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Additional Meanings of Human Body-related Idioms: Context, Semantics

Azaliya A. Zakirova

Kazan State Medical University, Russia, Kazan

Mariia I. Andreeva

Kazan State Medical University, Russia, Kazan

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5760-0934>

lafruta@mail.ru

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Abstract: The paper addresses a vital issue of forming idioms with nominations of human body. Human body-related words nominating body parts, physiological and mental processes are used to form numerous English idioms. In given paper these idioms are referred to as *human body-related*. The paper aims at revealing the specifics of lexical and semantic constituents of the idioms with reference to their contexts. We collected 200 human body-related English idioms from academic books and dictionaries. The research comprised four stages. The thematic classification based on the lexical structure of the idioms revealed prevalence of the idioms comprising words *head, eyes, heart, back, foot, and hand*. The similarities found in the meanings of all the idioms under study provided semantic classification into five groups, namely, *characteristics, action, state, causation, and ability*. Next we focused on contextual and semantic specifics of the idioms. In particular, the idioms, containing the word *head* were studied in the texts of the British National Corpus. The contexts provided the following additional meanings of the idioms: higher position, achievements, location, expenses, and inability to do something. The revealed collocations follow A^V+K type. The obtained results and developed algorithm may be applied to lexical and contextual studies of idioms and lexical groups.

Keywords: human body-related idiom, British National Corpus, semantics of idiom, lexical collocations of idiom, newspaper context, contextual semantics

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оригинальная статья

Дополнительные смыслы в значениях идиом с компонентом *тело человека*: контекст, семантика

Закирова Азалия Азатовна

Казанский государственный медицинский университет,
Россия, г. Казань

Андреева Мария Игоревна

Казанский государственный медицинский университет,
Россия, г. Казань<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5760-0934>

lafruta@mail.ru

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Аннотация: Рассматривается насущный вопрос формирования идиом с компонентом *тело человека*. Номинации тела человека, а именно части тела, чувства, физиологические и психические процессы, используются для образования многочисленных английских идиом. В данной статье эти идиомы называются идиомами с компонентом *тело человека*. Цель – выявить специфику лексико-семантических составляющих идиом, основываясь на контекстах. Мы изучили 200 английских идиом с компонентом *тело человека*, отобранных из академических источников и словарей. Исследование проводилось в четыре этапа. Тематическая классификация, основанная на лексической структуре идиом, выявила преобладание идиом, включающих слова *head* (голова), *eyes* (глаза), *heart* (сердце), *back* (спина), *foot* (нога) и *hand* (рука). Сходство, выявленное в значениях всех изучаемых идиом, позволило провести семантическую классификацию и выделить следующие пять групп: характеристики, действие, состояние, причинно-следственная связь, способность. На дальнейших этапах мы рассматривали контекстуальные и семантические особенности превалирующих групп *характеристики* и *состояние*. В частности, были изучены идиомы, содержащие слово *head*, на материале текстов Британского национального корпуса. В контекстах были выявлены следующие дополнительные смыслы идиом: более высокое положение, достижения, местоположение, расходы, неспособность измениться, что-то вспомнить, победить. Структурные типы словосочетаний с идиомами изучались на основе газет, загруженных в Google Ngram Viewer, и выявили преобладание

типа А^V+К. Полученные результаты и разработанный алгоритм могут быть в дальнейшем применены к лексическим и контекстуальным исследованиям различных идиом в частности и лексических групп в целом.

Ключевые слова: идиома с компонентом *тело человека*, Британский национальный корпус, семантика идиомы, лексические сочетания идиомы, газетный контекст, контекстуальная семантика

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Introduction

Idioms have been studied in numerous research works within various domains of linguistics [1–4]. However, the exact definition of idioms lacks one unified and accepted standpoint among the researchers. P. Tabossi and F. Zardon claim that idioms are ‘strings of words whose semantic interpretation cannot be derived compositionally from the interpretation of their parts’ [5]. A relatively broad definition of an idiom is given by Sinclair, who argues that it is ‘a group of two or more words which are chosen together in order to produce a specific meaning or effect in speech or writing’¹. Thus, complex nature of idioms is determined by their ‘non-flexibility’, i.e. the idioms are set phrases and their lexical components are rarely changed, primarily for stylistic reasons. We follow theories of A. V. Kunin and define idioms as ‘stable combinations of lexemes with fully or partially reinterpreted meaning’ [7].

