

A corpus-based study of the expression *good as gold*

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1. Introduction

Researchers working with New Zealand English are twice-blessed: once on account of a wonderfully comprehensive and perceptive dictionary of New Zealand English in the form of *The Dictionary of New Zealand English* (Orsman 1997) and twice on account of the availability of excellent corpora of New Zealand English. Two corpora easily accessible to researchers are *The Wellington Corpus of Written New Zealand English* (WWC) and *The Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English* (WSC), made available jointly as WWC/WSC (1998). In addition, the Origins of New Zealand English Project archive (ONZE) at the University of Canterbury holds three valuable corpora: the Mobile Unit Corpus (a corpus of English spoken by speakers born in New Zealand between 1850 and about 1900), the Intermediate Corpus (a corpus of English spoken by speakers born in New Zealand 1890-1920s), and the Canterbury Corpus (a corpus based on recordings made each year since 1994) (cf. Lewis 1996; MacLagan and Gordon 1999). Of all these tools, it is fair to say, I think, that the corpora are not quite as well known to the general public or as widely used as the dictionary. This is understandable since the corpora were envisaged more specifically as a research tool than the dictionary was. It is my purpose here to illustrate how the corpora can be utilised as a complement to the dictionary in researching a New Zealand colloquialism.

The particular colloquialism to be explored is *good as gold*. The expression is subtly and interestingly different from uses of the sequence *good as gold* in other varieties of English and lends itself to text-based study as a way of understanding these differences. Orsman (1997: 304) has this to say about use (b) of the adjective *good*:

- (1) As good as gold affirming good will, approval, agreement in reply to a question or request; 'fine, good-oh, she's right'. Contrast the international English sense 'well-behaved' as in OED 9 a (1695). [Four examples follow from NZ literature dated 1947, 1968, 1976, and 1980.]

The expression does not appear in some of the more popular treatments of New Zealand slang (e.g. Orsman and Hurley 1994; McGill 1998), perhaps because it is not felt to be particularly slangy or particularly colourful. Orsman's definition suitably captures the essence of the New Zealand usage and draws attention to its distinctiveness vis-a-vis the usage in other varieties. My intention here is not to take issue with the definition. Rather I wish to show how the corpora can add to our knowledge of this expression, beyond what Orsman's definition says about it.

In Section 2, I document the usage of the expression in the New Zealand corpora (particularly WSC and WWC). In Section 3, I compare the usage of the expression with other colloquialisms heard in New Zealand in order to

better appreciate the significance of its frequency. In Section 4, the results of a search for the expression in the British National Corpus are presented for comparison with the New Zealand results.

2. Occurrences in NZ corpora

A search for the string *good as gold* in the one-million word corpus WSC resulted in just four hits, with two of these occurrences from the same person in one conversation. I provide in (2)-(4) the relevant parts of the conversations in which the phrase occurred, together with the background information to the conversation and the coding of each turn as found in the corpus and its accompanying documentation.

(2) WSC#DGZ090 Buying Bus ticket 3 mins 8/11/94

SB is a Pakeha male aged 35-39, Company Director (#1549)

CC is a Pakeha female aged 16-19 P/T Cafe Worker (#1186)

- < 0210:CC> right do you want any i d with that
 < 0215:SB> no you'll be all right
 < 0220:CC> oh okay <O>laughs</O>
 < 0225:SB> okay thank <[1]<[1>you <unclear>word</unclear>
 <?>you got your phone number on the back</?></[1>
 good <[2><[2>as gold</[2>
 < 0230:CC> <[1>right that's great thank you very much</[1></[1>
 < 0235:CC> <[2>yep</[2></[2> okay thanks very much and
 <[><[>thanks for doing</[> this too <latch>
 < 0240:SB> <[>bye</[></[>
 < 0245:SB> good as gold
 < 0250:SB> <with silly voice>don't lose your ticket
 <[><[>now</with silly voice></[>
 < 0255:CC> <[>no</[></[> i won't
 < 0260:SB> so you're all set <&>tape cuts out</&> <&>7:26</&>
 <&>end of sample</&>

(3) WSC#DPF049 Telephone conversation, Mother calls Son 19/02/93

BD is a Pakeha male aged 20-24 (#820)

AA is a Pakeha female aged 50-54, P/T Primary Teacher (#819)

- <0460:AA> this is being taped <.>actually</.> you're being taped
 for linguistic research
 <0465:BD> oh right
 <0470:AA> yes
 <0475:BD> kaba kaba <drawls>monko</drawls>
 <0480:AA> <O>laughs</O> i'm sure you're impressed

