

Attila Cserép

A lexicographic and corpus linguistic investigation of *put a damper/dampener on*

Abstract

Some sources trace the idiom *put a damper/dampener on* back to either the HEAT/FIRE or the SOUND domain. *Damper* is said to have originally referred to either a metal plate that regulates the air supply in a chimney or a device that stops the vibration of a piano string. Diachronic corpus evidence suggests that the sense ‘something that moistens’ of *dampener* was metaphorically extended in the context of *be*, *cast* and *throw* and developed the meaning ‘somebody/something that depresses the spirits’ based on the conceptual metaphor EMOTIONAL INTENSITY IS HEAT/FIRE. The ‘draught regulator’ and ‘(piano) sound reducer’ senses are more recent developments, and the variant *dampener* is much more recent.

Keywords: idioms, etymology, conceptual metaphor, diachronic corpus, dictionaries

1 Introduction

Idiom etymology is a fascinating field of research, but it is full of origins shrouded in mystery. As objects and practices of bygone times disappear, speakers face the task of understanding the relationship between the literal reading and figurative sense of an expression. The idiom in the title is paraphrased in the second edition of the *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* as “to stop an occasion from being enjoyable” (2006: 93). The entry adds a piece of etymological information, throwing light on the possible origin of the phrase: “A damper is a device used on piano strings to make the sound less loud”. This suggests a metaphor that maps the physical reduction of sound vibration onto the action of subduing the joy in a situation. If this is indeed how the metaphor has arisen, the variant *dampener* might be the result of the reanalysis of *damper* as the adjective *damp* and the *-er* suffix that forms nouns from verbs (the verb *damp* itself converted from the adjective *damp* in the sense ‘wet’). Since, in modern use, the sense of ‘make something wet’ is expressed with the verb form *dampen*, rather than or in addition to *damp*, this could explain why *dampener*, a word related to the concept of wetness, can replace *damper*. This brief study is a lexicographic and corpus inquiry into the origin of *put a damper/dampener on* to test the above hypothesis.

2 Lexicographic evidence

2.1 *Idiom dictionaries*

As a first step, some idiom dictionaries have been consulted to retrieve any etymological information. No hint at the origin is given in the *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (1998: 78), the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (Siefiring 2005: 72) and *A Dictionary of American Idioms* (Makkai et al. 2004: 286). Both the *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* (2006: 93) and the *Dictionary of Idioms and Their Origins* (Flavell & Flavell 1992: 67) trace the expression back to music. The damper is a device which stops the vibration of the strings in a piano. The second edition of the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (2002: 88), however, identifies two possible sources.

This expression may refer to either of two meanings of ‘damper’. In a piano, a damper is a device which presses the strings and stops them vibrating, so stopping the sound. In a chimney, or flue, a damper is a movable metal plate which controls the amount of air getting to the fire, and so controls how fiercely the fire burns.

The editors of this dictionary share the view that *damper* might be related to music, but they also suggest that the literal scenario might be one of checking the intensity of fire. In the latter case, the damper has the function of controlling the amount of air needed, and consequently, the intensity of the fire. In cognitive linguistic parlance, the literal scene of heating is mapped onto the target domain of enthusiasm, joy and happiness. This is not surprising, as the notion of heat often serves to conceptualize emotionally charged situations. Several related metaphors have been proposed in Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Kövecses (1996: 116) classifies the idiom under SADNESS IS LACK OF HEAT, which supports the connection between heat and happiness. The source domain of heat or fire is mapped onto various emotions, as the mappings in (1) show:

- (1) ANGER IS HEAT (Lakoff 1987: 388–389, Kövecses 2010: 81)
 HAPPINESS IS HEAT (Kövecses 2010: 111)
 LUST IS HEAT (Lakoff 1987: 410, Lakoff & Turner 1989: 84)
 PASSION IS HEAT (Ritchie 2013: 7)
 ANGER IS FIRE (Lakoff 1987: 388–389, Kövecses 2010: 81, 235)
 ENTHUSIASM IS FIRE (Kövecses 2010: 235)
 HAPPINESS IS FIRE (Kövecses 2010: 111)
 LOVE IS FIRE (Kövecses 2010: 235)
 SEXUAL DESIRE IS FIRE (Kövecses 2010: 64)

Kövecses (2010: 142) argues that the main meaning focus of these metaphors is emotional intensity, i.e. expressions and words pertaining to heat and fire convey meanings closely related to the intensity of emotions. The metaphors in (1) can therefore be generalized as EMOTIONAL INTENSITY IS HEAT/FIRE, and since the source domains of FIRE and HEAT are also utilized for target domains other than EMOTION, at a more abstract level, INTENSITY (OF A SITUATION) IS HEAT/FIRE (Kövecses 2010: 142–143).

