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► **To cite this version:**

Ramon Marti Solano. American slang and phraseology beyond their borders . Roberto Cagliero and Anna Belladelli. American English(es): Linguistic and Socio-Cultural Perspectives, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp.156-181, 2013, 978-1443847483. <http://www.cambridgescholars.com/american-englishes-16> . hal-01645035v2

**HAL Id: hal-01645035**

**<https://hal-unilim.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01645035v2>**

Submitted on 7 Jan 2018

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# American slang and phraseology beyond their borders

Ramón Martí Solano

## 1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that the influence of American English on British English is not a recent phenomenon. However, the use of a strictly American phraseology is definitely something that bears on the linguistic production of the last decade even though a certain number of expressions originating in the United States had been adopted by British English in previous decades of the twentieth century and even before. It has already been pointed out that this influence is far more widespread in certain language registers or genres in British English (Moon 1998: 134-135). What is more, and in the case of lexicalized variants of the same phraseological unit (PhU), “corpus evidence shows the increasing incidence of American variants in British English” (Moon 2006: 230-231)<sup>1</sup>. This piece of research aims to describe and analyze the influence and extent of American slang and phraseology on British English:

The common European linguistic and cultural heritage has had a strong influence on English FEIs<sup>2</sup> in the past; less so today, since the strongest influence appears now to be intervarietal, with American FEIs penetrating British English (Moon 1998: 41)

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<sup>1</sup> Moon mentions *not see the forest/wood for the trees* and *blow one's own horn/trumpet* as clear examples of this type of influence.

<sup>2</sup> The abbreviation FEIs stands for Fixed Expressions and Idioms.

Some PhUs that originated in the US and were considered as American expressions in earlier dates are no longer geographically motivated and are used by speakers of British English as part of their own phraseological background. Examples such as *to make/cut a long story short* and *rule sth with an iron hand/fist*<sup>3</sup> show that these PhUs are well established and are so widespread that they are no longer regarded as American expressions, even though the latter is labeled as *US* in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (CALD3). It goes without saying that cases such as these should be considered in the same way as some former intervarietal loanwords such as *belittle*, *governmental*, *lengthy*, *bogus*, *boss*, *alibi* or *commute*, originally American coinages and subsequently imported and expanded into use in Great Britain and no longer labeled as *American* in current dictionaries and other lexicographical works.

However, many other idioms which were originally American have become fashionable in British English, in particular in journalism or the media. Other American idioms become known to British speakers because of the influence of American culture, for example films and music. In some cases 'American' idioms are now so common in British English that it would be wrong to label them as only – or even mainly – used in American English. Even though some people may think of these idioms as American, they are now much more widely known and used. (CIDI, vii)

This quotation from the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (CIDI) does not, for obvious reasons, take into account the different degrees of institutionalization and frequency of use of a certain number of distinctive and idiosyncratic American idioms in British English and, in particular, their presence in the British press. We are convinced that the language of the media represents the ideal environment for phraseological research since multi-word lexical items and other sorts of innovative lexical combination “are more likely to be found in

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<sup>3</sup> All the examples of American/British variant forms will follow this order. So *chew the rag/fat* will show first the American variant form and secondly the British one.

journalism than in other text-types” (Moon 2001: 229). After a brief historical background of the Anglo-American linguistic relations, we examine, first, the concepts of slang and phraseology and their interrelation. Then we determine what can be regarded as a strictly American phraseology and the criteria behind it. The following chapter deals with the use of general corpora for slang and phraseological research and the need of online newspaper archives to complement this type of investigation. We proceed with the lexicographical treatment that these multi-word lexical items get in dictionaries and thesauri and finally we focus on a frequency study carried out using the electronic archives of the British newspaper *The Guardian* as a working corpus. This study shows the incidence and pervasiveness of American phraseology in this type of discourse and the various degrees of usage and levels of institutionalization.

## **2. American lexical and phraseological influence on British English**

The linguistic relations between the United States of America and the United Kingdom have fluctuated along the centuries but generally speaking Britons have traditionally shown different degrees of hostility toward American English. The language was brought to North America when the first European colonists settled along the eastern coast of Massachusetts and Virginia. For obvious reasons, the first words that found their way into British English were all related to elements of nature, flora or fauna characteristic of the new territories such as *opossum*, *persimmon* or *raccoon*.

American words could even displace traditional English ones. In Britain, the fruits of certain species of bog plants were known as *marsh-worts* or *fen-berries*. When the related North-American fruits were imported from New England in 1686, they were called by the name given to them in America: *cranberries* (1672). (Bailey 2003: 475-6)

These new terms that designated new realities were accepted and incorporated into the English language on the eastern shores of the Atlantic. But as far as slang and phraseology are concerned, it must be stated that it is not until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that there is a distinctive and characteristic American production of familiar, colloquial and substandard lexicon (Mencken 2000: 567). As it appears, Americanisms were often synonymous with slang, a situation which has not changed much from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

When the English papers denounce Americanisms, which is very often, it is commonly slang that arouses their most violent dudgeon. This dudgeon, of course, is grounded upon its very success: the American movies and talkies have implanted American slang in England even more copiously than they have implanted more decorous American neologisms. (Mencken 2000: 571)<sup>4</sup>

This association is, nevertheless, very well grounded in the traditional perception that British people have had, and they still have on the whole, of Americans for the last 100 years or so.

