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Is Time A'Changin’?: A diachronic investigation of the idioms used in Time

Abstract. A newly-available net-based corpus of 105 million words of written American English (Time Magazine, 1923–2006, at http://corpus.byu.edu/time) was investigated for the occurrence and diachronic distribution of various types of ‘pure’ idioms such as be raining cats and dogs. Idioms from the Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms (2002 (1995)) were selected for four types of variation and change. Group 1, the 46 idioms labeled ‘old-fashioned’, proved to be noticeably more common before 1970. Group 2, several constructions of the type as scarce as X, exhibited considerably more variation than in more diversified corpora such as the British National Corpus. Group 3, Biblically-derived idioms, were generally less common after 1960, but with the lowest frequencies in the 1930s. The frequencies for the final group, 32 idioms focusing on deception, were relatively constant from the 1950s on, with an interesting dip in the 1970s. Changes in editorial policies may possibly have influenced these results. While not of sufficient magnitude for detailed studies of individual items over time, the Time corpus clearly is sufficient to provide us with a great deal of data and numerous valuable insights into the use of these idioms.

Keywords: idiom, corpus, language change, variation, American English.

1 Introduction

By now a spry octogenarian, Time first hit the newsstands in March, 1923, and (together with Newsweek, which was launched a decade later) has remained a weekly icon of American households ever since. The recent release of the Time corpus (http://corpus.byu.edu/time) by Mark Davies marks a milestone in diachronic corpus linguistics, as it has now become possible quickly and easily to tap into this linguistic record of middle-class American writing. The present paper explores one dimension of this usage: Time’s idioms, and some of the ways this usage may have changed.

2 Idioms

In the present paper, idioms are defined in the narrower sense of (relatively fixed or frozen) idiomatic expressions (Langlotz 2006, Nunberg et al. 1994; cf. also Alm-Arvius 2006, Cruse 2006, Gustawsson 2006, Makkai 1972). They include such well-known phrases as:

(1) a one-horse town
(2) to catch forty winks
(3) It ain’t over till the fat lady sings

These expressions form a rather amorphous subset of the more general class of formulaic language (Wray 2002), for which further terms such as fixed expressions and idioms (Moon 1998) abound.

Idioms in this narrower sense (what Moon (1998: 23) calls opaque metaphors or pure idioms) will here be taken to exclude a number of related phenomena, such as ad hoc coinages not in general use, foreign phrases (idée fixe, caveat emptor), single-morpheme items (cran-, as in cranberry), compounds (fire escape, dance hall) and intertextual quotations (O brave new world!, No man is an island, Let them eat cake!). However, the borders leak, the guards are not always vigilant, and so we find that the erstwhile intertextual phrase a sea change is now generally used as simply an idiom meaning ‘a major change’, with no discernible links to The Tempest.

As the more salient characteristics of idioms in this narrower sense, Nunberg et al. (1994: 492–93) present:
• Conventionality: Idioms are conventionalized: their meaning or use can’t be predicted, or at least entirely predicted, on the basis of a knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another.

• Inflexibility: Idioms typically appear only in a limited number of syntactic frames or constructions, unlike freely composed expressions (e.g. *the breeze was shot, *the breeze is hard to shoot, etc.).

• Figuration: Idioms typically involve metaphors (take the bull by the horns, metonymies (lend a hand, count heads), hyperboles (not worth the paper it’s printed on), or other kinds of figuration.

• Proverbiality: Idioms are typically used to describe—and implicitly, to explain—a recurrent situation of particular social interest (becoming restless, talking informally, divulging a secret. or whatever) in virtue of its resemblance or relation to a scenario involving homey, concrete things and relations—climbing walls, chewing fat, spilling beans.

• Informality: Like other proverbial expressions, idioms are typically associated with relatively informal or colloquial registers and with popular speech and oral culture.

• Affect: Idioms are typically used to imply a certain evaluation or affective stance toward the things they denote.  