Context functions as an instrument to study and reveal specifics of idioms’ semantics [8–11]. However, contextual study of human body-related idioms may be viewed as a research niche [1; 2].

Within current anthropocentric linguistic paradigm the research is **relevant** as it focuses on the study of idioms comprising a human body-related (henceforth HBR) word, such as body parts, organs, and physiological processes. The research **novelty** comprises detailed study and multiple approaches, namely, lexicographic, semantic, contextual, taken to unveil the nature of the idioms under study [1; 2].

The research **aims** at revealing lexical and semantic specifics of the idioms with HBR word, and the features of their functioning in the general English-language discourse.

The aim presupposes the following **tasks**: 1) eliciting HBR idioms from dictionaries; 2) performing thematic classification of the idioms according to their lexical composition; 3) performing classification of the idioms by their meaning; 4) analyzing lexical and semantic compatibility of individual idioms; 5) analyzing and revealing additional meanings of the idioms based on their syntactic contexts registered in the texts of the British National Corpus; 6) analyzing collocations with the idioms in the newspapers uploaded into Google NGram viewer tool; 7) comparing the semantics of the idioms.

There has been a significant increase of researchers’ interest in the anthropocentric notions, namely HBR metaphors and idioms [12–21]. Andreici et al. claim that one way of reflecting anthropocentrism by linguistic means is revealed in polysemantic set phrases, in particular, formed by the lexemes *head, blood, skin* that trigger certain associations in human mind [22].

The specifics of an idiom’s literal and figurative meanings correlation was emphasized by both Russian and foreign researchers [4; 10; 19–25]. The authors note that the lexical form and meaning of an idiom reflect the extralinguistic information provided by native speakers during the formation of the idiom [26; 27]. The correlation also presupposes that the literal and figurative meanings can also be considered in terms of ‘source domain’ and ‘target domain’, introduced by G. Lakoff and M. Johnson. The correlation of the source and target domains is based on their similarity [4].

Structural approach is generally accepted and applied in linguistics to study the semantics of words, and idioms in particular [3; 9]. Following I. A. Sternin, we distinguish nuclear, peripheral and potential semes in the structure of an idiom. A seme is defined as the ‘minimal component of the meaning’ [8]. The core seme of a word helps to distinguish its semantic fields. Peripheral semes indicate differences in the meaning of idioms [28].

The study of the context of an idiom unveils its potential semes. The use of the context to study an idiom was initiated by M. T. Tagiev [29] and was later developed by A. V. Kunin [6]. The term ‘syntactic context’ was introduced by N. N. Amosova to denote the context that rests on the syntactic construction, namely, ‘a semantically realizable word, regardless of the lexical meanings of the words included in this construction’ [25]. Given views emphasize the role of the context in the analysis of idioms’ semantics. Bulut claims that context is a clue to dealing with idioms [30].

The structural syntactic theories highlight crucial role of context in analyzing the semantics of idioms in a way allowing idioms’ meaning extension.

The context is also of primary importance for analysis of possible collocations with HBR idioms. We followed the theory introduced by V. D. Arakin [31] who distinguishes

¹ Cobuild C. Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms. HarperCollins, 1995.

between core word (Kernel, henceforth K) and adjunct (henceforth A). We use the following abbreviations for the parts of speech: n (noun), v (verb), a (adjective), d (adverb), pr (preposition), conj (conjunction).

The authors follow given theories of the structural approach to semantics, lexis and contextual linguistics and arrange the research work accordingly. The research comprised four stages, corresponding to the following research questions (henceforth RQ):

RQ1: What are the most common nominations of human body parts or physiological processes used to form HBR idioms?

RQ2: What are semantic groups of HBR idioms?

RQ3: What additional meanings are revealed in the contextual study of HBR idioms containing 'nucleus' lexeme?