It is quite true, of course, that many Americanisms have entered the speech of England, some imperceptibly, some over a great deal of opposition. The transfer, as a matter of fact, began quite early, long before talking films and radio were even thought of. Sir William Craigie states in *The Study of American English* (Oxford, 1927) that although, “for some two centuries, roughly down to 1820, the passage of new words or senses across the Atlantic was regularly westwards,” practically the only exceptions being words denoting things peculiar to America, “with the nineteenth century ... the contrary current begins to set in ... bearing with it many a piece of drift-wood to the shores of Britain.” (Pyles 1952: 217)

In the above-mentioned work Craigie gives several examples of American words having entered British English such as *prairie*, *blizzard* or *squatter* but he also includes some PhUs such as *to strike oil*, *to make one's pile* or *to take a back*

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<sup>4</sup> We have used the 2000 edition of Mencken's *American Language*, first published in 1919.

*seat*. These expressions, although coined in America, are today part of the common core of multi-word lexical items in the English-speaking world. Verbal predicates, together with noun groups and prepositional phrases, represent the largest proportion of PhUs in English and, when they do not include specific constituents, they tend to be adopted quite freely by the other varieties. Pyles also cites other former scholars on the subject of American English such as Weekley and Hornwill and other examples of American PhUs having been imported elsewhere, namely *to cut no ice*, *to fill the bill* and *hot air*, among others.

English men of letters and politicians usually found the language spoken in America despicable and very disagreeable. This animosity toward American English and the strong belief that the English of England was superior have been constant traits of the attitude of many a prominent figure in the United Kingdom:

In 1955, the Prince of Wales asserted: “We must act now to ensure that English – and that, to my way of thinking, means English English – maintains its position as the world language well into the next century.” (Bailey 2003: 495)

Such common phrases as *be/feel under the weather* and *cut no ice with sb* are mentioned, among many other expressions and words, in an article published in London in 1929 as “Americanisms that have become firmly lodged in English.” (Mencken 2000: 231). Mencken carries on with other American expressions which have worked their way into England. These include *fill the bill* and *fly off the handle* (Mencken 2000: 557).

The word Americanism is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) in its third sense as “A word or phrase peculiar to, or extending from, the United States.” The term is certainly not devoid of an important amount of negative connotations, as other words ending by *-ism*:

What is American about American English is still a staple criticism for British journalists, and *Americanism* as a term for reprobate English flourishes. A computer-search of the “quality” London newspapers printed in 1992 yielded such phrases as “the usual quota of insidious, unnoticed Americanisms” and “those loose

Americanisms of demotic speech.” [...] “Americanisms” are never praised, though there may be a begrudging suggestion that they are racy, fashionable, and colloquial. (Bailey 2003: 459)

Even though the actual term “Americanism” is sometimes associated to a discourse of a disparaging or deprecating nature in Great Britain, words and phrases of American origin appear in all different types of lexical contexts, text-types and language registers with no particular negative connotation. As a general rule, British speakers, as speakers of any other language, make use of their lexicon regardless of etymology or word-origin unless there is a conscious metalinguistic use or a humorous or facetious intention.

However, in an article published in the British newspaper *The Daily Mail* as recently as January 6<sup>th</sup> 2011, Matthew Engels, a columnist of the Financial Times, launches a scathing and reactionary attack on the invasion of American phrases and stereotypes into British English. Unsurprisingly enough, the two adjectives associated with the word *Americanism* in this article are *ugly* and *witless*.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. American slang and phraseology

It is rather infrequent to find the terms *slang* and *phraseology* together in academic literature. However, this is not the case in dictionary descriptions of either slang words or multi-word lexical items. PhUs, when labeled as *American* in dictionaries of idioms, are usually labeled as well either as *offensive* or *informal* or *slang*. This shows, from a lexicographical perspective, the direct connection between PhUs, especially American PhUs, and the non-standard or substandard registers in English.

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<sup>5</sup> Engels, M. 2011, “Say no to the get-go! Americanisms swamping English, so wake up and smell the coffee”, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1282449/Americanisms-swamping-English-wake-smell-coffee.html>

The concept of slang itself has constantly evolved since the first recorded use of the term and its sense has been extended to include not only cant, jargon and vulgar language but also all types of colloquialisms and informal expressions as expressed in the introduction of the *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* (ODMS):

Finally, in the early years of the nineteenth century, the term 'slang' came to be applied much more generally to any 'language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some new special sense'. (ODMS 1992: v)

Dictionaries of slang and slang thesauri do not normally represent just one geographical variety but they encompass as much lexical and phraseological material as possible from different language varieties. The general lexicographical practice is to label those entries which are markedly and distinctively characteristic of language varieties other than British English or American English, such as South African English, Hibernian English, Australian English or New Zealand English. However, reference to British and American English can sometimes be found for those words and phrases which are restricted to such subgroups as, for instance, *American Black English* or *Cockney rhyming slang*.

We tend to associate American slang to words describing mainly people, often disapprovingly, such as *bozo* ("a stupid person"), *dweeb* ("a person who is physically and socially awkward and has little confidence"), *honky* ("a word used by some black people to refer to a white person"), *john* ("a man who is the customer of a prostitute"), *leatherneck* ("a soldier in the US Marine Corps"), *patsy* ("a person who it is easy to cheat or make suffer") or *tightwad* ("a person who is not willing to spend money"). Other associations, as is common with slang in general, are with alcohol and drugs in words such as *blow* ('cocaine'), *hooch* ("strong alcohol, especially whiskey"), *sauce* ("alcohol"), *junk* ("a dangerous drug, especially heroin"), *shooting gallery* ("a place where people go to inject illegal drugs") and with words related to crime and violence such as *hit* ("an act of murder"), *pen* ("penitentiary"), *punk* ("a young man who fights and is involved in



criminal activities”) or *sting* (“a clever and complicated act of stealing”). But if we look at the CALD3 we find that *informal*, *slang*, *offensive* and *humorous* are the four usage labels applied to the majority of American idioms found in its nomenclature, which substantially widens the number and the range of sub-standard lexical items coming from the U.S. and corroborates what the *Cassell’s Dictionary of Slang* (CDS) calls “the pre-eminence of America in today’s slang vocabularies” (CDS 2000: vii). But some lexicographers do not always relate or associate slang with phraseology or idioms as the following quotation from the *American Slang Dictionary* (ASD) illustrates:

