

Specialized lexicography for children: dictionaries and picture books of idioms

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the largely understudied field of children's idiom lexicography by analysing two principal categories of resources: dictionaries and picture books. It critically examines a sample of each, including works by Beal (1993), Terban (2006), Amoroso (2008), Oelschlager (2011), and Ringstad (2012), to evaluate the selection, presentation, and explanation of idioms intended for young readers. Through textual and comparative analysis, the study reveals that these resources are largely author-driven rather than corpus-based, often reflecting subjective choices and inconsistent levels of complexity. While some works aim to entertain and inform children directly, others appear to rely on adult mediation due to the intricacy of content or presentation. The findings underscore the lack of standardized lexicographical methodologies for children and call for further research and guidance in this domain. Ultimately, the study highlights the cultural and educational importance of idioms and the potential of well-crafted lexicographical materials to support children's language development and cognitive growth.

Keywords: children; idioms; lexicography; dictionaries; picture-books.

1. Introduction

“A children's dictionary must be attuned to the child user or it will be unreadable and unread. Even more than an adult dictionary, it needs to align with the age, place and culture of its young readers in order to deserve their attention” (Rennie 2022, 3). While highlighting the added requirements that child as opposed to adult lexicography must account for, Rennie (2022, 4) strongly underlines that as yet there is no manual devoted to explaining how children's dictionaries in English should be compiled. Indeed, the lexicographers who work on children's dictionaries are the ones who also work on adult lexicography and whose thoughts and methodologies simply adjust to suit the needs of their young readership. Notwithstanding the lack of a clear-cut methodology and a general lexicographical practice, children's dictionaries go back a long

way and are a resilient genre, with new dictionaries that are continuously being compiled and others revised (Rennie 2022, 9).

John Withals' *A Shorte Dictionarie for Yonge Begynners* (1553) is an example of an early English-Latin bilingual dictionary that was specifically addressed to children (Considine 2022). That the first lexicographical works were often written for young learners is indeed a well-acknowledged fact by histories of lexicography (see Béjoint 2010; Shapiro 2017), with the nineteenth century being a particularly prolific time (see Iversen 2011, 2012, 2014, 2018, 2020, 2022). It was not, however, until the twentieth century that "children's dictionary publishing was given a huge boost" (Banerji 2022, 80). The importance placed upon spelling and vocabulary learning at school by the National Curriculum in the 1990s pushed the publication of lexicographical works aimed at children to multiply exponentially (Banerji 2022, 80). Nowadays, the market offers a wide range of dictionaries and thesauri for children of all ages and school levels.

Though probably not as numerous as those for general use, children's idiom dictionaries are also plentiful. Along with being able to read and spell single words, children at an early age are also expected to become familiar with chunks of words many of which are not simply literal. The understanding and use of idiomatic expressions from an early age has in fact been seen to make a difference in conversational skills. It contributes to achieving a good command of the language which is still considered as being a strong sign of intellectualism, wit and creative thinking¹. That being able to comprehend and reproduce idiomatic expressions is one of the characteristics of fluency is proven by the contents of the syllabi for the English language certifications aimed at foreign students. Indeed, to obtain the highest grades that are often likened to a native- or a near-native speaker's knowledge of the language, a good grounding in idiomatcity is required (see, for instance, the syllabi for the IELTS and Cambridge Proficiency examinations). Without using such features in speech, Lazarton (2001, 103) claims that "learners are apt to sound bookish". Indeed, idioms are not appendages of language, but rather central and effective instruments of communication. Notwithstanding the importance of the idea that "children may grow up familiar with words and idioms" in order that they might learn to read, write, speak fluently as well as gain psychological maturity (Rennie 2022, 9), little to no metalexigraphical appreciation of such works exists. Within a more elaborate investigational project, it is the aim of this article, therefore, to try and begin to present some information of this kind. It will be done, firstly, by presenting an overview of the type of lexicographical material on the market, and secondly by attempting to appraise a sample of the materials collected.

1 See English Path at <https://www.englishpath.com/blog/master-english-language-idioms-and-phrases/>.

2. Methodology

To carry out this research, materials devoted to idioms for children were searched on the websites Amazon.com; Archive.org; JStor.org; and WorldCat.org using the keywords “children”, “dictionary/ies”; “idioms”, “juvenile literature”, “kids”. The material retrieved in response to my research needs consisted primarily of picture books and dictionaries. On the two typologies of works I chose to address the following research questions a) what are the authors’ intentions; in other words, what information do the authors provide in their prefaces? b) what contents are included; in other words, what type of idioms have been selected? c) how are the idioms presented and explained; in other words, what type of meaning is conveyed and how is it conveyed?

3. Results

The works on idioms addressed to children in the databases were found to belong to two principal categories of reading materials: dictionaries and picture books. Although not considered dictionaries in the strictest sense, the picture books, just like the dictionaries, list and explain idioms. For this reason, I decided to consider them lexicographical products to analyse along with the ones actually entitled “dictionaries”. What will follow is therefore the presentation of these two categories by means of the examination of a sample of two/three products for each. To illustrate the dictionary category, *The Kingfisher book of words: A-Z guide to quotations, proverbs, origins, usage, and idioms* by George Beal (1993) and *A Scholastic Dictionary of Idioms* by Marvin Terban (2006) were chosen. To illustrate the picture books, *Go fly a kite* by Cynthia Amoroso (2008), *Life is a bowl full of cherries* by Vanita Oelschlager (2011), and *The bizarre origins of kangaroo court and other idioms* by Arnold Ringstad (2012) were chosen.

