

ENGLISH COLLOQUIAL IDIOMS

FREDERICK T. WOOD

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By the same author

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ENGLISH PREPOSITIONAL IDIOMS

ENGLISH VERBAL IDIOMS

A PRELIMINARY ENGLISH COURSE

A JUNIOR ENGLISH COURSE

A MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGLISH COURSE

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EXERCISES IN PROSE INTERPRETATION

TRAINING IN THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION

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THE USE OF ENGLISH

A REMEDIAL ENGLISH GRAMMAR FOR FOREIGN STUDENTS

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The late Dr Wood intended to supply a preface to his book discussing the problem of defining the term 'colloquial' but he died before completing it.

A

A.1 (A-One). Excellent: first-class: good in every respect. Originally used by Lloyd's Register of Shipping in the classification of vessels as regards general condition, seaworthiness, etc. Colloquially, used as a term of high commendation for anything. The *Oxford Dictionary* gives the following two examples.

'He must be a first-rater,' said Sam.

'A 1', replied Mr Roker.

(Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*)

The Chinese police are certainly A 1 at such work. (*Reynolds's Newspaper*, 24 Nov. 1861)

ABIDE. Bear: endure: put up with. (Usually used in the negative, *cannot abide*.)

I can't abide people who are always boasting of their own achievements.

I can't abide a butcher,

I can't abide his meat,

The ugliest shop of all is his,

The ugliest in the street.

(Walter de la Mare, 'I Can't Abear')

ABOUT. Note the colloquial construction *it is* + adjective + *about* + noun, where *about* refers to a notion implied in *it* + the noun, and understood from the context or situation.

It's very sad about Mrs Brown, isn't it? (i.e. she has died, been injured, or suffered some misfortune).

It's unfortunate about your holiday (i.e. that you have had to cancel it, change the date, etc.).

ABSOLUTE. Used for purposes of emphasis, with a meaning approximating to 'complete', e.g. *an absolute fool*, *an absolute nuisance*, *an absolute pleasure*, *an absolute treat*.

Hence *absolutely* = completely.

It is absolutely stupid to say that.

It absolutely poured with rain.

You can trust him to be absolutely fair.

ACHES AND PAINS. A cliché used to denote physical pains of various kinds.

I wish she would be a bit more cheerful; she is always complaining of her aches and pains.

ACTUALLY. Used to suggest that the fact stated would seem incredible.

The unscrupulous fellow actually robbed his own mother.

Sometimes used also as an exclamation to express surprise or incredulity.

After cheating me in that way he had the cheek to ask me for a loan of five pounds.—Actually!

ADAM. *As old as Adam.* Of great antiquity: going back a long way in history. (Sometimes used in the literal sense of 'to the beginning of the human race', but more often as hyperbole.)

That custom is as old as Adam.

I shouldn't know him from Adam. I should be quite unable to recognise him.

I knew him when we were at school together, but that's many years ago. If I were to meet him today I shouldn't know him from Adam.

Sometimes used also, though illogically, of a woman. There is no equivalent idiom *I shouldn't know her from Eve*.

The old Adam. Unregenerate human nature.

Despite many centuries of civilisation, there is still a bit of the old Adam in all of us.

ADVERT or AD (noun). An abbreviated form of *advertisement*, sometimes heard in spoken English (e.g. *put an advert in the newspaper*), but usually regarded as a vulgarism or illiteracy.

AFFAIR. Used loosely in the sense of 'thing', 'object', or even 'piece of work' or 'performance'.

What's that strange-looking affair over there?

His car is only a second-hand affair.

The concert was rather an amateurish affair.

Usually used disparagingly, though not necessarily so. It is quite possible to describe something as 'rather a neat little affair'.

AFTER ALL. 1. Contrary to what was supposed or expected.

I managed to get to the meeting after all.

We took our raincoats with us, but we did not need them after all.

2. When everything else is taken into consideration.

Jack may have treated you rather shabbily, but if he is in serious difficulties I think you should help him. After all, he is your brother.

AGE. See AGES

AGES. A very long time.

It has taken me ages to get this garden in order.

That happened ages ago. I have not been to the pictures [i.e. the cinema] for ages.

An age is also used with a similar meaning (e.g. *a few minutes that seemed like an age*), but this is mainly in literary and more formal spoken English.

For *this day and age*, see under DAY

ALIVE AND KICKING. Very vigorous and active.

I thought your grandfather was dead.—Far from it; he is very much alive and kicking.

The reference may originally have been to a new-born baby.

ALIVE WITH. Infested with living creatures of a verminous or destructive kind.

