

# Understanding idioms and idiomatic expressions in context: a look at idioms found in an Irish soap opera.

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## Abstract

This paper looks at idioms drawn from a corpus of soap opera and compares their communicative functions to those performed by idioms in corpora of naturally-occurring conversation. In this study soap opera data is validated as a suitable tool for demonstrating the role that idioms play in spoken interaction. Soap operas, as well as other media genres, try to convey a believable linguistic world, exploiting idioms and providing contexts in which the pragmatic functions of idioms can be understood and analysed. This paper suggests that the analysis of idioms found in soap opera can contribute to the increase of knowledge and understanding concerning the communicative functions that idioms have in conversation. The data used in this study is drawn from corpora of naturally-occurring conversation — the *Limerick Corpus of Irish English* (LCIE) and the *Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English* (CANCODE) — and a corpus of the Irish soap opera, *Fair City*.

## Introduction

Idioms are used in everyday situations performing specific communicative functions. They are highly lexicalized and ready-made recognizable phrases, which contribute to the naturalness of the conversation; they often occur in storytelling and at crucial junctures such as evaluations and codas and other transition points (McCarthy 1998: 146). Moon (1992) argues that the use and recognition of idioms could be seen as indicators of membership of a particular cultural group. Due to the fact that idioms seem to be culturally bound, the understanding of idioms, together with the recognition of the appropriate contexts in which they are used, often proves to be difficult for members of a culture that differs substantially from the culture of the target language. Prodromou (2005) affirms that 'the attempt by non-native speakers to incorporate idiomatic expressions into their discourses produces

hesitation, error and pragmatic failure'. This study compares the functions that idioms have in naturally-occurring spoken data with the functions that idioms perform in data drawn from an Irish soap opera: *Fair City*. It aims to present soap opera as a valid tool for creating awareness of the communicative role that idioms play in spoken interaction. Soap operas are often geographically situated and use language in different contexts, which, although fictional (written to be spoken), are nonetheless representative of a particular culture, and therefore recognisable as such by the audience. Furthermore, the language used in soap opera allows the observation of many pragmatic features characteristic of spoken language. In the first part of this paper a theoretical overview of idioms is provided, followed by a comparative analysis of the data considered in this study and the main findings and conclusions.

### Defining idioms

Idioms can be defined from a narrow perspective or a broad perspective. A narrow definition is one that states that idioms are fixed sentences only formed by frozen metaphors, the type of verb plus complement, for example *have an axe to grind*, or prepositional phrases such as *over the top*. Carter (1987:135) affirms that there is no advantage in drawing strict lines between idioms and non-idioms or treating collocations separately from idioms; instead what he considers important is to illustrate the different degrees of flexibility of fixed expressions. Thus, a broad approach allows the inclusion of other categories that are culturally relevant because they are also an expression of idiomatic richness. Cowie (1975: viii-ix) defines an idiom as 'a combination of two or more words which function as a unit of meaning'. Moon (1998) classifies idioms according to three different factors: (a) opacity or non-compositionality, (b) institutionalization, and (c) lexicogrammatical fixedness.

According to these three factors, an idiom is an expression which is figurative (non-literal), has become conventionalized, and is therefore recognized and used by the members of a particular community; it also has a restricted word order. McCarthy (1998: 130) defines idioms as 'strings of more than one word whose syntactic, lexical and phonological form is to a greater or lesser degree fixed and whose semantics and pragmatic functions are opaque and specialised, also to a greater or lesser degree'.

McCarthy's definition of idiom enables the inclusion of the following items, which could be found in written and spoken language (McCarthy 1998: 130-131). All the examples are taken from the Irish soap opera corpus:

- Clausal idioms: fixed expressions of the type verb + complement, e.g. *take it easy*, *keep (something) to yourself*
- Idiomatic phrasal verbs: lexical verb plus particle(s), e.g. *sniffing around*, *looking up*
- Prepositional idioms: lexical verb plus particle(s), as in *up to (someone's) neck*; *in the air*, *over the top*
- Binomials and trinomials: usually irreversible combinations with *and* or other conjunctions whose order may vary from language to language: *loud and clear*, *song and dance*
- Frozen similes: usually formally identifiable by the removability of the first as: *strong as oxen* (strong as an ox).<sup>1</sup>
- Possessive 's phrases: *a woman's loving touch*.
- Opaque nominal compounds: *pillow talk*, *beauty sleep*, *false alarm*
- Cultural allusions: these include slogans, catch phrases, and proverbs, e.g. *takes two to tango*, *no way Jose*, *the boys in green*
- Idiomatic speech routines, gambits, and discourse markers, which are very frequent in conversational data: *mind you*, *how's it going?*.

