

**Abstract**

This paper presents the results of a semantic classification of the phraseological pattern *on + the + N* in English (*on the run, on the take, on the sly, on the line*), a very productive pattern with an open slot. From the realizations found in four dictionaries of idioms and in the *Oxford English Dictionary* six notional fields have been identified. Several processes contribute to the productive character of this pattern, namely analogical production, especially geographical variants and different language registers, the process of metaphorization and antonymic analogy.

**Key words**

Phraseological pattern; productivity; semantic classification; open slot; corpus linguistics; dictionary of idioms.

**Resumen**

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una clasificación semántica del esquema fraseológico *on + the + N* (*on the run, on the take, on the sly, on the line*), un esquema con casilla vacía muy productivo en inglés. A partir de las realizaciones recogidas en cuatro diccionarios fraseológicos (*dictionaries of idioms*) y en el *Oxford English Dictionary* se han identificado seis campos nocionales. Varios procesos entran en juego en el carácter productivo de este esquema: la producción analógica, especialmente las variantes geográficas y los registros de lengua, el proceso de metaforización y la analogía por antonimia.

**Palabras clave**

Patrón fraseológico; productividad; clasificación semántica; casilla vacía; lingüística de corpus; diccionario fraseológico.

Fecha de publicación: 26/08/2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/LINRED.2020.XVII.18>



## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to study the productivity of the phraseological pattern *on + the + N* in English as a pairing of form and meaning. The ultimate goal is to present a semantic classification that accounts, if not for all, at least for most of the realizations of this pattern. *On + the + N* is a very productive phraseological pattern with one open slot that is filled with a wide range of nouns, especially deverbal nouns (*on the make, on the take, on the run*) and nouns belonging to a substandard register (*on the randy, on the piss, on the scoot*).

Many of the realizations of this pattern are used in (very) informal speech and it is obvious that a newspaper corpus would have been unsuitable to check and test their frequency of use. Thus, and for reasons of representativity, the *enTenTen15* corpus<sup>1</sup> has been chosen on a sample of all the realizations found in four dictionaries of idioms and in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The *English Web Corpus* (*enTenTen15*) was compiled in 2015 by retrieving texts from the Internet and it is a contemporary corpus that encompasses a wide range of text types and geographical varieties.

As for the selection of examples, other corpora have been used such as the *British National Corpus* (BNC), the *Corpus of American Contemporary English* (COCA), the *14 Billion Word Web Corpus* (iWeb) and online newspaper archives. The *Corpus of Global Web-Based English* (GloWbe) has been used to check geographical varieties.

The *on + the + N* pattern represents a good starting point to explain phraseological productivity in which linguistic analogy plays a fundamental role. The combination of the three constituents produce a wide range of fixed phrases in English that can be subsumed under six general headings corresponding to six different semantic notional fields, namely motion and haste; failure, decline or decrease; dishonest behaviour or action; debauchery; increase or improvement; honesty and correctness.

## 2. Productivity in phraseology

Idioms with lexicalized variants are usually represented by the alternation of two (or sometimes even three or four) nominal, verbal, adjectival or prepositional constituents having attained lexicalized status and having been recorded as such in dictionaries of idioms. Cases such as *hit the road/trail, go for the jugular/throat, upset/overturn the applecart, fly/show/wave the flag, a passing/nodding acquaintance, hard/hot on your heels, fray at/around the edges, green about/around/at the gills* are common in English and show both the intrinsic variability of the so-called fixed phrases (Corpas Pastor 1996: 27-30; Moon 1998: 120; Langlotz 2006: 11) and the lexicalization of alternative word forms that have become recurrent and frequent amongst language users.

Contrary to idioms with lexicalized variants, open-slot idioms are phraseological units that have a large number of slot-fillers for one (or sometimes two) of their main lexical constituents (usually a noun or an

<sup>1</sup> Access to the *enTenTen15* corpus has been possible via *Sketch Engine*.

adjective). They can be close-ended, as with the phraseological unit (PU) *with a capital* \_\_\_\_\_, where the slot can be filled with a limited number of items (in this case the exact number of letters of the English alphabet) or open-ended, that is the slot can be filled with a much larger number of items, as with the PU \_\_\_\_\_ *to a fault*, in which numerous adjectives are possible even though the preferred realization is *generous* both in the BNC and the COCA<sup>2</sup>.

According to Moon (1998: 163), the concept of *idiom schema* can be applied to a set of idiomatic expressions that have the same reference, share the same metaphor and whose constituents are related words, usually synonyms, such as *hold a pistol to someone's head*, *put a gun to someone's head*, *feel a pistol at one's head* and *with a gun to one's head*. This concept is used by Moon mainly to account for the instability and the variability that are to be found in the so-called fixed phrases. This concept is more encompassing than the concept of phraseological pattern as it includes all semantically-related phrases regardless of their morpho-syntax.

