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COMING TO TERMS WITH SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

Corpus studies have taught us that many lexical items regularly co-occur with specific evaluative meanings, to the extent that those items themselves can imply attitude. Examples can be obvious, such as 'recover from + something bad', or less obvious, such as 'cause + something bad'. When such an item co-occurs with an opposite meaning, it has been argued that the reader may draw the conclusion that the speaker is being insincere or ironic. Phrases such as 'come to terms with' are interesting in this regard. The Cobuild dictionary asserts that 'come to terms with' co-occurs with negative meaning (as in 'come to terms with failure'). In at least half the cases found, however, and even in the example quoted in that dictionary, 'come to terms with' is used with an item that appears to be positive, such as 'success'. In this paper it is argued that this cannot be interpreted as insincerity or irony, but that it forces a reinterpretation of the positive term, along the lines of 'success may seem to be a good thing but it necessitates considerable life adjustment'. In more interesting cases, the item following 'come to terms with' relates to another individual and thus an interpretation of conflicting points of view is required. An invented example would be 'Joe has to come to terms with Mary's success', where 'success' may be positive for Mary but negative for Joe. A genuine example, from a White House press conference, is 'The US must come to terms with China's industrial development', where a divergence in viewpoint is imposed on the US and China. This paper develops this argument, discusses how similar phrases might be found, and illustrates how the imposition of conflicting points of view is used in discourse.

KEYWORDS

Discourse structure; evaluation

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Coming to terms with success

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1. Introduction

In his 2017 paper, ‘Varieties of non-obvious meaning in CL and CADS’, Alan Partington stresses the important role of corpus linguistics in identifying ‘hidden’ meaning, in lexical units and in texts. He identifies the observation of ‘evaluative prosody’ as one of the most important contributions of researchers such as Sinclair, Louw and Stubbs, but comments that ‘there is still much about evaluative prosody which remains non-obvious’ (Partington 2017: 347). He continues to outline some of the ways in which the claims around evaluative prosody are controversial, including the questions ‘what are the circumstances in which an evaluative tendency can be overridden’ and ‘what is the effect of point of view and agency’ (ibid.).

Partington takes from Sinclair the notion of ‘unit of meaning’ (Sinclair 2004) and from Hoey the concept of ‘lexical priming’ (Hoey 2005). Both Sinclair and Hoey suggest that language is more patterned and therefore predictable than intuition would lead us to expect. The ‘unit of meaning’ proposed by Sinclair is a unit in which the form is semi-fixed and has a meaning that goes beyond the compositional meaning of the unit (Sinclair 2004). Some definitions of a construction, from the very different tradition of Cognitive Linguistics, are entirely compatible with this notion (Croft et al. 2004: 225).

This paper is a qualitative case study of a phrase, encountered serendipitously (Partington 2017: 339), and its evaluative prosody. The case study illustrates the role of a corpus study of many instances of a phrase in casting light on its use in one specific context.

2. Serendipity

In this paper I explore further the notion that lexical units have hidden evaluative meanings. As often happens, the first clue to such meaning comes from a single instance of use that ‘sounds odd’ and that inspires further investigation. In this case, the person who identified the oddity was a visiting researcher to my university.¹ Corpus investigation of the phrase in question showed that the researcher was correct in identifying the example as unusual. This serendipitous encounter led to more extensive thinking about the nature of prosody and semantic sets.

1 I would like to thank the visiting researcher for bringing this example to my attention.

The example (see example 1) I shall discuss in this paper comes from a press conference in the US, a context well known to Partington (Partington 2003).

(1) The US must come to terms with China's industrial development.

What puzzled the researcher who brought this to my attention was that, according to their prior experience, the phrase *come to terms with* is used with evaluatively negative items: 'loss', 'death', 'failure' and so on. But development is a good thing, so what did the example mean?

My own instincts, it turned out, were less reliable. To me, the example was unremarkable, in the sense that it did not 'sound odd', but it was also interesting as an example of evaluative meaning and point of view (Partington et al. 2013: 46). I suggested that the speaker was implying that whereas industrial development was entirely good from China's point of view, an industrially-developed China presented challenges for the USA. I proposed a similar, invented example (example 2).

