

# Decoding idiom change: Root form and frequency analysis of transformed idioms in American mass media

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the evolution of three idioms – ‘seen better days’, ‘spill the beans’ and ‘kill two birds with one stone’ – and their transformations within the landscape of American mass media. Drawing upon a vast collection of examples from newspapers, magazines, television programs and social media platforms, this article provides an extensive analysis of linguistic transformations and their cultural implications. The occurrences of both the original and the transformed idioms, their frequency and their contextual usage were all analyzed utilizing resources such as COCA, Sketch Engine, Ngram Book Viewer and dictionaries. Examples such as ‘known better days’ replacing ‘seen better days’, ‘spill the tea’ emerging from ‘spill the beans’, and variations like ‘hit two birds with one stone’ and ‘feed two birds with one scone’ illustrate shift towards more contemporary, socially conscious language. The findings underscore the interplay between language, technology, and cultural expression providing valuable insights into the evolving landscape of the English language and its implications for researchers, linguistic training, and professional practice globally.

**Keywords:** transformed idioms, mass media, corpus, Sketch Engine, Ngram Book Viewer

## **Decodificación del cambio de modismos: forma raíz y análisis de frecuencia de modismos transformados en los medios de comunicación estadounidenses**

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo examina la evolución de tres modismos – “he visto días mejores”, “soltar la sopa” y “matar dos pájaros de un tiro” – y sus transformaciones dentro del panorama de los medios de comunicación estadounidenses. Basándose en una amplia colección de ejemplos de periódicos, revistas, programas de televisión y plataformas de redes sociales, este artículo proporciona un análisis extenso de las transformaciones lingüísticas y sus implicaciones culturales. Se analizaron las apariciones de los modismos originales y transformados, su frecuencia y su uso contextual utilizando recursos como COCA, Sketch Engine, Ngram Book Viewer y diccionarios. Ejemplos como “días mejores conocidos” que reemplazan “días mejores vistos”, “derramar el té” que surgen de “derramar los frijoles” y variaciones como “golpear dos pájaros de un tiro” y “alimentar a dos pájaros con un bollo” ilustran el cambio hacia un lenguaje más contemporáneo y socialmente consciente. Los hallazgos subrayan la interacción entre el lenguaje, la tecnología y la expresión cultural, proporcionando información valiosa sobre el panorama cambiante del idioma inglés y sus implicaciones para los investigadores, la formación lingüística y la práctica profesional a nivel mundial.

**Palabras clave:** modismos transformados, medios de comunicación, corpus, Sketch Engine, Ngram Book Viewer

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Several studies have addressed idiom modification. According to Džanić & Berberović (2020), for an idiom to undergo modification, its components must each hold individual meanings and contribute to the idiom's overall intelligibility. However, semantic transformations such as word substitution or addition do not necessarily compromise the comprehensibility of idiomatic expressions, as noted by Mancuso et al. (2020) and Tabossi et al. (2009)

Transformed idioms in mass media represent a linguistic phenomenon in which traditional expressions undergo reinterpretation, structural alterations and/or cultural adaptations within the context of popular communication. Idioms, as culturally-rich linguistic constructs, play a significant role in shaping the way language is used, conveying complex ideas succinctly and reflecting social and cultural norms and values. Idiomatic expressions, encompassing proverbs, sayings, catchphrases and slogans, may be manipulated to achieve a variety of effects, such as surprise, irony, novelty or humour (Glaser, 1986; Naciscione, 2010). Omazic (2008) emphasizes their use for "filling empty contextual slots or for pure enjoyment of language play".

When undergoing transformations, idioms offer opportunities as well as difficulties to language users and academics alike. Kunin (1964) introduced the concept of "phraseological actualizer", denoting a word, phrase, sentence or group of sentences semantically related to idioms that act as triggers for transformation. Modified idiomatic expressions are commonly employed to enhance the memorability of slogans in commercial advertising and are prevalent in journalism, particularly in newspaper headings, to spark the reader's curiosity (Glaser, 1986). They are not confined to specific contexts and forms, so can be found in both fiction and non-fictional environments, as well as in public speech. Moreover, Aimagambetova & Suleimenova's (2017) research sheds light on the dynamic character of language in the media, with a special emphasis on the way journalists strategically alter phraseological units to accomplish a range of communicative goals. We gathered materials from mass media and samples from corpora. Therefore, understanding transformed idioms in mass media is crucial for several reasons, not least for elucidating the challenges encountered by language learners when encountering unfamiliar idiomatic expressions in mass media discourse. Furthermore, studying transformed idioms offers insights into the evolving nature of language and the complexities of contemporary communication.

This study builds upon existing research by exploring the phenomenon of transformed idioms in American mass media. By investigating the frequency, identification techniques, types of transformations, and contributing factors of modified idioms such as 'known better days', 'spill the tea', and 'kill two birds with one stone', the research aims to deepen understanding of how idiomatic expressions evolve within contemporary media contexts.

## 2. MOTIVATION

### 2.2. Studies Related to Transformed Idioms in English Encountered in Mass Media

Studies of English idioms conducted using electronic corpora show that their forms are relatively variable (Moon, 1998; Cignoni et al., 1999). The changes undergone by some

of these idioms include lexical substitution, addition, ellipsis, pluralization, passivization, nominalization, etc. For instance, in her database comprising 6,776 fixed expressions and idioms, Moon (1998: 120) found that around 40% of units have lexical variations or what she terms as institutional transformations (the latter including negation, passivization and nominalization). According to Natsir M. (2020) explored Instagram, and claimed that young generation tend to change words, especially in social networks. Also, the results from Aimagambetova's research showed that humor and cultural references played significant roles in the transformation process highlighting the contribution of transformed idioms to the comedic and relatable aspects of media content.

Chen (2019), on the other hand, explored the role of transformed idioms in social media platforms, specifically on Twitter. By examining a large collection of tweets, Chen observed how users creatively modified idioms to fit within the constraints of character limits and to convey nuanced meanings (*ibid.*). The findings emphasized how transformed idioms have become an integral part of the online discourse, giving rise to new forms of expression in the digital age. This approach was a clear reminder of Moon's 1998 study, which presented an influential model to explore what Moon called 'fixed expressions and idioms' (FEIs). Her corpus findings show that almost 40% of English FEIs allow for lexical variation or transformation, with a smaller percentage having two or more variations (*ibid.*). However, Moon (1998) differentiates between fixed expressions, a term that is similar to Weinreich's (1969) stable collocations, and idioms. Thus, unlike in 'fixed expressions', the term 'fixed' is not applicable to idioms, which Moon (1998) defines in terms of characteristics such as compositionality and institutionalization; change can, therefore, be observed in idioms.