Other non-slang idioms are: *change one’s tune*, *lead a dog’s life*, *raised in a barn*, and *streaming mad*. Idioms that are also slang include: *spew one’s guts out*, *dead from the neck up*, *do a job on someone*, and *ream someone out*. Many slang phrases are also idiomatic, but *slang* and *idiom* refer to different aspects of words and expressions. *Slang* focuses on informality and the characteristics bulleted previously, whereas *idiomatic* refers to the nonliteral interpretation of a phrase. Some slang phrases are idioms, but all idioms are not slang. (ASD 2006: xvi)

Considering that the vast majority of the common core idioms can be classified as belonging to a standard register and that idioms labeled American are usually labeled *informal* or *slang*, we can infer that idioms originating in the U.S. carry with them, for speakers of other varieties of English, an aura of informality, sometimes even vulgarity, which is inevitably associated to the American way of life.

What is then American phraseology and how does it relate to slang? We consider American phraseology as the inventory of a number of phrases which have been coined in the U.S. and which may or may not contain an element, in the form of a lexical constituent, making reference to a native, historic or current reality characteristic of this country. For the present study I have not taken into consideration spelling variants (*off-color/off-colour*), inflectional variants (*high-strung/highly-strung*) or prepositional variants (*in a pinch/at a pinch*) which stand for minor and thinly-represented phenomena, even though some American

inflectional variants are gaining ground in British English, as is the case with *put a dampener/damper on something*.

In the seminal work on English phraseology *Phraseologie der englischen Sprache*, Gläser draws a clear distinction between what she describes as the denotative and the connotative meanings of PhUs. Inside connotations she establishes the following subtypes: derogatory, taboo, jocular/humor/facetious, appreciative, formal, archaic, foreign, colloquial and slang. For colloquial she supplies examples such as *forty winks*, *full of beans*, *in a blue funk* and *to play ducks and drakes with sb*. For slang, the idioms she mentions include *big banana*, *the whole caboodle*, *off one's rocker*, *to have a ball*, *to get one's books*, *on the razzle-dazzle* and *up the creek* (Gläser 1986: 36). It is obvious that it is extremely difficult to draw a line between what can be considered as colloquial and what counts as slang (Horwill 1939: vii), but one thing is certain: some expressions originally regarded as slang become gradually institutionalized and for that matter accepted by larger groups of speakers, a fact which allows them to climb up the language register ladder.

### **3.1. Elements of or reference to American culture**

Is it relevant to ask oneself whether there is a distinct American phraseology when the large majority of idiomatic expressions are shared by both American and British English? An example such as *bury the hatchet* shows the evolution of idioms which originated in the U.S.<sup>6</sup> and which have become widely used all over the English-speaking world. Nonetheless, some idiomatic expressions contain constituents that are distinctly and unmistakably American either because they refer to extra-linguistic realities characteristic to this country or because they refer to elements associated to its history, popular culture (music, cinema, etc.) or

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<sup>6</sup> According to the *American Thesaurus of Slang* (ATS) the earliest date of occurrence of this expression can be traced back to 1754.

traditions, as for instance *be whistling Dixie*, *50 million Elvis fans can't be wrong* or *a new kid on the block*. The *American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (AHD1) describes the entry *whistle Dixie* as follows:

**Whistle Dixie** Engage in unrealistic, hopeful fantasizing, as in *If you think you can drive there in two hours, you're whistling Dixie*. This idiom alludes to the song "Dixie" and the vain hope that the Confederacy, known as *Dixie*, would win the Civil War. (AHD1 2003: 462)

A search for this unit in the electronic archives of *The Guardian* (GEA) has yielded a total of 14 article results of which only one corresponds to the idiomatic use of the phrase:

It's been a bad few weeks, dominated by the spectacle of Lebanon being bombed to bits while our prime minister watched with his hands in his pockets, **whistling Dixie**. (GEA, 9 August 2006)

At the other end of the spectrum, a string such as *a new kid on the block* is either not found in some dictionaries of slang or simply unlabeled. This phrase, which is labeled as *American & Australian* in the CALD3, is one of the most widely used idioms of American origin to be found in British journalistic discourse. Even if the nominal constituent *kid* has been employed in familiar speech (labeled as *slang* by the OED in the fifth sense of its dictionary entry) for *child* in Britain, its sense of "young man or woman" is definitely American (OED Vol. VIII: 421). As for *block*, known in the U.S. as "[a] connected or compact group of houses or other buildings" from 1796 onwards (Craigie 1940: 206), it should be noted that it is this new American sense of the word that becomes apparent in the idiom.

Other phrases are decidedly more opaque for the contemporary speaker of whichever variety of the English language. This is the case of *paint the town red*, a well-documented example of a phrase of American origin which is geographically unmotivated and therefore considered as part of the common core of English

phraseology. According to the *American Thesaurus of Slang* (ATS), the first occurrence can be traced back to 1884. This dictionary explains its origin as follows: “Presumably originally of celebrating cowboys shooting up the town and threatening to “paint it red” if there was any interference.” (ATS 1953: 883).