(2) Joe has to come to terms with Mary's success.

In this case, success is undoubtedly a good thing for Mary, but a successful Mary is presented as problematic for Joe (who is the jealous type, perhaps). The phrase *COME to terms with* can, it seems, be used not simply to evaluate what follows as problematic, but to create an interesting dichotomy between the participants in the situation.

Based solely on intuition, we might, in fact, posit three situations in which the phrase is used:

1. It is used with overtly negative collocates e.g. *...helping people...to come to terms with their very difficult past involving traumatic events* (enTenTen21). In line with Partington et al.'s argument, the phrase means that the speaker is adopting the point of view of the reported person; in this case the speaker adopts the position of 'people' who have a 'difficult past'.
2. It is used with evaluatively neutral words, but implies that the situation referred to is to be evaluated negatively e.g. *...trying to come to terms with what was happening in my country...* (enTenTen21). This is case of 'semantic prosody' (Louw 1993; Stubbs 2001), where the usual co-occurrence of the phrase with something negative implies an interpretation of 'what was happening in my country' paraphrasable as 'the bad things that are happening in my country'.
3. It is used with overtly positive words, implying a difference between two points of view e.g. *For this reason, the Biden administration should come to terms with China's economic success and diplomacy.* (enTenTen21) This might be described as an exploitation of the semantic prosody of the phrase, and it might be said to suggest a 'hidden' meaning. Using Partington et al.'s argument again, the speaker adopts the

Biden administration’s point of view, but can also see things from China’s perspective.

This paper seeks to test whether this interpretation is correct and to ask:

1. What does the phrase *COME to terms with* really mean?
2. Can the items that follow the phrase be interpreted as belonging to a semantic set and if so what?
3. How frequent are exploitations of the semantic prosody, as in example 1?

To answer these questions, a series of corpus studies were conducted, using the enTen-Ten21 corpus in SketchEngine and the CoCA corpus in English-corpora.org.

3. *COME to terms with*: a study

The study begins with dictionary definitions of the target phrase. Table 1 shows the definitions and one example from four widely-used on-line dictionaries of English for learners. Given that all the dictionaries are based on corpora, it is to be assumed that the lexicographers have selected ‘typical’ uses of the phrase as identified through corpus evidence. Longman, Oxford and Cambridge all select examples with recognisably negative situations (death, childlessness). The negativity of *come to terms with* and of *death* or *will never have children* reinforce each other: the evaluation is prosodic. The example from the Cobuild dictionary is different, as ‘I had become an adult’ is not in itself negative – indeed, it is presumably positive from the point of view of the maturing child – but the use of *come to terms with* imposes an interpretation of the situation as ‘difficult or unpleasant’ from the point of view of the father.

Dictionary	Definition	Example
Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English	“to accept an unpleasant or sad situation and no longer feel upset or angry about it.”	George and Elizabeth have come to terms with the fact that they will never have children.
Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary	“to accept something unpleasant by learning to deal with it.”	She is still coming to terms with her son’s death.
Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary	“to gradually accept a sad situation, I think he’s still coming to terms often the death of someone you love.”	with the death of his wife.
Collins Cobuild Dictionary	“If you come to terms with something difficult or unpleasant, you learn to accept and deal with it.”	My dad needed to come to terms with the fact that I had become an adult.

Table 1: Definitions and one example from four widely-used on-line dictionaries of English for learners

The next part of the study focused on the frequency of the word forms comprising the lemma COME in *COME to terms with* in comparison with their overall relative frequency. Table 2 shows the frequencies of the forms of the verb COME in the enTenTen 21 corpus (column 2), together with the frequencies of each verb form when the verb is followed by *to terms with* (column 4). The percentages (columns 3 and 5) are shown to illustrate the extent of the difference. (The percentages do not total 100% because of rounding.) For example, *came* accounts for 25.36% of the lemma COME overall, but *came to terms with* accounts for only 3.82% of the phrase *COME to terms with*. Column 6 shows the equivalent percentages for *COME to terms with* in CoCA, for comparison. The verb form split in the two corpora are very similar.

