

# [ Variability of Proper- -Noun Idioms in Different Varieties of English ]

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**[Abstract]** *The paper sets out to investigate the grammatical and semantic variability of selected idioms across different varieties of English, employing the cognitive linguistic and cultural linguistic perspectives. The analysis revealed that lexemes in idioms are prone to considerable variability in different English varieties. It was also revealed that the topic of the text, as well as the intention of its producer, played an important role in the process of modification. Examples of this kind of modification might be variants of the idiom Bob's your uncle, such as Jah's your uncle or Mao's your uncle, as found in the NOW corpus.*

**[Keywords]** *idioms; variability; cognitive linguistics; cultural linguistics; corpus*

## [1] Introduction

The present paper sets out to investigate the grammatical and semantic variability of selected idiomatic expressions across different varieties of English, employing the cognitive linguistic and cultural linguistic perspectives. Contrary to the traditional/orthodox view, which considers the meaning of idioms to be non-compositional, fully opaque and hence unpredictable (e.g. Fraser, 1970; Katz 1973; Crystal, 2003; Cruse, 2011), the cognitive linguistic perspective maintains that the meaning of most idioms can be understood with the help of the conceptual systems which are deeply embedded in human brains and function independently of language (e.g. Nunberg, 1978; Nunberg et al. 1994; Kövecses, 2010). This suggests that it may be possible to rely on our knowledge of these conceptual systems in order to understand the meanings of unfamiliar idiomatic expressions. The concepts in people's minds consist very often of prototypical elements that are generally used to describe a particular event or situation. In this way, idioms function similarly to metaphors (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1994, p. 463). In addition to this, Cultural Linguistics considers the meaning of idiomatic expressions to be culturally motivated (Sharifian, 2017). Different approaches have been applied with respect to the ability of both native and non-native speakers of English to understand the meaning of idioms (see e.g. Langlotz, 2006 for a summary of different approaches to idiom comprehension and Kvetko, 2009 for different types of idioms). Also, the question has also been raised whether the form of an idiom is unconditionally fixed or allows for a certain variability, and to what extent the possible variability is admissible (e.g. Moon, 1998; Langlotz 2006, Callies; 2017). Moreover, once the semantic and grammatical variability of idioms has been established, the actual instances of idiom variability can be investigated in order to determine the reasons and influences that lie behind this process. It is the aim of the present paper to take this route, and to carry out a small-scale case study showing the relationship between the variability of idiomatic expressions in a language and the cultural settings in which they occur. For this purpose, several name idioms, i.e. idioms containing a proper noun, have been chosen. The advantages of this choice are twofold. First, name idioms represent a rather restricted group in terms of the number of expressions which belong to it, and are therefore suitable for initial research in this field of study. Second, proper nouns can be viewed as bearing a direct relationship to the particular text or the particular culture in which they appear. Additionally, the meaning of name idioms is generally regarded as non-compositional (Moon, 1998), which means that individual elements of the idioms do not contribute to its overall meaning. These idioms constitute a less researched area of linguistic study. From the psycholinguistic point of view, it has been concluded that "syntactic behavior of idioms is determined, to a large extent, but speakers' assumptions about the way in which parts of idioms contribute to their figurative interpretations as a whole" (Gibbs, 1989). Non-compositional idioms are therefore regarded as more rigid.

## [2] Theoretical background

The theoretical background to this study, on which the analysis rests, comprises two areas of investigation. First, I will discuss the approach to idioms presented in various textbooks aimed at ESL learners. Second, I will summarize different linguistic approaches to idiom comprehension. Knowledge of these theoretical issues is necessary in order to adopt an up-to-date approach to the problem under investigation.

### [2.1] Idiom variability

The following section will examine idiom variability from several different perspectives. First, I will address the question of whether idiom variability is mentioned in various ESL textbooks, and second, I will examine the linguistic approach to this issue. The overview will address the question of whether and to which degree these two approaches differ.