*On the make*, *on the cards*, *on the rocks* or *on the shelf* and many other instantiations of the *on + the + N* pattern share the same morphosyntactic structure but are entirely different idioms from a semantic point of view. For that reason, they are not idioms with a lexicalized variant or open-slot idioms or even realizations of an idiom schema but rather individual and idiosyncratic idioms sharing the same phraseological pattern.

Finally, another terminological distinction has been made between a phraseme construction or template (Steyer 2015: 281) and a multi-word pattern (Steyer 2016: 14). A phraseme construction or template is one out of many different types of multi-word units (the example given by Steyer is *eine Seele von Mensch*<sup>3</sup>, where the invariable segment is *eine Seele von* and the variable constituent is *Mensch* and that corresponds in the classification presented above to an open-slot idiom) and is another term for an open-slot idiom. A multi-word pattern such as *N by N* (step by step) is, in its turn, a phraseological construction and not a single PU with an open slot allowing a more or less wide range of semantically related lexical items. A multi-word pattern, or a phraseological pattern, as I will hereafter present it, is a superordinate construction made up of mainly function words and grammatical categories whose syntactic structure together with the choice of lexis may carry or imply a variety of meanings.

Productivity is a linguistic concept, traditionally associated with morphology, which distinguishes between productive, semi-productive and unproductive affixes. For example, the deadjectival suffix *-al* and the deadjectival/denominal suffix *-ist* are still productive in English (these suffixes are used to produce new words in the language). The denominal suffixes *-dom* and *-hood* can be classified as semi-productive as their output is quite restricted. Conversely, the deverbal prefix *en-* is said to be unproductive as it is no longer used to create new verbs as new verbs in contemporary English are created mainly by conversion. The term is also used in

<sup>2</sup> The only restriction on the choice of adjectives concerns the semantic prosody of this expression, which is positive, thus the adjectives found as fillers in the COCA by order of frequency: *generous*, *loyal*, *honest*, *cautious*, *observant*, *polite*, *modest*, *gracious*, *fair*, *competitive*, *curious*, *courteous*, *empathetic*, etc.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase literally means 'a soul of a person' and is used in German to indicate that someone (a man, a woman, a child, etc.) is a very good and honest person.

phraseology and is applied to multi-word units and more precisely to phraseological patterns showing different degrees of productivity.

The phraseological pattern *in + full + N* is a very productive pattern in English. *In full swing* is the most frequent realisation in the COCA with a total of 979 tokens, followed by *in full view* that has 467 tokens. The meaning of the pattern is transparent and straightforward although, depending on the slot-filler, can be more or less idiomatic. *In full swing* is only used adverbially to indicate that something 'has already been happening for a period of time and there is a lot of activity' whereas *in full view*, 'able to be seen by other people', is usually followed by the preposition *of*. The former construction, more idiomatic, implies vigorous action whereas the latter, less idiomatic, insists on the fact of being clearly visible. Other realizations found in the COCA include *in full sun, in full force, in full compliance, in full flower, in full control, in full regalia, in full agreement, in full armor, in full flight, in full possession, in full gear, in full color, in full operation, in full sunlight, in full voice, in full battle, in full costume, in full daylight, in full effect, in full command, in full support, in full disclosure, in full riot*, etc.

Then, there are phraseological, or rather paremiological, patterns that are unproductive as is the case with a particular sub-group of proverbs, known as symmetrical proverbs, that is proverbs that belong to a superordinate pattern *Adj + N + Adj + N* in which the adjectives are identical.

1. *past + N + past + N* > Past shame, past grace
2. *safe + N + safe + N* > Safe bind, safe find
3. *happy + N + happy + N* > Happy wife, happy life

The examples above show the patterns followed by their one-off paremiographical realization, something which is confirmed by the searches carried out in the COCA that yield no results for any of the three patterns above<sup>4</sup>. These hapaxes are actually paremiological relics of the past and are mainly found in dictionaries of proverbs and other paremiological works.

### 3. The phraseological pattern *on + the + N*

This syntagmatic pattern can be classified as a multi-word pattern with an open lexical paradigm having as the slot-filler the third constituent, that is the noun. Not all of the phrases cast in this mould are idiomatic and non-compositional, however, and from a grammatical point of view, they are prepositional phrases functioning as adverbials. In fact, what binds together all these phrases is the fact that they are analogical formations (Monneret 2018: 15) based, for the most part, on lexical variants of a substandard register. Some prototypical examples of the pattern include *on the go, on the run* and *on the trot* in which the slot is filled with deverbal nouns related to action and movement whereas the phrases take on a special meaning or meanings different

<sup>4</sup> The only occurrence in the COCA is one token of the word sequence *happy place happy place* which is a reduplication of the noun phrase and therefore does not constitute a realization of the paremiological pattern in question.

from the meaning of the words if they were taken individually. Although most nouns are in the singular, some items include a lot-filler in the plural form.

It must be added that for theoretical and methodological reasons combinations that are embedded in larger PUs such as *the icing on the cake*, *catch somebody on the hop*, *put your neck on the line*, *put your head on the block* or *keep your feet on the ground* have not been included. Other realizations of the pattern when followed by a compulsory preposition, as for instance *be on the lookout for something or somebody*, *be on the road to something* and *be on the scent of something* have also been excluded. These latter examples actually behave as adjectives rather than adverbials and therefore do not fall into the pattern whose realizations are either introduced by a verb (usually the copula) or are used as postnominal modifiers.