	COME		COME to terms with			
	1	2	enTenTen21		CoCA	
			3	4	5	6
Come		22,929,298	38.52%	84,775	63.40%	68.42%
Comes		11,728,010	19.70%	5,767	4.31%	2.74%
Coming		9,760,413	16.40%	32,721	24.47%	24.26%
Came		15,094,370	25.36%	5,116	3.82%	4.56%
Total		59,512,091		133,707		

Table 2: COME and COME to terms with in enTenTen21

Table 2 indicates that the base form *come* and the progressive form *coming* are both over-represented in *COME to terms with*. The other two forms are under-represented. This in turn suggests that in the target phrase (a) *come* is likely to be found as a non-finite form rather than the present tense (or else *comes* would not be so infrequent) and that (b) the activity is more likely to be presented as on-going (*coming*) than as completed (*came*).

Further study of the left context of the most frequent form, *come to terms with*, using 1000 random lines from the enTenTen21 corpus, shows that frequent meanings are connected with difficulty and necessity. Of the 1000 lines, 500 are *to come to terms with*. A further random 1000 lines for *to come to terms with* were obtained. Words and phrases frequently occurring to the left of this are:

- *struggle* (145), *ATTEMPT* (37), *difficult* (22), *effort/s* (6), *hard* (20), *TRY* (142)
- *able* (24), *inability* (7), *unable* (26), *(FIND a) way* (12)
- *begin* (21), *START* (9)
- *FAIL* (8), *refuse* (9)
- *FORCE* (130), *helped/forced her/me/them*
- *HAVE (got)* (142), *NEED* (31)
- *(take/need) time* (27), *(HAVE) yet* (15)

Other frequent leftwards words include:

- Modals (*can, could, must, should, would*)
- Indicators of negativity (*never, not, ever*) and of length of time (*eventually, finally*) and completeness (*fully*)
- Indicators of difficulty in finding a way (*how*)

In short, the activity expressed by *COME to terms with* is presented as difficult but necessary. This is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows 20 random concordance lines from *en-TenTen21*, left sorted and with the indicators of difficulty and necessity underlined.

1 cant stretch, in ways we must all come to terms with. Jordan doesn't use Success
 2 ise and Back Arts Studios? Can he come to terms with his past and with the people
 3 s own Cosby story that helped her come to terms with the experience she had with
 4 at void, that emptiness? How do I come to terms with the loss, I look at your pho
 5 l of this. Steve had more or less come to terms with the way destiny had decided
 6 gave support to ISIS. 'Iraq must come to terms with simmering, unresolved grievance
 7 years in the business I can never come to terms with the way other Agents value p
 8 t. It's all bitterness, you can't come to terms with the superior mode of the Ang
 9 a consequence, the US now has to come to terms with the dichotomy of being the s
 10 she says. It was very painful to come to terms with that bitter disappointment.
 11 was, and still is, difficult to come to terms with the fact that some not only
 12 ll, going chic means you need to come to terms with black, the most despised col
 13 crossover has forced managers to come to terms with the fact their workers aren'
 14 the 1980s. Parrish struggles to come to terms with the broken pieces of his own
 15 e body of a family struggling to come to terms with the shock of its own unmoor
 16y very soon, Azhani would have to come to terms with losing her lover. Otherwise
 17 a journey where he is forced to come to terms with his past and do what he can
 18 lection on our part as to how to come to terms with this alternative critical pu
 19 but Christine is still unable to come to terms with her loss, let alone move on.
 20 tness that comes over us when we come to terms with the reality of an irreconcil

Figure 1: 20 random concordance lines for *come to terms with*

What is more pertinent to the study, though is what is found to the right of the phrase. Rather than assume that the evaluatively positive / negative distinction would be the most important, I instead chose to do a bottom-up classification of the situations represented in the right co-texts in concordance lines. The selected corpus was CoCA, because the initial example came from contemporary US English. A random 200 concordance lines were obtained, from a total of 3,238 instances of the search term *to terms with*. Each line, apart from a few mis-hits and some where there was insufficient context to establish the meaning, was coded with a category. The purpose of the coding was not to establish a system of discrete categories. This is because the categories necessarily overlap; for example, the 'loss or death' category overlaps with the 'change' one. Some lines would fit more than one category (see example 3).