Some doubt is cast on the role of HEAT/FIRE or SOUND as the origin by *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (1997: 338), which notes that *put a damper on* “employs the noun *damper* in the sense of ‘something that damps or depresses the spirits’, a usage dating

from the mid-1700s”. In other words, *damper* may have developed a figurative sense by the time the idiom arose.

2.2 *The Oxford English Dictionary*

Meanings of *damper* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 3rd edition) with dates of the first attestation are summarized in Table 1.¹

	Meaning paraphrase
1a	Something that damps or depresses the spirits, etc.; also, a person who does the same (1748)
1b	Something that takes off the edge of appetite (1804)
1c	An operative who damps the materials used in various manufactures (1921)
2a	A piece of mechanism in a pianoforte for ‘damping’ or stopping the vibrations of the strings, consisting of a small piece of wood or wire covered with cloth or felt, which rests against the strings corresponding to each key, and is raised or withdrawn from them when the key is pressed down (1783)
2b	‘The mute of a horn and other brass wind instruments’ (Stainer & Barrett Dict. Mus. Terms).
2c	In an organ: a thumping-board (1879)
3	A metal plate made to turn or slide in a flue or chimney, so as to control the combustion by regulating or stopping the draught (1788)
4a	<i>Magnetism</i> (1881)
4b	<i>Electrical Engineering</i> . One of a set of short-circuited conductors in the pole faces of a synchronous electric motor or generator which resist any tendency of the machine to ‘hunt’, i.e. oscillate by running alternately faster and slower than the synchronous speed. Also damper bar, damper winding (1906)
4c	Any device designed to damp mechanical vibrations; spec. a shock-absorber on a motor-car (1929)
5	Any contrivance for damping or moistening.e.g. An appliance for moistening the gummed back of postage stamps; one for damping paper for a copying-press, for cleaning slates, etc. (1845)
6	Chiefly <i>Austral.</i> and <i>New Zealand</i> . A simple kind of unleavened cake or bread made, for the occasion, of flour and water and baked in hot ashes (1827)
7	A till, a cash register; a drawer in which cash is kept. <i>slang.</i> (1846)

Table 1. The senses of damper (n) in the OED with dates of the first attestation.

As can be seen, the figurative sense 1a arose in the middle of the 1700s. The earliest instance of *put a damper on* comes from 1843 (OED entry *clerk*), shown in (2) below, and this concurs with the remark in *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*.

¹ I wish to express my thanks to Dóra Pődör for providing me with data from the OED (personal communication).

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- (2) 1843 J. F. Murray *World of London* II. 29 If the clerk of the weather office is determined to put a damper on the festivities.

The senses related to the HEAT/FIRE domain and SOUND domain (senses 3 and 2 in Table 1) were first attested somewhat later than sense 1a, in the 1780s. Metaphorical meaning extension typically goes from the concrete to the abstract. How can this abstract sense precede the establishment of the more concrete senses? This mystery disappears, if the meanings of *damp* are examined (see Table 2).