This pattern is extremely productive in English and, as with productivity in morphology, is also the source of a very high number of low frequency items and hapaxes (Plag 2006: 123). The type of corpus, especially the type of sources used to compile the corpus, is a key question when looking at the interface between frequency and productivity. A huge oral corpus of informal conversations would have probably yielded many more results for some of the realizations than a corpus of the same size but compiled from the web since an important number of the phrases cast in this mould tend to be used in informal, or even very informal speech, and therefore are likely to be absent from written corpora.

The question remains whether the verb *to be* should be part of the pattern or not. The segments *be on the go* and *be on the move* have been classified as non-idiomatic verbal phraseologisms whereas *on the spot* is classified as a non-idiomatic adverbial phraseologism (Gläser 1986: 69-70). Under the heading *unilaterale adverbiale Idioms* are found several phraseological patterns and particularly the *prep. + def. art. + N* in which the N slot is filled mainly with metaphorical nouns: *on the never-never*, *on the warpath*. (Gläser 1986: 98).

In what follows a distinction as the one presented above will not be made, nor will the verb *to be* be included as part of the pattern as occurrences in corpora show realizations of the pattern used either with the verb *to be* or with no verb, preceded by an adverbial particle (*out*) or even with non-copulative verbs.

### 3.1. The collection of types

This is definitely one of the most productive phraseological patterns in English having given rise to a large number of regular and idiomatic instantiations. The types were collected from four phraseographic sources, namely the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (CIDI), the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (CCDI) and the *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (LID) and the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (ODI). The aim of this methodological approach is to contrast lexicography and corpora and, by doing so, observe the frequency of these PUs in corpora. Phraseological units include both fixed expressions and idioms (Moon 1998), that is multi-word units irrespective of their degree of idiomaticity. The results are presented below.

**Productivity and semantic classification of the phraseological pattern *on + the + N***

on the air	on the house	on the rails
on the ball	on the increase	on the razzle
on the beat	on the inside	on the rebound
on the bill	on the jump	on the record
on the blink	on the knocker	on the rise
on the block	on the lam	on the road
on the boil	on the latch	on the rocks
on the books	on the level	on the ropes
on the bounce	on the line	on the run
on the broo	on the loose	on the scene
on the bubble	on the make	on the scrounge
on the button	on the mark	on the shelf
on the cards	on the market	on the sidelines
on the carpet	on the mat	on the skids
on the cart	on the match	on the sly
on the case	on the mend	on the spot
on the cheap	on the money	on the square
on the couch	on the move	on the stump
on the cuff	on the nail	on the take
on the defensive	on the never-never	on the tapis
on the door	on the nod	on the tiles
on the double	on the nose	on the town
on the downgrade	on the off chance	on the trot
on the fiddle	on the outs	on the turn
on the flat	on the phone	on the up
on the fly	on the prod	on the wagon
on the gad	on the prowl	on the wane
on the game	on the pull	on the warpath
on the go	on the QT	on the way out
on the ground	on the rack	on the wing
on the hoof	on the rag	

The collection was completed with other idiomatic phrases found in the OED, and presented below, by using the search string *on the \** and by checking the meaning and syntactic function of each of the entries so as to confirm their phraseological status. Dictionaries of idioms have to be selective, for matters of space, and make choices as far as their entries are concerned. Firstly, highly transparent combinations such as *on the agenda* or *on the alert* are, for that matter, not usually included in the macrostructure of dictionaries of idioms. Secondly, some of the phrases belong to a substandard register and tend to be avoided and are, in their turn, found in



dictionaries of slang<sup>5</sup> (*on the bash* or *on the creep*). Finally, there are cases of realizations that are extremely infrequent in corpora, or even nonce forms, and are only recorded by the OED so that they can be attested and described lexicographically (*on the bustle* or *on the randan*).

on the agenda	on the fuddle	on the scoop
on the alert	on the gamble	on the scoot
on the angle	on the hog	on the scout
on the back	on the hop	on the sick
on the back burner	on the lash	on the skite
on the back foot	on the lurk	on the skive
on the ballast	on the pad	on the sneak
on the bash	on the peg	on the spurs
on the batter	on the pineapple	on the stuff
on the beam	on the piss	on the table
on the beer	on the pogy	on the tap
on the bend	on the plush	on the toboggan
on the bimble	on the pounce	on the toot
on the booze	on the queer	on the turf
on the bum	on the ramble	on the twist
on the bustle	on the randan	on the upswing
on the buy	on the randy	on the wamble
on the creep	on the razz	on the watch
on the crook	on the recovery	on the whizz
on the cross	on the relief	
on the dodge	on the roister	
on the ebb	on the rove	
on the fall	on the rush	
on the frolic	on the schnozz	

### 3.2. Patterns and meaning

The strong link between syntax and semantics (or pattern and meaning) has long been put forward in the British tradition of corpus linguistics and pattern grammar (Sinclair 1991: 65). Later on, the stress was laid on the association of certain patterns with lexical items carrying a particular meaning and especially in the process of analogy that this association implies: “We might speculate that, when a pattern is used with words with a particular meaning, speakers begin to use other words with a similar meaning with the same pattern, by a process of analogy, so that at any point in time, what words belong to a list is in a state of flux.” (Hunston &

<sup>5</sup> A certain number of phrases of substandard register can be found in the *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional Language* by Eric Partridge (see references).