(3) ...to come to terms with a childhood of abuse and poverty in New Orleans... (CoCA)

Example 3 could be coded as 'personal experience (of a bad situation)' or 'the past' or 'events and agency' with the subject as the victim of actions by others. Similarly, the pur-

pose was not to quantify the uses. Rather, the aim was to discover the range of things to which ‘coming to terms’ is applied. These have been divided initially into identifiable negative things, and those where there is no overt indication of negativity. Table 3 shows the first of these: the negative set. These are the uses that, given the dictionary definitions shown in Table 1, are expected.

Label	Explanation	Examples
Loss and death	Lines are given this coding only when they include words such as <i>loss</i> and <i>death</i> . It is notable that a person can be described as coming to terms with the death of a loved one (in the past) or with their own death (in the future).	<i>the death of her father; the losses he and his generation experienced; the horrific slaying of their two-year-old boy; the loss of a sibling; the fact that she was dying; mortality</i>
The past	Lines with this coding include words such as <i>past</i> or <i>history</i> . The specific (negative) features of the past are sometimes specified and sometimes not. Usually, a person or group is described as coming to terms with a past in which they have done bad things, but the alternative, that bad things have been done to them, was also found. For example: <i>the United States takeover of Hawaii in 1898</i> [the subject is residents of Hawaii, represented as having been taken over]; <i>the crimes of the Soviet past</i> [the subject is Russia, represented as having committed crimes]	<i>this controversial chapter of its history; the United States takeover of Hawaii in 1898; his past; things about our treatment of the original inhabitants; church history; the past; its own past; the crimes of the Soviet past</i>
Events and agency	Lines with this coding express actions that are done by or affect individuals, as opposed to the community events which are coded as ‘the past’. The first set of examples are those where the subject is the victim of others’ actions. The second set are those where the subject does a bad thing, or fails to do a good one, or is responsible for something bad by proxy.	VICTIM: <i>when Michael ran us off the road; my rape; how far their pay will be pruned; the abuse; her partner’s indifference; an incident that killed several close friends</i> AGENT: <i>the fact that he never won a Cup title; knowing I was going to have to send her away to train; the fact that the break had to be made; having lost control; inability to serve in the military; the horrible harm my brother has done</i>
Personal experience	This includes circumstances not listed in the categories above, such as illness, disability, disappointment and poverty. There are also instances of personal feelings that are overtly	CIRCUMSTANCES: <i>their partner’s positive [HIV] status; the fact that our disabilities sometimes mean...; their son Max’s special needs; the disease; her condition; the diagnosis; her</i>

	negative.	<i>impoverished surroundings; the futility of his position; the unrealistic nature of our cherished childhood fantasies</i>
Community experience	This includes circumstances not listed in the categories above, such as political, financial, or environmental problems.	<i>FEELINGS: the bitterness; his need for sadness; guilt; his demons; a lot of that anger</i> <i>the disaster's devastating impact; a combined financial hit; the increasingly pervasive Shiite militia influence; the experience of totalitarianism; yet one more aspect of Apartheid's warping effects; white power and domination; an environmental crisis; the often inexplicable turmoil of the present</i>

Table 3: Sets of evaluatively negative meaning in 200 instances of COME to terms with in CoCA

Table 4 shows sets which are more ambivalent, evaluatively. These suggest that 'coming to terms with' can involve an adjustment which is difficult but which does not necessarily respond to something bad.

