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► **To cite this version:**

Ramon Marti Solano. From Idiom Variants to Open-Slot Idioms: Close-Ended and Open-Ended Variational Paradigms. Research on Phraseology across Continents, Vol. II, University of Bialystok Publishing House, pp.167-180, 2013. hal-00933011

HAL Id: hal-00933011

<https://unilim.hal.science/hal-00933011>

Submitted on 20 Nov 2017

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From idiom variants to open-slot idioms: close-ended and open-ended variational paradigms

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Abstract

There is a cline between idiom variants and open-slot idioms in English: from *blow a fuse/gasket* in which the nominal constituent admits only a single substitution to *wear your heart on your sleeve* in which the noun group *your heart* is actually instantiated by a plethora of other nouns or noun groups making of this multi-word unit an open-slot idiom with an open-ended variational paradigm. Variation is regularly signalled in general dictionaries and in dictionaries of idioms by means of different typographical marks such as oblique strokes or commas or by including a note in the body of the article. On the contrary, not all lexicographers indicate the information concerning an open paradigm of variant forms in the entry or the body of the article of open-slot idioms whose phraseographic status is hard to delimit or grasp.

Key-words: idiom variant, open-slot idiom, lexicographic treatment, variational paradigm

1. Introduction

A great number of idioms are varied when used in discourse, although a clear line should be drawn between regular (or lexicalised) variation, contextual variation, manipulation or exploitation of multi-word units and open-slot idioms. Idiom variants are usually represented by the alternation of two (or even sometimes three or four) nominal, verbal or adjectival constituents having attained lexicalised status and being recorded as such in dictionaries of idioms. *Hit the road/trail, fit as a fiddle/flea, go for the jugular/throat* are instances of idioms with lexicalised nominal variants. Idioms with verbal variants such as *up/raise the ante, upset/overturn the applecart, fly/show/wave the flag* are regularly registered

in general dictionaries and dictionaries of idioms as are idioms with adjectival variants such as *a passing/nodding acquaintance*, *hard/hot on your heels* or *plain/clear/smooth/easy sailing*. Prepositions and adverbial particles can also alternate in a number of idioms, as shown in such dictionary entries as *fray at/around the edges*, *like death warmed up/over* or *green about/around/at the gills*. All these variant forms are usually represented by means of oblique strokes and may be registered or not in dictionaries depending on the personal choice of each lexicographer.

A second type of regular variation includes those entries in which a more or less open-ended paradigm is provided, as is the case with inserted adjectives. This lexicographic practice shows that the expression in question is generally instantiated with an inserted adjective, although no clear guidelines are given as to the type or exact number of adjectives except for the actual adjectives found both in the entry and in the examples, as illustrated by the following dictionary entry from the Longman Idioms Dictionary (LID):

2 (also **cast a critical, professional etc eye over**) to look at something, or consider something, in a particular way: *She took care with the arrangements, knowing that her mother would cast a critical eye over them.* | *Gavin has agreed to cast an expert eye over our programme.* (LID)

Finally, dictionaries may choose to record idioms with no explicit variant or group of variants but rather lemmatised with a slot, signalled by an underscore, that may occupy an initial, medial or final position, as shown respectively by *___ to a fault*, *too ___ for words* and *do sth under the banner of ___*. More than one slot is also possible, as with the phrases *___ with a capital ___* and *once a ___ always a ___*. Rarely do general dictionaries apply this lexicographic technique, which is reserved especially to a small number of dictionaries of idioms.

2. Types of phraseological variation

Multi-word units can vary in many different ways and this variation may concern pragmatics, semantics, syntax, lexicology and even morphology. In the present study I will be mostly dealing with lexical variation. Lexical variants of phraseological units are the product of three distinct processes, namely lexical substitution, lexical insertion and lexical truncation.

