Chapter 5 – Finding Phrases

5.1 In section 5.2, a Google search showed that the idiom storm in a teacup/tempest in a teapot was manipulated in various ways in about every second instance of use. In this task we will investigate another well-known idiom: too many cooks spoil the broth.

(i) Open Google on the Internet. Click on “Advanced search”. Change “10 results” to “30 results”. In the box for “exact phrase” type in: too many * spoil the. Apart from too many cooks spoil the broth, this will retrieve all examples with small modifications like too many chefs spoil the soup and more imaginative variants like Too many clicks spoil the sale and Too many superlatives spoil the telling. Finally, in the “Domain” box, type in “uk” to get examples from British webpages only. Then click on “Search”. Among the first thirty examples, how many were manipulated? How were they manipulated?

(ii) Go back to the search page and in the search box “without any of these words” add: cook, chef, broth, soup. Then click search again. This will give you only manipulated examples.

(iii) Try the searches described in (i) and (ii) in some other domain, perhaps your home country if it is not the UK. You will find domain abbreviations in Table 10.2 in the book.

(iv) Investigate some other idioms or proverbs of your own choice. You will see that the extent to which they are manipulated varies considerably.

5.2 Many words are frequent because they are part of frequent phrases. Think about the word ear. How is it used in English? Is it part of any frequent phrases? To investigate this, use PIE.

(i) Go to http://pie.usna.edu/. Choose “N-Grams Simple”. In the search box, type in: + + + + ear. The four + signs make the program retrieve all 5-grams with four words before the keyword. Then change the “Minimum frequency” to 3 and click on “Search”.

(ii) Study the list of 5-grams closely. Some may be just chance occurrences, but many will be examples of more or less fixed phrases. Write down the ones you recognise and group those that belong together. If you are uncertain about the meaning and want to see more context, click on the phrase to get the concordance lines (depending on server traffic, this does not always work – if it doesn’t, you can find the same concordance lines via the BYU-BNC interface).

(iii) How is ear used in the BNC? In what kind of phrases does it occur?