3.1 The idiom dictionaries and the authors’ intentions

The two dictionaries chosen to exemplify this category are, as mentioned above, *The Kingfisher book of words: A-Z guide to quotations, proverbs, origins, usage, and idioms* by George Beal (1993) and *A Scholastic Dictionary of Idioms* by Marvin Terban (2006). Although the titles of the two dictionaries do not include the word “children” or “kids”, the book covers surely mean to catch the attention of a young readership. While the colorfully illustrated covers of the two dictionaries might suggest that they are addressed to a very young readership, the prefaces of both works hint at a readership that goes to school, as the term “scholastic” in Terban’s title indeed expresses. That said, neither dictionary really explicitly states who the readers are. In the prefaces, there is no indication of the age of the intended readership. Only from the authors’ statements regarding the purpose of their works can this be gained. In the preface to his

Dictionary, Terban (2006, vi) states that his work “will explain the meanings and origins behind more than 700 idioms that you might hear and read in English every day”. Similarly, Beal (1993, 8) points out that by listing common idioms and proverbs, his work is “a useful learning tool that contains important information regarding the English language”. More importantly still, they both underline the usefulness of their dictionaries for learning the three skills, reading, writing, and speaking. “This book can help you read and speak with new understanding”, writes Terban (2006, vi); “*The Book of Words* explains how the language is used and offers help in writing it and speaking it correctly”, writes Beal (1993, 8). The assumption to be made is that the intended user can read and not only.

This becomes evident when the user opens the works. The layout of the entries and the information imparted reflects the tradition of dictionary-making. Indeed, as one would expect, the entries are listed in alphabetical order.

(1) Apple

The apple of someone’s eye: someone most dear to a person. (Beal 1993, 76)

(2) Apple of your eye

Katey is the apple of my eye

Meaning: a person or thing that is greatly loved, treasured and adored

Origin: This saying is used in the Bible. Ancient people thought that the pupil of the eye was solid and shaped like an apple. The pupil (“apple of the eye”) was precious because without it, you couldn’t see. (Terban 2006, 5)

Beal introduces the idiom under what he considers to be the keyword of each idiom. As can be seen from example (1), in the case of *apple of someone’s eye*, the idiom is entered under the headword “apple”. In Terban’s work, the headwords are the idioms themselves, as can be seen in example (2). To be able to access such works, children therefore need not only to be able to read, but also to know how to look up words. To do so they must have an awareness of what an alphabetical order is, and more importantly, they need to have the skill of singling out the keyword(s) of each idiom. This is something that needs to be taught and therefore confirms that both dictionaries are suitable for children who not only go to school but have quite a sound understanding of language too.

These dictionaries are in fact both lengthy and rich in information. Beal’s dictionary is 203 pages long and is divided into six parts. Besides listing and explaining quotations, proverbs, and idioms in the manner seen in example (1) above, it devotes a section to explaining the meaning of root words of Anglo-Saxon, Greek, and Latin origin (e.g. “ac” (‘oak’) from Anglo-Saxon origin, “acoustos” (‘hearer’) from Greek and “animo” (‘life’) from Latin (p.107)), a section to explaining the origins of words that have entered the English

language from other languages (e.g. “alcohol” from Arabic (p. 139)), another to the differences in usage between homophones or similar sounding words (e.g. “acetic” vs. “ascetic” / “accept” vs. “except” (p.172)), and another section devoted to providing the American English equivalents of British English words (e.g. “elevator” and “lift” (p.132)). Terban’s dictionary is 298 pages long, and even though it focusses on idioms and sayings alone, for each it provides not only the meaning but also an example of use, and an etymological explanation, as shown in example (2) above. It is clear that to be able to use these works successfully, the user needs to be prepared to acknowledge that English words and idioms have origins of some sort, can have differing forms while having similar meanings, and have meanings that are not obvious at first glance. Although the intended age of the readership is not expressed, there is clear reason to believe that both reference works are meant for children aged at least 9 years old (as is actually stated on the Amazon.com website).

3.2 The content of the dictionaries and the choice of idioms

In the opening page of the section on idioms, Beal (1993, 75) writes:

(3) Idioms are phrases and expressions that are commonly used. Most are familiar, some are amusing, but the majority are not to be taken literally. If you say, “My heart sank”, you do not mean that your heart actually sank, but that you felt depressed because something had gone wrong.

In the Introduction to his work, Terban (2006, v) writes:

(4) Idioms appear in every language, and English has thousands of them. They are often confusing because the meaning of the whole group of words taken together has little, often nothing, to do with the meanings of the words taken one by one. [...]. In order to understand a language, you must know what the idioms in that language mean. If you try to figure out the meaning of an idiom literally, word by word, you will get befuddled. You have to know its “hidden” meaning.

In English, the term “idiom” can point to two different types of phraseological unit. On the one hand, it can generically refer to “any phraseological unit [that] does not necessarily have to be metaphoric” (OED: s.v. Idiom 3a); on the other, it can refer to “group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words” (cf. OALD online s.v. Idiom). Judging by the statements reported in examples (3) and (4) above, the type of phraseological unit that Beal and Terban deal with is the more specific one. The authors do not include collocations or phrasal verbs in the works, neither do they imply quotations with the word “idiom”: Beal, indeed, devotes a separate section of his dictionary to quotations as he does to proverbs, unlike Terban who by referring to idioms as sayings and expressions accounts for proverbs too. In sum,

the idioms that Beal and Terban include in their dictionaries are semi-idioms, made up of some literally interpreted elements (e.g. *to cry over spilled milk* (meaning ‘to cry over something that has already happened’), and pure-idioms, whose elements are all non-literal in meaning (e.g. *to kick the bucket* (meaning ‘to die’).