RQ4: What are possible collocations with HBR idioms in newspaper texts?

Materials and methods

The research **material** is based on 200 HBR idioms elicited from three academic books of the Cambridge Publishing House, namely, Michael McCarthy, Felicity O'Dell *English Idioms in Use²*, *English Vocabulary in Use, Upper-Intermediate³*, *English Vocabulary in Use, Advanced⁴*.

As idiomatic expressions are often used in media texts, films or TV shows and form a part of the essential values of the culture, we resorted to written texts for detailed semantic and syntactic analysis of the HBR idioms. Thus, the authors compiled a set of short texts obtained from the British National Corpus. The texts were numbered and codified by the authors.

The British National Corpus (henceforth BNC) was compiled by Oxford University press in the 1980s – early 1990s, containing 100 million words of text from a wide range of genres (namely, spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic discourse)⁵. All the example sentences and contexts were elicited from the British National Corpora.

We also resorted to Google NGram Viewer online tool for the collocations with HBR idioms. This tool is based on Google books and represents the frequency of words usage both graphically and contextually⁶. All the example sentences and contexts were elicited from the Google Books NGram Viewer.

The research rested on the following methods: lexicographic analysis, descriptive method, componential analysis, lexicographic method, distributive analysis.

Results and Discussion

At the preliminary stage 200 HBR idioms were elicited from three academic books (mentioned above).

At Stage 1 the idioms under study were classified thematically based on their lexical components (Fig. 1).

As Fig. 1 suggests, the prevailing number of idioms belong to the thematic group *head* (24)⁷. E.g. **to lose one's head**, **to knock that on the head**, **to keep one's head down**, **to have a head like a sieve**, **to be a big-head**.

Moreover, the most frequently used words in HBR idioms comprise the following: *eyes* (18), *heart* (17), *back* (15), *foot* (14), *hand* (11), *face* (9). E.g. **to turn a blind eye**, **to bare one's heart**, **to be on someone's back**, **to put one's foot down**, **to change hands**, **to keep a straight face**.

The least frequently used words nominating human body parts in idioms are *heel*, *toe*, *guts*, and *chest*. E.g. **to drag one's heels**, **to keep someone on toes**, **to have a gut feeling**, **to get it off one's chest**.

At Stage 2 the idioms were classified into five groups according to their meaning (Fig. 2). We can distinguish between five semantic groups. Semantic group *characteristics* (77) comprises idioms nominating personal features of character (e.g. **to be a pain in the neck**, **to have a heart of gold**, **to be sharp-tongued**), talents (e.g. **to have green fingers**, **to have a good head for figures**), features of objects (e.g. **first-hand**, **to be to hand**, **as long as your arm**), description of action (**to laugh / scream / shout one's head off**, **face to face**, **to slog / sweat / work one's guts out**).

Semantic group *action* (62) includes nominations of physical action (e.g. **to put finger on sth**, **to shrug one's shoulders**, **foot the bill**, **to keep a straight face**), mental action (e.g. **to pick someone's brain**, **to get one's head around**, **to make up one's mind**).

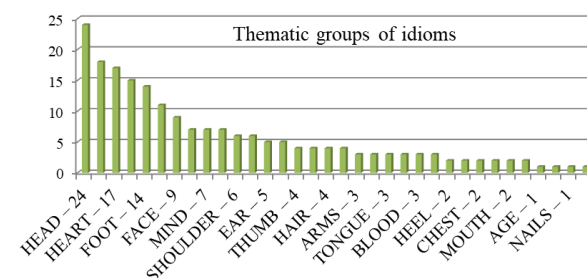


Fig. 1. Thematic classification of HBR idioms

Рис. 1. Тематическая классификация идиом с компонентом тело человека

² O'Dell F., McCarthy M. *English idioms in use advanced with answers*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

³ McCarthy M., O'Dell F. *English vocabulary in use upper-intermediate & advanced*, 2011.

⁴ McCarthy M., O'Dell F. *English vocabulary in use: Advanced*. Ernst Klett Sprachen, 2002.

⁵ British National Corpus. Available at: <https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/> (accessed 15.11.2021).