- <0485:AA> okay all right
 <0490:BD> yeah cheers
 <0495:AA> yeah you gotta sign a form to say it can be used for
 evidence against you
 <0500:BD> oh yeah
 <0505:AA> mm
 <0510:BD> good as gold
 <0515:AA> cheers
 <0520:BD> later
 <0525:AA> bye bye <&>13:53</&>

(4) WSC#DGZ095 Vet Consultation 26/10/94

SV is a Pakeha female aged 30-34, Veterinary Surgeon (#1550)

CC is a Pakeha female aged 25-29 (#1553)

- <0060:CC> <[>i looked</[></[> at her in the light the other day
 and of course the light <&>17:00</&> was reflecting off
 the back of the <[1><[1> <unclear>word</unclear>
 </[1> <with silly voice><?>and i just thought</?> oh
 she looks really vacant </with silly voice> and i thought
 <[2><[2> well she's always</[2> looks pretty vacant
 but <[3><[3><O> laughs</O></[3>
 <0065:SV> <[1>oh okay</[1></[1>
 <0070:SV> <[2>yeah i know</[2></[2>
 <0075:SV> <[3>yeah i know</[3></[3> but she's been <.>h</.>
 happy been in herself
 <0080:CC> yeah <[><[>good</[> good as gold
 <0085:SV> <[>good</[></[>
 <0090:SV> <[><[>okay</[></[>

A number of observations can be made about these instances: (i) The phrase occurs as a free-standing expression, rather than as an adjectival or adverbial expression integrated into clause structure. (ii) The phrase is phatic in function rather than informational, like *good* or *okay*, affirming a satisfactory state of affairs, as described in Orsman (1997). (iii) The expression, as used in (2) and (3), occurs as part of the concluding turns of the conversation, arguably signalling the approaching termination. In this respect, too, it functions like *good* and *okay* and indeed occurs alongside these words in (4).

In the one-million corpus of written New Zealand English WWC, three instances were found, with two instances occurring together as part of the same utterance. The relevant passages are shown in (5) and (6).

(5) Text F03

At the moment, the other third is mainly anti-Australian jokes. He's been doing them for a couple of years now. And they still do the trick? "Good as gold, good as gold." He has an emergency joke he uses to check out particularly enigmatic audiences. "It's very much a weathervane; I tell it about fourth or fifth story in."

[Wichtel, Diana. 1986. Now you're talking. NZ Listener 20/9/86, pp. 27-29.]

(6) Text K67

Silence again in front. But there was a slight noise behind them. Red whipped round, his rifle ready.

"It's the boss," he said.

"How'd you get on?" came a voice from above.

"Got six, we reckon, sir. The rest bolted."

"That's the stuff. The other blokes got a few as well, not sure how many. Are you all right?"

"Good as gold, thanks. Anyone hit?"

"Mac got a graze on the arm. Nothing much. They seem rotten shots."

"That's what we thought."

[Davin, Dan. 1986. The Salamander and the Fire. Auckland: Oxford University Press. Pp. 5-10]

Observe that the expression occurs only as part of dialogue in WWC. In these instances, too, the expression is free-standing. However, the function in both instances is more adjectival/adverbial than was the case in WSC. In (5), the expression is used to describe how successful the jokes are and in (6) it is used in answer to a direct question about how the speaker is. Note also the occurrence with *thanks* in (6).

The transcripts from the Mobile Unit Corpus and the Canterbury Corpus were also examined.¹ One should note that currently only ten minutes worth of each recording in the Canterbury Corpus has been transcribed, so a search was made using these ten minute excerpts only. The transcripts from the Mobile Unit Corpus were searched exhaustively and no instances of the phrase *good as gold* occurred in the language of the interviewees. However, the expression is used once by an interviewer and occurs as part of a larger construction *and still as good as gold*. The expression was used by an interviewer talking about a house that had been built years ago and was still standing some years later. Two instances of *good as gold* were found in the Canterbury Corpus and again both instances are distinct from the uses found in the Wellington corpora. The relevant passages are given below in (7) and (8).

