



Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English

Volume 1: Verbs with
Prepositions & Particles
Volume 2: Phrase, Clause
& Sentence Idioms

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**OXFORD
DICTIONARY
OF CURRENT
IDIOMATIC
ENGLISH**

Volume 2:
Phrase, Clause & Sentence Idioms

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I R McCAIG

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Volume 2:
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Foreword

The appearance of this volume marks the realization of a project started as long ago as 1958. It was in that year that, at the suggestion of Bill (Dr W R) Lee, I began to compile a *Dictionary of Fixed (or Invariable) Phrases*,¹ of which a major feature was to have been an indication of frequency of occurrence, as in Michael West's *A General Service List of English Words*.² Like that book, the present dictionary was written primarily for the use of foreign learners of English, though for those at an advanced level. If native speakers find it as interesting as many have apparently found Volume 1 the authors will, of course, be delighted.

The collecting of idiomatic expressions quickly became obsessive. My reading became more intensive and more varied; the collection grew more and more formidable as I tried, in vain, to establish some meaningful order of 'frequency'. Somehow I did not seem to be able to find, in the current 'literature' I was so diligently combing, even a couple of examples of expressions (other than of phrases like *in fact, of course* etc) that I knew to be both current and used, or at least understood, by most native speakers.

About this time other researchers in related areas of lexis began to use other techniques to establish native speakers' 'knowledge' of their mother tongue. In France Professor Gougenheim and his colleagues used the notion of 'availability'³ to elicit words from French schoolchildren in drawing up the vocabulary of *Le Français Fondamental*.⁴ Later, in Birmingham, an interesting piece of research⁵ was carried out by Professor John Sinclair and his colleagues: the object was to listen out for and record any uses of the phrase *red herring* that might crop up in their presence, in addition to numerous 'dissociated' uses of the two words. They had been struck by the fact that this idiomatic combination had not occurred a single time in the admittedly limited corpus of written material that they had analysed. The small group of observers collected no less than 50 instances in 'a period of several months'. Yet in all my years of collecting from written sources I had not come across more than three or four occurrences of this expression.

These two experiments, together with my own observations, convinced me that no useful statements could be made about the 'frequency' of the kind of idiomatic expression I was collecting. For most of the expressions likely to appear in the dictionary one or two authentic examples might be enough to qualify them for entry, provided they could be elicited with ease from native speakers. I have described this method, and its sometimes unexpected results, in an article contributed to the commemorative volume in celebration of A S Hornby's 80th birthday.⁶ Briefly, the method was simply to supply several

¹An impracticable title, as it turned out. The dictionary as it now appears contains many idioms of clause or sentence length, and provides ample evidence both of normal variation in idioms and of 'nonce' variation for special effect.

²M West: 'A General Service List of English Words' in Faucett, Palmer, Thorndike and West: *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection*, Part V, 1936; 2nd edn West: *A General Service List of English Words*, London, 1953.

³In French, *disponibilité*. (Professor Gougenheim visited Edinburgh University in 1959.)

⁴i.e. Basic French (for the foreign learner).

⁵See *English Lexical Studies* OSTI Report January 1967-September 1969, Birmingham, England.

⁶R Mackin: 'On collocations: "Words shall be known by the company they keep".' in: Strevens (ed) *In honour of A S Hornby*, Oxford, 1978.

people with an incomplete version of a particular expression; a prompt, complete phrase in the expected form in reply was sufficient evidence that it was 'available' to them and probably to other native speakers, or at least to members of the British 'speech community'. It was thus taken to be a part of current usage.

From 1958–63 the examples had mounted alarmingly day by day, and I became more and more aware of the dangers involved in accumulating an unmanageable corpus of material. This awareness became all the more acute as a result of my preparing a new edition of Henry Sweet's *The Practical Study of Languages*. On p 269 of that book,⁷ Sweet writes:

It should never be forgotten that it is much easier to heap up material than to utilize it. It is easy for the dictionary compiler to brag of the tons of material, the millions of slips that have been collected for him, but when it comes to sorting these slips according to the meanings of the words, and weighing the evidence of each, he often wishes he had started with a ton or two less.

