

The secret grammar of words

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20 most frequent words

the

of

and

to

a

in

that

I

it

was

is

he

for

you

on

with

as

be

had

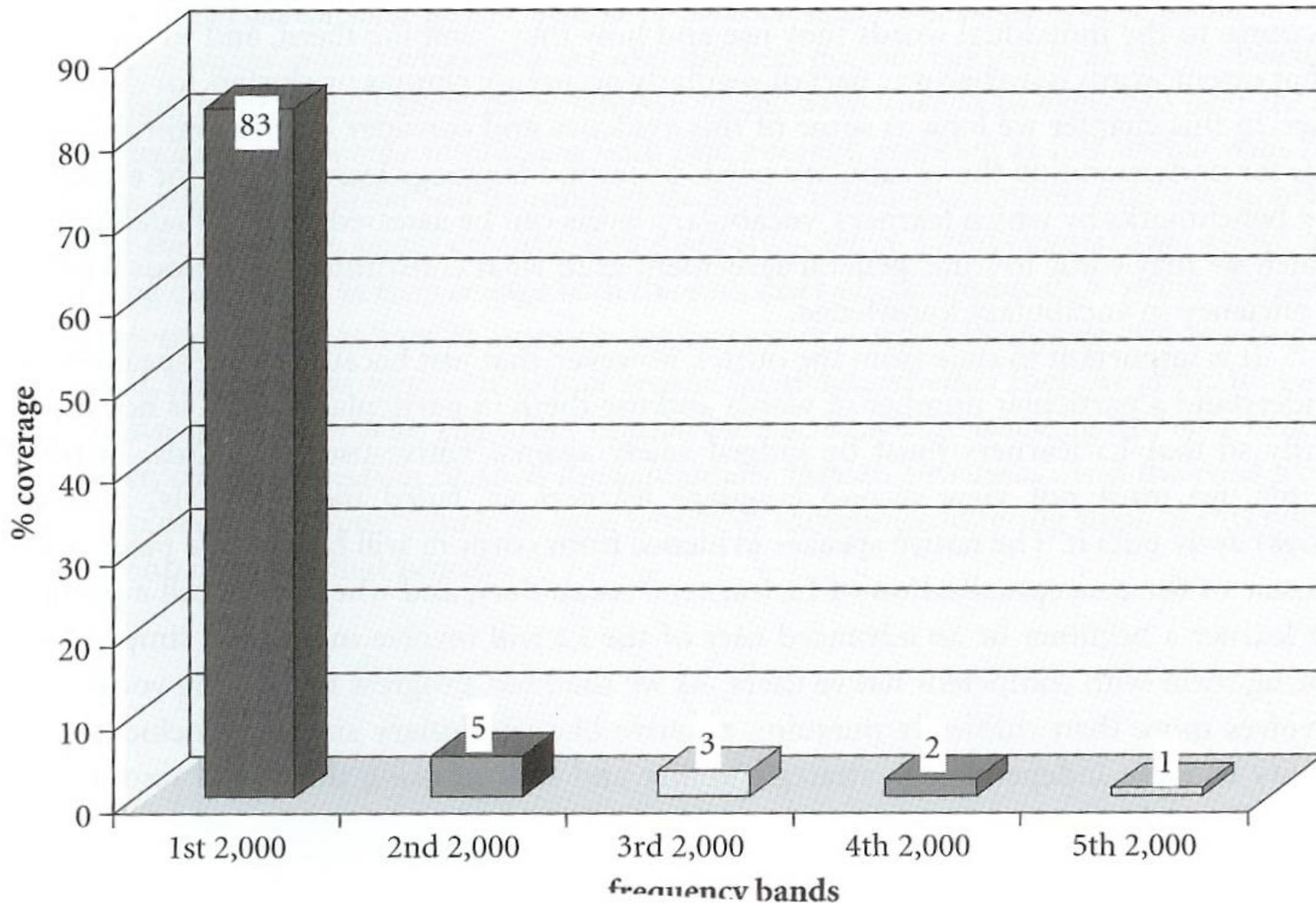
but

The percentage of text coverage of high frequency words

top X words	% text coverage
3	11.5%
10	22%
50	37%
100	44%
1000	74%
2000	80%
3000	85%

(after Schmitt, 2000)

Figure 1: Text coverage in a 10 million-word corpus of spoken and written English



O'Keeffe, A., McCarthy, M., & Carter, R. (2007) *From corpus to classroom: Language use and language teaching*. Cambridge University Press, p. 32.

“Learners would do well to learn the common words of the language very thoroughly, because they carry the main patterns of the language.”

Professor John Sinclair, 1991: *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*.

“When a child can employ two hundred words of a foreign language he possesses a practical knowledge of all the syntactical constructions and of all the foreign sounds.”