⁶ Google Books NGram Viewer. Available at: <https://books.google.com/ngrams> (accessed 15.11.2021).

⁷ Hereinafter the number in brackets indicates the frequency of the idiom.

Semantic group *state* (29) comprises HBR idioms nominating emotional state (e.g. **one's heart sinks, to raise a few eyebrows**), physical state (e.g. **to feel it in one's bones, to shake in one's boots**), mental state (e.g. **to keep one's head above water, to bury your head in the sand**), psychological state (e.g. **to get one's fingers burnt, to be rushed off one's feet**).

Semantic group *causation* (22) contains idioms representing positive consequences of causation (e.g. **to put someone's mind at rest, to stand shoulder to shoulder with someone**) and negative consequences of causation (e.g. **to stab someone in the back, to get on everyone's nerves**).

Semantic group *ability* (7) comprises idioms nominating individual features (e.g. **to turn one's hand to any job, could do sth with one hand tied behind back**), inability (e.g. **couldn't believe one's eyes, couldn't keep one's eyes off**).

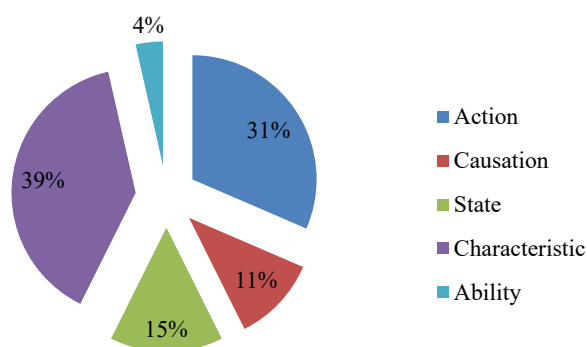


Fig. 2. Semantic groups of HBR idioms
 Рис. 2. Семантические группы идиом с компонентом тело человека

At Stage 3 we focused on the contextual specifics of HBR idioms, in particular those containing the word *head*. The given thematic group is chosen as it contains the largest number of the idioms studied (24). For the purposes of the research we resorted to the texts of the British National Corpus.

Contexts and additional meanings revealed for HBR idiom V + head and shoulders above someone

The idiom **V + head and shoulders above someone**, *to be much better than someone* is revealed in 27 contexts in the BNC. The idiom functions in prose, tabloids, and biography genres. Typically, the idiom is preceded by verbs (**stand** (6), **tower**, **put**, **be**). E.g., *Today, both he and Anthony Tohill stand head and shoulders above every other midfield pairing in the country.*

The idiom is followed by the nomination of a person (**her sisters**, ES8⁸), **competitors** (ES2), **rivals** (ES11), generic words, like **rest of ...** (ES1, 20–26), **others** (ES8, ES19). For example, ES19 *Of these twelve, the first eight are much the most abundant, with silicon and oxygen head and shoulders above the rest.*

The meaning of the idiom **head and shoulders above** is extended and explained in the contexts of the BNC. In particular, in ES8 the schooner is **head and shoulders above** others due to its decks, design, technical characteristics for circumnavigation and family cruising. For example, ES8 *Modern Schooner # GIFT HORSE is without a doubt the finest Ocean 60. Not only is she in excellent condition, but her lovely teak decks and customized interior put her head and shoulders above her sisters. The immense strength of the British built Ocean 60's construction is well known and the design has proven itself with circumnavigations, very successful charter operations and shorthanded family cruising.*

In ES11 the idiom **head and shoulders above** is used as character really stood higher than others on the steps of the cathedral so that's why it looked as his rivals bowed before him. For example, ES11 *He engineered it so that he was standing head and shoulders above his rivals when they filed past to shake his hand and offer their condolences.*

In ES13 the poet is better than someone because of greatness of his personality and poetry. For example, ES13 *Though short, he stands head and shoulders above most. He is one of those characters whose personality is somehow several sizes too large <... > And what poetry! It is larger than life, more real than truth, dramatic and daring, perceptive and flowing, and, significantly, full of paradox and ambiguity.*

