

ENGLISH
VERBAL IDIOMS

BY
FREDERICK T. WOOD

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By the same author

A PRELIMINARY ENGLISH COURSE
A JUNIOR ENGLISH COURSE
A MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGLISH COURSE
SCHOOL CERTIFICATE EXERCISES IN ENGLISH
EXERCISES IN LITERARY APPRECIATION
EXERCISES IN PROSE INTERPRETATION
TRAINING IN THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION
AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
MODERN TRAVEL: AN ANTHOLOGY
MODERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY: AN ANTHOLOGY
THE SCHOOLBOY IN FICTION: AN ANTHOLOGY
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A COURSE IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION
CURRENT ENGLISH USAGE: A CONCISE DICTIONARY
THE USE OF ENGLISH
A REMEDIAL ENGLISH GRAMMAR FOR
FOREIGN STUDENTS
ENGLISH COLLOQUIAL IDIOMS
ENGLISH PREPOSITIONAL IDIOMS

PREFACE

THE present book is intended primarily for foreign students of English, though it is hoped that it may be useful to others also. The basis of it is those verbal compounds, so numerous in English, the meaning of which could not be easily deduced from a knowledge of the normal meaning of the constituent words. Any foreign student with a knowledge of the normal meanings of *put* and *up*, or of *fall* and *out*, would be able to understand 'put up your hand', or 'the baby fell out of the perambulator'. Such combinations, therefore, are not included. But a knowledge of the meaning of the individual words will give him no clue to such expressions as 'to put a person up for the night', 'to put up with something', 'to fall out with someone'. Or again, he will probably understand the instruction 'Don't stand on the chair', but will he understand 'Don't stand on ceremony'? It is with expressions such as these that the present volume is mainly concerned, and they probably form about nine-tenths of it. To them, however, have been added non-compounds (a) if they are used in a special sense different from the normal one with which the student may be acquainted, (b) if they are characterised by some peculiarity of usage which affects their meaning (e.g. *hung* and *hanged* as past tenses and past participles of the verb *to hang*), and (c) if they have any grammatical peculiarities to which attention should be drawn. Metaphorical uses have not generally been entered if they could be readily deduced from a knowledge of the literal meaning; if they could not (e.g. *to eat one's words*) they have been included.

It should be stated that even within the field indicated above, the book does not set out to be exhaustive. The aim has been rather to provide a guide to what might be called 'ordinary written and spoken English'. Specialised technical uses have therefore been omitted; so have most of those so-called 'idiomatic phrases', like 'to kill the fatted calf' and 'to grease the palm', which are listed in so many books on English grammar and composition, and which the foreign student likes to parade in the belief that they show his mastery of the language. My own view is that the practice should be discouraged, since it only too often has the opposite result to that intended. Many of these phrases are rarely used by English people themselves, and even those that are in commoner use are apt to appear unnatural and incongruous in the context given them by so many non-native speakers. Consequently,

I have admitted only the few that have become a normal part of everyday English and can be used with safety, provided the speaker or writer realises at what level of expression they are acceptable.

In the case of each idiom in the list, an illustrative example has been given (sometimes more than one). If it can be used in both the active and the passive voices, there is an example for each, while where a student might suppose that a passive might be possible, but where in actual fact one is rarely or never used, a note to that effect is appended.

Where it is appropriate, after the definition of meaning a note appears that the idiom or construction is literary, colloquial or slang. If no such note is given it may be assumed that the expression may be used in both normal spoken and written English. Occasionally a particular idiom is described as an Americanism, but in general American usage has been disregarded, except where it is beginning to find its way into the English of Great Britain.

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Sheffield

September 1963

A

ABIDE. The usual sense of *abide* is *stay*, though this is now archaic. There is also a colloquial use in the sense of 'endure', 'put up with', 'tolerate'. It is generally found only in negative sentences.

I can't abide that fellow.

She couldn't abide to live in poverty.

It is used only in the active voice, and usually only as an infinitive after an auxiliary verb or some part of the verb *can*.

ABIDE BY. Adhere to : remain faithful to.

Having made our decision, we must abide by it.

You must abide by the regulations.

The past tense and past participle are *abided* : 'He abided by his word', 'They have always abided by their promises'. It is not used in the passive.

ACCOUNT FOR. (1) Give a statement to show how money or property entrusted to one has been used.

She had to account to her husband for every penny she spent.

The librarian has to account for each book in his charge.