Of these “more-or-less orthogonal properties”, the preference for proverbiality and informality are the ones that might be most expected to have a negative impact on the use of idioms in *Time*, a magazine which is part of a relatively formal written genre. As we shall subsequently see, however, *Time* has long had a house predilection for playful language, and contains numerous feature articles that fall within less formal spheres.

In order to have an operational definition of idioms, *CCDI*, the *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms* (2002), has been chosen as the reference point or selectional base. It includes a total of 1,390 headwords (with singular and plural forms combined) and 3,485 different idioms, a number of them with two or more main variants (which are not distinguished when counting for the present paper). *CCDI* is solidly based on the corpus evidence provided by the Collins COBUILD Bank of English (BoE) database, which at the time of *CCDI*’s first edition (1995) consisted of just over 200 M (i.e. 200 million) words. Its major drawback for the present investigation is that the American component of the BoE was much smaller than a geographically balanced corpus of English would require, a point that needs to be remembered in a study of *Time* data. This is most clearly seen in its tendency to overlabel items as BrE (Minugh, in press).

It has repeatedly been shown that although individual idioms often are experienced as salient in their contexts (particularly as headlines), they are as a whole strikingly infrequent in corpora. As *CCDI* (1995: v) notes,

... idioms are comparatively infrequent [...] Nearly one third of the idioms in this dictionary occur less often than once per 10 million words of the corpus. The idioms in the highest frequency band occur in our data at least once per two million words of English. [...] only a few of these occur as frequently as any of the words we have marked for frequency in *The COBUILD English Dictionary*.

These figures of less than 1 per 1 M words have been repeatedly confirmed (Moon 1998, Minugh 1999: 65, Minugh, in press) and have never been seriously questioned. As a consequence, it has until quite recently not been possible to conduct major empirical studies based on corpus evidence of the kind envisioned by Sinclair (1991: 102):

So if we need, say, fifty occurrences of a sense of a word in order to describe it thoroughly, then the corpus has to be large enough to yield fifty instances of the least common sense.

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1. This passage is abridged from the original, which also includes further material in footnotes.
2. This selection is not completely unproblematic. A comparison with the Oxford equivalent, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (1993), indicated a surprisingly large number of items found in only the one dictionary or the other: almost 30% for both works.
Sinclair’s benchmark, amply motivated in his 1991 study, would then imply that for idioms occurring once per 5 M words, and having only one sense (a typical situation), a satisfactory investigative corpus should consist of at least 250 M words. Moreover, an investigation wishing to examine change over time should then have successive subcorpora, each of at least that order of magnitude.

3 The Time corpus

By such a yardstick, the Time corpus is clearly inadequate for a definitive investigation. Nevertheless, at roughly 100 M words, it is the first large-scale historical corpus of (an important genre in) American English, and therefore well worth investigating further. With that caveat in mind, let us now consider the make-up of the Time corpus.

The Time corpus is essentially a search engine that examines the entire range of articles in Time from its first publication in 1923 onward. This database contains about 105 M words in over 275,000 articles and is text-only (no advertisements, pictures, or the like). It permits reasonably sophisticated corpus searches for strings that allow us to find not merely the canonical forms of idioms, but also variants, such as (1), here repeated for convenience’ sake, and (1a):

(1) a one-horse town
(1a) a one-mule town

The genre of the Time corpus is clearly journalistic, normally a prose that is collectively written and edited, rather than primarily bylined from one author. The range of areas written about is not unlike that of a major newspaper. As regards time constraints, these are more relaxed than in a daily newspaper, although breaking stories clearly have a much tighter deadline than many of their feature articles. The language is almost exclusively American English, although in more recent years a greater number of (translated) articles or partial contributions have appeared from abroad. As with newspapers, a certain minimal duplication can occur in e.g. weekly lists of the most popular movies or books.

