The Development of Idiomatic Expressions in Dickens

Miyuki Nishio
Faculty of Engineering, Kinki University

1. Introduction

Charles Dickens adopts an abundance of examples of various colloquial phrases and expressions in his works. Tadao Yamamoto (2003) also admit that Dickens' language is very idiomatic[1]. In order to deeply understand Dickens' language as well as his works, it is one of the best ways to study idiomatic phrases which Dickens uses in his letters and novels. One of the characteristic features of Dickens' idiomatic phrases is that some phrases show a considerable amount of variation and sometimes suggest the separation of a word or words from the established or fixed phrases. This kind of phrases is copious in Dickens' works. The purpose of this research is to demonstrate how idiomatic or colloquial phrases develop in Dickens' works by using *the Dickens Lexicon*[2].

The Dickens Lexicon includes the full corpus of Dickens texts and an additional set of major eighteenth and nineteenthth century fictional texts. Reading Dickens' novels, you can see the characteristic features in the Victorian Age. Needless to say, Dickens read a lot of the eighteenth century novels, which influences his style and language. My research exploits the Dickens corpus and the eighteenth and nineteenth century corpora as well as *the Dickens Lexicon* in order to closely scrutinize the idiomatic phrases of Dickens and clarify the feature of Dickens' usage of English. Each corpus includes:

Dickens corpus: *Sketches by Boz* (1833-36), *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), Other Early Papers (1837), *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), *Master Humphrey's Clock* (1840-41), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), *American Notes* (1842), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44), A *Christmas Carol* (1843), *The Chimes* (1844), *Pictures from Italy* (1844-45), *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), *The Battle of Life* (1846), *The haunted Man* (1848), *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), *David Copperfield* (1849-50), *A Child's History of England* (1851-53), *Bleak House* (1852-53), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Reprinted Pieces* (1858), *The Uncommercial Traveller*

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[1] See *Growth and System of the Language of Dickens,* 14, 399-400

[2] Dr. Tadao Yamamoto tried to compile a Dickens Lexicon, studying Dickens' language, particularly idioms. Many researchers, including me, have been trying to compile it, but it has not yet been completed.

(1860), *Great Expectations* (1860-61), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1869-70), *All the Year Round, Letters* and *Speeches*

The eighteenth century corpus:

Daniel Defoe: *The Life, Adventures, and Piracies of the Famous Captain Singleton, A Journal of the Plague Year, The Military Memories of Capt. George Carleton, The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, Robinson Crusoe*

Henry Fielding: *A Journey from this World to the Next, Amelia, The Life and Death of Jonathan Wild, the Great, The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams, The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling.*

Oliver Goldsmith: *The Vicar of Wakefield*

Samuel Richardson: *Clarissa Harlowe, or the History of a Young Lady.*

Tobias Smollett; *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle, The History and Adventures of an Atom, The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom, The Expedition of Humphry Clinker, The Life and Adventures of Sir Launcelot Greaves, The Adventures of Roderick Random, Travels through France and Italy*

Laurence Stern: *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

Jonathan Swift: *Guillver's Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, The Journal to Stella*   (Total tokens: approx. 4,220,000)

The nineteenth century corpus:

Jane Austen: *Emma, Mansfield Park, Northanger Abbey, Persuasion, Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility*

C. Bronte: *Jane Eyre, The Professor, Villette*

A. Bronte: *Agnes Grey*

E. Bronte: *Wuthering Heights*

Wilkie Collins: *After the Dark, The Moonstone, The Woman in White*

George Eliot: *Adam Bede, Brother Jacob, Daniel Deronda, Middlemarch, Silas Marner, The Mill on the Floss*

Elizabeth Gaskell: *Cranford, Mary Barton, Sylvia's Lovers*

W.M. Thackeray: *The Luck of Barry Lyndon, Vanity Fair*

Anthony Trollope: *Barchester Towers, Can You Forgive Her?, Dr. Thorne, The Eustace Diamonds, Phineas Finn, The Warden*, (Total tokens: approx. 5,337,000)

Idioms or idiomatic phrases have been studied in terms of grammaticalization or from a historical viewpoint. Though many scholars, including Traugott, Hopper, Nunberg, Akimoto, Brinton and so on, have defined what idioms are, there does not seem to be any clear-cut, non controversial definition of the term.