All the missing volumes have now been accounted for.

(2) Give an explanation of :

How do you account for the accident ?

The disappearance of the papers has never been accounted for.

ACQUIT ONESELF (followed by the adverbs *well*, *ill*, *creditably*, etc., or by an adverb phrase such as *with credit*, *with distinction*).

Achieve a result by one's efforts or conduct.

Considering its lack of training, our team has acquitted itself well.

Used only in the active voice.

ACT THE FOOL : ACT THE GOAT. Deliberately act in a foolish manner, often with the idea of entertaining or showing off. (Used mainly in spoken English.)

For goodness' sake stop acting the fool ; it annoys people.
 He would be quite a likeable fellow if only he wouldn't act
 the goat so much.
 Not used in the passive.

ACT UP TO (ONE'S PRINCIPLES, PROFESSION, etc.).
 Behave in such a way that one's actions are in accord with one's
 principles, etc.

He professes to have high principles, but he does not always
 act up to them.

A passive is not usual, but it is not impossible :

Principles mean very little unless they are acted up to.

ADD UP TO. Amount to, when everything is taken into con-
 sideration. (Colloquial.)

She gave many excuses, but what they added up to was that
 she did not wish to be troubled.

AGREE WITH: AGREE TO. We always agree *with* a person,
 i.e. we are of the same opinion. When a proposition or a fact is
 concerned we may either agree *with* it or agree *to* it. *Agree with*
 means 'regard with favour or approval'.

I agree with all you say.

I don't agree with giving children expensive presents.

Agree to means 'give consent to'. We may agree *to* something
 that we do not actually agree *with*.

They agreed to the proposal only under protest.

The workers threatened to strike unless the employers
 agreed to the terms within twenty-four hours.

Agree with is not used in the passive, but *agree to* may be.

The terms have now been agreed to.

A passive form without the preposition has been gaining
 ground over the past few years :

Terms for the settlement of the dispute have now been
 agreed.

AIM. (1) The usual preposition to follow *aim* is *at* ('The mark-
 man aimed at the centre of the target'), but *for* is sometimes used
 when the stress is on the ultimate objective which one has in
 view ('We are aiming for London, though it is doubtful whether
 we shall reach it before nightfall', 'It soon became clear that he
 was aiming for a directorship').

(2) *Aim* can also take the name of the missile as its object :

He picked up a stone and aimed it at the dog.

(3) *Aim at* can be used in the passive, but not *aim for* :

Everything aimed at has now been achieved.

We all realised who that remark was aimed at.

(4) In American English *aim to do something* is very frequent, and it is coming increasingly to be used in Britain :

The party aims to contest every constituency in the next election.

Many speakers and writers in Britain, however, would not accept this as idiomatic ; British usage prefers *at* followed by the gerund :

The party aims at contesting every constituency in the next election.

The city council aims at demolishing all the slum areas within the next five years.

AIR ONE'S GRIEVANCES. Express and discuss them openly.

Much of the ill-feeling is caused by the fact that there is no recognised means by which the workers can air their grievances.

A passive is possible, but is not very common :

The management instituted a system of consultation with the staff so that any grievances might be aired.

AIR ONE'S VIEWS, OPINIONS. Express them openly, often with the suggestion of doing so to the annoyance of other people, who may not wish to hear them.

She is not the kind of person one can introduce into company ; she is too fond of airing her opinions.

Generally used only in the active voice.

ANGLE FOR. Seek by indirect means to gain something one wishes for. (The metaphor is from angling, or fishing.)

We did not take his expression of interest in our ideas too seriously, for we suspected he was merely angling for votes.

Used only in the active voice.

ANSWER BACK. Retort rudely (usually to a request, instruction or rebuke): e.g. 'Will you fetch me the telephone directory, please?' — 'Fetch it yourself!'

The mother reprimanded the child for answering her back.
Not used in the passive.

ANSWER FOR. Take the responsibility for.

I cannot answer for other people's mistakes.

You may get away with this kind of thing now, but you'll have to answer for it some day.

A passive use is rare.

APPROVE (OF). *Approve* means 'give consent to':

The Council has now approved the scheme for the erection of a new public library.

If the scheme is approved, work on the project will start immediately.

Approve of means 'regard with favour or approval'.

Her father did not approve of her going to dances and not returning until midnight.

She would never do anything that was not approved of by her parents.

ARGUE ONE INTO SOMETHING. Persuade one to do something by persistent argument. (Followed by a gerund, a noun or a pronoun.)