One way in which a corpus can be examined for representativeness is to look at the distribution of some common words, and compare that to the total number of words. This was carried out with the words \{and, he, they, she, man, house, state, money\}, comparing entire decades only, i.e. 1930s to 1990s. There is a quite satisfactory match between the general distribution of text and these words, as is shown in Figure 1 (p. 6). The shape of the curve suggests that we first see a rise in the size of issues as people’s buying power and the magazine’s circulation are on the increase, followed by a shift to a more picture-oriented format, probably fueled by a drop in the costs and complications of color printing. Even if the motivations for such changes lie outside the scope of the present paper, it is clear that the words in these texts have not undergone any startling relative changes in frequency.

3 There is no American equivalent of the 100 M-word British National Corpus, itself primarly from the 1980s and early 1990s; the American National Corpus is currently at only 22 M and has as yet no announced completion date. These large corpora (and Mark Davies’ newly-released BYU Corpus of American English) are in any case based on post-1980 English.

Web-based corpora such as OUP’s in-house-only Oxford English Corpus or the UKWaC ‘British English Web Corpus’, both currently at 2 B words, are even more recent, being post-2000.

4 “The 275,000+ texts were taken from the TIME Archive, which is freely available online” (Information section, Time corpus). Each citation is specifically linked back to the issue, date, page and article in question.

5 A complicating factor for the magazine is that there now are three additional regional versions (Europe, Asia, and South Pacific) plus TIME for Kids; this variation is apparently not reflected in the database, which presents the core American version.
4 Idioms: variation and change

4.1 Variation

Previous discussions of idioms have not indicated any patterns in which the individual idioms exhibit changes as idioms over time, although they naturally may be expected to participate in any change that occurs in the pronunciation and forms of their component words. Given that the idioms themselves often are anchored in given images or schemata, this is only to be expected. Thus, we would not expect social changes to effect a change in the featured part of idiom (1), producing form (1′):

\[
\begin{align*}
(1) & \quad \text{a one-horse town} \\
(1') & \quad \text{a one-car town}
\end{align*}
\]

or in some Flash Gordon future, even

\[
(1'') \quad \text{a one-rocket town}
\]

Note that this is not to claim that such idioms cannot possibly be found, merely that they would be extremely rare, precisely because they violate the pattern of \{an animal to ride on or pull a wagon\}.

A query of the 2B word net-based OEC database produced one-{oxen, mongrel} town, plus 85 instances of one-horse town, but none indicating a shift to a non-animate source of locomotion.\(^6\) Instead, the variation that does exist, and which can be considerable, instead varies the type of object for which there is only one instance in the town.\(^7\) Thus, we find instances of one-{industry, paper, pub, stop, team,

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\(^6\) Both hyphenated and non-hyphenated variants included.

\(^7\) The element town can of course also be varied, but the variation is sharply limited: \{town, hamlet, village, ?city\}. A one-orchestra city could be a potential variant of this idiom, but a one-party country is probably merely referential (Mackenzie & Mel'čuk 1986:101).
typesetter} town, plus 15 instances of a locomotion-oriented variant: one-street town(s). Perhaps the most spectacular variant was the following:

(4) Croydon has just changed from being a one Starbucks town into being a two Starbucks town (OEC weblog 20.03.0009.002)

Looking at the Time data, we find a similar pattern: one/-newspaper (10), industry (4), paper (3), company (2), party (2), crop, doctor, factory, saloon, square, stoplight, street, tart, team} town, with the figures in parentheses indicating the number of instances. The phrase one-crop town is particularly interesting, as it is on the fuzzy border of idiomaticity, being quite close to a typical (non-idiomatic) phrase from the domain of economics, a one-crop economy.

Another point worth noting is that although the _Time_ corpus is only a twentieth the size of the _OEC_, it actually contains more variants of this particular idiom, which is in keeping with the impression mentioned earlier, i.e. that _Time_ has a relatively strong predilection for playfulness of language.

4.2 Change

One type of change may be described as ‘loss’, whereby an idiom becomes regarded as so ‘old-fashioned’ that it ultimately drops out of use. There are thus two dimensions involved here: how the idiom is perceived by speakers, and frequency-based corpus evidence of its non-use/disappearance. The two can to some extent be conflated, since dictionaries and style guides provide (corpus-based?) labels such as ‘old-fashioned’, a normative judgment that may hasten an idiom’s demise—at least, to the extent that such guides have an effect on users of English. This latter point is not irrelevant for a corpus based on a single editing staff and house style, as it is presumably more sensitive to such judgments.

