The Key to English

Figurative Expressions ENGLISH LANGUAGE SERVICES, INC.

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Preface

This book is presented as a glossary of stereotyped metaphorical and idiomatic expressions from intimate to the most formal styles in current use in written and spoken English. These expressions are particularly troublesome to the foreign learner. They usually contain ordinary words, but the student senses immediately upon encountering one of them that the words are used in some kind of special way and probably do not literally mean what they say. They usually communicate a great deal more than the mere dictionary meaning of the individual words, or else they say something that could never be guessed from a logical adding together of their parts.

Grammars are not concerned, for the most part, with these "idioms," as they are sometimes called, since the difficulty with them is not usually grammatical but almost entirely semantic and stylistic. And none but the largest dictionaries give the student any effective help in interpret-

ing them.

Criteria for inclusion of expressions in the book

The essential criteria for the inclusion of a figurative expression in this book are these: (1) The expression is stereotyped—that is, it occurs in only one, or at most two, forms—and has a certain age in the language; it has passed into common use and has a definite, agreed-upon meaning. (2) Taken as a whole, the expression means something more than, or something different from, the combined meanings of its individual parts.

The expressions range in complexity from simple wordcombinations consisting of preposition and noun, adjective and noun, verb and object, subject and complement, and attributives of various kinds, all the way to whole sentences, rejoinders, and comments.

The number of stereotyped figurative expressions in English is large, and several practical considerations limited the selection here. The following categories are excluded:

- 1) those whose meaning is easily inferred; e.g., look for a needle in a haystack, behind closed doors;
- those no longer in current use; e.g., Oh yeah?, likesixty;
- 3) those recently introduced or in restricted use, whose eventual acceptance cannot be judged; e.g., could care less = 'be indifferent';
- 4) those containing nonsense words or jargon, except well-established items like out of whack;
- those containing obscene or blasphemous words, or their euphemisms;
- 6) stereotyped similes, such as sweet as sugar, mean as a snake, etc.;
- metaphorical uses of single words, as 'This car is a lemon'; and
- 8) two-word verbs with metaphorical meanings, as put out = 'inconvenience'.

Historical and literary references omitted

Almost all stereotyped figurative expressions have interesting histories, and there was a great temptation to include historical explanations or references to literary sources in this book. However, for a number of reasons, such information was omitted entirely. Aside from considerations of space, which alone would have been decisive, it was found that, while the origin of many expressions is known to most well-informed speakers (smell to heaven from Shakespeare's Hamlet, turn the other cheek from the King James Bible), there are a great many others whose origin is disputed, and those that seem transparent often are not. (Is aboveboard from seafaring or card-playing?) Most figurative expressions stem from distant sources in some other time and place, from forgotten trades, myths, games,

once-notorious persons or events, or whatnot. They contain fossilized archaisms not used anywhere else in the language. All this information, even if it were readily available and could be succinctly expressed, would not be entirely to the point in this book, for this reason: the majority of the users of these expressions in contemporary English do not know it. Most people who say kick over the traces, for instance, have no idea what a trace is or why one should not kick over it. (Actually, it is-or was -part of the harness attaching a horse to a vehicle.) This does not prevent the expression from being used and understood. The same could be said of dozens of other expressions. In view of these facts, it seemed reasonable to expect the foreign learner of English to get along with the same information that the ordinary English speaker has, and so no explanations of meanings are given. If the student is curious about them, he should consult a more elaborate, encyclopedic reference book, dictionary of quotations, or thesaurus. Searching out the sources of stereotyped metaphors is a fascinating linguistic hobby, but it is not a very productive use of the language learner's time.

The student should not use these expressions on his own

In one respect, some guidance in addition to the dictionary meanings of the various expressions seemed necessary, that is, concerning their appropriateness or level of familiarity. Quite a few of the expressions listed, while they are not obscene or blasphemous (such were automatically excluded), are contemptuous, condescending, vulgar or extremely familiar, and in the wrong circumstances grossly insulting.