The idioms included are also claimed by the authors as being the most frequently used ones in the English language. They express this by referring to them as the most “common[ly]” used ones (Beal 1993, 8); the ones “you might hear or read in everyday English” (Terban 2006, vi). This seems to suggest that the dictionaries were therefore compiled following a corpus-driven approach, whereby the authors selected the idioms based on “the data collected by computer” (Sinclair 1991, 4). A close but restricted investigation on a select semantic area (food and drink) in both dictionaries, however, seems to exclude this. Indeed, a comparison of the results of earlier research that pinpointed the most frequently used food and drink idioms in English in the period 1964-2009 (Pinnavaia 2018) with the idiom wordlist in both dictionaries seems to suggest that both Terban and Beal played an important part in determining “what should or should not be selected for inclusion” (Sinclair 1991, 4).

According to the results retrieved from the British National Corpus and Collins Wordbanks Online, of the 276 food and drink idioms attested in English language dictionaries published in the years that range from 1964 to 2009, the following 64 (listed vertically in increasing order of frequency) are the most commonly used (cf. Pinnavaia 2018, 140-141).

Table 1: The 64 most commonly used food and drink idioms.

<i>daily bread</i>	<i>the best/ hottest thing since sliced bread</i>	<i>as like/ different as chalk and cheese</i>	<i>variety is the spice of life</i>	<i>pie in the sky</i>	<i>have egg on one's face</i>	<i>bear fruit</i>
<i>go bananas</i>	<i>dead duck</i>	<i>the world is one's oyster</i>	<i>a piece of cake</i>	<i>make a hash of</i>	<i>to be/ go nuts</i>	<i>the icing on the cake</i>
<i>break bread with</i>	<i>salt of the earth</i>	<i>old chestnut</i>	<i>first fruits</i>	<i>share/ slice of the cake</i>	<i>take with a pinch/ grain of salt</i>	<i>the cream of</i>
<i>earn/ make one's bread</i>	<i>a bite at/ of the cherry</i>	<i>take the biscuit</i>	<i>small beer</i>	<i>red herring</i>	<i>a bone of contention</i>	<i>the fruit(s) of</i>
<i>in the soup</i>	<i>a hard/ tough nut to crack</i>	<i>clever/ tough/ smart cookie</i>	<i>make a meal of/ out of</i>	<i>have/ put all one's eggs into one basket</i>	<i>sour grapes / the grapes are sour</i>	
<i>chew the fat</i>	<i>go/ sell like hot cakes</i>	<i>hard/ tough nut</i>	<i>have one's cake and eat it</i>	<i>(not) be one's cup of tea</i>	<i>the toast of</i>	
<i>full of beans</i>	<i>eat humble pie</i>	<i>hot potato</i>	<i>the apple of someone's eye</i>	<i>spill the beans</i>	<i>fair game</i>	

<i>easy meat</i>	<i>forbidden fruit</i>	<i>rotten/ bad apple</i>	<i>chicken and egg (situation)</i>	<i>make no bones about</i>	<i>bread and butter</i>	
<i>drive someone nuts</i>	<i>have a finger in the pie</i>	<i>the proof of the pudding is in the eating</i>	<i>not worth one's salt</i>	<i>couch potato</i>	<i>food for thought</i>	
<i>(a) curate's egg</i>	<i>turn to jelly</i>	<i>(the land of) milk and honey</i>	<i>crumbs of comfort</i>	<i>rub salt into someone's wound</i>	<i>carrot and stick</i>	

Comparing this list to the idioms included in the two dictionaries under observation, we saw that Terban includes only 33 of the above, excluding the following 31:

Table 2: The 31 food and drink idioms excluded by Terban (2006)

<i>daily bread</i>	<i>a curate's egg</i>	<i>as like/ different as chalk and cheese</i>	<i>variety is the spice of life</i>	<i>crumbs of comfort</i>	<i>the toast of</i>	<i>the fruit(s) of</i>
<i>Break bread with</i>	<i>best thing since sliced bread</i>	<i>the world is one's oyster</i>	<i>first fruits</i>	<i>share/ slice of the cake</i>	<i>fair game</i>	
<i>earn/make one's bread</i>	<i>a bite at the cherry</i>	<i>old chestnut</i>	<i>small beer</i>	<i>make a hash of</i>	<i>bread and butter</i>	
<i>in the soup</i>	<i>forbidden fruit</i>	<i>clever/ tough/ smart cookie</i>	<i>make a meal of/ out of</i>	<i>sour grapes</i>	<i>carrot and stick</i>	
<i>easy meat</i>	<i>turn to jelly</i>	<i>the land of milk and honey</i>	<i>chicken and egg</i>	<i>a bone of contention</i>	<i>bear fruit</i>	

Beal excludes even more because he only includes the following 17:

Table 3: The 17 food and drink idioms included by Beal (1993).