The above classification of idioms allows the incorporation of a variety of idiomatic expressions found in the Irish soap opera corpus *Fair City*.

#### *Idioms: theoretical overview*

In the field of anthropology, Basso (1976) and Fernandez (1991), among others, have asserted the relation between social context and the creation of figurative language. Makkai (1987) determines how values and the cultural setting affect the use and creation of figurative expressions. On the other hand, Ciacciari (1993) examines the notions of literal and metaphorical meaning regarding the understanding of idioms. She asserts that the individual words used in idioms and their rhetorical structure are both available to

people, and although this information is not always used, it is employed when required either by a specific task, or by the need to interpret an unfamiliar idiomatic expression. Pulman (1993) affirms that the meaning of idiomatic phrases cannot be deduced from the ordinary meanings of their components or by the usual rules of compositional semantics. He argues that the recognition and full interpretation of idioms depends on the process that he calls *contextual reasoning*. This process involves the consideration of information that can be derived linguistically from a sentence and also the consideration of the particular context or general background knowledge in which the sentence is conveyed. Because of this, contextual reasoning involves the process of resolution of ellipsis and the filling of what Pulman (p. 251) calls contextually dependent 'vague relations' associated with possessive, compound nominals, and some verbs such as *have* or *do* which need to be interpreted correctly according to context. In another study, Wray (2000) disputes the advantages of teaching formulaic sequences in terms of their component parts in second language pedagogy. She argues that the nature of formulaic language resides in the avoidance of the analytical processes that are employed to decode non-formulaic strings. Wray (2000: 463) asserts the importance of recognising native speakers' preferences for certain sequences of words in order for second language learners to gain full command of the targeted language.

Levorato (1993) researches the way in which children acquire idioms and also the development of figurative competence. She affirms that idioms are not acquired as words and, therefore, the process of learning idioms is not equivalent to the process of associating a string of words with its meaning. Learning idioms requires the development of figurative competence and this is attained in different stages. According to Levorato, a child's ability to comprehend and produce idioms is linked to his/her linguistic and communicative abilities. In a recent study, Grant and Bauer (2004) argue that idioms are not well defined and they support a restrictive definition of idioms, proposing the use of a test to divide them into 'core idioms', 'figuratives', and 'onces'. The idioms that they classify as 'onces' are those that only have one word of the multi-words unit (MWUs) considered to be non-literal or non-compositional. The rest of the words could be figurative or could have a literal meaning, e.g., *The meeting was short and sweet*

(Grant and Bauer 2004: 53). Grant and Bauer found that most idioms are placed into the 'figurative' category. They affirm that the test aims to facilitate the identification of 'core idioms', which are the most infrequent and the ones that present more difficulties for L2 learners and teachers in terms of acquisition and teaching.

Some researchers have based their analysis of idioms on naturally occurring discourse. Among others, Strässler (1982), Powell (1992), Moon (1992, 1997, 1998), Fernando (1996), Drew and Holt (1998), and McCarthy (1998) look at the pragmatic use of idioms instead of the traditional semantic form. They affirm that though idioms may be infrequent, when they are present, they serve some specific purpose and their presence is at least in part predictable. Idioms are never neutral and they are likely to be present in reference to a third party or with reference often to an object (e.g. for the closing of spoken narratives). This is due to the potential threat to face that the use of idioms has in direct relationships. McCarthy (1988: 133) affirms that 'when speakers do use idioms directly about their interlocutors, they may explicitly gloss their usage to guard against threats to face'.

