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Ramon Marti Solano, Ramón Solano

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*Phraseological units in English: variation through lexical insertion*

Ramón Martí Solano

University of Limoges

Maître de conférences

## **Abstract**

*This paper presents a piece of research based on corpus evidence of variation on idiomatic expressions through lexical insertion. Second only to lexical substitution, this type of phenomenon is pervasive especially in media discourse where phraseological units are frequently modified for various reasons. We claim that inserted adjectives represent an ever-increasing means of instantiating these multi-word units and that their recurrence bears out the semantic analysability of some of their constituent parts. We also introduce the concept of ‘variational collocates’, a regular paradigm of adjectives collocating with the nominal base of a phraseological unit. We show that this type of idiom variation is not entirely dependent on context by arguing that inserted adjectives can have diverse and contrasting semantic values.*

## **1. Phraseological units and variation**

The term phraseological unit (henceforth PhU) is an umbrella term that encompasses all multi-word units of the language whose meaning is not compositional, i.e. not retrieved or decoded as the addition of the meanings of each of their constituent parts. The canonical form of PhUs, also known as citation form, is purely a lexicographic convention even though lexicographers differ sometimes slightly, other times hugely, about the form multi-word units must take when recorded in dictionaries. Mainly for this reason we suggest, in its stead, the use of the term “lexicographic form”. The corpus, a selection of articles from the on-line versions of *The Guardian* and *The Observer* of nearly 8 million tokens, represents a clear-cut chunk of written English from the quality press in the UK from 2003 to 2007. The results of the retrieval of all types of transformations, idiom variants and exploitations have been systematically contrasted with potential occurrences in the *British National Corpus* (BNC) and in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) in order to account for institutionalisation, lexicalisation, ad hoc transformations, contextualisation and levels of creativity. Corpus evidence shows that the forms of PhUs are not as fixed as dictionaries, for obvious reasons, are bound to record.

All of the characteristics traditionally applied to PhUs can be questioned if we take into account, as fundamental notions, the inherent variability and instability of these forms and the tension between stability and creativity. Apart from items such as *take place* and *at all* which stand at the highest level of fixedness<sup>1</sup> and are therefore never varied (Moon 1998:120), full

idioms, mainly verbal and nominal phrases, are more often than not varied or exploited. Hence, the importance of considering variation as one of the main building blocks of linguistic description:

It is often pointed out that so-called ‘fixed phrases’ are not in fact fixed; there are very few invariable phrases in English. Nevertheless, in discussions, descriptions, and the teaching of languages, the myth of fixedness is perpetuated—as if variation was a minor detail that could safely be ignored. (Sinclair 2004:30)

Variation is thus intrinsic to any natural language: it is through variation that language change takes place and some forms or uses supersede others diachronically. In the realm of phraseology, multi-word units can be varied morphologically, syntactically, semantically and pragmatically. 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. Some lexicographers<sup>2</sup> opt, in cases like this, for a solution such as ‘*Cut one’s \_\_\_\_\_ teeth*’. In respect to this string, the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms (CCDI)* includes the following information in the body of the entry ‘This expression can be varied by adding an adjective before ‘teeth’’, which reveals to what extent lexicographers are aware of phraseological variation and how much they take into account its recurrence for matters of lemmatisation, as well as for lexicographic definitions and linguistic description. The phrase in italics in example (1) is illustrative of the fact that variation on idiomatic expressions through adjective insertion can be a fundamental linguistic issue:

(1) Her parents disapproved of subversive forms like rhythm & blues or rock’n’roll - they also forbade their four children from going to the cinema - so Doris *cut her musical teeth* by singing in her father’s church choir. (The Guardian, February 20 2004)

*Cut one's \_\_\_\_\_ teeth* is increasingly instantiated with a domain delimiter<sup>3</sup> such as *political*, which happens to be the only example of an inserted adjective for this PhU shared by the BNC and the COCA. The number of occurrences of this open-slot PhU is only 4 in the British corpus and 46 in the American corpus. The range of adjectives goes from *professional* or *legal* to *cinematic*, *theological* or *golfing*. Other expressions such as *cast an eye over sth* or *keep / have an eye on sth* have, through lexical insertion, given way to new lexicalised forms that have their own entries in dictionaries of idioms: *cast a critical / professional, etc. eye over*, *keep a weather eye on*, *keep an eagle eye on* and *have a beady eye on* are all recorded in the *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (LID).