(7) Speaker "15", 1994

you could always t in Bali you could always tell . they had a um - the note over there was equivalent to about a . oh a shilling or something . and the they were just absolutely filthy dirty little wee things like postage stamps because they're handling them a thousand times a day . but the big notes and that y'know they they were j as good as gold but the little notes . amazing that's all the that's all the Balinese and that see over there just little wee . hopeless . it equivalent to couple of those I spouse . coupla pennies . summin' . shocking

(8) Speaker "23", 1994

oh I said I'm sorry but I trespassed the other night I said Kobus took off . and Norman her husband had seen me and he said oh there's some girl with a white dog across our place (laughing) (laughing) some girl (laughing)

some girl . so that was that story - I don't know what upset him so I put him in the boot of my car after that and of course he just stayed there good as gold

yep - what sort of dog is he golden what . ones a golden labrador and ones a golden retriever which ones he - golden retriever I suppose . I can never remember which ones which

The form *as good as gold* occurs in (7), similar to the use by the interviewer in the Mobile Unit Corpus. This sequence never turns up in the WSC or WWC, only *good as gold*. In the Mobile Unit Corpus occurrence and the Canterbury Corpus occurrences in (7) and (8), the expression is integrated into the clause structure in an adjectival/adverbial manner, rather than being a free-standing phrase. Furthermore, these uses refer to the qualities of an entity (house, bank notes, dog) rather than being comments on a state of affairs. All these properties set them apart from the uses of *good as gold* in WSC and, to a lesser extent, WWC.

3. Comparison with other colloquialisms in NZ corpora

It is one thing to understand the meaning of an expression. It is another matter to know its frequency of occurrence. To appreciate the relative frequency of *good as gold*, compared with some other colloquialisms, a number of expressions were searched in the Wellington corpora. These expressions and the results are shown in (9).

		WSC	WWC
A	<i>bloody hell</i>	8	3
	<i>bloody thing</i>	5	3
	<i>bloody good</i>	5	2
	<i>bloody well</i>	5	1
	<i>bloody hard</i>	5	0
	<i>damn good</i>	5	1

¹ I thank Elizabeth Gordon for allowing me access to the ONZE archive. I thank Stacey Nicholas, Project Manager, ONZE, for her kind assistance in searching the corpora and for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

	<i>absolutely brilliant</i>	5	0
	<i>not brilliant</i>	3	0
	<i>really brilliant</i>	2	0
B	<i>yeah choice</i>	3	0
	<i>was choice</i>	2	0
	<i>it's choice</i>	1	0
	<i>really choice</i>	1	0
	<i>so choice</i>	1	0

I have divided the expressions into two groups. Group A contains the traditional intensifiers *bloody/damn*; Group B contains the more recently introduced descriptives *brilliant/choice*. Not surprisingly, all these expressions occur more in the spoken corpus than in the written corpus. In addition, though, the two groups show different patterns of occurrences, with the Group B expressions not occurring at all in the spoken corpus. Presumably, this reflects the time lag between innovation in the spoken language and its appearance in the written language.

We can see from the table that the expression *good as gold* patterns just like a Group A expression, rather than a Group B expression, in terms of frequency of occurrence. That is, it appears with about the same frequency as *bloody thing*, *bloody good* etc., and occurs, like these expressions, a little less in written corpora than in spoken corpora (4 in WSC and 3 in WWC). One might well suspect that this would be the case, but it is only by carrying out the necessary searches that one can translate hunches into the kinds of facts we require in linguistics. The common tools of corpus linguistics enable the researcher to make these comparisons of frequency with relative ease.

4. Occurrences in BNC

A corpus approach invites a comparison with other corpora of English. The most obvious corpus to compare with the New Zealand corpora would be the one-million word Australian Corpus of English, ACE, since this corpus was compiled in a way which is directly comparable to WWC. However, there are no instances of the expression at all in this corpus. So, attention was turned to other corpora.

A search of the (spoken and written) 100-million word British National Corpus (BNC) produced 18 instances of *good as gold*, each instance of which was examined for form and use. The form of the expression in the BNC varies between *as good as gold* (4) and *good as gold* (14) and may appear in either prose or dialogue. The expression functions as an adverbial or adjectival phrase, as opposed to being an independent, free-standing phrase. Consistent with this tighter integration into clause structure, the phrase in the BNC describes a person or entity, as opposed to having the phatic function observed in WSC. The examples below, taken from the BNC, are typical of this use.

(10)a. <hit text= "A68" n= "2128">

If Bell is ruled out as too old and Ramsey as too new, who else has stature? George Chase of Ripon, good as gold and wise as Solomon, but even shyder than Ramsey and without his intellectual bite?

[Chadwick, Owen. 1991. Michael Ramsey: A Life. Oxford: Oxford University Press.]

b. <hit text= "EA5" n= "1874">

"My ole lady threatened ter chuck me out if I didn't look fer a job," he said suddenly. "She's good as gold is my ole mum, but now me farvver's gone on short-time she's feelin' the pinch."