To some extent, idioms, like any other lexical items, can disappear merely as a consequence of falling out of fashion, a phenomenon primarily seen in (overused) slang. But another pressure on lexical items can be the fact that their anchor in everyday life disappears, through changes in the world people experience and know. As the horses in example (1) cease to be regarded as part of most people’s everyday life, this scenario (owning a horse > doing okay) becomes less and less relevant, although this particular scenario may have been saved by a transformation: increasing numbers of people have horses as a form of pet or hobby. Other such areas might include terms from sailing ships or the sphere of agriculture.

As more drastic examples, consider (5)–(7):

(5) a blot on your escutcheon
(6) a mess of potage
(7) it ain’t over until the fat lady sings

Ever since blotting paper began to disappear with the post-WWII development of the ballpoint pen and disappearance of ink-wells, _blot_ has been losing ground, from a high of 9.6 tokens/M of _blot_* in the 1940s to 1.9 in the current decade. Of course, escutcheons have never been in great favor in the peerless U.S., and the last _Time_ reference to an actual escutcheon was in 1930. Thus, it is hardly strange that (5) is opaque to Americans, who lack the domain of a titled upper class—it may never have been all that relevant for non-heraldic Americans, and certainly is not so today.

A larger-scale form of this same kind of change is when an entire major domain undergoes a sea-change, such as the Western shift from an overtly religious Christian society, with Biblical texts continually present and invoked, to its present state, where such texts and their metaphors are much less frequently invoked. If an idiom such as (6) is no longer associated with the Biblical story of Jacob and
Esau (Gen. 25:29–34), it become almost unintelligible, since a mess of has long since become primarily associated with untidiness or even excrement, rather than a dish of lentils, and pottage is also obscure.\footnote{For its Biblical use (the exact phrase was not in the King James Version), see OED, mess n.\textsuperscript{1}, 1, ‘a portion of food’, sense 2a. This is the only subsense not marked ‘obsolete’ or ‘regional’. Neither this use of mess nor the word pottage are to be found in e.g. the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary.}

A second form of change would be when an individual idiom becomes more popular, spreading beyond its original domain(s) and/or geographical regions. Thus, \(7\), an American idiom documented since at least the 1970s, first surfaces in the Time corpus in 1984:

\[(8)\quad \text{In the old joke, the opera is not over until the fat lady sings. (Time, June 18, 1984)}\]

However, it really took off and spread when George G.W. Bush used the expression on the campaign trail in New Hampshire in 1988. Political cartoons and reporting helped spread an awareness of the idiom to Great Britain, and by 1991 there even was a Dublin band called The Fat Lady Sings. The idiom is listed in CCDI (1995: 233) without a regional label, and is also to be found in the BNC, and is currently rampant on Internet discussions of the 2008 U.S. elections.

Other idioms emerge full-blown and Venus-like from the murky waters of politics, as the Nixonian smoking gun (labeled an Americanism by CCDI [1995: 174–75]), or Churchill’s 1940 recasting of the older blood, sweat and tears as blood, sweat, toil and tears (CCDI [1995: 35]).\footnote{For its origins, see e.g. Flavell & Flavell (2006: 43–44).} The high social status of the first user and the high stakes of its first use guarantee that it becomes widely disseminated, although not necessarily remembered.