## **2. Types of phraseological variation**

Five distinct types of variation on PhUs can be outlined: lexical substitution, lexical insertion, truncation, grammatical transformation and transcategorisation. Lexical substitution is the most frequent and widespread type of variation on PhUs. It is usually found in predicate phrases, schematised as VP + NP, in which either the verbal constituent or the nominal constituent (or sometimes both) is replaced by another item of the same word class with which it can bear different kinds of semantic relation. Examples such as *shed / weep crocodile tears* or *right up your alley / street* show how well-established, widespread and straightforward this type of variation is. Alternative lexical realisations do not change the holistic meaning of the unit nor do they add new semantic information or restrict its application to a certain domain but they can modify the mental scenario of the metaphor involved. Lexical insertion constitutes the second most important means of variation on PhUs. We will be dealing with this type of variation in depth and in detail further down this paper.

Other minor types of variation are truncation, in which part of the original unit is elided as in *scrape (the bottom of) the barrel* or *a weak link (in the chain)* and grammatical transformation, which stands for a minor part of phraseological variants and does not normally attain lexicalised status. It should be noticed that not all PhUs can be varied from a grammatical or syntactic point of view. The classical and rather hackneyed example *kick the bucket* cannot be passivised as, for instance, *\*the bucket was kicked*. We have found some examples of pluralisation, as in *keep a straight face > keep straight faces* where the nominal constituent changes according to a plural subject. Finally, transcategorisation, also known as word-class transforms, allows certain PhUs to be transformed into units of a different word-

class in order to adapt to the constraints of specific syntactic contexts. One of the commonest means of achieving this adaptation is represented by adjectivisation by which, as in example (2), a prepositional phrase with an adverbial function (*off the top of one's head*) becomes an adjective:

(2) There is nothing *top-of-the-head* about what Mr Hain has to say either; his pamphlet is the product of extensive online consultation and several focus-group discussions. (The Guardian, March 11 2004)

### **3. The semantic analysability of phraseological units**

PhUs have traditionally been regarded as fixed and non-compositional and their constituent parts as non-analysable. More recent phraseological research has shown that there is a cline of fixedness and that therefore there are multi-word units which are more fixed than others. Most idioms are definitely not lexically frozen if we understand this concept as total frozenness since “at least 90% of V-NP idioms, including many usually regarded as completely frozen, appear to allow some form of (syntactically) internal modification” (Nicolas 1995:233) and are regularly lexically modified either through substitution or insertion, or both. Syntactic flexibility, lexical substitution and lexical insertion in PhUs can be explained if we consider that these units are not simply long words but that their constituents have a meaning of their own (Glucksberg 2003:69). This characteristic, a sort of semantic autonomy assigned to the core constituent(s) of multi-word units, has been identified as the analysability of idioms (Langacker 1987:448; Gibbs 1995:98-99; Langlotz 2006a:28; Stathi 2007:82). The compositional view of idiom representation regards them as having a “motivated semantic structure” and states that “this structure influences their syntactic and lexical flexibility” (Langlotz 2006a:15).

### **4. Semantic prosody and variational collocates**

Words that currently collocate with other words end up establishing associations which are generally positive or negative: this extra semantic value constitutes their “semantic prosody”.

Hunston (1995: 137) summarises the notion of semantic prosody thus: “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)

Extraneous adjectives co-occurring with the nominal constituents of predicate PhUs make up a regular paradigm of what we have termed “variational collocates”. Let us consider the following example of variation on a PhU through the insertion of an adjective:

(3) He *had an idiosyncratic ear for* orchestral colour, a classical composer’s ability to create long, through-composed pieces from a handful of motifs and a jazz bandleader’s ability to write for specific personalities. (The Guardian, March 4 2004)

