**Miller, J 2010, ‘*Coals to Newcastle or glittering gold*? Which idioms need to be included in a learner’s dictionary for use in Australia?’, in A Dykstra & T Schoonheim (eds), Proceedings of the XIV Euralex International Congress, Leeuwarden, 6-10 July 2010, Fryske Akademy, Ljouwert (CD-ROM).**

**Introduction**

The knowledge of figurative language in the form of idioms is one way in which a native speaker of English can understand and communicate with those around them, even extending to visual images based on these idioms. (Many umbrellas, for instance, carry pictures reflecting the idiom *raining cats and dogs*.) Such idioms, however, may not be readily understood by non-native speakers, or even by native speakers of a different generation or on a different continent. Many idioms are included in monolingual English learner’s dictionaries (MELDs), but their inclusion does not necessarily mean that they are used by all members of the English-speaking country in which a dictionary is sold. Australia and the UK, for example, despite a degree of overlap, may use different idioms, and those idioms used by older speakers may not be known by younger speakers.

The background to this study is a larger research project, still in progress, on the use of idioms in MELDs relative to the needs of a target group of university-age learners of English (aged approximately 16 - 22) in Australia. The project aims to discover which idioms from a selected list are used by which age groups in the UK and Australia and whether, according to the findings, MELDs need to reflect age and country usage more accurately in their inclusion of idioms and in their labelling systems. In Australia, the *Macquarie learner’s dictionary* (*MLD*) of 1999 is now out of print, and so the only advanced learner’s dictionaries of English available are those produced in the UK or the US. The dictionaries and editions listed here are those which were available to this researcher in September 2009: *Cambridge advanced learner’s dictionary, 3rd edition (CALD 3), Collins* *Cobuild advanced learner’s English dictionary, 4th edition (Cobuild4), Longman dictionary of contemporary English, 5th edition (LDOCE5), Macmillan English dictionary for advanced learners, 2nd edition (MEDAL2)* and *Oxford advanced learner’s dictionary, 7th edition (OALD7)*. Although these dictionaries include American and British variants, they cannot cover all English-speaking countries in depth. Many Australian expressions are therefore excluded, and many British expressions are given which may not be used either in Australia, or by the younger generation in Australia or the UK with whom most students are peers (Nesi 2000). There are of course dictionaries explicitly for idioms, but a student who comes across an expression such as *a wolf in sheep’s clothing* may not recognise this immediately as an idiom and will therefore look up individual words first in a MELD. It is perhaps not possible to know what all users want from a dictionary, but Atkins and Rundell (2008, p. 32) suggest that 'a realistic goal is to meet the needs of most users most of the time.' This means that the ‘Big 5’ listed above all contain idioms. This paper examines five idioms, and addresses the questions of which native English speakers in Australia know these idioms, where they first heard them, and where they and older native speakers would use them. The answers to these questions help to indicate where a student in Australia is likely to encounter these and similar idioms.

**Literature review**

The definition of the term ‘idiom’ is problematic. Weinreich (1969, p. 42) defines an idiom as a phraseological unit with ‘at least two polysemous constituents’, and refers to the ‘common understanding’ that the ‘meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of its elements' (p. 26). There are writers who claim that only opaque metaphors are idioms (e.g. Gläser 1998, Deignan 1999, Čermák 2001). Others (e.g. Moon 1998) maintain that a degree of transparency is possible. Yet others (e.g. Cowie 1981, Zgusta 1971 in Howarth 1996) distinguish between pure and figurative idioms. Fillmore, Kay and O’Connor (1988) say that ‘an idiomatic expression or construction is something a language user could fail to know while knowing everything else in the language’ (p. 504). Idioms were selected for the *Macquarie learners’ dictionary* based on the editors’ judgement of whether ‘a learner would have trouble understanding it’ (Ann Atkinson, Senior Editor, *Macquarie dictionary*, personal communication, 9 November 2006).

Institutionalisation is seen as central to idiomaticity (Hanks 2004, p. 256), meaning that an idiom is ‘recognized and accepted as a lexical item of the language' (Bauer 1983, p. 48 in Moon 1998, p. 7). Institutionalisation does not necessarily imply frequent use. Moon (1998, p. 56) calls a frequency of 0.55 per million ‘high’ when referring to fixed expressions and idioms (FEIs) in the Oxford Hector Pilot Corpus. The *MLD* editors gave common use as a criterion for inclusion (Ann Atkinson, pers. comm., 2006), although ‘common use’ may be a relative term.

Stein wrote in 1999 that the principal MELDs used a British framework to express social and cultural items. Algeo (1995) had previously spoken against such national bias, particularly with regard to variations between American and British English and the choice of lexical items in a dictionary. Leech and Nesi also claimed in 1999 (p. 300) that MELDs did not do enough to include varieties other than British or American. This may still be the case, as the Australian market, for example, is much smaller than the American or British market, and may not be fully represented.