Also in ES14 the sportsman is **head and shoulders above** other men as he won the competition and got a gold medal. For example, ES14 *Lightning Linford, the British athletics team captain, stands head and shoulders above silver medallist <... > bronze medal winner <... > the men he beat with amazing ease to capture the 100 metres gold medal.*

Obviously, ES20 exemplifies Japan as a country that is better than other countries as it spends much more money on computer hardware and software. For example, ES20 *<... > But, as in 1990, Japan stands head and shoulders above the rest in hardware investment intentions this year. For software the review shows a downward trend in the UK, Canada and Spain this year. Japan, once again, is on the up [31].* In ES25 silicon and oxygen are better than the rest of the chemical elements as they are the most prevalent among other elements in the Earth's crust. For example, ES25 *Of these twelve, the first eight are much the most abundant, with silicon and oxygen head and shoulders above the rest. Silicon and oxygen, in fact, are the fundamental constituents of almost all the rocks in the Earth's crust.*

Contexts and additional meanings revealed for HBR idiom V+ing head against a brick wall

The idiom **V+ing head against a brick wall**, *to feel frustrated because someone stops person from making progress in something*, is found in 14 contexts of the BNC. The idiom is used in prose, popular magazines, and news scripts.

⁸ All the sentences extracted from British National Corpus are registered in authors' corpus and marked with a code developed by the authors. The code comprises two letters ES, which stand for 'example sentence' and a number.

The idiom collocates with verbs (**bang** (8), **hit**, **knock**, **bash**), pronouns (**their**, **my**, **your** (8), **her**). E.g. ES8 *So don't waste energy **banging your head against a brick wall**.*

The idiom is followed by adverbial modifiers of time, namely, **at the moment** (ES2), **in the end** (ES3), verbs (**to attempt**, **to fight** (ES4)), preposition (**about** (ES1)). E.g., ES14 *I must admit that I got fed up with pursuing it and I think it's like **banging your head against a brick wall** in the end.*

The meaning of the idiom **V+ing head against a brick wall** is explained in the contexts of the BNC. In particular, in ES5 a woman is tired of convincing everyone that she's not a thief, but the protagonist doesn't believe her. For example, ES5 *I am not a thief. I don't handle stolen property, and damn you for suggesting I do! I'm tired of it! Tired of **bashing my head against a brick wall!***

In ES6 the idiom is used in ecological context as despite their efforts governments don't solve environmental issues in an appropriate way and at proper pace. For example, ES6 *Like most activists, Isaacs is fed up with the sloth-like pace with which governments are taking on environmental concerns. 'After a while you feel like you're **banging your head against a brick wall,**' he says.*

The idiom used in ES8 means if you know that you aren't going to win in some fight or struggle, it will be pointless to continue so do not waste your energy and try next time. For example, ES8 *So don't waste energy **banging your head against a brick wall**. Admit temporary defeat with good grace, retreat, reconsider and wait.*

In ES11 the ballet teacher found that working with children was like **banging her head against a brick wall** as they were stubborn and often continued to do things their own way. For example, ES11 *Although she was terribly fond of the children she found that working with them was like **banging her head against a brick wall**.*

In ES13 an old man says that he's **banging his head against a brick wall** as he hasn't managed to change his ex-wife's attitude towards him in any way. For example, ES13 *I can't believe she's doing this to me after 33 years of marriage <...> I've done everything to get her back. But I'm **banging my head against a brick wall**.*

Contexts and additional meanings revealed for HBR idiom **off the top of one's head**

The idiom **off the top of one's head**, *without thinking about it for very long, say something immediately, from memory*, manifests itself in 39 contexts of the BNC. The idiom is common in broadcast discussions, popular magazines and prose.