The term “variational collocates” refers to the paradigm of adjectives that collocate inside the PhU with the main nominal constituent. The adjective *idiosyncratic* is normally associated with nouns such as *way, approach, style, factors, behaviour, character, interpretation, features, views*, etc., with which it commonly collocates. However, when it is inserted in a multi-word unit such as the one in (3), it immediately makes part of a regular paradigm of other adjectives such as *acute, sympathetic, trained* or *commiserative*. This adjective when used as a variational collocate displays a distinct preference for co-occurring with items denoting sympathy or accuracy, which leads us to conclude that the variational semantic prosody of *have an ear for* is positive. Another example of variational semantic prosody can be observed in the instantiations of the PhU *cast an eye on sth*. This phrase is normally found in actual contexts of use modified by the insertion of an adjective. A search in the BNC shows that the variational collocates of the phraseological nominal base *eye* are *critical, experienced, cold, professional, shrewd, speculative, acute, cautious* and *appraising* to mention just the most frequently used adjectives. These collocates form a homogenous group and share the same semantic trait, that of expertise, with the exception of the adjective *speculative* which deviates from the general pattern. New paradigmatic relations are then established between the core nominal constituent of a PhU whenever an internal modification through the insertion of an adjective takes place.

## **5. Variation through lexical insertion**

Insertion of external constituents is a very recurrent means of instantiating PhUs, especially in media discourse. This phenomenon is overwhelmingly widespread in the press and the number of occurrences can be at times extraordinary. These insertions are either a result of the contextualization of PhUs or of the processes of quantification or qualification concerning all the lexical units of the language, including PhUs. This significant trend has been extensively

studied (Nicolas, 1995; Moon, 1998; Naciscione, 2000; Langlotz, 2006a) and is gaining more and more attention in phraseological research. The interesting thing is that we can find some regularity if we look, for example, at the adjectives that are normally used for this purpose: *political, moral, judicial, domestic, academic, financial, economic, intellectual, historical, commercial, statistical*, etc., which all belong to the same notional paradigm. These adjectives function as “domain delimiters” (Ernst 1981:51) or as “viewpoint modification”, considered to be “the most widely available form of internal modification for idioms” (Nicolas 1995:241). These intrusive adjectives have lately been identified as “concern modifiers” and can be used with the majority of idioms, even with the most frozen ones which can also allow this type of modification (Stathi 2007:85). But other word classes can find their way into the lexicographic form of PhUs. Adverbs and nouns are sometimes inserted with the aim of modifying the whole string or only a specific constituent part. Insertion is numerically mainly adjectival although adverbs, nouns (generally as adnominal premodifiers) and even prepositions can be inserted in the canonical forms of idioms. Apart from adverbs, which represent the second most important variation through lexical insertion, and noun modifiers, the presence of other word classes represents either minor instances or clearly nonce variants.

### **5.1. Adjective insertion**

Extraneous adjectives inserted in PhUs are not only used to provide semantic focus or specialization (Moon 1998:128) but they can serve other purposes such as emphasis, intensification or they can even be used for expressing emotion. The most detailed study on variation on English PhUs through adjective insertion was carried out by Ernst (1981). This American scholar regards this phenomenon as a stylistic device and classifies these adjectives into three categories: “external modification”, “internal modification” and “conjunction modification”.

“Domain delimiters” (or external modification) are adjectives such as *political, financial* or *social* which function as sentence adverbs and which modify the meaning of an idiom as a unit. “Internal modification”, in its turn, concerns adjectives that modify only a noun which is part of an idiom. Finally, “conjunction modification” consists in the insertion of an adjective in a metaphorical or opaque idiom combining with the noun to get a literal meaning, in other words a sort of syllepsis. An intermediate level can be established inside the so-called domain delimiters as some of them can also be interpreted as locative, causal or temporal (Stathi 2007:93).



Examples (4), (5) and (6) are but a few instances of this overwhelmingly salient, pervasive and far-reaching phenomenon:

(4) “Teenagers want to *turn back the moral clock* and are more reactionary than their parents,” the Daily Telegraph’s social affairs correspondent enthused. (The Guardian, March 18 2004)

(5) Did A kill B? Was X liable for damage to Y? These “yes-no” or “either-or” questions are *grist to the judicial mill*. (The Guardian, February 3 2004)

(6) According to his own pollsters, a worryingly large number of those people have decided that he has *lost the domestic plot* by spending too much time on foreign affairs. (The Observer, September 26 2004)

Examples proliferate and can be found in abundance. Introducing an adjective in the canonical form of a well-known idiomatic expression is a stylistic device very popular in journalistic texts. The insertion of the adjective *political* represents in itself a remarkable lexicological and phraseological phenomenon. A search in the BNC shows that the typical and most frequent collocates of the adjective *political* are, in order of frequency, *party, system, power, science* and *prisoners*. The nominal bases associated to this adjective when it becomes a variational collocate can be as disparate as the following: *mountain, football, skin, chickens, tiger, slap, spotlight, bullet* or *strings*. Let us consider the examples below:

(7) This tiny margin would be enough to *save the political skin of* Patricia Hewitt, the health secretary, who threatened to resign if she could not pull the NHS as a whole out of the red. (The Guardian, February 21 2007)

(8) Sir Bob persuaded Mr Blair to launch the Commission for Africa report 18 months ago, but the prime minister may now find he is *riding a political tiger* that he no longer controls. (The Guardian, June 1 2005)

(9) But this is nothing set against the criticism that would be due to those who would endanger a vital part of Britain's infrastructure for the sake of *giving a political bloody nose*, and maybe worse, to their own leader. (The Observer, January 25 2004)

As is often the case, but not always, the inserted adjective qualifies syntactically a noun with which it never collocates in free combinations, that is outside the frame and constraints of more or less fixed and motivated PhUs. This type of variation is very widespread, fairly consistent and makes a substantial contribution to the specific meaning of PhUs. In all the three examples above, the intrusive adjective can be paraphrased as 'politically speaking' or 'in the political sphere', which tallies with the idea that "adjectives inserted into NPs in V-NP idioms can, where they are well formed, systematically be interpreted as adverbial modifiers of the whole idiom" (Nicolas 1995: 236). This principle is quite restrictive since all sorts of adjectives can modify core nominal constituents in PhUs, and furthermore, they can have diverse semantic values not always interpretable adverbially.

## 5.2. Adverb insertion

Inserting an adverb in a PhU does not differ considerably from inserting an adjective as we are dealing in both cases with the introduction of a certain degree of qualification which concerns the holistic meaning of the string. This type of lexical insertion is less frequent than inserting adjectives in PhUs but it tends to recur rather systematically in a number of multi-word units that function syntactically as adverbials. In the case of *with one's tongue in one's cheek*, modulation of the holistic meaning of the string is achieved by the insertion of an adverb as in the examples below:

(10) With Moyles having continually boasted, *with his tongue only slightly in his cheek*, that he was the "saviour of Radio 1", Parfitt will be banking on the laddish loudmouth to bring listeners to the key slot, which is the most important on the station as it sets the tone for the rest of the day. (The Guardian, January 5 2004)

(11) I think I have mixed feelings about Cage: half admiration for his independence of spirit and originality, half a suspicion that he was having a bit of a laugh at everyone's expense. He must *have had his tongue firmly in his cheek*. If he hadn't, he would have been a bit of a wanker. (The Guardian, January 16 2004)

Instances of the variant form found in (11) are particularly numerous in discourse, which shows its high level of institutionalisation. Lexical insertion, and especially adverb insertion, calls into question the syntactic frozenness typical of idioms as these adverbs modify the holistic meaning of the idiom semantically and syntactically: no other way of modulation is possible if the string in question is to be retained. Other types of adverbs can also be inserted:

(12) “I want to make a decision once *the dust has well and truly settled*. One thing's certain, reality's not going to be helped by a weekend of celebrations,” he said. (The Guardian, October 18 2004)

(13) At a time when other broadcasters have been criticised for withdrawing from the regions – *with the axe currently hanging over* ITV's regional studios in Nottingham – a move would underline the corporation's commitment to devolving its centres of production to cities including Manchester, Glasgow and Birmingham. (The Guardian, February 20 2004)

(14) The postmodernists who deny universal values in the name of cultural difference *are unwittingly in cahoots* with the tub-thumpers for Trafalgar and the groupies of St George. (The Guardian, February 21 2007)

As with the examples concerning *with one's tongue in one's cheek*, the presence of the non-compositional binomial *well and truly* in (12) modulates the degree of completion of the action denoted by the verb. Adverbs of time as in (13) or adverbs of manner as in (14) are also possible as internal modification of PhUs. It is interesting to notice the syntactic analysability of the latter two phrases that allows the insertion of an adverb in the same slot where an adverb would normally be inserted in a free combination.