As regards open-slot idioms, they are the product either of substitution or insertion but not of truncation:

Recurrent and systematic variation may result in PhUs having their entry forms altered in general dictionaries and dictionaries of idioms. The insertion of an adjective may eventually become so common and widespread that certain PhUs can be considered as having an open slot in their lexicographic form, as is the case with *cut your teeth* which is recorded by the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (CALD) as *Cut your political/professional, etc. teeth* and defined as 'to get your first experience of the type mentioned'. The definition itself represents a clear sign of the semantic openness of this string which is normally instantiated with the insertion of a qualifying adjective that specifies and restricts its sphere of application delimiting its referential scope. (Martí Solano 2011: 391)

Adjectives that were formally inserted as a means of contextualisation of certain phraseological units have become so widespread that the original shorter versions are less and less found in corpora. What was once optional becomes, by recurrence, a semi-obligatory constituent without which the holistic meaning of the string seems to go out of its depth. The string *keep an eye on* is usually instantiated by means of the inclusion of an adjective, since it has become too general a phrase and speakers feel the need to qualify with more precision its holistic meaning. The qualification process is only syntactically possible by means of the insertion of an adjective before the only nominal constituent, as illustrated by the following examples:

(1) *The trouble with that position is that the theatre itself is much less high-minded than those who **keep a watchful eye on** its purity.* (*The Guardian*, 24 November 2004)

(2) *Even so, just as it is as well to **keep a careful eye on** those leaders with a taste for writing poetry, so an enthusiasm for architecture is a characteristic that (...)* (*The Observer*, 29 May 2005)

(3) *"Speak has a legitimate right to make their views known to people, but we will be **keeping a close eye on** anybody crossing the line."* (*The Guardian*, 30 December 2004)

2.1. Phraseological variation and dictionaries of idioms

In order to cover a wider spectrum of lexicographic sources I have used seven dictionaries of idioms, namely *A Dictionary of American Idioms* (DAI), the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (CIDI), the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (CCDI), the *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (LID), the *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English. Volume 2: Phrase, Clause & Sentence Idioms* (ODCIE2), the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (ODI) and the *American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (AHDI). Only the ODI and the LID do actually make use of the open-slot lexicographic practice in a regular although unmethodical way. Despite the fact that criteria for the lemmatisation of open-slot idioms as such vary from one lexicographer to another, the random selection of examples in Table 1 shows the rather personal and arbitrary selection of entries.

Table 1. A sample of open-slot idioms as lemmatised in the ODI and the LID

ODI	LID
___ as sin	(now) that's what I call ___
___ from hell	___ city
___ in residence	___ is a two-way street
___ to a fault	___ isn't the word for it
___ your head off	___ to a fault
___ your socks off	___ with a capital ___
___ 's-eye view	a (wet) paper bag
a peach of a ___	a ___ of the first water
a slip of a ___	bang goes ___
on the ___ side	be ___ at heart
once a ___, always a ___	do sth under the banner of ___
scratch a ___ and find a ___	on the ___ front
strike (or sound) a ___ note	roll on ___
the poor man's ___	sb couldn't ___ his/her way out of
the rocky road to ___	so ___ it's not even funny
the sick man of ___	talk about ___
too ___ for comfort	the ___ of sb's dreams
too ___ for words	too ___ by half
what price ___?	wise in the ways of ___

<i>who's she ___ the cat's mother?</i>	<i>you can't beat ___</i>
--	---------------------------

It is obvious that the two lists above are but a sample of a larger set of open-slot idioms and that they cannot be taken as definitive. However, on comparing them, there is only one item in common, that is ___ *to a fault*. It seems that a more conservative approach to phraseography finds it hard to include gaps in the lemmatised entries of idioms, as this practice would convey a feeling of instability, vagueness, a kind of lexical no-man's-land to the dictionary users, hence the choice of head phrases such as *too close for comfort*, *as guilty/miserable/ugly as sin*, etc. in most dictionaries of idioms.

The LID, in its turn, includes an important number of idioms labelled 'spoken' such as *(now) that's what I call ___*, *roll on ___*, *talk about ___* or *___ isn't the word for it* which are actually conversational formulas with a compulsory open slot rather than idioms. It is interesting to notice that this same dictionary registers *sth smells fishy* (also *sth seems, sounds etc fishy*) instead of using an open-slot for the first constituent. On scrutinizing the examples found in this entry one clearly understands the reason behind this lexicographic choice: *sth* is instantiated by a long and rather complex noun phrase, as shown in one of the examples provided after the definition: "The latest proposal to split the cost of the stadium between the City and the Giants sounds fishy to me." As a result, one can state that lexicographic practices in this respect are inconsistent and that the same criterion is not always applied or respected.