With these words in mind I looked at my own accumulation of slips (still manageable though little short of a ton, it seemed) and, as Sweet put it, 'pausing to review my gains from a higher and freer point of view', sought a means of avoiding the possible fate described by him as 'sinking into a monomaniac machine incapable of any higher work'. Fortunately, I had for many years been aware of that most difficult area of English for the foreign learner: the so-called phrasal and prepositional verbs. If some hiving off were possible, here was a ready-made category of idiomatic expressions that called out for a more thorough description, clarification and illustration than it had hitherto received, numerous though the collections (in monolingual and bilingual books of reference) had been. They seemed to be worthy of a volume in their own right. Conscious that the description of these constructions was far from complete, I urged Tony Cowie, who was in 1963–64 a postgraduate student at the then School (now Department) of Applied Linguistics in the University of Edinburgh, to make this the subject of his Dissertation. He did so with enthusiasm and produced an analysis of the categories, though making use of a smaller corpus than I had gathered.⁸ Subsequently, he joined me in the writing up and editing of the *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English, Volume 1*. However, mindful of Professor J R Firth's⁹ stress on 'collocation' as a means of determining meaning and indeed as part of the meaning of a word or phrase, I proposed that we should make 'collocation' a feature of this Dictionary. Thus it is that, for the first time I believe, there took shape an idiomatic dictionary that combined original up-to-date citations with discrete meanings enlightened if not almost 'defined' by listed collocations, all within a rigorously described grammatical system. This system was presented in a detailed Introduction, the work of Tony Cowie, who also wrote up over half of the entries.

While we were wrestling with Volume 1, I had to address myself to the problem of what was to be done with the huge number of expressions that I had collected which lay outside the broadest definition of *Verbs with Prepositions and Particles*, the title of Volume 1. My interest in linguistics, and in the founding and early development of The British Association for Applied Linguistics, led inevitably to my meeting Dr Peter Wexler, now Reader in the Department of Language and Linguistics at Essex University, but then work-

⁷H Sweet: *The Practical Study of Languages*, 1st edn, London, 1899; revised edn, London, 1964.

⁸At least one valuable study had already been made (T F Mitchell: 'Syntagmatic relations in linguistic analysis' in *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1958, pp 101–18). Tony extended Professor Mitchell's basic categories of 'phrasal verb' from four to six.

⁹Professor Firth had been a colleague of mine for all too brief a period in 1958 at the School of Applied Linguistics.

ing at Manchester University on the application of computer technology to linguistic analysis and allied problems. He had access to the giant steam-age computer named Atlas and arranged for my endless examples to be programmed for sorting into alphabetical order – a case of taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut if ever there was one. Nevertheless, it was an enormous relief to have this chore taken over by a machine, and I hereby record my thanks to Peter and his monster, Atlas. The complexities of dealing with the headphrases in this present Volume 2 have been dealt with by the umpteenth Son of Atlas and the sweat of brows other than mine!

In working out ways of presenting what we have now come to describe as *Phrase, Clause and Sentence Idioms*, the title of Volume 2, I considered many other possible groupings: grammatical categories; notions (as now featuring in *The Threshold Level*¹⁰); etymological groupings; proverbs; catchwords; clichés; and so on, including that proposed by Harold Palmer in the *Second Interim Report on English Collocations* (IRET, Tokyo, 1933). However, I eventually rejected them all in favour of an alphabetical ordering, to be supplemented by as comprehensive an Index as possible, containing not only an alphabetically-arranged list of other words in each headphrase, but also many of the collocates as well.

