

# *Birds of a Feather Don't Always Flock Together: User Problems in Identifying Headwords in Online English Learner's Dictionaries\**

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**Abstract:** Idioms, sayings and proverbs (referred to here as 'phrasemes'), are a central part of the English language. However, it is often difficult for learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL) to choose the correct headword when looking for such expressions in a dictionary. Learners may not recognise a word as belonging to a phraseme, and so may not look under a single, 'important' word. Moreover, their choice of a salient word may not accord with the lexicographer's. Thirdly, they may not recognise phraseme variants, such as *carry/take coals to Newcastle*. They may therefore often fail to find the phraseme altogether.

A study of 84 phrasemes in five online English learner's dictionaries (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, *Collins COBUILD Advanced Dictionary*, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*) revealed a lack of uniformity across and often within dictionaries. This paper is based on 14 of these phrasemes, which appear in one or more of these dictionaries and include proper nouns and/or variable words.

To make learner's dictionaries more user friendly (Zgusta 1971), it is argued that they need greater consistency in their choice of phraseme headwords, both within and between dictionaries, and that greater cross-referencing is necessary within a single dictionary. Five strategies are presented to help learners with their dictionary searches.

**Keywords:** ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE, DICTIONARY, ONLINE, HEADWORD, PHRASEME

**Opsomming:** *Birds of a Feather Don't Always Flock Together: Gebruikersprobleme by die identifikasie van trefwoorde in aanlyn Engelse aanleerderswoordeboeke.* Idiome, segswyses en spreekwoorde (hier na verwys as 'fraseme') vorm 'n sentrale deel van die Engelse taal. Dit is egter dikwels moeilik vir aanleerders van Engels as 'n Addisionele Taal (EAT) om die regte trefwoord te kies wanneer daar na uitdrukkings in 'n woordeboek gesoek word. Aanleerders kan dalk nie 'n woord herken as behorende tot 'n fraseem nie, en kan derhalwe nie onder een enkele 'belangrike' woord kyk nie. Meer nog, hulle keuse van 'n opvallende

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woord kan nie ooreenstem met dié van die leksikograaf nie. Derdens, hulle kan dalk nie fraseem-variante, soos *carry/take coals to Newcastle*, herken nie. Hulle kan derhalwe dikwels glad nie daarin slaag om die fraseem te vind nie.

'n Studie van 84 fraseem in vyf aanlyn Engelse aanleerderswoordeboeke (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, *Collins COBUILD Advanced Dictionary*, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*) het 'n gebrek aan eenvormigheid tussen en dikwels binne woordeboeke getoon. Hierdie artikel is gebaseer op 14 van hierdie fraseem wat in een of meer van hierdie woordeboeke verskyn en sluit eiename en/of variante woorde in.

Om aanleerderswoordeboeke meer gebruikersvriendelik (Zgusta 1971) te maak, word daar bepleit dat hulle groter konsekwensie in hul keuse van fraseentrefwoorde nodig het, sowel binne as tussen woordeboeke, en dat groter kruisverwysing nodig is binne 'n enkele woordeboek. Vyf strategieë word aangebied om aanleerders te help met hul woordeboeksoektogte.

**Sleutelwoorde:** ENGELS AS ADDISIONELE TAAL, WOORDEBOEK, AANLYN, TREFWOORD, FRASEEM

## Introduction

One of the main precepts for any dictionary is that it should be user friendly (Zgusta 1971), implying that someone can search a dictionary easily and with a successful outcome. In the case of multi-word expressions such as idioms, sayings and proverbs (henceforth referred to as 'phrasemes'), providing enough information to lead to a successful search is particularly problematic, since a variety of headwords could be chosen by both the lexicographer and the user, and the choices made by these two parties do not always coincide. Monolingual English learner's dictionaries (MELDs) include phrasemes, usually as sub-entries, in their paper dictionaries, and list them under headwords in their online dictionaries. There are dictionaries purely for idioms or proverbs, but learners of English as an additional language (EAL) may not know that a word is part of a phraseme and are therefore more likely to search for an individual headword in a MELD. All the major MELDs are now available online, and indeed Macmillan issued a press release in November 2012 to say that from 2013 their dictionary would only be available on the Internet, and they would no longer produce a print version (Macmillan Publishers Limited 2012). In theory, it should be easier to find a phraseme in an online dictionary.