3. Open-slot idioms

If we consider the examples given by both the ODI and the LID, we can define open-slot idioms, from a phraseographic point of view, as those strings recorded by some dictionaries of idioms in which one or several constituents have been elided. As far as dictionary users are concerned, these slots can be filled with an open-ended paradigm of the word class (usually a noun, an adjective or a verb) that fits in semantically and syntactically in the open slot.

3.1. Open-slots as qualifiers

Several types of open-slot idioms have been identified according to formal and semantic criteria as well as to the extent of their variational paradigms. For space reasons, I

will only be dealing with a small number of the selections of idioms listed above. A first group includes those expressions used as qualifiers either of an object or of a person. These can have an open slot for a noun (*a peach of a* + NOUN, *a slip of a* + NOUN, *an armchair* + NOUN) or for an adjective (ADJ + *to a fault*, *too* ADJ for words).

A search in the online archives of *The New York Times* has yielded the following results, which are obviously not complete or definitive but rather indicative of an open-ended paradigm: the slot in the schema *a peach of a* + NOUN is filled with a variety of nouns such as *show, person, place, deal, fellow, time, film, movie, car, dress, tune, shot, performance*, etc. showing a wide range of possible candidates, both /human/ and /non-human/, whose excellence is highly praised.

A slip of a + NOUN is another qualifying expression that indicates smallness in a positive way. It is labelled ‘old-fashioned’ in the *Cambridge Advances Learner’s Dictionary* (CALD) and this is corroborated in (4) by the interpolated clause which follows the phrase in bold type:

(4) *In another way, I’m not, because Sheherazade is such **a slip of a girl**, as your grandmother might say, that for a moment I wonder if we’ve got the wrong 300-acre estate (...)* (*The Observer*, 7 November 2004)

The lemmatisation of this unit in the CALD as *a slip of a sth* is at odds with the example provided after its definition, *I knew her when she was a slip of a girl*, since the nominal constituent is “girl” and obviously is not “something”, which is quite misleading for foreign learners as they might expect an object and not a person as the slot-filler. Only 6 results have been found in the BNC for this string either in combination with *girl* or *lad* or *child*. The CoCA has yielded a total of 20 results with a larger set of nouns such as *girl, thing, woman, smile, lass, lad, dress, boy*, etc. including not only nouns referring to (young) people but also to objects.

The results in the *New York Times* for the schema *an armchair* + NOUN represent an open-ended paradigm of nouns designating professions, occupations or persons with a particular set of beliefs such as *cook, strategist, navigator, official, psychologist, Bolshevik, constitutionalist, anthropologist* or *traveler*.

Concerning idioms with an open slot for adjectives, the undisputed winner is ADJ + *to a fault*. I have found, among others, the following slot-fillers: *honest, unselfish, loyal, generous, fashionable, efficient, self-involved, impeccable, faultless, indulgent, slapstick*,

vital, good-natured, consistent, earnest, impartial, neutral, rational, cautious, measured, humble, courteous, liberal and solicitous. The semantic prosody¹ of this variational paradigm is clearly positive, which is borne out by the definition provided by the CIDI:

be kind/generous, etc. to a fault

to be extremely kind/generous, etc

She's a really sweet person and she's generous to a fault.

On the contrary, ADJ + *as sin* (as recorded in the ODI) would not be considered an open-slot idiom but rather an idiom with a restricted variational paradigm. This fact is clearly recorded by the CIDI in which this string is lemmatised as “as guilty/miserable/ugly as sin”, with a close-ended variational paradigm. By the same token, an item such as ____ *in residence*, as it is recorded in the ODI, would not be considered an open-slot as the paradigm is very limited and concerns a small group of nouns such as *writer, poet, artist, composer* and the like.