All this research adds to our knowledge of how English idioms are transformed in the context of mass media, as it shows how modified idioms appear in a variety of contexts. They can be impacted by marketing tactics, the need to create a comedic effect, the target audience's cultural background and, in very specific contexts, the need to observe the constraints placed on the number of characters allowed (in the case of social media). Transformed idioms provide linguistic originality, capturing the attention of the listener and conveying ideas more efficiently through the subtleties or cross-references they may contain. In mass media, transformed idioms are often used to create memorable campaigns. In this study, however, we focus primarily on popular idioms found in newspapers and explore their modifications.

## 2.2. Idioms and Their Modifications

Many idioms have a semi-fixed, or partially variable, shape, according to Moon (1998). This variability may involve changing a certain word or words within the idiom. It is important for learners to discern which words to modify, and the extent of the modification, as inappropriate substitutions could result in unnatural word combinations for native speakers. However, if the original words and their substitutions are contextually related, and the change seems deliberate, it can, in fact, enhance understanding and communication. Burger (1998), too, categorized modification into two main types: formal, which involves incorporating previous examples, and semantic, where idioms alter their meanings within a particular context. Another type of modification, discussed by Dronov (2010) is termed meta-communicational. This type involves "inserting an adjectival modifier into an idiom",

with the adjective signaling the idiomatic nature of the entire phrase (Paquot, 2015). Such modifications are often observed in journalistic style and are commonly found in scientific papers found within corpora like COCA.

For the purposes of this study, we shall nonetheless take into account Vrbinč's (2011) classification of idiom transformations, as it gives a more comprehensive set of categories of modification, each with its related subsets. Examples of these categories and their subsets provided by Vrbinč (2011) can be found below, and they are the ones we shall use in the discussion of our findings:

**- Word substitution:**

*a. Verb substitution.* The majority of idioms belonging to this group undergo a change in the verb:

*ex.* So profitable has the business become, and such are the prospects as NHS hospitals lay off staff and cut back operations, the private equity industry – never slow to spot a fast buck – is stepping in.

*b. Adjective substitution.* It is common for an adjective to be replaced either by another adjective or by some other part of speech:

*ex.* The Funny Old-World column achieved new heights of surrealism in this week's Eye (1156) with the piece about the alien allegedly robbing slippers from school-girls' lockers in Japan.

*c. Pronoun substitution.* The pronoun *it*, which is a constituent element of the idiom 'it will all come out in the wash', is replaced by the pronoun *this* to refer back to the previous paragraph: (4) Worse, the BBC's occupational health department, which is responsible for running the scheme, has itself been outsourced too – well, you guessed it. No doubt this will all come out in the wash when Radio 4's File on Four investigates the disaster-prone outsourcer later this month.

**- Expansion:** To bring the idiom closer to the text or just to add more information, this type of modification expands idioms mostly by appending adjectives, adverbs, or prepositional phrases to the underlying form. Most of the base form is still present.

*a. Premodifier.* The idiom is expanded by adding a premodifier, adding more information to its meaning:

*ex.* Alistair Mackintosh, Manchester City's chief (presumably still grateful that Sport England footed a £165m bill for the 2002 Commonwealth Games, including the very stadium which Man City now play in).

*b. Postmodifier.* In all the examples found, the postmodifying structure is a prepositional phrase:

*ex.* That's when I had the great idea. It came like a flash from heaven.

**- Shortening:** This kind of change typically involves the verbal portion of the phrase being removed. The verbs "to be" and "have" are typically left out since they primarily serve grammatical purposes and are not very important for understanding the meaning of the unit. Since most of the time a reader only needs to remember one aspect of an idiom in order to recollect the entire structure, writers take advantage of the reader's prior knowledge. The

“economical” syntax that characterizes journalistic language—and particularly headlines—also explains the usage of elliptical forms in headlines.

**- Grammatical modification:**

- a. *Nominalization*: Originally verbal idioms are replaced by nominal forms.
- b. *Comparative Modification*: The degree of comparison within the idiom may be substituting the base form of the adjective with the comparative form.
- c. *Number Modification*: The noun in an idiom may change in number.
- d. *Passive Voice Transformation*: An idiom may be transformed into the passive voice.

**- Coordination**: This kind of change deals with merging idioms that are not quite the same. Two or more idioms must contain at least one similar ingredient that is utilized in only one and left out of the other in order to be combined. Two idioms remain, nonetheless, one of which is found in its elliptical form and the other in its basic form:

ex. What a miracle it is. I have passed over the hill or i mean over the moon. Here over the moon means be happy. In addition, over the hill means being no longer young.

**- Combination of different types of modification:**

- a. *Expansion and Grammatical Modification*
- b. *Expansion and Shortening*
- c. *Word Substitution and Grammatical Modification*
- d. *Word Substitution and Expansion*

### 2.3. Corpora-based Analysis

Numerous studies have investigated the frequency and patterns of idiom use in various corpora. Baddorf and Evens (1998), for instance, utilized three different corpora – the Wall Street Journal (WSJ), the Dictionary of Old English (DOE) and the corpus of Gutenberg – to analyze 30 idioms with their syntactic variants. This was useful to them as they were able to identify the most common syntactic structures and variations of the idioms across different genres and time periods. By comparing the usage of idioms in these diverse corpora, they were able to gain insights into the evolution and persistence of these expressions in the English language. Furthermore, their research highlighted the importance of considering different linguistic sources when studying idiomatic expressions, as it allowed them to capture a broader range of variations and usages. This multi-corpus approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the syntactic flexibility of idioms, shedding light on how these expressions adapt to different communicative contexts.

