

## **Abstract**

This article outlines criteria to define a figurative idiom, and then compares the frequent figurative idioms identified in two sources of spoken American English (academic and contemporary) to their frequency in spoken British English. This is done by searching the British National Corpus (BNC), to see whether they are frequent on both sides of the Atlantic, or more common in one country or the other. It also compares the frequency of figurative idioms identified as frequent in two British idiom dictionaries to see whether their occurrence in the BNC justifies their ‘frequent’ label. The main aim of the frequency comparisons is to help teachers know which, if any, are useful to teach to EFL/ESL students.

**Keywords:** figurative idioms, American spoken English, British National Corpus, multiword units (MWUs), EFL/ESL teaching

## **In a manner of speaking: Assessing frequent spoken figurative idioms to assist ESL/EFL teachers**

Recent information on the frequency of idioms in spoken American academic English (Simpson & Mendis, 2003) and in contemporary spoken American English (Liu, 2003) has helped language teachers decide which ones might be useful to teach to ESL/EFL students. However, as Liu (2003, p.672) has noted, what constitutes an 'idiom' not only varies from scholar to scholar, but is also affected by context. Therefore, to identify more idioms to teach to ESL/EFL students, we must first identify criteria to define an idiom and then search a corpus – a large collection of texts – to establish their frequency.

This study attempts first to outline criteria to identify a particular type of idiom, what some people have called 'figurative idioms' (Cowie, Mackin & McCaig, 1983; Alexander, 1987; Howarth, 1998) or transparent/semi-transparent/semi-opaque metaphors (Moon, 1998; Fernando & Flavell, 1981). The next step involves doing a corpus search in the spoken part of the British National Corpus (BNC) to establish the frequency of a number of the figurative idioms (hereafter called 'figuratives') from both Simpson & Mendis's (2003) and Liu's (2003) spoken American English lists in order to test their frequency in a large balanced corpus like the spoken BNC (10+ million words comprising recordings of people of different ages, social class, location and gender). By first searching the spoken BNC for figuratives from the spoken American corpora, then searching for the figurative idioms marked as frequent in two idiom dictionaries, and for some found in English language teaching course books, the aim is to make recommendations about teaching them to ESL/EFL learners.

## Criteria for defining figuratives

When defining figuratives, Grant & Bauer (2004) chose the most commonly used criterion to define an idiom, that of non-compositionality (you cannot work out the meaning of an idiom by adding together the meanings of the individual words that comprise it), plus an additional one of figurativeness, to divide the presently large collection of multiword units (MWUs) known as idioms into three groups:

1. core idioms (non-compositional, non-figurative)
  - *by and large, so and so, red herring*
2. figuratives (non-compositional, figurative)
  - *take the plunge, keep a low profile, go off the rails*
3. ONCEs (one non-compositional element, may also be figurative)
  - *a long face, take its toll, at stake*

Figuratives were determined by asking the question: “Is it possible to understand the meaning of the MWU by recognizing the ‘untruth’ [of the statement] and pragmatically reinterpreting it in a way that correctly explains the MWU?” For example, in the statement ‘Jack has *gone off the rails* since his wife died’, it is an ‘untruth’ that he would be likely to be on or go off rails, so this statement is reinterpreted in the context to work out the intended meaning of ‘not moving forward in a controlled manner, being out of control’.

## Identifying figuratives in academic and contemporary spoken American English

Looking first at figuratives in academic spoken English, Simpson and Mendis (2003) started with their spoken academic corpus and identified idioms in it, using criteria also noted by Fernando (1996), McCarthy (1998) and Moon (1998). They identified 20 idioms deemed useful for an academic purposes curricula, and 32 which occurred

frequently – 4 or more times in MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, a 1.7 million plus word corpus), 9 of which occur on both lists, and 3 excluded for not being figuratives. The remaining 40 are listed in Table 1.

(insert Table 1 here)

To add to this number, Liu's (2003) list of 302 frequent 'idioms' in contemporary spoken American English was consulted. Liu used different criteria, that of Fernando (1996), to divide idioms into three categories (pure, semiliteral, and literal), searched in three American spoken corpora to establish frequency, and then divided the most frequent 302, out of the total of 9,683 idioms, into three groups:

- Band 1 (47 items that occurred 50 or more times per million words)
- Band 2 (107 items that occurred 11-49 times per million words)
- Band 3 (148 items that occurred 2-19 times per million words)

From Liu's Appendix B (idioms from the combined three corpora of spoken American English) list, a total of 70 figuratives were included in the corpus search of the BNC, including 4 from Band 1, 5 from Band 2, and 61 from Band 3 as Table 2 shows.

(insert Table 2 here)

### **Idioms from the spoken American English lists excluded from the figuratives list**

Excluded from Simpson & Mendis's (2003) list are MWUs considered to be truncated from a full expression (what the hell / what the heck – because their meaning would be clear when the full expression was used), and compound words (nitty-gritty).