All my best cabbages were alive with caterpillars.

Figuratively:

The town was alive with rumours of one sort and another.

ALL AGOG. In a state of excited expectancy.

The children were all agog to hear the story.

ALL ALONG. From the very beginning of an affair, project, etc.

I said all along that he was not a person to be trusted, but you would not listen to me.

ALL AND SUNDRY. Strictly, all taken collectively and individually, but in colloquial usage merely a periphrasis for *all* or *everyone*.

We shall have to restrict the number of guests; we can't invite all and sundry.

ALL AT ONCE. Suddenly.

I had been puzzling over the problem for over an hour without any result, when all at once the solution flashed across my mind.

All at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils.

(Wordsworth, 'The Daffodils')

(But this idiom must not be confused with the same sequence of words in such a sentence as *We shall have to make several journeys for the goods; we cannot take them all at once*. Here *all* is part of the object of *take*, and *at once* is an adverb phrase meaning 'in a single operation'.)

ALL AT SEA. Completely confused.

The guide was ready enough with his usual patter on the history of the place, but as soon as you began to question him on anything outside that, he was all at sea.

ALL BUT. Nearly: almost. (Used mainly before adjectives and past participles, but sometimes also before finite verbs.)

The new building was all but complete when it was destroyed by fire.

The work is all but finished.

She all but wept when she heard the news.

ALL FOR. Entirely or completely in favour of.

I'm all for anything that makes life easier.

As usual, John was all for going; taking the risk, and getting out of Germany. But Peter was cautious. (Eric Williams, *The Wooden Horse*, Phase II, ch. ix)

ALL IN. Everything included.

I reckon it costs me two hundred pounds a year to run my car, all in.

On top of his wages he gets tips and various other perquisites, so that he probably makes the equivalent of about twenty-five pounds a week, all in.

ALL IN GOOD TIME. In due course: when a suitable or opportune time arrives.

When are you coming to do those repairs to the roof of my house? It was over a fortnight ago that I asked you about them.—All in good time, madam; I haven't forgotten.

ALL MANNER OF. All kinds of.

They asked me all manner of questions.

He'll give you all manner of excuses for his absence.

ALL MY EYE. A term of contempt, used to show that one does not believe a story, a statement, etc.

He told you he was never given the instructions? That's all my eye. Why, I gave them to him myself.

A variant is *All my eye and Betty Martin*.

ALL OF A . . . Followed by a verb stem to denote :

(a) an uncontrollable nervous movement, as *all of a tremble*, *all of a flutter*, *all of a dither*, *all of a twitch*, *all of a fidget* ;

(b) a state or condition that is thought of as a defect of the thing so described, as *all of a skew*, *all of a tilt*, *all of a slope*.

Occasionally a noun may be used, as *all of a heap*.

ALL OF A SUDDEN. Suddenly.

All of a sudden a man burst out of the hedge, and made off down the road.

ALL ONE CAN DO. Preceded by *It is/was* and followed by an infinitive or infinitive construction, to suggest great difficulty in doing what is stated in the infinitive.

It's all we can do to keep ourselves in food and clothing; holidays are out of the question.

It was all I could do to refrain from laughing.

The thieves drove so fast that it was all the police could do to keep up with them.

ALL OUT. See **GO ALL OUT**

ALL OVER. 1. Covered with.

His shoes were all over mud. His hands were all over grease.

2. Finished (suggesting defeat, failure or death).

Preceded by *It is/was/will be* and followed by *with*.

If the patient has another relapse, I am afraid it will be all over with him.

When our opponents scored another goal only a few minutes from the end of the match, we knew it was all over with us.

3. Everywhere : over a wide area. (Probably a shortened form of *all over the place*, for which see next entry.)

We've been looking for you all over.

4. Exactly characteristic of the person in question.
 You say he refused to buy the goods unless he was allowed a discount? I'm not surprised. That's John all over. Always wanting things on the cheap.

ALL OVER THE PLACE. In many different places.

When you've finished playing with your toys, put them back in the toy cupboard; don't leave them lying all over the place. I've searched all over the place for that lost ring, but I've not found it.

Variants, bordering on slang, are *all over the show* and *all over the shop*.

ALL OVER THE SHOP. See **ALL OVER THE PLACE**

ALL OVER THE SHOW. See **ALL OVER THE PLACE**

ALL RIGHT. 1. Satisfactory.

Will it be all right if I let you have the information by next Friday?

If the arrangement is all right with you, it's all right with me.