### **5.3. Noun insertion**

It is the semantic nature of the core idiom components that accounts for the preference of a specific word-class type as the inserted lexical item. The PhU *jump / climb / get on the bandwagon* shows a marked preference for noun modification as illustrated by the following examples:

(15) Oxford's refusal *to board the managerialism bandwagon* was an important result for all universities, says Nicholas Bamforth. (The Guardian, December 20 2006)

(16) 'I knew that was me as soon as it started,' Westwood says, 'but then dance music came in - house music - and all those guys who *jumped on the hip-hop bandwagon* just jumped straight off.' (The Observer, October 3 2004)

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. The variational schema *on + the + [N] + bandwagon* is to be found in 7 occurrences in the BNC and in 20 in the COCA. It should be noted that our corpus has yielded a total of 8 occurrences of the same schema, which accounts for the rapid advance and pervasive use of this specific variational pattern if parameters such as time span and corpus volume are taken into account.

The analysability of the core nominal constituents in the PhUs in (16) and (17), namely *drum* and *button*, allows the insertion of a noun or a noun phrase which delimits the referential scope of the phrase:

(17) More positively, the new government agencies in and around the social care sector are starting to *bang the human rights drum*. (The Guardian, November 26 2003)

(18) It should be possible for both sides to make fun of each other's accents, without *pushing the racism button*. (The Guardian, January 17 2007)

In (17) the insertion of the compound noun *human rights* is the result of a post-nominal modification becoming pre-nominal. The idiom *bang the drum* is usually instantiated in discourse followed by the preposition *for* and a noun phrase, which means that *bang the drum for human rights* has been syntactically transformed into *bang the human rights drum*. The existence of free combinations such as *push the power / copy / play / record button* and of the

PhU *push the panic button* definitely sets the syntactic conditions for the creation and acceptability of this variant form in (18).

## 6. Semantic values of inserted adjectives

### 6.1. Delimiters

Classifying adjectives such as *financial*, *intellectual*, *social*, etc. have been defined as “domain delimiters” (Ernst 1981:51) since they delimit the referential scope of the string to a specific domain. By the same token, some noun modifiers such as *money* in *money advice* or *school* in *school matters* can also be considered domain delimiters. The principal function of adjectives is modification: the combination *Adj + N* prototypically restricts the domain designated by the noun alone to a subpart, and designates a subset of the entities denoted by the noun alone. Adjectives denoting provenance can also be classified as delimiters as shown in the following examples:

(19) The phased withdrawal of the subvention would be traumatic, but it would do Scotland nothing but good to learn that public *money does not grow on English trees*. (The Guardian, December 4 2006)

(20) That rejection should give Chen pause, but he is nevertheless committed to pursuing constitutional change in his second term, and constitutional change is *a red rag to the Chinese bull*. (The Guardian, March 26 2004)

### 6.2. Emphasisers

A pleonastic relation between two elements occurs when one of them seems redundant and appears not to add any semantic information not already supplied by the other element. Some adjectives can be inserted in PhUs with the sole aim of emphasising the idiomatic meaning of the string as a whole.

(21) “There is massive inefficiency in the system. We have started *from complete scratch*. We are a very much leaner and very much meaner machine.” (The Guardian, February 19 2004)

(22) But while it's clear that the government wants to bask in the reflection of the hunters' current popularity, it also wants to *keep a tight lid on* this year's festival. (The Observer, June 19 2005)

The adjective *complete* in (21) does not add any new information to the original phrase *from scratch* but serves to emphasise one of the most lexically and syntactically transparent PhUs in English. This variant form could be glossed as "from the very beginning". As it happens with *very*, the inserted adjective in (21) is used to add emphasis to the noun that it precedes. No occurrences of this variant have been found either in the BNC or in the COCA, compared to just 11 occurrences for the variant form in (22) found in the COCA.

### 6.3. Expressive adjectives

Some adjectives carry expressive meaning: they express an emotional state on the part of the speaker or writer. This is the case of expletives such as *bloody* in "Yes, I broke the bloody window", or *goddam* in "You're behaving like a goddam husband", adjectives which are devoid of any descriptive meaning. The analysability of the nominal constituents in (23) and (24) is even more evident in the light of these examples which demonstrate the transparency of the units as a whole and their syntactic and lexical flexibility:

(23) Acting's hard anyway, but when you're Asian it's especially difficult. Five years ago there was nothing around. I started off doing a few TV bits, the usual Asian one-line things. And East Is East *opened up every bloody door* there was. (The Guardian, December 3 2004)

(24) Hall admits that if writing comedy is hard, writing comic narrative is even harder. "I'm the make-me-laugh guy," he explains. "I gotta bake it *from goddamn scratch* every time." (The Guardian, November 27 2004)

### 6.4. Intensifying adjectives

Descriptive meaning in adjectives may vary in intensity without an actual change of quality. *Large* and *huge* do not differ in quality, they designate the same area of semantic quality space but they differ in intensity. This scale of intensity takes the form of a regular paradigm of adjectives that can be inserted in PhUs allowing this sort of modification, generally nominal and prepositional phrases rather than predicate phrases.