Further excluded from this list were those from Liu (2003) judged to be phrasal verbs (deal with, go through, find out, etc), ‘vague language’ (kind of, sort of), collocations or fixed expressions (in fact, at all, as well, in order to/that, etc), and discourse markers (first of all, according to, etc). Although some phrasal verbs are figurative, they are not included as figuratives, nor are non-idiom fixed expressions, but a search of the BNC of a brief sample of these will be done for frequency comparison purposes.

### **Corpus search results**

In order to compare ‘apples with apples’ as much as possible, the frequency results from the spoken BNC (just over 10 million words) were divided by five to give a rough equivalence to the MICASE (1.7 million+ words) results. The search comparison is listed in Table 3, with the nine figuratives occurring on both Simpson and Mendis (2003) lists – those considered useful for an academic purposes curricula, and those which occurred frequently – marked with an asterisk (\*):

(insert Table 3 here)

### **MICASE / BNC comparison**

While few reliable conclusions can be drawn when comparing two relatively small and quite different spoken corpora, some generalizations can be put forward for future research.

Firstly, all but three (*ring a bell*, *chicken(-)and(-)egg situation*, *get to the bottom of*) occurred much more often in the specialized American academic spoken corpus than

in the more general British one, either because they are more American or because they are part of the idiolect of individual lecturers and students, something noted by Simpson and Mendis (2003):

|   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| <i>the big picture</i>                          | <i>carrot(s) and stick(s)</i> |
| <i>flip a coin / flip side of the same coin</i> | <i>thumbs up</i>              |
| <i>on (the right) track</i>                     | <i>put the heat on</i>        |

Secondly, some figuratives occurred approximately twice as often in the specialized American academic spoken corpus than in the more general British one, possibly for the same reasons:

|                                       |                                      |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>rule(s) of thumb</i>               | <i>goes to show</i>                  |
| <i>take (something) at face value</i> | <i>take my/someone's word for it</i> |

Thirdly, some figuratives which occurred in the specialized American academic spoken corpus had zero occurrences in the spoken part of the more general BNC corpus. For example, *full-fledged* had zero occurrences but 6 occurrences when spelled *fully fledged* and not hyphenated. As variations in spelling were checked, the zero occurrences of the others might indicate that either they are more American than British, or that they might occur in written but not spoken English:

|                            |                               |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>knee(-)jerk</i>         | <i>come out of the closet</i> |
| <i>right off the bat</i>   | <i>on the same page</i>       |
| <i>beat to death</i>       | <i>hand-waving</i>            |
| <i>go off on a tangent</i> | <i>shift gears</i>            |
| <i>litmus test</i>         |                               |

Fourthly, some figuratives might be more American than British because of their association with an American sport (baseball) not played in Britain:

|                              |                          |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>a ballpark idea/guess</i> | <i>right off the bat</i> |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|

## **Comparing frequency in three corpora of spoken American English and the BNC**

Looking now at contemporary American spoken English, a total of 70 ‘idioms’ judged to be figuratives (or figurative ONCE) were selected from Liu’s (2003) Appendix B (most frequent across all three spoken corpora) list and compared with the spoken BNC as shown in Table 4, with those in bold also in the MICASE corpus. Numbers include all verb inflections (eg, make/makes/made/making sure) and are based on occurrences per million in both spoken corpora.

(insert Table 4 here)

### **Results of comparison of ‘figuratives’ in the American and British corpora**

While not possible to do more exact comparisons because of Liu (2003) using a range of frequency, a number of generalisations are nevertheless put forward for consideration and future research.

Firstly, only one figurative occurs frequently enough in British English to qualify for the most frequent (50+/-million) found in Band 1:

*make sure*

Secondly, only 3 figuratives occur more frequently in spoken British English than spoken American:

*more or less*  
*take into account / take account of something*  
*go wrong*

Thirdly, several figuratives occur with the same frequency in spoken British English to qualify for the Band 3 frequency range (2-19 occurrences per million in spoken American English):

|                                   |                                       |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>take steps</i>                 | <i>by hand</i>                        |
| <i>be / keep in touch with</i>    | <i>have / get a clue</i>              |
| <i>do one's best</i>              | <i>chances are/were</i>               |
| <i>bits and pieces</i>            | <i>in line with</i>                   |
| <i>from scratch</i>               | <i>off the top of my / one's head</i> |
| <i>get to the point</i>           | <i>get sth across</i>                 |
| <i>in (the) light of</i>          | <i>come / spring to mind</i>          |
| <i>in the long/short run/term</i> | <i>keep an / one's eye on</i>         |