3.2. Open-slots as themes

Some open-slot idioms, generally those having the slot at the end, are filled in by the theme, which is the noun or the noun phrase which encapsulates the new information in the sentence and represents its focus. *What price ____?* is the choice made by the ODI for the entry of this idiom that is lemmatised in the CIDI as *What price fame/victory/success, etc?* The lexicographer’s choice of nouns implies that variants should include nouns denoting very positive situations. This is not always the case when occurrences of the string are searched in online newspaper archives, as illustrated in (5) and (6):

(5) *One of the bizarre examples has been the parents of dead children whose organs were removed complaining bitterly that they have only been given £1,000, while the Alder Hey parents got £5,000. **What price children’s organs?** (The Guardian, 20 February 2004)*

(6) *In New Zealand he may find out that he is not only behind Jones in the pecking order but also behind Wilkinson, whom I strongly suspect*

¹ Hunston (1995: 137) summarises the notion of semantic prosody as follows: “Briefly, a word may be said to have a particular semantic prosody if it can be shown to co-occur typically with other words that belong to a particular semantic set.” (Hunston & Francis 2000: 104)

Woodward is desperate to play, and the Irishman Ronan O’Gara. What price some dissension if results go against the Lions? (The Guardian, 23 May 2005)

However, other theme-related open-slot idioms can be instantiated by means of a totally open paradigm of nouns or noun phrases. The string *Bang goes ____* is one of these cases. The phrase is lemmatised as *bang goes sth* in the CIDI and as an open-slot in the LID. Again, this is a conversational formula rather than an idiom.

3.3. Open-slots as arguments

Predicate or phrasal idioms are made up of a verb plus an argument usually realised as a noun phrase, as in *bang the drum* or *lose the plot*. Other syntactic types in which a prepositional argument is required are also common, as *with the rocky road to ____* or *wise in the ways of ____*. The ODI lemmatises with an open slot *the rocky road to _____* whereas the CIDI prefers the entry *rocky road*, which is defined as follows: *if you are on a rocky road you are experiencing a difficult period and have a lot of problems*. A search in the online archives of *The New York Times* has yielded the following slot-fillers: *knowledge, renewed prosperity, glory, economic unity, holiday tradition, a global market, press freedom, health reform, European unity, success, stardom*, among others. It is obvious that the CIDI considers the argument as an external constituent whereas the ODI regards it as internal and therefore as part of the idiom structure.

Do sth under the banner of _____, as this idiom is lemmatised in the ODI, represents a clear example of an idiom with an external constituent rather than an open-slot idiom. The combination does not even have its own entry in the CALD, where it appears in the example of the third subentry of the noun *banner*:

3. [S] an idea, principle or belief that is strongly supported by someone
*They won the election **under** the banner **of** lower taxes.*

This lexicographic treatment does not give idiom status to this combination, which should be interpreted as a colligation. The word is used figuratively to mean “idea”, “principle” or “belief” and the supporting example is provided simply to show the prepositions used in the syntactic frame.

3.4. Open-slots as delimiters

The notion of delimiters in phraseological variation theory was first used by Ernst in 1981 (see references). “Domain delimiters” (Ernst 1981: 51) are generally inserted adjectives, although sometimes they can be nouns with an adjectival function, that delimit the referential scope of idioms to a particular domain, sphere or field, as illustrated in the following examples: *turn back the **moral** clock*, *lose the **domestic** plot*, *the crest of the **economic** wave*, *beat about the **academic** bush*, *bang the **human rights** drum*, etc.

When cases of idioms with domain delimiters are searched in lexicographic works some sort of mismatch may arise between the head phrase and the examples provided after the definition. *Strike a note* is lemmatised as an invariable idiom in the CIDI even though the two examples make use of an internal modification which is signalled by the use of a bold type:

strike a note

to express and communicate a particular opinion or feeling about something

*I find it really difficult to strike **the right** note when I'm writing job applications.*

*At the end of her speech, she struck a note **of** warning about the risks involved in the project.*

The string is thus instantiated under the following two schemas: *strike a ____ note and strike a note of ____*. The slot-fillers for the first schema in the BNC are, among others, *sad*, *prophetic*, *discordant*, *victory*, *sombre* and *responsive*. In the CoCA the slot-fillers are *positive*, *cautionary*, *familiar*, *whimsical*, *triumphant*, *surprising*, *strong*, *nautical*, *jarring*, *false*, *different* and *deep*.