Another significant corpus-based study was conducted by Moon (1998b), who searched for 6776 common British and American English fixed expressions and idioms in the Oxford Hector Pilot Corpus (OHPC). The OHPC, comprising 18 million words, offered precise data and revealed that 40% of the idioms studied occurred in a variant form (*ibid.*). To date, corpus-based research on transformed idioms has been scarce, though, so the purpose of this study is to make a small contribution to filling this gap so that more general conclusions can eventually be drawn. To make the data even more reliable statistically, we chose the

Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which encompasses over one billion words as of March 2020 – that is many times over the capacity of the OHPC. The idioms selected for analysis in this paper are ‘spill the beans’, ‘seen better days’ and ‘kill two birds with one stone’, which serves as the root of the transformed idioms ‘spill the tea’, ‘known better days’, ‘hit two birds with one stone’. These transitions, far from being mere novelties of linguistic expression, offer a profound glimpse into how language morphs to align with evolving cultural contexts and are indicative of deeper societal movements, technological evolutions and the ever-changing modalities of human interaction. Building upon the insights gleaned from prior research, particularly the examination of transformed idioms in various media contexts, and the techniques employed for their identification, this study aims to delve deeper into the phenomenon, proposing the following research questions:

Research Questions:

- RQ1: What is the frequency of traditional vs. transformed idioms in American mass media?
- RQ2: Which techniques are suitable in identifying transformed English idioms within mass media contexts?
- RQ3: What type of transformation characterize the altered idioms ‘known better days’, ‘spill the tea’ and ‘kill two birds with one stone’?
- RQ4: What factors contribute to the modification of idioms within the context of mass media?

### 3. METHODOLOGY

A mixed approach was used in this study, with quantitative methods addressing RQs 1, 2, and qualitative methods being employed to answer RQs 3 and 4. Three quantitative tools were used to this purpose: the Ngram Viewer allowing the examination of diachronic variations of preferred words and expressions, COCA, which provided a broad picture of word frequency and Sketch Engine which provided a clear picture of word frequency. COCA was chosen as it is considered to be the only large and balanced corpus of American English (Davies, 2010) and it covers genres such as spoken language, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, TV and movies subtitles, blogs and other web pages, which befits the purposes of this study. To this we added the Sketch Engine as a corpus manager and text analysis software enabling access to texts in over 100 languages. The three idioms chosen for in-depth investigation here were examined for frequency on the Ngram Viewer before being run through COCA and Sketch Engine for further data on usage. Next, we looked at the type of transformations incurred by the root forms and, to put this in a broader picture, we also ran a statistical study to find out how frequently this kind of modification occurs against other types.

The qualitative research was conducted through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which involved examining to what extent language use reflects and reinforces societal norms and power relations. Semiotic analysis was also used to investigate the visual and multimodal aspects of mass media discourse, particularly in advertisements, television shows and online

platforms, to understand how messages are equally conveyed through non-verbal means. The data collected for sampling was selected from a diverse range of American mass media texts, including TV shows, news items, advertisements, social media content and online chat fora to capture a broad spectrum of language use and discourse practices.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Analysis of Idiom ‘Seen Better Days’ and Its Transformed Version ‘Known Better Days’

One of the idioms under investigation is ‘seen better days’, which transforms into ‘known better days’”. According to the Cambridge dictionary, the former is defined as “to be old and being in bad condition” (Cambridge University Press, n.d.), while the latter is identified as a variation of the former (Rafatbakhsh & Ahmadi, 2019).

*Examples:*

1. My computer has seen better days, so I’m thinking about getting a new one.
2. Well, this car has known better days, but it has been reliable since the day I bought it 20 years ago.

Analysis conducted using Sketch Engine indicates that the idiom we have identified as ‘root’, namely ‘seen better days’ is frequently used among English speakers, as evidenced by the high number of hits, totaling 10,198 (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Occurrences in the Corpus for the Idiom ‘Seen Better Days’

	“Seen Better Days”
<b>Number of hits</b>	10,198
<b>Number of hits per million tokens</b>	0.17
<b>Percent of whole corpus</b>	0.00001656%
<b>Corpus size (tokens)</b>	61,585,997,113

Source: *Sketch Engine*

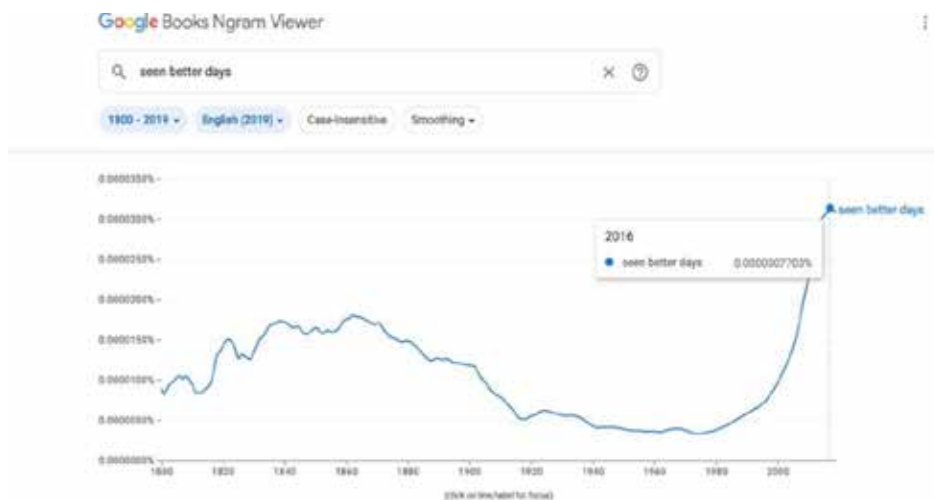
When it comes to its transformed version, this appears to be less popular than its root form, as illustrated by the 86 hits only from 61,585,997,114 tokens (see Table 2). However, people tend to modify the root form of idioms and play with idioms in order to make their speech more colorful (Aimaganbetova, 2017).

**Table 2.** Occurrences in the Corpus for the Idiom ‘Known Better Days’

	“Known Better Days”
<b>Number of hits</b>	86
<b>Number of hits per million tokens</b>	0.00
<b>Percent of whole corpus</b>	1.396e-7%
<b>Corpus size (tokens)</b>	61,585,997,113