Fourthly, while some figuratives have zero occurrences in spoken British English (*make the headlines, put sth to rest, push the envelope*), a number of others do not occur frequently enough to reach the minimum frequency of two per million:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>in the wake of</i>                   | <i>make fun of</i>                       |
| <i>back and forth</i>                   | <i>a level playing field</i>             |
| <i>be open to ideas</i>                 | <i>the ball is in their / sb's court</i> |
| <i>err on the side of</i>               | <i>take its toll</i>                     |
| <i>fall short</i>                       | <i>on the horizon</i>                    |
| <i>begs the question</i>                | <i>sth / things are up for grabs</i>     |
| <i>hit home</i>                         | <i>a rule of thumb</i>                   |
| <i>be / keep on track</i>               | <i>up in the air</i>                     |
| <i>make good on sth</i>                 | <i>in the eyes of / sb's eyes</i>        |
| <i>give sb a break</i>                  | <i>draw the line</i>                     |
| <i>shed / cast / throw light on sth</i> | <i>be over one's head</i>                |
| <i>at stake</i>                         | <i>in good / bad shape</i>               |
| <i>get a handle on sth</i>              | <i>in the works</i>                      |

### **Adding to the list of spoken figuratives**

To add to the lists of figuratives, first the two British idiom dictionaries that indicate frequency (*Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*, 1998 and *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms*, 1995) were examined and the frequent idioms were combined. The result was that a total of *only* 79 frequent occurred in both dictionaries, and of these, the following 76 were judged to be figuratives. Table 5 lists these, with the ones in **bold** either on the Simpson and Mendis or Liu lists.



(insert Table 5 here)

Frequency figures are also given for written English to see if this justifies their frequency label. However, the corpus search showed that only 10 of the 76 occur in spoken English more frequently than the threshold of two occurrences per million words, only 4 occur slightly more often in written English, and only 1 considerably more frequently, something language teachers and students may wish to take note of.

|                                | <u>SE / WE</u> |   | <u>SE / WE</u> |
|--------------------------------|----------------|---|----------------|
| <i>get your act together</i>   | (2.51/1.39)    | <i>(be) on the spot</i>                               | (4.16/4.72)    |
| <i>make/ pull a face/faces</i> | (2.22/2.81)    | <i>in the short (2.22/4.93)/long (3.87/5.50) term</i> |                |
| <i>give/lend sb a hand</i>     | (6.77/2.80)    | <i>(be) over the top</i>                              | (5.12/1.99)    |
| <i>(be) on top of sth</i>      | (2.51/)        | <i>get/come to grips with sth</i>                     | (3.29/3.39)    |
| <i>from scratch</i>            | (2.32/3.36)    | <i>bear/keep sth in mind</i>                          | (38.68/19.66)  |

A second strategy used was to see which figuratives were being taught in idiom books. Two idiom books were chosen for this task, one American and one British, with the first 10 figuratives in each being selected for the corpus search.

- Watkins, D. (2001). *The Idiom Adventure*, Fluency in speaking and listening. White Plains, N.Y.: Addison Wesley Longman.

|                                   | <u>SE / WE</u>   |                                   | <u>SE / WE</u> |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>a breeze</i>                   | (0.19/0.11)      | <i>kick the habit</i>             | (0.19/)        |
| <i>a couch potato</i>             | (0/0.14)         | <i>out of step</i>                | (0.29/)        |
| <i>have a green thumb/fingers</i> | (0/0.29, 0/0.23) | <i>see red</i>                    | (0/0.41)       |
| <i>make sth from scratch</i>      | (0.19/3.36)      | <i>up in arms</i>                 | (1.26/0.42)    |
| <i>run-of-the-mill</i>            | (0.19/0.78)      | <i>work oneself into a lather</i> | (0/0.05)       |

- McCarthy, M. and O'Dell, F. (2002). *English Idioms in Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

|                                       | <u>SE / WE</u>        |   | <u>SE / WE</u> |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|---|----------------|
| <i>not all there</i>                  | (0.29/)               | <i>give sb a taste/dose of their own medicine</i> | (0.1,0.1/0.12) |
| <i>off her trolley/rocker</i>         | (0.19,0.29/0.14,0.17) | <i>a sore point</i>                               | (0.1/0.20)     |
| <i>not right in the head</i>          | (0)                   | <i>bitten the dust</i>                            | (0.19/0.30)    |
| <i>one sandwich short of a picnic</i> | (0)                   | <i>a bitter pill to swallow</i>                   | (0.19/0.06)    |
| <i>as nutty as a fruitcake</i>        | (0)                   | <i>sugar the pill</i>                             | (0/0.10)       |

These results show that none of the above 20 figuratives occurs frequently enough in spoken English to meet the threshold of 2 per million, and only one (*from scratch*) does so in written English. Idiom books could more usefully include frequency figures based on a large and balanced corpus so that teachers and students can prioritise which, if any, to teach/learn.