[Bowling, Harry. 1992. The Girl from Cotton Lane. London: Headline Book Publishing. Pp. 1-118.]

c. <hit text= "G22" n= "587">

Dennis and his friend Tommy want to stop this by setting up a National Centre where doctors and medical scientists can undertake research to prevent premature birth. Dennis will try very hard to help Tommy run the campaign because he thinks it's an excellent idea. All you have to do is be as good as gold for a week. There will be special "Good As Gold Awards" for the most original No-Menacing ideas and activities, which means you could win a unique award.

[1991. Brownie. London: Girl Guides Association.]

d. <hit text= "H94" n= "3926">

"I'm obsessed by you," he muttered. He knelt beside her and clasped her hands passionately. "You're a challenge. I've never met anyone like you before. You're totally unselfish. You care for others more than yourself." He smiled to himself. "You're as pure and as good as gold. You even glow like it. Nothing seems to spoil you. You're constant."

[Wood, Sara. 1993. Mask of Deception. Richmond, Surrey: Mills & Boon.]

Consider the reference to George Chase in (10a), where he is being compared with Michael Ramsey for an ecclesiastical position. Chase is described *as good as gold and wise as Solomon*. It is Chase's personal qualities of goodness and wisdom which are being profiled, not the general state of affairs involving Chase. Or consider the reference to the *Good as Gold Awards* in (10c), a passage from the Girl Guides Association publication, *Brownie*. The passage makes it clear that the intention behind the awards is to recognise exemplary behaviour on the part of an individual. The awards are not given on account of any generally satisfactory state of affairs. An examination of the remaining examples in (10) reveals a similar kind of semantic function for the *(as) good as gold* phrase. The BNC use contrasts most vividly with the WSC use, as summarised in (11).

(11)	WSC use of <i>good as gold</i>	BNC use of <i>good as gold</i>
i.	4 occurrences per million words	1-2 occurrences per million words
ii.	the form is always just <i>good as gold</i>	the form is <i>(as) good as gold</i>
iii.	the expression is free-standing	the form is usually integrated into clause structure as an adjectival/adverbial phrase
iv.	the expression refers to a satisfactory state of affairs	the expression refers to the quality of an individual or entity

- | | | |
|------|---|--|
| v. | the expression occurs only in dialogue | the expression occurs in dialogue or prose |
| vi. | the expression tends to occur with <i>good, okay, or thanks</i> | — |
| vii. | the expression tends to occur at the conclusion of a conversation | — |

The occasional instances of *good as gold* which one encounters in writing originating from outside New Zealand also conform to the BNC pattern rather than the WSC pattern. A recent issue of *Time* (March 5, 2001, No. 9), published in New Zealand, illustrates this. In an essay by Roger Rosenblatt (p. 64) on why ex-President Clinton feels at home in Harlem, New York, we find *...and there's old Bill — good as gold, one day a week*. The larger context establishes Clinton's personal qualities as the topic of this part of the essay and the phrase *good as gold* refers here to Clinton's exemplary kind of behaviour (one day a week).

5. Conclusion

A corpus-based approach to the study of lexicography complements the insights contained in dictionaries, as illustrated in this study of the one expression *good as gold*. It complements the dictionary information in the following ways:

(i) We have access to details on the backgrounds of the speakers, the contexts of the recording, and the exact time of the recording for the spoken corpora. While the WSC provides background information on the speakers of the sort relevant to sociolinguistic analysis, the occurrences of *good as gold* in this corpus are too few for us to draw solid conclusions about the speakers and the contexts.

(ii) We have access to actual spoken English, not just remembered or fictionalised dialogue. The spoken corpora, for example, revealed the use of *good as gold* as part of the conclusion of a conversation, something not evident from the dictionary entry.

(iii) We are able to make comparisons with other colloquialisms in terms of frequency of occurrence.

(iv) We are able to make comparisons with usage and frequency of the expression in other varieties of English. A comparison with the BNC use of (*as*) *good as gold* is especially interesting in this regard since it is deceptively similar in form and use to WSC *good as gold*. (Note, though, that Orsman (1997) draws attention to this distinction.)

(v) *Good as gold*, as found in the WSC, is the distinctively New Zealand use and is the only use found in that corpus. The BNC use of (*as*) *good as gold* is also found in New Zealand: it occurs in the Mobile Unit Corpus (the interviewer, not the interviewee) and the Canterbury Corpus. The WWC use is partly like the BNC use (descriptive, rather than just phatic) and partly like the WSC use (free-standing, *good as gold* rather than *as good as gold*, occurrence with *thanks*). The study of the corpora has revealed, therefore, not just a difference between New Zealand and British ('international') usage, but differences between the corpora within New Zealand as well.

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