Francis 2000: 96). The PUs that will be analyzed are all idiomatic instantiations of a template whose productive slot is filled with a paradigm of lexical items having a similar meaning in each of the semantic groups in which they are classified. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are idiosyncratic realizations that do not fit in any of the semantic groups as well as other irregular cases that are the result of specific processes of metaphorization.

The preposition *on* seems to have developed several senses as part of this phraseological pattern. On the one hand, the sense of exactitude as found in PUs such as *on the dot* or *on the button* and on the other hand the sense of dependency as with *on the dole*, *on the pogy* and *on the relief*. Other figurative senses include continued motion as with *on the move* or *on the go*, and also addiction or overconsumption as with *on the booze* or *on the beer*. It should be noted that the meaning is to be found in the whole pattern, i.e. the combination of the preposition *on*, the determiner *the* and the noun.

It should be claimed that *on*, as with the prepositions *to* and *of*, has clearly semantic and pragmatic functions and that they “emerge in stock expressions and other collocations with specific lexical items” (Pace-Sigge 2015: 15). The same argument can be applied to the preposition *in*, and to many others, as the idea of an original sense of inclusion (for *in*) or of superposition (for *on*) has to be dismissed as prepositions have more abstract values when they are part of fixed phrases in which the question of the sense of the preposition on its own is no longer pertinent (Chauvin 2016 : 617).

#### 4. Semantic groups

Six main semantic groups that fall into the *on + the + N* pattern have been identified. They have been ordered according to their degree of productivity: the first four groups are certainly more productive than the last two groups, something which bears on the predominantly negative connotation of this phraseological pattern.

1. motion and haste
2. failure, decline or decrease
3. dishonest behaviour or action
4. debauchery
5. increase or improvement
6. honesty and correctness

In order to check the real use and frequency of this type of phraseological pattern, a selection of 13 types, together with their number of tokens and their frequency per million words in the *English Web Corpus 2015* (*enTenTen15*), is shown in table 1. The *enTenTen15* is a synchronic corpus of English of slightly over 15 billion words that includes the main varieties of the English language and is made up of texts collected from the internet. It is, therefore, a very large corpus and well-adapted for this type of PUs. The selection has been made



on grounds of unambiguity (phrases having only a non-compositional reading) and syntactic status (phrases used exclusively as adverbials and not being part of a more extended syntactic frame).

Table 1. A range of frequency of a selection of realizations of the *on + the + N* pattern in the *enTenTen15* corpus

PUs	Number of tokens	Frequency per million words
on the rise	66,511	3.62
on the move	49,297	2.68
on the go	47,297	2.57
on the fly	28,460	1.55
on the mend	3,078	0.17
on the prowl	3,066	0.17
on the upswing	2,073	0.11
on the sly	1,244	0.07
on the trot	1,181	0.06
on the lam	1,123	0.06
on the skids	437	0.02
on the whizz	0	0
on the toot	0	0

As table 1 clearly shows there is a wide range of frequencies of use that goes from hapaxes to high frequent phrases such as *on the rise*. Phrases with slot-fillers from a standard register (as is the case with *move*, *go* or *fly*) tend to be much more frequent than phrases with slot-fillers from an informal or substandard register such as *skids*, *whizz* or *toot*.

#### 4.1. Motion and haste

Group 1 has been named *motion and haste* and as a matter of fact these two concepts are closely connected in phrases such as *on the fly*, *on the run* or *on the trot*. Some of these phrases are polysemous, having developed a more or less related sense as with *on the trot* which means ‘very busy and active’ but also ‘one after the other’ or ‘continually’. In its turn, the phrase *on the run* is also polysemous: it can simply mean ‘to hurry from one activity to another’ but it can also mean ‘to be trying to avoid being caught, especially by the police’ as can be observed, respectively, in examples (1) and (2). The sense of the phrase in example (1) belongs to group 1 whereas the sense in example (2) relates it to group 3 (dishonest behaviour or action).

- (1) Rudy was never stationary. He was always **on the run**, flying to the bank, the map office, down to the hardware store in Old Town. Wherever you went, Rudy had been there before you. (COCA)
- (2) A police officer shot himself in the chest as law enforcement officers closed in on him at a campground. He had been **on the run** after he allegedly shot and wounded his estranged wife in front of their children. (COCA)

Group 1 is undoubtedly the most productive of all the semantic groups. The slot in the pattern is usually filled with a deverbal noun as for example *turn, go, fly* or *jump* but there are also cases of substantives such as *road* or *knocker*. Some of these phrases can be polysemic and in that case the notions of motion and haste are linked with that of being busy or very active, for instance in phrases such as *on the go* or *on the fly*.

