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### *Collocations Hinting at Power*

One well known definition of collocations says that they represent the way words combine in a language to produce natural sounding speech and writing. The combination of words follows certain rules peculiar to each language. As, for example: *strong wind* but *heavy rain* and not the other way round<sup>1</sup>(1). The word “collocation” is derived from the verb *to collocate* meaning “to set or arrange in a set or position”, collocation being “*a noticeable arrangement or conjoining of linguistic elements*<sup>2</sup> ranging from *free combinations* – *see a man/a car a house* – to set or fixed or idiomatic expressions – *not to see the wood for the trees*. The meaning of a free combination can be derived from that of its components – *to get away* “to escape”, *to get back* “to return”. Set expressions have not only a fixed form, but their meaning is given by their elements arranged in a certain order, having an intrinsic connection they can be expressed by a single word, and represent complex parts of speech.

The term *idiom* has been defined as the language peculiar to a people or to a strict district or community, or class, corresponding to the term *dialect*, but also as an expression in a language having a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements, being nothing other than collocations, phrases and sayings, rare semantic varieties of words and collocations, peculiar construction patterns, and, in short, any word or form that is likely to puzzle a foreign student” (Harold E. Palmer, *A Grammar of English Words*, London, New York, Toronto, 1958).

In a narrow sense idioms consist of proverbs and sayings, while in a broad sense they include collocations of different types.

Idiomatic phrases may contain variable elements (*absolute/ultimate, arbitrary power*) or invariable elements (*bread and butter, heart and soul*); they may have a literal meaning based on their component elements (*to rise to power*) or they may have a figurative meaning (*the power behind the throne*). An idiomatic phrase may have one meaning (*to fall in love*) or several meanings (*to foot the bill*); it may have a certain grammatical status: verbal phrase (*to lose power*), noun phrase (*a flight of steps*), adjectives (*power-hungry*) ; it may correspond to a certain semantic field (*to lose ground, to be in the air, to give the cold shoulder*).

In what follows we will present a number of idiomatic phrases connected in variable degrees to the notion of *power* trying to explain their meaning. To do this we start from two main meanings of the word *power* with their corresponding synonymic series as they are given in Webster’s *New Dictionary of Synonyms* (G. and C. Merriam Company, Publishers, Springfield, Massachusetts, USA, 1973).

*Power (n) force, energy, strength, might, puissance* express the ability to exert effort for a purpose. Power denotes an ability to act or be acted upon, to effect something.

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for students of English*, Oxford University Press, 2002

<sup>2</sup> *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition, 1993

Under this heading we will include several idiomatic phrases and, as we have said, will try to explain the origin and the evolution, where the case is, of their meaning.

*Find one's feet* refers to the ability of being independent, to be able to manage things by oneself. It may be that the phrase is linked to a little child who learns to walk without help: "the toddler found his own feet in front of his surprised and happy parents". There are cases when the phrase is used in an abstract way: "the proposals found their feet after the chairman's speech".

*Hell-bent* refers to a person so much determined to do something that any consequences, even the threat of going to hell, are disregarded: "he has been working for 20 hours without any break because he is hell-bent to finish the experiment". This phrase has its origins in America in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. It became the slogan in the political campaign for elections in Main, suggesting determination and speed in reaching victory, hence "hell-bent for election" has been adopted in the language of election in general to suggest speed and determination in achieving the respective target.

*Stiff upper lip* characterises someone who refrains from showing his feelings, his emotions, the one who has the strength to suffer in silence. This phrase is recorded for the first time in American English about 1815 suggesting obstinacy, later on, it spread in the usage of British English with the added connotation of being courageous. Nowadays, the phrase is used for the typical English boys or men, educated in public schools, as for example, at Eton, who have the strength not to react emotionally to critical situations or to stress: "boys at Eton learn from the very beginning to keep stiff upper lip". Rarely, the phrase can be used for women; "he could not read anything on her face so much stiff upper lipped she was".