The study which follows is based on the online versions of five British English MELDs, known as the 'Big 5', consulted online in November 2012: *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (CALD)*; *Collins COBUILD Advanced Dictionary (COBUILD)*; *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE)*; *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (MEDAL)*; and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD)*. There is a sixth online MELD, the *Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary*, but it was not included in the study, which addresses phrasemes used in Australia and which come predominantly from the UK,

using British English spelling (e.g. *ploughshare* rather than *plowshare*).

Correct understanding and use of phrasemes is especially important for learners of English as an additional language, because the meaning of phrasemes is often figurative and therefore hard to guess, and a misunderstanding can lead to confusion or even embarrassment. There are three particular problems which EAL learners face when searching for a phraseme in a dictionary. Firstly, they may not recognise a word as belonging to a phraseme, and so may fail to identify the headword. For example, *COBUILD* lists the phraseme *to beat/turn swords into ploughshares* at *ploughshare* but not at *sword*. Secondly, their choice of an 'important' or salient word may not be the same as the lexicographer's. Phrasemes containing proper nouns, such as *the man/woman on the Clapham omnibus*, offer particularly unusual, and therefore salient, nouns, but these may not be used as headwords in MELDs. For example, most learners could not be expected to be familiar with the words *Clapham* or *omnibus*, yet a search under either of these words in *LDOCE* would fail to find the phraseme, which lists it only under the first noun, *man* (but not under *woman*). Thirdly, users may not be aware of phraseme variants, such as *not to budge/give /move an inch*. This means that if a phraseme is listed under only one of the variants, a user may fail to find it. Only *CALD* and *OALD*, for instance, give the alternatives *budge/give/move* for this phraseme, with *LDOCE* and *MEDAL* only providing cross references at *budge* and *give* but not at *move*.

The Big 5 are becoming ever more sophisticated in their online search engines, and changes are being made daily. Such online dictionaries should theoretically offer the user a greater choice of search words. Consistency is necessary both within and between dictionaries, however, in order for users to conduct consistently successful searches. Learners too need to be given direction to help them use dictionaries efficiently. The study which follows compares the use of headwords for 14 phrasemes containing proper nouns or variable words in online versions of the Big 5 to see if these dictionaries are truly user friendly in regard to their search facilities for phrasemes, and suggests strategies for learners to improve their search experiences.

## Background

The area of phraseology proliferates with terms used by different researchers to refer to the same thing; conversely, the same term may have different meanings for different researchers. The word 'idiom' is a prime example of this, as the concept embodied by the word is a notoriously difficult one to define. For this reason, the overall term 'phraseme', common in French and German phraseology (Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2005: 30), has been adopted in this paper to refer to figurative expressions of more than one word, including idioms, proverbs and sayings. The MELDs themselves usually refer to these different expressions more loosely as 'idioms', or sometimes 'phrases'.

An understanding of English phrasemes allows EAL learners not only to communicate more freely with native speakers but also to orient themselves

and adapt to a culture. As Nation says (2001: 397), knowing a word means "being aware of restrictions on the word for cultural, geographical, stylistic or register reasons". As Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor (1988: 504) warn, however, "an idiomatic expression or construction is something a language user could fail to know while knowing everything else in the language". For this reason, it is important for EAL learners to understand phrasemes. It is also important for them to be aware of any cultural restrictions on their use, such as whether the term is humorous or old fashioned (Miller 2010), so that they can communicate effectively with different age groups in a range of situations.