Source: *Sketch Engine*

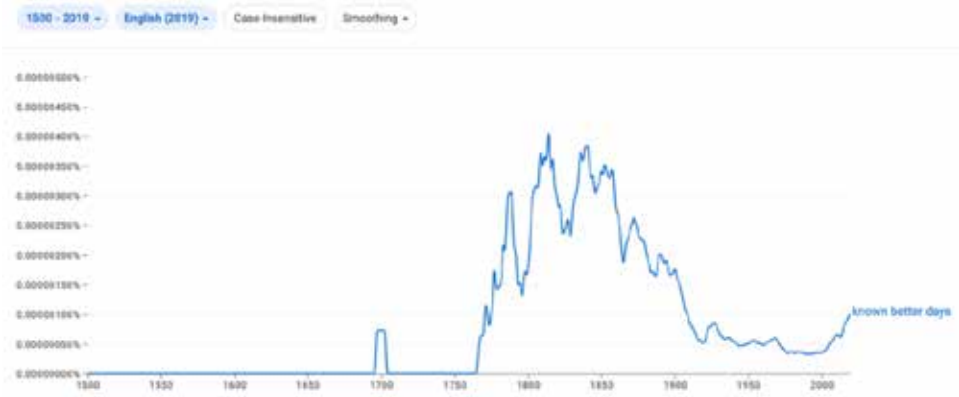
The phrase ‘seen better days’ is used in different situations, including common speech, literature, and the media. This term is frequently used by writers in literature to portray persons or environments that were once thriving but are now in decline. (Shakespeare’s influence/ 2007) Fig. 2 illustrates the usage of the idiom ‘seen better days’ since its emergence in the late 1600s. It is believed that one of the earliest recorded instances of its use was by Shakespeare in his play *Timon of Athens* (1674). Following some fluctuations between 1700 and 1870 and a subsequent period of decline from 1875 to 1990, the frequency of the idiom rose from 1990 onwards, continuing to increase up to the present day. As of 2019, it appears that the popularity of the idiom peaked at just over 0.00003%. From Fig. 3, it is obvious that its transformed counterpart, ‘known better days’, experienced similar trends, despite being less commonly used compared to its original form, with a frequency of at approximately 0.0000001%. However, the expression ‘seen better days’ is not old. In fact, the modified form, ‘known better days’ is commonly used expression in modern language. This expression usually describes something or someone that has decreased over time from better or more prosperous state.



**Figure 1.** Analysis of the Idiom ‘Seen Better Days’

Source: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=seen+better+days&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=seen+better+days&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)

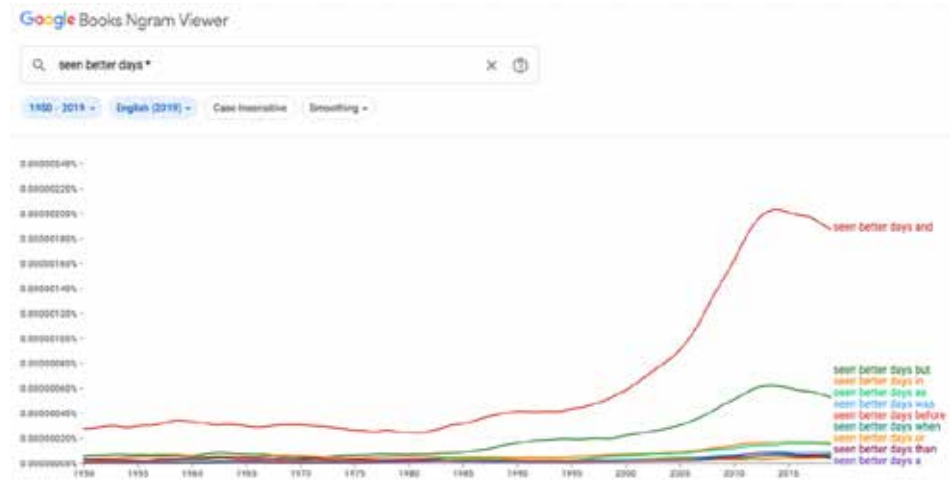




**Figure 2.** Analysis of the Idiom ‘Known Better Days’

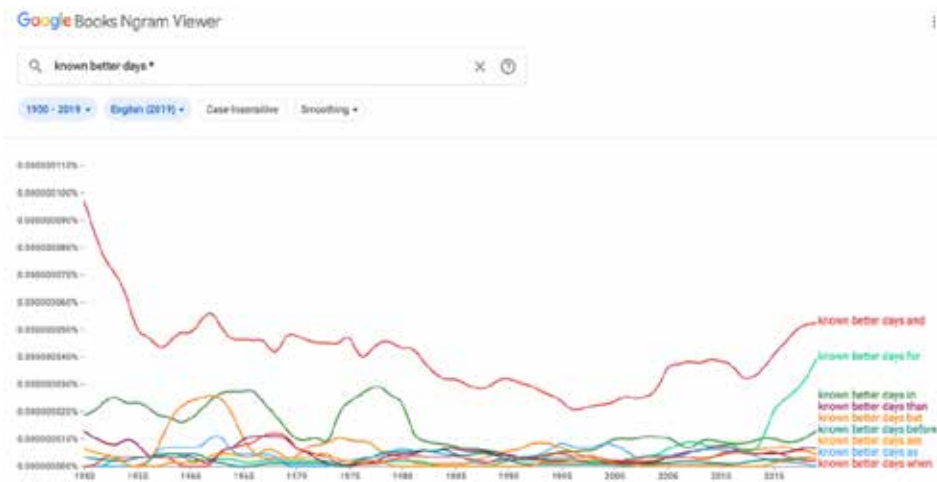
Source:[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=known+better+days&year\\_start=1500&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=known+better+days&year_start=1500&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)

Furthermore, a comparative analysis of the prepositions, conjunctions and verbs used after both idioms reveals that ‘seen better days’ employs a broader range of such elements compared to ‘known better days’ (Fig. 4). The former includes ten distinct elements, while the latter is limited to ‘and’, ‘for’, ‘in’, and ‘than’ (Fig. 5).



**Figure 3.** Analysis of the Most Common Elements Used After ‘Seen Better Days’

Source:[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=seen+better+days+\\*&year\\_start=1950&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=seen+better+days+*&year_start=1950&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)



**Figure 4.** Analysis of the Most Common Elements Used After ‘Known Better Days’  
 Source: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=known+better+days+\\*&year\\_start=1950&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=known+better+days+*&year_start=1950&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)