She argued her husband into doing what she wanted.

He would not have done it of his own will, but he was argued into it by his wife.

The opposite idea is expressed by *argue out of*.

ARGUE ONE ROUND. Bring one round to a desired point of view by argument.

At first he was opposed to the scheme, but I managed to argue him round.

If you have once made a decision, stand by it; don't allow yourself to be argued round.

ASK AFTER. Inquire about one's health, etc. (usually as a matter of politeness or general interest rather than to gain information for any specific purpose.)

When I met Mrs Smith this morning she asked after you and the children.

Not used in the passive.

ASK FOR. (1) Ask to be given (something).

She walked up to the counter and asked for a pound of sugar.

Everything that was asked for has now been sent.

The motorist was asked for his name and address.

(2) Ask to see (someone).

Go to the inquiry office and ask for Mr Johnson.

Here is a gentleman asking for the manager.

A passive is unusual.

(3) Run the risk of something (usually something unwelcome or unpleasant) happening to one. (Colloquial.)

He is foolish to behave in that way; he is asking for trouble.

If you go out without a coat in this weather you're asking for pneumonia.

Not used in the passive.

ASK OUT. Invite out (usually to one's house).

Mr and Mrs Brown are not at home; some friends have asked them out.

I am going to look after my daughter's children; she and her husband have been asked out for the evening.

The name of a meal, such as *lunch*, *tea*, *dinner* may be added, or that of a social function, such as a dance.

We have been asked out to dinner next Thursday evening.

ATTEND ON: ATTEND TO. *Attend on* means 'wait upon'.

At least a dozen people attended on the bride of the wealthy prince.

Wherever she went she was attended on by a large number of followers and servants.

Attend to means:

(1) Deal with:

The manager himself is attending to the matter.

All the most urgent matters have now been attended to.

(2) Take notice of; give one's attention to:

You must attend carefully to these instructions.

She didn't attend to what I was saying.

No-one likes giving lectures that are not attended to by a large part of the audience.

AVAIL ONESELF OF. Take advantage of; make use of.

I shall avail myself of your kind offer.

You should avail yourself of every opportunity of travelling abroad.

Note that when the subject of *avail* is a personal one, as in the above examples, the object must be a reflexive pronoun; but when the subject is non-personal, the object is an ordinary personal pronoun, or sometimes a noun.

All his efforts availed him nothing.

His plea for leniency did not avail the prisoner.

A passive is not used.

B

BABY-SIT. A recent verb, made by back-formation from *baby-sitting*, i.e. sitting in someone else's house to look after the baby, or young children, in order that the parents may go out.

Some women university students are willing to baby-sit for a few shillings an evening.

She baby-sits for her daughter every Thursday evening.

I am baby-sitting for a neighbour this evening.

Baby-sat is not often used.

BACK. (1) a book: put a paper cover on it to protect the binding.

All scholars must back their textbooks with a sheet of strong brown paper.

All our books have now been backed.

(2) a horse: place money on, as a wager or bet, in a race.

I've been lucky today; every horse I've backed has come in first.

The favourite was backed by hundreds of people, but they all lost their money.

From this, by metaphorical application, comes the colloquial expression *to back a winner*, i.e. to undertake some enterprise which turns out much more successful or profitable than was expected.

In putting this new product on the market the firm has backed a winner.

In this metaphorical sense the passive is never used. We cannot say 'A winner was backed by the firm'.

(3) a scheme, project, etc.: give support to.

The Government are backing the campaign to cut down smoking.

In his early days Hitler was backed by powerful financial interests in Germany.

(4) Hold the opinion that a particular candidate will be the successful one. (An extension of meaning (2), the implication being that if we were to place a bet on the chances of the various candidates, we should put our money on this particular one.) (Colloquial.)

Of the four candidates, I am backing Mr Jackson.

He is being backed by a number of other people, too.

BACK DOWN. Retreat from a position one has taken up: withdraw, or partially withdraw, a claim or an assertion. (Colloquial.)

At first he was very aggressive in his attitude, but when he saw that he was likely to meet with stiff opposition he began to back down.

BACK OUT. Withdraw from. (Colloquial.)

Those who were most insistent that we should undertake the project were the first to back out when they saw that difficulties were likely to arise.

BACK UP. Give support to. (Colloquial.)

I'll put the suggestion to the meeting, if you'll back me up.
He had a good deal of evidence to back up his story.
He was not backed up by his friends to the extent that he had hoped to be.