### **Data and methodology**

The soap opera data used in this paper is drawn from a corpus of Irish soap opera: *Fair City*. This electronic corpus of 24,000 words was formed by transcribing a selection of randomly recorded episodes shown in Ireland between the years 2001 and 2002. The *Fair City* corpus was searched exhaustively for idioms. Each idiom was then classified according to the categories of form as detailed above by McCarthy (1998) and also according to function. The evaluative functions of the idioms found were compared with the results that McCarthy (2003) obtained after analysing 100 idioms selected at random from the *Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English* (CANCODE). We note that the classification of idioms regarding form and function was not always an easy task considering the 'fuzzy boundaries' between categories in particular contexts (see McCarthy 1998) and involves an inevitable degree of subjective interpretation. In order to determine variations or similarities regarding the frequency in which idioms are used in the Irish soap opera corpus and idioms found in naturally occurring speech, the number of idioms (per thousand) found in the *Fair City*

corpus was compared to the *Limerick Corpus of Irish English* (LCIE).

### Classification of idioms according to form

Some 275 idioms were found in the Irish soap opera corpus. Speech routines have been omitted for practical reasons and also because they could be considered formulaic language — rituals that do not involve, in general terms, a greater degree of choice. The range of forms of idioms found in the data corresponds to the forms found in naturally-occurring conversation.

*Table 1: Distribution of idioms according to form*

Form	Fair City
Clausal idioms	155
Idiomatic phrasal verbs	40
Cultural allusions and catch phrases	29
Opaque nominal compounds	19
Prepositional idioms	23
Binomials and trinomials	7
Frozen similes	1
Possessive phrases	1
Creative idioms	0
Total	275

### *Frequency of idioms in the soap opera corpus*

In order to determine if some idioms tend to be used with more frequency than others, all the idioms found in the Irish soap opera corpus were manually counted according to their frequency of use. Because of the limited size of the corpus (24,000 words) most idioms appeared just once. The following idioms appeared more than once in different conversations:

- to go out* (with someone) (4)
- to get over* (2)
- mind your own business* (2)
- to be on the game* (2)
- hang on a minute/second* (2)
- let somebody down* (2)
- on your hands* (2)
- (somebody) *will be in touch/keep in touch* (2).

The next two idioms, *for God's sake* and *to have a word* (with somebody) — idioms already mentioned above — are used twice in other conversations: *for God's sake* (two in the same conversation) and *to have a word* (with somebody) (two in the same conversation).

The following idioms appeared more than once in the same conversation. Some of these idioms are also used (once) in another conversation and they are marked with a plus sign (+):

*to be out of order* (3+)  
*to give someone a hand/ to want a hand* (2+)  
*to be/be not* (someone's) *business* (2+)  
*to get things back on track* (2+)  
*to make up my/your mind* (2+)  
*to get over* (2)  
*have an eye* (for somebody) (2)  
*to clean up* (someone's) *act* (2)  
*to put* (something) *to bed* (2)  
*cross your mind* (2)  
*carrying on* (2)  
*in the middle* (2)  
*dangerous road* (2)  
*put-down* (2)  
*hard feelings* (2)  
*to do/be the Colombo* (2)  
*Dublin Four* (2)  
*Shakespeare* (2)  
*Goldfinger* (2).

As it is not possible to analyse each idiom, the analysis of functions presents a variety of idioms used in *Fair City*.

### **Analysis of functions**

Idioms are a communicative resource and they perform a range of different functions. Idioms can be found in everyday stories and anecdotes, in collaborative ideas discourse, and in the negotiation of meaning and convergence (McCarthy 1998). The functions that idioms perform in naturally occurring conversation are also manifested in the Irish soap opera data. In this analysis it becomes evident that although the use of idioms is optional, they are found

at specific points of the spoken discourse, to serve specific purposes.

### *Spoken generic activity*

Idioms tend to be present in narrative evaluations and non-narrative observation comment discourses, as well as in segments of topic changes and closings. Because the use of idioms is optional, the choice of a particular idiom brings into consideration the potential threat to face that it presents for the speaker and/or listener, and raises considerations of social distance and power. Moreover, idioms refer to shared knowledge and common values, playing, with their presence, an essential role in the particular process of communication. McCarthy observes that idioms are present in discourse evaluation segments. The subsequent analysis is based in McCarthy's explanation of idioms' generic functions (1998).