2. In a satisfactory state, condition or position.

I've not been very well, but I'm all right now.

Are you all right for money?

He doesn't care what happens to anybody else, so long as he's all right.

3. Used to suggest, in a general way, the absence of any objection, or of any need for concern or alarm.

Is it all right for me to see the patient for a few minutes?

It's all right; don't make a fuss; there's no harm done.

4. Used to express approval, consent or agreement.

All right, I'll meet you at seven o'clock, then.

Might I leave a quarter of an hour earlier today?—All right, but see that all the letters are ready for posting before you go.

Sometimes used sarcastically, or to express impatience or annoyance.

All right, do it your own way, but don't blame me if you come to grief.

5. To link one stage of an explanation, a piece of exposition, etc., to the next.

You have followed the explanation so far? All right, now we come to the second stage. (In speech the stress is on *right*.)

6. To preface a threat.
All right, my lad, if you won't do what you're told you must take the consequences.
7. To convey the idea of 'going the right way', 'on the right road'.
Am I all right for Bristol on this road?
Is this train all right for Birmingham?
8. Used for purposes of emphasis, with the meaning 'certainly', 'without doubt'.
He's dead all right.
9. Used to express the idea of 'quite capable of doing whatever is specified'. (Usually implying that there is a common belief or pretence to the contrary.)
Don't take any notice of the excuse that he could not understand the document because it was in English. He can understand English all right when it suits his purpose.

ALL ROUND. 1. To every member of a group or company.

The organiser of the expedition stood us drinks all round.

2. In every subject, branch or department.

It is difficult to say which is his best subject; he seems equally good all round.

Hence (attributively) *an all-round sportsman*.

ALL THAT. 1. *Not as bad/dear/old/hot as all that.* As would seem to be suggested or implied.

There is no need to get alarmed; things are not as bad as all that.

Merely because I'm grey-headed, don't imagine that I'm drawing the old age pension; I'm not as old as all that.

You needn't open all the windows; it's not as hot as all that.

2. Before an adjective or an adverb, with a meaning equivalent to that of the adverb of degree *so*, or the construction *so (as) . . . as that*. (Regarded by purists as an illiteracy in written or more formal spoken English, but often used colloquially, the *that* referring to something that has been stated before.)

It wouldn't worry me to go without porridge for breakfast;

I'm not all that fond of it.

I wouldn't walk all that far, just to see an exhibition of modern art.

3. *And all that.* And other things of that kind.

By cereals we mean wheat, oats, rye, barley, and all that.

Cf. the title of the book *1066 and All That*, by W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, a humorous treatment of various episodes from history.

ALL THE ANSWERS TO ALL THE QUESTIONS. Generally used sarcastically. To say that a person 'Knows (or has) all the answers to all the questions' implies that he tries to give the impression that he can explain away all difficulties, but that his explanations are far too facile.

Browning sometimes gives us the impression, especially where religious difficulties are concerned, that he has all the answers to all the questions.

ALL THE MORE. To an even greater extent or degree.

His mother asked him to stop teasing the cat, but he only did it all the more.

Also adjectivally.

I know you find the subject difficult, but that is all the more reason why you should work hard at it.

ALL THE RAGE. Very popular. Arousing great interest, excitement or enthusiasm. (Usually the suggestion is that the enthusiasm surpasses reasonable limits.)

For a few years black leather jackets were all the rage among teenagers; then new fashions took their place.

ALL THE SAME. 1. Making no difference.

I think I should prefer to go on Friday, if it's all the same to you.

Sometimes used to express apathy or indifference.

Well, there's my offer. You can either take it or leave it; it's all the same to me.

2. Nevertheless: although that is so.

Marcus. We'll take half the road each [a road that is under construction], and I'll lay five to one that my fellows carry their half a good score of paces farther than yours. . . Is it a bet?

Flavius. Yes. All the same, I hope my fellows know more about the business than I do.

(L. du Garde Peach, *The Road-Makers*)
The fall in brewery shares this year does, of course, allow for a good deal. All the same, I feel that we shall see many shares go lower yet. (*Observer*, 26 Sept. 1965)

ALL THE WORLD AND HIS WIFE. Everyone. (Usually used hyperbolically in the sense of 'a very large number of people'.)

All the world and his wife seem to be out in the country today. 'Me leave you, my precious!' cried Peggotty. 'Not for all the world and his wife. Why, what's put that into your silly little head?' (Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ch. viii)

ALL THERE. Usually used with a negative (*not all there*), in the sense of 'mentally subnormal', or positively in questions that suggest or presuppose a negative answer, e.g. *He's not all there*, *Do you think he's all there?* The positive use in statements generally means 'having all one's wits about one', or 'intellectually alert'.