#### [2.1.1] Idiom variability in ESL textbooks

A number of ESL textbooks are concerned solely with idioms, as these are considered to be an important part of the intermediate and advanced language competence of any learner of English as a foreign language. Their role in both formal and informal discourse is strongly accented in order to prepare learners of English to be able to deal with idioms in everyday encounters with native speakers, as well as with the more varied role idioms play in the media. To achieve this aim, variability of idioms is mentioned, but only marginally: “Some idiomatic expressions are fixed and cannot change – very often you can change the tense and the pronoun” (Wright, 2002, p. 8), “Sometimes additional words can be used within an idiom, especially to change the emphasis” (Gairns & Redman, 2011, p. 8), or “Most idioms are fixed in their form and cannot be changed or varied. Sometimes, however, the grammar or the vocabulary can be varied slightly” (O’Dell & McCarthy, 2009, p. 6). The previously mentioned ESL textbooks are aimed at intermediate learners of English, which might be the reason why the possible range of use of idioms and their variability is mentioned only to a limited extent. The textbook *English Idioms in Use – Advanced* (O’Dell & McCarthy, 2010) elaborates more on the subject of the range of use of idioms, mentioning e.g. that they can be used to add an emphasis to an utterance, to make an utterance more interesting, to catch a reader’s eye, or to indicate membership of a particular group (p. 8). However, the variability of idioms is likewise mentioned only marginally: “Idioms are a type of formulaic language. Formulaic language consists of fixed expressions which you learn and understand as units rather than as individual words. [...] The words and word order of idioms are usually fixed, and we cannot change them in any way” (O’Dell & McCarthy, 2010, p. 6).

As a conclusion of this micro-analysis of several ESL textbooks, it can be mentioned that the ability of English idioms to change both lexically and grammatically without losing their idiomatic meaning is not commonly known among learners of the language.

### [2.1.2] Idiom variability in linguistics

A number of recent linguistic studies have aimed to show the relationship between the idiomatic expressions of a language and the cultural setting in which they occur. Two of these studies, “‘Idioms in the making’ as evidence for variation in conceptual metaphor across varieties of English” (Callies, 2017) and “Fixed expressions and culture” (Fiedler, 2017), published very recently in the academic journals *Cognitive Linguistic Studies* and *International Journal of Language and Culture*, have provided inspiration for the present paper. The shared conclusion of these two articles is that idiomatic expressions do vary when compared across different varieties of English; the question, which remains to be answered, is how and why. Both articles also observe greater variability in African Englishes than in other varieties of English. Although the link between idiomatic expressions of a language and its culture is proved beyond doubt, the actual research on the extent and the nature of the variability has only begun, as Callies (2017) states in one of his articles: “Generally speaking, when compared to the field of lexico-grammar, there is relatively little research on idiomatic phraseology and figurative language use in varieties of English” (p. 63). The following sections outline a brief history of approaches to idiom variability.

### [2.1.3] The traditional approach

The traditional approach to idioms is marked by allowing no lexical and/or grammatical variability, or only a very limited amount. For example, Crystal (2003) describes idioms as follows: “Two central features identify an idiom. The meaning of the idiomatic expression cannot be deduced by examining the meanings of the constituent lexemes, and the expressions are fixed, both grammatically and lexically. Thus, *Put a sock in it!* means ‘stop talking’, and it is not possible to replace any of the lexemes and retain the idiomatic meaning” (p. 163). Similarly, Cruse (2011) states that: “All the items of a sentence except those which form part of the idiom can be changed without destroying the idiomatic meaning in the sentence. Items inside the idiom cannot be changed. The meaning is attached to the phrase, and not to the individual constituents” (p. 86), while Griffiths (2006) maintains that “An expression is an idiom if its meaning is non-compositional, that is to say it cannot be worked out from knowledge of the meanings of its parts and the way they have been put together” (p. 19). Just as the lexical variability of idioms is excluded from traditional approaches, only little more allowance is given to their grammatical variability. Cruse (2011) notes that some aspects of grammar may be part of the meaning of the idiom and some aspects of grammar may not. For example, the passive voice may function differently in different idioms. In the sentence *His leg was being pulled continually by the other boys*, the passive voice, according to Cruse (2011, p. 87), does not destroy the idiomatic meaning of the sentence, while in the sentence *The bucket was kicked by him* it does (Cruse, 2011, p. 87).