### *Evaluation in oral narratives*

In oral narratives events are outlined and speakers and/or listeners provide evaluations of the events. Idioms tend to occur at the evaluation points, conferring interest in the event, signalling that the event is worth being listened to, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: *Evaluation in oral narratives*

Event line	Evaluation line
Example (1): <\$1> First place. Left the rest of them in the tracks	<\$2> <\$E>laughs<\$E> <\$1> <b>It went like a dream</b>
Example (2) <\$2> He was always in music when I knew him he used to wear to wear the long <G3> and everything	just like <b>Rory Gallagher</b> <\$E2> laughs <\\$E2>.

In example (1) in Table 2, speaker 1 is referring to a dog that has won a race. He evaluates the event with the use of an idiom, adding more interest to the particular event and thus elevating the achievement: *it went like a dream*.



In example (2), speaker 2 is talking about a person that he and the listener knew in the past, and who has now returned to their locality. speaker 2 describes what this person used to be like, and compares him with an Irish rock star who died in the 1980s. With this cultural allusion, speaker 2 evaluates the story, making it more interesting in order to get the hearer's attention.

*Observation and comment in collaborative ideas discourses*

The process of observation-comment involves two parts: first, the observation of some phenomenon, and second, a subjective evaluation of the phenomenon. Speakers make statements or observations that convey their perception of the world. They complement the observation with a comment that indicates their stance towards those observations. The process of observation and comment can be shared by the participants (one observes and another comments) creating, thereby, solidarity between the parties involved in the conversation and an appeal to shared perceptions as projected in the comment. Many idioms conveyed in both sets of data perform the functions of observing and/or commenting on a situation that has already occurred or that is taking place during the time the speakers are interacting communicatively.

*Table 3: Observation and comment*

Observation	Comment
<p>Example (3)</p> <p>&lt;\$2&gt; &lt;\$E&gt;Sighs &lt; \$E&gt; It seems to be I don't know complicated.</p>	<p>&lt;\$1&gt; Well we all <b>pick up baggage</b> along the way.</p> <p>&lt;\$2&gt; Like?</p> <p>&lt;\$1&gt; <b>Like broken hearted kids</b> there's nothing we can do about it.</p>
<p>Example (4)</p> <p>&lt;\$1&gt; An early morning appointment.</p>	<p>&lt;\$2&gt; Ah that's handy save you having to <b>get up on the crack of dawn</b> to travel here.</p>

In example (3) in Table 3, the topic of conversation is racism. speaker 2 makes an observation regarding racial discrimination, a problem that is affecting him personally. Speaker 1 evaluates this

observation at two different points. The use of idioms allows speaker 1 to put across her point of view by talking from a general perspective, reducing with this the risk of threatening speaker 2's face.

In example (4), speaker 1 makes a statement and speaker 2 offers an evaluation that completes the discourse and manifests the empathy that she has with speaker 1.

### *Discourse boundaries*

When speakers choose idioms to change topic or to end a conversation they generally take into consideration the face of their hearers and also their own face. The kinds of idioms that are common at closings are clichés, proverbs, and sayings (McCarthy 1998: 136). The use of these idioms demonstrates the need to protect face, 'sheltering' in shared values. If a speaker wants to maintain a certain rapport with the hearer he or she will take great care in selecting an idiom that avoids being offensive or patronizing, as can be observed in extract (5), in which speaker 2 makes politely clear that the conversation, and consequently the negotiation of meaning, has ended.

- (5) <\$1> Tess all I'm saying is that if they want Mark and Laura can spend some time with me.  
 <\$2> And if they don't?  
 <\$1> He phoned the hotel look that's my new address I'm going to be there from tomorrow Tess I won't make any more contact. I'll leave it **in your hands** and thanks for seeing me.

In example (6), speaker 1 chooses an idiom to protect himself from a threatening situation, trying to bring it to closure in order to protect his face and the face of his hearer. The relationship between the speakers is business-related and basically symmetrical, even though speaker <\$1> is trying to secure a business deal with speaker <\$2>. At the same time, speaker <\$2> is suggesting to speaker <\$1> that they start an affair together.