The idiom is used with verbs **lift** (15), **decide**, **say**, **come**, **do** (e.g. ES15 *In my imagination, I can lift **off the top of my head**, just like a lid* [31]); nouns **number**, **opinion** (24), **team**, **place** (e.g., ES24 *And that's purely expression of opinion **off the top of my head*** [31]); adverbs **totally**, **personally**, **purely** (18),

somewhat (e.g. ES18 *... and I mean that's purely **off the top of my head**, that...).*

The idiom is followed by pronouns (**I** (ES4, ES10-ES14), **what** (ES20, ES28-ES29), **which** (ES21)), conjunctions (**and** (ES1, ES30), **but** (ES2, ES6-ES8)). E.g. ES4 *So I, **off the top of my head** I said twenty pounds.*

The meaning of the idiom **off the top of one's head** is explained in the contexts of the BNC. In particular, in ES1 the idiom is objectified in the meaning of *do something quickly, without thinking for a long time*. For example, ES1 *... so it was a bit of a rush, and that's really one of my feelings about it – I sat down and wrote it **off the top of my head** and not an awful lot is very considered.*

Additional meaning *inability to tell something and thus inquiring* is revealed in ES6: *erm I mean I can't tell you **off the top of my head**, but I would like to know how many erm career advisory erm people actually help girls to direct their career.*

In ES7 the idiom is used in the meaning *inability to remember the exact number*. For example, ES7 *... tell me how many crimes have been committed at the Park and Rides? – Well I don't know the number **off the top of my head**, but I do know... – But you say that the number's gone down.*

In the following context the idiom is implemented in the meaning of *something that they can easily remember*. For example, ES9 *... which I can remember go something along the lines of rehearsal at four thirty, picnic tea <...> this is all **off the top of my head**, four sharp, picnic tea, concert, and go home.*

Contextual meaning *ability to imagine something quickly* is objectified in ES15: *In my imagination, I can lift **off the top of my head**, just like a lid. As I do so, a shaft of light comes from above, sparkling with diamonds just like those on the water.* The semantic structure of the idioms was extended by additional meanings revealed in the BNC contexts (Tab.).

At Stage 4 we studied the collocations and frequency with HBR idioms containing the word *head* (see Stage 3) in newspaper texts registered in Google Ngram Viewer (Fig. 3). We resorted to newspaper texts as the specifics of media discourse implies the use of figurative and vivid linguistic units, in particular idioms, aimed at attracting and engaging readers.

It should be noted that almost all the collocations revealed in BNC texts (see Stage 3) were also used in newspapers and were the prevailing ones. This research outlines top frequent collocations with HBR idioms containing the word *head* under study.

According to the structural theory of V. D. Arakin [31], the HBR idiom **head and shoulders above** is marked as kernel (K) and coded as $K^{n+conj+n+pr}$. Revealed collocations correspond to the formula $A^V+K^{n+conj+n+pr}$, where V is represented by the following verbs: **stand**⁹ (31), **be** (19), **set** (7), **put** (3), **sit** (2), **tower**, **remain**, **regard**, **get**, **rise**. E.g. *Microsoft is a product company, and for the past decade its Windows and Office products have **stood head and shoulders above** all others; He's now on his second Delta Marine motor-yacht, which he says is 'head and shoulders above any builder in composite construction'.*

⁹ Italics is used for verbs found collocating with kernel idiom both in BNC and Google Ngram Viewer newspaper texts.

Tab. Additional meanings of HBR idioms revealed in the contexts

Табл. Дополнительные смыслы идиом с компонентом тело человека, выявленные в контекстах

Idiom	to be head and shoulders above someone	to be banging head against a brick wall	off the top of one's head
Meaning	to be much better than someone	to feel frustrated because someone stops person from making progress in something	without thinking about it for very long, say something immediately, from memory
Core seme	characteristics	state	action
Differential semes	higher	negative	quick
	higher technical characteristics	frustration	–
	higher location	inability	–
	high money expenses	caused by inability to solve environmental issues	inability to remember easily
	high level of personality	caused by inability to win	inability to remember the number
	high sport achievements	caused by inability to change attitude	inability to imagine
	high distribution of chemical element	caused by children's behaviour	–