Prevented by *force majeure* from making any worthwhile progress on this volume, in 1969 I invited Isabel McCaig to undertake the writing up of the material, and she agreed, with the happy consequences that will soon become apparent to the reader. We were, of course, conscious that the entries could not be related as neatly as those of Volume 1 to a limited grammar that could be offered as an explanatory system in the Introduction: we were concerned with nothing less than the whole grammar of English. As we proceeded with the entries, providing collocational information similar to that of Volume 1, and some grammatical categorization, we realized that the problems relating to the latter were too complex to be dealt with by means of the improvised 'code' we were then using. So we were very glad at this point to press Tony Cowie back into service after a period of heavy commitments elsewhere. With his help the new system evolved quite quickly from 1976 on. During the years 1976 to 1980 Isabel McCaig patiently wrote and rewrote her earlier drafts of the entries, adapting them all to the changes that were agreed upon at numerous editorial meetings. While doing so her own reading led to an enormous increase in the number of quotations available to her: some more apposite than those I had already collected, others containing phrases for which I had provided her with no example at all. Her thoughtful, pithily expressed definitions and the cleverly constructed illustrations that she abundantly provided to supplement the 'authentic' quotations in order to cover additional meanings for which no suitable ones were available, will, I am convinced, add hugely to the user's enjoyment and satisfaction in reading through this wide-ranging collection of idiomatic expressions. The editor-in-charge at Oxford during this crucial period between 1976 and 1980 was Jonathan W Price.

In the course of our collaboration, the text was organized, amended and added to, notably by Tony Cowie. For a time Robin Laidlaw generously gave us his help, working on the details of entries for several letters, as well as attending editorial meetings at which his contributions were always helpful. But it is Tony Cowie's midnight oil that has burned longest of recent years. As in Volume 1, the Introduction has been prepared by him. In it he explains the coherent scheme of idiomaticity which he has developed from the happy combination of his own independent work in the field and the work done by Isabel McCaig and me.

¹⁰J A van Ek: *The Threshold Level*, Strasbourg, 1976.

Since 1981 the production of the Dictionary has been in the capable hands of Marion Strachan at Oxford. She has worked hard and single-mindedly to ensure that it did not gather dust. It has been for her a demanding but I hope a not unrewarding or too exhausting a task.

All three authors wish to record their thanks also to Simon Nugent, who dealt with Volume 2 in its early stages; to Christina Ruse, who, as editor of the Educational Reference section at OUP, for a time helped us with many valuable suggestions; and to Lesley Jeffries, Rosemary Sansome and Penny Willis, all of Leeds University, for their careful scrutiny of the Introduction.

I wish to record my personal thanks to all those mentioned above; to others in the Press whom I do not know, but of whose efforts I am always conscious; to innumerable friends and acquaintances who have wittingly or unwittingly contributed to the book; to members of my own family; but above all to my wife Marian, whose tolerance and help have been exemplary. She it is who has often reassured me by providing the missing words in an incomplete phrase at any time of the day or night.

Ronald Mackin

Colchester 1983

General Introduction

The accurate and appropriate use of English expressions which are in the broadest sense idiomatic is one distinguishing mark of a native command of the language and a reliable measure of the proficiency of foreign learners. We can go beyond simple observation of the usage of such students and ask them whether the noun in a *chequered career* or the verb in *catch someone's imagination* can be replaced. If they recognize a *chequered history* or *seize someone's imagination*, they have a sense of fine lexical tolerances which surpasses that of many British undergraduates.

However, such are the semantic and structural problems posed by idioms that many students view them with the trepidation of a man approaching a well-planted minefield. Of all the difficulties the most familiar is that of meaning: to the learner, idioms such as *fill the bill* or *spill the beans* do not mean what they appear to mean. The sense of the whole cannot be arrived at from a prior understanding of the parts. In those examples, a special meaning is attached to the whole expression. In others, one word may have a common, literal meaning, while the other has a specialized sense which may be difficult to grasp. Examples of such 'semi-idioms' are *foot the bill* and *sink one's differences* (where the first word in both cases has a figurative meaning).