<i>go bananas</i>	<i>hard nut to crack</i>	<i>the world is one's oyster</i>	<i>a piece of cake</i>	<i>red herring</i>	<i>make no bones about</i>
<i>full of beans</i>	<i>sell like hot cakes</i>	<i>rotten apple</i>	<i>have one's cake and eat it</i>	<i>put all one's eggs into one's basket</i>	<i>food for thought</i>
<i>salt of the earth</i>	<i>eat humble pie</i>	<i>the proof of the pudding is in eating</i>	<i>make hash of</i>	<i>spill the beans</i>	

What stands out from both wordlists is the exclusion of all the idioms that include the headwords regarding *bread* and *fruit* that are renowned for being idiomatically productive (Pinnavaia 2018, 25). Such idioms are, moreover, not just common in the English language: their connection with the biblical tradition

explains why verbatim equivalents of the original biblical expressions exist in all countries that have a Christian culture, thus making them very popular worldwide (see Piirainen 2012). The same could be said for the expression *sour grapes* which, by stemming from Aesop's fables, is as popular as biblical idioms are. Its exclusion from both dictionaries in fact comes somewhat as a surprise.

If food and drink idioms are to be taken as a measure of the level of objectivity as far as the selection of idioms is concerned, then it might be safe to say that the wordlists in both dictionaries were not compiled by selecting the idioms that English speakers use more frequently. Indeed, the frequency-based method seems not to have informed the lexicographical plan of either dictionary. By stating that a "panel of teachers helped [him] choose the most commonly confusing idioms", Terban (2006, vi) in fact confirms that the process of idiom selection was a concerted effort among English language teachers and thus author- rather than corpus-driven. Even though Beal does not state how he carried out the idiom selection, it is unlikely he used the corpus-driven approach given he includes even fewer idioms than Terban. Besides wishing to help children disentangle the meanings of some of the more "commonly confusing" idioms – as stated by Terban, the authors also hope to entertain them. Beal (1993, 8) makes this clear in the preface when he claims his work is "also a fun book to read, for it contains many whimsical illustrations that will make you laugh while you learn". Instead of simply listing the idioms that are considered as being the most frequent in the English language, both authors seem to carefully select what they consider to be above all the more interesting and the more entertaining ones to explain to and to exemplify for children.

3.3 The presentation and explanation of the idioms in the dictionaries

That the two dictionaries are author-driven can be seen even more clearly in the way the idioms are presented and explained. Besides having wordlists of differing lengths, also the information provided for each idiom is very different in each dictionary, as shown by the two examples below.

(5) p's and q's

to mind your p's and q's: to be polite and well-behaved. (Beal 1993, 94)

(6) Mind your p's and q's

Please try to mind your p's and q's when the princess visits the school

Meaning: to be extremely exact; be careful not to say or do anything wrong;

Origin: This term was beginning to be used in the 1600s, and by the late 1700s it was very popular. The letters "p" and "q" can often be confused, so children learning to read and printers selecting type have to be careful with these letters. Another possibility comes from old English pubs where a list of pints ("p's") and quarts ("q's") a drinker consumed were written on a blackboard to be paid later.

Finally, *pieds* and *queues* are dance steps that a French dancing instructor would teach his students to perform with care. There's no proof as to where this catchy saying originated, though. (Terban 2006, 148)

As we can see in example (5), Beal provides only the meaning for every idiom, whereas, as illustrated in example (6), Terban also provides an example of use as well as some information regarding the origins of the expression.

As far as the meanings are concerned, both authors provide succinct definitions made up of one or more simple sentences. As exemplified by the definition of *mind one's p's and q's* reported above, Beal tends to explain the meaning of the idiom using one single sentence; Terban usually explains it using two, sometimes even three sentences. Indeed, whether they opt for one or more sentences, both try to provide as much information as possible and not in a circular manner². Beal often provides more than one synonym in the same sentence so as to make the meaning clearer: for instance, he not only explains *to mind one's p's and q's* with the adjective “polite”, but also with the adjective “well-behaved”. Similarly, by adding a second or third sentence, Terban makes explicit what he means by the first. As can be seen in example (6): “to be extremely exact” is further explained by the second sentence “be careful not to say or do anything wrong”. To ensure that children will understand the meaning of every idiom, Terban goes even further. He also includes an example of use that normally describes a situation with which children ought to be familiar. His examples of use refer principally to home settings that depict parents, siblings, close relatives, and pets or school settings that involve teachers and friends. The formal school environment, chosen by Terban to clarify the meaning of the idiom *to mind one's p's and q's*, is indeed appropriate for children. Both authors are thus concerned to unveil the meaning of idioms as concisely but at the same time as precisely as possible and they do this by using simple or core vocabulary (see Fontenelle 2009; Kamiński 2021; West 1953), avoiding turns of phrase, or circular definitions, typical of many dictionaries addressed to adults in which “more than a quarter of all definitions are written using words whose definitions ultimately refer back to the word being defined” (Bullock 2011, 226).