In this connection it must be pointed out that this book is presented as a glossary to be consulted as needed for aid in understanding the language, not as a prescriptive handbook for making one's English more picturesque or interesting, or anything of the sort. There is nothing more disastrous for any learner of a foreign language than to set

out on his own to use expressions of the type found in this book. He may make himself sound ridiculous; even worse, he may insult his hearers. These figurative expressions, almost without exception, are loaded with all kinds of connotations, good or bad, frivolous or serious, respectful or contemptuous, and all of them should be avoided by the student until he has had deep and extensive experience in English and is fully aware of the circumstances under which they may properly be used.

Aids in using the book

The student should consult the *Notes on the Method of Listing* (page ix) and the *Index* (page 75). The former explains the method of alphabetization, the use of symbols and abbreviations, and so on; the latter will help the student find expressions if he is not sure how they are listed in the book. For instance, the expression go *Dutch* will be found in the G's, but there is also a reference to it in the Index under *Dutch*.

This book is one of *The Key to English* series, prepared for the Collier-Macmillan English Program by the Materials Development Staff of English Language Services, Inc., under the direction of Edwin T. Cornelius, Jr., and Willard D. Sheeler. The original compilation of figurative expressions presented here was made by Oliver Rice. Earle W. Brockman served as consulting editor.

Notes on the Method of Listing

1. Expressions are listed as phrases, filed according to the first word. Sometimes the first word is a preposition, sometimes a verb, adjective, or other part of speech. Verbs and nouns are in their base forms. For the convenience of the student, there is an index in which references are given from words other than the first. For example, get cold feet appears under the G's, and the index refers the student from cold feet to the whole phrase.

2. Alphabetization is by word, not letter by letter. That is, all those expressions beginning with do come before those beginning with dog, whatever the word following do

may be.

3. Expressions beginning with an article (a, an, the) are listed according to the next word; also expressions beginning with a possessive pronoun (my, your, his, etc., generalized in the list as one's).

4. Words in parentheses are optional. In some cases, they may either occur or not occur, with no difference in meaning, as high in smell to (high) heaven; in other cases, they alternate with a preceding word, as in drug on (in)

the market, where either preposition may be used.

5. The word someone('s) in an expression means that any noun (or pronoun), according to the context, may be substituted. The word one('s) means that the pronoun used must refer to the logical subject of the verb in the expression or of the predicate in which the phrase occurs. For example, in get next to someone, any noun or pronoun may replace someone; in get one's dander up, the pronoun replacing one's must refer to the subject of get: I told him not to get his (not ordinarily my, her, our, John's, etc.) dander up.

6. Expressions marked neg, are used only in negative

contexts, which of course may take various forms, including the "affirmative" question implying a negative answer. For example, all there may occur in sentences like these: He's not all there. Do you think he's all there? He hardly seems to be all there. He can't be all there.

7. The symbol *** in the example means a word-forword repetition of the expression listed at the beginning of the entry. If any words in the expression have to be changed in the example, then the symbol is not used.

8. Expressions that occur as predicate attributes after a form of BE are listed separately, and the designation (be) follows them; likewise, expressions following HAVE and a few other verbs

9. Expressions in which both the subject and the attribute are prescribed, with a form of BE in between, are listed according to the subject, in this form: goose . . . cooked (be). This means that the expression may occur with any form of BE between goose and cooked.

10. Expressions used only, or usually, after the dummy subject IT are so marked; for instance, as broad as it's long, which generally occurs in the predicate after it: It's

as broad as it's long.

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- above the mark above a standard of quality That's a fine school. Its graduates are always ***.
- according to Hoyle proper(ly), by the rule They do every-thing ***.
- ace in the hole available secret resource You're my ***;
 I'll call on you when I need you.
- add fuel to the fire make a bad situation worse, often in a misguided effort to help Your intervention in the dispute will only *** and make him more stubborn than ever.
- after a fashion in a careless or incomplete way The job was done, ***, but I'm not proud of it.
- after hours after one's scheduled working hours All my appointments are taken today, but I can meet you *** if you wish.
- ofter one's own heart just as one likes; usu. follows a man John's a man after my own heart; he's loyal, intelligent, and a good friend besides.
- against the (one's) grain (go, be) contrary to one's nature or principles, therefore (be) repugnant (to) It goes against my grain to spy on someone, but if you suspect him of cheating, we have no choice.
- all ears eagerly attentive, like a dog on the alert The boys were *** when I mentioned going to the circus.
- all hands all the members of a working group The boss expects *** to be here at six tomorrow morning.
- all in all considering everything The book has some weak spots, but *** I consider it a success.
- all over but the shouting (with dummy it) so nearly over that only formalities remain, the real issue being settled It's ***; our team is 10 points ahead and there's only a minute left to play.
- all there usu. neg. sane, of sound mind Sometimes the old man says such peculiar things that I wonder if he's ***.
- all thumbs awkward, clumsy, esp. in actions involving the hands When it comes to sewing, I'm ***; I've never been good at it.