It is interesting to notice that some phrases in this group have a negative connotation that relates them to other semantic groups, for example *on the lam* which is mainly American slang and means 'be escaping, especially from the police'. The notions of motion and haste are combined with the idea of running away because of wrongdoing. Contrary to *on the run*, *on the lam* is a monosemic phrase and this is so because *lam* is actually a cranberry word, i.e. a word that has no lexicosemantic entity on its own as it is only used as part of a more complex phraseological unit.

- (3) In Culliton's delightful and sneakily feminist debut novel, a Brooklyn mother is **on the lam** after embezzling thousands of dollars from her daughters' private school. (*The New York Times*, 2017-10-01)
- (4) He went into hiding in 1969 after being ordered by the state to leave Sicily after he had finished serving a five-year prison sentence for Mafia association. During his decades **on the lam**, the only picture authorities had of the fugitive was more than 30 years old. (*The Washington Post*, 2017-11-17)

Examples (3) and (4) explicitly show the type of textual environment surrounding this phrase. Dishonest or criminal activities such as "embezzlement" in (3) or "Mafia association" in (4) both signal and reinforce the negative connotation suggested by this phrase. Other negative semantic connotations are associated with the notions of vagrancy or begging as with *on the hog*, *on the bum* and *on the scrounge*.

#### 4.2. Failure, decline or decrease

From a lexicographic point of view, the items belonging to this group are frequently defined or described as 'experiencing difficulties, doing badly, becoming less strong or likely to fail'. Contrary to the general tendency of singular slot-fillers in all semantic groups, it should be noted the presence of a number of plural nouns in this particular group as with *on the ropes*, *on the rocks* or *on the skids*, suggesting the existence of a semi-productive morphological sub-pattern.

This second semantic group is also productive, but less than the previous one, and is especially characterized by its informality. In fact, most of the phrases in this group are labelled informal (*on the ropes* or *on the rocks*) or even slang (*on the toboggan*, which is also geographically labelled as an Americanism and is defined as ‘a rapid decline’ by the OED). Other American phrases in this group are *on the bubble* and *on the downgrade*. Some of these phrases tend to appear in specific contexts, i.e. with the passing of time they have developed a specialized contextual use as with *on the rocks*, used to “characterize business ventures and marriages that have failed” (Lattey 1986: 227). The phrase was originally used in seafaring to describe a shipwreck ending up on the rocks, hence the negative outcome of some journey and finally the negative outcome of an enterprise, especially of a marriage.

- (5) As Ms. Spears, a proud hillbilly and soon to be mother of two, attempts to clean up her image and quash speculation that her marriage to a backup dancer turned rapper is **on the rocks**, it's her former rival, Ms. Aguilera, who has found the road to respectability. (COCA)

Example (5) is one of the 45 hits of the segment *is on the rocks* in the COCA. 30 hits have the word *marriage* in their co-text and 3 the word *relationship*, which corroborates the contextual use of the phrase and this precise co-textual lexical association.

### 4.3. Dishonest behaviour or action

This third semantic group takes on a particular negative and disapproving connotation and as a matter of fact several phrases in this group are generally related to cheating or deceiving in order to gain some personal profit such as *on the take*, *on the fiddle* and *on the make* as can be observed in the co-texts of examples (6), (7) and (8) respectively. Otherwise, they are related to prostitution (*on the game*, *on the turf*) or to pickpocketing or robbery (*on the whizz*, *on the cross*, *on the creep*, etc.).

- (6) Set in Gujarat, in the 1980s and '90s, the movie depicts an India of petty corruption, with cops and politicians **on the take**, and honor among thieves more aspirational than real. “This world is broken,” Raees says in voice-over. “You have to turn crooked to fix it.” (*The New York Times*, 2017-1-27)
- (7) Caine is cast as Brian Reader, the ‘king’ of the thieves... until his nerve goes (or he loses his “arsehole” as his colleagues inelegantly put it when Reader begins to have doubts about the job). He has been **on the fiddle** all his life. His criminal career started when he stole a tin of peaches aged 13 and has escalated from there. (*The Independent*, 2018-9-15)
- (8) Here is my problem. My friends - some old, some new, both male and female - indulge in a great deal of innuendo about me behind my back and even to my face. I am seen as a sly old dog **on the make**. It is not meant without affection, but I find it totally offensive. It is just company and conversation I seek. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2017-4-29)

#### 4.4. Debauchery

The term debauchery has been used in the fourth group in the broad sense of ‘bad sexual behaviour, drinking too much alcohol and taking drugs’ (or any combination of the three). It is in this category where one can find the highest number of types with no occurrences in the corpus. Again, this is not unusual, but rather a highly expected result, as all these realizations are more likely to be used in speech and in extremely unconventional contexts than in online newspaper archives used a corpus. This is also a very productive and negatively-connoted semantic group, mainly because of the large number of nouns of a substandard register that can be used as slot-fillers. The meaning of the construction in this semantic group is about doing an activity in an extreme or excessive way, especially bingeing, as in (9), with phrases such as *on the lash*, *on the fuddle*, *on the scoop*, *on the scoot*, etc., although the activity does not only involve drinking in excess but can also involve drugs (*on the stuff*) or sex (*on the pull*).

