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## IDIOM VARIATION IN BUSINESS ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY

### Abstract

This paper deals with the variation of idioms from sport which are used to talk about competition in business, e.g. *a level playing field*. In business English textbooks they are listed in one form, whereas corpus data show that they occur in two or more lexical and/or syntactic forms. Furthermore, it has been shown that alterations result in a change in the overall meaning of the idiom and that different variation types serve specific functions. In order to explore the variability of idioms included in business English textbooks, we conducted two corpus studies of ten competition idioms. The aim is to show that competition idioms vary lexically and syntactically, and that there may be considerable differences between the textbook form and those in which the idioms occur in the corpora. In addition, we will give a cognitive linguistic account of how different variation types affect the idiomatic meaning and what functions they fulfil. The findings may have implications for teaching figurative language in ESP given that (1) idiom variation presents a challenge to non-native users of English, (2) idioms are frequently creatively exploited in discourse, and (3) idioms are used not only to convey information but also evaluation.

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### Key words

idioms, variation, business English, textbook, corpus.

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## Sažetak

Tema ovoga rada je varijantnost engleskih idioma koji tržišnu konkurenciju opisuju na osnovu sporta, npr. *a level playing field* 'ista pravila za sve'. U udžbenicima poslovnog engleskog jezika ti se idiomi navode u samo jednom obliku premda podaci iz korpusa pokazuju da se javljaju u dva ili više leksičkih i(li) sintaktičkih oblika. Prethodna istraživanja pokazuju da upotreba idioma u različitim oblicima ujedno znači i promenu njihovog značenja, kao i da se različite vrste varijanata upotrebljavaju u različite svrhe. U ovom radu prikazujemo dva korpusna istraživanja varijantnosti deset idioma koji se odnose na tržišnu konkurenciju, a koriste se u udžbenicima poslovnog engleskog jezika. Cilj nam je da pokažemo kako ti idiomi imaju promenljiv leksički sastav i strukturu, te da postoje značajne razlike između oblika idioma navedenih u udžbenicima i oblika koji se javljaju u korpusu. Uticaj različitih vrsta varijanata idioma na njegovo značenje i funkciju tumači se u teorijskom okviru kognitivne lingvistike. Rezultati imaju važne posledice za poučavanje figurativnih izraza u engleskom jeziku struke, uzevši u obzir sledeće: (1) varijantnost idioma predstavlja velik izazov za neizvorne govornike engleskog; (2) u diskursu je česta kreativna upotreba idioma; (3) idiomi nisu samo način prenosa informacija, nego imaju i evaluativnu funkciju.

## Ključne reči

idiomi, varijantnost, poslovni engleski jezik, udžbenik, korpus.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Figurative expressions, including idioms, are an important research topic in ESP, especially in business English since business discourse (both written and oral) abounds in figurative language (Boers, 1999; Charteris-Black & Ennis, 2001; Handford, 2010; Herrera-Soler & White, 2012; White, 2003). As a result, idioms have become an integral part of some business English textbooks, e.g. *Management and Marketing* (MacKenzie, 1997) and the textbooks in the *Market Leader* and *Business Advantage* series. For example, MacKenzie's *Management and Marketing* and *Market Leader Intermediate 3rd Edition* (Cotton, Falvey, & Kent, 2010) contain sports idioms which are used to talk about competition in business, e.g. *in the driving seat*, *move the goalposts*, etc.

Corpus-based studies have shown that a large number of English idioms occur in two or more lexical and/or syntactic forms and may also be creatively exploited in discourse (Moon, 1998). Many different types of idiom variation have been found, e.g. lexical substitution, the addition of extra words and phrases,

stative and causative alternatives, etc. However, in business English textbooks idioms are listed in only one form, a case in point being competition idioms. Corpus data show that they may have variant realizations which are different from the textbook form. For example, *in the driving seat* ('being in control') has a lexical variant *in the driver's seat* in American English (example 1) and it may also occur as a dynamic construction (example 2)<sup>1</sup>:

(1) Few services show just how much consumers *are in the driver's seat* like Priceline.com.

(2) Empowering the client to identify personal goals *puts* the client *in the driver's seat*, creating balance and motivation in the client–case manager relationship.

Another example is the idiom *move the goalposts* ('change the rules in order to gain advantage'). Corpus data show that the verb *move* alternates with *shift* (example 3) and the whole expression may also occur as an intransitive construction with the NP *the goalposts* as the subject (example 4):

(3) Problems arise when roles are not properly defined, when people are '*shifting the goalposts*' and objectives are not clear.

(4) Now *the goalposts are moving again*, with the changes to the way its replacement, the GCSE, is being marked.

As illustrated by the variant forms in (1)–(4), the use of alternative words and changes to syntactic structure affect the overall idiomatic meaning. In (1) and (2) the same event is conceptualized as static or dynamic, respectively. The expression *shift the goalposts* in (3) is an example of a synonymous variant, whereby the original and substituting word are semantically related. Example (4) shows that an idiom may portray the same event from a different perspective. Thus, the expression *move the goalposts* describes a situation in which an agent acts upon another entity, whereas the variant form *the goalposts are moving* is non-agentive. When it comes to teaching idiom variation in ESP, examples (1)–(4) raise the following questions:

- How variable are idioms included in business English textbooks?
- How do different variation types affect the idiomatic meaning and what functions do they fulfil?
- Since idiom variation may potentially cause problems for non-native users of English, how can it be incorporated in the ESP classroom?