The complexities can be formidable, so that the student needs precise guidance, often in considerable detail. It is with the aim of providing such information in depth that the *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* has been compiled. Work on the Dictionary, which is now completed by the publication of the second volume, extends over more than twenty years. Two volumes were decided on at an early stage. In the course of preparing Volume 2 we discussed many expressions that, because of their construction, we decided ought more properly to go into a second edition of Volume 1. Most of these had been considered at first to be simple prepositional phrases (e.g. *in the limelight*, *in the family way*, *(up) in the clouds*) but since their meanings depended on the presence of a verb – often the verb was *be*, or *get*, or some other equally common – we concluded that they should be held back. A revised edition of Volume 1 will appear and any expressions that have fallen between the two stools will be rescued and incorporated therein.

Uniformity of grammatical treatment in the first volume was made possible by limiting it to a small range of idiom-types (verbs with particles or prepositions). The present volume is grammatically heterogeneous (though there are certain dominant phrase and clause patterns); but the view of idiom which informs both volumes is the same; and users familiar with the layout and typography of Volume 1 will find few changes in the internal organization of entries.

An important feature of the whole Dictionary is that the grammatical and semantic description of idioms is supported by quotations from a variety of contemporary sources, both written and spoken. Most of the examples are drawn from an analysis of works of fiction, biography, history etc which was specially undertaken to provide illustrations for the Dictionary. As the drafting of entries proceeded, this collection of upwards of 30,000 recorded excerpts was added to from time to time, especially from such sources as the daily and weekly press, and radio and television broadcasts. Further substantial additions were made after 1971, when work began on the second volume.

The scope of the present volume is explained in some detail below (0.1). We set out some of the grammatical types represented here and discuss the nature of idiomaticity itself, showing how the criteria adopted are used to decide

which entries to include. The second part of the Introduction (0.2) describes features of the entries which are specifically designed to help in the learning and teaching of idioms.

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0.1

To turn from Volume 1 to Volume 2 is to be reminded of the enormous structural variety of English idioms. Those treated in the first volume could be allocated to six related clause patterns; those dealt with here are found in phrase patterns – *a bargain basement, easy on the eye, in the nick of time* – subject-less clause patterns – *cut one's losses, paint the town red, pay sb a compliment* – and simple or complex sentence patterns – *one swallow does not make a summer, give sb an inch and he'll take a mile*. This is to give but a small sample of the great range of construction types represented.

The spread is considerable, yet the majority of entries can be classified under two general headings – *phrase idioms* and *clause idioms*. Within these major groupings are several dominant sub-categories (each of which is given detailed tabular treatment in the front matter (⇨ *The content and arrangement of the entries*, 3.0)). The most common *clause* patterns spanned by idioms, for instance, are the following:

Verb + Complement	go berserk
Verb + Direct Object	ease sb's conscience/mind
Verb + Direct Object + Complement	paint the town red
Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object	do sb credit
Verb + Direct Object + Adjunct	take sth amiss

while the most commonly occurring *phrase* patterns are these:

Noun Phrase	a crashing bore
Adjective Phrase	free with one's money etc
Prepositional Phrase	in the nick of time
Adverbial Phrase	as often as not

In this necessarily selective survey of the grammatical patterns in which expressions are found, the term 'idiom' has been applied without distinction as to pattern. The view taken here – as in Volume 1 – is that idiomaticity is largely a semantic matter, and that it is manifested in much the same way in expressions of different structural types. How then can idiomaticity itself be recognized and defined? Here it will be best to consider under separate headings the rather complex issues that face the analyst and the dictionary-maker.

1 How in practice do we decide whether a particular expression is idiomatic or not? We may sense that *fill the sink* as used in

She filled the sink with hot water.

is not idiomatic, while *fill the bill* ('be satisfactory or adequate for a purpose') as in

Sometimes solid food doesn't fill the bill.

is idiomatic. What kinds of criteria can be called upon in support of our intuitions?