Possibly not as basic are the words Terban uses to explain the origins of idioms. In example (6), he includes the terms “consumed”, “catchy”, and “instructor”, with which children may not be very familiar. Moreover, the second explanation for the origins of *to mind one's p's and q's* stemming from the world of pubs might also be difficult for children to comprehend. The discrepancy between the words and situations chosen to explain the meaning of idioms

2 A circular definition is a description of the meaning of a lexeme that is constructed using one or more synonymous lexemes that are all defined in terms of each other e.g. *fast*—adj. ‘swift; quick; speedy’; *swif*—adj. ‘rapid; fast’ (see a glossary of linguistic terms available at <https://glossary.sil.org/term/circular-definition>).

and those to explain their origins is evident. It seems to point to two different approaches: the examples of use and meanings come from the author himself; the etymological information does not. As Terban (2006, v) clearly states, the explanations he includes are the most “accepted” ones offered by “word experts who study origins of idiomatic expressions”. Just like Beal, who includes etymological information regarding words – not idioms mind, Terban includes etymological explanations, some of which are suitable solely for young adults. Even though research has shown that an awareness of the origins of words and idioms is important for lexical comprehension and retention (Boers 2001; Boers *et al.* 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Boers and Lindstromberg 2009; Nation 2013), it is important to modulate it in order to meet children’s needs. While exhaustive and complex etymological information could be useful and interesting for adults, it could be discouraging for younger children and thus counter-productive in the learning phase.

The shift between the familiar and complicated communicative situations and between the simply- and laboriously-worded descriptions to explain the meaning of idioms supports the initial claim that the intended readership in both Beal and Terban’s dictionaries is neither obvious nor unique. Whilst they may appear as easy-reading children’s idiom dictionaries, they are actually much more complicated works. Despite their colourful appearance that makes them seem suitable for younger children who presumably cannot read very well, Beal and Terban’s dictionaries are intricately structured and have an information load that is more appropriate for older children who are presumably good readers. This contrast is summarized by the Terban himself in the last line of the introduction to his book: “whether you’ve been speaking English all your life or are just learning, this book can help you read and speak with new understanding and a lot more fun” (vi). With these introductory words, he underlines the real nature of his dictionary, which holds true for Beal’s too: on the one hand, they make excellent reference works for older readers who are already competent speakers of English and possibly accustomed to using idioms; on the other hand, they can be useful aids for younger children – who are learning to read and write – to broach the subject of idioms on the condition that they be assisted by someone who can help decipher some of the more complex linguistic and semantic notions.

3.4 The picture books and the authors’ intentions

The assistance of a parent or a teacher is just as important for children when they have a picture book about idioms to read, as we will see with the three books chosen to exemplify this category. *Go fly a kite* by Cynthia Amoroso (2008), *Life is a bowl full of cherries* by Vanita Oelschlager (2011), and *The bizarre origins of kangaroo court and other idioms* by Arnold Ringstad (2012) are colourful and beautifully illustrated books. They look like typical picture books for young or very young children who presumably cannot read, with titles that sound like

children's stories. These books are not story books, however: they are collections of idioms. Indeed, below the main title, Amoroso (2008) adds "and other sayings we don't really mean", just as Oelschlager (2011) and Ringstad (2012) point out that "Life is a bowl full of cherries" and "The bizarre origins of kangaroo court" are one of many other idioms. In actual fact, each book is not only a collection of a select number of idioms, but also one in a series of books devoted to idioms that each of these three authors have written³. So, while the pictorial characteristics hint at books that are clearly meant for young children (see Kümmerling-Meibauer 2021), they deal with a topic that is not easy for this kind of readership to understand by themselves. Given that none of the authors indicates what the intended age of the readership should be, we must assume that the authors leave it to parents or to accompanying adults to decide how to use the book and for what age group.

As far as the authors' intentions for writing the books are concerned, Cynthia Amoroso (2008, 3) includes the following statement in the preface to her work:

(7) This book will help you understand some of the most common idioms. It will tell you how you might hear a saying or phrase. It will tell you what the saying really means. All these sayings and short phrases – even the silly ones – are an important part of our language.

As we can see from this quotation, Amoroso's intent is to explain the meaning of and how to use idioms. This is also very clearly shown in the layout of her book and all her other books in the series in which, besides a picture that accompanies each idiom, she provides quite a long example of use, followed by its meaning. The layout of Ringstad's books is also similar to the one we find in Amoroso. Although Ringstad, unlike Amoroso, does not include a preface to explain the purpose of his work, the layout of every page of his books reflects the same intent that Amoroso expresses, with the added difference that besides the meaning and example of use, he also provides etymological information.

While Vanita Oelschlager's books do not have an introductory declaration of intent, they do all include a page, either in the middle or at the end, in which she points out what idioms are. And yet, although she explains that idioms have "hidden" meanings (2011, 36), she does not give prominence to such meanings. Oelschlager concentrates much more on the picture that depicts the idiom's literal meaning than anything else. That is not to say that she does not care to provide information regarding what the idiom means and how it can be used in a communicative situation. She does, but only in a very discrete manner, written in very small print, upside down, and at the bottom of the page. Corroborated by the claim that idioms show "a language's sense of humour, [...] your language's ticklish spots" (2011, 36), Oelschlager's prime concern is

³ See archive.org for all the other picture books in the series published by these authors.

simply to introduce idioms to children in a fun way. While the entertaining aspect is clearly not to be underestimated in Amoroso and Ringstad's works, their intentions are primarily to teach children the meaning and the use of idioms.

The amount of explanatory information and the way it is introduced in the three books seems therefore to suggest that the three authors have slightly differing intentions and readerships in mind. Oelschläger's books are suitable for very young children whose parents or accompanying adults may just want them to look at the pictures without necessarily understanding what idioms are and how to use them. The other two books that are clearly focused on the meanings, the use, and – in the case of Ringstad – the origins of idioms are surely more appropriate for older children who can read by themselves, and who might not necessarily require the aid of an adult to understand what they are and how they work in language.