It has been proposed that the teaching of phraseology "should occupy a central and uncontroversial position in instructed second language acquisition" (Granger and Meunier 2008: 247). Phrasemes are important for language learners because idioms and other fixed expressions come in chunks and thus provide syntactic patterns for encoding (producing language) and decoding (understanding language) (Nattinger and De Carrico 1992: 114), providing learners with "ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation" (Nattinger 1980: 341). Although phrasemes may be hard to learn (Kövecses and Szabó 1996: 326), they are nonetheless important. Decoding the meaning of a phraseme involves the use of various resources, and a dictionary can be paramount in this. However, finding a phraseme in a dictionary can be problematic, since the user has to know which headword to search under.

The use of headwords for listing certain types of phrasemes in a dictionary was first adopted in 1670 by John Ray, whose "material words" for proverbs were "Printed in different Character, that so with the least cast of an eye any man may find any Proverb" (Doyle 2007: 186). Alphabetical listing for proverb dictionaries was used first in the seventeenth century, based on the first word of the proverb (Doyle 2007: 183-185). This first word, of course, was variable, since many proverbs start with either *a*, *the* or a pronoun. Verbs too may vary, as in the example *take or carry coals to Newcastle*. Choosing the canonical form and showing variations is thus a major problem for lexicographers (Moon 1999: 273).

The use of headwords became more standardised in the twentieth century in separate works by Whiting and Tilley (Doyle 2007: 191), who both chose the first noun of a proverb as the alphabetical listing feature. If no noun was present, then the first finite verb was chosen, and if there was no verb then they used the "first important word" (Doyle 2007: 191). This method for listing proverbs and other phrasemes became the dominant method in the United States and was also adopted in general dictionaries, which usually include phrasemes as sub-entries under a headword chosen from the phraseme (Bergenholtz and Gouws 2007: 237-238), rather than as entries in their own right. In a study of six English dictionaries, however, Gates (1986: 102-103) found that five of them placed phrasemes at the first "major invariable word". For instance, *go/run to seed* was placed at *seed*. In general, though, the dictionaries in Gates' study had no consistency between them in their choice of headword, with some favouring nouns and others favouring verbs. This lack of consistency accords with Atkins and Rundell's (2008: 168) suggestion that phrasemes are "the most difficult

MWEs [multiword expressions] to handle in lexicography. In the absence of hard and fast criteria, it is well nigh impossible to be wholly consistent". The choice of a key word, or headword, is therefore a vexed matter, and is often "a largely subjective and complex decision" (Mulhall 2010: 1355) on the part of the lexicographer.

Online dictionaries should theoretically offer the user a greater choice of search words for phrasemes than paper dictionaries, but in practice this is not always the case. Although online dictionaries have the capacity to transcend the restrictions of the printed page, and can include hyperlinks, wild card searches and audio files, many online dictionaries are merely Internet versions of paper dictionaries (Nielsen and Mourier 2005: 110). They thus present the same problems as printed dictionaries in terms of phraseme searches, and may not always be user-friendly. Traditionally, entire phrasemes are not normally used as headwords in a dictionary, except in the case of compounds and phrasal verbs (Atkins and Rundell 2008: 181). Although online dictionary search engines are now making the entry of phrasemes in a search box more feasible, only three of the five MELDs in this study allow the user to find a phraseme by entering the entire phrase in the search box.

The strategies for choosing headwords mentioned by Doyle (2007) and Gates (1986) create several problems for learners of English as an additional language. If MELDs list phrasemes predominantly under nouns or verbs, this presupposes that the learner can recognise which part of speech a word belongs to. However, since learners often have trouble determining parts of speech (Nesi and Hail 2002: 282), the search process may be made more difficult for them. For example, in the saying *birds of a feather flock together*, the verbal form *flock* is less well known than its nominal equivalent, so that learners searching under the noun *flock* will fail to find the associated phraseme. Moreover, although surveys of dictionary use have shown that learners usually look first under nouns when searching for a phraseme (Moon 1998: 201), this strategy may not be an innately subconscious process, but may be the result of previous search experiences in other dictionaries. Those dictionaries that operate on a different principle will therefore present problems for learners.