The phrase *put sth/sb on the map* can be said to have two different types of slots. The first one is compulsory and corresponds to the direct object and the second one is optional and serves as a domain delimiter. In order to investigate the potential range of the variational paradigm, different searches have been made both in the BNC and the CoCA and the results are set up in Table 2:

Table 2. Variational paradigm of *put sb/sth on the map* in the BNC and the CoCA

Idiom schema	BNC	CoCA
[nn*] on the map (compulsory open slot)	Cubism British post-war ballet the Ethiopian fossil beds	women's tennis Columbine High School Harvard Business School

	his own business the firm the hobby rugby league poetry	his school women's basketball the story the company the museum
on the * map (optional open slot)	political sporting rock nuclear monument marketing literary artistic academic	literary cultural international fine-dining fashion culinary art

The compulsory slot is mainly filled in with things, places or institutions rather than with people. On the other hand, the optional slot is filled in mainly with adjectives or nouns that function as delimiters that restrict the large sphere represented by the nominal constituent *map*.

The phrase *jump/climb/leap/get on the bandwagon* is usually lemmatised with a number of verb variants, as the entry in the CIDI amply shows.² However, forty-one occurrences have been found in the BNC, out of which seven correspond to the open-slot variant schema *on the + NOUN + bandwagon*, two to the schema *on the + NOUN PHRASE + bandwagon* and seven to the schema *on the + ADJ + bandwagon*.

(7) *Too many celebrities are **getting on the health bandwagon** and producing ill-conceived "fitness" manuals.* (BNC)

² This phrase is usually recorded taking into account the degree of variability of its verbal component. As a result, it is common to find several synonymous or quasi-synonymous verbs as part of the lemmatised form. However, no mention of its immense potentiality of variability through lexical insertion is made in dictionary description except for the fact that the vast majority of the examples illustrative of the phrase tend to include an extraneous lexical item. (Martí Solano, 2011: 398)

(8) *As for the so-called foresters who **jumped on the tax-avoidance bandwagon** and ruined our moorlands, then I hope (...)* (BNC)

One of the most prolific open-slot idioms happens to be *wear your heart on your sleeve*. This phrase epitomises the notion of inanalysability of the nominal constituent *heart*. The heart stands for feelings, emotions and passions in English lexis and phraseology as in a large number of other languages and cultures in the world, so one would expect that the paradigm of nouns should include items particularly related to those semantic fields. However, the feelings and emotions that are encapsulated in the analysable phraseological constituent *heart* have clearly been expanded and diversified to include five main types of domains, namely “feelings” (*emotions, vulnerability, influences*), “religion” (*faith, Christianity, atheism*), “nationality” (*roots, identity, heritage, patriotism*), “politics” (*political affiliation, political colours*) and “cultural preferences” (*classic influences, literary passions, intellectual interests, intellectualism*):

(9) *“Speedy”, as he is known, is currently rushing merrily around the country in a showy bid to save his colleagues from defeat. He **wears his presidential ambitions on his sleeve**. (The Guardian, 24 March 2004)*

(10) *The new champion is a descendant of Sir Logan Campbell, a Scottish emigre who became mayor of Auckland in the 19th century, but he has always **worn his heritage on his sleeve**. (The Guardian, 21 June 2005)*

Another similar case, although not as prolific as the previous one, is *take a leaf out of sb’s book*. A search in the online archives of *The Guardian* has yielded actualisations such as the following showing clear evidence of an open-ended paradigm:

(11) ***Taking a leaf out of Skins’s character-per-week structure**, the second episode hones in on Nathan. He’s ended up with the double blow of being kicked out of home (...)* (The Guardian, 7 July 2010)

(12) *They were undone only when Spurs **took a leaf out of the Bolton style guide** to claim their second equaliser with a goal from a set piece, Niko Kranjcar’s corner (...)* (The Observer, 3 October 2009)

(13) *The Arts Council's basis for making judgments on artistic merit (...)*
*Here, the arts system could consider **taking a leaf out of the scientific and academic worlds** and adopting a process of peer reviews. (The Guardian, 21 December 2007)*

Not only is the nominal constituent *book* replaced by a synonym or quasi-synonym as in (11) but the whole prepositional complement can be substituted by an unpredictable range of noun phrases, as shown in (11) and (13).