### **Frequency of other non-figurative MWUs**

To compare the frequency of other non-figurative MWUs – including phrasal verbs, vague language, discourse markers, and collocations – a corpus search of 20 (10 phrasal verbs and 10 others) from Band 1 of Liu’s (2003) list was carried out. When determining frequency of MWUs such as ‘kind of’ or ‘sort of’, meaning ‘somewhat’ rather than ‘type of’ or ‘caring/helpful of’, a sample was done of the first 50 occurrences in spoken British English, and then based on this, the approximate total over all the occurrences was worked out. Similarly, with occurrences of ‘as far as’, those involving measurements of distance were subtracted from the total as were occurrences of ‘a deal with’, which has a different meaning from the phrasal verb ‘deal with’. Once again, the number of occurrences per million includes verb inflections (deal/deals/dealt/dealing), with Table 6 below showing the results of this comparison.

(insert Table 6 here)

While all of the phrasal verbs are more frequent in the BNC than most figuratives, 3 (come up with, go ahead, point out) were less common in British spoken English than American. Similarly, collocations such as ‘of course’, ‘in terms of’, ‘in fact’, and ‘at

all’ are also frequent, as is vague language such as ‘sort of’, which occurs more often in spoken British English than ‘kind of’. Furthermore, ‘by the way’ and ‘according to’ are less common, with the latter proving to be much more common in written British English.

In addition, for frequency comparison purposes, a corpus search was done of a number of collocations beginning with ‘in’, with twenty chosen from all three bands. While the majority of these should cause no problems in reception and understanding for ESL/EFL students, they may not feature in the students’ productive vocabulary. The results of this corpus search can be seen in Table 7.

(insert Table 7 here)

While ‘in terms of’ and ‘in fact’ also occur frequently in spoken British English, ‘in a/some way’, ‘in a/some sense’ and ‘in general’ are more frequent in spoken American English. Furthermore, while ‘in private’, ‘in good faith’, and ‘in no way’ occur less frequently in spoken British English, ‘in case’ occurs much more frequently.

### **Pedagogical implications**

With regard to learning figuratives and other MWUs, teachers may wish to draw students’ attention to which ones occur more frequently in spoken British or American English, or in a specialised area like academic English.

Furthermore, both teachers and students would benefit if a number of steps were followed. Firstly regarding figuratives, it might help to know which metaphors the figuratives are based on (Lakoff, and Johnson, 1980). One textbook (Wright, 1999) that provides practice in this uses a metaphor for each chapter heading (A company is a ship) and then gives exercises using associated figuratives (*knows the ropes, all in the same boat, on course, on board*, etc).

Secondly, students should be taught the skills to ‘recognise the untruth in the figurative and pragmatically reinterpret it to find the intended truth’ whenever and wherever figuratives occur. For example, BNC figuratives such as *be given/get the green light* (0.39 SE; 1.04 WE) or *fight like cat and dog* (0 SE, 0.06 WE) are not difficult for students to reinterpret as most have an understanding of the purpose of a green light and of the relationship between cats and dogs. Using authentic language from the spoken (SE) and written (WE) BNC – corpus-based pedagogical material (Simpson and Mendis, 2003) – shows how it should be possible for students to use both the known circumstances and contextual clues to work out the intended meaning.

- But, and it's but, supporting the document today does not give the C E C the [green light](#) to rush into any amalgamation with the Transport and General Union and carve up the G M B. [SE]
- For this reason he was given the [green light](#) to prepare more detailed proposals for further consideration. [WE]
- We'd fight like cat and [dog](#). [WE]
- We fought like cat and [dog](#) the whole time we were together -- or at least most of the time," she added, remembering, "he made my life an absolute misery!" [WE]

Other figuratives may be less obvious for students to reinterpret, but with classroom practice most can be understood such as these BNC examples (*make sure, change one's mind, lend a hand*):

- It is your responsibility to [make sure](#) that money is paid each and every week. [SE]
- Smoke alarms need very little maintenance, but they do need to be tested regularly to [make sure](#) they are in good working order. [WE]

- For example a lot of people change their [mind](#) about wanting goods and decide I don't think I want that new pair of shoes after all. [SE]
- My colleagues seemed genuinely worried by my decision and many of them tried to convince me to change my [mind](#). [WE]
- And Karen last weekend, after you were sitting for them suddenly took ill on the Saturday I think, and Sheila wasn't in any great shape, so he went back home er, from the office an-- over his lunch hour to see if he could just go and lend a [hand](#), ge-- generally help out over his lunch hour. [SE]
- When, that first night, she went to her own bungalow, I was left mostly on my own, though Alec came in early in the evening to lend a [hand](#). [WE]

Thirdly, based on how figuratives are used in the discourse, teachers can help students learn to understand them and can provide practise using them in the safe environment of the classroom prior to attempting them outside in the real world.

Fourthly, teaching resources such as idiom books and dictionaries should include frequency figures, both spoken and written, based on occurrences in a general, or specialised, corpus. Idiom dictionaries that already distinguish frequent ones should explain how this has been determined so students can learn if some are more frequent in one genre (media) than another.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the limitations of this comparison, we know that figuratives occur less frequently than many phrasal verbs, collocations and discourse markers so may merit less teaching time. However, as Liu (2003) has noted, even low frequency figuratives could be important on occasion so teaching students the skills to reinterpret the figurative when it occurs in discourse will help them become more independent learners.