3.5 The content of the picture books and the choice of idioms

The idioms the three authors include in their books are the same types of phraseological units that we find in Beal and Terban's dictionaries, and that is semi- and pure-idioms. Amoroso (2008, 6) states this in the front matter of all her books by describing idioms as "sayings and phrases with meanings that are different from the actual words". In her 27-page book, *Go fly a kite*, she includes 37 idioms that are both semi-idioms, such as the similes *dead as a doornail*, *as easy as falling off a log*, and pure-idioms, such as *beat around the bush* and *spill the beans*⁴. The 15 idioms that Oelschläger includes in the 38 pages of her book, *Life is a bowl full of cherries*, are also metaphorical expressions, which she admits are difficult to understand because "the group of words has little, often nothing to do with the meaning of the words taken one by one" (36). The idioms comprise semi-idioms such as *as flat as a pancake* and *packed in like sardines* and pure-idioms such as *the goose is cooked* and *cold turkey*⁵. Similarly, Ringstad includes semi-idioms such as *as happy as a clam* and *pass with flying colours* and pure-idioms such as *the crow flies* and *magic bullet*. Even though he does not have a front matter in which to explain the nature of idioms, the 28 expressions he includes in the 32-page *The bizarre origins of kangaroo court* are of the same type we find in the other picture books and in the dictionaries under scrutiny⁶.

4 The idioms in Amoroso (2008) are: *an apple a day keeps the doctor away*, *an axe to grind*, *back to square one*, *beat around the bush*, *beggars can't be choosers*, *behind the scenes*, *below the belt*, *bite the bullet*, *a bolt from the blue*, *burning the midnight oil*, *bury the hatchet*, *catch 22*, *caught red-handed*, *a chip on your shoulder*, *dead as a doornail*, *down the hatch*, *easy as falling off a log*, *face the music*, *a flash in the pan*, *full of beans*, *go fly a kite*, *have your cake and eat it too*, *ignorance is bliss*, *keep a stiff upper lip*, *make ends meet*, *miss the boat*, *on cloud nine*, *out of the blue*, *pit stop*, *pull your hair out*, *read the riot act*, *a shot in the dark*, *spill the beans*, *through the grapevine*, *turn the tables*, *wet blanket*, *X marks the spot*.

5 The idioms in Oelschläger (2011) are: *as flat as a pancake*, *big cheese*, *couch potato*, *to cry over spilt milk*, *food for thought*, *sweet tooth*, *life is a bowl of cherries*, *packed in like sardines*, *the whole enchilada*, *one bad apple*, *you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar*, *your goose is cooked*, *pie in the sky*, *cold turkey*, *eat your words*.

6 The idioms in Ringstad (2012) are: *behind the eight ball*, *no spring chicken*, *bite the bullet*, *ballpark figure*, *extend an olive branch*, *according to Hoyle*, *put a sock in it*, *batting a thousand*, *as the crow flies*, *read*

If we were to consider the frequency of use of the food and drink idioms as a metre, as was done for the dictionaries earlier, we might say that Oelschlager and Ringstad are less sensitive to usage. The two food and drink idioms – *happy as a clam* and *from soup to nuts* – that Ringstad includes in his book are in fact among the more rarely used in English (Pinnavaia 2018, 138-139). Similarly, in Oelschlager's *Life is a bowl full of cherries*, which is devoted solely to food and drink idioms, the only three idioms that can be considered among the more frequently used are *couch potato*, *food for thought*, *one bad apple* (see Pinnavaia 2018, 140-141). Possibly a little more focused on usage is Amoroso. In actual fact, she is the only one to refer to the idioms included in her books as the “most common” and the ones people use “everyday” (2008, 6), which may explain why we find *full of beans*, *have your cake and eat it*, and *spill the beans* that are among the most frequently used food and drink idioms in English (Pinnavaia 2018, 140-141).

However, since these books are only one of a series, it makes little sense to try and ascertain whether the idioms included are the more or the less frequently used ones in English. Because in each book only a select number of idioms are presented, to be able to truly gauge the authors' awareness of what people really do or do not say, we would have to examine all the idioms in all the books of each series, which clearly goes beyond the scope of this work. Without the necessary reference data, and just at a glance, the selection of the idioms in each of these books does, nonetheless, seem to be arbitrary. There does not seem to be a greater plan behind the selection in each book except that of presenting as many idioms as possible in the whole series, and of course in the most entertaining manner possible for the readership in mind.

3.6 The presentation and explanation of the idioms in the picture books

That Amoroso and Ringstad's books are best for children who can read seems to be confirmed by the way the idioms are presented and explained. And of the two, Ringstad's book is probably the one that is the most suitable for older children who presumably have a better understanding of their mother tongue. This is because he includes etymological information that is, as we said earlier when looking at Terban's dictionary, the most difficult to understand from both a conceptual and a lexical perspective. However, compared to the etymological information provided by Terban, Ringstad uses much simpler vocabulary, thus allowing him to engage better with children.

(8) STEALING SOMEONE'S THUNDER

MEANING: when you steal someone's thunder, you can use their idea or invention to your own advantage.

the riot act, kangaroo court, make hay while the sun shines, think tank, magic bullet, the cards are stacked against me, in a nutshell, as happy as a clam, clean someone's clock, dyed in wool, rule of thumb, the coast is clear, pass with flying colours, close but no cigar, from soup to nuts, pencil pusher, burn the candle at both ends, stealing someone's thunder, at a drop of a bat.