Set label	Explanation	Examples
A person's own characteristics, identity, or choices	The characteristics are not marked as negative and may be interpreted as neutral or positive e.g. <i>her own identity, his sexuality, her position of privilege.</i>	<i>that part of me that needed a father; our own diversity; his sexuality; the fact that she's not gay; their own rolling thoughts; her own identity; their orientation; her size; her position of privilege; his own difficult choices; his homosexuality</i>
Personal experience	These are circumstances that are not labelled negatively but which can be interpreted as requiring adjustment.	<i>their home lives; marriage, career, family, parenthood; what I am about to show you; medication; certain aspects of their relationships; the contrasting evidence of their own eyes and...; the Australian environment; what's going on; the landscape; the great feminine principle in life; perception of colour; having been loved</i>
Community experience	These, similarly, are circumstances not labelled negatively but which can be interpreted as requiring adjustment. They are experienced by communities	<i>capitalism; their religion; the myths with which we think; science; health care; this union; UN objectives</i>

	rather than individuals.	
Change or a new situation	Change is not necessarily marked as a negative circumstance, and each instance is presumably open to interpretation depending on one’s standpoint.	<i>this shifting dynamic; the modern smartphone; this Trump trend; the collapse of the newspaper model; this new knowledge; a new reality; the reality of historical change; urban modernity</i>
The future	It appears that it is the idea or expectation of the future that requires adaptation.	<i>any of the possible things that might happen; the fact she’s never going to be able...; the fact that it’s never gonna go away; his impending end; the fact that they might never achieve parity...</i>

Table 4: Sets of evaluatively neutral or positive meaning in 200 instances of COME to terms with in CoCA

In the 200 instances from CoCA, there are in addition four instances where a dichotomy between points of view can be observed. Examples are given below (4-6).

- (4) ..he surrounds Nicole with a bestiary of believers who try to come to terms with her gifts in different ways. (CoCA)
- (5) Do you think that Russia has now come to terms with Poland’s membership of NATO? (CoCA)
- (6) It will also not be easy for the Palestinians to come to terms with Israel’s need to live within certain fixed boundaries, in safety... (CoCA)

The conclusion is that *COME to terms with* is most frequently used with situations that are labelled as negative, but that there are substantial numbers of counter examples, including those where a negative interpretation would be inappropriate, such as when someone is described as coming to terms with an aspect of their identity. As a further confirmatory move, specific collocates of the phrase (within 5 words to the right) were searched for in the enTenTen21 corpus. Words were selected that the initial study suggested would be frequent, with both negative meanings (e.g. *death, failure*) and neutral or positive meanings (e.g. *change, success*). Table 5 shows the results, separated into negative and positive, in frequency order on each side of the table. The numbers suggest that negative collocates are likely to be much more frequent than positive, that apparently neutral words such as *sexuality* and *change* are by no means rare, and that positive words such as *success* and *victory* are relatively infrequent but not unknown.

Collocate	Number	Collocate	Number
<i>past</i>	4,431	<i>sexuality</i>	1,662
<i>death</i>	3,741	<i>change</i>	1,574

<i>loss</i>	3,291	<i>identity</i>	1,332
<i>illness</i>	482	<i>success</i>	88
<i>failure</i>	296	<i>victory</i>	46

Table 5: Relative frequency of specific collocates (R1-5) in enTenTen21

As a follow-up study, the 88 instances of *COME to terms with ... success* were examined to ascertain whether the success was the subject's or another person's. Thirteen instances were discarded as false hits: *success* occurred in a different sentence or in a negative phrase such as *lack of success*. Of the remaining 75 instances, the majority (66) refer to the subject's own success e.g. *Justin admitted he is still coming to terms with his band's success; the mobile vendors are struggling to come to terms with their own success*. That leaves nine instances where there is a dichotomy – one person regards as negative a situation which is positive for another. These are shown in examples 7-15.

- (7) One day we might have to come to terms with its [the Orch OR hypothesis] success, and myriad implications. (enTenTen21)
- (8) For this reason, the Biden administration should come to terms with China's economic success and diplomacy. (enTenTen21)
- (9) ...even when contemplating the possibility of physics outside the domain of effective quantum field theory one inevitably must at least come to terms with the success of effective field theory in reproducing a vast class of experimental data. (enTenTen21)
- (10) Minority consolidation in favour of the Congress ... would be highly simplistic ways of coming to terms with Shashi Tharoor's phenomenal success in Thiruvananthapuram... (enTenTen21)
- (11) ...forced Jewish interpreters of the Alexander tradition to come to terms with Alexander's undeniable temporal success. (enTenTen21)
- (12) ...revolutionaries who haven't yet come to terms with the successes of the mixed modern model. (enTenTen21)
- (13) Ansar Al-Sharia ... has difficulty coming to terms with the recent Shia successes in Yemen. (enTenTen21)
- (14) Coming to terms with Singapore's success is even more difficult for conservative ideologues. (enTenTen21)
- (15) If she has come to terms with Harvey's success... (enTenTen21)