As both Simpson and Mendis, and Liu, note a corpus can be consulted for both the frequency of occurrence and the role of idioms, either a large and representative

corpus like the BNC or the proposed American National Corpus (ANC), or a small and specialised one like MICASE. For example, the MICASE search revealed that contrary to expectations, some idioms – especially figurative ones – occur in spoken academic English so their inclusion in a teaching syllabus can be justified for that target audience. Finally, idiom teaching materials would be more helpful if as Liu (2003) notes, rather than the idioms included being based on the intuition of the authors', they were based on frequency and range of occurrence in authentic language.

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**Table 1 Figuratives from Simpson and Mendis (2003) lists**

|                             |                            |   |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| <i>bottom line</i>          | <i>the big picture</i>     | <i>carrot and stick</i>                       |
| <i>come into play</i>       | <i>draw a line between</i> | <i>chicken and egg question</i>               |
| <i>get a grasp of</i>       | <i>get a handle on</i>     | <i>get to the bottom of things</i>            |
| <i>hand-waving</i>          | <i>hand in hand</i>        | <i>go off on a tangent</i>                    |
| <i>in a nutshell</i>        | <i>ivory tower</i>         | <i>litmus test</i>                            |
| <i>on the same page</i>     | <i>shift gears</i>         | <i>play devil's advocate</i>                  |
| <i>split hairs</i>          | <i>down the line</i>       | <i>thinking on my feet</i>                    |
| <i>on (the right) track</i> | <i>knee-jerk</i>           | <i>flip a coin/flip side of the same coin</i> |
| <i>right off the bat</i>    | <i>on target</i>           | <i>thumbs up</i>                              |
| <i>fall in love</i>         | <i>out the door</i>        | <i>take sth at face value</i>                 |
| <i>beat to death</i>        | <i>put the heat on</i>     | <i>a ballpark idea/guess</i>                  |
| <i>full-fledged</i>         | <i>goes to show</i>        | <i>come out of the closet</i>                 |
| <i>ring a bell</i>          | <i>take/make a stab at</i> | <i>take my/sb's word for it</i>               |
| <i>rule(s) of thumb</i>     |                            |   |

**Table 2 Figuratives from Liu's (2003) lists**

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <i>make sure (Band 1)</i>              | <i>in other words (1)</i>              | <i>make sense (1)</i>                      |
| <i>have/keep in mind (1)</i>           | <i>on the other hand (Band 2)</i>      | <i>back and forth (2)</i>                  |
| <i>make a difference (2)</i>           | <i>all of a sudden (2)</i>             | <i>have/play a part/role (in) (2)</i>      |
| <i>be open to ideas (Band 3)</i>       | <i>take steps (3)</i>                  | <i>more or less (3)</i>                    |
| <i>be/keep in touch with (3)</i>       | <i>down the road (3)</i>               | <i>do one's best (3)</i>                   |
| <i>take into account (3)</i>           | <i>in light of (3)</i>                 | <i>go wrong (3)</i>                        |
| <i>in the long/short run/term (3)</i>  | <i>hold s.o./sb accountable (3)</i>    | <i>at stake (3)</i>                        |
| <i>by hand (3)</i>                     | <i>have/get a clue (3)</i>             | <i>chances are/were (3)</i>                |
| <i>in the wake of (3)</i>              | <i>have sth on one's mind (3)</i>      | <i>keep/be on track (3)</i>                |
| <i>make good on sth (3)</i>            | <i>get to the point (3)</i>            | <i>on and off/off and on (3)</i>           |
| <i>give someone a break (3)</i>        | <i>shed/cast light on sth (3)</i>      | <i>be/put on hold (3)</i>                  |
| <i>a fair game (3)</i>                 | <i>up in the air (3)</i>               | <i>come to mind (3)</i>                    |
| <i>in the eyes of/in sb's eyes (3)</i> | <i>the big picture (3)</i>             | <i>ballpark (figure/estimate) (3)</i>      |
| <i>keep an eye on (3)</i>              | <i>draw the line (3)</i>               | <i>be over one's head (3)</i>              |
| <i>get/have a handle on sth (3)</i>    | <i>in (good/bad) shape (3)</i>         | <i>make fun of (3)</i>                     |
| <i>in line with (3)</i>                | <i>a level playing field (3)</i>       | <i>call sth into question (3)</i>          |
| <i>get/have hands on sth (3)</i>       | <i>off the top of one's head (3)</i>   | <i>put sth to rest (3)</i>                 |
| <i>take its toll (3)</i>               | <i>make up one's mind</i>              | <i>the ball is in your/their court (3)</i> |
| <i>get sth across (3)</i>              | <i>have/get a say/voice in (3)</i>     | <i>on the horizon (3)</i>                  |
| <i>right off the bat (3)</i>           | <i>sth/things are up for grabs (3)</i> | <i>a rule of thumb (3)</i>                 |
| <i>bits and pieces (3)</i>             | <i>err on the side of (3)</i>          | <i>fall short (3)</i>                      |
| <i>in the works (3)</i>                | <i>beg the question (3)</i>            | <i>from scratch (3)</i>                    |
| <i>hit home (3)</i>                    | <i>in the pipeline (3)</i>             | <i>make/catch/hit the headlines (3)</i>    |
| <i>push the envelope (3)</i>           |  |  |