(25) For Anglia's directors, defeat came with *a considerable silver lining*: just before losing their franchise, they sold the company for £22m to a rival, FirstGroup, which mistakenly thought a new deal was almost in the bag. (The Guardian, March 15 2004)

(26) The LVF itself issued a statement to the Belfast Telegraph saying they weren't involved. But paramilitary statements are often taken *with a generous pinch of salt*. (The Guardian, April 29 2005)

The variant forms in examples (25) and (26) could be glossed as “with a huge advantage” and “with great caution” respectively. Intensification relates here to the capacity of certain adjectives, which can be used to express both amount and degree, to signal the variance in intensity, as with the pair “great caution / extreme caution”.

### **6.5. Remotivators**

When introducing a remotivator, the idiomatic meaning of the string is still recoverable although the original metaphorical process is revived. This type of adjectives corresponds to Ernst's “conjunction modification” (1981:53). In (27) the adjective *blond* refers to Raikkonen's hair colour, the noun *feathers* gets remotivated and instantially refers to his actual hair.

(27) There is speculation that Raikkonen may *have his blond feathers ruffled* by the arrival of Montoya next year. It could spell the end of his dominance at Woking. (The Guardian, March 2 2004)

Instances of this type of internal modification can be subsumed under the heading of exploitation or manipulation of PhUs for stylistic reasons or for rhetorical effects.

### **6.6. Resultative adjectives**

One last and minor type of adjectives that can be inserted in PhUs is made up of resultative adjectives. They modify the core nominal constituent of the idiom by means of a fairly limited paradigm of items such as *resulting* or *consequent*.

(28) After all, as the Times asserts, they have “manufactured their own weapon of intellectual mass destruction, and have *disappeared in the resulting puff of smoke*”. (The Guardian, October 9 2004)

In (28) the noun phrase *puff of smoke* is remotivated and both the idiomatic and the non-idiomatic readings are possible.

## **7. Conclusions**

Variation through lexical insertion in PhUs is mainly adjectival. This phenomenon represents a pervasive stylistic device favoured by journalists in media discourse. Some variant forms produced by the insertion of adjectives in the lexicographic form of PhUs can eventually become lexicalised. The concept of semantic prosody proves valuable when analysing idiom variation through adjective insertion. Some regular variational paradigms can be observed in this procedure, which shows that this lexico-grammatical and phraseological phenomenon cannot simply be boiled down to exploitation or stylistic manipulation. Furthermore, modifying adjectives are not just used in order to supply as much background or contextual information as possible, they can also be used for emphasis, evaluation or as expletives, in the same way as they function in free combinations. These variant forms tend to be, by and large, proportionally represented in the three corpora although synonymous or pragmatically interchangeable adjectives may occur in one corpus and not in another, as is the case with *large* and *generous* when inserted in the PhU *take sth with a pinch / grain of salt* or even *commiserative* or *sympathetic* when inserted in the PhU *lend an ear*.



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<sup>1</sup> Even the most fixed multi-word units such as complex conjunctions, especially *by dint of*, can in certain circumstances be varied through lexical insertion as is the case with the attested *by the very dint of* where the inserted adjective displays its regular intensifying value.

<sup>2</sup> The *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (LID) and the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (ODI) are especially keen on this lexicographic technique with plenty of headphrases lemmatised as follows: \_\_\_\_\_'s-eye view, \_\_\_\_\_ your socks off, be \_\_\_\_\_ at heart, do sth under the banner of \_\_\_\_\_, etc.

<sup>3</sup> *Domain delimiter* (Ernst, 1981:51) applies to adjectives such as *political, financial, musical, legal*, etc. which delimit or restrict the application of the string to a certain domain.

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Postal address:        Ramón Martí Solano  
                              16 rue Montesquieu  
                              86000 POITIERS  
                              FRANCE

Email address:        [ramon.marti-solano@unilim.fr](mailto:ramon.marti-solano@unilim.fr)