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<sup>1</sup> All examples have been drawn from the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English.

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, we aim to show that idioms included in business English textbooks are lexically and syntactically relatively flexible and occur in two or more different forms, which is not reflected in the way they are presented. More specifically, based on a study of ten competition idioms from *Market Leader Intermediate 3rd Edition* (Cotton et al., 2010) in the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English, we will show that there may be considerable differences between the forms in which idioms are listed in teaching materials and those in which they occur in corpora. Secondly, using the cognitive linguistic theoretical framework, we will show that different variation types change the idiomatic meaning in a specific way and therefore fulfil various functions in discourse. All of this raises the issue of how to incorporate idiom variation in the ESP classroom.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives a brief outline of the cognitive linguistic approach to figurative language and idiom variation. Section 3 deals with figurative language in business discourse and ESP learning. Sections 4 and 5 present the methods and results of two corpus studies. Section 6 is a general discussion of the results and Section 7 deals with the implications of incorporating idiom variation in the ESP classroom. The final section is the conclusion.

## 2. THE COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE AND IDIOM VARIATION

According to the cognitive linguistic view, most idioms are motivated by various cognitive mechanisms which link the meanings of idioms with the meanings of their constituents (cf. e.g. Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff, 1987), and the mechanisms in question are metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge (Gibbs, 1990; Gibbs & O'Brien, 1990; Kövecses & Szabó, 1996). Studies of lexical and syntactic behaviour of idioms (e.g. Delibegović Džanić, 2007; Fillmore, Kay, & O'Connor, 1988; Gibbs & Nayak, 1989; Gibbs, Nayak, Bolton, & Keppel, 1989; Jaki, 2014; Naciscione, 2010; Nunberg, Sag, & Wasow, 1994; Parizoska, 2009) have shown that variations are not entirely unpredictable, but are dependent on and constrained by various semantic, constructional and discourse factors.

Corpus-based studies of idioms (Langlotz, 2006; Moon, 1998; Omazić, 2003) have identified a number of variation types, e.g. lexical substitution, the addition of new words, modification of nouns by means of adjectives, relative clauses and prepositional phrases, noun inflection, passivization, etc. Furthermore, it has been shown that some verbal idioms vary their lexico-syntactic structure systematically to construe the same event as static or dynamic (*let the cat out of the bag* vs. *the cat is out of the bag*), causative or non-causative (*bring something to a head* vs. *come to a head*), etc. (cf. Moon, 1998). It has been established that changes to lexical components and syntactic structure result in a shift in the idiomatic meaning, and that different variation types serve specific functions in discourse (e.g. lexical

substitution serves as topic indication; cf. Langlotz, 2006). Overall, the mechanisms of idiom variation clearly point to a close connection between the literal and figurative meanings of idioms, as well as the connection between individual idiomatic components and the meaning of the expression as a whole.

Idioms have been identified as a major stumbling block for non-native users of English, but the application of the cognitive linguistic approach to the meanings of idioms has been proved to facilitate comprehension. This becomes all the more important as idioms are very common in business discourse, where they are frequently used in modified form, especially in advertising and newspaper headlines. The key issue is how much exposure learners have to idiom variation in their business English courses. This is dealt with in the following section.

### 3. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN BUSINESS DISCOURSE AND ESP LEARNING

Figurative language is pervasive in economics texts and business communication, which is why it has received a lot of attention from ESP researchers and practitioners. There are two major strands of research regarding figurative language in English for business and economics. One is concerned with conceptual metaphor in business discourse, more specifically the types of metaphors used in economics texts and their cross-cultural variation (Boers, 1999; Boers & Demecheleer, 1997), metaphor use in business discourse (Charteris-Black & Musolff, 2003; Koller, 2004; Skorzczynska & Deignan, 2006), and the function of metaphor in business meetings (Handford & Koester, 2010). Studies of metaphors in business discourse have shown that very productive source domains for metaphorical expressions in the language of economics and business are HEALTH, WAR and SPORT. For example, in her study of metaphor families in American media, Morgan (2008) shows that business competition is conceptualized in terms of WAR, (TEAM) SPORT, RACE, GAME and PREDATION. The other strand of research focuses on figurative language learning, primarily strategies involving the use of conceptual metaphor in ESP classes. Awareness-raising activities in which explicit reference is made to metaphors have been proved to aid understanding and retention of various types of figurative expressions, e.g. phrasal verbs and idioms (Boers, 2000; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008; Charteris-Black, 2000; Littlemore, 2002; Littlemore & Low, 2006).