**Table 3 Frequency of figuratives in MICASE and the spoken BNC**

| Idiom / Figurative   | Total in<br>MICASE<br>1.7 mil | Total in<br>BNC<br>2 mil | Idiom / Figurative                   | Total in<br>MICASE<br>1.7 mil | Total in<br>BNC<br>2 mil |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>bottom line*</i>  | 17                            | 8                        | <i>come out of the closet</i>        | 4                             | 0                        |
| <i>the big picture*</i>  | 7                             | 0.6                      | <i>full-fledged / fully fledged</i>  | 4                             | 0 / 1.2                  |
| <i>come into play*</i>   | 14                            | 4                        | <i>get a handle on*</i>              | 4                             | .6                       |
| <i>down the line</i>   | 11                            | 7.16                     | <i>goes to show</i>                  | 4                             | 2.32                     |
| <i>flip a coin, flip side of a/the same coin / toss a coin</i> | 10                            | 0.4 / 0.6                | <i>on the same page*</i>             | 4                             | 0                        |
| <i>on (the right) track</i>                                    | 9                             | .8                       | <i>ring a bell</i>                   | 4                             | 5                        |
| <i>knee-jerk</i>   | 8                             | 0                        | <i>split hairs*</i>                  | 4                             | .2                       |
| <i>hand in hand*</i>   | 8                             | 1.8                      | <i>take (make/have) a stab at it</i> | 4                             | .6                       |
| <i>right (straight) off the bat</i>                            | 7                             | 0                        | <i>take my/someone's word for it</i> | 4                             | 2.12                     |
| <i>carrot(s) and stick(s)*</i>                                 | 7                             | 0.6                      | <i>chicken-and-egg (question)</i>    | 1                             | 2.4                      |
| <i>draw a/the line between*</i>                                | 7                             | 2.4                      | <i>get a grasp of</i>                | 1                             | 0.6                      |
| <i>on target</i>   | 7                             | 2.4                      | <i>get to the bottom of things</i>   | 1                             | 1.8                      |
| <i>thumbs up</i>   | 7                             | .4                       | <i>go off on a tangent</i>           | 3                             | 0                        |
| <i>fall in love</i>  | 6                             | 5.6                      | <i>hand-waving</i>                   | 2                             | 0                        |
| <i>out the door</i>  | 6                             | 2.6                      | <i>in a nutshell</i>                 | 3                             | 2.4                      |
| <i>rule(s) of thumb</i>  | 6                             | 3.2                      | <i>ivory tower</i>                   | 3                             | 0.6                      |
| <i>take (something) at face value</i>                          | 6                             | 2.6                      | <i>litmus test</i>                   | 1                             | 0                        |
| <i>beat to death</i>   | 5                             | 0                        | <i>play devil's advocate</i>         | 3                             | 1.4                      |
| <i>put the heat on</i>   | 5                             | .2                       | <i>shift gears</i>                   | 1                             | 0                        |
| <i>a ballpark (idea / guess)</i>                               | 4                             | 1.2                      | <i>thinking on my feet</i>           | 1                             | .6                       |