2 Is the distinction between idioms and non-idioms clear-cut, or do the two categories shade off into each other?

3 What criteria in particular must expressions satisfy to merit inclusion in the Dictionary?

4 Finally, how do the conclusions we reach as to the idiomaticity of individual items affect the way they are categorized grammatically? If *fill the bill* is shown to be a unit of meaning in some ways comparable to a single word (cf *satisfy, suit*) why not simply classify it as 'verb', rather than as an instance of a Verb + Direct Object construction (the second of the clause patterns listed just above)?

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In considering these questions, undue complication will be avoided if the discussion is limited to idioms of a few structural types. Here we shall confine ourselves to two: (i) noun phrases containing an adjective and a noun (e.g. *a chequered career, a blind alley, an eager beaver*); (ii) clauses consisting of a verb and a direct object (e.g. *catch sb's imagination, jog one's/sb's memory, blow the gaff*). We shall return later to the more complex cases and especially to those idioms which span whole sentences.

The best-known approach to the definition of idiomaticity, and one which linguists as well as dictionary-makers have helped to popularize, fastens on the difficulty of interpreting idioms in terms of the meanings of their constituent words. Definitions such as the following are representative of this approach:

... groups of words with set meanings that cannot be calculated by adding up the separate meanings of the parts.¹

... peculiarity of phraseology ... having meaning not deducible from those of the separate words ...²

However, defining idioms in a way which throws emphasis on ease or difficulty of interpretation leaves a great deal unsaid. This characterization does, it is true, identify what is odd about an expression such as *blow the gaff* (or *kick the bucket*). Moreover, certain tests appear to bear out the appropriateness of the judgement in such cases. Thus it is impossible to find acceptable substitutes for the noun or verb in either of those expressions. Consider **puff the gaff* and **kick the pail*. In addition, the object noun cannot be replaced by a pronoun in a subsequent mention of the idiom:

?I expected him to blow the gaff and blow it he did.

This can be compared with the altogether acceptable:

I asked him to fill the sink, but not to fill it to overflowing.

However, an approach based simply on the semantic opaqueness (or transparency) of whole combinations yields a very small class of idioms. It leaves out of account, for example, an important group of expressions which have figurative meanings (in terms of the whole combination in each case) but which also keep a current literal interpretation. Among such 'figurative idioms' are *catch fire* and *close ranks*. There is other evidence, too, especially the fact that a small number of words can be substituted in expressions often regarded as opaque (consider *burn one's boats* or *bridges*), that idioms are not divided as a small water-tight category from non-idioms but are related to them along a scale or continuum (▷ Volume 1, p.x).

A view of idiomaticity which does full justice to the rich diversity of word-combinations in English must recognize that the meaning of a combination may be related to those of its components in a variety of ways, and must take account also of the possibility of internal variation, or substitution of part for part. The application of both criteria together produces a complex categorization.³

(i) *Pure idioms*. Though discussions of idiomaticity at both a technical and non-technical level are usually limited to the type illustrated by *blow the gaff* and *kick the bucket* (surely the most often quoted idiom of all), idioms in the strict sense comprise only one, and certainly not the largest, of a spectrum of related categories. Historically, pure idioms form the end-point of a process by which word-combinations first establish themselves through constant re-use, then undergo figurative extension and finally petrify or congeal.⁴

¹D Bolinger: *Aspects of Language*, 2nd edn, New York, 1975.

²J B Sykes (ed): *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 7th edn, Oxford, 1982.

³For a more detailed treatment, see A P Cowie: 'The treatment of collocations and idioms in learners' dictionaries', in: *Applied Linguistics* 3/1981, pp 223-35.

⁴The term 'petrification' is aptly used of various types of meaning-development by Geoffrey Leech in: *Semantics*, 2nd edn, Harmondsworth, 1981.