	Meaning paraphrase
1a	<i>transitive</i> . To affect with ‘damp’, to stifle, choke, extinguish; to dull, deaden (fire, sound, etc.). Also <i>fig.</i> (1564)
1b	to damp down (a fire or furnace): to cover or fill it with small coal, ashes, or coke, so as to check combustion and prevent its going out, when not required for some time. Also <i>fig.</i> (1869)
1c	<i>Acoustics, Music</i> , etc. To stop the vibrations of a string or the like; to furnish (the strings of a pianoforte) with dampers. In wider use: to impose or to act as a resisting influence on (an oscillation or vibration of any kind) so that it is either progressively reduced in amplitude or, if the resistance is sufficiently great, converted into non-oscillatory return to an equilibrium position; also used with the oscillating body as object. So to damp out: to damp, to extinguish by damping. (1840)
1d	<i>Magnetism</i> . To stop the oscillations of a magnetic needle by placing a mass of conducting metal near it. (1879)
2	To stifle (the faculties) with noxious ‘fumes’; to stupefy, benumb, daze. <i>Obsolete</i> . (1570)
3	To deaden to restrain the ardour or energy of; to depress, deject, discourage, check.
3a	persons, their spirits, zeal, hopes, etc. (1548)
3b	actions, projects, trade, etc. Now <i>rare</i> . (1548)
4	To envelop in fog or mist; also <i>fig.</i> (1631)
5a	To make moist or humid, to wet as steam, vapour, mist, or dew does; to moisten. (1671)
5b	<i>reflexive</i> . To take a drink, ‘wet one’s whistle’. <i>slang.</i> (1862)
6	<i>Horticulture</i> . to damp off (intr.): Of plants: To rot or go off from damp; to fog off. (1846)

Table 2. The senses of damp (v) in the OED with dates of first attestation.

The figurative sense of the verb *damp* (3 in Table 2) was well-established and had long been in use (since 1548) when *damper* was formed (in the related figurative sense) in the mid-1700s. Furthermore, the time points of the first attestations of senses 1a (1748), 2a (1783) and 3 (1788) of *damper* are very close, suggesting roughly simultaneous emergence, assuming a direct relation between the first use of a word in a given sense and the dates in OED.

At this point, it is instructive to juxtapose the entries for *damper* (Table 1) and the verb *damp* (Table 2). For ease of comparison, Table 3 shows the sense correspondences that I have established, based on the OED. The meaning paraphrases in Table 3 should be considered as simple guidewords.

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<i>damp</i>	<i>damper</i>
1a stifle (1564), 1b check combustion (1869)	3 draught regulator (1788), 1b appetite reducer (1804)
1c reduce sound (1840)	2a sound reducer (1783), 2b mute [no date]
1d reduce vibration (1879)	4a (1881), 4b (1906), 4c (1929) vibration reducer
3a, 3b depress, discourage (1548)	1a sb/sth that depresses the spirits (1748)
5a moisten (1671)	5 device for moistening (1845), 1c person (1921)

Table 3. Sense correspondences of damp → damper based on the OED.

One of the proposed origins of the idiom is the piano device. The related sense is 1c of *damp* ('reduce sound') and 2a ('sound reducer') as well as 2b ('mute') of *damper*. Meanings 1a ('stifle') and 1b ('check combustion') of *damp* are linked to the HEAT/FIRE domain and therefore correspond to sense 3 of *damper* ('draught regulator'). It is noteworthy, however, that the OED exemplifies sense 1a of *damp* not only in relation to HEAT/FIRE, but also in relation to SOUND and notes that figurative uses also occur. The dictionary examples show various objects in the proximity of the verb: *their own matter, the very light of heavenly illumination, the Sound, a musket ball, a piece of Wood-coal, his own appetite, a fire* (OED entry *damp*). Since *appetite* also collocates with the verb, sense 1b of *damper* ('appetite reducer') has also been listed as corresponding to sense 1a of *damp* ('stifle'), but perhaps sense 1a of *damper* ('sb/sth that depresses the spirits') could also have been added. This meaning collocates with the following nouns embedded in PPs: *to an enterprising spirit, of curiosity, to sanguine and florid temperaments* (OED entry *damper*). These seem to be even more abstract than the nouns co-occurring with sense 1a of *damp* listed above, which is the reason why the addition has not been made. The particular meaning that *damper* seems to have in the idiom is sense 1a ('sb/sth that depresses the spirits'), which matches senses 3a and 3b of *damp* ('depress, discourage').

While the OED is an outstanding achievement, the dates of first attestations do not necessarily mean that the word was not in use before. Lack of data from a certain time period could be due to our inadequate knowledge and the unavailability of documented use, rather than to the non-existence of the word.² Nevertheless, the OED data seem to allow for the conclusion that *put a damper on* was formed as a figurative expression with *damper* meaning 'something that restrains/depresses', though this cannot be taken as definitive proof. When the idiomatic expression arose, *damper* also had more concrete meanings having to do with controlling either fire or vibrations, i.e. literal senses related to the HEAT/FIRE and SOUND domains. The word *dampener* is a more recent formation. It was first attested in 1887 in a literal sense, and the only example of figurative use comes from 1920 (OED entry *dampen*). The lexicographic evidence has been supplemented with corpus data.