**Table 4 Figuratives in spoken American and British English**

| Most frequently used figuratives                        | Total in 3 corpora of spoken Amer Eng / million | Total in spoken BNC / million | Most frequently used figuratives                | Total in 3 corpora of spoken AmerEng / million | Total in spoken BNC / million |
|---|---|-------------------------------|---|--|-------------------------------|
| <i>make sure</i>  | 50 +  | 109.27                        | <i>come to mind</i>                             | 2-19   | 1.93                          |
| <i>in other words</i>                                   | 50 +  | 48.54                         | <i>in the eyes of / in sb's eyes</i>            | 2-19   | 1.84                          |
| <i>make sense</i>                                       | 50 +  | 24.95                         | <i>the big picture</i>                          | 2-19   | 0.29                          |
| <i>have / keep in mind</i><br><i>keep, bear in mind</i> | 50 +  | 8.80 / 1.55, 38.68            | <i>ballpark (figure, estimate, etc)</i>         | 2-19   | 0.1                           |
| <i>on the other hand</i>                                | 11-49   | 23.88                         | <i>keep an/one's eye on</i>                     | 2-19   | 7.35                          |
| <i>back and forth</i>                                   | 11-49   | 1.74                          | <i>draw the line</i>                            | 2-19   | 1.16                          |
| <i>make a difference</i>                                | 11-49   | 33.75                         | <i>be over one's head</i>                       | 2-19   | 0.77                          |
| <i>have / play a part / role in</i>                     | 11-49   | 2.71                          | <i>get / have a handle on sth, / put / keep</i> | 2-19   | 0.1 / 0, 0.1 / 0.1            |
| <i>all of a sudden</i>                                  | 11-49   | 15.66                         | <i>in good / bad shape</i>                      | 2-19   | 0.19 / 0.19                   |
| <i>be open to ideas</i>                                 | 2-19  | 0.1                           | <i>make fun of</i>                              | 2-19   | 0.58                          |
| <i>take steps</i>                                       | 2-19  | 3.96                          | <i>in line with</i>                             | 2-19   | 6                             |
| <i>more or less</i>                                     | 2-19  | 44.29                         | <i>(a) level playing field</i>                  | 2-19   | 0.87                          |
| <i>be / keep in touch with</i>                          | 2-19  | 4.06 /                        | <i>call sth into question</i>                   | 2-19   | 0.48                          |

|                                     |      |                     |                                 |             |                |
|-------------------------------------|------|---------------------|---------------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| get in touch                        |      | 3.77<br>12.96       |                                 |             |                |
| down the road                       | 2-19 | 2.51                | get / have hands on sth         | 2-19        | 2.03 / 0       |
| do one's best                       | 2-19 | 12.38               | off the top of my (one's) head  | 2-19        | 2.51           |
| take into account / take account of | 2-19 | 28.33               | put sth to rest                 | 2-19        | 0              |
| in (the) light of                   | 2-19 | 10.54               | take its toll                   | 2-19        | 0.1<br>(taken) |
| go wrong                            | 2-19 | 27.85               | make up one's mind              | 2-19        | 8.12           |
| in the long / short run / term      | 2-19 | 11.60               | the ball is in your/their court | 2-19        | 0.29           |
| hold someone / sb accountable       | 2-19 | 0.1                 | get sth across                  | 2-19        | 3              |
| at stake                            | 2-19 | 0.87                | have a say / voice in sth       | 2-19        | 2.32/0.39      |
| by hand                             | 2-19 | 6.19                | on the horizon                  | 2-19        | 0.87           |
| [not] have / get a clue             | 2-19 | 12.58               | right off the bat               | 2-19        | 0              |
| chances are / were                  | 2-19 | 4.06 / 0            | sth / things are up for grabs   | 2-19        | 0.39           |
| in the wake of                      | 2-19 | 0.58                | <b>a rule (s) of thumb</b>      | <b>2-19</b> | <b>1.55</b>    |
| have (something) on one's mind      | 2-19 | 1.55                | bits and pieces                 | 2-19        | 12.67          |
| keep / be (on track)                | 2-19 | 0.29/0.29<br>(0.29) | err on the side of              | 2-19        | 0.19           |
| make good on sth                    | 2-19 | 0.29                | fall short                      | 2-19        | 1.74           |
| get to the point                    | 2-19 | 0.48                | in the works                    | 2-19        | 0.48           |
| on and off / off and on             | 2-19 | 2.42 /<br>0.97      | beg the question                | 2-19        | 0.48           |
| give sb a break                     | 2-19 | 0.29                | from scratch                    | 2-19        | 2.32           |
| shed / cast light on sth            | 2-19 | 0.1 / 0.1<br>0.58   | hit home                        | 2-19        | 0.39           |
| be / put on hold                    | 2-19 | 0.48                | in the pipeline                 | 2-19        | 1.96           |
| (sth as) a fair game                | 2-19 | 0.29                | make / catch / hit headlines    | 2-19        | 0/.1/.19       |
| up in the air                       | 2-19 | 0.68                | push the envelope               | 2-19        | 0              |