### [2.1.4] The cognitive approach

In comparison to the traditional approach outlined above, cognitive linguistics admits greater variability in idioms: “Idioms and many formulaic expressions are not simple

fixed or frozen phrases. In many cases, idioms are analysable to varying degrees” (Cuyckens & Geeraerts, 2010, p. 698). Cognitive linguists consider idioms to be “an integral part of the language that eases social interaction, enhances textual coherence, and, quite importantly, reflect fundamental patterns of human thought” (Cuyckens & Geeraerts, 2010, p. 698). Similarly, “many, or perhaps most, idioms are products of our conceptual system and not simply a matter of language” (Kövecses, 2010, 232). By this assertion, Kövecses implies that it may be possible to understand, at least partially, the meaning of idiomatic expressions with the help of our general knowledge of the world. In other words, as Evans & Green (2006) state: “Language serves to encode and externalize our thoughts” (p. 7). Our knowledge of the world is reflected in the conceptual systems stored in our minds. These assumptions suggest that it is possible to modify an idiomatic expression, both lexically and grammatically, as long as the canonical meaning of the idiom remains transparent. Furthermore, the decomposability of idioms, i.e. the way in which the individual words of an idiom contribute to its overall meaning, plays an important role in determining the figurative meaning of the idiom (Cuyckens & Geeraerts, 2010, p. 709). Decomposability is a matter of degree (Cuyckens & Geeraerts, 2010); some lexical components of an idiom contribute to the overall meaning of the idiom more than others. However, recent research has shown that non-decomposability does not necessarily imply fixedness in terms of lexis and grammar (Geeraert et al., 2017). Proper name idioms, which are the subject of the present article, might be regarded as semantically decomposable, as the proper name – the key word – has a very specific reference, very often related to the culture in which the idiom appears.

### **[2.1.5] The cultural approach**

Just as general knowledge of the world varies from individual to individual and from culture to culture, underlying concepts vary as well. Wierzbicka (2001) maintains that figurative language may serve as a reflection of the culture in which it is in current use. Additionally, Cultural Linguistics considers idiomatic expressions to be culturally motivated (Sharifian, 2017). These two assertions therefore seem to suggest that a certain amount of variability in idioms may be possible. Several recent linguistic studies on idioms have focused on the relationship between idiomatic expressions in a language and the cultural setting in which they occur. Two of these studies, “‘Idioms in the making’ as evidence for variation in conceptual metaphor across varieties of English” (Callies, 2017) and “Fixed expressions and culture” (Fiedler, 2017), published recently in the academic journals *Cognitive Linguistic Studies* and *International Journal of Language and Culture*, have provided inspiration for the present paper. Both articles provide evidence of the important role played by culturally conditioned conceptualisations “as a further dimension of variation in the study of World Englishes” (Fiedler, 2017, p. 189). Fiedler (2017) also notes that “there are few realms in which the intimate link between language and culture is more obvious than proverbs and idioms” (p. 190). Additionally, both articles show considerable convergence in observing greater variability in African Englishes than in other varieties of English. English might be considered a fruitful source for similar investigations,

as it has spread all over the world and become accommodated by many different cultures (Kachru, 1983; Fiedler, 2017).