The results of studies of figurative language in business discourse have been applied to teaching materials. Business English textbooks (level Intermediate and higher) contain exercises on figurative expressions which are usually grouped together according to the source domain (e.g. SPORTS, HEALTH, etc.), topic (e.g. idioms used to talk about communication) or their function in discourse (e.g. giving examples in presentations or making your message seem cooperative or conflictual). Some textbooks include figurative expressions that are used to talk

about competition in business, which are typically labelled as sports metaphors or sports idioms.<sup>2</sup> For example, the sports metaphors exercise in *Management and Marketing* (MacKenzie, 1997) includes expressions such as *neck and neck, on the ropes, a level playing field, etc.* *Market Leader Intermediate 3rd Edition* (Cotton et al., 2010) contains ten idioms from sport in a unit that deals with competition. *Business Advantage Upper-intermediate* (Handford, Lisboa, Koester, & Pitt, 2012) also makes an explicit connection between competitive sport and business and includes figurative expressions such as *touch base, the ball's in their court, etc.*

Although teaching materials for business English include figurative expressions, some issues have been raised concerning the criteria for their selection. Corpus-based studies have shown there are certain discrepancies between expressions included in textbooks and quantitative data in terms of frequency. For example, Skorczynska Sznajder (2010) has shown that there is only a small overlap between metaphorical words and phrases included in the textbooks and those that occur in a one-million word corpus of business periodical and journal articles. Together with a number of other studies of figurative language in business discourse (e.g. Charteris-Black, 2004; Koller, 2006; MacArthur & Littlemore, 2008; O'Keefe, McCarthy, & Carter, 2007), it stresses the importance of using corpus evidence to determine the frequency of occurrence of figurative expressions, their use, collocational patterns and grammatical behaviour, which can then be applied to developing activities and teaching materials based on authentic examples.

In the study of a specific type of figurative expressions – idioms – corpus data have proved to be invaluable. Studies of English idioms in multi-million word corpora have challenged the notion of those expressions being invariable. In fact, many idioms have two or more conventionalized forms. For example, Moon (1998: 120) has shown that around 40% of idioms in the 18-million word Oxford Pilot Hector Corpus have one variation, and around 14% two or more variations of their canonical forms. Furthermore, idioms are very often creatively exploited in journalism. This is also true of business press articles, particularly headlines, in which idioms are often used in varied forms (Herrera & White, 2010; White, 2011).

Even though research has shown that a number of English idioms are variable, this is not reflected in business English textbooks which contain exercises on idioms. A case in point are sports idioms which are used to talk about competition in business. For example, competition idioms in *Market Leader Intermediate 3rd Edition* (Cotton et al., 2010) are all listed in a single form. On the other hand, entries in corpus-based idioms dictionaries show that some idioms in this group have alternative forms.

Although there are a number of studies of figurative expressions in the language of economics and business as well as corpus-based studies dealing with

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<sup>2</sup> Authors of business English textbooks use different terms for figurative expressions: *metaphors* (MacKenzie, 1997), *idioms* (the *Market Leader* series) or *metaphors and idioms* (Handford, Lisboa, Koester, & Pitt, 2012; Lisboa & Handford, 2012).

ESP teaching materials (for an overview cf. Skorczynska Sznajder, 2010), no study of idiom variation in ESP textbooks has been conducted. Given the fact that idiom variation is widespread, we will use corpus data to show that idioms included in business English textbooks are lexically and syntactically relatively flexible. In addition, we will show how different types of lexical and syntactic changes affect the idiomatic meaning. All of this has important implications for teaching figurative language in ESP.

#### 4. MATERIAL AND METHODS

A relatively small number of business English textbooks for the intermediate level and higher contain exercises with figurative language. These in turn include between 5 and 16 expressions at the most. For example, the vocabulary tasks in the three *Market Leader* textbooks – Intermediate, Upper-Intermediate and Advanced – contain 10, 16 and 8 idioms respectively. The sports metaphors exercise in *Management and Marketing* (MacKenzie, 1997) contains 16 items, some of which are single words (e.g. *hurdles*). In addition, multi-word units are always listed in one form.

We conducted a study of ten competition idioms from *Market Leader Intermediate 3rd Edition* (Cotton et al., 2010). This textbook was selected for the study because the vocabulary task involving competition idioms is used in our undergraduate business English course. The textbook forms of idioms are as follows: *a level playing field*, *in the driving seat*, *to be neck and neck*, *flogging a dead horse*, *a major player*, *move the goalposts*, *keep your eye on the ball*, *ahead of the game*, *a one-horse race*, and *on the ropes*. The forms of two idioms are distinctly British: *flog a dead horse* and *in the driving seat*. The fact that the vocabulary exercise lists idioms used in British English was to be expected since the textbook is written in that variety of English. Even so, the book includes a task on words and phrases related to travel which reflect lexical distinctions between British and American English. Therefore, we decided to perform two parallel studies, one in a corpus of British English and the other in a corpus of American English in order to determine whether any of the other eight idioms have corresponding American forms in addition to *beat a dead horse* and *in the driver's seat*.

The studies were conducted in the British National Corpus (BYU-BNC; 100 million words) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; 520 million words), respectively. The BYU-BNC and COCA have been chosen because of their size and because they contain a wide range of texts. Moreover, owing to the fact that it is regularly updated, COCA is a reliable source of ongoing changes in language (Davies, 2010). Fiction and spoken parts of the corpora which include informal conversations, meetings, TV and radio shows were excluded from the

study because they are not used as a source of activities and exercises on idioms in most business English textbooks.<sup>3</sup>

When searching for variations, we conducted queries consisting of one or more lexical key constituents of each idiom and collocates of the key constituent(s) within the span of 5 words. In each case non-metaphorical uses were manually removed.