The use of idioms may also vary between countries and age groups. Low and Littlemore (2009) suggest that more research needs to be done on regional variations in metaphoric language. Their study refers to classroom management, but this finding could be more broadly applied. Curtain’s study (2001), meanwhile, reveals that speakers of English in Australia in the over 50 age group knew more colloquial expressions than those in the 18-28 age group. Thus age and location are likely to be factors in idiom use.

For the purposes of this study, ‘idiom’ is used to refer to a figurative expression of at least two words, whose meaning is non-literal and therefore may be opaque to those who hear it for the first time. Some expressions that carry a more proverbial usage, such as *all that glitters is not gold*, are also included, since these are alsolabelled as ‘idioms’ in most MELDs.

**Study**

The overall aim of the larger study was to elicit as many idioms as possible from different age groups in the UK and Australia, using a given list as a prompt, and to compare knowledge and use of these idioms according to country and age group. A list of 84 idioms was drawn up based on the list at the back of the *CALD2*. Each idiom had to appear in at least two of the major English advanced learner’s dictionaries, and/or in the *Macquarie learner’s dictionary*. These idioms represented the categories of Biblical, literary/historical, British, Australian, and older reference (e.g. referring to steam-powered vehicles). The idioms were separated into six online surveys, and participation was invited online and through contact with schools. The total number of completed surveys was 2085, with some participants completing more than one survey.

This paper is based on five of the idioms in the first survey: (1) *a wolf in sheep’s clothing* (Biblical, then popularised in Townsend’s nineteenth century translation of Aesop’s fables); (2) *all that glitters is not gold* (Shakespeare - literary); (3) *back of Bourke* (Australian); 4) *carry/take coals to Newcastle* (UK); and (5) *full steam ahead* (older reference)*.* The popular form of these idioms, as given in the MELDs, was used in the survey, so that *glitters* was used rather than the original *glisters*, for example. Participants were asked to state if they knew the idiom and if so, where they had first heard it and where they might use it. The results of their responses are discussed below.

**Findings**

Three questions are relevant in this section. First, do Australians in the age range of the target group (approximately 16-22) know these particular idioms? Secondly, if they know the idioms, where did they first encounter them? And thirdly, where would they, and older people who might address them, use these idioms? The answers to these questions give an indication of how useful it is for the target group to know these and other idioms, and thus, how important it is to include them in a MELD used in Australia.

These particular idioms were not all familiar to the 81 native speakers in the Australian 16-22 age range. Over half knew *full steam ahead* (69%), roughly half had heard *wolf in sheep’s clothing* (52%)*¸* and under half had heard *all that glitters is not gold* (44%). Hardly any knew the Australian idiom *back of Bourke* (2%) or the British idiom *carry/take coals to Newcastle* (4%). These idioms are represented in all of the ‘Big 5’ to a greater or lesser extent (see Table 1).

Table 1: Details of recognition of the idioms by 81 respondents in the Australian 16-22 age group, and the dictionaries in which these idioms appear

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***CALD3*** | ***COBUILD4*** | ***LDOCE5*** | ***MEDAL2*** | ***OALD7*** | **Percentage of native Australian participants aged 16-22 who had heard the expression** |
| ***Wolf in sheep’s clothing*** | ✓ | - | - | ✓ | ✓ | 52% |
| ***All that glitters is not gold*** | ✓ | - | - | - | ✓ | 44% |
| ***Back of Bourke*** | - | - | - | ✓ | ✓ | 2% |
| ***Carry/take coals to Newcastle*** | ✓ | - | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 4% |
| ***Full steam ahead*** | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 69% |

*Full steam ahead* was obviously the most widely recognised, and this is reflected in its appearance in all the dictionaries. *Wolf in sheep’s clothing*was the next most familiar, and appears in only three of the dictionaries. *All that glitters is not gold*, although familiar to almost half of the age group, appears in only two of the dictionaries. *Carry/take coals to Newcastle* was known to only 4% of the participants in this age range. Information on older speakers which is part of the larger survey, however, reveals that it was known to 73% of those aged 23 and above, so it is likely to be heard from older speakers if not from peers, justifying its appearance in four of the dictionaries. *Back of Bourke* was known by only 2% of participants, which justifies its inclusion in only two of the dictionaries. It might be argued that this is a classic case where an idiom could appear only in an online or Australian edition of a MELD.

The second question is where the idioms were first encountered. From the 17 sources the target age participants gave, the most common were conversation, literature, parents and television (see Table 2). (As it was hard for participants to remember where they had first heard an expression, some people gave no response, while others gave more than one source. The figures in Table 2 therefore do not add up to 100% for each idiom.)