In *Phraseology*, Thierry Fontenelle (1998) mention that " idioms are to be found at one extreme of a continuum ranging from totally free combinations of words to completely frozen, fixed multiword units."[3] And they also point out that collocations will be found in the fuzzy area half-way between free combinations and idioms as in the following figure:

Figure 1 The cline of idiomaticity

Before turning to a closer examination, it should be noted that the terms "idiomatic phrase" or "collocation" used in this paper are different from the definition which many scholars have been discussed. According to Yamamoto's definition of idioms[4],

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[3] "Lexical Functions in Dictionary Entries", *Phraseology*. 191

[4] Dr. Yamamoto defined idioms as "expressions which are delimitable units of a language, which may happen to be single sounds, single words, phrases, or sentences. Delimitation takes place according to the linguistic sense of those who use the language as their mother tongue, this sense being at once psychological, social and historical." (2003: 394)

An example is given to illustrate delimitable units: "That blessed star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode". This is a quotation from *Christmas Carol*.
        Dictionary ……… the / (three) / wise / men
        Grammar ……… "the" & "(three)" & "wise" & "men"
        Lexicon ……… (the (three) wise men)
He further adds an explanation: "The dictionary can separate each word ("the" and partly "three" may belong to grammar), in grammar each word is capable of being separated and combined freely, (for example, three men, the three men, the wise men, the three wise men and so on), but in the lexicon, 'the (three) wise men (of the East)' is the final delimitable unit. The parentheses (three) show that this unit may be enlarged and varied without doing damage to the word-group as a unit. It is evident that this idiom owes its current use to the Bible and denotes "the Magi," which association and special meaning would be lost if analysed and combined freely as in the dictionary or grammar"(2003:399).

idiomatic expressions dealt with in this research includes fixed collocations, that is to say, idioms and restricted collocations as well.

Bybee and Hopper (2001) point out that "the more often two elements occur in sequence, the tighter will be their constituent structure." The same applies to the use of idiomatic phrases in Dickens works. Dickens exploits various kinds of idiomatic expressions in his novels and sometimes develops them into transferred or metaphorical ones. Namely, by repeating the same phrases over and over again in his works, these phrases develop, and become stable to various degrees. This change can be illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 2 The cline of development of idiomatic expressions in Dickens

Here, "stability" indicates the level in which there are not many other variations. After they become stable or fixed, they sometimes deviate from the original phrases. Of course, there is no clear boundary among these developmental processes of the idiomatic phrases as is mentioned above.

In the research of idioms or idiomatic expressions, grammaticalization and diachronic or historical developments have been mainly discussed, but only a few studies have so far been made of the development of a particular writer. The aim of this paper is not to discuss the definition of idiom, but to show the characteristic feature of some phrases used by Dickens. Clarifying the development of the phrases Dickens uses may contribute to the research of the development in the history of the English language as well.

2. The developmental stage of the idiomatic expressions

The level of fixedness of the phrase is different from each other. In this section, I would like to demonstrate some examples of these four stages[5], that is, change, development, stability and deviation, and to show the different level of fixedness of the

[5] According to Yamamoto, the language of Dickens changes in such a cline as [change → development → stability]. However, Dickens sometimes further develops the idiomatic expressions into metaphorical and transferred one, which can be considered Dickens' creativity. Therefore, the fourth stage "deviation" is added after the stage "stability".

phrases.

2.1. Change

One of the examples is "to get up the steam". The *OED* gives the definition of this phrase as "to produce sufficient steam to work the engine." The following examples are cited in the *OED*:

> **1832** MARRYAT *N. Forster* xl, I have …a way of going a-head, by **getting up the steam**…---and the fuel is brandy.
> **1844** DARWIN in *Life & Lett*. (1887) I. 301 **Get up your steam**, if this weather lasts, and have a ramble in Wales.
> **1883** FENN *Middy & Ensign* xxxix. 237 Every effort being made by the firemen to **get up steam**.   (bold emphasis mine)

In the first citation, the phrase "getting up the steam" is used in the literal sense, not a figurative one. Looking up "steam" in the *OED*, there are various kinds of phrases. It says, "in phrases descriptive of the working of a steam-engine, especially of a locomotive; often used figuratively"[6]. The verbs used here have great variety, for example, *get on, put on, blow off, shut off, turn off* and so on. Most of the examples quoted here are used with literal meaning of the word "steam" as follows:

> **1850** N. KINGSLEY *Diary* 4 Mar. (1914) 112 **Got up steam** again today and tried the larboard engine and have got both in running order.
> **1881** *Punch* 27 Aug. 94/2 The [H.M.S.] *Hercules* **got up steam** and went on her way westward galumphing.   (bold emphasis mine)

How frequently is the word "steam" used in Dickens? Dickens uses "steam" 165 times in his works. The word "steam" collocates with "get up" 7 times. Dickens sometimes uses this phrase figuratively or metaphorically with the meaning of "to work oneself into energy, to summon energy for special effort".