Traditionally, one of the main sources of idiomatic expressions has been sports and other leisure activities such as card games. Special mention should be made here of hunting and fishing, which have provided numerous phrases having entered common speech and pervading even today all sorts of speech situations—the American expression *fish or cut bait* is just one example. We could say that the role that hunting, fishing and other traditional sports have played in the past centuries has been assumed by American football and baseball today. *Drop the ball, (right) off the bat, get to/reach first base, be out in left field, come out of left field, touch base, a whole new ball game, in the ballpark, play hardball, be a slam dunk, heavy hitter* and *Monday-morning quarterback* make up a sample of phrases from these sports that have become idiomatic and, above all, that have transcended the exclusively American usage to become an integral part of other varieties of English.

### **3.2. Discrete American lexical constituents**

Other idioms can be instantly labeled as *American* insofar as they contain a lexical constituent, usually a noun, which denotes or refers to elements characteristic to the United States, as for example the units of money *dollar, buck, dime* or *cent* in phrases such as *pay top dollar, look a million bucks, be a dime a dozen* or *not a red cent*. These multi-word lexical items seem to have been accepted by British journalism and mass media on the whole but also in everyday familiar or substandard speech. Other examples include the American word *cookie* in phrases such as *toss your cookies* or *a tough cookie*. Finally we should consider in this respect those phrases including a distinctive American lexical constituent as for instance *store* or *elevator* in phrases such as *mind the store* or *sb’s elevator doesn’t go all the way to the top (floor)*.

It has been pointed out that one of the reasons why some American words and phrases are used in the British media, and in the British press in particular, is because journalists tend to include them in items of news coming from the U.S. or in editorials about this country mainly for rhetorical and stylistic reasons:

For example, the mainly American *beat the bushes* ‘try hard to obtain or achieve something’ occurs in BofE in British journalism, admittedly with respect to American or international topics. [...] And while most English FEIs exist in both varieties, they may well have different distributions, thus affecting register of use. (Moon 1998: 135)

The following example from the GEA is quite revealing of this phenomenon:

The United States, compounding this, has not regarded it as its task to stop the violence but has instead let it go forward. The question of who’s **minding the store** comes to mind. (GEA 24 July 2006)

Attention should also be drawn here to American/British lexical pairs such as *closet/cupboard* in the PhU *a skeleton in the closet/cupboard*. No token of either variant has been found in the BNC. However, the electronic archives of *The Guardian* have yielded the following results: 257 article results of *a skeleton in the closet* and 293 results of *a skeleton in the cupboard*. Even though the number of occurrences of the British variant form is slightly higher, the overwhelming presence of the American variant is undoubtedly not negligible.

### 3.3. American slang words

Less commonly, American slang words can be found as constituents of well-established PhUs. *Rap* in the sense of “an accusation of crime, or a punishment” as it appears in the strings *a bum rap* and *beat the rap* is a clear example of the

development of lexicalized multi-word lexical items common in substandard registers of American English having been exported overseas.

The verb *ride* in the sense of “try to control someone and force them to work” as it appears in the American PhU *ride herd on somebody* is another example of this type of phenomenon. According to the OED this expression was originally used to mean “to guard and control (a herd of cattle) by riding on its perimeter” (OED Vol. XIII: 901) and this sense was later extended to mean “to boss” or “to keep in check”.

### 3.4. Lexical variants

One of the most interesting developments concerning the influence of American slang and phraseology on other world Englishes has to do with lexical variants in PhUs. Idiomatic expressions are not as fixed lexically or syntactically as one might think or at least as lexicographical descriptions tend to present them. These multi-word units are more often than not varied and undergo different types of transformations. To make a long story short, we can say that there are three main types of phraseological variation, namely, and in order of importance, lexical variance, lexical insertion and truncation or elision. Table 1 shows some examples of lexical variants in PhUs in American and British English:

Table 1. Lexical variants in PhUs in American and British English

American English	British English
<p><b>silent</b> partner            chew the <b>rag</b>            burn your <b>bridges</b>            come <b>unglued</b>            not be worth a <b>hill</b> of beans            do a roaring <b>business</b>            a <b>fair-haired</b> boy</p>	<p><b>sleeping</b> partner            chew the <b>fat</b>            burn your <b>boats</b>            come <b>unstuck</b>            not be worth a <b>row</b> of beans            do a roaring <b>trade</b>            a <b>blue-eyed</b> boy</p>

can't see the <b>forest</b> for the trees <b>hem</b> and haw <b>knock on</b> wood blow one's own <b>horn</b> be wearing <b>blinders</b> be up your <b>alley</b> sweep sth under the <b>rug</b>	can't see the <b>wood</b> for the trees <b>hum</b> and haw <b>touch</b> wood blow one's own <b>trumpet</b> be wearing <b>blinkers</b> be up your <b>street</b> sweep sth under the <b>carpet</b>
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The expressions in Table 1 are but a sample of many other lexical variants found in the two varieties. *Burn your bridges* epitomizes, to my phraseological eye, the extent and incidence of American lexical variants in British English. We have carried out a search for the two lexical variants: the originally American preferred realization *bridges* and its British counterpart *boats* in the BNC and in the GEA.