### [3] Research Questions

Although the link between the variability of idiomatic expressions of a language and its culture has already been proved, actual research on the size and the nature of this variability has only just begun (Callies, 2017). The present article explores the lexical and grammatical variability of a selected group of idioms with regard to different varieties of English. The research presented is by no means suitable for consequent generalizations; it is a small-scale case study whose aim is to test out hypotheses which will be addressed in a future research project. Such a research project will have to be based on a considerably larger number of idiomatic expressions. The main research problems/questions the present article addresses are:

- I. Is there a variability of proper name idioms in different varieties of English? Is the proper name component of the idiom susceptible to greater variability than other components of the idiom?
- II. What are the possible reasons/explanations for the lexico-grammatical variability of proper name idioms across different varieties of English?
- III. In the following paragraphs, the methodology of the research will be briefly explained; afterwards, the results of the case study itself will be presented.

### [4] Methodology

The research drew on the *News on the Web* (NOW) corpus. The corpus contains approximately 7.1 billion words from various web-based newspapers, magazines and websites, dating from 2010 to the present time. The NOW corpus is a monitor corpus, which means that the amount of the data contained in the corpus, grows “by about 140–160 million words of data each month” (News on the Web, online). The scope of the corpus is around 20 English-speaking countries from all around the world, and the corpus can therefore undoubtedly serve as an appropriate tool for analysing lexical units across different varieties of English. Additionally, in contrast to the GloWbE corpus, which can also be used for comparisons between English varieties across the world, the NOW corpus allows a researcher to see what is happening with the language over a selected period of time as well as tracing the emergence of new words and phrases during the last couple of years. However, a few drawbacks of the analysis should be mentioned, as these might influence the value of the conclusions drawn from the analysis. First, to obtain results suitable for generalizations, a multi-billion-word corpus should be employed to conduct the analysis. The idioms under scrutiny, i.e. idioms with a proper-noun component, are rather rare in texts (Moon, 1998). The choice of the NOW corpus is by all means suitable for the small-scale research presented here, but the designed method of data extraction will have

to be tested on more extensive language material in order to reach generalizable conclusions. Second, the size of the sub-corpora of the different English varieties in the NOW corpus should be taken into account, and the frequencies of the investigated expressions should be normalized in order to better compare the results across different English varieties. The choice of the corpus was also influenced by the fact that, according to Langlotz (2006), similar research has only been conducted so far with the help of the BNC, which might not reflect the possible idiom variants exhaustively (p. 290).

First, each of the selected idiomatic expressions was investigated in the NOW corpus in terms of its distribution across different varieties of English. Second, the possible variability of each idiom was addressed and quantitatively assessed. Consequently, individual idiom variants were examined and generalized conclusions were drawn regarding the reasons for the variability or the functions these varieties perform in the discourse in which they appear.

## [5] Discussion

The case study examines the variability of eight name idioms, i.e. idioms containing a proper noun which can be regarded as a key word. These idioms are: *Bob's your uncle*; *before you can say Jack Robinson*; *every Tom, Dick, and Harry*; *rob Peter to pay Paul*; *(not) know someone from Adam*; *Johnny-come-lately*; *doubting Thomas*; and *as patient as Job*. Contrary to the original assumption which presupposed a considerable variability of their proper noun component as well as the cultural specificity of such modifications, the corpus analysis revealed that the proper name idioms form a heterogeneous group in terms of their lexical variability. In accordance with this proposition, the idioms under consideration can be divided into three groups according to the type/degree of variability they are subject to. The first group contains idioms with key word variability, i.e. idioms whose proper noun component is subject to substitution by other proper nouns. The idioms which belong to this group are: *Bob's your uncle*; *before you can say Jack Robinson* and *every Tom, Dick, and Harry*. The second group of idioms is characterized by a certain amount of variability of other components of the idiom, while the proper noun component of the idiom remains unchanged. The idioms belonging to this group are: *before you can say Jack Robinson*, *every Tom, Dick, and Harry* and *rob Peter to pay Paul*. The contents of the first two groups partially overlap, as some of the idioms display both variability of their proper noun component as well as variability of other parts. The last group comprises expressions which are not subject to any variability at all. They appear in the NOW corpus in their canonical form, no matter which variety of English is involved. These idioms are: *not know someone from Adam*; *Johnny-come-lately*; *doubting Thomas*; and *as patient as Job*. The idioms, roughly divided into these three groups, will now be investigated individually in order to pinpoint their individual characteristics.