The phrase "to get up the steam", however, shows a considerable amount of variation in Dickens and suggests the increasing separation of the word "steam" from the fixed phrase. Look at the examples below.

> …all five young ladies having, in the figurative language of the day, a great

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[6] *OED*, *s.v.* steam, 7.d

amount of **steam to dispose of**, the altercation would…have been a long one… *MC* 4 / …I have four (slips) to write to close the chapter; and, as I foolishly left them till this morning, have **the steam to get up** afresh. *Life* I 130 / …I must buckle-to again and endeavour to **get the steam up**. *Life* I 153 / **With my steam very much up**, I find it a great trial to be so far off from you… *Life* II 125 / I see no hope of finishing before the 16th at the earliest, in which case **the steam will have to be put on** for this short month. *Life* II 332 /I write from Paris. I am **getting up some French steam**. *Let* I 158 (bold emphasis mine)

These are not completely fixed, but to some extent freely combined with other expressions. Moreover, the noun "steam" is preceded by a definite article or a pronoun. It can be said that this phrase has not been grammaticalized. Considering these facts, this phrase is not stable or fixed.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century corpus, the word "steam" is used 36 times, which is less frequently used than in the Dickens' works. The phrase "to get up the steam" is used only once by Trollope, which also indicates that this phrase is not fixed.

Considering the historical background, steam boats were invented in 1783 and steam locomotives were invented in the early nineteenth century. Therefore, the actual sense of "steam", that is, relating to the "engine", was not so common at that time. One of the reasons why Dickens frequently uses the word "steam" in his works is that he is interested in railways and familiar with the steam engine. Therefore, he often uses the word and sometimes develops it into transferred or metaphorical one.

2.2. Development[7]

The phrase "many's the time" is an example of the next stage development, meaning "on many occasions, often". The phrase "many's the time" is frequently used in Dickens works, as well as in the eighteenth and nineteenth century corpora, but there are some other variations.

Many's the hard day's walking in rain and mud, and with…*OCS* / I've tried to instil it into him, **many and many's the time**; … *BR* / …; and **many's the summer evening** she and I will sit and listen… *MC* / "**Many's the time** that I've not breakfasted at my own …*MC* / …; and **many's the time** I hope to do the same in time to come,"… *MC* / **Many's the kind thing** they say to me. *The Chimes* / I ha'

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[7] The stage "development" indicates that some idiomatic phrases are in the way of development, in order words, in the process of turning into stable and fixed ones. It is different from the historical development of the English language.

gone home, **many's the time**, and found all vanished *HT* / **Many's the day**, and
many' s the way in which he has backed me. *LD* / …; and **many's the bone, and
feather**, and what not, that he's brought… *OMF* (bold emphasis, mine)

The *OED* gives the explanation of "many" as in "in predicative use, usually with
inversion of subject. Now chiefly in *many's the time*."[8] According to the citations in the
OED, [many's the time + clause] construction has been frequently used since 1840.
From a historical perspective, "many" is a predicative adjective at first, and then
"many's the time" is used as an adverbial phrase, which is not recorded by the *OED*
until 1920[9]. This developmental process is illustrated as follows:

Figure 3 The development of "many's the time"

Dickens uses "many's the" construction 10 times as seen in the examples above.   In
most cases, "many" is adopted predicatively because that-clause follows [many's the
+NP] construction. Two of them function as an adverbial phrase: "I've tried to instil it
into him, many and many's the time; …" and "I ha' gone home, many's the time, and
found all vanished". In these examples, "many and many's the time" and "many's the
time" are added disjunctively at the end of the sentence or after the subordinate that-
clause. The original construction, where "many" functions as a predicative adjective, is
dominant in Dickens. In order words, this phrase is still in the way of development.
Interestingly, there is no instance of "many's the time" in British National Corpus
(BNC). From a viewpoint of the historical development of English language, this
phrase becomes less common.

2.3. Stability
    The phrase "heart and soul" is used as an adverbial phrase, meaning "with all one's
energy and devotion". As Yamamoto mentions (2003), Dickens frequently uses adverb-
idioms consisting of a pair of nouns denoting the parts of the body which emphasize the

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[8] *OED*, *s.v.* many, adj. 1.c
[9] According to the *OED* (s.v. time, 18) *many's the time* juxtaposes to such
phrases as *many a time, many times* and so on. The *OED* considers it as an
adverbial phrase. The example of 1920 is from *Beyond Horizon* by E. O'Neill :
Many's the time I've said to her.

completeness of some action or state such as "body and soul", "hand and foot" and so on[10].

