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**John Holleman.** *American English Idiomatic Expressions in 52 Weeks: An Easy Way to Understand English Expressions and Improve Speaking.* Hong Kong: Chinese University Press. 2006. x + 454pp.

**Reviewed by John Algeo**

The English word *idiom* is from a Greek root meaning, among other things, “peculiar.” With respect to the book under review, the English word denotes a construction whose meaning is not predictable from the sum of the meanings of its parts. Thus, *stick it to (someone)* means “treat (someone) harshly or unmercifully.” That particular idiom is not treated in this book, but then one might paraphrastically say about idioms what Ecclesiastes (12.12) says about books: “Of making many idioms there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.” No book can include all the idioms of a language, but this one includes a good many — some 3243 by the author’s own count.

This textbook on idioms is organized into fifty-two chapters, one for each week of the year. Each weekly chapter averages more than sixty idioms, grouped into semantic categories (totaling thirty-two, from “achievement” to “work”). However, as the semantic categories are scattered over fifty-two weeks, they may not be particularly helpful pedagogically. The idiom entries are brief, each consisting of a lemma, a definition, and an illustrative example.

One might quibble about a number of entries. *Fence* “to sell stolen goods” is not an idiom; it is just one out of several meanings of that verb. *Let it lay* would be judged incorrect or at least inelegant by many native speakers who prefer *let it lie*. *Lap up* is not limited to “eat or drink” because one can also lap up every word. The idiom in *hours on end* is not limited to *hours*, as something may go on also for days or months on end. However, these are mere trivia.

The subtitle of the reviewed book suggests that learners might use the text to improve both their comprehension and their production of English. Idioms are so pervasive that avoiding them altogether in speech would require an act of super-numerary exertion. Yet it is questionable whether learners should be encouraged to learn idioms with an eye to producing them. The problem is that, in addition to the meaning of an idiom, learners must know the idiom’s nuances and pragmatics, that is, its implications and appropriate contexts. Thus, *wet behind the ears* does mean “inexperienced” (its gloss in this text); however, *wet behind the ears* is dismissive or patronizing in a way that *inexperienced* is not. “He is too inexperienced for that responsibility” is a statement of opinion; “He is too wet behind the ears for

that responsibility” is an insult. Learners are well advised to avoid an idiom unless they are so familiar with it that they do not need a textbook for learning it.

Yet learners certainly need help in interpreting idioms. So the best use of a text like this would be to improve comprehension. The question, then, is whether the presentation in this book is one well adapted to that use or whether there are other more appropriate presentations. The book’s organization by weeks and general semantic categories is not helpful for its use as a reference work. Nothing beats the alphabet for looking up linguistic forms.

The book does have an alphabetical index, but it has two problems. One is that using it requires a two-step procedure: first find the form in the index, then find the page on which the form is entered. For look-up, it would be simpler if the forms were listed alphabetically in the body of the book. The other is that the index enters the forms exactly as they appear in the body of the book, and that is a problem because many of the entry forms begin with prepositions (*in/out of one’s shell*) or semantically light verbs (*have a meltdown*). In such cases, it is also possible to have other prepositions (*into/from/back to one’s shell*) or verbs (*experience/recover from/undergo a meltdown*), so the idioms are better entered under their semantically heavy words, *shell* and *meltdown*, as they generally are in dictionaries.

Dictionaries are, in fact, a better source of information about idioms. Of the sixty or so entries for week 26, more than eighty percent can be found with little effort in *Merriam-Webster’s 11th Collegiate Dictionary*, which also includes a great many other idioms not in this textbook. This textbook effectively calls attention to the importance of understanding idioms, but that understanding may be better and more easily achieved by consulting a good dictionary.

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#### *About the reviewer*

**John Algeo**, Professor Emeritus, University of Georgia, has recently published *British or American English? A Handbook of Word and Grammar Patterns* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). He is currently revising his and Thomas Pyles’s textbook *Origins and Development of the English Language* for its sixth edition, to be published in 2008.