*Set the Thames on fire* is used for a great achievement; it is used for a person who has managed to build himself up a remarkable reputation which would be as if he has set a river on fire, which implies strength and power: "his book was a great success setting the Thames on fire". Some other rivers are used to make up the phrase – the Liffey in Ireland, the Hudson in the USA, the Rhine in Germany: "Er hat den Rhein und das Meer angezündet"; the German phrase was recorded about 1580. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a theory according to which the word "Thames" in this phrase would not refer to the river crossing London, but to "temse" with a similar pronunciation, which was an old word for "sieve" used about the year 1700. A skillful farmer using a sieve for bolting meal could be very fast and skillful in his endeavour and working hard and efficiently the sieve got hot as if set on fire. This explanation is not credited to be scientifically based, but we found it in several sources.

The next phrase has also an indirect reference to power or force, perhaps more than the previous ones: *to keep the wolf from the door* means to be safe from poverty or hunger. To reach that condition one should use his strength and powers to keep away the wolf, a ferocious animal, having here a metaphorical sense. This phrase was used even in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to refer to the effort to keep poverty like a hungry wolf at one's door: "with five children and a poor income, the man was under great pressure to keep the wolf from the door." In a broader sense, the phrase refers to someone having enough money to live a decent life or to pay regularly his bills: "Mother has signed a check for me to be able to pay the rent and other bills, so to say, to keep the wolf from the door."

*Blue-stocking* is used for an intellectual woman, actively involved in the literary life of a community. There was a time when intelligent women were regarded as being rare and they needed a lot of power to be able to make them heard and respected. As it seems, the phrase was used about the year 1400 to name a distinguished Venetian society, Della Calza, whose members used to wear blue stockings. Two hundred years later the cultivated women in Paris have also adopted the fashion of blue stockings and about the year 1750 a number of cultivated and less conformist women in London used to have gatherings where literary, political, philosophical discussions were going on. Sometimes men attended these parties and caring little about their way of being dressed, instead of wearing black stockings according to the standards of fashion of the time, wore blue stockings: “the blue stockings of those days tried to promote the women’s rights”.

*Power, faculty, function* designate an ability of a living being to act or perform in a given way. With this meaning, “power” can also be used in cases in which the mind may not play an important role.

*Dutch courage* designates courage that is not real in that it is induced by drinking alcohol: “after another round of drinks the man and the woman got the Dutch courage to be nasty to the innkeeper”. The origin of this phrase can be found in the rivalry between England and the Netherlands in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries which led to a number of negative statements about the Dutch: “Dutch treat” – to receive nothing, “Dutch bargain” – a deal of no value, made under the influence of alcohol. “Dutch courage” was mentioned in one of Walter Scott’s novels, which proves that it became known in Great Britain at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Later on, this phrase lost its negative connotation about the Dutch and has been used to designate an artificially induced courage: “I’ve eaten too much and I need some Dutch courage for another course.”

*To give the cold shoulder or show/turn a cold shoulder to someone* or even the verb *to cold-shoulder* is used when somebody is treated with indifference. The phrase implies that somebody has the right or presumes to have the power to look someone down and has been used in English since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The explanation most commonly given refers to the elements of the phrase, an animal *shoulder* provided the meat to be roasted and offered to guests; when it was served *cold* the host must have been reluctant to entertain the guests and would have liked them to leave her house. Other lexicographers support the idea that the host turned her back, therefore her shoulder, to unwelcome guests: “they had been permanent guests in her house for months now so that she gave them the cold shoulder”, “the Prime Minister cold-shouldered the representatives of some tabloids.”

*To turn the tables* refers to a complete reversal of a situation, to somebody having the power to place someone in a position that the doer of this action has been in, or to obtain an advantage over someone “yesterday they defeated us in Parliament, but today we have great hopes to turn the tables on them.” The phrase has been in use since 1600 and several explanations have been given to its meaning:

- in ancient Rome rich men used to buy costly pieces of furniture or old valuable tables and when they complained about their wives spending too much money, the latter reminded them of their financial extravagancies by hinting at “tables”;
- several hundred years ago tables in English houses had two faces, one rough used for every day meals of the family and a polished one used for guests.