## [5.1] Lexical variability of the idiom *Bob's your uncle*

The meaning of the idiom *Bob's your uncle*, as defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary*, is “something will happen very quickly and simply” (online). Additionally, as the Cambridge Online Dictionary states, the use of the idiom is old-fashioned and informal. The following table summarizes the findings from the NOW corpus. The query which was used to trace the variability of the idiom *Bob's your uncle* was \*’s your uncle. Table 1 lists variants of the idiom for each of the 20 varieties of English listed in the corpus. The abbreviations used in the first column of the table are explained in the endnote<sup>4</sup>. The numbers in the table reflect the number of hits for each variant of the idiom. The minimum frequency during the analysis was set to 1.

	Bob's your uncle	other
US	20	Jah's your uncle (1)
CA	24	Bob Ryan's your uncle (1); Mao's your uncle (1)
GB	41	Bob Killey's your uncle (1); Ben's your uncle (1)
IE	22	Job's your uncle (1)
AU	15	Bjorn's your uncle (1)
NZ	20	Saint Nic's your uncle (1)
PK	1	before you could say Bojo's your uncle (1)
ZA	14	Miyagi's your uncle (1)

Table 1

As the table shows, variability in the wording of the selected idiom can be ascertained, even though the original version is still much preferred. However, given the source of the data (which are solely journalistic texts), it can be concluded that the idiom allows a certain amount of freedom in order to tailor it to the journalistic purposes of the text in which it appears. In the following paragraphs, attention is paid to some of the idiom variants listed in the right column of the table. In each case, the context of the expression was investigated, using the function of the corpus enabling access to the webpage on which the original article appeared.

### » Jah's your uncle

This version of the idiom appears in an article on New Orleans' drinking culture, offering not only descriptions of different kinds of – mostly – alcoholic drinks that are typical of the area, but also stories related to them. One of the mentioned drinks is called the Holy Trinity. The simplicity of the way it can be prepared is crowned by the expression under investigation – the short description of the procedure is ended by the modified idiom *Jah's your uncle*. The choice of the proper noun, Jah, seems to be directly related to the name of the beverage itself, the Holy Trinity, Jah being a shortened version of Yahweh,

the proper name for God in the Hebrew Bible (“Yahweh”, n.d.). The religious connotations, however unusual in relation to the topic of the article, are therefore even more strengthened by the modification of the idiom.

» Mao’s your uncle

The article describes a deal between China and the USA: “China is discussing construction of a super-underwater railway tunnel that would have high-speed trains barrelling from China to the U.S., [...] faster than you can say ‘Mao’s your uncle’” (McParland, 2014). Again, the link between the topic of the article and the choice of the proper noun in the idiom is clear, Mao being considered the founder of the modern People’s Republic of China (Schram, 2019). Additionally, in this case, the meaning of the idiom has been slightly changed as the alluded quality in question is not only simplicity but also speed. The idiom modification therefore suggests the powerful position of China in enforcing its international business aims.

» Bjorn’s your uncle

Even though this expression appeared on an Australian website, the actual article is in fact a description of, or an invitation to, a cruise in Northern Norway, which also explains the choice of the proper noun Bjorn, instead of Bob, in the idiom. The article gives the reader advice on how to prepare for encounters with the “tough and individualistic people” (Callender, 2017) who live in the area. After reading this advice, the article suggests, the actual encounter will be easy.

» Saint Nic’s your uncle

The article in which this expression appeared deals with various recipes suitable for various occasions of the year. Even though the recipe after which the phrase appears is designed for the Christmas season – hence the abbreviated reference to Saint Nicolas – the actual recipe, as well as its ingredients, are typically New Zealand. The modification in this case serves the purpose of enhancing the fact that the recipe is to be used during the festive season.