² This might explain why sense 1c of *damp* ('reduce sound') seems to have been attested later than the corresponding sense of *damper*. It is not likely that *damp* was backformed from *damper*.

3 Corpus evidence

3.1 *The Hansard Corpus*

Instances of the noun *damper* have been retrieved from the Hansard Corpus (Davies 2015). It is a large historical corpus of British English, consisting of 1.6 billion words. It contains speeches given in the British Parliament from 1803–2005.

The noun *damper* has 124 occurrences (irrelevant examples such as the comparative of *damp* and the misspelling of *clammer* have been removed). It is used predominantly in a figurative sense, which is not surprising, given the genre of parliamentary speeches. The oldest example of the idiom has the form *throw a damper on* (3) and comes from 1841. The first attestation with *put* (4) is from 1860.

- (3) ...it was the manner in which that evidence was given, that led him to doubt whether the House would be just- 1327 fied in directing this prosecution: He did not like to throw a damper on prosecutions of this nature...
- (4) By the course they were following they were putting a damper upon the Christian liberality of the country.

A summary of the various patterns can be seen in Table 4. The two columns of the table differ in the schematicity of the patterns. “Freq” refers to the absolute frequency of the item. The percentages are rounded. Passive forms (*a damper should be put upon them*) and relativization (*the damper which the Chancellor of the Exchequer put on*) are included in the corresponding active form of *put a/the damper on*. Two predominant constructions emerge from the corpus. The noun typically functions as a subject complement in combination with the existential verb (*be a damper*) or it is the direct object of a verb (*throw/put a damper on*). The most common forms are *put a damper on* and *be a damper on*, or – at a more schematic level – *throw/put a (Adj) damper* and *be a (Adj) damper on*. The citation form *put the dampers on* given in the *Dictionary of Idioms and Their Origins* (Flavell & Flavell 1992: 67) is much less common. Typical prepositions are (*be a damper/throw a damper/put a damper*) *on/upon*, less frequently (*be a damper*) *to*. The variant *upon* is subsumed under *on* in Table 4.

Pattern	Freq	Pattern	Freq
<i>put a damper on</i>	43	<i>put a (Adj) damper on</i>	49 (43%)
<i>put a Adj damper on</i>	6		
<i>put the damper on</i>	8	<i>put the (Adj) damper on</i>	9 (8%)
<i>put the Adj damper on</i>	1		
<i>put some damper on</i>	1	<i>put some damper on</i>	1 (1%)
<i>put the dampers on</i>	2	<i>put the dampers on</i>	2 (2%)
<i>throw a damper on</i>	5	<i>throw a (Adj) damper on</i>	7 (6%)
<i>throw a Adj damper on</i>	2		
<i>act as a damper</i>	5	<i>act as a (Adj) damper</i>	6 (5%)
<i>act as a Adj damper</i>	1		
<i>operate as a damper</i>	1	<i>operate as a damper</i>	1 (1%)
<i>V NP as a damper</i>	3	<i>V NP as a damper</i>	3 (3%)
<i>be a damper</i>	19	<i>be a (Adj) damper</i>	25 (22%)

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<i>be a Adj damper</i>	6		
<i>be any damper</i>	1	<i>be any damper</i>	1 (1%)
<i>be the superlative Adj damper</i>	2	<i>be the superlative Adj damper</i>	2 (2%)
Other	9	Other	9 (8%)
Total	115	Total	115 (100%)

Table 4. The patterns of figurative damper

The chronological distribution of variants demonstrates that *throw* was more common than *put* up to the late 19th century, but in the 20th century only *put* survives. Furthermore, definite *damper* (*put the (Adj) damper on*) is observed only in the 20th century, especially in the second half.