We conducted relatively general queries to find potential lexical substitutions as well as syntactic variations. For example, the query for *move the goalposts* consisted of the lemma *goalpost* and a lexical verb to find verbs alternating with *move* and possible syntactic variations. There were two queries for *in the driving seat* in each corpus: the strings *driving seat* and *driver's seat* respectively. These queries were designed to find British and American forms of the idiom, verb variation and syntactic variations, including those without the preposition *in*.

We obtained 1111 examples of the variant realizations of the ten competition idioms, 266 from the BYU-BNC and 845 from COCA. The variant forms which occur in the corpora were cross-checked against entries in three corpus-based idioms dictionaries: *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (1998), *Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary* (2002) and *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary 2nd Edition* (2006). Dictionaries were used to check which forms found in the corpora are conventionalized expressions. Since all three dictionaries are based on multi-million word corpora, they provide reliable evidence of forms in which idioms occur and their conventional and non-conventional use. All competition idioms except *a major player* are listed in the dictionaries.

## 5. RESULTS

Three types of results were obtained. Firstly, all the ten competition idioms are variable and occur in forms which are not included in the textbook. Secondly, competition idioms show different degrees of variability. Finally, variation of competition idioms involves lexical substitution, lexico-syntactic variation and adnominal modification (premodification and postmodification of nouns), with each variation type serving a specific function.

### 5.1. Forms of competition idioms in the corpora

Corpus data show that all ten competition idioms occur in the textbook form as well as in other forms. This is shown in Table 1.

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<sup>3</sup> The only exception is the *Business Advantage* series. Examples of the use of metaphors and idioms were extracted from business meeting discourse in the Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus (CANBEC). For an example exercise cf. Handford (2010).

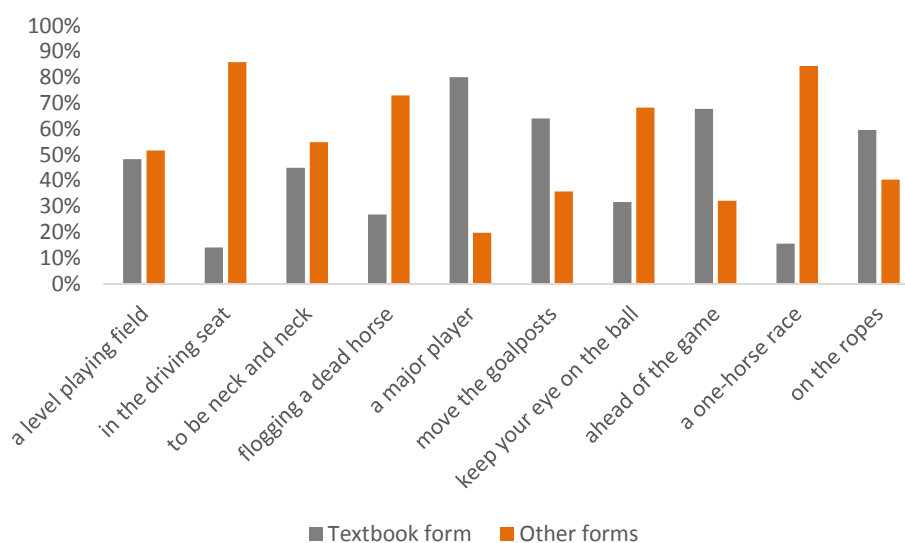


TEXTBOOK FORM	BYU-BNC		COCA	
	<i>Textbook form</i>	<i>Other forms</i>	<i>Textbook form</i>	<i>Other forms</i>
a level playing field	48	12	23	64
in the driving seat	19	18	3	116
to be neck and neck	21	15	47	68
flogging a dead horse	2	0	5	19
a major player	64	9	142	42
move the goalposts	18	9	16	10
keep your eye on the ball	7	7	19	49
ahead of the game	11	12	86	34
a one-horse race	7	24	0	14
on the ropes	9	2	50	38

**Table 1.** Occurrences of competition idioms in the BYU-BNC and COCA

Table 1 also shows that some idioms occur more frequently in forms which are not included in the textbook. In the BYU-BNC this is the case with one expression, *a one-horse race*. The corpus has 7 tokens of the textbook form and 18 tokens of the variant form *a two-horse race*. In COCA five idioms predominantly occur in forms different from the textbook form (*a level playing field*, *in the driving seat*, *to be neck and neck*, *flogging a dead horse* and *keep your eye on the ball*), while *a one-horse race* does not occur in the written part of the corpus at all. In the majority of cases the variant forms of these six idioms also occur in the BYU-BNC (e.g. *a two-horse race*), which shows that they are common to British and American English. Only two variant realizations reflect distinctions between the two varieties: COCA has 116 tokens of *in the driver's seat* and 13 tokens of *beat a dead horse*, both of which are American idioms. By comparison, the BYU-BNC has one token of *in the driver's seat* (vs. 36 tokens of *in the driving seat*), while *beat a dead horse* fails to occur in the corpus.