(9) What was once, in the Eighties and Nineties a glorious holiday rite of passage, that gin and tonic in an airport bar signifying “clocking off” for a fortnight, has mutated into drunken stag-do brawls, slurring frequent fliers and grans **on the lash** who’ve had five too many. (*The Independent*, 2017-08-15)

(10) They do not attempt to emulate the behaviour of rock stars of the past, who after a gig would go out **on the razz** all night before returning to the hotel to throw a television set out of the window. (*The Independent*, 2017-12-13)

(11) We had to go out **on the pull** to get laid. Dress up, go to a club and snog someone at the end when the DJ played the slow song. If we “swiped” someone we liked, we’d get arrested. (*The Independent*, 2017-11-25)

Examples (10) and (11) share the same left co-text, i.e. the verb *go out*, showing the use of some of the pattern realizations with non-copulative verbs.

#### 4.5. Increase or improvement

Group number 5 has been named *increase or improvement* and semantically represents the opposite of group number 2 “failure, decline or decrease”. Even though this group includes fewer types than groups 1 to 4, they tend to show a higher frequency of use and indeed it is the phrase *on the rise* that has the highest number of tokens in the corpus, 66,511 hits, which represents 3.62 per million words. This correlates with the fact that *on the rise* has a negative semantic prosody and is preferentially associated with nouns denoting crime and drug use: when using the search string *[nn\*] is on the rise* in the COCA the most frequent slot fillers are *crime* and *marijuana/heroin/drug/substance use* followed by other negative-connoted nouns such as *obesity* and *disease*. Other types in this group such as *on the upswing* and *on the mend* are found in the medium frequency range.

(12) And as American interest in Cuba escalates – many “people-to-people” tours are sold out or wait-listed through 2012, and a Republican presidential win would likely eliminate them entirely – prices are **on the upswing**, as well. (COCA)

Both *on the rise* and *on the upswing* are used to indicate an increase in prices (12) but, contrary to the semantic preferences of *on the rise*, *on the upswing* is used in connection with improvement in the economy and the industry in general. *On the mend*, in its turn, denotes improvement and is especially associated with health.

#### 4.6. Honesty and correctness

Finally, group number 6 is the least represented of the six groups in terms of frequency and number of types but it has been included, nevertheless, as potentially productive. This group clearly shows that the same phraseological pattern can be used for entirely opposite concepts or ideas. Three UPs denote honest action or behaviour (*on the level* is general English whereas *on the square* and *on the up* are mainly American phrases). For the rest, they mostly mean the same thing, something done correctly, as and when it was expected to be done as illustrated in examples (13) and (14).

(13) Many hardcore Leavers forget that part of living in a democracy confers upon us the absolute right to do that. But here’s where Farage was **on the button**: were they to win such a poll, none of us would be able to deny that the terms of the debate would be irrevocably changed. (*The Independent*, 2018-01-12)

(14) At a hospice in Greensboro, N.C., John read the email to his ailing wife and responded on her behalf. “Thank you for being such a strong supporter and friend to her,” he said. “She’s talked about you a ton these past few weeks, and her sense of you being a person with great insight and empathy. She’s clearly **on the mark** there.” (COCA)

#### 4.7. Idiosyncratic cases

Some of the realizations of the template are unproductive from a semantic point of view and therefore have been excluded from the categorization. *On the shelf*, for example, both as ‘something not noticed or not used’ or ‘as someone who is not married and is considered too old for anyone to want to marry them’ belongs to a semantically unproductive pattern and therefore has not yielded any analogical realizations. Other examples are *on the wagon* meaning ‘having decided not to drink any alcohol for a period of time’, *on the books* ‘employed by a company or belonging to an organization, society or sports team’ and *on the cards* ‘likely to happen’, among others. These *one off-idioms* (Jackendoff 2008: 8) do not fit semantically under any of the six groups that have been identified despite the fact that they are both idiomatic and structurally congruent.

## 5. Sources and processes of productivity

Apart from the general process of lexical analogy involved in the examples presented so far, other sources and processes concerning productivity should be considered: for the former informal register and slang and geographical varieties and for the latter metaphorical extension and antonymic analogy.

### 5.1. Informal register and slang

Informal register, and slang words in particular, is frequently used in the *on + the + N* pattern. A selection of realizations of the template with this sort of slot-fillers include *on the toot*, *on the turf*, *on the twist*, *on the whizz*, *on the sneak*, *on the stuff*, *on the skite*, *on the scoop*, *on the scoot*, *on the roister*, *on the queer*, *on the ramble*, *on the randan*, *on the randy*, *on the razz* and *on the piss*. It is interesting to notice that all of them have to do either with a debauched lifestyle or with illicit or criminal activities corroborating the link between language register, semantics and constructions.