A variety of nouns collocate with *damper*, ranging from the lexical field of economy (*silk trade, enterprise, investment*), through social issues and government (*radicalism, crime, effort*) to emotions and feelings (*enthusiasm, hopes, spirit*). You can put the damper on not only things but people as well. There is a remarkable fit between these nouns and the types of things that can be damped according to the OED: “persons, their spirits, zeal, hopes, etc.” as well as “actions, projects, trade, etc.” (see meanings 3a and 3b in Table 2). Two of the three noun collocates that OED (entry *dampener*) provides are also attested in the corpus: *spirit* and *curiosity*.

The Hansard Corpus data supports the more recent origin of *dampener*. The earliest figurative use is from 1965. It is not only more recent but also much less common. Only 28 instances have been found, as opposed to the 115 tokens of *damper*. The patterns are similar, the only difference is that *be a (Adj) dampener* has a higher frequency than *put a (Adj) dampener on*.

3.2 Google Books (via BYU)

The Hansard Corpus cannot provide instances of use before the early 1800s. It has therefore been decided to search for older examples in the British English version Google Books offered via Mark Davies’s website (<https://googlebooks.byu.edu/#>), consisting of 34 billion words and covering the period between 1500 and 2010. No evidence of the use of *damper* has been found before the 1670s, which is why this study has focused on the period between the 1670s and the 1790s. The oldest occurrences of figurative *damper* are given below in (5)-(12).³

- (5) Some Observations upon the Answer [signed: W. S.] to an Enquiry into ...
 John Eachard – 1672
 ...Thanksgiving, or a Solemn Day of Humiliation; such a time called only for close Drawers, and the Breeches were to be left at home, because they were great dampers of the power of the Spirit, and a vast hindrance to the efficacious carrying on ..

³ The original spelling used in the corpus has been retained in the examples, except (13).

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- (6) The Double Gallant: Or, the Sick Lady's Cure. A Comedy. As it is ...
 1735
 O Name it not 3 That eternal Damper of all Pleasure, my Husband, Sir Solomon, came into the Mall in r the very Crisis of our Conversation-I saw him ata di- \ flame, and complain'd that the Air grew tainted, that I * was Sick o'th' sudden, and left ...
- (7) Christ alone exalted: being the compleat works of Tobias Crisp, D.D. ...
 Tobias CRISP – 1755
 ... whereas fear fills men full of doubts: when things are not clear, there are disputings, but faith puts an end to all doubts and fears ; wherefore, so long as there is fear, there is unbelief. 2. Fear is prejudicial to all religious duties: it is a damper of prayer...
- (8) The State Records of North Carolina
 Volume 9, Part 2, page 1241
 North Carolina, William Laurence Saunders, Walter Clark – 1771
 ... those counties to procure proper Associations of the People in support of Govern-ment, such a measure cannot fail to cast a damper upon the machinations of Faction and disconcert any desperate measures they may have in contemplation.
- (9) Epigrams of Martial, &c. with Mottos from Horace, &c
 Martial– 1773
 Which are the best dampers to a keen appetite, Norfolk Dumplings or Sussex Puddings 2" the Translator is much at a loss to determine so. important a Quaestion for the satisfaction of his Lordship and his two worthy Courts ; for though he has ...
- (10) The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure ...
 1775
 ... themselves the greatest enemies to good company; mere dampers to the mind, wet blankets to the imagination, and extinguishers of good sense and good humour. Taciturnity is the great vice of Englishmen, and it would be more expedient ...
- (11) The European Magazine: And London Review
 1785
 If the Damper looks morose, every body wonders what the moody gentleman is displeased with, and each in his turn suspects himself in the fault; if he only looks wise, all are expesting when the dumb oracle will utter, and in the mean time his ...
- (12) Clarissa: Or, The History of a Young Lady. Comprehending the Most ...
 1784
 Besides, what other people call blame, that call I praise: I ever did; and so l very early discharged shaienze, that cold-water damper to an enterprizing spirit. These are smart girls ; they have life and wit; and yesterday, upon Char-, lotte's raving ...

The dates in the corpus should be treated with some caution. Efforts have been made to double-check them. While (6), (7) and (12) can be traced back to earlier dates than shown, (8) seems to come from some years later: 1775 instead of 1771 (Clark, Saunders & Beauregard 1886–1907). The discrepancy may be due to erroneous dating or the difference between the

time the text was written and the time of publication or edition including the given text. Example (6) comes from a play written in 1707, despite the corpus date of 1735 (Austin & Ralph 2018). Example (7) is dated 1755, but the text was written by Tobias Crisp (1600–1643), whose sermons were published soon after his death (Bickley 1885–1900). The exact birth of the text cannot be determined, but the language comes from the first half of the 1600s. Finally, example (12) is from a play that was originally published in 1748.