5 The \textit{Time} test data

5.1 Old-fashioned idioms

Of its 3,485 entries (some 4,400 if all the variants are counted), the CCDI, with its emphasis on “real English,” excludes all obsolete or archaic idioms, but retains a total of 46 idioms it labels as ‘old-fashioned’. These ‘old-fashioned’ idioms include:

- not have a bean
- not know how many beans make five
- have a bee in your bonnet
- cut the cackle!
- set your cap at someone
- be the cat’s whiskers
- be raining cats and dogs
- be in the catbird seat
- pull someone’s chestnuts out of the fire
- get your dander up
- cheer someone to the echo
- enough is as good as a feast

The reader is at this point invited to see whether he/she would accept the above items. It is of course entirely possible for a given idiom to be in general use, but not in an individual’s personal repertoire (a point our English Department has repeatedly observed when creating tests for learners, with the test checkers often complaining that they do not recognize a few idioms selected by the test makers). The most
famous of these ‘old-fashioned’ idioms is probably be raining cats and dogs, which—as corpus linguists have repeatedly noticed—may hold the distinction of being the most-taught and least-used idiom in English. In the author’s (subjective) judgment, at least, the following are still clearly in circulation:

- be in apple-pie order
- a little bird/birdie told me
- the cat’s meow (not the cat’s whiskers!)
- warm the cockles of your heart
- in two shakes of a lamb’s tail
- snug as a bug in a rug
- catch forty winks

and possibly the following:

- in for a penny
- turn up like a bad penny
- scarce as hen’s teeth
- (not) up to snuff
- sober as a judge

These 46 items were therefore tested against the Time corpus. Most idioms, as CCDI notes, may be expected to occur between 1 and 10 times per 10 M words, so the ‘old-fashioned’ items may be expected to occur at less than that level in recent decades, but be more frequent previously. The results clearly indicate that a number of these idioms have been in use throughout the 20th century, as Table 1 (below) illustrates.

Table 1. The 10 most frequent ‘old-fashioned’ idioms in Time corpus, per 10 M words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idiom</th>
<th>Total Freq</th>
<th>20s–50s</th>
<th>60s–00s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>get someone’s dander up</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(not) be up to snuff</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cheer someone to the echo</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be in the catbird seat</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(be in the catbird seat)</td>
<td>(0.8)</td>
<td>(0.0)</td>
<td>(2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a blot on your escutcheon</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>warm the cockles of your heart</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have a bee in your bonnet</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cock a snook at someone</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the first water</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pushed around) from pillar to post</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, at least one such item, be in the catbird seat, appears to have come into circulation in the latter part of the century—and here Thurber’s play may have been instrumental in helping it become known. Another six items occurred once in the latter part of the century and not at all in the former part, even if only one occurrence is too slim a reed to base claims upon; only one other item, turn up like a bad penny, occurred twice in the latter, but once in the former part of the century.

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The figures in parentheses are with all overt references to Thurber’s play The Catbird Seat removed.
At the same time, we may note that a total of 11 items occurred only once in the 85 years of the *Time* corpus, and a further 10 did not occur at all. This could be interpreted as indicating that they are more than old-fashioned, and are in fact obsolete or archaic. However, 18 of these 21 were labeled as BrE by CCDI, so that they are not to be expected in AmE.\footnote{It should perhaps be mentioned that the 200+ M then-BoE had a relatively small AmE contribution, and its component from *Time* would not have been particularly large, so that there is little danger of circular reasoning based on identity between the *BoE* texts and the *Time* corpus.} Those entirely missing are as follows:

- know how many pins make five
- pin your ears back (‘listen carefully’)
- enough is as good as a feast
- be up a gum tree
- not my line of country
- (clever as) a cartload of monkeys
- not on your nelly
- sell the pass
- two shakes of a lamb’s tail (‘BrE, old-fashioned AmE’)
- spoil the ship for a ha’porth of tar

Since the absolute numbers of tokens for the individual idioms per decade are relatively small (even the largest, *get someone’s dander up*, occurs more than 5 times per decade during only the 30s to the 60s), their numbers have been aggregated for the comparison in Figure 2 (cf. also Table 1, above).

**Figure 2.** The (adjusted) frequencies per 10 M for ‘old-fashioned’ idioms in the *Time* corpus

What emerges is a fairly strong sense that some sort of change appears to have taken place in the (late?) 60s, and the temptation is almost irresistible to link this linguistic shift to the social changes ushered in by the social turmoil in the U.S. of the late 60s: student unrest, the growing power of the civil rights movement, the resistance to the war in Vietnam, ‘flower power’ and the first stirrings of the feminist movement. If this is correct, we are seeing a re-evaluation of ‘received wisdom’.