Several realizations of this semantic subcategory concern heavy drinking and drinking sprees: *on the skite*, *on the scoop*, *on the toot*, *on the randan*, *on the piss* and *on the scoot* among many others. As far as illicit or criminal activities is concerned *on the turf* is related to prostitution, *on the twist* to cheating, *on the whizz* to picking pockets and *on the sneak* to robbery.

(15)As it turned out, customers would have stood a better chance riding shotgun with George Michael after a hefty night **on the toot**. The schemes collapsed, triggering £700m of losses for 50,000 small investors. (iWeb).

As a good number of realizations of this pattern are extremely rare, very large corpora are needed in order to retrieve certain examples (15). The *iWeb*<sup>6</sup> is a reference corpus of 14 billion words compiled from about 95,000 websites and an absolutely indispensable tool for the retrieval of realizations of the pattern that have slang words as slot-fillers, most likely to pop up in websites rather than in more conventional corpora.

### 5.2. Geographical variants

The *Corpus of Global Web-Based English* (GloWbE) has been used to detect geographical variants. It has 1.9 billion words and allows comparisons between different world Englishes. A search of the PU *on the lash* shows the preferential use of the phrase in European English (81 hits out of a total of 94 correspond to British English and Irish English put together, which makes 86,1%). *On the razz* is also preferentially European as 18 out of the 22 hits correspond to these two varieties. *Schnozz* is American Jewish slang for *nose*, hence *on the schnozz* which

<sup>6</sup> For further information go to <https://www.english-corpora.org/iweb/>.



is synonymous with the PU *on the nose*. Other exclusively or mainly American PUs of this pattern include *on the toot*, *on the prod*, *on the bash*, *on the creep*, *on the rag*, *on the toboggan*, *on the blink*, etc.

### 5.3. Metaphorical extension

The process of metaphORIZATION involves a change of meaning, usually a change from a literal concrete meaning to a figurative abstract meaning. This metaphorical extension can be observed in the UP *on the wane*, used specifically to indicate the phase of the moon in which its shape becomes less and less round. Then the phrase has been metaphORIZED to describe any situation that is becoming less and less strong or important (Moon 1998: 214).

MetaphORIZATION of realizations of phraseological patterns has been observed for the *ADV1 and ADV1* pattern and especially for the case of *over and over* where the initial meaning of physical movement has been extended to repetition (Levin & Lindquist 2015: 13). In the case of the *on + the + N* pattern, several compositional phrases have developed a metaphorical sense and have finally become fossilized as idioms. The PU *on the ropes* (group 2) means 'doing badly and likely to fail' and can be used contextually as an equivalent of the UP *on the rocks*, especially when a failure in business is concerned. The phrase, which originated in boxing, was used to indicate that a boxer was actually on (or against) the ropes of the boxing ring and was then in a difficult situation. The phrase has since undergone a metaphorical extension and is currently used in relation to the economy, business or industry.

### 5.4. Antonymic analogy

Antonymic analogy is the process by which a new PU is formed by replacing one of the PU's constituents with its exact opposite. In phraseology in general, adjectives and prepositions are the ones that usually commute in some phrasemes. Some examples of antonymous adjectives used to create new phrasemes are *best* and *worst* in *the best of both worlds* that has given rise to *the worst of both worlds*, and *fast* and *slow* in *the fast lane* and *the slow lane* (Martí Solano 2018: 106-107) but most of the cases concern prepositions or adverbial particles: *in/out of the running*, *in/out of the loop*, *keep your eye on/off the ball*, *get on/off sb's case*, etc. A number of cases concern the *on + the + N* template, namely *on/off the mark*, *on/off the rails*, *on/off the beam* and *on/off the hook*. Examples (16) and (17) illustrate the antonymic meaning from 'correct' (16) to 'incorrect' (17).

(16)The aftermath of the war in Iraq has put the articulators of the doctrine on the defensive. Talk of accelerated "regime change" is muted for the moment. As a creed and ideology, however, preponderance is still operative. If this analysis is **on the mark**, there is much work to be done by Catholic theologians, social ethicists and others, and indeed by the hierarchy. (COCA).

(17)"The short story is that every aspect of the oil infrastructure has been starved – drilling, refineries, distribution, even the gas stations in Iran," Stern told Reuters. "It's a mess." Even if Stern's analysis

is **off the mark**, as some have suggested, Iran's policies are not doing much to stem the dwindling reserve tide. (COCA).

It should be noted that in the case of *on/off the cuff*, there is no antonymic analogy involved but rather two distinct processes of metaphorization implying two different senses. On the one hand, *off the cuff* means 'on the spur of the moment, unrehearsed' and is normally used with verbs such as *speak* and *talk*. On the other hand, *on the cuff* means 'on credit' and is restricted to American usage. The same applies to the pair *on the peg/off the peg*. The former is used mainly in the military and means 'under arrest' or 'in trouble with authority' and is currently rare or obsolete. The latter is a current common phrase especially used in British English: Americans prefer *off the rack* and Australians *off the hook* to mean 'clothes that are made and bought in standard sizes and not made specially to fit a particular person'.