In comparison with the BYU-BNC, in COCA there are considerable differences in frequencies between the textbook form and other forms in some cases. This could be attributed to corpus size, with COCA being five times larger than the BYU-BNC. The fact that COCA is updated, whereas the texts in the BYU-BNC date up to 1993, may also be a factor. However, taken together, corpus data show that six of the ten idioms occur more frequently in forms which are not included in the textbook. This is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Frequencies of the textbook form and other forms in the BYU-BNC and COCA

Figure 1 shows that of these six idioms, in two cases – *a level playing field* and *to be neck and neck* – the difference between the frequencies of the textbook form and other forms is relatively small (48% vs. 52% for *a level playing field* and 45% vs. 55% for *to be neck and neck*). The other four idioms predominantly occur in forms which are not included in the textbook. For example, 32% of the tokens of *keep your eye on the ball* are in the textbook form and 68% are in other forms. The difference is even more prominent in *a one-horse race*: 16% of the tokens are in the textbook form, whereas 84% are in other forms.

## 5.2. Variability of competition idioms

The results show that competition idioms exhibit different degrees of variability. Two expressions vary only lexically and variation involves specific items, whereas eight expressions occur in several different lexical and syntactic forms.

Idioms which belong in the first group are *a one-horse race* and *a major player*. All the variations of *a one-horse race* (‘a situation in which there is only one competitor’) relate to the quantifier *one*, so that the number of participants in a competition changes depending on the construal:

(5) Our p. r. objective this year was to convince everyone that this is a *two-horse race*.

(6) In 1948, when Harry Truman won a *four-horse race*, the Dow dipped 2% for the year.

Variations of *a major player* ('an important company or person with a lot of power or influence') relate to the modifier *major*. Here is an example of its antonymous variant *a minor player* from COCA:

(7) While most people focused on the New York Stock Exchange, the administration also spent a lot of effort to reopen what seemed like a relatively *minor player* – the New York Mercantile Exchange, where oil contracts are traded.

The other eight idioms occur in two or more different lexical and syntactic forms. We will illustrate this with the expressions *be neck and neck*, *ahead of the game* and *a level playing field*.

COCA has 115 tokens of *neck and neck* ('at the same level as the competition'). Of these, 47 are in the form *be neck and neck* and 41 tokens are with other verbs, the most common variant being *run neck and neck* (33 tokens). This expression also occurs in the hyphenated form *neck-and-neck* (20 tokens) and is used before nouns, as in the following example:

(8) In a very tight, *neck-and-neck race*, you'd think that there would be some serious competition for this community.

The idiom *ahead of the game* ('in front of the competition') occurs 23 times in the BYU-BNC and 120 times in COCA. In both corpora the most common form is *be ahead of the game*, but other verbs alternate with *be*, as in the following example:

(9) 'What's more, this investment is needed if we are to *stay ahead of the game*.'

Of the ten competition idioms, *a level playing field* ('a situation of fair competition') is lexically and syntactically the most flexible. The adjectives *equal* and *even* are used instead of *level* to refer to a situation that is fair for all competitors. Conversely, the adjectives *unequal*, *uneven* and *unlevel* are used to refer to a situation that is unfair. This idiom also occurs as a verb phrase, with *the playing field* as the object (10) or the subject (11):

(10) It can give a company a competitive advantage or at least *level the playing field*.

(11) The law established that 25 percent of all city contracts be awarded to minority-owned firms and 5 percent go to women-owned businesses because at the time, *the playing field was far from level*.

As shown in this section, eight of the ten competition idioms vary considerably, not only lexically, but also syntactically.

### 5.3. Types of variations of competition idioms

Corpus data show that competition idioms undergo lexical substitution, lexico-syntactic variation, and adnominal modification (premodification and postmodification of nouns).

#### 5.3.1. Lexical substitution

Lexical substitution relates to individual idiomatic components. Corpus data show that the most commonly replaced idiomatic constituents are verbs and adjectives. There are two major subtypes of lexical variations, synonyms and antonyms.

One subtype of lexical substitution involves replacing a lexical constituent by a semantically related item to create a synonymous variant. Consider the following alternative forms of the idioms *a level playing field* (12), *move the goalposts* (13) and *flog a dead horse* (14):

(12) He said the state should set up *an even playing field* for independent power suppliers to compete with the utilities.

(13) Congress and the Justice Department keep *pushing back the goalposts*.

(14) All of which has of course been said before, so there's no point in *hammering that particular dead horse still further into the ground*.

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Examples (12)–(14) show that variation leads to a change in the overall meaning of the idiom to various degrees. In (12) the idiomatic meaning has been adapted slightly by replacing the component adjective *level* with the broadly synonymous adjective *even*. Examples (13) and (14) illustrate changes which have led to an intensification of meaning and thus create a striking stylistic effect. In (13) the idiomatic meaning ‘change the rules’ is intensified by replacing the verb *move* – which describes motion in a neutral way – with *push back*, which denotes a highly energetic action. In (14) the meaning of the idiom is elaborated and intensified by the use of the verb *hammer* which denotes hitting a target with great force, and the addition of the adverbial phrase *still further into the ground*. Therefore, the expression in (14) could be interpreted as ‘a complete waste of time’.