**Table 5 Figuratives found in both British idiom dictionaries that indicate frequency**

|   |                                       |   |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| <i>get your act together</i>            | <b><i>draw the line</i></b> at sth    | <i>(be) on the spot</i>                     |
| <i>get in on the act</i>                | <i>keep a low profile</i>             | <i>back to square one</i>                   |
| <i>clear the air</i>                    | <i>cross your mind</i>                | <i>on the spur of the moment</i>            |
| <i>jump on the bandwagon</i>            | <i>(be) on the cards</i>              | <i>follow suit</i>                          |
| <i>give sb the benefit of the doubt</i> | <i>give/lend sb a hand</i>            | <b><i>in the short/medium/long term</i></b> |
| <i>(be) a bone of contention</i>        | <i>(be) run of the mill</i>           | <i>ram sth down sb's throat</i>             |
| <i>(be) out of the blue</i>             | <i>put your finger on sth</i>         | <i>keep sb on their toes</i>                |
| <b><i>(be) the bottom line</i></b>      | <i>give and take</i>                  | <i>bite your tongue</i>                     |
| <i>(be) in cold blood</i>               | <i>loud and clear</i>                 | <i>keep track</i>                           |
| <i>(be) in the dark</i>                 | <i>bend/stretch the rules</i>         | <i>have/get the upper hand</i>              |
| <i>(be) down to earth</i>               | <i>play it safe</i>                   | <i>have your work cut out for you</i>       |
| <i>(be) easier said than done</i>       | <i>(be) on top of sth</i>             | <i>(be) out of this world</i>               |
| <i>make ends meet</i>                   | <i>set/start the ball rolling</i>     | <b><i>(be) up in the air</i></b>            |
| <i>make/pull a face</i>                 | <i>(be) over the moon</i>             | <i>turn a blind eye to sth</i>              |
| <i>at first glance</i>                  | <i>get on sb's nerves</i>             | <i>(be) over the top</i>                    |
| <i>bear fruit</i>                       | <i>(speak) off the cuff</i>           | <i>(be) out of your depth</i>               |
| <i>give it a shot/whirl</i>             | <i>in a nutshell</i>                  | <i>(not) see eye to eye</i>                 |
| <i>go against the grain</i>             | <i>(be) plain sailing</i>             | <i>not (be) the end of the world</i>        |
| <i>stick to your guns</i>               | <b><i>(be) in the pipeline</i></b>    | <i>get/come to grips with sth</i>           |
| <i>take the plunge</i>                  | <i>lose your head</i>                 | <i>get the hang of sth</i>                  |
| <i>(be) off the record</i>              | <i>break sb's heart</i>               | <i>hold your own</i>                        |
| <i>set/put the record straight</i>      | <i>get your own back</i>              | <i>let sb off the hook</i>                  |
| <i>red tape</i>                         | <i>fall into place</i>                | <i>break the ice</i>                        |
| <i>behind the scenes</i>                | <b><i>(be) on the right track</i></b> | <i>(be) at loggerheads</i>                  |
| <b><i>from scratch</i></b>              | <i>bear/keep sth in mind</i>          | <i>come to a head</i>                       |
| <i>stick/poke your nose in</i>          |                                       |   |

**Table 6 Frequency of phrasal verb and fixed expression MWUs from Liu's (2003) list**

| MWU                    | Total in 3 corpora of spoken Amer Eng / million | Total in spoken BNC / million | MWU          | Total in 3 corpora of spoken Amer Eng / million | Total in spoken BNC / million |
|------------------------|---|-------------------------------|--------------|---|-------------------------------|
| deal with              | 50+   | 156.48                        | kind of      | 50+   | 42.99                         |
| go through             | 50+   | 165.16                        | sort of      | 50+   | 389.68                        |
| come up / come up with | 50+   | 199.29 / 35.87                | of course    | 50+   | 547.39                        |
| look for               | 50+   | 121.83                        | in terms of  | 50+   | 141.47                        |
| find out               | 50+   | 119.71                        | as/so far as | 50+   | 102.01/11.02                  |
| get into               | 50+   | 71.93                         | at all       | 50+   | 296.37                        |
| go ahead               | 50+   | 23.49                         | as well as   | 50+   | 59.95                         |
| put on                 | 50+   | 72.43                         | by the way   | 50+   | 40.32                         |
| end up                 | 50+   | 60.73                         | first of all | 50+   | 74.17                         |
| point out              | 50+   | 37.61                         | according to | 50+   | 37.81                         |

**Table 7**      **Frequency of collocational MWUs with ‘in’ from Liu’s (2003) list**

| MWU                           | Total in 3 corpora of spoken Amer Eng / million | Total in spoken BNC / million | MWU           | Total in 3 corpora of spoken Amer Eng / million | Total in spoken BNC / million |
|-------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|---------------|---|-------------------------------|
| in terms of                   | 50+   | 141.47                        | in public     | 2-19  | 4.06                          |
| in fact                       | 50+   | 290.96                        | in case       | 2-19  | 40.42                         |
| in a way /<br>in some way     | 50+   | 43.03 /<br>11.41              | in common     | 2-19  | 6.00                          |
| in a sense / in<br>some sense | 50+   | 33.46 / 0.77                  | in essence    | 2-19  | 2.71                          |
| in general                    | 50+   | 22.63                         | in detail     | 2-19  | 6.87                          |
| in time                       | 11-49   | 25.43                         | in control    | 2-19  | 6.77                          |
| in effect                     | 11-49   | 16.73                         | in private    | 2-19  | 0.48                          |
| in favor /<br>favo[u]r (of)   | 11-49   | 28.14                         | in good faith | 2-19  | 0.77                          |
| in charge (of)                | 11-49   | 13.34                         | in no way     | 2-19  | 1.64                          |
| in advance                    | 2-19  | 12.18                         | in practice   | 2-19  | 11.02                         |