## 6. Conclusions

The syntactic pattern and the syntagmatic relation between the grammar and the content words in the *on + the + N* pattern carry meaning, that is patterns of word combinations are intrinsically meaningful. Besides, they are form-meaning pairings of varying degrees of productivity. This productivity is due to a large lexical paradigm, to be found mainly in informal register and slang but also in geographical varieties. The semantic classification of the idiomatic realizations reveals a general association of this pattern with negative meanings and contexts of use, i.e. a negative semantic prosody. This association is not exclusively negative since the same pattern is used, although much less frequently, with a positive meaning and also with idiosyncratic meanings that fall out of any of the six semantic groups.

Ramón Martí Solano

[ramon.marti-solano@unilim.fr](mailto:ramon.marti-solano@unilim.fr)

Universidad de Limoges, Francia





## Referencias bibliográficas

- [BNC] *The British National Corpus*. <https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/> (accessed 22 May 2020).
- [CCDI] *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (2002, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.): London: HarperCollins.
- [CIDI] *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (2005, 7<sup>th</sup> ed.): Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [COCA] *Corpus of Contemporary American English*. <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/> (accessed 22 May 2020).
- [enTenTen15] *English Web Corpus 2015*, [https://app.sketchengine.eu/#concordance?corpname=preloaded%2Fententen15\\_tt21](https://app.sketchengine.eu/#concordance?corpname=preloaded%2Fententen15_tt21) (accessed 16 May 2020).
- [GloWbE] *Corpus of Web-Based Global English*, <https://www.english-corpora.org/glowbe/> (accessed 16 May 2020).
- [iWeb]. *iWeb: The 14 Billion Word Web Corpus*. <https://www.english-corpora.org/iweb/> (accessed 16 May 2020).
- [LID] *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (1998): Harlow: Longman.
- [ODI] *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (2004, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.): Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [OED] *The Oxford English Dictionary*. <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.univ-paris3.fr/> (accessed 28 August 2019).
- Chauvin, Catherine (2016): "Polysémie prépositionnelle entre invariance, figement et analogie : une étude de cas en anglais (She was in high heels, in her makeup, in a belt)", *Language design: journal of theoretical and experimental linguistics*, 18 (extra), pp. 307-323.
- Corpas Pastor, Gloria (1997): *Manual de fraseología española*, Madrid: Gredos.
- Gläser, Rosemarie (1986): *Phraseologie der englischen Sprache*, Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Hunston, Susan y Gill Francis (2000): *Pattern Grammar. A corpus-driven approach to the lexical grammar of English*, Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Jackendoff, Ray (2008): "'Construction after Construction' and Its Theoretical Challenges", *Language*, 84(1), pp. 8-28.
- Langlotz, Andreas (2006): *Idiomatic Creativity: A cognitive-linguistic model of idiom representation and idiom-variation in English*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Lathey, Elsa (1986): "Pragmatic classification of idioms as an aid for the language learners", *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 24 (3), pp. 217-233.
- Levin, Magnus & Hans Lindquist (2015): "On the ADV1 and ADV1 construction with adverbs of direction in English", Sebastian Hoffman, Bettina Fischer-Starcke y Andrea Sand (eds.), *Current Issues in Phraseology*, Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 7-33.
- Martí Solano, Ramón (2018): "Les ressorts de la manipulation phraséologique dans le discours journalistique en anglais : les procédés d'inversion", Laurent Gautier (ed.), *Figement et discours spécialisés*, Berlin: Franck und Timme, pp. 93-110.
- Monneret, Philippe (2018): "Phraséologie et analogie", Olivier Soutet, Salah Mejri e Inès Sfar (eds.), *La phraséologie : théories et applications*, Paris: Honoré Champion, pp. 15-32.
- Moon, Rosamund (1998): *Fixed Expressions and Idioms in English. A Corpus-Based Approach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Pace-Sigge, Michael (2015): *The Function and Use of TO and OF in Multi-Word Units*, London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Partridge, Eric (1984 8<sup>th</sup> ed.): *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.
- Plag, Ingo (2006): "Productivity", Keith Brown (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 121-128.
- Sinclair, John M (1991): *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sketch Engine, <https://www.sketchengine.eu/> (accessed 16 May 2020).
- Steyer, Kathrin (2015): "Patterns. Phraseology in a State of Flux", *International Journal of Lexicography*, 28 (3), pp.279-298.
- Steyer, Kathrin (2016): "Corpus-Driven Description of Multi-Word Patterns", Gloria Corpas Pastor, Johanna Monti, Violeta Seretan y Ruslan Mitkov (eds.), *Proceedings of the EUROPHRAS conference Multiword Units in Machine Translation and Translation Technologies*, Ginebra: Éditions Tradulex, pp. 13-18.