Table 2. *Burn your bridges/burn your boats*

Idiom	BNC	GEA
burn your bridges	3	82
burn your boats	18	14

The results set out in Table 2 are quite revealing of the fact that the American variant form has largely accrued in newspaper discourse if we look at the results in the GEA where *burn the bridges* displays the larger number of occurrences. Equally interesting is to observe that only three instances of the American variant occur in the BNC, which clearly shows scanty evidence of this form up to 1993 in British English. The expansion of the American variant has been so remarkable in the last fifteen years or so that British speakers usually hesitate between the two possibilities as the following quotation illustrates:

So you won't be nipping back to London from Thursday evening to Tuesday morning like most of our visiting writers, I said. 'No,' she said, 'I've *burned my boats, or is it bridges?*' and smiled but there was a trapped hunted look in her smile as she said it, [...]. (Lodge 2002: 6)

#### 4. The BNC and the electronic archives of newspapers as corpora

The *British National Corpus* (BNC) is a corpus of contemporary British English from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and going as late as 1993. We consider that for this precise reason a corpus of this kind cannot reflect the latest changes concerning idiom usage in British English. Corpus research shows that the vast majority of American idiom usage in the British press has chiefly taken place in the last decade. The advantages of using the archives of a newspaper in the guise of a linguistic corpus are manifold. On the one hand, the texts composing these archives are articles mainly from the year 2000 to date, which makes archives a precious source for contemporary lexical and phraseological research. On the other hand, the huge diversity of sections found in broadsheets represents an extraordinary source of linguistic variety even if theoretically the linguistic production of newspapers is generally classified as journalistic discourse in genre studies. However, article result figures must be taken with a grain of salt since some of these multi-word lexical items may be used with a different sense from the idiomatic one. The American phrase *go postal*, which as an idiom means “to become very angry and do something violent” has a medium-high level of frequency in the GEA. The fact of the matter is that a large number of these occurrences correspond to a combination, frequently found in headlines, and used to indicate “going back to traditional letter-writing”. We have therefore not included this item in our frequency study. All this leads us on the one hand, to insist on the insufficiency of a general corpus like the BNC for a piece of research of this type and on the other hand, to stress the importance and usefulness of newspaper archives as a substitute corpus<sup>7</sup>. Newspaper corpora on CD-ROM or

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<sup>7</sup> *The Guardian* has recently changed their search system of its electronic archives and it is no longer possible to look for exact groups of words by using the inverted commas, which makes it very difficult, sometimes impossible, to carry out searches for multi-word lexical items in this type of up-to-date word databases.



online newspaper archives are available and invaluable tools for frequency studies of idioms for the simple reason that these units are rarely found in general corpora (Minugh 1999: 68).

As an example illustrative of the arguments presented above, the American PhU *a slam dunk* has only one occurrence in the BNC whereas there are 256 article results in the GEA. A detailed description and analysis of the characteristics and usage of such an expression and of the contexts in which it occurs in British English would be simply impossible if we were to use the BNC as a working corpus.

## 5. Lexicographical treatment

Far matters of space and for the sake of lexicographical specificity, we have decided not to conduct a research on the presence of American idioms or American idiom variants in L1 dictionaries, L2 dictionaries and bilingual dictionaries. It goes without saying that the choice of idiomatic expressions is ultimately in the hands of each lexicographer and that several extra-linguistic constraints imposed by publishing houses actually affect, to different degrees, the inclusion or exclusion of an important amount of these multi-word units. Consequently, we have only looked into dictionaries of idioms, dictionaries of slang and slang thesauri.

### 5.1. Dictionaries of Idioms

As far as the PhU *not amount to a hill/row of beans* is concerned, both the frequency search and the lexicographical survey show how the so-called American variant is actually well-established in British English and therefore can be regarded as a common-core variant or, otherwise stated, as geographically unmarked. The variant form *hill* is favored in the GEA if we compare the number of article results which amount to 57 for *hill* and 25 for *row*. Lemmatization is predominantly done using the constituent *hill* if we look at Table 3. Four out of the five dictionaries of

idioms favor the American variant—the only one not doing so is the *Oxford Dictionary of Current and Idiomatic English* (ODCIE2), which was first published in 1983 and is clearly biased toward British English.

Table 3. Lemmatization of the PhU *a hill/row of beans*

Dictionary of idioms	lemma
CCDI	not amount to a hill of beans/not worth a row of beans
CIDI	not be worth a hill of beans <i>American, informal</i>
LID	not amount to a hill of beans ( <i>also</i> not amount to a row of beans <i>BrE</i> )
ODI	a hill (or row) of beans
ODCIE2	(not) worth a row of beans

In Table 3 we have examined the case of the PhU *not amount to a hill of beans/not worth a row of beans* as a instructive example of the evolution of phraseological variant forms in English but also as a representative instance of how the American variant is gaining ground and how it has become customary not only in everyday use in British English but also in its lexicographical treatment. The bias of the LID toward the American variant form is most noticeable as it gives the British variant as a second option between brackets.