- all up with someone (be) (with dummy it) without hope or further chance of success It's all up with him; he's just failed the last exam.
- all wet wrong, mistaken, often willfully or stubbornly so You're *** if you think the governor will approve this scheme.
- all wool and a yard wide of high character, reliable You can trust him completely; he's ***.
- And how! That certainly is true! Yes, indeed! response to a question or remark Did we win the game? ***!
- another guess (thought) coming (have) be mistaken If you think I'm going to pay for that coat, young man, you've got another guess coming!
- apple of someone's eye, the object of great affection or concern That child is the apple of her grandfather's eye; he adores her.
- as big (large) as life in the flesh, in actuality, usu. to the surprise of the observer I thought Tom had gone to Europe. There he is, ***.
- we thought Charles would be ashamed to come to the party, but he was there, ***.
- as broad as it's long (with dummy it) all the same, equal It's ***. If you take the short road over the mountains, the trip will take you longer; you might as well go the long way over the highway.
- as I live and breathe to my great surprise I thought John was out of town, but there he is, ***.
- at a clip in one motion, at one time The store was having a sale and selling phonograph records three and four ***.
- at a loss not knowing what to say or do Her husband's absence left her completely *** when the accident happened.
- at a stretch without interruption I don't like to drive 500 miles ***, but I can if I have to.
- at bay driven, like a hunted animal, into a position where flight is no longer possible and it is necessary to fight one's attackers The enemy is *** now; he will have to fight.
- at first hand from the person(s) concerned, not by hearsay

 Did you get this information ***, or is it just gossip?
- at it busy at some scheduled or expected activity (often undesirable) I had to finish typing the report before noon, so I was *** by 8 o'clock.

- or loose ends (a loose end) not busy, disorganized, without a program of activity The children have been *** all day, and they're restless and bored.
- at odds in disagreement, quarreling The brothers don't agree on how the farm should be run; they're frequently

- at sea confused, bewildered Why don't you explain what you mean? You can see the class is completely ***.
- at sixes and sevens confused, in disorder Things are happening so fast that I'm ***; I don't know what to do next.
- at someone's beck and call ready to obey someone's orders at all times It's hard for the old man to realize that his wife is no longer at his beck and call and that he will have to take care of himself.
- at the drop of a hat without advance preparation or notice, without hesitation I love to travel; I'm ready to go ***.
- at the eleventh hour just before the crisis is reached and further action is impossible (12 being considered the crucial hour) The bill was about to be defeated, but *** enough votes were found to pass it.
- at the end of one's rope (tether) without further resources or strength We're at the end of our rope; if this effort doesn't succeed, there's nothing else to be done.
- ax to grind (have) an ulterior, selfish purpose I suspect that John is joining us for some purpose of his own; he usually has an ***.
- babe in the woods one who is inexperienced, naïve, unsophisticated Philip is only a ***; when he tries to negotiate with those men from New York, he'll lose everything.
- back number old issue of a journal; hence, a person or thing that is old-fashioned, out of date I'm a ***; I can't do any of the new dances.
- back talk impudent or argumentative answer to someone in authority Mr. Hill doesn't tolerate ***; he expects his orders to be obeyed without question. (verb: talk back.)
- back to (against) the wall in a situation where further retreat is impossible Their backs are to the wall; if they don't find another creditor, they'll go bankrupt. (Also: have one's back . . .)
- bad blood (between X and Y) resentment, anger, usu. from some past injury There's been *** between the brothers for a long time; I think it has to do with an unpaid debt.