» before you could say Bojo’s your uncle

In this case, the phrase was not only modified to stay in line with the title of the article, “Could BoJo really be the keeper of Britain’s moral compass?” (Husain, 2017), but it changed its meaning as well. This was achieved by combining two idiomatic expressions into one, namely the idioms *Bob’s your uncle* and *before you can say Jack Robinson*, which is generally “used to say that something happens very quickly” (Cambridge Dictionary, online). The newly coined idiom therefore refers to events or processes which are not only simple but also quick. The proper noun *BoJo* itself is an abbreviation of Boris Johnson, the former Foreign Secretary and the current Prime Minister of the UK.

## » Miyagi's your uncle

This expression appeared in a review article on a brand-new Nissan car. The description uses both Japanese and South African features to deliver the feelings of the uniqueness and power to the potential buyer. The car is nicknamed a “Japanese beast” (Bhagaloo, 2011) and a “warrior landed with a Samurai sword in the form of a 3.8-litre twin-turbo'd V6” (Bhagaloo, 2011), thus alluding to its country of origin. It is also stressed that it is particularly easy to control the car – there are just a few steps which must be taken and “Miyagi's your uncle” (Bhagaloo, 2011). Here again, the reference is taken from Japanese culture, referring to Mr. Miyagi, a Japanese fictional karate master (“Mr. Miyagi”, n. d.). It seems that the two kinds of references employed in the article serve two different purposes to promote the car in South Africa. The Japanese references serve the purpose of stressing the “unadulterated power” (Bhagaloo, 2011) of the product, while the African references highlight the suitability of the car for the African environment.

## [5.2] Lexical variability of *before you could say Jack Robinson and every Tom, Dick, and Harry*

The procedure was the same as in the previous case; the results will therefore be presented in a more concise way. The following two tables, Table 2 and Table 3, summarize the results extracted from the NOW corpus.

	before you can say Jack Robinson	other
US	0	before you can say Twerk (1)
CA	0	before you can say Thelma and Louise (1)
GB	2	before you can say Inspector Clouseau (1); before you could say Jack Robinson (1)
IE	0	before you can say Kill Bill (1); before you can say George Orwell (1)
AU	0	before you could say Jack Robinson (3)
NZ	0	before you can say vinaka (1); before you can say knife (1)
IN	1	before you can say Amar-Akbar-Anthony (1)
ZA	0	0
NG	2	before you could say Jack Robinson (10); before you can say Juliet (1)
JM	0	before you can say Amen (1)

Table 2

The idiom *before you can say Jack Robinson* is used to “refer to something being done or happening very quickly” (Cambridge Dictionary, online). Just like the idiom discussed in the previous section, *before you can say Jack Robinson* is regarded as old-fashioned by the Cambridge Dictionary (online). However, compared to *Bob’s your uncle*, the idiom *before you can say Jack Robinson* is rather infrequent. In fact, according to Table 2, which summarizes the results from the NOW corpus, there are two canonical variants of the idiom, namely *before you can say Jack Robinson* (5 hits) and *before you could say Jack Robinson* (15 hits). Even though the Cambridge Dictionary (online) lists both variants, other dictionaries, including the Oxford Dictionary (online) and Macmillan Dictionary (online), list only the variant *before you can say Jack Robinson*. The general impression, therefore, is that the variant with *can* is preferred by dictionaries while the variant with *could* is in current use, as evidenced by the corpus. Second, while the use of the canonical form of the idiom seems to be rather rare, the number of possible context modifications/substitutions is more numerous.