- (6) <\$2> And sometimes what we don't have seems very attractive don't you think?

- <\$1> Actually I'd better not I I really have to make tracks sorry.  
<\$2> I know you do but do but at least we'll finish the bottle of wine.  
<\$1> Okay so.

In this extract both participants collaborate in the discourse, smoothly concluding the conversation, in spite of the high threat to face (for both participants) that the situation presents.

### *Cultural solidarity*

Idioms allow speakers to express cultural solidarity and to convey their social identity. The use of idioms assumes shared background knowledge and for this reason they are usually conveyed among the members of a particular culture or subculture. Speakers can choose to use idioms to create bonding, to manifest empathy, or to show an insight and understanding of the particular culture that he or she shares with the hearer. In *Fair City* the idioms used are often used to convey cultural solidarity. The social settings are similar and most characters interact symmetrically. In naturally-occurring conversations cultural solidarity is often conveyed through cultural allusions. This fact also can be observed in the following extracts drawn from *Fair City* (the idioms which are in bold are the ones that exemplify the particular point; the same applies for the subsequent examples where there is more than one idiom per turn or extract).

- (7) [Speaker 2 comments about the new boyfriend of a woman who is not present during the conversation.]  
<\$2> A doctor **Dublin Four** mummy and daddy and rugby and all that.  
<\$1> Sorry sorry hold hold for a minute there. I was married to Nicola and I'm not a Dublin Four rugby type so what are you talking through?

The comments of speaker 2 presupposes that speaker 1 understands what she means by being a *Dublin Four*, which is a cultural allusion that refers to social class. (Dublin 4 is a postal district of Dublin which could be considered higher middle class. As an idiomatic expression *Dublin Four* refers to a person that belongs

to a higher middle class professional group that is successful economically.) Speaker 1 knows what she is trying to convey but he distances himself from supporting her comment. It could be said that both speakers share in this conversation cultural solidarity although they do not have the same views regarding this specific topic of conversation.

(8) [The conversation refers to a dinner that speaker 1, a local politician, is going to attend.]

<\$2> Ah so it's a socio-political thing.

<\$1> No no no. I think so. It's eh the World Cup kicking off support the boys in green or the kids in green or somebody is in green anyway.

The use of the idiom *the boys in green* presupposes shared knowledge and refers to the Irish national soccer team who wear green jerseys.

### *Interactional contexts*

Idioms in interactional contexts are usually conveyed to strengthen relationships. Humour and irony also play an important role in this process, softening the potential threat to face.

### *Reinforcing relationships*

Idioms are often used among friends or within a group of people who share similar background knowledge, values, and interests. Idioms are generally used in symmetrical contexts and they often serve to reinforce relationships, as can be observed in example (9). In this example, speaker 1 is talking about the living arrangement he has with his ex-wife:

(9) <\$1> <\$E1> Sighs <\\$E1> yeah I've been pretty pathetic all right haven't I?

<\$2> No Mike you're definitely not pathetic not in my book. Cheers.

In (9) the use of the idiom helps speaker 2 to convey her acceptance of speaker 1, reassuring him that she has a high regard for him. With this she is acknowledging his positive face.

### *Humour and Irony*

Idioms that convey humour and irony are mainly used among participants who belong to the same group and maintain a close social distance. Humour draws on shared knowledge, creating rapport between the parties involved in the conversation. In (10), the conversation takes place in a pub. The participants are talking about counselling. When the conversation is coming to closure, speaker 2 addresses speaker 3 (her son) regarding the appropriate time for his return home. He replies choosing an idiom to summarize what has been said repeatedly during the conversation (the importance of giving options), adding with this a humorous note.

(10) <\$2> Ah well I expect I'll see you back in the house  
whenever is closing time.