Example (11) is taken from a passage that begins as shown in (13).

- (13) Gentlemen, there is a pretty numerous sect of philosophers in this kingdom, whom I cannot describe by any apter denomination than that of *Dampers*. They are to be known in society by a sudden damp which they are sure to cast upon all companies where they enter. The human heart that comes within their atmosphere, never fails to be chilled; and the quickest sense of feeling is as effectually benumbed, as the touch is with the torpedo.

Dampers here refers to people who spoil the joy of others, discourage and demoralize talented people. *Dampers* metaphorically cast a (sudden) damp on others. The example is noteworthy, because it contains the related noun *damp*.

Damper means ‘appetite reducer’ in (9), and ‘sb/sth that depresses the spirits’ in the rest of the examples. Both senses are attested earlier than OED’s first attestations: 1773, as opposed to OED’s 1804, for ‘appetite reducer’, and the 1670s and possibly even earlier, as opposed to OED’s 1748, for ‘sb/sth that depresses the spirits’. Of the patterns listed in Table 4, *be a (ADJ) damper* can be seen in (7), but *put/throw a (Adj) damper on* is absent. Instead, *damp(er)* co-occurs with *cast* in (8) and (13). The sense ‘draught regulator’ is illustrated in (14) and (15). The text in (14) was originally published in 1783 (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007695608>).

- (14) The London Art of Cookery: And Housekeeper's Complete Assistant, on ...
 John Farley – 1792
 ... then with the crook you are enabled to open the surnace, or copper door, and with the other end push in the damper, without stirring from your station i but on the approach of the first swell, you will have sufficient time to proportinate your fire, ...
- (15) The Annual Register, Or, A View of the History, Politics, and ...
 1791
 ... which n done by letting down a damper upon the chimney corresponding to that with which ordinary reverberator) furnaces arc provided, and by raising the damper of a second chimney, which proceeds immediately from the sire-place, and ...

Instances of *put a damper* have been extracted from the corpus by searching for the verb and the noun within 4 words of each other. This proved to be difficult. The search for the word *damper* and collocate *put* within 4 words of each other did not yield any hits for some reason, so that alternate searches were used. The queries “[v]* * damper” and “[v]* * dampers” found verbs followed by the noun within two words between the 1770s and the 1850s. The result is given below in Table 5.

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	WORD(S)	TOTAL	1770	1780	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850
1	was a damper	44					1	3	8	14	18
2	is a damper	37				2	1	2	7	7	18
3	be a damper	21				4			4	9	4
4	closing the damper	16							4	1	11
5	throw a damper	10					1		2	4	3
6	put a damper	5								2	3
7	is much damper	5				1	3				1
8	lowering the damper	5							4		1
9	is the damper	4							2		2
10	putting a damper	2									2
11	cast a damper	2							2		
12	has a damper	1									1
13	have a damper	1									1
14	threw a damper	1									1
		154	0	0	0	7	6	5	33	37	66

Table 5. Damper preceded by verbs in Davies's (2015) Google Books Corpus.

The oldest use of *put* seems to come from the 1840s. However, this search did not capture instances where *damp(er)s* might be preceded by an adjective and a determiner after the verb. Therefore, a separate search was made to retrieve the Adj *damp(er)s* construction. This has found usage dated from 1812:

- (17) Refutation of M. M. De Montgaillard's Calumnies Against British ...
 Sir John Jervis White Jervis – 1812
 ... sea and for other reasons), but because I would at once prove to the enemy, the folly and fallacy of their hopes and endeavours to wrest the sovereignty of the sea from England; and thus, to put a complete damper on all the vain hopes of 226.

4 Summary of the data and discussion

Table 6 summarizes the findings. Based on this data, we can sketch the origin of the idiom along the following lines. *Damp(er)* in the sense ‘sb/sth that depresses the spirits’ emerged (long) before the literal meanings related to FIRE or SOUND. A careful examination of the patterns reveal that *damp(er)* was first used in combination with *be*, or *cast* and *throw*, later *put* (see Table 5). The high frequency of the preposition *on* with *be a damp(er)* might have facilitated the use of *put*. In the course of time, the expression has become fixed in the form of *put a damper on*.