Table 3 lists the occurrence of the canonical form as well as the variants of the idiom *every Tom, Dick, and Harry*. The meaning of the idiom is “everyone, without discrimination, ordinary people” (Spears, 2000, p. 106). Moreover, as the *NTS’s American Idioms Dictionary* states, the idiom, though containing solely male proper nouns, can apparently be used to refer to females as well – and without any modification in terms of lexis (Spears, 2000, p. 106).

	every Tom, Dick, and Harry	other
US	5	every Tom, Dick, and Harriet (2); every Tom, Dick, and Kardashian (1); every Tom, Dick, and Ari
CA	1	every John, Dick, and Harry (1); every Tom, Dick, and Pumpkin (1)
GB	2	0
IE	2	every Tom, Dick, and Harriet (1)
AU	0	0
NZ	0	0
MY	0	every Tom, Dick, and Sonny (1)
ZA	0	0

Table 3

The research in the corpus has revealed that a certain amount of variability concerning the idiom *every Tom, Dick, and Harry* is admissible. The applicability of the idiom to both male and female participants is enhanced by the use of the proper name *Harriet* as a counterpart to the proper name *Harry*. The occurrence of this modified form of the idiom, *every Tom, Dick, and Harriet*, is not unique, as it appears more than once and in two distinct varieties of English. The second type of modification, the substitution of other

components of the idiom, has also been observed in course of the research. The most common substitutes of the word *every* are: *any*, *even*, *average*, *ignorant* and *all*. The context of these modifications reveals that the substitution not only supports the original meaning of the idiom, but it also enhances it: “Economic infiltration is not something the average Tom, Dick or Harry will detect at first sight” (NOW).

### [5.3] Lexical variability of *rob Peter to pay Paul*

The meaning of the idiom *rob Peter to pay Paul*, as defined by the NTC’s American Idioms Dictionary, is “to take from one in order to give to another” (Spears, 2000, p. 342). This general description is expressed in a more precise way in the Cambridge Dictionary (online): “to borrow money from one person to pay back money you borrowed from someone else”. The following table, Table 4, summarizes the results extracted from the NOW corpus.

	rob Peter to pay Paul	other
US	29	0
CA	29	tax Peter to pay Paul (2)
GB	18	0
IE	9	0
AU	17	0
NZ	9	0
IN	6	steal Peter to pay Paul (1)
ZA	17	0
NG	33	rub Peter to pay Paul (1); rubbing Peter to pay Paul (1); cheating Peter to pay Paul (1); rob Peter to pay N-Power (1)
KE	0	borrowing Peter to pay Paul (1)

Table 4

The idiom *rob Peter to pay Paul* is an example of an idiom whose proper noun component invariably stays the same. By contrast, the first word of the idiom, the verb *rob*, is, at least in certain varieties of English, subject to substitution, while the second verb of the idiom, *pay*, is not. Two observations may be of interest concerning this idiom. First, the repeated use of the verb *rub* instead of *rob* in Nigerian English; second, the almost synonymous nature of the *rob* substitutes: *tax*, *steal*, *cheat* and *borrow*. Another notable feature is the frequent use of the idiom in Nigerian English as well as the greatest number of possible modifications in this variety of English.

#### [5.4] Lexical variability of *not know someone from Adam, Johnny-come-lately, doubting Thomas* and *as patient as Job*

The last group, consisting of four idioms (*not know someone from Adam, Johnny-come-lately, doubting Thomas* and *as patient as Job*), can be regarded as a relatively homogeneous group, as almost no variability occurs in the NOW corpus. The only exception is the idiom *not know someone from Adam*, whose variability is inevitable, as the idiom contains the word *someone*, which must be replaced according to the actual needs of the sentence in which the idiom appears. The remaining three idioms do not seem to be subject to any type of variability, as the results of the research in the NOW corpus suggest. The idioms *Johnny-come-lately* and *doubting Thomas* seems to be in current use (264 and 445 hits, respectively), while the idiom *as patient as Job* is rather rare (1 hit in the NOW corpus).