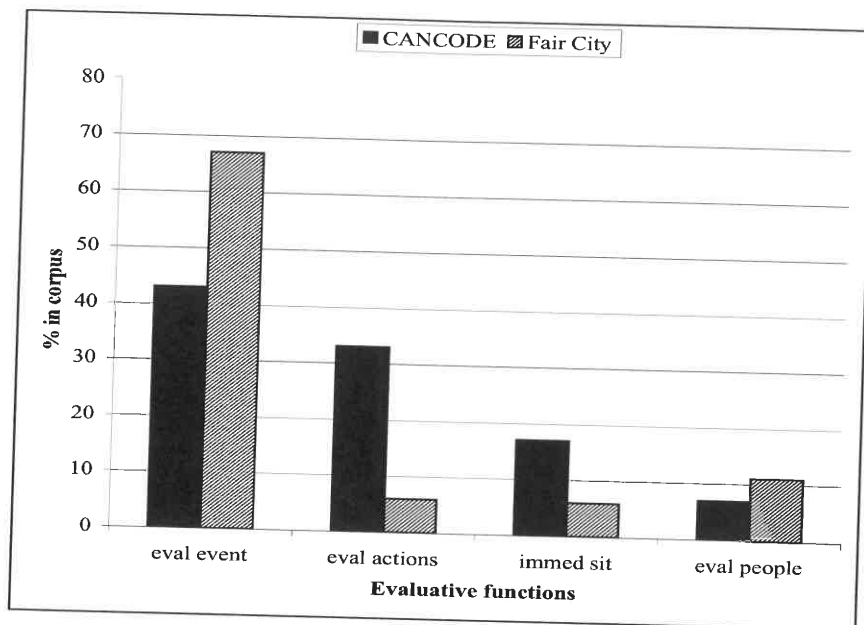
<\$3> Well why don't you bring me through my options.  
I haven't made up my mind yet.

### *Evaluative function of idioms*

An additional and sometimes overlapping discourse function of idioms is that of evaluation. McCarthy (1998) recognizes this evaluative function that all idioms have. Evaluations tend to occur when a speaker is saying something about a third person or about an object or other non-human entity, rather than about the speaker and the listener (Strässler 1982). By way of comparison with other data, let us compare findings based on CANCODE with the *Fair City* corpus. McCarthy (2003) selected at random 100 idioms from the five million word *Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English* (CANCODE). He found the following categories:

- Evaluating events (e.g. *it was the calm before the storm*)
- Evaluating people's actions (e.g. *she put her foot in it*)
- Evaluating people (e.g. *he's like a guardian*)
- Immediate situational comments (e.g. *Oh no! Me and my big mouth!*)

Idioms from the *Fair City* corpus were classified under these pragmatic categories. Figure 1 shows the three sets of results.

Figure 1: Evaluative functions: CANCODE, *Fair City*

The distribution of evaluative categories found in *Fair City* coincides, in general terms, with McCarthy's findings. Evaluating events is the category that has most tokens in the two sets of data, being considerable higher in *Fair City*. It is not surprising that *Fair City* has a higher total of 'evaluating events' than CANCODE: evaluating the narrative is appropriate to broadcast media (soap operas are, above all, narratives). In the soap opera genre events must be highlighted in order to create momentum and to advance the plot. By contrast, *Fair City* has considerably fewer occurrences of evaluating people's actions than CANCODE. Cultural politeness codes seem to have an important role in this process of evaluation. In *Fair City*, negative politeness seems to be preferred over positive politeness, as becomes evident by observing the small amount of evaluation of people's actions and the evaluation of people in this data. The latter is more common in *Fair City* than in CANCODE, a fact that can be explained by the higher density of characters in the soap opera: it is the interactions among these characters that, arguably, leads to a greater number of evaluations of people.

*Evaluating events*

In examples (11) and (12), the speakers are discussing differences in work practices. In (11), speaker 2, using an idiom, asserts her belief that speaker 3 has challenged her in an unfair manner. (Speaker 3 has already confronted speaker 2 previously in the conversation.) The use of the idiom contributes to the evaluation of the situation and softens the threat to face, facilitating the negotiation of meaning. In (12), the speakers talk about a person they both know, who has been inquiring about the disappearance of a man well known by them. Both speakers know the truth about his disappearance (his death). Speaker 2 evaluates the situation and uses an idiom to encapsulate what he thinks must be done in the specific situation.