ORIGIN: In the 1700s, an actor invented a way to make thunder noises for stage plays. When he heard his noise at a different play, he complained that they had stolen his thunder.

EXAMPLE: Rosa felt that Kirk had stolen her thunder. The day after she brought the principal an apple, he brought a whole fruit basket. (Ringstad 2012,30)

Just as the information regarding the origins of the idiom *steal one's thunder* exemplifies above, Ringstad always uses basic lexical items in no more than two sentences. Moreover, unlike Terban, he is careful to express it in his own words so that it is comprehensible to children who must nonetheless be competent readers. That Ringstad is concerned with making himself understood can be further gained by the way he explains the meaning of idioms. Not only does he provide concise one-sentence long definitions, using core vocabulary, but he also addresses the readers by using the pronoun “you”. This strategy helps strike up a relationship between himself and his readers (Machin & Mayr 2021, 62), with the aim of heightening their concentration in favor of a better understanding of what is being said.

Acknowledging the presence of the young reader is also what Amoroso does in her books. She also explains idioms in very simple terms as shown in the example below.

(9) TURN THE TABLES

Paul had been disappointed for the past three weeks. His friend Rob had got the lead in the class play. Paul only had a small part. But Paul tried to be happy. He worked hard to try and do his best at his small part.

But everything had changed today. Rob was sick and the play was next week. Their teacher picked Paul to take Rob's place in the lead role. Paul ran home. He excitedly told his Dad what had happened.

“Good for you Paul”, said Dad. “I guess you turned the tables this time”.

MEANING: when a situation changes and becomes either much better or much worse. (Amoroso 2008, 23)

As we can see, the meaning of the idiom *turn the tables* is expressed in one short and concise sentence using basic vocabulary in order to facilitate comprehension. Even though, unlike Ringstad, she does not use the “synthetic personalization” strategy (Fairclough 1992) in which she addresses the reader directly with the pronoun “you”, she does, like Ringstad, engage directly with her young readers by providing examples of use that have a story-like nature to them. These consist in invented settings that children are likely to be familiar with. As shown in example (9), they describe situations at school or at home with friends, teachers, parents, and grandparents that children will recognize. In actual fact, Amoroso's examples of use remind us of the ones Terban includes in his dictionary that – as was said – are surely child-friendly.

What undoubtedly helps to make both Ringstad's and Amoroso's books particularly attractive to children are of course the pictures. Both authors illustrate their pages with illustrations that depict the idioms' literal meanings. Compared to Amoroso's, Ringstad's stand out more: they take up the top half of the page and are more precisely drawn and coloured. Amoroso's pictures are less rigorously positioned: sometimes they are on the right-hand or left-hand side of the page next to the idiom, sometimes below it. Moreover, because she often includes two idioms on the same page, the illustrations are not only smaller but also not as clear cut as Ringstad's. It is, however, Oelschlager's books that have the largest, brightest, and most captivating illustrations.

Oelschlager's pictures take up two pages. Each picture represents what may seem to be a very simple story based on the idiom's literal meaning. In the case of the idiom *pie in the sky*, the picture depicts a little girl who asks the pie that has replaced the moon in the sky where it has gone. It apparently has very little to do with the real meaning of the idiom ("this is something you think you can do that is unrealistic" (Oelschlager 2011, 31)) and how to use it ("Being an astronaut at 13 is a pie-in-the sky dream" (Oelschlager 2011: 31)). However, given that research has shown that the relationship between literal and metaphoric meanings of idioms is hardly ever arbitrary (see Casadei 1994,1996,1997; Gibbs 1992; Gibbs *et al.* 1997; Kovesces and Szabo 1996; Langlotz 2006; Nayak and Gibbs 1990; Prandi 1999), there may be much more underlying information to Oelschlager's pictures than one might think. If we take the case of *pie in the sky*, talking to a pie in the sky that looks like the moon is in fact unrealistic, thus disclosing – albeit in a concealed manner – the real meaning of the idiom. To expect a child to understand this, however, would be impossible and in contradiction with the size and motif of the picture. Oelschlager's pictures are clearly meant to draw the attention of the very young, but the underlying meanings of these pictures can only emerge with the guidance of an adult. In contrast to Ringstad and Amoroso's books, Oelschlager's are in fact not really addressed to children at all but rather to adults, who are expected to read the books to their children. This would explain why, albeit in small print and upside down at the bottom of the page, the meanings and examples of uses that Oelschlager includes are short, simple, and familiar enough for children to understand if read aloud by an adult. Of the three types, Oelschlager's picture books might indeed seem to be the most appropriate for younger children wishing to learn about idioms, but given the intricate nature of idioms and the underlying information that each picture 'hides', they are only truly useful if this young readership is assisted by an adult.

4. Conclusions

Because “lexicography for children is [...] a vibrant industry full of creative, careful, and caring thinkers”, but surprisingly “woefully understudied” (Murphy 2022, vii) and especially for the acquisition of idioms, I have begun to address the issue with the appraisal of two major categories of lexicographical material that abound in this area – dictionaries and picture books. It is clearly not possible to draw wide and generic conclusions given the restricted sample of material examined, but we might be able to start advancing some tentative ones that I hope to confirm as this project evolves.