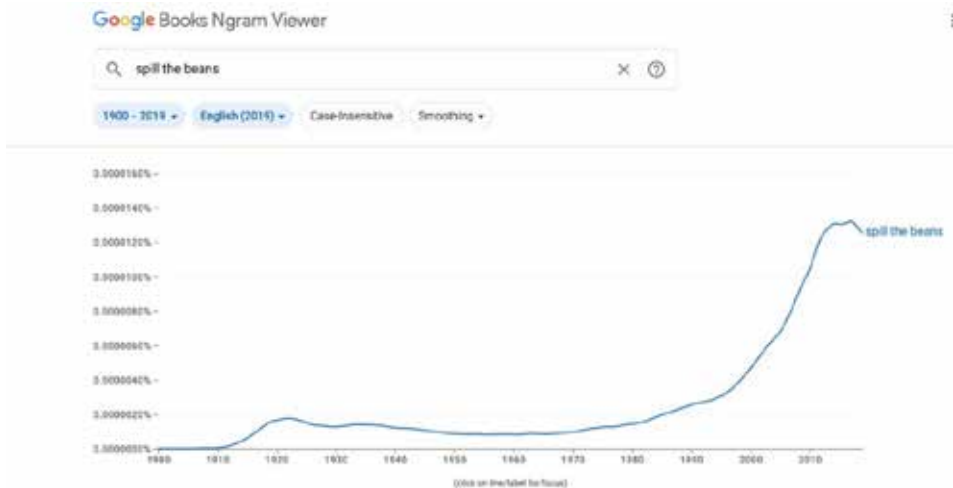
Finally, it is apparent that the idiom ‘seen the better days’ is used in a wider variety of contexts, with particular prominence observed in online platforms such as web, news and blogs (see Fig. 5). Additionally, the evidence of ‘seen better days’ generally supports the word ‘and’.



**Figure 5.** Usage of ‘Seen Better Days’ According to Contexts  
 Source: <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>

## 4.2 Analysis of Idiom ‘Spill the Beans’ and Its Transformed Version ‘Spill the Tea’

According to Oxford English Dictionary, ‘spill the beans’ means to tell somebody something that should be kept private or secret. Although it is believed to have originated from the Ancient Greek voting system, where black and white beans were used to cast positive or negative votes and the act of spilling them would mean revealing the winner, the English idiom earned an active usage only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Fig. 6).



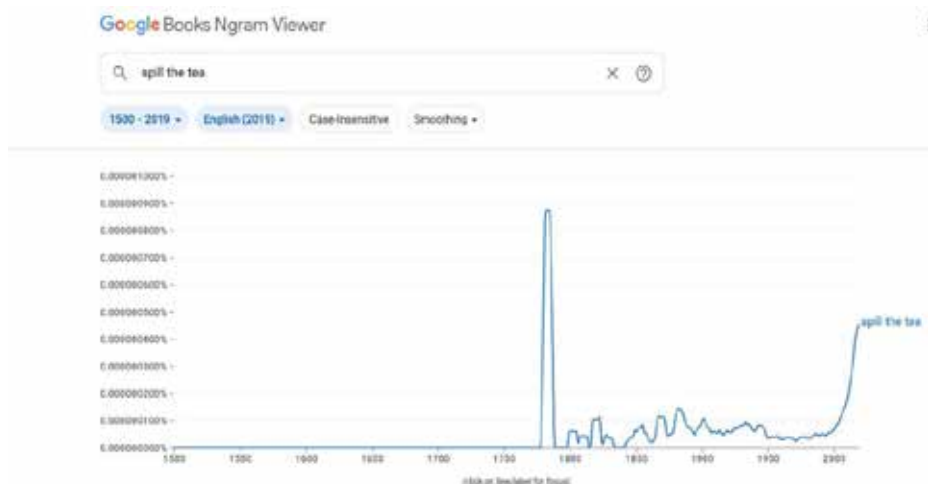
**Figure 6.** Analysis of the Idiom ‘Spill the Beans’

Source: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=spill+the+beans&year\\_start=1900&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=spill+the+beans&year_start=1900&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)

A version of the switch from ‘spill the beans’ to ‘spill the tea’ was mentioned by Khalis & Rifhan (2019), who believed that the isolated lexical item ‘tea’ did not stand for the drink, but for the letter T. They recount that, in a 1994 interview with the drag queen, Lady Chablis, the latter referred to T meaning ‘truth’ when using the modified idiom, implying that what was being revealed should have been kept private. The term, nonetheless, resonated with the public, and its use increased considerably with the advent of the internet. The transformed idiom has been in use since 1700s. The rise in the usage of the transformed idiom from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be noticed in Fig. 7.

*Examples:*

1. We don’t want to spill the beans yet.
2. She made the mistake of spilling the tea on her sister’s love life.



**Figure 7.** Analysis of the Idiom ‘Spill the Tea’

Source: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=spill+the+tea&year\\_start=1500&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=spill+the+tea&year_start=1500&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)

“Spill the tea” is used more deliberately and with enthusiasm about the upcoming discovery, whereas “spill the beans” tends to suggest an accidental or unintentional disclosure. Both idioms underline the act of disclosing information. With regard to frequency of usage, Sketch Engine shows 18,366 hits for ‘spill the beans’ (see Table 3), which demonstrates its popularity among English speakers, but only 1,215 hits for its modified form (Table 4).

**Table 3.** Occurrences in the Corpus for the Idiom ‘Spill the Beans’

	“Spill the Beans”
<b>Number of hits</b>	18,366
<b>Number of hits per million tokens</b>	0.3
<b>Percent of whole corpus</b>	0.00002982%
<b>Corpus size (tokens)</b>	61,585,997,113