In nearly all of these instances, the exception being example 15, the coming to terms may be described as intellectual rather than emotional. The protagonists are rivals, in politics (e.g. *the Biden administration*) or academia (e.g. *Jewish interpreters of the Alexander tradition*).

Considerable background knowledge, or imagination, is needed to interpret the examples; in fact the texts from which they come devote substantial space to explaining what is meant, such as why Alexander's success presents a problem for Jewish interpreters (example 11) or why Singapore's success challenges conservative ideologues (example 14). It is notable that example 1 would fit this pattern but the invented example 2 would not. The notion of intellectual adaptation in turn raises the question of what exactly is involved in 'coming to terms with'. The dictionary definitions in Table 1 suggest an emotional accommodation: managing to be less upset by a distressing situation. In examples 7-14 above, however, the accommodation might be said to involve taking different actions or having different theories as the result of a situation.

To explore this further, I examined something which up to this point I had taken for granted: the subjects of *COME to terms with*. From 1,000 instances from enTenTen21, nearly all are individuals or groups of people, sometimes national or local communities such as *the community of Tulsa* or *the Roma*. The few other entities are:

- Political, religious, or other social entities: *the West, a Balkan country, the mainstream media, Presbyterian churches, the Left, the Sierra Club, an urban police force*.
- Intellectual or academic abstract entities: *organization theories, medical education, history*.

In the examples with these subjects, *coming to terms* again involves an adjustment that is more intellectual or organisational than emotional. Perhaps, though, the correct interpretation is that the phrase *COME to terms with* is used when the adjustment is *both* intellectual and emotional. Figure 2 shows 10 of the 100 instances in enTenTen21 where the word *Trump* occurs in the rightwards context of *COME to terms with*. A purely impressionistic interpretation is that the required change in thinking and acting often has emotional consequences too. That impression is strengthened by indicators of emotion in the context of many of the instances. In Figure 2, these indicators of emotion are underlined.

1 As the dust settles and America comes to terms with the election of Donald Trump, it's time to take a look at the embarrassment of the media class.

2 As everyone is still coming to terms with the implications of a Trump presidency in the US, the French Presidential election period has begun...

3 The Republican Party might be coming to terms with Donald Trump becoming its nominee for the presidential elections, but the party has a long path of reconciliation...

4 It seems it's all about a close friend who won't come to terms with Donald Trump's loss in the late Presidential election.

5 ...he anticipates some initial negative impact on deal flow as the business community comes to terms with what a Donald Trump presidency means for the world economy.

6 As the world comes to terms with how the Trump Presidency might impact the world, much has also been written about the best way to respond.

7 On January 27, as people tried to come to terms with the magnitude of Trump's Executive Orders and their devastating impact on people who had been screened for admission to the United States and who believed that they were on their way to safety...

8 However, they have swiftly come to terms with the reality of the Trump administration.

9 Germany's Spiegel described Janša on Monday in an article headed 'Slovenia's Donald' as somebody in the EU who is not capable of coming to terms with Trump's defeat.

10 With Republicans slowly starting to come to terms with President Trump's defeat this year, there's been talk about how 'history will judge' his administration. Sometimes that refrain is used to reassure that there will be an accounting for the awful things that have happened on his watch...

Figure 2: Selected 10 instances of COME to terms with ...Trump (enTenTen21)

Line 6 from figure 2 is expanded at greater length here as example 16. It ends with *emotions can be overwhelming*:

- (6) Much has been written amidst the turmoil of Donald Trump's stunning victory in the US election. Disbelief was probably the main reaction, from people who voted against him as well as those who voted for him. As the world comes to terms with how the Trump Presidency might impact the world, much has also been written about the best way to respond. I have to confess to probably going a bit over the top with my emotional responses. When someone as divisive as Trump comes along, emotions can be overwhelming.