### Headwords used in the Big 5

Policies on headword use vary among the Big 5. In comparing their use of headwords for 84 phrasemes from five different categories (Biblical, literary or historical, UK in origin or reference, Australian in origin or reference, and older in origin or reference), there is a lack of consistency across, and sometimes within, dictionaries. *CALD*, *LDOCE* and *MEDAL* mostly use nouns and verbs as headwords, with a phraseme often cross referenced at both the noun and the verb. For example, the saying *birds of a feather flock together* is listed under *birds*, *feather*, *flock* and *together* in *CALD* and *MEDAL*, under *bird* in *LDOCE* and *OALD* (with a cross reference at *feather*), and not at all in *COBUILD*. *COBUILD*

and *OALD* prefer nouns, although *OALD* sometimes uses verbs or adjectives instead. In the paper versions of these dictionaries, *CALD* (2008: x) and *LDOCE* (2003: xiv) instruct their readers to look for idioms at the end of an entry under the "first important word"; *MEDAL* (2002: xi) directs readers to the "first main word"; and *OALD* (2010: R14) directs readers to the "first 'full' word". Instructions on idiom searches are not readily visible in *COBUILD* (2009). No advice is given in the online versions of these dictionaries, and this choice of "main", "full" or "important" word is of course a hard one for the user to make.

The following fourteen phrasemes appear in one or more of the Big 5 and include proper nouns and/or variable words. They provide a snapshot of the problems raised by many other phrasemes in these dictionaries. These phrasemes and their headwords in each MELD are listed in Table 1. The X symbol indicates that a phraseme does not appear in a particular dictionary and a word in brackets indicates that the phraseme is cross referenced from that word.

**Table 1:** Fourteen phrasemes and their headwords in the Big 5 (cross references in brackets)

Phraseme	CALD	COBUILD	LDOCE	MEDAL	OALD
To beat/turn swords into ploughshares	beat, turn, swords, ploughshares	ploughshare	sword, ploughshare	X	sword, (ploughshare)
A pretty/fine kettle of fish	pretty, fine, kettle, fish	X	X	X	X
To hide/cover a multitude of sins	hide, cover, multitude, sins	multitude (sin, sins)	multitude (sin)	hide, multitude	multitude (hide, cover, sin)
Give somebody an inch and they'll take a yard/mile	give, inch, take, mile	X	inch	inch (mile, yard)	inch (mile, yard)
Not to budge/give/move an inch	budge, give, move, inch	X	inch (and in an example at 'budge')	(budge) inch	inch (and in an example at 'budge')
To carry/take coals to Newcastle	carry, take, coals, Newcastle	X	coal, coals	coal, coals, Newcastle	coal, coals (Newcastle)
The man/woman on the Clapham omnibus	man, woman, Clapham, omnibus	X	man	X	Clapham, omnibus
Back of Bourke	X	X	X	Bourke	Bourke
To send someone to Coventry	send, Coventry	(send) Coventry	Coventry	send, Coventry	(send) Coventry
The road to Damascus	road, Damascus	X	Damascus	Damascus	Damascus

As old as Methuselah	as, old, Methuselah	X	Methuselah	(Methuselah — descrip- tion, no phraseme)	(Methuselah — example, no phraseme)
Not to know someone from Adam	not, know, Adam	X	Adam	Adam	know, (Adam)
In the land of Nod	land, nod	X	land, (nod)	(land, nod)	land, (nod)
To rob Peter to pay Paul	rob, Peter, pay, Paul	Peter	rob, (Peter)	rob, Paul	rob, (Peter)

Online searching has made it easier to find phrasemes in all the Big 5, but the process can still lead to frustration. The search process for each dictionary is outlined below, exemplified by the phraseme *to rob Peter to pay Paul*.