(ii) *Figurative idioms*. This category has already been identified. It is idiomatic in the sense that variation is seldom found (though note *act the part or role: a close, narrow shave*) and pronoun substitution unlikely (though consider *Bill had a narrow shave and Fred an even narrower one*). The merging of this group into that of pure idioms is illustrated by such expressions as *beat one's breast* and (again) *burn one's boats*. The literal senses of these expressions do not survive alongside their figurative ones in normal, everyday use and for some speakers they may indeed be unrelatable. For such speakers the expressions fall into the category of pure idioms.

(iii) *Restricted collocations*. In such combinations, sometimes referred to as 'semi-idioms', one word (ie in the case of two-word expressions) has a figurative sense not found outside that limited context. The other element appears in a familiar, literal sense (cf the verb and noun, respectively, in *jog one's/sb's memory*) and the adjective and noun in *a blind alley*. Some members of this category allow a degree of lexical variation (consider, for instance, *a cardinal error, sin, virtue, grace*), and in this respect 'restricted' collocations resemble 'open' ones (see below). Another point of similarity is that the 'literal' element is sometimes replaced by a pronoun, or deleted altogether, in sentences where there is an earlier use of the full expression:

The Board didn't entertain the idea, and the Senate wouldn't entertain it either. Bloggs had a rather chequered career, and I've heard it said that Blenkinsop's was equally chequered (or: *an equally chequered one*).

In other respects, however, restricted collocations are idiom-like. The particular sense which *jog* has in *jog one's/sb's memory* occurs in no other context, while that of *chequered* is limited to collocations with *career* and *history*. It is the determination of a special meaning by a limited context which argues for the inclusion of such expressions in an 'idiomatic' dictionary.

(iv) *Open collocations*. Most sharply and easily distinguished from idioms in the strict sense are combinations such as *fill the sink* (already referred to) and *a broken window*. The use of the terms 'open', 'free' or 'loose' to refer to such collocations reflects the fact that, in each case, both elements (verb and object, or adjective and noun) are freely recombinable, as for example in *fill, empty, drain the sink* and *fill the sink, basin, bucket*. Typically also, in open collocations, each element is used in a common literal sense.

What has been said of the relationship between idioms and non-idioms occurring in two types of pattern (verb + direct object and adjective + noun) holds true of other construction types. Clause patterns containing a complement in addition to an object, for example, subsume figurative idioms (*bleed sb white*) as well as restricted collocations (*catch sb red-handed*). So do prepositional phrases: compare *in a nutshell* (idiom) with *in the raw* (collocation).

We have discussed the nature of idiomaticity in some depth partly to throw light on the problem of deciding which word-combinations to include in a dictionary which has 'idiomatic' as part of its title. In the spectrum of categories set out earlier in this Introduction, two were identified as 'idiomatic'; clearly items belonging to those categories must be recorded. As regards the central area – the restricted collocations – we have suggested that there are strong arguments for covering that also. On the other hand, we have been careful to exclude open collocations as defined in section (iv). The Dictionary will not, for example, be found to include an entry for *on one's return* since *on* in the sense 'at the time of' can be combined with a number of other nouns: *arrival, departure, demise, death, dismissal*. There are, however, a number of borderline problems which are not so easily resolved. In doubtful cases we have tended to be accommodating, so that some combinations in which both or all the constituents are used in a straightforward sense have been included. The

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expression *a fair question* is listed, for example, because while both adjective and noun occur in several other contexts (*a fair settlement*, *a reasonable question*), *a fair question* is the collocation most often heard in debates or discussions. Regular users of the Dictionary will note also that we have been liberal in including expressions one or more of whose key elements is a 'grammatical' word – a modal verb, for example, or a subordinating conjunction. The entries *can't hear oneself think*, *can't help oneself*, *can't help doing sth* are among several introduced by modal auxiliaries. Finally, users will note that where a figurative idiom has a literal equivalent in current use, the latter is sometimes given an entry of its own, as in the following example:

do you mind?¹ an enquiry as to whether sb objects to some action or event
do you mind?² an expression of objection, sometimes aggressive, to sth which is occurring . . .