In order to compare the lexicographical treatment of American PhUs a study has been carried out in which 40 PhUs from the *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (LID)<sup>8</sup> with the label *American English* have been chosen at random in order to determine whether or not and to what extent these entries are included in other dictionaries of idioms. It is interesting to note that the vast majority of PhUs labeled as *American* by the LID are also labeled as *slang* or *spoken*, which confirms the regular association between American speech and a high degree of informality. For the purpose of this study we have used five dictionaries of idioms,

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<sup>8</sup> This dictionary has been chosen as the starting point for this research as it favors idioms of American origin and registers a great number of them.

namely the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (CCDI), the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (CIDI), the *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (LID), the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (ODI) and the *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English. Volume 2* (ODCIE2)

Table 4. Lexicographical treatment according to dictionary of idioms of a sample of PhUs of American origin

AmE PhU	LID	CCDI	CIDI	ODI	ODCIE2
be right up sb's alley	+	+	+	+	
apple polisher	+	+			
a straight arrow	+	+	+	+	
sb's ass is in a sling	+	+		+	
haul ass	+		+	+	
be left holding the bag	+	+	+	+	+
clean sb's clock	+			+	
come unglued	+	+	+		
toss your cookies	+			+	
be a dime a dozen	+	+	+	+	
hit pay dirt	+	+	+		
be whistling Dixie	+	+	+	+	
put on the dog	+		+	+	
down-and-dirty	+	+	+	+	
be in Dutch with sb	+			+	
behind the eight ball	+		+	+	
cop a feel	+		+		
play hardball	+		+		
hell on wheels	+		+		
ride herd on sb	+	+	+	+	
hit a home run	+	+			
be bleeding red ink	+	+			
a laundry list	+	+	+		
hang a left/right	+		+	+	
have legs	+	+	+		

get a line on	+			+	
bark/howl at the moon	+	+		+	
be/get on the same page	+	+	+	+	
rain on sb's parade	+	+			
sb is a piece of work	+		+		
make a pit stop	+		+	+	+
take a powder	+	+	+		
a full-court press	+		+		
get a bum rap	+		+		
get the shaft	+		+		
get/be bent out of shape	+	+	+	+	
be sent to the showers	+	+	+		
get a bum steer	+		+		
mind the store	+			+	
walk your talk	+		+		
40	40	21	29	21	2

Table 4 shows, among other things, the striking difference between the treatment of American idioms in the LID, which has been used as a benchmark and obviously totals 100% of the units selected for the study, and the ODCIE2 which only registers two out of the forty strings, that is 5%. Here is a quotation from the introduction of the ODCIE2 which clearly accounts for this fact:

The idioms in this dictionary represent the usage of educated British speakers in the latter half of the twentieth century. This is not to say that the dictionary confines itself to idioms that are peculiarly British. Very many – if not most – of the expressions listed form part of a ‘common core’: they are readily understood, and commonly used, in other parts of the English-speaking world. While no attempt has been made to describe expressions which are solely, or principally, American, the dictionary does include a few items – marked (US) or (esp US) – which have a marginal status in British English. These are idioms which though not fully established in British usage, and still regarded as ‘American’ by some speakers, are nonetheless used often enough to merit inclusion in a dictionary of this kind. Note, for example: **be a different (etc) ball game** ... (esp US) [...] (ODCIE2: xxxviii)

Apart from the fact that the selection of headwords or head-phrases depends, although not exclusively, on the personal choice of the lexicographer, the results set out in Table 4 demonstrate that the other three dictionaries have adopted a moderate, middle-of-the-road approach to the inclusion of these units in their nomenclature.

## 5.2. Dictionaries of Slang and Slang Thesauri

We have used for our research a certain number of slang dictionaries and thesauri (see references). Our selection of American PhUs has been benchmarked against Green's *The Slang Thesaurus* (GST) and the three referenced dictionaries of slang, namely *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* (CDS), *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (CNPDSUE) and *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* (ODMS) in order to account for representativeness of phraseology in lexicographical works on slang and substandard language. Taking into consideration the lexicographers' personal choices and other editing and commercial constraints, we can state that these American English idioms are present, all in all, in the works consulted. Mention should be made of some exceptions to the general trend. Dictionaries sometimes vary in the choice of the verb collocate for phrases such as *beat the rap*, the one favored by the GST and the ODMS, whereas the CNPDSUE favors *ripe the rap* and the CDS, *take the rap*. It goes without saying that some PhUs are not registered by one dictionary or another, as is the case with *ballpark figure* which does not appear in the nomenclature of the ODMS, or even PhUs that, although registered by a thesaurus, are wrongly or awkwardly classified, as for instance *duck soup* which appears twice under the subheadings "quality" and "goodness" in the GST. Lexical variants are also registered, as with *toss the cookie*, which is recorded as *barf* or *blow one's cookies* in the GST.

As far as the representativeness of American idioms in slang thesauri is concerned, the GST exemplifies the lexicographical approach to such a

phenomenon. Word and phrases alike are crammed in under headings and subheadings regardless of their frequency of use or their origin. In fact, no reference or geographical label whatsoever is given to identify entries as common core, mainly British or mainly American. The only geographical labels used by this thesaurus are *US black* for Black American English and *Aus.* for Australian English. One must conclude from this lexicographical practice that no distinction is made between usages that are found in actuality nearly exclusively in American or in British English. In view of this lexicographical practice, it comes as no surprise that all the American idioms under scrutiny have their entry in this thesaurus. Moreover, when idioms present different lexical variant forms, these are registered without any reference to language variety, as, for example, *blue-eyed boy/fair-haired boy* or *come unglued/come unstuck*.