The other subtype of lexical substitution is creating an antonymous variant. Consider the following variant forms of the idioms *keep your eye on the ball* (15) and *a major player* (16):

(15) Rep. Michael Burgess, a Texas Republican, said that BP “appears to have *taken their eye off the ball*.”

(16) Newspapers and film and TV are, however, the major players. Alongside them there are many *minor players*.

Replacing an idiomatic constituent by an antonym in sentences (15) and (16) has led to the creation of a corresponding antonym of the idiomatic meaning. The expression *take your eye off the ball* in (15) describes a situation in which a competitor is not paying attention to what they are doing, while *minor players* in (16) denote companies that do not have a lot of power.

In this section we have shown that lexical substitution affects the overall meaning of the expression, most commonly by creating a synonym or an antonym. Some synonymous variants serve to adapt an idiom slightly, whereas more radical changes intensify the idiomatic meaning. On the other hand, antonymous variants create a semantic contrast.

### 5.3.2. Lexico-syntactic variation

Corpus data show that some verbal idioms vary to construe the same event as static or dynamic (location vs. motion), or as caused motion and self-motion. This variation type involves a change in the number of participants, and alterations to syntactic structure are always accompanied by verb substitution.

For example, in the following variant form of *be in the driver's seat*, the verb *be* alternates with *get* to construe the same event as dynamic:

(17) As we are seeing in regard to North Korea at the moment, when the nonproliferation specialists *get into the driver's seat*, a lot of texture and a lot of subtlety disappear.

The dynamic variant in (17) is an example of the self-motion schema, which describes a participant's own motion, whereas its static counterpart with *be* specifies the position of a trajector relative to a landmark (Radden & Dirven, 2007: 276ff).

Three idioms which have lexico-syntactic variations in the corpora are listed in the textbook as prepositional phrases: *ahead of the game*, *in the driving seat* and *on the ropes*. However, the descriptions of the idiomatic meanings and examples indicate that these expressions are typically used with the verb *be*: *ahead of the game* 'being in front of the competition', *in the driving seat* 'being in control', *on the ropes* 'being in a very bad situation'. Corpus data confirm that the static variant with *be* is indeed the most frequent form of all three idioms in both the BYU-BNC and COCA, but they also occur with force-dynamic verbs. In the latter case, the idioms vary to construe the relation between an entity and a location from different perspectives, i.e. as self-motion or caused motion. This is expressed by verbs that describe a specific motion event and a particular syntactic structure. Consider the following variants of the idiom *be ahead of the game*:

(18) Murdoch's logic was that higher energy costs are inevitable, given coming carbon regulations and dwindling supplies of conventional fuels such as oil. So why not *get ahead of the game*?

(19) [...] are we so willing to give away the very technology which has *put the United States consistently ahead of the game*?

The intransitive construction with *get* in (18) reflects the self-motion schema, whereas the transitive construction in (19) describes an event in which one participant brings about the motion of another participant toward the location specified by the prepositional phrase.

Corpus data also show that the three expressions which contain a prepositional phrase denoting a location occur in a number of variant forms that reflect different conceptualizations of the same event and form a cluster. This is illustrated by the following variant forms of the idiom which contains the prepositional phrase *on the ropes* ('having serious problems or likely to fail'):

(20) When a country's economy *is on the ropes*, though, there's no question who's calling the shots.

(21) Every great champion at some point *gets back on the ropes* or takes something some people consider to be a fall.

(22) The bruising economy also *put Blaylock on the ropes*.

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Examples (20)–(22) show that the same event may be conceptualized as static or dynamic, as caused motion or self-motion, and that there may be one or several participants. Thus, *be on the ropes* (20) is a static construal of a difficult situation, whereas the expressions in (21) and (22) construe the same event dynamically, albeit with a different number of participants. The variant form in (21) denotes a participant getting into a difficult situation on their own, while (22) describes how an entity was brought into a difficult situation by another entity.

### 5.3.3. Adnominal modification

Corpus data show that among the ten competition idioms analysed in this study, *a major player* is systematically modified adnominally.

The most common types of modifiers added to this idiom are adjectives and prepositional phrases with *in*. Their function is that of restrictive qualification (Radden & Dirven, 2007: 142): they subcategorise the referent of *a major player* ('an important company or person'). Consider the following examples of premodification:

(23) *Major corporate players* have already taken stakes.

(24) But Kerkorian still felt that Chrysler management wasn't doing enough to increase the stock's value. Other *major financial players* were starting to think the same thing.

The premodifiers in (23) and (24) restrict the reference of the idiomatic component *major player* in that they specify the referents as corporations and financiers, respectively.

Postmodifying prepositional phrases also have an identifying function. This is illustrated by the following examples:

(25) Despite these changes, state-owned enterprises will continue to be *major players in the Polish economy*, at least in the short term.

(26) Economically, Taiwan emerged as *a major player in the global high-tech industry*.