- *CALD*: After entering *rob* in the search box on the home page, the user is taken to the *rob* main definition page. A box on the right offers "More results", with choices for "All" or "Idioms". Since the user may not know that a word is part of a phraseme, the "All" box is used in this example, and in fact this phraseme appears at the top of the box. (For most other phrasemes, it may be necessary to click "See all results".) A search at *Peter*, *pay* and *Paul* also leads directly to the phraseme as a main entry. It is also possible to type the entire phraseme into the search box on the homepage. The *CALD* search process is thus very easy to use in this case. In other respects *CALD* is unusual, in that some phrasemes can only be found when the plural form of a noun is entered (*swords*, *ploughshares*, *sins*, *coals*) rather than the singular form of the noun, contrary to most other forms of dictionary search which require the use of the singular noun. This may confuse and frustrate some users.
- *COBUILD*: Only the headword *Peter* is used for the phraseme in this *MELD*. After entering *Peter* or *peter* in the search box, the user is taken to a list of entries. The phraseme appears as a phrase under the word *Peter*, rather than as an entry in its own right. The restricted number of headwords and the use of the phraseme in a definition rather than as a headword make this a less user-friendly process.
- *LDOCE*: On entering the word *rob* in the search box, the user is taken to a list of entries where they must decide which entry, including which part of speech, to click on. In the case of *rob* this presents no challenges. After clicking on the first entry, "**rob** verb", the user is taken to a list of entries which include the phraseme. A search at *Peter*, however, leads directly to a list of possibilities including *peter* (verb), *Peter*, *Peter Abelard*, *Blue Peter* and *Peter Pan*. The user must decide which is the most relevant. After clicking on plain *Peter* they are taken to a cross reference which directs them back to the phraseme at *rob*. This is partly user friendly, in that only one of the words in the phraseme is used as a headword and one is used

as a cross reference. However, the need to decide on a part of speech may complicate the process for many users.

- *MEDAL*: The search term *rob* leads directly to the phraseme towards the bottom of the page, under "Phrases". The phraseme is not listed or linked under *peter* or *pay*, but curiously the search word *Paul* leads to the definition under *rob*. It is also possible to type the entire phraseme into the search box on the homepage. The process is easy to follow, but it is a little confusing that only the entire phraseme, or the first and last words, produce results.
- *OALD*: The search term *rob* leads straight to the phraseme part way down the page under the heading "Idioms". Alternatively, at *peter* the user is directed back to the phraseme with a hyperlink to the entry at *rob*. The complete phraseme may also be entered in the search box on the homepage. This process is user friendly, but more links from the other words in the phraseme would improve it still further.

### Obstacles to phraseme searches

There are thus three main obstacles which learners must negotiate if they are successfully to locate a phraseme in a MELD:

- **Identifying a word as belonging to a phraseme**  
The first obstacle that users may face is that they may need to know that a word is part of a phraseme if they are to pursue their search past the first noun. Suppose, for example, that the learner is looking for the phraseme *to carry/take coals to Newcastle*. They may understand the individual meaning of each word, but will not necessarily realise that the words combine to give a figurative meaning. In that case, they may look under the first noun. Experience has taught them that nouns are usually listed in a dictionary in their singular form; they would therefore miss the phraseme in *CALD*, which uses the plural form *coals*. Similarly, with the phraseme *the road to Damascus*, only *Damascus* is used as the headword in *LDOCE*, *MEDAL* and *OALD*, so that users searching only under *road* will fail to find the phraseme. A wide choice of headwords is therefore necessary if users are to search successfully, and users should be encouraged to persist if their first search does not yield results. Again, this presupposes that users realise they are indeed searching for a phraseme.
- **Locating salient words**  
Secondly, users must correctly identify the headword under which the phraseme is listed. Their choice of 'important' or salient word may not, however, accord with that of the lexicographer. Proper nouns in particular might be seen as particularly salient, yet in the nine examples of



phrasemes in this study containing proper nouns, the approach varies greatly among the Big 5 (see Table 1), and the proper noun is not always used as the headword.