- bag and baggage with all one's possessions They moved in yesterday, ***, as though they intended to stay forever.
- baker's dozen thirteen; a small, unspecified number The meeting was poorly attended; only a *** came.
- bark up the wrong tree pursue something other than the main point, waste one's efforts, like hunting dogs who have missed the quarry You're barking up the wrong tree by asking me all these questions; it's my father you should talk to.
- was all rich; they didn't *** when the speaker asked for a hundred dollars from each person present.
- bats in the (one's) belfry (have) be eccentric or insane Everybody knows the old man's got bats in the belfry, but some of his ideas are not as crazy as they sound.
- beat all be most unexpected, surprising He said yes? Well, that beats all! I never thought he'd agree.
- beat around (about) the bush avoid mentioning or dealing with important matters, postpone a decision Let's not *** any longer. Can't we decide now?
- beat it leave, depart The beggar was annoying me; I told him to ***.
- beat one's brains out think hard, usu. without success, in an effort to solve a problem I beat my brains out on that problem and still got the wrong answer.
- beat someone to the draw (the punch) act, or make a decision, before one's adversary has acted or decided We let them beat us to the draw; while we were trying to make up our minds, they went ahead and built a new factory.
- beat the bushes search in outlying places for last remnants

 The election is tomorrow, so the candidates have to ***
 for votes now.
- bed of roses usu. neg. comfortable, easy, happy situation
 This job is no ***; the pay is good, but the boss is a hard
 man to work for.
- bee in one's bonnet (have a) a fantastic, eccentric, illusory notion; whim Grandfather keeps talking about going back to college; he's had that bee in his bonnet for years.
- behind the eight ball in a difficult or disadvantageous situation I'm really ***; the chairman wants me to turn in my report tomorrow, and I haven't even started it yet.

- behind the scenes not visible publicly, out of sight All these speeches are for public consumption; the real negotiations are going on ***.
- below the mark below a standard of excellence If your schoolwork falls ***, you may not be admitted to college.
- bend an ear listen attentively A successful politician always bends an ear to the opinion of the public.
- bend one's neck submit, yield John is a proud man; he'll bend his neck to no one.
- bend over backward = lean over backward
- bend someone's ear talk boringly and at length to someone Charles has bent my ear all day; I'm tired of listening to him.
- beside oneself so affected by strong emotion as to lose control of one's actions, judgment The poor woman was beside herself with grief; it was useless to try to reason with her.
- beside the point irrelevant, not appropriate to the matter being discussed What the other man did is ***; it's your actions I'm concerned about.
- bet one's bottom (last) dollar bet all that one has, usu. in jest, to emphasize one's certainty I know that man; I bet my bottom dollar he fails to show up for the meeting.
- between the devil and the deep blue sea in a situation where one alternative action is as undesirable as the other We're ***; either way we move, we face disaster.
- beyond the pale beyond the limit of acceptability; in a state of ostracism Most of his former friends have dropped him; his involvement in radical politics has put him ***.
- bide one's time wait, in anticipation of eventual success or justification I've been asked to sell the house now, but I'm biding my time; eventually it will be worth a lot more.
- big shot an important person (usu, said envyingly or deprecatingly) Charlie doesn't have to worry about finding a job; his father's a *** in the government.
- big wheel often = big shot but usu. implies that the person is a successful and energetic manipulator rather than one who has achieved a permanent position of eminence or power
- birds of a feather people of the same type, quality, etc. (usu. deprecatory) I'm not surprised to hear that he's gone into business with his brother; they're ***.

- bite off more than one can chew undertake or commit oneself to do more than one can accomplish Dave has always been successful, but it looks as though this time he has bitten off more than he can chew.
- bite one's tongue (off) refrain from speaking The man was so rude that I had to bite my tongue to keep from getting into an argument with him. With could—an expression of regret for having said something I could bite my tongue off for saying that!
- bite someone's head off speak angrily or in an ill-tempered way in response to a greeting, question, etc. The boss is in a bad mood this morning; I just asked him a simple question and he nearly bit my head off.
- bitter pill an unpleasant duty; a defeat, humiliation, etc.