## 6. Frequency study

PhUs in general and idioms in particular are extremely rare in corpora, a fact that has been underlined by several scholars (Moon 1998; Hanks 2000). Exception should be made of such grammatical strings as *in general*, *in terms of*, *in addition to*, etc, which are quite recurrent in discourse. Frequency, when dealing with idioms, is a very relative notion since, contrary to monolexical units, they have a much lower frequency occurrence in corpora. Figures which could be regarded as low or very low for single function words or lexical words can be seen as high or very high when they are applied to idiomatic expressions:

74 occurrences (of *red herring*) in 100,000,000 may sound quite rare, but this is actually one of the more frequent idioms. The expression *kick(ed) the bucket*, by contrast, is much rarer. It is frequently mentioned but rarely used. It occurs only 11 times in the British National Corpus. Worse still, closer examination reveals that only two of these occurrences are genuine uses of the idiom. The rest are either independent uses of the words in their literal, physical meaning, or mentions of the idiom in scholarly discourse. A frequency of 2 in 100 million is extremely low,

implying that an ordinary person will only use or see or hear the expression once every five or ten years. And yet few native speakers of English are unaware of the expression in its idiomatic meaning. These facts are quite puzzling, and highlight the problem facing the collector and analysts of idioms. (Hanks 2000: 311-2)

Frequencies are then higher or lower, as far as journalism is concerned, depending on pragmatics, that is whether the holistic meaning of the string lends itself to being used in contexts related to politics, economics or any of the main topics dealt with by the press. It is evident that some idiomatic expressions are unsuitable for this type of discourse insofar as they tend to appear mostly, or rather exclusively, in conversational exchanges due to their pragmatic nature, as with *eat my shorts*, or because they are extremely vulgar or offensive as *shoot the shit*. Other typically American expressions are extremely unlikely to be found in journalistic discourse for the simple reason that they are too blatantly slangy and generally restricted to conversational exchanges, as with *get off your tail*, an expression used to admonish someone to start doing something profitable.

### **6.1. AmE PhUs of high and medium-high frequency**

For the purposes of this study, and in light of previous quantitative phraseological research, we have determined that a frequency of occurrence ranging from 100 to 300 article results in the archives of a leading British quality newspaper is to be considered as high. Consequently, and for the other groups of American English phraseological units (AmE PhUs), the pre-established frequency ranges are set as follows: medium-high for occurrences between 50 and 100, medium for occurrences between 20 and 50, low for occurrences between 10 and 20 and finally very low for occurrences below a total of 10 occurrences. A random selection of the 321 idioms labeled as *American English only* in the CALD3 on CD-ROM has been used for the present frequency study.

Table 5. High-frequency AmE PhUs in *The Guardian*<sup>9</sup>

High frequency	GEA
play hardball	248
a new kid on the block	203
with an iron hand/fist	165
pay top dollar	128
a pit stop	107

Not surprisingly, the highly-rated idioms of American origin in Table 5 are for the most part considered as common core idioms among British speakers, except for *play hardball* and *pay top dollar*. Verb predicates and nominal groups seem to be the grammatical types of AmE PhUs that have become common and pervasive in British journalism. The phrase having obtained the largest number of article results is *play hardball*, which is defined as follows:

**play hardball/hardball it/play rough** *v.* [1970s+] (orig. US) to act ruthlessly and single-mindedly in pursuit of a goal; thus *hardballer*, one who is ruthless and aggressive. [baseball imagery] (CDS 2000: 927)

This expression represents well the status of phrases originally coined in the U.S. that have been imported by other language varieties and, in the present case, have been easily assimilated by the British mainstream phraseology. The same thing applies to *pay top dollar*, which does not appear singular or peculiar in British contexts and, although still fairly informal, is widely used in journalistic discourse. Although *with a rod of iron* is traditionally considered to be the eminently British variant, there are only 43 results of this phrase compared to 165

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<sup>9</sup> The figures corresponding to the number of article results supplied in this table and in the following correspond to searches in the online archives of *The Guardian* which date back to June 2009.



of the commoner equivalent PhU *with an iron fist/hand* for the same period (2000-2009) in the GEA.

The popular American phrase *make a pit stop* meaning “to make a short stop during a long car journey in order to rest and eat” represents a semantic shift from the same phrase as used in motor racing. Going from the more specific to the more general, the phrase is widely used both in America and in Britain. There are a number of 107 articles in the GEA, which accounts for its commonness and pervasiveness. An important number of occurrences refer to the “literal” meaning in sport: 60 from the section “Sport”, 38 from “Sport – Formula One” and 29 from “Sport – Motor Sport”. The second group in number comes from the section “Travel”. It should be pointed out that, again, the number of occurrences in the BNC is barely 4, which contrasts starkly with the results in the GEA. Some of the examples of the idiomatic use of the phrase show a further development of its semantics toward a more general sense of “taking/making a stop”:

No trip to China would be complete without taking **a pit stop** for a traditional cuppa. Even though the Chinese tea ceremony is as steeped in tradition as neighbouring Japan, it does not go in for the latter's rigid set of rules and concentrates more on setting the perfect mood. (GEA 31 July 2008)

On our way back to the city centre, we **make a pit stop** at the Casa Luis Barragan, a hidden museum in the Tacubaya district that was once the home of Barragan, one of Mexico's most influential 20th-century architects. The entrance hallway is dark and narrow with a small yellow glass window giving the only light. (GEA 8 November 2008)

This second group of American idioms includes three rather well-established phrases which take their source from baseball: *a heavy hitter*, *a whole new ball game* and *come/be out of left field*.