- (11) <\$3> Look I'm sorry about what I said earlier all right.  
<\$2> Why?  
<\$3> What?  
<\$2> Well you obviously think I'm making things up about my clients trying to get myself off the hook.
- (12) <\$2> Look Carol this is serious which part of that deal you don't understand?  
<\$1> Oh Leo you get a grip will you?  
<\$2> Look she is going to start looking for Billy she is going to start asking questions she is going to start talking to Mike right she is going to start talking I don't know who she is going to start <G2> things aren't right so now you just go and talk to her nip this thing in the bud.

In extract (13) speaker 3 (speaker 2's business associate) uses the idiom to evaluate the actions of speaker 2 regarding his relationship with a businesswoman with whom the company wants to secure a deal. The woman has proposed to speaker 2 that they have an affair.

- (13) <\$2> Look I didn't do or say anything all right I don't know how this happen I don't even know why it happened.  
<\$3> You do find her attractive?

<\$2> I suppose she is quite a good looking and so what I suppose there was that kind of thing from the beginning anyway.

<\$3> You see **it does take two to tango** Paul.

The idiom in this conversation serves to add humour to the situation. It must be said that the relationship between both speakers, although work-related, is symmetrical. It also could be said that the use of this particular idiom threatens the face of the speaker by underlining his responsibility in the development of the situation. In spite of this, the idiom is well received (with humour) because of the relationship between both parties allows a reasonable degree of banter.

In (14), speaker 1 evaluates the situation in which her married friend is finding herself involved: going out with a man who used to be her boyfriend when she was younger.

(14) <\$1> Are you getting all **dolled up** for tonight?

<\$2> Hardly.

<\$1> Well sounds like Danny <\$G2> its really nice.

<\$2> Malachy is coming as well Renée.

<\$1> Even better two men **dancing attendance on you**.

<\$2> Its just a night out between friends that's all.

<\$1> There's no harm in **a man having an eye for you** you know.

<\$2> He just **don't have an eye for me** Renée.

<\$1> Just so long as you don't do anything about it.

The idiom *a man having an eye for you* used by speaker 1, apart from evaluating the situation, also serves to convey humour, implying solidarity with the hearer. Nevertheless, speaker 2 feels threatened by the evaluation of the situation and answers back with the same idiom, this time used in a negative clause.

### *Evaluating people's actions*

When idioms are used to evaluate directly the action/s of the hearer they often offer a higher potential threat to the face of the hearer. On the other hand, direct evaluations of people's actions also create solidarity and rapport among speakers. The degree of social distance and power play an important role regarding the



choice of these idioms, and the risk of losing face could be attenuated or almost non-existent depending on the symmetry of these two variables. In extract (15), speaker 2 is telling speaker 3 that she will have a date while she is babysitting. speaker 3 evaluates directly the action of the hearer, threatening her face. The relationship between the two parties is very close and this social distance mitigates the negative effect of the blunt metaphorical reference.

(15) <\$2> Yeah he is coming to see me tonight.

<\$3> He is coming straight around to the house not so much for foreplay.

<\$2> <G5+> he is going to visit me.

<\$3> You're joking.

<\$2> What?

<\$3> You kind of let him see you **up to your neck** in dirty nappies that it's not going to **keep him keen** Gina.

### *Evaluating people*

In *Fair City* evaluations of others (not present in the conversation) have a substantially higher number of tokens than evaluations of the hearer. The threat to face presented by direct evaluations varies according to the social distance and social power already established between the participants. In extract (16), seen already in (9), the evaluation is positive and is addressed directly to the positive face of the hearer. In extract (17), although the evaluation of a third party starts with an unfavourable comment on his appearance, it ends up with a positive evaluation of an aspect of his personality (good quality as a leader).

(16) <\$1> <\$E1> Sighs <\\$E1> yeah I've been pretty pathetic all right haven't I?

<\$2> No Mike you're definitely not pathetic **not in my book**. Cheers.

(17) <\$1> She walked past us as if we didn't exist I note how the service disappears when Mike isn't around. He may look **like a wet week** in <G2> but he knows how to **keep the menials in line**.