BAG. Take possession of. (Slang.)

The rude fellow pushed his way through the crowd and bagged the front seat.
All the comfortable chairs were immediately bagged by a party of schoolgirls.

BAIL OUT. (1) Secure a person's release from prison, while he is awaiting trial, by standing bail for him (i.e. paying down a sum of money which will be forfeit if he does not appear before the court when he is due to do so).

The prisoner was remanded in custody, and all attempts by his friends to bail him out were unsuccessful.

He was committed to prison overnight, but was bailed out the next morning.

(2) Jump from an aeroplane, by aid of a parachute. (See *BALE OUT*.)

BALE OUT. Jump from an aeroplane, in an emergency, with the aid of a parachute. (Strictly speaking, the spelling should be *bail out*, but *bale out* has now become the generally accepted form. It is taken from bailing out water from a boat, i.e. scooping it up with a pail and throwing it over the side.)

Realising that the aeroplane was likely to crash, the crew baled out.

N.B.—While we can speak of baling (or bailing) out a boat, or baling the water out from a boat, where an aeroplane is concerned the verb is always used intransitively.

BANDY WORDS. Argue: engage in altercation with someone: exchange words rapidly and impatiently. (Not much used.)

I refuse to bandy words with a person who cannot keep his temper.

The passive use is very rare.

BANK ON. Count on. (Colloquial.)

The withdrawal of their support is a great blow to us; we were banking on that.

We are banking on an attendance of at least five hundred.

I'll help you if I can, but don't bank on it.

Not generally used in the passive.

BARGAIN FOR. The literal meaning is 'come to an agreement on the price to be paid for something'. In colloquial English it is used to mean 'expect to get (something)'.

When I undertook to mend his watch for him I didn't bargain for all this trouble.

If you try to intimidate us by threats, you'll get more than you bargained for.

They found that the trouble they were put to was more than had been bargained for.

BARK ONE'S SHIN, NOSE, etc. Graze the skin off. (The metaphor is from stripping bark off a tree.) (Colloquial.)

In climbing over the rocks he barked his shins.

A passive is possible, but not very frequent.

Both his shins were badly barked.

BARK UP THE WRONG TREE. Direct one's attack, criticism or efforts to the wrong quarter. (Colloquial.) Generally only the tenses compounded with the present participle are used.

In blaming us for what has happened you are barking up the wrong tree; we had nothing whatever to do with the affair.

The metaphor is taken from the idea of stripping bark from a tree.

Not used in the passive.

BASH. Hit fiercely and savagely. (Slang.)

As a verb, *bash* does not occur in any idiomatic construction, but there is the expression *to have a bash at something*, i.e. to

make an attempt, even though success does not seem very probable.

I am doubtful whether I could ever learn Chinese, but I'm willing to have a bash at it.

BE AFRAID. (1) *Afraid* + infinitive: *afraid of* + gerund. The infinitive shows the thing that fear inhibits one from doing (e.g. 'She was afraid to cross the road', 'Some children are afraid to go upstairs in the dark'); the construction with *of* + the gerund shows a consequence which one fears may follow as a result of some action or activity ('She did not say all she thought, for she was afraid of offending him', 'They dared not set foot on the icy pavement, for they were afraid of slipping down'.)

(2) *Afraid*, followed by a noun clause, is also used to suggest regret or reluctance in making a statement.

I am afraid that we shall have to decline the invitation.

I am afraid we are going to get a poor summer again.

I am afraid he cannot be trusted.

This use is confined almost entirely to speech or correspondence, and normally occurs only in the first person, though an original first person may, of course, become a third person in indirect speech.

He said he was afraid that he would have to decline the invitation.

BE FRIENDS WITH (SOMEONE). Note the use of the plural noun, even though the reference is to only one person in his relationship with the other.

I have been friends with him ever since our schooldays.

The idiom has possibly developed from the idea of two people being friends with each other (where, of course, the plural is logical), and then has been applied, less logically, to each one individually.

Similarly *make friends with*.

BE OFF. Go: depart: leave. (Colloquial.)

The correct use of this combination presents no difficulty to the native speaker, but it may to the foreign student of English, for it cannot be used in all tenses or in all situations. The idiomatic uses are as follows.

(1) As an imperative:

Be off, before I call the police. (Often also *Be off with you!*)

(2) As an infinitive:

We hope to be off by eight o'clock.

To be off by that time, we shall have to get up early.