In the Dickens Corpus, "heart and soul" is used 42 time, while in the eighteenth century it is used only five times, and in the nineteenth century 21times. Not only Dickens but also the nineteenth century contemporary writers predominantly use this phrase. Therefore "heart and soul" can be considered to be stable.

There is another example, "rough and tough". There is no entry of "rough and tough" in the *OED*. Instead, there is an entry of "rough and ready". The *OED* defines "rough" as "lacking in culture or refinement, uncultivated, having rude manners or ways"[11]. The *OED* predominantly quotes the phrase "rough and ready", while there is no example of the phrase in the Dickens corpus. There is an intriguing example from *Dombey and Son*, however: "I'm rough, sir, but I'm ready least ways, I hope I'm ready, you understand." Here "rough" and "ready" are separately embedded in the speech, which shows that "rough and ready" is not stable and fixed in Dickens. Instead, Dickens played on words and changed "ready" into "tough" to form the rhymed expression.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century corpora, there is only one example of "rough and ready" used by Trollope, but no example of "rough and tough". The phrase "rough and tough" is not stable from a historical point of view, but somewhat fixed and stable in Dickens' works though it has not yet led to the level of deviation.

Let's move on to the next example. The expression "jog trot" is more expressive than the corresponding single adjective, *monotonous*. According to the *OED*, "trot" originally means "a gait of a horse between walking and running"[12]. And then the phrase "jog-trot" comes to be used figuratively. These are the examples from Dickens:

> …we are a <u>humdrum</u> couple, going on in a jog-trot sort of way… *Cricket* 3 / … it has become a very jog-trot, <u>monotonous</u>, tiresome sort of business… *Pictures from Italy /* (a gentleman) "I have good reason to believe that a jog-trot life, the same from day to day, would reconcile one to anything." *DS* 33 / "Therefore", says Mr. Tulkinghorn, pursuing his case in his jog-trot style, "I have much to consider." *BH* 41 (underlined mine)

"Jog-trot" co-occurs with synonyms such as *monotonous* and *humdrum*, which indicates that "jog-trot" is common for Dickens and the word is stable in Dickens's works.

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[10] *Growth and Structure of the Language of Dickens*, 441-443
[11] *OED, s.v.* rough, adj. 14
[12] *OED, s.v.* trot, n. 1.a.

Dickens uses "jog-trot" 23 times, while there are only eight examples in the eighteenth and nineteenth century corpora. It cannot be said that "jog-trot" was common for the reader at that time.

Dickens plays on words and uses another variation of "jog-trot": "'It's rather **jog-trotty** and humdrum. But it'll do as well as anything else!'" (bold emphasis mine *BH* 17) According to the *OED*, "jog-trotty" is a nonce word[13] and this is the only instance quoted. It may be considered that "jog-trotty" is a kind of deviation for Dickens.

2.4. Deviation

One of the examples to demonstrate the stage deviation is the phrase "turn and turn about", meaning "in turn, alternately"[14]. The examples from Dickens are :

> (Mrs. Gamp) "…Mrs. Prig and me has nussed ('nursed') together, turn and turn about, one off, one on". *MC* / Starling and I were Cook's Mate, turn and turn about. *XS Haunted*

What is the most interesting here is that there is a variation "change and change about" based on the original phrase: "… now he's one thing, now he's another; now he's something else, **change and change about**." (bold emphasis mine, *DC*)   In the eighteenth and nineteenth century corpora, there are only two instances of "turn and turn about" and needless to say, there is no example of "change and change about".

In the *OED*, "turn and turn about" as an adverbial phrase occurs twice. Of course there are many other examples as a noun phrase. Intriguingly enough, there is one quotation of "change and change about" from *Martin Chuzzlewit*: "To let us change and change about." This phrase, however, functions as a verbal phrase.   In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, "change and change about" is used as a verbal phrase, but later in *David Copperfield*, it is employed adverbially by analogy of "turn and turn about".