Despite some consistency, therefore, there is also much variation between dictionaries. *Bourke*, *Coventry* and *Damascus* were easy to find, but not all the MELDs listed *Newcastle*, *Adam*, *Clapham*, *Nod* or *Peter*. In particular, the choice of *Paul* as a headword in *MEDAL* is most unusual, since it is neither the first noun nor the first salient word.

— **Recognising phraseme variants**

Thirdly, users may not be aware of phraseme variants, such as *to carry/take coals to Newcastle*. This means that if a phraseme is listed under only one of the variants, a user may fail to find it. Seven phrasemes in this study had possible variations, as demonstrated in Table 1 above. Treatment of variants again differed among the Big 5.

## Discussion

The greatest consistency in search results within a dictionary was found in *CALD*, whose numerous headwords generally make searching easy without the user needing to know which part of speech the word belongs to, or whether a word is part of a phraseme. The only detracting factor was the need to enter plural noun forms in some cases, which is counter-intuitive for most dictionary users.

*COBUILD* tended to include phrasemes in its noun entry examples, rather than as individual entries. For example, under *multitude* we read, "If you say that something covers or hides **a multitude of sins**, you mean that it hides something unattractive or does not reveal the true nature of something". The phraseme is written in bold font, but the reader used to finding items as an entry on the left or in a vertical list might have trouble finding the phraseme. In the four examples in this paper, however, *COBUILD* is consistent in using unusual, or salient, nouns as its phraseme headwords, even when these are not the first noun in the phraseme. For example, *to beat/turn swords into ploughshares* is listed at *ploughshare* rather than at *sword*. *COBUILD*'s lack of inclusion of many phrasemes is a drawback for users, and the choice of phrasemes included does not always reflect those which are most commonly used. For example, Biblical phrasemes such as *to beat/turn swords into ploughshares* are less commonly used than phrasemes referring to older measurements, such as *not to budge an inch* (Miller Forthcoming), which does not appear in *COBUILD*.

The *LDOCE* user has first to negotiate the part of speech they need before they can find the phraseme. As Nesi and Haill (2002: 282) suggest, this may cause problems for some learners. The choice of possible topics under each headword further complicates the issue. For example, when searching for *the man/woman on the Clapham omnibus*, the user may also choose whether they are

looking for a particular "topic", such as "occupation", "board game", "military" or "family". Fortunately, it is also possible to click just on the headword itself. While *LDOCE* tends to prefer nouns to verbs as headwords, this policy is not always consistent. For example, *to rob Peter to pay Paul* is listed at the verb *rob*, but *not to know someone from Adam* is listed at the noun *Adam*. The choice of headword nouns is also not consistent, for while unusual words such as *multitude* are sometimes used (in *to cover a multitude of sins*), at other times more common nouns such as *man* are chosen (in *the man/woman on the Clapham omnibus*), although a more salient word such as *Clapham* or *omnibus* would have led to the phraseme more quickly.

*MEDAL*, like *CALD*, also includes phrasemes at main entries, but occasionally cross references them with hyperlinks at other entries. For example, at the end of the page under *budge*, we find "see also → *inch*". *MEDAL* is fairly consistent in its use of nouns as headwords, but at times the choice of salient noun is puzzling. Why, for instance, is the second noun *Paul* chosen instead of the first noun *Peter* as the headword for the phraseme *to rob Peter to pay Paul*?

In *OALD*, the headword is usually a noun, though not always the first noun in the phraseme; sometimes a verb is chosen, however, as in *not to know someone from Adam*. A welcome feature is the addition of idioms in small font underneath a headword entry. For example, at *Newcastle* there is a small entry on the main page directing the user to the phraseme *carry/take coals to Newcastle*.

The above discussion highlights the fact that one of the main problems for users is the lack of consistency between dictionaries, and sometimes within a single dictionary. If a user is familiar with a particular MELD, they may use a strategy which does not work in another MELD, leading to the frustration of an unsuccessful search. Of the five dictionaries in this study, *CALD* and *MEDAL* were the most user friendly; *COBUILD* included fewer entries and headwords but was consistent in its choice of headwords; *LDOCE* showed less consistency, and the lack of hyperlinks made any cross references less effective; and *OALD* tended to use nouns as headwords, but not always consistently.