We can now return to the question of grammatical classification that was raised earlier. If it is true that highly idiomatic expressions tend in some ways to resemble single words, should this unity be reflected in the way they are grammatically described in dictionary entries?

One answer would be to say they should, and to describe such idioms as *a red herring* and *a sacred cow* as nouns. This is the practice in certain general English dictionaries which, following well-established American precedents, treat idiomatic noun phrases as main entries.⁸ However, the labelling (if not the separate listing) is open to criticism. As we have seen there is no clear dividing-line between idioms and non-idioms: they form the end-points of a continuum. That being so, the question is raised of how semi-idioms (restricted collocations) are to be designated. To call such combinations as *the cold war* or *a narrow escape* 'nouns' would not accord with the fact that *war* and *escape* can function with unchanged meaning in other, non-idiomatic, phrases (cf *a conventional war*, *a remarkable escape*) or that in certain noun phrase idioms, though not in all, the adjective has a comparative form (*an even narrower escape*). On balance it seems preferable to classify expressions of this structural type as noun phrases, drawing no distinction in doing so between the more and the less idiomatic cases. This approach has the advantage of enabling us to speak of *a sacred cow* as a unit of meaning (and the parts of *the simple life* as tightly bound together) while at the same time leaving us free to account for possible syntactic mobility or modification.

The same general principles govern the recognition of other syntactic patterns. Consider, for example, the case of *kick the bucket* and *blow the gaff*. One approach, taking account of the semantic fusion of the parts, would be to treat the expressions as intransitive verbs. To do so, however, would leave the lexicographer with no means of accounting for those pure idioms (such as *blow the gaff*) which allow a passive transformation (cf *the gaff was blown*), since the specification of this structural change requires the recognition of an independent direct object which, as shown in the example, moves forward to become the subject of the passive clause. An appropriate designation in such cases would be 'Verb (transitive) + Direct Object', and this labelling, in the abbreviated form [V + O], appears in the entries concerned.

Idioms of the types considered throughout this Introduction (phrases and subject-less clauses) occupy syntactic units longer than the word but smaller than a complete simple sentence. Indeed, many linguists would take the view that nothing more extensive should concern the student of idiomaticity. However, there are good grounds for treating as idiomatic certain expressions which span simple or complex sentences. Their claim to be included in a dictionary of idiomatic English merits careful consideration.

⁸See *red herring n*, *sacred cow n*, in: *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Springfield, Massachusetts, 1966.

We are concerned with combinations such as:

the early bird catches the worm
when/while the cat's away the mice will play
the buck stops here
if one believes that, one will believe anything

One fact that calls for immediate comment is that the first two expressions have some of the hallmarks of figurative idioms, as identified earlier. Thus *the early bird catches the worm* is both metaphorical in origin and invariable in form (**the early cat catches the mouse* though recognizably a reworking of the original is clearly a nonce variation – of which more later). Moreover, when acceptable variation is found, as in *give sb an inch and he'll take a mile/a yard/an ell*, it is characteristically limited. The general class of sentence idioms also appears to include some items that have moved to total opaqueness. Many native speakers, for example, will be unable to trace the reference to 'a buck' (in *the buck stops here*) to the game of poker. For others, the precise literary origin of *the emperor has no clothes* will be equally obscure.

Most, if not all, of the examples already cited will be recognized by native speakers as falling within long-established functional categories. Thus *the early bird catches the worm* is a well-known saying or proverb, while *the buck stops here* is a somewhat less familiar catchphrase. No attempt is made in this volume to match in range or fullness of historical documentation the authoritative treatments of English sayings and catchphrases which already exist.* Our aim, rather, has been to focus on aspects of their structure and use in present-day English which will be of particular interest to advanced foreign students.