The development of this phrase can be demonstrated as in the following figure:

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[13] *OED, s.v.* jog-trotty.
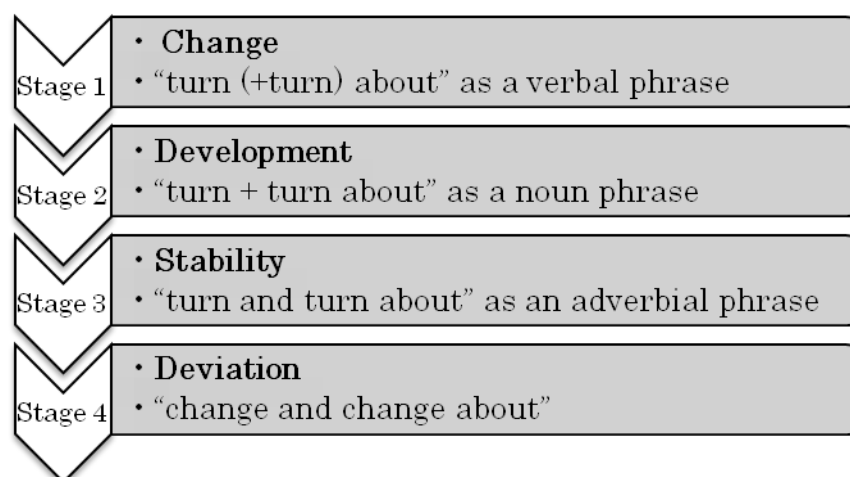[14] *OED, s.v.* turn. n. 28.b.

Figure 4 The development of "turn and turn about" in Dickens

In the stage 1, "turn about" or "turn and turn about"[15] are originally employed as a verbal phrase. The stage 2 indicates that "turn and turn about" is mainly used as a noun phrase. In the stage 3, "turn and turn about" becomes an adverbial phrase, in other words, disjunctive. In the stage 4 "change and change about" is turned into an adverbial phrase by analogy.

3. Conclusion

To briefly sum up, the degree of fixedness or stability of each phrase is clarified by closely examining each phrase. "To get up the seam" has many variations and is not stable. When it comes to "many's the time," only two examples function as an adverbial phrase and the original pattern of "many" as a predicative adjective is dominant in Dickens. Therefore, this phrase is more stable than "get up the steam" but less stable than "heart and soul". It is still in the way of development. The phrases "heart and soul" and "rough and tough" are more fixed than "many's the time", but cannot be considered as "deviation". "Turn and turn about" is first mainly used as a noun phrase, and then becomes an adverbial phrase. Moreover, "change and change about" comes to be used as an adverbial phrase by analogy, which is an example of deviation.

"turn and turn about"

"many's the time"   "jog-trot"
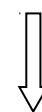
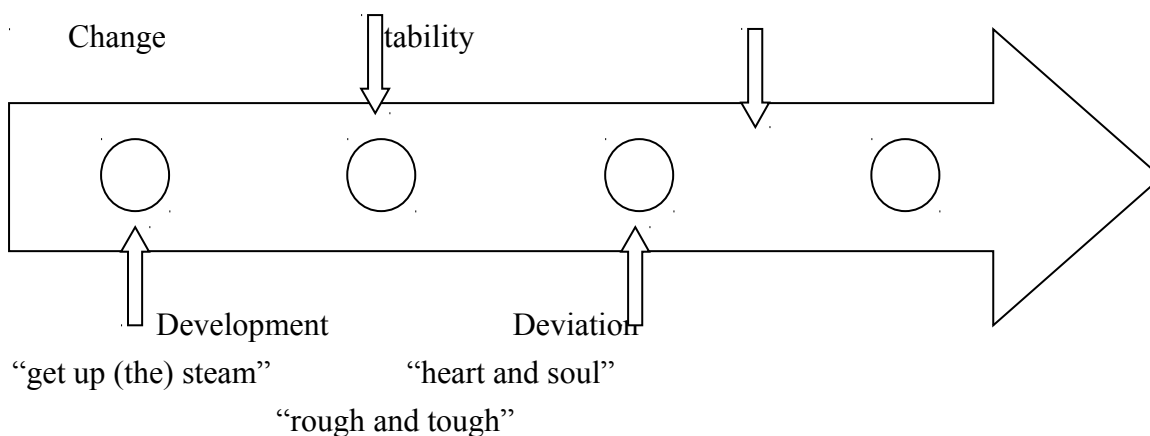[15] "Turn and turn about" is not common as a verbal phrase. "Turn about" is more commonly used.

Figure 5 The cline of development of idiomatic expressions in Dickens

Examining the idiomatic phrases more closely and carefully contributes to better understanding of the novels. It can also help to make a research of the historical development of the idiomatic phrases. The close scrutiny of Dickens' idiomatic phrases may provide insights into the characteristic structure of the idiomatic phrases in the English language as well, because Dickens affords numerous materials in his works.

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