Therefore,” to turn the tables” meant to turn the face of the table;

– in a game of cards, a player being at a disadvantage could reverse the board placing his adversary at the disadvantage. According to other sources it was about a game invented in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and known in Chaucer’s time under the name of “tables”, from the Latin word “tabulae”(“table” in Romanian) in which reversals of fortune often took place as a player could double the stakes, that is to turn the tables.

*To make someone’s flesh creep* designates the action by which someone can frighten a person by some action or by telling him something dreadful, creating in the interlocutor the sensation given by a disgusting animal creeping on his skin: “don’t tell me once again what you could do to me because you make my flesh creep”. This phrase has been known in English since the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was used by Dickens in “The Pickwick Papers” and by Jonathan Swift in “Gulliver’s Travels” centuries later. With a milder sense the phrase may suggest something that induces nervousness:” The elder brother showed his little sister some pictures that made her flesh creep.”

It is interesting to analyse the meaning of the phrase *all mouth and trousers* which characterises persons speaking too much, promising to do a lot and, in fact, doing nothing: “she promised to have an overview of the matter, but after so many months of waiting I think she is all mouth and trousers”. The phrase, used from the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has the word “mouth” which suggests too much talk, and “trousers” metonymically alluding to the courage and power of men. There is also a modified form of the phrase *all mouth and no trousers* suggesting that someone in a difficult embarrassing position, is unable to act properly, as if a man appears in public with no trousers on :” our headmasters has not been able to change anything in the school, and everybody keeps saying that he is all mouth and no trousers.”

Lack of courage, cowardice, therefore lacking any power or strength is *to show the white feather* :” he didn’t say a good word for the poor fellow, so everybody accused him of showing the white feather.” The phrase comes from Cockfighting; when a game cock was found to have a white feather in its tail, it was believed, perhaps proved, that it was a poor fighter. By extension of meaning the phrase has come to designate a coward, and in the time of World War I women meeting men in the street not wearing a military uniform, showing that they did not go to the front to fight , used to stick a white feather to their lapels to show that they did not have the courage to be soldiers.

It has been our intention, as stated from the beginning, to give the stories behind some phrases which suggest power or lack of power. Such phrases or collocations are almost always present in the language of native speakers, they add colour, vividness and enrich the meaning of spoken or written English. It is not rarely that such phrases do not have equivalents in Romanian which may lead to misunderstanding and confusion in perceiving the message.

It has not been our intention to analyse the structure of such collocations and we are aware that sometimes the connection of the meaning of the phrases we have chosen and the notion of power or lack of power is covered or only suggested. Nevertheless, we hope that some meanings have been clarified and the stories behind the chosen collocations could may bring some scientific information and at the same time being fun.

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**Résumé**

La signification du terme “collocation” (collocation), dérivé en anglais du verbe “to collocare” (colloquer), dont le sens est d’arranger les mots dans un certain ordre, est parfois fondée sur les significations des éléments linguistiques composants; il y a, cependant, des cas où le sens global de la collocation n’a qu’une vague, ou bien aucune connexion avec les sens des éléments qui la composent. Il est, le plus souvent, difficile pour les étrangers, de saisir le sens de ces expressions fixes qu’ils rencontrent lors de l’étude d’une langue ou, tout bonnement, dans la communication. Il ne fut pas dans nos intentions d’entreprendre une analyse structurale de ces formes linguistiques; ce que nous avons essayé de faire, c’était de mettre en évidence le sens de quelques telles expressions, fréquemment employées en anglais (britannique et américain), dans la communication orale, et qui envoient, plus ou moins directement, au mot “power” et à ses synonymes. En même temps, nous avons considéré que les explications relatives au sens ou à l’évolution du sens des expressions idiomatiques en question apportent des connaissances culturelles d’ordre général, tout en provoquant, quelquefois, l’amusement.