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<i>damper</i>	OED	Hansard	Google Books
1a sb/sth that depresses the spirits	1748	1824	1672 (?)
1b appetite reducer	1804		1773
2a sound reducer	1783		
3 draught regulator	1788	1947	1783
4a vibration reducer	1881	1938	
5 device for moistening	1845		
<i>put + damper</i>	1843	1860	1812

Table 6. First attestations of senses of damper and the idiom in the sources.

The use of *cast* and *throw* evokes images of actions that are different from what people do (or did in the past) with draught regulators or sound reducers in the piano. The corpora show that *damper* ‘draught regulator’ co-occurs with *shut down*, *let down*, *raise* or *close*. *Lower* in Table 5 would also be a good candidate. The ‘sound reducer’ sense is not frequent enough in the corpora studied to determine the verbs, but *put* seems more likely here, though not with the piano, where damper is a fixed part. The average speaker probably did not have knowledge of the piano mechanism, and only piano repairmen might have had the experience of putting the dampers on. This does not necessarily mean that an idiom cannot be derived from the practices of various trades, but all the above makes it unlikely that *put a damper on* was first used literally in the FIRE and SOUND domains. However, metaphorical expressions do not always have plausible literal readings, and the idiom storehouse of English provides a number of literally impossible or highly unlikely scenarios. Yet, *cast/throw/put a damper* has not been found in the meaning ‘extinguish a fire’ or ‘reduce sound’.

The pervasiveness of EMOTIONAL INTENSITY IS HEAT/FIRE suggests not only the ‘draught regulator’ meaning, but also the ‘device for moistening’ sense as a possible origin. This hypothesis is unlikely, given the dates in Table 6. Nevertheless, the formal similarity between *damp* and *damper*, the synonymy of the two verbs both in the ‘depress, discourage’ and ‘moisten’ senses, as well as the use of *damper* ‘draught regulator’ coupled with the conceptual metaphor mentioned above all reinforce a connection between HEAT/FIRE and *put a damper on*. It is not surprising that *dampener* can replace the original noun. What is more surprising is why this variant is restricted to British English, as the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (2002: 88) claims. There should be no substantial difference between the conceptualizations of British and American speakers.

A number of points remain unclear. Why did the verb *put* appear in addition to *cast* and *throw*? Was its use supported by the loose synonymy of these verbs, or the frequent pattern *damper on*? Was *damper* less and less associated with its abstract meaning as time went by, and as the metal dampers in chimneys and furnaces as well as dampers in pianos spread? A psycholinguistic testing of the images of today’s speakers could throw some light how people conceptualized events and actions, but such a testing is beyond the scope of this study.

5 Conclusion

The history of idioms and semantic change involve complex processes closely intertwined with cognition and culture. A detailed study of the origin of idioms would necessitate a combined methodology of linguistics and folklore. We can only indirectly look into the minds of people living in the past centuries. This work has examined the linguistic side of the origin of *put a damper on* and found that the idiom can be ultimately traced back to the FIRE/HEAT domain due to the ‘moisten’ sense of *damp* (v) and the conceptual metaphor (EMOTIONAL) INTENSITY IS HEAT/FIRE. The literal reading of the idiom originally evoked the image of a person throwing (*throw/cast*) some damp substance (*damper*) onto the fire, and this was mapped onto the abstract meaning of ‘having depressing and discouraging effect’. Later on, *damper* developed the ‘draught regulator’ and ‘sound reducer’ senses. The former reinforced the motivating FIRE/HEAT domain, the latter mapped physical sound reduction onto the abstract reduction of intense emotion and business activity. *Dampener* is related to not only the verb *damp*, but also the noun *damp*. In fact, the noun has an archaic sense that is the same as the figurative sense of *damper*. We can see a chronological development from *damp* (n) through *damper* (n) to *dampener* (n) with the same underlying sense of something depressing, discouraging. And this is not discouraging at all.

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Attila Cserép
University of Debrecen
Department of English Linguistics
H-4002 Debrecen
P.O.B. 400
cserep.attila@arts.unideb.hu