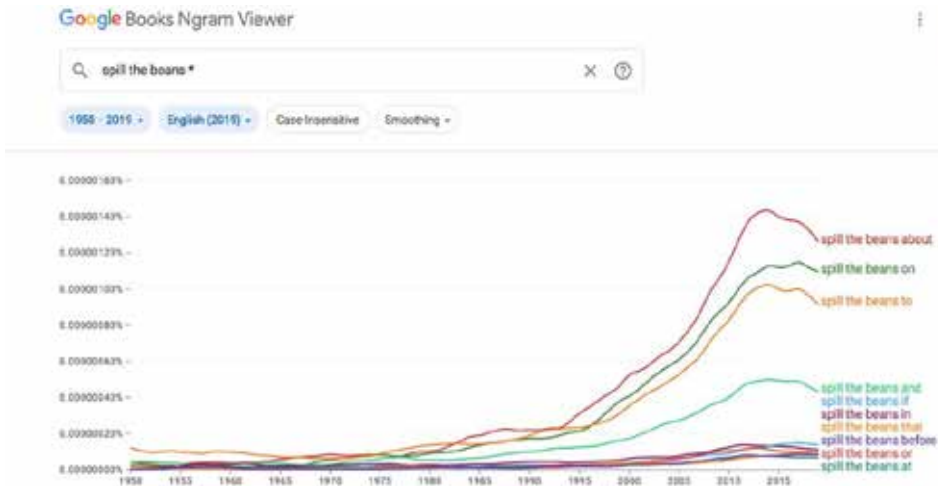
Source: *Sketch Engine*

**Table 4.** Occurrences in the Corpus for the Idiom ‘Spill the Tea’ (source: Sketch Engine)

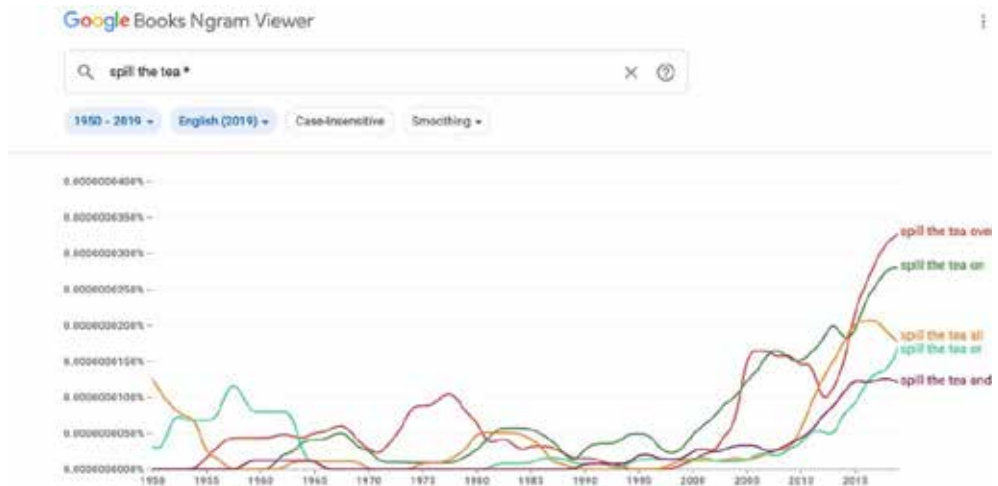
	“Spill the Tea”
<b>Number of hits</b>	1,215
<b>Number of hits per million tokens</b>	0.02
<b>Percent of whole corpus</b>	0.000001973%
<b>Corpus size (tokens)</b>	61,585,997,113

Source: *Sketch Engine*

Compared to ‘seen/known better days’, current idioms differ in terms of the parts of speech following them. While both ‘spill the beans’ and ‘spill the tea’ are frequently used in combination with the preposition ‘on’, ‘spill the beans’ tends to be even more frequently followed by the preposition ‘about’ (Fig. 8), while ‘spill the tea’ is followed most prominently by ‘over’ (Fig. 9).



**Figure 8.** Analysis of the Most Common Elements After ‘Spill The Beans’  
 Source: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=spill+the+beans+\\*&year\\_start=1950&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=spill+the+beans+*&year_start=1950&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)



**Figure 9.** Analysis of the Most Common Prepositions Used in the Context of “Spill The Tea”  
 Source: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=spill+the+tea+\\*&year\\_start=1950&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=spill+the+tea+*&year_start=1950&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)

The idiom ‘spill the beans’ is typically followed by the prepositions ‘about,’ ‘on,’ and ‘to,’ while the idiom ‘spill the tea’ often goes with ‘over,’ ‘on,’ and ‘all.’ The examples that support these usages according to COCA can be seen below (see Fig. 10 and Fig. 11).



Figure 10. Usage of ‘Spill the Beans According to Contexts

Source: <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>



Figure 11. Usage of ‘Spill the Tea According to Contexts

Source: <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>

### 4.3. Analysis of Idiom ‘Kill Two Birds with One Stone’ and Its Transformations

The idiom ‘kill two birds with one stone’, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, signifies the accomplishment of two objectives through a single action. However, variations of this idiom have emerged over time, including ‘hit two birds with one stone’ and ‘feed two birds with one scene’.

*Examples:*

1. I killed two birds with one stone: picked the kids up from school and on the way stopped at the supermarket.
2. Cycling to work is a great way of hitting two birds with one stone: getting more exercise while cutting down on the cost of your daily commute.

Although there is no known reason behind the transformations of the idiom ‘kill two birds with one stone’, the shift from ‘kill’ to ‘hit’ appears to have started when educators, aiming to employ a more politically correct language to reflect awareness of animal rights and display more animal-friendly attitudes, started substituting (PETA TeachKind, n.d.). Teachers recognize that, while certain idioms may seem innocuous, they convey underlying meanings and can potentially send controversial messages to students, potentially normalizing animal abuse, such as the idiom in question (PETA TeachKind, n.d.).

In a broader sense, the transition from ‘kill’ to ‘hit’ and then to ‘feed’ demonstrates a larger pattern of language becoming more upbeat and encouraging of life. ‘Feed two birds with one scone’, which encourages a caring mindset, represents a shift initiated by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, USA) in 2018 to promote animal-friendly language ((PETA TeachKind, n.d.). PETA’s campaign led to the creation of a “complete list of animal-friendly idioms” containing 166 animal idioms with 88 alternatives (PETA n.d.). Notably, the organization maintains its campaign through its official website and Twitter, where it has received a significant amount of media attention (Fomenko, 2023). In mass media, transformed idioms are often used to create memorable campaigns, such as “Putting your best face forward” might become “Put your best skin forward” for a skincare advertisement. These transformed idioms help capture attention and create a lasting impression, making the campaign more effective in reaching its target audience. When creating marketing materials, consider how transforming common idioms can add a creative and memorable touch to your message (Kelly, 2016).

Table 5 indicates that “kill two birds with one stone” has 9293 hits in Sketch Engine, highlighting its continued popularity as the traditional form of the idiom. However, contemporary trends show a shift towards modified versions such as “hit two birds with one stone” (621 hits) or “feed two birds with one scone” (56 hits), reflecting evolving language preferences.