In (25) and (26) the *in*-phrase contextually specifies the situation in which a person or a company has a lot of power or influence.

Examples (23)–(26) also show that adnominal modification has a function similar to that of lexical substitution, namely topic indication (Langlotz, 2006: 272ff). Although idioms are altered in different ways in these two types of variations (by replacing idiomatic constituents or through the addition of new words), their function is to contextually specify the relation and/or participants they describe.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The study of ten competition idioms in the BYU-BNC and COCA has shown that all ten expressions occur in two or more lexical and/or syntactic forms. The entries in three corpus-based idioms dictionaries which were used in the study confirm that the following variant forms found in the corpora are conventionalized expressions:

- *level the playing field*  
(textbook form: *a level playing field*)
- *in the driver's seat*  
(textbook form: *in the driving seat*)
- *run neck and neck*  
*a neck-and-neck race*  
(textbook form: *to be neck and neck*)
- *take your eye off the ball*  
(textbook form: *keep your eye on the ball*)
- *stay/get ahead of the game*  
(textbook form: *ahead of the game*; example: *be ahead of the game*)

There are four other variant realizations which are not listed in the dictionaries, but could be considered conventionalized expressions. Each occurs five times in the BYU-BNC and COCA respectively, which constitutes a frequency cutoff threshold for word combinations in large corpora (Evert, 2005), i.e. items occurring five or more times are not random occurrences.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, there are reasonable grounds for the following variant forms to be regarded as conventionalized expressions:

- *put someone in the driving/driver's seat*  
(textbook form: *in the driving seat*; example: *be in the driving seat*)
- *put someone ahead of the game*  
(textbook form: *ahead of the game*; example: *be ahead of the game*)
- *a two-horse race*  
(textbook form: *a one-horse race*)
- *put someone on the ropes*  
(textbook form: *on the ropes*; example: *be on the ropes*)

The results have also shown that the idiom *a major player* and its antonymous variant *a minor player* are conventionalized expressions even though they are not listed in idioms dictionaries. There are 64 tokens of *a major player* in the BYU-BNC and 142 tokens in COCA, while *a minor player* occurs 9 times in the BYU-BNC and 42 times in COCA.

Overall, corpus data provide sufficient evidence of the flexibility of forms of competition idioms. Furthermore, the majority of variant realizations found in the two corpora are not creative modifications for stylistic effect, but display regularity. This is in line with previous studies of lexical and syntactic behaviour of idioms, which have shown that idiom variation follows established patterns (cf. e.g. Cignoni, Coffey, & Moon, 1999; Omazić, 2003; Tabossi, Wolf, & Koterle, 2009). For example, constituent verbs and adjectives of competition idioms vary systematically to create antonymous expressions, e.g. *keep your eye on the ball/take your eye off the ball*. Adnominal modification is systematic in that it restricts the reference of a variant form by adding further specifications, e.g. *a major industry player*. As regards lexico-syntactic variation, the relation between a trajector and a landmark may be construed as static or dynamic or from different perspectives. The prepositional phrase which specifies the location remains stable, while alterations to lexical and syntactic structure reflect different construals of the same situation as a state or a process (e.g. *be in the driving seat* vs. *get into the driving seat*), or as self-motion or caused motion (e.g. *get ahead of the game* vs. *put someone ahead of the game*).

All this suggests that idiom variation should be included in the ESP classroom. If idioms are presented and taught in a single form, this could lead

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<sup>4</sup> Evert (2005: 133) argues that word combinations which occur five or more times in a corpus can be safely used for statistical analysis.



learners to believe that they are invariable expressions. Furthermore, variation affects the overall meaning of an idiom and each variation type serves a specific function in discourse.

This raises the issue of how idiom variation can be incorporated in the ESP classroom. We believe that three important factors should be taken into consideration: (1) idiom variation may present a challenge to non-native users of English, (2) idioms are frequently creatively exploited in discourse, and (3) idioms are used not only to convey information but also evaluation. The implications of incorporating idiom variation in ESP are discussed in the following section.

## 7. INCORPORATING IDIOM VARIATION IN THE ESP CLASSROOM

All business English textbooks have a language section which includes vocabulary and grammar. In addition to simple lexical units, textbooks contain multi-word units – even at the beginner level – which highlights the importance of constructions in developing learners' lexical competence. Common multi-word units include collocations, the majority of which are part of specialized vocabulary (e.g. *market leader*, *launch a product*), but others are part of general English and include figurative expressions. Familiarizing ESP students with figurative language becomes all the more important given that within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) understanding idiomatic usage is expected at level B2 and higher. Moreover, it is explicitly stated that knowledge of fixed formulae such as idioms and proverbs is a “significant component of the linguistic aspect of sociocultural competence” (CEFR, p. 120).