3.5. Open-slot sayings and proverbs

Although proverbs are regarded as one of the most fixed types of phraseological units, they can be manipulated and give rise to antiproverbs, remotivation and other types of exploitation:

Exploitation is sometimes so common that it forces reconsideration of the 'canonical' form of the FEI. For example, all tokens in OHPC of the proverb *beauty is in the eye of the beholder* are exploited: [...] The syntagmatic structure of the proverb remains intact, and the first example certainly refers explicitly to the original form, but the persistence of exploitation and substitution suggests that the canonical form of this FEI should be *__ is in the eye of the beholder*, with an open slot in subject position to be filled by any abstract that is considered essentially subjective. (Moon 1998a: 172)

A very small number of sayings and proverbs can therefore be considered as open-slots, as for instance *Once a _____ always a _____* in which both slots are filled with the same lexical item. A search in the CoCA for slot-fillers has yielded the following results: *spook, senator, prostitute, junkie, cheater* and *bishop*. The semantic prosody of the variational paradigm is in this case clearly negative. The range of variants is rather small since, as a general rule, proverbs and sayings are thinly represented in general corpora and therefore their degree of frequency is usually low or very low. This type of open-slots is illustrated in examples (14), (15) and (16):

(14) *One thinks of Truffaut's famous letter in which he suggested that if Godard ever made an autobiographical film, the appropriate title might be **Once a Shit, Always a Shit**. (The Guardian, 29 April 2005)*

(15) *“Once a Wasp, always a Wasp” is the club's proud boast and Green will remain a part (...) (The Guardian, 13 May 2005)*

(16) *Once a Raj orphan, always a Raj orphan. In Jane Gardam's superb new novel, Sir Edward Feathers, (...) (The Guardian, 20 November 2004)*

The traditional proverb *One man's meat is another man's poison* is another example of a paired parallel phrase that has become an open-slot proverb. Only three examples have been found in the CoCA, all of them from the spoken part of the corpus:

(17) *Well, Harry, you know the old saying “one man's trash is another man's treasure”, and that is very much the case here. (CoCA)*

(18) *They did that because they wanted us to write about their relentlessness in pursuit of terrorism and their successes. You know, one man's breach of security is another man's public relations. (CoCA)*

(19) *And on amazon.com, one of the major indicators of a title's performance, “XXX” ranked for weeks in the top 100. As they say, one man's pornography is another man's art. (CoCA)*

5. Conclusions

Open-slot idioms seem not to be entirely accepted by lexicographers as they are only recorded by a small number of them. Most dictionaries of idioms prefer to lemmatise open slots by means of strings of variant forms in the head phrase and/or by including them in the examples provided after the definition. Printing inserted elements in bold type in the examples is another means of avoiding the slot in the head phrase. Only the *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (LID) and the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (ODI) do make use of slots, although both their actual selection and theoretical criteria appear to be arbitrary and unmethodical. The fondness for the inclusion of spoken fixed phrases, mainly conversational formulae and other discourse structuring devices, could explain in part the abundance of open-slots in these two dictionaries of idioms. Although several types of open-slot idioms have been identified according to semantic, syntactic and discursive functions of the potential variational paradigm, a much

larger sample would definitely be necessary to account for the extent and typology of this phraseological phenomenon.

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Summary

Although traditionally regarded as fixed phrases, idioms do actually vary a great deal. Some of these idiom variants may become institutionalised and eventually be lemmatised in dictionary entries. Thus, cases of lexical variation such as *hard/hot on your heels* or *break fresh/new ground* represent one end of the cline of a close-ended variational paradigm. Sometimes inserted adjectives can become so pervasive that they may be included in a dictionary entry as with *cut your political/professional, etc. teeth* in the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (CIDI). Finally, at the other end of the cline we find examples such as *wear your heart on your sleeve*, frequently instantiated by the substitution of its nominal component *heart* by an extensive paradigm, which perfectly exemplifies the ongoing process of variation through substitution and which is definitely an open-slot idiom even though it is not registered as such in general dictionaries and dictionaries of idioms. The analysability of the component *heart* can explain the use of nouns such as *emotions* or *feelings* but would certainly not account for other occurrences such as *Christianity*, *presidential ambitions* or *heritage*. As is also the case with *take a leaf out of somebody's book*, some phraseological units are usually varied by means of the substitution of one of the noun phrases by others being or not semantically related and hence constitute clear instances of open-slot idioms. It is mainly the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (ODI) and the *Longman Idiom Dictionary* (LID) that

lemmatise some of their entries as open-slots by eliding the variable component and replacing it with a gap. For instance, *with a capital A/B etc.* and *rocky road* are the canonical forms in the CIDI whereas _____ *with a capital* _____ and *the rocky road to* _____ are the head phrases in the LID and the ODI respectively.