### 5.2 Creative variation
In examining the variations for the idiom *a one-horse town*, we have already claimed that *Time* tends to encourage verbal fireworks, one way of accomplishing this being precisely through variation of (otherwise relatively) fixed idioms. Treating them as constructions with a fairly open slot, we can then examine further instances, such as:

(9) as scarce as X
(10) as slippery as a Y
(11) as happy as a Z

The canonical form for (9) is $X = \textit{hen's teeth}$, which in fact did occur six times. But there are no less than a further 22 instances which vary this pattern. Here are some of the more spectacular ones, which fall into two categories: the relatively rare cases of sheer inventiveness, as in

- as scarce as heavy-metal bands at Republican rallies
- with good seats at good shows always as scarce as bagels in Mecca

and the more common pattern of context-triggered comparisons, as in

- as scarce as heavy-metal bands at Republican rallies
- with good seats at good shows always as scarce as bagels in Mecca

A similar pattern may be seen in (10), *as slippery as Y*, where only two of the ten instances are the canonical *as slippery as an eel*, with a third instance playing on it (*slippery as an eel’s hips*). The others are either physically related, as in

- a brick path worn slippery as slate
- with a ball as slippery as shaving soap

or inventive:

- Kansas men (= ‘football players’) were slippery as noodles
- Slippery as wrestlers covered with oil, [neutrons] slide through the electric fields
- The stucco and chicken-wire cliffs of Hollywood success… [are] treacherous, lonely and slippery as glass
- as slippery as Wagner’s without Wagner’s soaring sense of continuity
- this principle is as slippery as a wet fox in a rabbit hole.

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12 Similar data may be found for *as rare as X*. *As scarce as could be* did not occur, although numerous other adjectives occurred in this construction.
For (11), the structure happy as a Z, no single canonical form seems to exist; instead, CCDI lists a number of variants: as happy as {a clam, a lark, a pig in muck, a sandboy, Larry}, with clam being AmE, lark neutral, and the others BrE. No particular order of preference is given.

Here, however, the Time corpus outdoes itself. All but sandboy are represented in the corpus, some repeatedly: happy as a clam (at high tide) (4+3), a lark (5), a pig (in muck) (2+1), as well as three proper names (Lark [a car], Larry 2x). There are a further two instances of happy as a grig (‘lively person’) and three of happy as a king, but more noticeably, there are another 46 additional terms, all different. Here are a few:

- as happy as a five-year-old with his curls cut off
- wonderful Florida sunshine that he is apt to sit back, happy as a grapefruit, and soak it up
- as happy as a hayride down the middle aisle of Oklahoma!
- The Hotel Business: ...as happy as a room clerk with a waiting list.
- as happy as a Teletubby on tequila

Again, we see this mixture of context-linked and purely inventive forms. And again, it may be noted that the (various) canonical forms account for only 18 of the 70 instances. This is far more variation than that found in e.g. the BNC (Gustawsson 2006, Minugh 2006), and confirms the claim that Time is more playful in its use of idioms.

5.3 Secularization?

Although modern America is often characterized as more overtly religious than much of today’s Europe, it may nevertheless be plausibly maintained that the secularizing process has not left the U.S. untouched (cf. the discussion in Gilbert 2000: 24–44). If this is the case, there should be a shift towards less awareness of Biblically based idioms, as well.