He's all there, is George. You won't take him in easily.

ALL TO THE GOOD. So much the better.

We have had six offers of help. If more volunteer, all to the good.

ALL UP WITH. The end of one's life, hopes, something one has been striving for, etc. (Preceded by *it is/was*, etc.)

As the enemy closed in, the faithful band of defenders realised that it was all up with them.

ALL VERY WELL. Used sarcastically or ironically, to express disagreement, dissent or objection. The idea is that a suggestion, advice, etc., is sound enough in itself, but in the situation in question it is impracticable.

It's all very well for the doctor to tell me I need a month's holiday; but who's going to look after my business while I'm off?

ALL WELL AND GOOD. Used to express approbation of a possible contingency or situation.

If he offers to work on Saturday morning, all well and good, but I shall not ask him to.

I am opposed to spending so much public money on higher education. If a boy or girl can profit from it, all well and good; but so much of what is spent nowadays is just wasted.

ALL YOURS. Simply means 'You may have it'.

'May I borrow that newspaper, please, when you have finished with it?' — 'There you are; it's all yours.'

ALRIGHT. A mis-spelling of *all right*, which see.

AMP. Abbreviation of *ampère*, e.g. *a thirteen-amp. plug*.

ANATOMY. Body. (In this sense usually used jocularly.)

'He's alive, I tell you,' said a voice. . . 'Come and feel.'

At least fifty hands accepted the invitation, and, ignoring the threats and entreaties of Mr Blows, who was a highly ticklish subject, wandered briskly over his anatomy.

(W. W. Jacobs, *A Spirit of Avarice*)

AND. Used to co-ordinate two examples of the same noun, to suggest different kinds. The *and* is usually stressed.

There are poets and poets.

There is coffee and coffee.

In most contexts the suggestion is that one is inferior to the other, and should only be allowed the name by courtesy; but when Lytton Strachey (*Eminent Victorians*) writes of Thomas Arnold that he believed 'there were Unitarians and Unitarians', the meaning seems to be that some were more strictly Unitarian than others.

AND ALL. Including or together with whatever or whoever is mentioned before the phrase.

The elephant swallowed the buns, bag and all.

Cromwell instructed Sir Peter Lely to paint him warts and all, otherwise he would not pay a farthing for the portrait.

Old Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all. (From the song *Widdicombe Fair*)

In the regional usage of certain districts of the Midlands and northern England, *and all* is appended to a statement to give emphasis, and has something of the same meaning as *certainly*.

It's warm today, isn't it? — It is, and all.

AND ALL THAT. See **ALL THAT**

AND CO. In standard usage merely a commercial term, but in colloquial English sometimes used to mean those associated with the person named. There is often a disparaging suggestion about it.

I don't know who was responsible for the damage, but I shouldn't be surprised if it was Johnson and Co.

Cf. the title of Kipling's school story *Stalky & Co.*

AND THAT. And other things of that kind or in that class.

We spent over an hour clearing up all the waste paper and that which the trippers had left behind.

AND THEM. And the other people whom, in a particular situation or context, one associates with the person or persons named.

We are expecting Harry and them to tea (i.e. Harry and his family, or his friends).

The form of the idiom seems to be invariable, *them* being used even when it is part of a subject.

I wonder what Harry and them are doing now.

ANSWER BACK. Reply impertinently to an instruction, request, etc., when no reply is called for.

He is not really a rude or ill-mannered boy, but he has an unfortunate habit of answering back.

Also transitively, with a personal object.

I'm not going to have a child of that age answering me back.

ANYBODY. Anyone of importance, distinction, social position, etc.. We have both the ordinary and the colloquial sense of the word in such a sentence as the following:

Anybody who is anybody would not behave in that way.

ANYTHING BUT. Strictly, 'anything except', but when followed by an adjective that denotes, or a noun that implies, certain qualities or attributes, 'the very reverse or opposite of'.

The task was anything but easy.

He is anything but a gentleman.

This in itself is not colloquial; it is found in formal spoken and written English. But it becomes colloquial when the descriptive word is omitted and is left to be understood from a preceding sentence.

Was the examination easy? — Anything but.

A verb may similarly be omitted.

Did you enjoy your holiday? — Anything but.

APOLOGY FOR. Used disparagingly, to express the idea that the thing in question does not really deserve the name given it, or that it is merely a poor substitute, e.g. *an apology for champagne*, *an apology for Yorkshire pudding*.