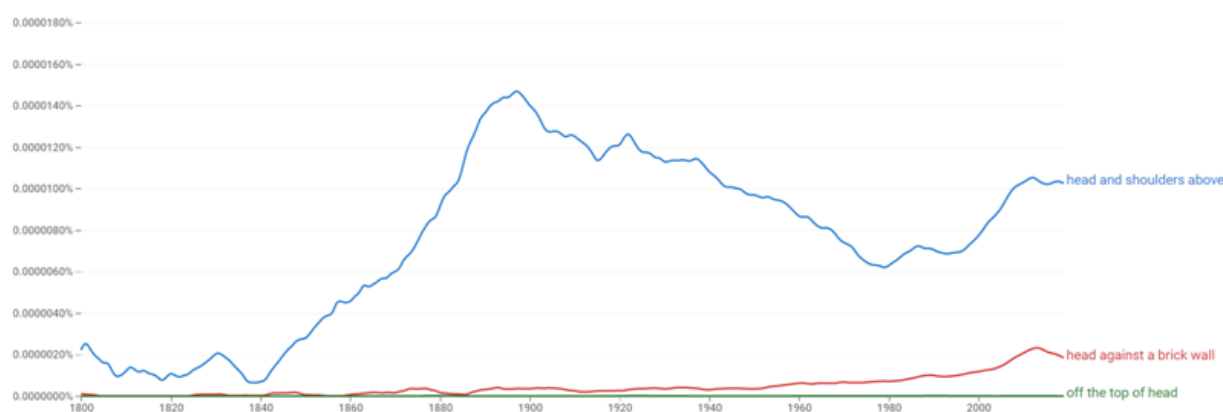


Fig. 3. HBR idioms frequency in Google Ngram viewer

Рис. 3. Частотность идиом с компонентом тело человека в текстах сервиса Google Ngram viewer

The verbal collocations with the HBR idiom **head against a brick wall** were coded as $A^V+K^{n+pr+n+n}$ and comprise the following verbs: **beat** (9), **bang** (6), **hit**, **bash**, **pound**, **ram**, **slam**, **butt**. E.g. *Now you spend half a day **beating** your **head against a brick wall** of busy signals, ranting at recorded messages, hanging around on hold; By 1996, though, **hardcore** was **banging** its **head against a brick wall** of schlocky ultraviolence and velocity.*

It should be noted that the vast majority of the verbs revealed share the meaning of *hitting*. However, the power and intensity of hitting differs.

Coded as $A^V+K^{pr+n+pr+n}$, the HBR idiom **off the top of head** collocates with verbs **know** (2), **think** (2), **write**, **list**, **craft**, **go**, **be**, **say**, **blow**. Contextual analysis showed that the syntactic function of the idiom is that of adverbial modifier. E.g. *He can list several such deficiencies **off the top of his head**; Each time, his verse was completely different, both times **off the top of his head**.*

Conclusion

Based on the obtained results the most common nominations of body parts used to form HBR idioms comprise *head*, *eyes*, *heart*, *back*, *foot*, *hand*, and *face*. The idioms belong to five semantic groups, namely, *action*, *state*, *causation*, *characteristic*, and *ability*.

The research showed that the vast majority of additional meanings of the HBR idiom **to be head and shoulders above someone** comprise a potential seme *higher*, namely, higher characteristics, expenses, achievements, location. The potential seme *inability* is added to two idioms **to be banging head against a brick wall** and **off the top of one's head**. According to BNC texts, the former idiom is used as a result of inability to solve problems, win and change one's behavior. The latter idiom nominates inability to remember and to imagine things.

Mostly, idioms are preceded by verbs both in BNC texts and Google N-Gram newspapers texts. HBR idioms **to be banging or hitting head against a brick wall** and **off the top of one's head** also collocate with pronouns and nouns / adverbs, respectively. The research findings outline top frequent collocations with three HBR idioms containing the word *head*.

The idioms under study are followed by different parts of speech. The idiom **to be head and shoulders above someone** is most often used with nouns and generic words; the idiom **to be banging head against a brick wall** with adverbial modifiers of time, verbs and prepositions; the idiom **off the top of one's head** with pronouns and conjunctions.

Further research perspective lies in the extension of the research material. The developed algorithm can be applied to other idioms, in particular to those with a colour-nominating word as a lexical component. Moreover, the data

obtained in the study may be narrowed only to the texts of specific sub-corpora of the BNC, such as fiction texts, magazines or newspapers.

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