A search of the idioms in CCDI revealed a total of 33 idioms directly deriving from the Bible (this fact is rarely indicated in CCDI, which provides little or no etymological information for its idioms, so that a few other idioms with Biblical origin may have been missed). All 33 are to be found in the Time corpus, although with frequencies ranging from 10.7 to 0.2 per 10 M. The most frequent idioms often have inflated numbers because they are the name of a contemporary book or play; the second number indicates the frequency when such references are removed:

- an olive branch (10.9, 10.7)
- a thorn in your side/flesh (9.1)
- the day of reckoning (7.4)
- wailing and gnashing of teeth (6.1)
- beat/turn swords into plowshares (5.9, 5.1 without the Plowshare movement)
- in seventh heaven (5.5, 1.7 without the play/film)
- fall by the wayside (5.1)
- fall from grace (4.6, 4.4 without the play)

Of these items, the most frequent, (hold out) an olive branch, is one of the idioms that most easily lends itself to more general use, since it functions as a synonym for ‘(offer to) make peace’, ‘(be willing to) negotiate’. This sense does not require a religious framework, unlike e.g. fall from grace, which primarily is to be construed via the scenario of Christian theology (particularly through the loaded term grace). In general, we may note that many of these terms have accrued specific historical and cultural meanings that may be invoked, such as the Plowshare peace group of the 80s. These specific meanings help keep the idioms alive, at the same time as they remove them from their primary use as transmitters of general human experience and wisdom.
Again, as the numbers are not very large, the aggregate numbers will be considered when investigating the change in the use of these idioms over time in the *Time* corpus. The results may be seen in Figure 3, below.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Figure 3 is the dip that occurs in the Great Depression. That was of course a time of major economic trauma and conflict, and it is possible that a religious scenario that included days of judgment was not what people wanted to hear, as the judgment would apply to them. During the 40s and 50s, a judgmental scenario may well have better fitted the concept of apocalyptic struggles with the Nazis, and then the Communists, both of which were external enemies of America. Such speculations would, however, require an investigation into the details of the use of these idioms, a procedure beyond the present investigation.

![Figure 3. Biblical idioms in the *Time* corpus (per 10 M)](image)

In any case, with the exception of the 30s, we may possibly be seeing a pattern not unlike that of Figure 2, where there is a break with the past in the 60s: from then on, there is a relatively steady, lower level for such idioms, with no sign that the Bush administration has succeeded in convincing *Time* to bring these particular Biblical idioms back into use. A word of caution is in order, however: as these particular idioms are anchored in the Bible, their potential for being brought back into various domains of public use is considerably larger than many of the other idioms based on e.g. agricultural life of the past. In other words, they may at any time arise like Lazarus from the tomb of the forgotten.

### 5.4 In an age of deception

The semantic field of deception offers an opportunity to examine a relatively static area of society, as it is difficult to believe that deception would suddenly become more salient to human activities. The need for such idioms might be expected to remain relatively constant during the near-century of the *Time* corpus, even if it is by no means given that the gatekeepers at *Time* (i.e. its editors and policy-makers) maintained exactly the same policy towards articles mentioning such behavior.

To test this question, another feature of the *CCDI* dictionary was utilized: the second edition of this dictionary lists 32 different semantic areas for its idioms (2002:Index, 1–17): DECISIONS, LOVE, INFORMATION, HELP AND ENCOURAGEMENT, SADNESS, MONEY and so on. The group that will be
examined here is DECEPTION, with 41 idioms. All but three of these are relatively easily searchable, and these 38 form the basis for the next investigation. Of these 38, 5 are labeled as currently British, 6 American and 1 Australian. The most common are listed below, again with the second figure indicating that proper names have been removed, and with regional labels in square brackets:

- give/pay lip service to sth (17.5, 17.0)
- go through the motions (13.7)
- cloak and dagger (8.2)
- a shell game (5.5)
- monkey business (4.6)
- made out of whole cloth (4.2) [AmE]
- sell someone down the river (2.7)
- a white lie (3.3, 2.6)

These are rather a mixed bag, with some derived from espionage (cloak and dagger), others from fraudulent tricksters (shell game), yet others from hypocrisy (lip service, go through the motions), and at least one from the American slave trade (sell sb down the river).

As with the religious idioms, the numbers are too small for reliable item-by-item analysis. The top quartile, or eight most common idioms, as listed above, account for no less than 654 of the total of 887 tokens, or 73.7%. Many of the other expressions fail to occur at all for decades at a time. Instead, the aggregate figures will again be used, the results being seen in Figure 4 (below).