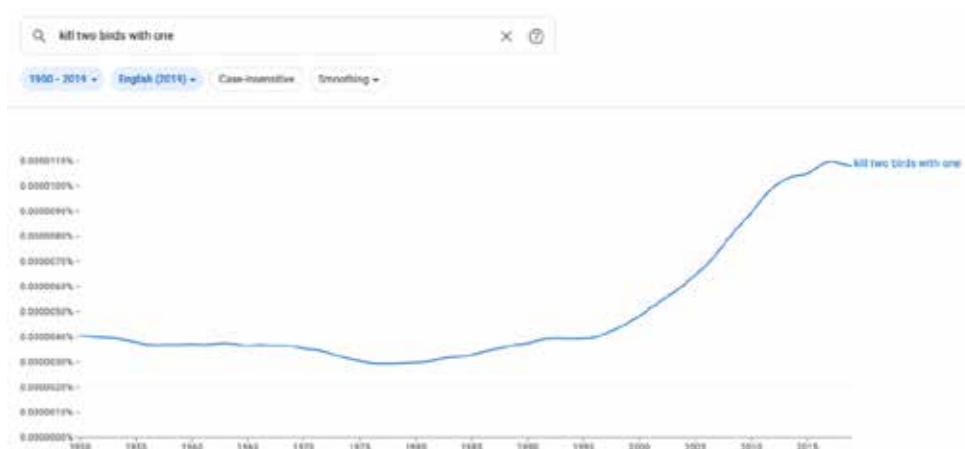
**Table 5.** Comparison of Occurrences for ‘Kill Two Birds with One Stone’ and Its Two Transformations

	‘Kill Two Birds with One Stone’	‘Hit Two Birds with One Stone’	‘Feed Two Birds with One Scone’
<b>Number of hits</b>	9,293	621	56
<b>Number of hits per million tokens</b>	0.15	0.01	0
<b>Percent of whole corpus</b>	0.00001509%	0.000001008%	0.093e-8%
<b>Corpus size (tokens)</b>	61,585,997,113	61,585,997,113	61,585,997,113

Source: *Sketch Engine*

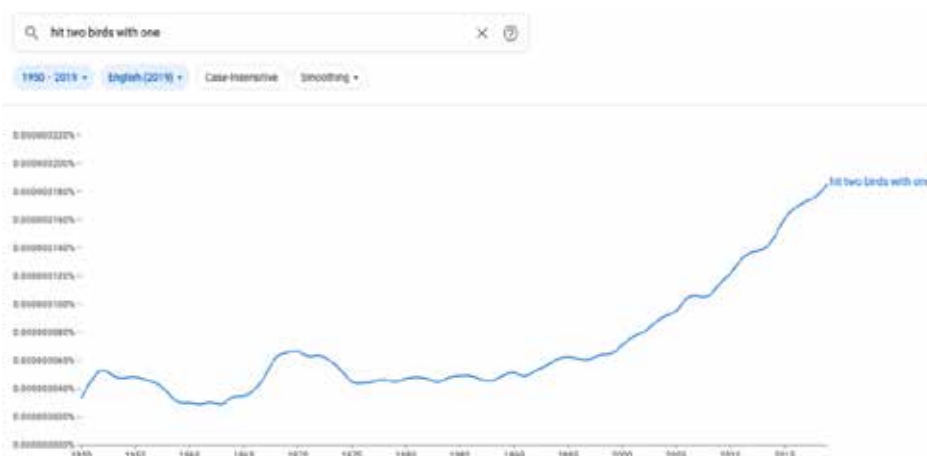
Moreover, from the Ngram viewer we can notice that the root form of ‘kill two birds with one stone’ started to decline in 2017 (see Fig. 12). Conversely, modified form of both idioms ‘hit two birds with one stone’ and ‘feed two birds with one scone’ started to increase

year by year (see Fig. 13 and Fig. 14). Finally, it is obvious from the analysis using COCA that the original form ‘kill two birds with one scone’ is widely used in TV/N, as well as in fiction and online (see Fig. 15). Raymond Gibbs (2007) challenges the traditional view of idioms as ‘bits and pieces of fossilized language’ and says that traditional approach fails. According to Gibbs, studying idioms provides a unique opportunity to understand the rich and flexible nature of natural language and human thought (Gibbs, 2007).



**Figure 12.** Analysis of the Idiom ‘Kill Two Birds with One Stone’

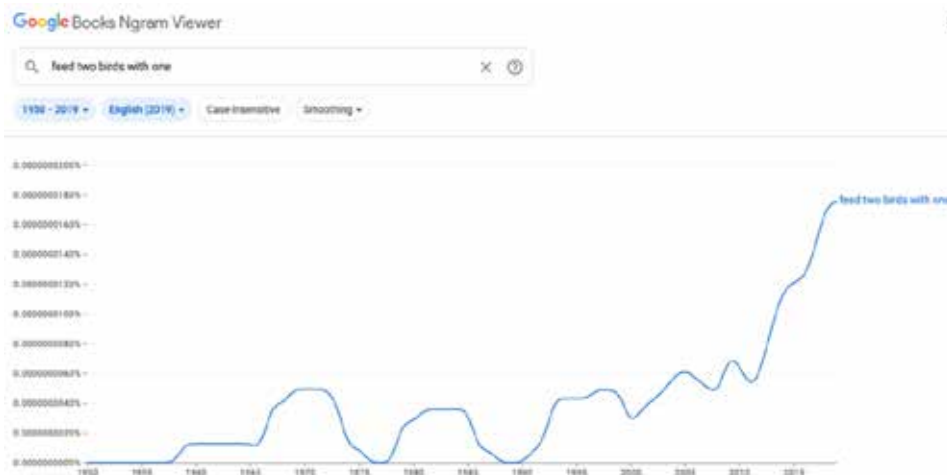
Source: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=kill+two+birds+with+one+&year\\_start=1950&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=kill+two+birds+with+one+&year_start=1950&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)



**Figure 13.** Analysis of the Idiom ‘Hit Two Birds with One Stone’

Source: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=hit+two+birds+with+one&year\\_start=1950&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=hit+two+birds+with+one&year_start=1950&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)





**Figure 14.** Analysis of the Idiom ‘Feed Two Birds with One Score’

Source: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=feed+two+birds+with+one&year\\_start=1950&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=feed+two+birds+with+one&year_start=1950&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)



**Figure 15.** Use of ‘Kill Two Birds with One Stone’ Based on Context

Source: <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>

## 5. DISCUSSION

Following a thorough examination of both transformed and traditional idioms, it was found that although transformed idioms are becoming more and more common in contemporary discourse, traditional ones are still often utilized in everyday speech. Traditional idioms continue to be relevant because they are used consistently by people of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. On the other hand, younger generations and digital communication tend to use modified idioms more frequently, which illustrates how language is changing in reaction to technological improvements. There has been much written about the transformation possibilities. Cutler (1982) connects diachronic trends to transformative limitations. She discovers some evidence in The Oxford English Dictionary suggesting that the first

items examined were less fixed in form and that, as their literal equivalents disappeared, they got more fixed in form, such as *kick over the traces* and *let off steam*. More research has linked the meaning of phrases to how they are used, which helps to explain strange or unusual cases (Lakoff, 1987). Some studies also back up the idea that idioms have a specific structure that sets them apart from other phrases. (Jackendoff, 1991; Nunberg et al., 1994; Wasow et al., 1997) or restricted word combinations (Ross, 1970). These studies share a range of discoveries about how terms are organized. Changes were demonstrated with the database OHPC. Nevertheless, the OHPC was tiny a corpus with few tokens. It is obvious that transformations need to be thoroughly studies using larger corpora.