Thomas Prendergast, 1864: *The Mastery of Languages, or, the Art of Speaking Foreign Tongues Idiomatically.*

on

[preposition] (1) in contact with a surface or line: *There's something on your chin.* • *We live on 10th Avenue.*

(2) with time expressions: *I'll see you on Monday.* • *Phone me on my birthday.*

[adverb] connected, or continuing, or going forward: *Who left the lights on?* • *Keep on until you come to a roundabout.*

→ at

→ in

Grammar patterns

1 on (preposition) | + NP

Put the flowers on the shelf next to the TV.

Rosario is a large town on the river.

Most films are released on Fridays.

▲ to indicate position or specify a time

2 verb | + on (preposition) | + NP

I'm depending on you to help with the driving.

What does the generator run on? ~ Diesel oil.

▲ to talk about dependence and survival (Other verbs include: *bank, rely, count, survive, manage*)

At least we agree on one thing – the cost.

▲ to say what is talked about (Other verbs include: *advise, comment, remark, talk, lecture, disagree, vote.*)

3 verb | + NP | + on (preposition) | + NP

Why waste money on a taxi when we can walk?

How much did you spend on the groceries?

▲ to say what receives money, time, sympathy, blame, etc.

4 verb | + on (adverb)

Is Keith there? ~ Can you hold on a minute, and I'll get him.

The meeting dragged on and on, but no one could agree on a settlement.

▲ to emphasize that something is connected, continuing or going forward

5 verb | + on (adverb) | + -ing

Some people ignored the fire alarm and carried on working.
You can't go on pretending you love her.

▲ to talk about activities continuing or going forward

6 verb | + on (adverb) | + NP verb | + NP | + on (adverb)

Can I try on these jeans?

What does this say? ~ Just a minute, while I put my glasses on.

We cheered our team on.

▲ to emphasize that something is connected, continuing or going forward

Collocations

These verbs follow Grammar pattern 4: *catch on, carry on, go on, move on, keep on, press on, push on, stay on, sign on.*

These verbs follow Grammar pattern 6: *hand (something) on, put (something) on, pass (something) on, switch or turn (something) on, take (something) on, try (something) on.*

Many nouns follow *on*. Here are some of the most common:

on board, on foot

on disk, on line, on the phone

on TV, on the radio

on business, on duty, on call, on holiday, on strike

on time, on track, on the way

on purpose

on sale, on loan

on fire, on ice, on tap

on a diet

These adjectives are usually followed by *on*: *keen, tough, dependent, based.*

Set phrases

• **on and on (and on)** = continuing for a long time
The lecture went on and on, and I nearly fell asleep.

• **what's going on?**

What's going on? Why aren't you ready yet?

▲ to ask about what is happening

- **what's on (at ...)?**

What's on at the Tivoli? ~ High Terminal Rise II.

▲ to ask about films, plays, etc.

- **have a lot on / have nothing on** = be very busy/have nothing planned

I've got a lot on at the moment so can we put the meeting off?

What's he doing this evening? ~ Nothing, he hasn't got anything on.

- **straight on** = continuing in the same direction

Drive straight on until you come to a gas station.

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Grammar index

Here are the keyword entries where you will find information about features of traditional grammar:

articles → a/an, → the
auxiliary verbs → am/is/are, → be, → been, → being, → did,
→ do/does, → had, → have, → was/were
comparatives → more, → than
conditionals → if; (1st) → will; (2nd & 3rd) → had, → was/were, → would
conjunctions → and, → but, → if, → or, → so, → then
determiners → a/an, → all, → any, → more, → most, → much, → (also
possessive) → my, → no, → one, → other, → some, → that, → the, → this
discourse markers → and, → so, → then, → well
future tenses → going, → will
 future continuous → will **future perfect** → will
infinitive → to
linking verbs → am/is/are, → be, → seem
modal verbs → can, → could, → may, → might, → need, → should,
→ used, → will, → would
negation → never, → no, → not
participle (past) → been; (**present**); → being, going
passive → by
 present passive → am/is/are **past passive** → was/were
 present continuous passive → being
 present perfect passive → been
past continuous → was/were
past perfect → had
past perfect continuous → had
past simple → did
phrasal verbs → at, → back, → by, → come, → do, → for, → get, → give,
→ go, → in, → keep, → let, → look, → make, → on, → put, → see, → start,
→ stop, → take, → tell, → think, → up, → with, → work
prepositions → at, → by, → for, → in, → of, → on, → than, → to, → up, → with
present continuous → am/is/are, → still
present perfect → have, → just, → never
present perfect continuous → been, → have
present simple → do/does
pronouns → all, → any, → it, → more, → most, → much, → one, → other,
→ some, → that, → this, → you
questions → am/is/are, → did, → do/does, → had, → have, → how,
→ was/were, → what, → when, → who, → why
 indirect questions → how, → what, → when, → who, → why
 object questions → what, → who
 subject questions → what, → who
relative clauses → that, → who
reported speech → ask, → say, → tell, → that
superlatives → most
verb tenses → am/is/are, → be, → been, → being, → did, → do/does,
→ had, → have, → was/were