### [6] Conclusion

The present paper analysed a group of idioms with regard to their variability in different varieties of English. The topic was inspired mainly by the article “Idioms in the making’ as evidence for variation in conceptual metaphor across varieties of English” (Callies, 2017), which argued for a more thorough investigation of the variability of idioms, subscribing to the cognitive linguistic and cultural linguistic view of idiomatic expressions.

The selected idioms, namely the idioms *Bob’s your uncle, before you could say Jack Robinson, every Tom, Dick, and Harry, rob Peter to pay Paul, (not) know someone from Adam, Johnny-come-lately, doubting Thomas* and *as patient as Job*, were investigated by means of the NOW corpus, which was assessed to be particularly suitable for comparisons across different English varieties. It was concluded that even though the canonical form of the selected idioms under investigation is still the most preferred form across different varieties of English, substitution of their individual components cannot be overlooked. However, the degree of variability differs when individual idioms are investigated in greater detail. The selected idioms were therefore divided into three groups, each displaying a different degree/type of variability.

The first group contains the idioms *Bob’s your uncle, before you can say Jack Robinson* and *every Tom, Dick, and Harry*. These idioms displayed a considerable variability of their proper noun component. The case study explored the context of these modifications of the idiom *Bob’s your uncle*. It was concluded that the part of the idiom which contains the proper name, *Bob*, is particularly susceptible to variation. *Bob* is replaced by other proper nouns/names, such as *Jah, Mao, Saint Nic, BoJo* and *Miyagi*. The findings therefore seem to support the cognitive linguistic view of idioms, which stresses the role of cognitive processes in understanding the meaning of the idiomatic expressions. Second, the role of context has proved to be an important factor in idiom modification. Contextual influence was determined in the other two idioms of this group as well.

The second group consists of the idioms *before you can say Jack Robinson, every Tom, Dick, and Harry* and *rob Peter to pay Paul*. These idioms display variability of other components than the proper noun component. For example, even though *before you can say Jack Robinson* can be considered the standard, the variety with *could* seems to be far more common among users of the language. A similar tendency can be traced in the substitution of *rob* for *rub* in the idiom *rob Peter to pay Paul* in Nigerian English. A certain tendency for almost synonymous substitutions can also be observed: *average, ignorant* and *all* for *every* in *every Tom, Dick, and Harry* or *tax, cheat, borrow* for *rob* in *rob Peter to pay Paul*.

The last group is formed by idioms displaying no variability in the NOW corpus – or, as in the case of *know someone from Adam*, in which the variability is inherent in the idiom, *someone* being substituted according to the grammatical and lexical needs of the particular sentence e.g. *know Peter/him from Adam*.

However, what remains to be investigated in greater detail is the extent of the influence of the cultural setting on the actual modifications of idioms. The presented analysis did not convincingly reveal a direct link between the English variety and the actual wording of the idiom. However, the extent of the presented case study is too limited to draw any definite conclusions regarding this hypothesis. On the other hand, it was revealed that the topic of the text in which the modified idiom is used, as well as the intention of the text producer, plays an important role in the process under investigation. Further research in this area, concerning a greater number of name-based idioms, can be conducted in two directions. On the one hand, the idioms can be further investigated to prove the links between different variations of the same idiom and the cultural setting in which it is dominant. It is advisable that a far larger corpus of idioms should be investigated in the future to be able to draw generalized conclusions regarding the lexico-grammatical variability of idioms. On the other hand, the question concerning the relationship between idiom variability and the pragmatic or stylistic reasons for the variability can also be addressed.

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## [List of abbreviations]

US – USA, CA – Canada, GB – Great Britain, IE – Ireland, AU – Australia, NZ – New Zealand, IN – India, LK – Sri Lanka, PK – Pakistan, BG – Bangladesh, MY – Malaysia, SG – Singapore, Ph – Philippines, HK – Hong Kong, ZA – South Africa, NG – Nigeria, GH – Ghana, KE – Kenya, TN – Tanzania, JM – Jamaica

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