The analysis of the the idiom ‘*seen better days*’ and its transformed version ‘*known better days*’ revealed that both idioms convey the idea of something being past its prime time. However, this transition lacks a semantic difference or additional connotation to justify it. This shift likely originates from the increasing prevalence of ‘*known better days*’ among internet users. Therefore, it appears that sheer frequency of use can cause linguistic shifts even when the meaning remains unchanged.

Although ‘*seen better days*’ is still the more widely used expression, ‘*known better days*’ is becoming more and more well-liked as a mild variant. Sometimes the expression gains a little more contemplative or poetic subtlety from this altered version. It might be utilized more commonly in written works when the author is attempting to generate a contemplative or nostalgic feeling, like articles, personal essays, or literary works (Shakespeare’s influence).

When it comes to ‘*spill the tea*’, these days it is actively used on social media platforms, and Khalis & Rifhan (2019) reveal that the transformed idiom is widely encountered among Malay Twitter users in contexts such as revealing one’s, or another person’s, secret, discussing workplace-related issue or spreading celebrity gossip. In addition, Komala et al. (2022) examines “*spill the tea*” as a reference to sexual violence on social media platforms, especially Twitter. The internet and social media have contributed to the modification of existing idioms, making them more relevant to the digital age. The internet and social media have contributed to the modification of existing idioms, making them more relevant to the digital age. This modification of idioms reflects how language evolves in response to changes in society and technology. It’s important to consider the impact of these changes, particularly in the context of sensitive topics such as sexual violence. As social media continues to shape our communication landscape, it becomes crucial to critically examine the language and expressions used within these platforms. This not only allows for a better understanding of the nuances of communication in the digital age but also highlights the need for responsible and respectful language use, especially in discussions related to sensitive issues. However, “*spill the tea*” has become more and more well-known in recent years, especially in pop culture and social media. This expression is frequently used to characterize the deliberate dissemination of juicy rumors or shocking information. In this sense, “*tea*” refers to veracity or insider knowledge. For example, in an informal conversation among friends, someone might be impatient to hear the most recent exciting news and exclaim, “*Come on, spill the tea!*”

Moreover, in examining such idioms expressions as ‘*spill the beans*’, Nunberg et al. (1994) distinguishes them by their syntactic flexibility and the presence of a referential DP (Determiner Phrase). This means the definite article can be substituted by other determiners, affecting the idiomatic nature while retaining the referential properties of the phrase. For

‘spill the beans’, this framework would suggest that while the phrase has a fixed idiomatic meaning, its syntactic structure allows for some variation in determiners (e.g. ‘spill some beans’) without altering its idiomaticity.

Finally, the evolution of the idiom ‘kill two birds with one stone’ to variations like ‘hit two birds with one stone’ and ‘feed two birds with one scone’ reflects a shift towards more animal-friendly language. This transformation began as educators and organizations, including PETA, sought to promote sensitivity to animal rights and discourage language that could normalize animal harm. PETA’s initiative, which includes a comprehensive list of animal-friendly idioms, demonstrates a broader trend in language adaptation toward positivity and compassion, influencing both educational settings and mass media campaigns aimed at enhancing public awareness and engagement.

While discussions about these idioms may seem trivial, such linguistic changes can contribute significantly to reducing societal acceptance of violence by prompting individuals to consider the implications of their language more thoughtfully. This increased consciousness can then be translated into more compassionate behavior toward other people and animals. The goal of this article is to advance a more inclusive and respectful culture, not merely to modify slang. Critics may argue that changing idioms is a useless work that will not result in tangible change. But as history has demonstrated, language changes throughout time and has a significant impact on mental processes. Similar to how offensive language and racial slurs have been eliminated from civil discourse to promote inclusivity and respect, we can also polish our vocabulary to make it less harsh and more sympathetic. When harmful idioms are altered to be more inclusive, it can have a positive impact on society by promoting a more respectful and harmonious environment.

## 6. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

While the COCA provides a comprehensive and diverse corpus widely utilized in linguistic studies, it inherently presents certain limitations. The first one is its inability to fully capture the rich spectrum of regional dialects and other variations within American English. Consequently, findings drawn from the COCA may not fully encapsulate the linguistic nuances present in specific regional contexts. This limitation poses challenges in generalizing research findings to broader linguistic landscapes.

Moreover, the scope of this study is further constrained by the selection of only three idioms for an in-depth analysis. While this focused approach allows for a detailed examination of specific idiomatic expressions, it inevitably restricts the breadth of linguistic phenomena explored within the corpus. Consequently, the universality of its conclusions is questionable, as they will be limited to the selected idioms, so we warrant caution in applying conclusions to a broader range of linguistic contexts.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study address the research questions by highlighting the prevalence and transformation of idioms in American mass media. Traditional idioms remain widely used across all demographics, while transformed idioms are more common in digital communica-

tion. The idiom “seen better days” remains widely used, while its transformed counterpart “known better days” is gaining popularity, particularly on online platforms. Similarly, “spill the beans” has a higher frequency than “spill the tea”, but the latter has surged in usage due to social media influence. The idiom “kill two birds with one stone” has seen transformations such as “hit two birds with stone” and “feed two birds with one scone”, reflecting a shift towards more politically correct and animal-friendly language. These transformations often involve shifts towards contemporary, socially aware, or politically correct expressions, driven by the internet and mass media, which make idioms more relevant to modern communication contexts. Corpus analysis tools like Sketch Engine proved effective in identifying and comparing idiom usage frequencies.

As we move forward in a technology-driven world, our idiomatic expressions will continue to evolve and mirror the changing dynamics of our communication landscape. Educators should integrate both traditional and transformed idioms into their curricula to illustrate this dynamic nature of language. Both highlighting cultural and technological influences, teachers can demonstrate students how idioms adapt over time. Using digital tools such as Sketch Engine can enhance students’ research skills by allowing them to explore idiom usage in various contexts and media. This approach not only enriches the learning experience but also promotes critical thinking, media literacy, and a deeper understanding of contemporary communication.

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