*Immediate situational comment*

Immediate situational comments are affective reactions to the immediate linguistic situation. Immediate situational comments are used in both sets of data to convey agreement or support the hearer, or to express disagreement, creating distance. Extract (18) presents a situation in which an immediate situational comment is conveyed to manifest disagreement. In this example, speaker 1 is expressing his regret for having been a bad father and for abandoning his wife (speaker 2).

(18) <\$1> <\$E1> Crying <\\$E1> I regret that everyday of my life and whatever you believe it or not I regret ever hurting you.

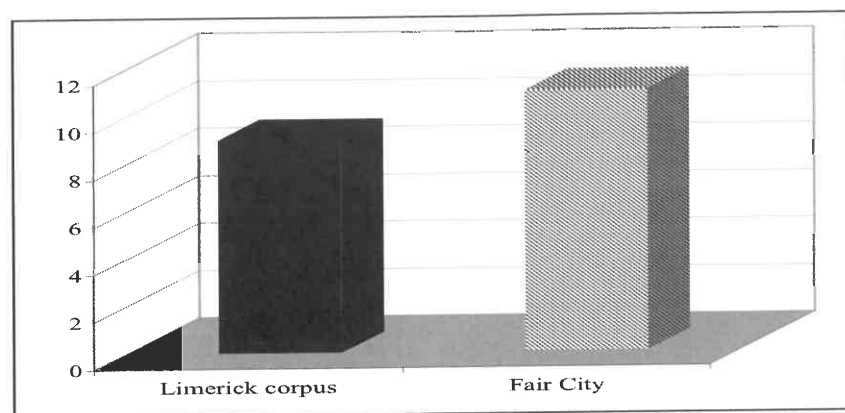
<\$2> Oh well **talk is cheap**.

**Comparing number of idioms across corpora**

In order to determine if the frequency with which idioms are used in the soap opera corpus represents the frequency with which idioms are used in real speech, the average number of idioms per thousand words found in *Fair City* is compared, in this section, with averages found in the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (LCIE). A sub-corpus from this source comprising 5,000 words of this corpus was assembled. It contains five randomly chosen extracts from conversations that reflect those typically found in *Fair City* contexts, that is, conversations between family and friends. The idioms found in this corpus were then manually counted and the average per thousand words was calculated and compared to *Fair City*. Strässler (1982) found one idiom per 1,150 words in his spoken data. Moon (1998: 97) notes that Strässler 'has a fairly narrow view of idiom, but he also identifies some instantial metaphors as idioms'. Results here seem to bear this out, as can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 illustrates the numerical similarity of the total of idioms per thousand words found in LCIE (9) and the *Fair City* corpus (11). The numerical difference between the idioms occurring is not significant and could be explained by the larger amount of data drawn from *Fair City*, from which the average number of idioms per thousand words has been calculated (24,000 compared to 5,000).

Figure 2: Average number of idioms per thousand words: LCIE and Fair City.



### Summary and conclusions

The analysis shows that most of the idioms drawn from the *Fair City* corpus can be categorized and favourably compared with the forms that idioms have in natural conversation. Regarding the functions of idioms, all types of functions were found in the soap opera corpus. Moreover, the distribution of idioms into evaluative categories reflects, in general terms, the findings from CANCODE (see McCarthy 2003). In *Fair City*, idioms are used across all social contexts enacted in the soap opera and the potential threats to face are considered by the speakers. Idioms are used mainly in symmetrical relationships or in situations in which the participants manifest social or cultural solidarity. Consequently, it can be said that the idioms found in the Irish soap opera corpus have forms and functions that mirror those found in naturally occurring conversation. Even more, the analysis highlights the need to acknowledge the context in which idioms are used and the functions that they perform. Politeness codes, levels of social power, and social distance are central to the understanding of idioms. Thus soap opera, by exploiting idioms in appropriate contexts, creates a believable linguistic world in which the pragmatic functions of idioms can be understood and analysed. Non-native students should be encouraged to observe idioms used in soap opera and films and to discuss their meanings and functions in order to develop an awareness regarding the contexts in which they can be conveyed.

## Note

1. The phenomenon of stylistic variation of idiomatic expression is widely accepted and documented (Fernando and Flavell 1981: 42; Carter 1999: 209).

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