For the user, only *CALD* comprehensively addresses the three main problems raised in this paper. First, almost every word in a phraseme is searchable as a headword, so that the EAL learner does not need to know that a word is part of a phraseme in order to find an expression. Secondly, the generous provision of headwords means that the learner does not have to second guess the lexicographer's choice. Thirdly, many phraseme variants are addressed, facilitating searches for variable phrasemes.

In general, however, the results of this study are in line with those of Gates (1986), in that there is still a lack of consistency between dictionaries. Although Atkins and Rundell (2008) highlight the difficulty of achieving total consistency in the treatment of multi-word expressions, online search facilities should make the search process simpler by providing wider choices. During the course of this study, from the months October 2011 to November 2012, it was found that *OALD* did indeed increase its range of cross references. It is

therefore likely, and of course desirable, that this trend continue across all the Big 5.

Five strategies are suggested to help EAL learners with phraseme searches. First, they need to be aware of the existence of phrasemes in English. When they are confronted by a group of words that seems to present an unfamiliar meaning (such as *carry/take coals to Newcastle*) they may then realise that the overall meaning of the phrase may be more than the sum of its parts, so that it might be necessary to use a dictionary even though they may understand the individual words. Secondly, they can be instructed in the ways in which dictionaries work generally with regard to phraseme headwords. Since, however, as shown above, there is a lack of consistency, they may try searching first under what appears to be a salient word. If unsuccessful, they should be encouraged to keep searching using different words in a sentence until their search yields results. Thirdly, EAL students can be made aware that phrasemes often have variants (such as *carry/take coals to Newcastle*); hence they might need to look under a different word if their first search is unsuccessful. Fourthly, since all the Big 5 are freely available online, and all vary in their coverage of phrasemes, learners may also be encouraged to try more than one dictionary. Finally, it would be helpful for EAL students to make their own lists of phrasemes and any variants, and to share such lists with their peers. The key word in all these strategies is 'persistence'. Teachers of EAL students can promote such strategies in class, but lecturers or teachers in any discipline can post simple instructions on dictionary use, and links to dictionary websites, in their course details on their Learning Management Systems.

## Conclusion

It can be seen from this study that the choice of headwords varies greatly, both within and between dictionaries, making it difficult for students to conduct consistently successful searches and potentially leading to frustration (Gouws and Prinsloo 2005: 9). It seems axiomatic that dictionaries should be consistent within themselves when choosing headwords, but this appears not always to be the case. Nevertheless, greater consistency would benefit users, who could familiarise themselves with the style of a particular dictionary and even apply their techniques when searching in a different dictionary.

Those dictionaries which provided the greatest number of headwords and cross references were obviously the easiest to use, and *CALD* was the winner in this respect. The ability to find a phraseme at any of its constituent words is a great bonus for users who do not recognise a phraseme as a multi-word expression. It is therefore suggested that as wide a choice of headwords as possible be used. If this is not possible, then searching would be facilitated by a consistent use of salient words (such as proper nouns), first nouns, and first finite verbs, as initially proposed by Whiting and Tilley (Doyle 2007: 191).

Learners should be encouraged to persist when searching in a dictionary,

and to try different dictionaries until they are satisfied with their results. Although they may be unaware that a word forms part of a phraseme, it is still worthwhile for them to search under what may appear to be familiar words (such as *rob* in *rob Peter to pay Paul*) if they do not understand the meaning of a sentence. In this way, they may be led to a phraseme and will extend not only their decoding but also their encoding vocabulary. It is not necessary to be an English language teacher in order to promote such strategies to students in any discipline.

In terms of headword choices, it seems that while the Big 5 might be *birds of a feather* in one sense, they do not always *flock together*. A greater understanding of search strategies would therefore help EAL students to make better use of their dictionaries and improve their language skills.

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