter to-morrow.

ANSWER BACK.—*To retort impudently.* The child would answer back to all the nurse said.

ANSWER FOR.—*To be accountable for.* We cannot answer for his actions.

ANSWER TO.—*To act conformably with.* That answers precisely to our need.

ANSWER UP.—*To be prompt in replying.* The master told his boys to answer up when the Inspector came.

To speak clearly without mumbling. Answer up I cannot hear what you say.

ANSWER UP TO.—*To respond, to reply.* At the roll call, the men answered up to their names.

To have a reply ready. Young Smith could always answer up to every question.

APPEAL

APPEAL (TO/FOR).—*To beseech, call or ask earnestly.* He appealed to Cæsar.

To offer attraction. Flying does not appeal to me.
I appeal to you for alms.

APPLY.

APPLY.—*To devote one's energies.* The youth applied himself so that his work advanced.

To put against or upon. Apply this plaster and the wound will heal.

APPLY FOR.—*To seek for.* I shall apply for assistance to the Parish.

APPLY TO.—*To make reference to.* Do those remarks apply to me?

To address to. For particulars, apply to Williams & Co.

To place upon. Apply this lint to the cut.

APPROVE.

APPROVE.—*To express one's commendation.* I approved his actions then; but he is wrong now.

APPROVE OF.—*To hold good.* I approve of that paper for this room.

ARGUE.

ARGUE.—*To go to show.* That very act argues him a rascal.

To reason or debate. He'll argue all night long, unless you stop him.

ARGUE ABOUT.—*To discuss a matter.* What are you two arguing about?

ARGUE AGAINST.—*To dispute to the contrary.* You see, you are just arguing against your own principles.

ARGUE ALONG LINES.—*To follow a plan of argument.* You are arguing along the same old lines. I've heard it all before.

ARGUE FOR.—*To debate on behalf of.* I'll try to argue the matter for you; but he's very obstinate.

Assure

ARGUE INTO.—*To convince by arguing.* You want to argue me into agreeing to your proposals.

ARGUE OUT OF.—*To persist in argument.* You'll argue me out of my wits soon.

ARM.

ARM.—*To take weapons for oneself or to prepare for fighting.* Arm yourself; the foe is at hand.

ARM FOR/WITH/AGAINST.—*To prepare generally or specially.* They were armed for every contingency.

Are you armed for the fray?

He was armed with a sword and a shield.

They were armed against assaults.

ARRANGE.

ARRANGE.—*To dispose, place in order.* Arrange those books on the shelves, they are in disorder.

To settle or adjust. Have you arranged your business satisfactorily?

To plan beforehand. Have you arranged when to come?

ARRANGE ABOUT.—*To make a decision in reference to something.* Don't discuss it now. We will arrange about it to-morrow.

ARRANGE FOR.—*To make plans for.* The secretary must arrange for meeting him.

ASK.

ASK.—*To make enquiry.* Ask the policeman which way to go.

I asked a plain question.

To demand. The law asks complete obedience.

To announce a forthcoming marriage in church. John and Mary were asked at St. Andrew's Church last Sunday.

ASK ABOUT.—*To make enquiries.* The clerk said that he would go and ask about the invoice.

ASK AFTER A PERSON.—*To make kindly enquiries about a person's health or well-being.* We asked after John's brother.

ASK FOR.—*To request.* He asked his mother for sixpence.

ASK OF (OR FROM) A PERSON.—*To make a request.* He asked of (or from) the passers-by enough to buy a meal.

ASK UP TO.—*To go as far in fixing a price.* We can ask up to five shillings for this vase.

ASSIGN.

ASSIGN.—*To allot.* This is the task you are assigned.

ASSIGN TO (FOR).—*To apportion.* Here are the shares assigned to your company.

ASSURE.

ASSURE.—*To affirm.* I assure you that all is well.

ASSURE OF.—*To make sure.* I can assure you of one thing. It is going to rain.

Attend

ATTEND.

ATTEND.—*To give heed.* Please attend. What is your name and address?

To give service. The doctor is attending him.

To accompany. Six servants attended her ladyship during her tour.

To visit. He attends Church most regularly.

ATTEND AT.—*To be present.* I shall attend at the hour named.

ATTEND TO.—*To take notice of.* Attend now to what I tell you.

To take action, to concentrate upon. He attended to his business.

ATTEND UPON.—*To follow as an attendant or subordinate.* The Secretary attended upon the Chairman.

AVAIL

AVAIL ONESELF OF.—*To take advantage of any matter.* He availed himself of the cheap day ticket on the railway.

BACK.

BACK.—*To support financially.* He has backed the company for £100,000.

To withdraw. As he spoke he began to back.

To supply with a back. They backed the cloth with linen.

To adjoin at the rear. Our garden backs theirs.

To wager in favour of. He has backed a winner in the Derby.

To mount a steed. He backed the horse and rode off.

BACK DOWN.—*To cease making any opposition, or giving support.* We could see that he would back down if we stood firm.

BACK INTO.—*To cause to enter backwards.* The man backed the car into the garage.

BACK ON TO.—*To be adjacent to.* Their house backs on to our garden.

BACK OUT (OF).—*To withdraw one's support or presence.* He backed out of the party; or He backed out of the room.

BACK UP.—*To encourage, support.* All through, our father backed us up.

To lift by the help of the shoulders.—Give me a back up this wall.

BAIL.

BAIL (GO FOR).—*To assume financial responsibility.*—His brother had to go bail for him, and the judge allowed bail on the payment of £100.

BAIL (OUT).—*To pay money into court for the safeguarding of a person's reappearance before justice.* The man offered to bail the prisoner out.

BAIL (OR BALE) OUT OF.—*To scoop water out of.* The sailors tried to bail the water out of the sinking boat.