The most evident finding that emerges from having examined Beal and Terban’s dictionaries, as well as Amoroso, Oelschlager and Ringstad’s picture books on idioms is the authors’ self-determination. In the absence of a met-lexicographical tradition, the authors seem ‘to do their own thing’. Each author approaches his/her work from an introspective point of view, focusing on what they consider as being the more interesting and entertaining features for children. This explains the marked ideational, textual, and interpersonal features (in Halliday & Matthiessen’s 2004 terms) that distinguish these works from one another and in general from lexicographical works for adults.

As far as the ideational aspect is concerned, or in other words, what idioms the dictionaries and the picture books hold, it is clear that – unlike lexicographical material for adults (see Jackson 2022) – Corpus Linguistics does not inform the selection. Not being lexicographers in the strictest sense of the term, each author includes his/her own selection of semi- and pure-idioms and, of course, as writers of “dictionaries” Beal and Terban can include many more in each of their works than can Amoroso, Oelschlager, and Ringstad in each of their books. That said, because the picture books examined are only one of a series, to expose young readers to a good number of idioms that the authors consider worthy of note, regardless of their frequency of use, seems to bring together both categories of works.

The analysis of the works has shown, however, that the way the authors expose idioms to children is quite different not only between the dictionaries and picture books, which is to be expected, but also between the works in each category. It is rather surprising how little information Beal provides compared to Terban, even though his work is classified as a dictionary. While Terban provides a meaning, an example of use, and etymological information for each idiom, Beal provides only a meaning. This may be explained by the fact that Beal’s *Book of words* is only in part devoted to idioms. His work features many other types of phraseological units along with a great deal of historical information on the English language. Differences are evident between the picture books too. We saw how, unlike Amoroso and Oelschlager, Ringstad adds etymological information, just as, unlike in Ringstad and Amoroso’s books, in

Oelschlager's the explanatory information is inconspicuous. These textual differences between the works in each category not only underscore the absence of one unique lexicographical model, but also the authors' inclination to follow their own personal lexicographical plan, with the risk of running into textual inconsistencies.

Beal, Terban and Oelschlager's works may be a testimony of this. In Beal's work the richness and complexity of the sections devoted to the historical and linguistic notions of the English language contrast greatly with the brevity and simplicity of the idiom meanings. Similarly, in Terban's work the elaborately formulated etymological information is not consistent with the simply expressed meanings and example of uses. These textual inconsistencies suggest that the intended age of the readership might not be restricted to children alone. After all, the historical and etymological facts seem more appropriate for (young) adult readers. A similar hypothesis seems plausible for Oelschlager's books too. The textual inconsistency between the two-page illustrations and the 'difficult-to read' explanatory information seems more suitable for an adult-cum-child readership: adults who might just want their children to enjoy the pictures or adults who might want to try to begin to explain what idioms are by reading the meanings and examples of use to them.

Given that none of the works studied here express what age the intended readership is, the presence of such textual inconsistencies may help us understand who the real readers of the works should be and what type of interpersonal relationship the works foster. We would normally expect lexicographical material for children to address children directly. It is the case of Amoroso and Ringstad's books, whose intelligible contents and easy syntactic constructions make them suitable for children to read alone. Because they do not manifest textual inconsistencies, the authors speak straight to their child readers, thus creating a direct interpersonal relationship between themselves and the presumed readers.

The textual inconsistencies present in Beal and Terban's dictionaries as well as Oelschlager's books instead suggest that the interpersonal relationship between author and child, for whom the books are meant, is not direct. The skills needed to use a dictionary (see a.o. Beech 2004; Lew & Galas 2008; Wingate 2004) along with the linguistic competence to be able to understand complicated historical and semantic notions necessarily imply the mediation of an adult. The interpersonal relationship that Beal and Terban's dictionaries favour is therefore not a direct one between author and presumed reader but an indirect one through an adult mediator. As an author, Oelschlager is even more removed from her readership. The younger children for whom the books are meant can only truly understand what they are looking at if a parent or older sibling can guide them in understanding the pictures and what they mean. Thanks to her books, Oelschlager therefore fosters the creation of that strong

interpersonal relationship between the older child/adult reader and the child listener, which – as research has shown – is so important for the development of language in children (a.o. Knauer *et al.* 2020; Montag *et al.* 2015; Tompkins *et al.* 2017).

In sum, the ideational, textual, and interpersonal characteristics of the works belonging to the two categories summarily explored here – the dictionaries and the picture books on idioms – certainly seem to reflect the absence of metalex-icographical studies in this area of lexicography. Unlike the dictionaries and books on idioms for adults that are compiled following a similar method, also owing to the fact that they are derived products from general lexicographical works (see, for instance, all the idiom dictionaries created from the general and learner’s dictionaries by Cambridge, Collins, Longman, Macmillan, Merriam-Webster, and Oxford), each work examined here discloses the author’s autonomy in the selection, presentation, and explanation of idioms. There is clearly need of further investigation on a wider sample of material and to examine all the aspects contained in the material more deeply to support this statement. In the meantime, however, I would like to conclude by underlining that the number and types of works devoted to teaching children idioms are indicative of how important idioms are not only for linguistic purposes but also for cultural ones. If there is any chance that we might save our planet and its inhabitants, it can only be by educating its youngest members. The wisdom and insight that idioms hold could indeed be an excellent starting point for routing our children and consequently humanity.

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