Table 6. Medium-high-frequency AmE PhUs in *The Guardian*

Medium-high frequency	GEA
a heavy hitter	97
lose your shirt	77
a whole new ball game	75
a tough cookie	67
come/be out of left field	56
go the whole nine yards	52

The phrase *a tough cookie* which dates back to the 1930s and means “a survivor, an emotionally strong person” (CDS 2000: 1221) seems to be well-established in British journalistic discourse but also in everyday speech as British speakers, although aware of the American flavor of a word such as *cookie*, are familiar with this idiomatic expression as illustrated in the following example:

Lee Jasper, the mayor of London's director on equalities and policing, said: "She is a firefly - small, diminutive and red-hot. She is not into flamboyant gestures but she is an exceptional officer and **a tough cookie**." (GEA 15 September 2006)

## 6.2. AmE PhUs of medium-frequency

Table 7 shows idioms that have a medium-range frequency of use in the GEA. These multi-word lexical items are, for the most part, institutionalized in British journalism although there seems to be a tendency for several of them to be used in some particular sub-genres, especially in the sports section of newspapers

Table 7. Medium-frequency AmE PhUs in *The Guardian*

Medium frequency	GEA
be in a funk	49
live high on the hog	45
look a million dollars	45
a laundry list	44

plough a lonely furrow	42
ballpark figure(s)/estimate(s)	34
a hill of beans	34
take the fall for	34
hit pay dirt	33
be a dime a dozen	32
close up shop	28
a turkey shoot	26
a know-it-all	26
in the ballpark	21

According to the CIDI a *turkey shoot* is defined as follows: “if a fight or a war is turkey shoot, one side is certain to be completely defeated because the other side is much stronger.” Our investigation into this particular PhU has shown that it usually occurs in sport contexts in which the imagery and stereotypes about war are common practice among these specialized journalists.

In her introduction to the CCDI Rosamund Moon specifies that some idioms are rarely used in British English and she gives as examples *live high on the hog* and *spin your wheels*. We have carried out a search for these two phrases in the GEA. Contrary to the previous statement we have found 45 article results for *live high in the hog*, which visibly demonstrates that idiom usage changes rapidly:

After all, it wouldn't do to give the impression that they, of all people, are now **living high on the hog** in Regent's Park when they should be starving, laudanum-addicted in their garrets. (GEA 11 October 2008)

The PhU *look a million dollars* has also a lexical variant form, *look a million bucks*, representing a different level of informality. The former has 45 occurrences in the GEA whereas the latter is actually non-existent.

This show has got everything: a brilliant, full-throated sexy dame in Clive Rowe's Sarah the Cook, who **looks a million dollars** in her Primark specials; a glittering, hissable villain in King Rat; [...] (GEA 19 December 2007)

### 6.3. AmE PhUs of low and very low frequency

As observed in tables from 6 to 9, the lower we descend in the frequency range, the larger the number of multi-word lexical items of American origin. Otherwise stated, it seems that the number of occurrences of AmE PhUs is inversely proportional to their frequency in text databases. What comes of these observations is the evidence that only a certain amount of AmE PhUs are actually widespread or rather widespread in British English whereas an important number of these idioms are seldom or virtually never found in corpora.

Table 8. Low-frequency AmE PhUs in *The Guardian*

Low frequency	GEA
mind the store	20
kick up your heels	19
go on the block	19
come unglued	19
a straight arrow	16
out of the ballpark	15
a bum rap	15
a bum steer	12
beat the rap	12
ride herd on sb	12
a quantum jump	10
be an easy mark	9
be on pins and needles	7
a pack rat	7
be left holding the bag	6
go hog wild	6
Monday-morning quarterback	6

Let us consider the case of *a bum steer*. This American phrase, even though some dictionaries do not label it as such, has no occurrences in the BNC and only 12 article results in the GEA. What is interesting here is the fact that it tends to occur in the “Sports” section of the newspaper, exactly 7 occurrences, out of which 5 are in the “Football” subsection as illustrated by the following example:

"If someone wants to give you **a bum steer**, then so be it. If people want to know they should ask me," the Spurs manager moaned. "I have a list of players I want - and Keane is not on it." (GEA 26 July 2002)

Table 9. Very low-frequency AmE PhUs in *The Guardian*

Very low frequency	GEA
king of the hill	5
be in a snit	4
the low man on the totem pole	3
be out in left field	3
do roaring business	3
hem and haw	3
toss your cookies	2
put/throw a monkey (wrench) in the works	2
be duck soup	2
lie down on the job	1
be whistling Dixie	1
sb's elevator doesn't go all the way to the top (floor)	1
as straight as a pin	1
be all over the lot	1
50 million Elvis fans can't be wrong	0
put/work a mojo on sb	0
have a heavy foot	0

If we agree on the statement that “[t]he frequency or currency of an item is not the only reason for entering it in the inventory that is the headword list of a dictionary” (Moon 1992: 500), phrases such as *be whistling Dixie* is listed in 4 out

of the 5 dictionaries of idioms investigated even though, with just one article result in the GEA, it can be considered as practically non-existent in British English.

## **7. Conclusion**

The vast majority of multi-word lexical items are common and well-known to all varieties of English. Speakers can be more or less acquainted with certain phrases also according to the volume of their own phraseological background. Concerning idioms originating in the U.S., many of these have made their way into the other world Englishes and have eventually become common core idioms. It should be said that idiom usage can change rapidly and that one item that has a relatively low presence outside one variety may, in the matter of little time, become known and even widespread in other varieties. It is undoubtedly the presence and magnitude of American journalism and mass media in general that has lately boosted specific American expressions that were formerly restricted to domestic usage. Once these phrases or variant forms of shared phrases become institutionalized outside the American borders, they go through a process by which they become less and less geographically motivated.

There is certainly a cline or continuum in the frequency of use: the vast majority of American idioms can be found in British journalistic discourse. However, the most important feature of these intervarectal loan-phrases consists in their level of integration which is clearly determined by their frequency of use. Only a restricted number of American idioms are well-established and “in full swing” in British journalism. For the most part, phraseological Americanisms are rarely used although some of them are definitely perceived of as being common core idioms by British speakers following in this manner the tradition of other well-established expressions originating in the U.S.

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