Table 2: The sources in which each idiom was first encountered by Australians in the 16-22 age range

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Wolf in sheep’s clothing* (no. who had heard before = 42)** | ***All that glitters is not gold* (no. who had heard before = 36)** | ***Back of Bourke* (no. who had heard before = 2)** | ***Carry/take coals to Newcastle* (no. who had heard before = 3)** | ***Full steam ahead* (no. who had heard before = 56)** |
| **Bible/church** | 2% | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Childhood** | 12 % | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Conversation** | 33% | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3% |
| **Friends** | 14% | 5% | 0 | 0 | 5% |
| **General use** | 26% | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3% |
| **Internet** | 2% | 3% | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Literature** | 26% | 22% | 0 | 33% | 9% |
| **Media (other – eg film, radio)** | 14% | 5% | 0 | 0 | 9% |
| **Older people** | 5% | 3% | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Parents** | 21% | 22% | 50% | 0 | 14% |
| **Relatives (other)** | 14% | 17% | 0 | 0 | 7% |
| **School** | 17% | 5% | 0 | 0 | 7% |
| **Shakespeare** | 0 | 11% | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Song/music** | 2% | 11% | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Television** | 14% | 17% | 50% | 0 | 12% |
| **Travelling** | 0 | 0 | 50% | 0 | 2% |
| **Work** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2% |

*All that glitters is not gold* was encountered by at least one participant, and possibly all four who gave song/music as their source, in Led Zeppelin’s song *Stairway to heaven*. Another gave *Lord of the Rings* as her source, though she did not specify if this was the book or the film. *Wolf in sheep’s clothing* was heard in ‘the song by the same name’. *Full steam ahead* was heard in *Thomas the tank engine*. Again it was not clear if this was the book or the television series. These findings indicate that idioms are likely to be seen or heard in popular culture. This is important, as although it might be assumed that idioms are first heard in the home, this was not always the case. Learners of English in Australia are therefore likely to encounter idioms in many situations, especially in their general reading, conversation with native speakers, and on television.

The third question is whether the target group will hear these idioms in Australia. Table 3 indicates the places in which native English speakers of three different age groups would use them.

Table 3: Situations in which Australian participants would use each idiom, by age range, ranked in order of use

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Age 16 – 22**  **(no. = 81)** | **Age 23 – 40**  **(no. = 36)** | **Age 41 +**  **(no. = 133)** |
| **Talking to older people** | 1st | 3rd | 2nd |
| **Talking to parents** | 2nd = | 2nd | 5th = |
| **Talking to friends one’s own age** | 2nd = | 1st | 1st |
| **Talking to siblings** | 4th | 4th = | 3rd |
| **Writing a text message** | 5th | 12th | 9th |
| **Talking to colleagues at work** | 6th = | 4th = | 5th = |
| **Talking to one’s boss** | 6th = | 7th = | 8th |
| **Talking to children** | 8th | 7th = | 7th |
| **Writing an essay** | 9th | 11th | 12th |
| **Talking to younger people** | 10th | 6th | 4th |
| **Talking in formal situations** | 11th | 9th | 10th |
| **Chatting on the Internet** | 12th | 10th | 11th |

Although the younger group gave ‘older people’ and ‘parents’ in their top two places, they also gave ‘talking to friends one’s own age’ in equal second place and ‘writing a text message’ in fifth place. The older groups gave ‘talking to colleagues at work’ in fourth/fifth place and ‘talking to younger people’ in sixth/fourth place. This indicates that many of the target group would encounter these idioms through interaction with friends, work colleagues or lecturers, of many different ages.

**Limitations**

A limitation of the study was the non-random nature of the sample, as school students were required to participate by their teachers, and adults were likely to be already interested in language. Given the difficulty of gaining participants, however, this limitation was unavoidable, and while the results are therefore not generalisable to the wider populations of Australia and the UK, they are at least indicative of language used by different age groups in these two locations, and could provide the basis for a much larger study.

**Conclusion**

The implications of these results for dictionaries are that many idioms are likely to be encountered by the target group, either from friends, in conversation and literature, or on television. If Atkins and Rundell’s (2008, p. 32) desideratum is to be met, therefore, such idioms need to be included in a MELD. Some idioms, however, may rarely be heard by younger people in Australia, and so are less likely to be needed in a learner’s dictionary sold in that country. While it might be costly to provide a separate list of expressions used in Australia, an online version of a MELD could indicate which idioms are more likely to be used there, and by which age groups. This would enable learners to participate more fully in the local culture, confident that even when they cannot understand an expression they would know where to find its meaning and use it in the right context.

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