One such feature is that proverbs and catchphrases may be structurally shortened for a variety of reasons and with a number of effects. Traditional sayings of a given structural type tend to be used in a narrow and stereotyped set of functions. Thus *a stitch in time saves nine* and *the early bird catches the worm* are typically used to comment approvingly on timely or judicious action or to reinforce a recommendation. Often it will be felt sufficient to hint at the whole by the use of a part, as in such utterances as '*A stitch in time, you know!*' Sometimes, the fragment will take on a life of its own as a phrase idiom, as is the case with *an early bird*. This coexists in present-day usage alongside the saying from which it originated and is granted a separate entry in this volume.

Although individual sayings occasionally develop special functions, catchphrases characteristically do so. Catchphrases normally originate with a popular entertainer – when they serve much the same purpose as a signature tune – or with a well-known public figure. *The buck stops here* and *if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen* were first spoken by the late President Truman; and their association with him, combined with the vigour and freshness of his language, ensured that they were taken up and repeated more widely. As in many similar cases, both the function and form of these catchphrases are varied from time to time, as the following quotation from an article on the Vietnam war makes clear:

The harsh truth is that ~~the~~ buck started here (i.e. in the US) and that it stops here as well.

This example of nonce variation in an expression whose original form is well-known brings us to a final point. Sentence idioms in particular are commonly refashioned by native speakers to achieve a variety of striking effects. The effect may be a pun, as when an element in a fixed expression is replaced

*See especially: W G Smith: *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, 3rd edn, Oxford, 1970; and E Partridge: *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases*, London 1977.

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by a similar-sounding but semantically incongruous word:

(add to) the gaiety of nations (catchphrase) ... (NONCE) *Whatever else he does he will surely add to the gaiety of NATO.*

Or the device may be to take an existing semantic contrast – say between words of ‘favourable’ and ‘unfavourable’ meaning – and vary the words which carry that contrast:

The way one man's meat is another man's poison, so one woman's ideal husband is another woman's pain in the neck.

The achievement of humorous effects by the manipulation of idioms normally regarded as fixed calls for a degree of cultural or literary awareness possessed only by mature native speakers of English.⁷ But of course the advanced foreign student can be helped to use and vary idioms in ways which will be thought normal and regular. It is with design features which are intended to provide such help that the second part of this Introduction is concerned.

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This Dictionary has been designed primarily for the foreign student, so it is chiefly his or her needs which we have had in mind when deciding what information about individual entries to include, and how to present it. Dictionaries for the foreign student must be organized to help with problems of production as well as interpretation, and both volumes of this work incorporate a number of special features which are intended to encourage the confident use of idiomatic expressions. Three features are singled out for special mention here: the use of special conventions in headphrases to show limited lexical choice; the inclusion in most entries of words with which the headphrase can co-occur, or collocate; and guidance about special kinds of idioms which can be used to link sentences, or exchanges between speakers, together.

As we explained in the first part of the Introduction, the vocabulary of English contains many expressions that are semi-fixed, or partially variable, in their form. Variability may mean the possibility of substituting one word or several words at one or more points – consider, for example, *a matter, problem or question of academic interest or concern*. Knowing how many words, and which words, to substitute is important for the learner, because failure to make the right choices may result in combinations that no native speaker would produce. (It is for this reason, among others, that many foreign learners steer clear of English idioms altogether.) The student therefore needs clear guidance on these fine points of lexical detail. Fortunately it is often possible to provide such information clearly and simply through the headphrase (the phrase or clause in bold print which introduces dictionary entries).

When the student has to deal with a ‘restricted collocation’ (a semi-idiomatic expression which allows internal variation) there may in fact be a choice between two words which are related in meaning. In such cases these words are divided by an oblique stroke:

(as) clever/smart as paint
take the biscuit/cake
in the long/short run

Or the choice may be wider, in which case **etc** is placed in the headphrase after the word for which others can be substituted, and the full range of possible alternatives appears lower down in the entry:

cut a fine etc figure ... adj: fine, Δ handsome, neat; sorry, ridiculous, abject.

⁷See: R Mackin: ‘On collocations: “Words shall be known by the company they keep”’, in: P Strevens (ed): *In honour of A S Hornby*, Oxford, 1978.