The/A Lexical Approach

- meaning is encoded primarily in words
- the most frequent words in English encode its most frequent meanings
- words frequently co-occur with other words (collocations and fixed phrases) and they often occur in particular syntactic environments (grammar patterns)
- fluency is a function of the capacity to store and deploy, in real time, these high frequency lexical and syntactic co-occurrences

Most Frequently Used Idioms Across Three Corpora of Spoken American English (in Order of Frequency)

kind of (meaning somewhat)
sort of (meaning somewhat)
of course
in terms of
in fact
deal with
at all
as well
make sure

go through
come up
look for
find out
go on (with + gerund or present participle)
as well as
in a/some way
go ahead

in order to/that
get into
first of all
come up with
figure out
put on
in other words
end up (with)
according to

Liu, D. 2003. The most frequently used spoken American idioms: A corpus analysis and its implications. In *TESOL Quarterly*, 37/4.

TABLE 4
Descriptive Statistics of Top 20 Lexical Verb (LV) Lemmas Functioning in Phrasal Verb (PV) Forms

LV lemma	# in BNC PVs	% of all BNC PVs	Cum % of all BNC PVs	Total # in BNC	BNC rank	% as PVs
GO	48,016	9.3	9.3	227,103	2	21.1
COME	36,878	7.1	16.4	145,047	9	25.4
TAKE	22,970	4.4	20.8	173,996	7	13.2
GET	20,223	3.9	24.7	213,726	3	9.5
SET	18,569	3.6	28.3	39,149	40	47.4
CARRY	15,617	3.0	31.3	30,572	53	51.1
TURN	13,040	2.5	33.8	44,051	32	29.6
BRING	12,514	2.4	36.2	42,567	33	29.4
LOOK	12,226	2.4	38.6	109,110	11	11.2
PUT	11,970	2.3	40.9	67,839	16	17.6
PICK	9,997	1.9	42.8	14,274	138	70.0
MAKE	7,368	1.4	44.2	210,880	4	3.5
POINT	7,159	1.4	45.6	13,767	149	52.0
SIT	7,112	1.4	47.0	27,388	64	26.0
FIND	6,934	1.3	48.3	96,010	13	7.2
GIVE	6,174	1.2	49.5	125,312	10	4.9
WORK	5,985	1.2	50.6	63,104	19	9.5
BREAK	5,428	1.0	51.7	18,642	109	29.1
HOLD	5,403	1.0	52.7	46,773	30	11.6
MOVE	5,197	1.0	53.7	37,820	41	13.7
Total	278,780	53.7	53.7	1,747,130	39*	24.2*

Note. # = token frequency. Cum % = cumulative frequency percentage. Values based on non-separable and separable counts (i.e., verb [V] + adverbial phrase [AVP], V + X + AVP, V + X + X + AVP). Total phrasal verb (PV) tokens in the British National Corpus (BNC) = 518,923; total lexical verb (LV) tokens in BNC = 10,404,107. * = Average of column.

“....these [lexical verbs] combine with only eight particles (*out, up, on, back, down, in, over, and off*) – a total of 160 combinations – to account for more than half (50.4%) of the PVs in the BNC.”

Gardner and Davies, op.cit. P. 349

Exercises

1 Look at these film titles. Which Grammar pattern is each one an example of?

- a *Strangers on a Train*. (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951)
- b *Carry on Camping*. (Gerald Thomas, 1969)
- c *And the Ship Sails On*. (Federico Fellini, 1983)
- d *Blame it on Rio*. (Stanley Donen, 1984)
- e *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. (Wes Craven, 1984)
- f *Born on the Fourth of July*. (Oliver Stone, 1989)
- g *Get on the Bus*. (Spike Lee, 1996)

2 There are fourteen examples of *on* that have been taken out of this text. Can you put them back?

I've had a lot lately, so I've been depending Ron to keep an eye the children while I'm away business. Monday evening I came home to find Ron asleep the couch, the television, and the baby crawling around the floor with nothing. 'What's going?!' I shouted. 'Come, Ron,' I said. 'This is not. I'm relying you.' From then things have improved ... a bit.

Leave-taking

He took her hand. She took his money.

He took a lover.

She took exception. He took leave of his senses.

She took advice. He took fright.

She took him to the cleaner's. He took to drink.

She took a holiday.

He took his life.

She took up ballroom dancing.

(Susie Bamworth, in *Mini-Sagas*, edited by Brian Aldiss, Enitharmon Press, 2001.)

Then I went **home**, and on the way home
on the way **home** I had to do a lot of shopping

Then I got **home**
when I got **home**

I got **home** at about lunchtime

And then I came **home**

And then I went **home** again