Interestingly enough, the Depression of the 30s does not seem to have unleashed a storm of accusations about fraud, at least in Time. Instead, the peak appears to have been in the 50s (a decade traditionally seen as soporific, at least under the Eisenhower administration). Here, the split between the first and second half of the century does not seem to hold; rather, there is an eroding of trust that culminates during the period when fear of Communism is at its height, followed by the distrust in the Vietnam War period, with a return to skepticism from the Reagan administration on through today. As noted above, however, such a large-scale shift need not reflect actual social changes, since it suffices for Time’s gatekeepers to shift policies on what they write about or how they express it.

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13 As this paper is not technically oriented, the details of the searches have not been presented. For an item such as pull sb’s leg, the problem lies in the noise ratio: normally, this is a question of so many false hits appearing in a simple search that it becomes impractical to investigate the item in question.
Returning to the idioms themselves, we may note that a few of them were completely missing from the *Time* corpus:

- do the dirty on someone [BrE]
- sell the pass [BrE]
- lie through your teeth
- be economical with the truth

In at least the latter instance, it is somewhat surprising that *be economical with the truth* is listed without a regional label; it originated in an inspired ministerial moment in the mid-80s, in connection with the *Spycatcher* trials in Britain, and appears to be firmly anchored in the British political tradition, so that if it were to appear in *Time* (which it failed to do) one would expect it to be in a British connection.

Among the items that appeared rarely, one in particular stands out: *to speak/talk with forked tongue*. This was a standard cliche of Hollywood films, where the Indian brave or chief (it varied) expressed his disbelief in the probity of the white man—usually correctly so. It clearly failed to make it into *Time*, presumably precisely because it was such a cliche, although it appears to be making a strong comeback as a term of abuse on the Internet.\(^{14}\)

Again, however, it appears that a much more detailed study of the individual instances would be necessary, before making major claims about the shifts in deception idioms during these eras.

### 6. Conclusions

The most important conclusion to be drawn from this investigation is that the *Time* corpus comprises a fascinating resource for information about American English of the twentieth century. Its 100 M words contain a wealth of examples for many different types of investigation into linguistic and cultural matters,

\(^{14}\) The Internet as a source is beyond the scope of the present paper, but it would appear as if its untrammeled nature, as opposed to the relative dignity of *Time*, may mean that numerous ways of attacking and belittling opponents are making a strong comeback via the Internet.
and the corpus search engine is sufficiently sophisticated to provide access in a relatively non-technical way.

At the same time, it must be remembered that *Time* is a collective enterprise under the control of the fairly stringent editing of one single publishing house, and represents one single genre, albeit with articles on many aspects of human life. News items from the spheres of politics and economics dominate, and of course are primarily drawn from the United States. These caveats having been stated, it nevertheless remains true that the *Time* corpus is the first major diachronic source for studies of American English, and no comparable source yet exists for British (or other varieties of) English.

With regard to general analyses of idioms in the strict sense, the size of the *Time* corpus is clearly still inadequate to achieve even the reasonable goal of 50 instances per meaning or diachronic unit examined, as set forth by John Sinclair in 1991; for most of these idioms, the entire corpus is not even sufficient to produce 50 instances in total. Here, it appears likely that only the Internet-based, automatically-retrieved corpora of the 21st century will be large enough to begin to satisfy that criterion. But for a general analysis of English, that merely begs the question of genre, as well, since Internet writing is not equivalent to all writing—not to mention the additional mode of spoken English.

On a more positive note, the *Time* corpus appears to contain a plethora of examples for studies of how idioms may be varied, particularly through context-based (text-anchored) variation of one of their slots, as in the spectacular variation the *Time* corpus exhibits as regards constructions such as a *one-X town*. Since the great danger with idioms is their overuse as given clichés, it is indeed nice to know that being _happy as a clam at high tide_ is not the only game in *Time*’s town.

References