Teaching materials for business English at advanced levels also contain exercises on lexical variation. These include words and phrases in British and American English which have the same meaning, e.g. *subway* and *underground* (Cotton et al., 2010: 15) and verb-noun collocations with schematic verbs that have a wide collocational range, e.g. *take decisions/responsibility* (MacKenzie, 2010: 23). Introducing idiom variation could be one step further in the development of learners' lexical competence since alterations to the lexical and syntactic structure of idioms result in shifts in meaning. The fundamental issue with idiom variation is that it may make the learning of idioms more challenging, but there are several possible solutions to this. One is using the systematicity behind variation, which should be based on meaning. This could help reduce “the perceived arbitrariness of the foreign language system” (Taylor, 2008: 57). The systematicity behind variation can be the basis for visual or other types of representation to accommodate for different types of learners. This approach is in line with lexical exercises included in some business English textbooks, which involve noun formation using suffixes or opposite adjectives using prefixes. If types of idiom

variation are treated as systematic and constrained (just like morphological variation), then such exercises can easily be included in the ESP classroom. For example, lexical substitution of competition idioms involves creating synonyms and antonyms, and lexico-syntactic variations reflect static and dynamic construals of the same event or portraying the same scene from different perspectives.

Another solution is the use of authentic materials illustrating variation to increase motivation (Berardo, 2006; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998). For example, business press articles are an ample source of idiom variation. This is where variation itself comes into focus, as it becomes important to raise learners' awareness of the fact that journalists often use modified idioms in headlines to attract readers' attention to the article. ESP teachers could use activities and exercises aimed at raising awareness not only about idioms being variable, but also about the fact that they are often used in non-canonical forms. In order to tackle idiom variation, ESP learners can experiment themselves by playing with figurative language (Littlemore & Low, 2006). For example, they can write advertisements for products in which they include idiomatic expressions and vary their structure and meaning to fit the product.

Incorporating idiom variation in the ESP classroom becomes especially important at advanced levels since it has been shown that a large number of idioms are used not only to convey information but also evaluation (Moon, 1998: 221ff). This is reflected in CEFR, which states that idiomatic expressions "both incorporate and reinforce common attitudes" (CERF, p. 20). Exercises in which the evaluative function of idioms is discussed have already become a part of some business English textbooks. For example, the textbooks in the *Market Leader* series contain exercises in which learners have to decide which idioms have a positive meaning and which a negative meaning (Cotton et al., 2010: 68), while the textbooks in the *Business Advantage* series teach how to use idiomatic expressions in spoken communication in order to respond to situations positively or negatively (Lisboa & Handford, 2012: 53). Using an idiom in a modified form is also a way of expressing evaluation, as it involves adapting a conventionalized expression to a specific situation by changing its lexical and/or syntactic structure. This is an established function of idiomatic creativity in discourse. Therefore, ESP teachers should raise learners' awareness of the fact that the non-conventional use of an idiom conveys the speaker's attitude toward a situation. Ultimately, this means empowering learners with the knowledge that will enable them to communicate in English more effectively.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to show that idioms in business English textbooks are variable, and to give an account of how different variation types affect the idiomatic meaning and what functions they have in discourse. We conducted two corpus studies of ten idioms which are used to talk about competition in business.

The results show that competition idioms are lexically and syntactically relatively flexible and occur in the textbook form as well as in other forms. Moreover, in 6 out of 10 cases there are considerable differences between the frequencies of the textbook form and those in which the idioms occur in the corpora. The results also show that different variation types affect the idiomatic meaning in specific ways. We therefore argue for idiom variation to be included in the ESP classroom, especially at advanced levels. Since it may potentially cause problems for learners, idiom variation should be presented and taught in ways which facilitate learning.

One final issue concerning idiom variation is what should be the basis for the choice of variant forms which are to be taught in ESP. We believe that it should be frequency and conventionality. In order to establish the frequency of figurative expressions and how conventionalized they are, two types of reliable sources should be used: corpora and corpus-based idioms dictionaries.

On a more general level, this study highlights the importance of the use of corpora in ESP and the advantages of applying the cognitive linguistic approach to teaching figurative language. Corpora are a reliable source of examples of variant forms of idioms, more specifically large general corpora which contain hundreds of millions of words. Specialized corpora are another valuable source, but most of them are not available to ESP teachers. Moreover, they tend to be relatively small and therefore may not present an accurate picture of an idiom's lexical and syntactic behaviour. On the other hand, owing to their size and the fact that they contain a wide range of texts, general multi-million word corpora provide sufficient evidence of forms in which idioms occur and their conventional and non-conventional use.<sup>5</sup>

The application of the cognitive linguistic approach to teaching figurative language in ESP could be extended to include idiom variation. More specifically, ESP students should be encouraged to make a connection between modified forms of idioms and their meanings. Raising students' awareness of the fact that idiom variation is systematic and of how variations change and adapt the idiomatic meaning to specific contexts may significantly facilitate comprehension of idioms in their modified forms.

[Paper submitted 17 Feb 2017]

[Revised version received 20 Mar 2017]

[Revised version accepted for publication 30 Mar 2017]

### ***Acknowledgement***

We would like to thank Mateusz-Milan Stanojević for his helpful comments and suggestions.

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<sup>5</sup> Another valuable source for ESP teachers is enTenTen, an English web corpus which currently contains almost 20 billion tokens (<https://www.sketchengine.co.uk/>). Two of its key features are word sketches, which show a word's collocates and grammatical behaviour, and creating your own corpora.

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