 It's a ***, but all we can do is admit our mistake and apologize.
- black and blue bruised all over Football is a rough game; the players often come out of it ***.
- black eye defeat, rebuff; bad reputation 1. The committee gave him a ***; they turned down his proposal. 2. The scandal in the police department has given the town a ***.
- black mark (against someone) something discrediting Jim has a few ***s against him, but in general he's O.K.
- black sheep member of a group, usu. a family, who behaves disreputably Uncle Henry was the *** in the family; he went out west and was involved in some trouble about a gold mine.
- bleed someone white live at someone's expense, take all he has I feel sorry for the old man. His children have bled him white.
- blind alley a course of action leading to failure or frustration You're headed into a *** with that approach. I suggest you start over and find some more reliable data.
- blood in one's eye (have) be in a mood to fight I saw he had blood in his eye, and so I didn't antagonize him further.
- blow hot and cold to be alternately strongly in favor, or against something He sounds enthusiastic about the idea, but don't count on his support at the meeting. He's always blowing hot and cold.
- blow off steam release pent-up feeling, say things in anger that one does not really mean Please forgive me for saying that; I just needed to ***.

- blow one's own horn (trumpet) boast, call attention to one's achievements I hate to blow my own horn, but I must tell you that I just won first prize for my essay.
- blow one's top = lose one's temper
- bolt out of (from) the blue an unexpected event, like a thunderbolt from a clear sky Everything was going fine, until suddenly, like a ***, the former owner claimed I had cheated him.
- bone to pick with someone a matter, usu. disagreeable, to discuss and settle Just a minute, Harry. I've got a bone to pick with you. How about the twenty dollars you promised to pay me today?
- born with a silver spoon in one's mouth born of rich parents

 The minister has some difficulty understanding the problems of the poor; after all, he was born with a silver spoon
 in his mouth.
- born yesterday usu. neg. naïve, lacking experience, unsophisticated You can't fool me; I wasn't ***.
- break one's neck (to do something) make a great effort I'll break my neck to get this done by Friday, but I can't promise for sure.
- break one's word fail to keep a promise After promising to keep the book for me, he broke his word and sold it to someone else.
- break the ice relieve embarrassment or shyness by being the first to speak or act No one danced until Charles and Mary broke the ice by going out on the floor; from then on, everybody had a good time.
- breathe a word usu. neg. speak Don't *** of this, because they haven't announced it yet, but they're planning to get married.
- bring coals to Newcastle = carry coals to Newcastle
- bring down the house be a resounding success, win great applause Your speech really brought down the house, Paul; everybody thought it was great.
- bring home the bacon earn the living for a household Bob brings home the bacon, and he expects everybody to listen when he speaks.
- one is working on to fail, collapse He made one mistake and brought the whole scheme down around his ears.

bring something home to someone make someone more acutely aware of something, usu. disagreeable The hero's guilt was brought home to him by the last act in the play

bring up the rear be last (in a procession) You and Jane

go ahead, and we'll ***.

build castles in the air entertain a wish or hope that has little chance of fulfillment You're building castles in the air; you know you'll never travel to Central Asia.

- burn (all) one's bridges (behind one) act in such a way that retreat from a position is impossible John is burning all his bridges. He has quit his job and declared that he is going to be an artist or nothing.
- burn the candle at both ends use up one's resources extravagantly; of things, or health and energy The doctor told John he'd have to get more rest; he can't go on burning the candle at both ends without ruining his health.
- bury one's head in the sand refuse to recognize an obvious but unpleasant truth You're burying your head in the sand, George; you've got to admit eventually that your brother is incompetent and is causing you to lose clients.
- bury the hatchet become friendly after being enemies, stop fighting The two families, after quarreling for years, finally decided to ***.
- butt one's head against a stone wall = knock one's head against a stone wall
- by a long shot neg. by a great deal That amount of money won't be enough, ***.
- by and by after a time, eventually (somewhat archaic)

 Maybe we'll meet again, ***.
- by hook or by crook somehow, by regular, or perhaps irregular, means That boy is very persistent; ***, he'll get what he wants.
- by (through) the grapevine by rumor I hear *** that you're being promoted, Frank.
- by the skin of one's teeth by the barest margin The car missed me by inches. I escaped by the skin of my teeth.
- call a spade a spade call something frankly by its name rather than by a euphemism Let's ***, John; the man's a thief.
- call it a day stop work for the day We've all worked hard.

 Let's ***.
- call someone on the carpet reprimand He neglected his work until he was finally called on the carpet.