4. COME to terms with: a conclusion

Having carried out these various steps in the study, it is possible to arrive at a conclusion about the meaning of *COME to terms with*. The dictionary definitions in Table 1 do account for most of the found instances, but by no means all. It is true that the rightwards contexts of the phrase (i.e. the noun phrases following *with*) usually indicate a negative situation, or something that with a bit of thought can be interpreted as negative for someone. However, the most central meaning would seem to be 'change in response to change'. The subject of the phrase must change in some way, either in response to changing circumstances, or in response to changing awareness. The change may be purely emotional, or it may be both intellectual and emotional. The phrase represents the process of change as something that is challenging: difficult but necessary.

This generalisation allows us to interpret both typical and atypical examples. Death, loss and illness can be seen as examples of change, as can one's own sudden success. Recognition of another's identity, such as a child becoming an adult, or of one's own, such as sexuality, can be seen as examples of a change of perception. Some examples, such as the one that sparked this study, require a little more work to interpret. Here is that example repeated as example 17, together with other more arcane instances and their possible interpretations (examples 18-20).

- (17) The US must come to terms with China's industrial development. [Possible meaning: The US must change the way it relates to China because of China's development.]
- (18) The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians is now fighting to revitalize the language and come to terms with their native heritage in the context of the modern United States.
(enTenTen21) [Possible meaning: The Cherokee people will adjust the way they understand and teach their heritage.]
- (19) And the little finger on my left hand was gradually coming to terms with its new responsibilities as the "A"-typing key, and my ring finger was making friends with the "S".
(enTenTen21) [Possible meaning: The fingers are like people who have to change what they routinely do.]
- (20) The teams and their drivers eventually came to terms with their tyres last season but that has not been the case this year, with the new generation of generally softer rubber, with temperatures difficult to control. (enTenTen21) [Possible meaning: The drivers and technicians have to change the way they drive and/or manage tyre use because of the new materials.]

To continue with answers to the research questions, the semantic prosody of *COME to terms with* cannot be expressed with a simple label such as 'negative'. If it can be summarised, it might be as 'the difficulty of necessary change'. The semantic set that the noun phrases following *with* belong to is equally difficult to pin down. In fact, I would argue that the semantic set of items following *COME to terms with* is defined as the totality of those things that people find it necessary to come to terms with. In other words, the 'set' does not exist as a set outside the context of the phrase. The 'set' is constructed by the phrase itself.

5. Conclusion

This paper has presented a case study of a phrase, or unit of meaning, or construction, encountered serendipitously. The series of corpus investigations has suggested a 'non-obvious meaning' of *COME to terms with*. The investigations were qualitative and involved studying both left and right contexts, and the relative frequency of verb forms.

The paper has provided an illustration of some of the points made by Partington (2017), particularly in relation to evaluative prosody. The prosody of the target phrase cannot adequately be summarised as 'negative evaluation', though there are plenty of examples of the phrase imposing a negative interpretation on an apparently neutral circumstance (as in *coming to terms with the past*). The semantic set composed of the noun phrases following the phrase is equally difficult to express, and is certainly not 'bad things that happen'. Instead of the phrase drawing on a semantic set, it in fact creates one. Interpreting the phrase often requires some mental effort: what does it mean when a parent comes to terms with their child growing up, or when an intellectual group comes to terms with

a new discovery, or when a political bloc comes to terms with another's lifting itself out of poverty? Many of the examples illustrate what Partington et al. (2013: 61) call 'embedding' and suggest a dichotomy between points of view.

Whilst the study presented in this paper has been simple, it points to the value of detailed qualitative corpus investigation in uncovering the meanings hidden in everyday phrases. Behind the apparent banality of example 1, where the study started, lies a history of diplomatic relations, of the views that nations have of themselves and of others. The phrase *COME to terms with* implies a difficult adjustment to change. Extending the phrase from its use in describing a response to personal tragedy to the public sphere captures the impact of emotional response to political decision-making. As Partington has often noted, small choices of phraseology can have large implications.

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