

The syntax of idioms. A macro-variational point of view (WG1)

1 Intro/outline Idioms are expressions with a non-compositional interpretation: their meaning cannot be derived from (the combination of) the literal meanings of their parts. A canonical example is *kick the bucket* ('to die'), the meaning of which is non-transparent, as it has nothing to do with either kicking or buckets. The existence of such expressions within natural language gives rise to many questions that have puzzled linguists for years (cf. Fraser 1970; Chomsky 1980; Machonis 1985; Schenk 1994; Grégoire 2009; among others). In this poster, we discuss two of these questions (specifically, their internal (§3) and their external (§4) syntax) from a macro-variational point of view. Idioms in dialectal Dutch (§2) and English form the basis for our study.

2 Data and methodology Existing discussion of idioms typically focuses on English, and within that language on a relatively small set of 'poster children' (cf. Chomsky 1981; Marantz 1984; Svenonius 2005; a.o.). Moreover, an extensive portion of the claims in the literature seems to be based on informal/personal judgments. It is hard to find reliable syntactic generalizations in such a small and relatively unvaried data set. Fortunately, recent work has started to present systematized and extensive corpus studies (cf. Horvath & Siloni 2009, 2015; Fellbaum 2015; a.o.) as a means of demonstrating the syntactic properties of idioms.

To our knowledge, no systematic study and detailed comparison has been reported on the question whether there is cross-linguistic variation in the syntax of idioms. Moreover, little consideration has been given in the literature to the syntactic properties of idioms in dialects of one and the same language. To fill these gaps, we collect data on idioms in Dutch dialects from two sources. The first is a literature study of 13 dialect dictionaries, which differ in their syntactic properties so that differences in the syntax of their idioms may be expected. Idiom entries from the dictionaries are collected and annotated according to their syntactic categories, e.g. argument structure, definiteness, tense, modality, aspect, and voice. The second source is formal interviews with 6 native speakers from each of the 13 dialect regions (both in Flanders and the Netherlands) that were studied. These are aimed at collecting information (by means of judgement tasks) on the extent to which idioms are dependent on functional categories such as aspect, voice, or determiners (see §3 and §4 for further information). In addition, further tests are included to determine the flexibility of an idiom (i.e. passivization, topicalization, modification, etc.). The data from the two sources are then collected in a searchable database, which is used to inform the theoretical side of the research.

3 The internal syntax of idioms: What triggers idiomaticity? The internal morphosyntax of idioms appears to be no different from that of non-idiomatic expressions, in the sense that both types are built by the same abstract mechanisms (e.g. Fellbaum 1993, Nunberg et al. 1994, Ifill 2002, Svenonius 2005). What, then, gives rise to an idiomatic interpretation of an expression? Idioms are commonly divided over two types (e.g. Nunberg et al. 1994): idiomatically combining expressions (ICEs) are relatively compositional in the sense that elements of the literal expression can be mapped onto elements of the figurative meaning, while Idiomatic Phrases (IdPs) map to their figurative meaning as a whole. We pursue the idea that in IdPs, the non-canonical use of the definite determiner (i.e. the occurrence of a definite determiner where an indefinite one or a possessive pronoun is expected according to the regular rules of the language) is a trigger for idiomaticity. That is, definite determiners prototypically signal the presence of a uniquely identifiable referent in the discourse, but in IdPs they also show up where there is no such referent (e.g. Fellbaum 1993, Grégoire 2009). In (1), the nominal part of the idiom (*the slip*) does not point to a referent in the discourse. Furthermore, if we replace the definite determiner by an indefinite one as in (2), the idiomatic interpretation is lost.

- (1) Mary gave her boyfriend the slip. = Mary escaped her boyfriend.
(2) Mary gave her boyfriend a slip. ≠ Mary escaped her boyfriend.

Our findings from dialectal Dutch, exemplified by (3), confirm the prediction that replacing a definite determiner in an IdP by an indefinite one (or by a possessive pronoun) always results in the loss of idiomaticity:

- (3) a. *Els heeft vandaag de bokkenpruik op.* = *Els is irritable today.* [Utrecht Dutch]
 Els has today the buck's wig on
 b. # *Els heeft vandaag een (a) / haar (her) bokkenpruik op.* ≠ *Els is irritable today.*

In ICEs, like *spill the beans* where the DP refers to an identifiable secret, the article is used exactly like in non-idiomatic phrases: an indefinite article for a new referent, a definite article for a known referent.

4 The external syntax of idioms: Is there a size-limitation? It has long been noted (e.g. Chomsky 1980, 1981; Marantz 1984; Svenonius 2005) that verbal idioms are typically comprised of the verbal predicate and its internal arguments: for instance, there are many idioms comprised of the verb and a DP-theme (*bite the dust*), or a PP-goal (*come to the point*). Kitagawa (1986), McGinnis (2002) and Svenonius (2005) claim that although verbal idioms can co-occur with functional material such as aspect, tense, or voice (e.g. *he kicked the bucket* in the past tense or *they are bringing down the house* with progressive aspect), the idiomatic interpretation is never dependent on the presence of these items. There thus seems to be a strict size limit to verbal idioms: a verb forms an idiom with its arguments and nothing more. However, this common assumption is in fact wrong, since certain verbal idioms in English are reliant on additional functional material. Some idioms, for instance, depend on progressive aspect (Harwood 2015):

- (4) a. *Bob is pushing up daisies.* = *Bob is dead.* b. *Bob pushes/pushed up daisies.* ≠ *Bob is dead.*

However, it has been reported that there are no verbal idioms in English that are genuinely dependent on perfect aspect or tense. Assuming a functional hierarchy of the sort depicted in (5) (cf. Tenny 1987; Cinque 1999), this would imply that progressive aspect constitutes the upper boundary for traditional verbal idioms.

- (5) Tense > Modality > PerfectAspect > ProgressiveAspect > Voice > Verb

Evidence from Dutch shows that the upper boundary of the traditional verbal idiomatic domain is in fact subject to cross-linguistic variation. Dutch, as exemplified by the dialect of Aalst in (6), differs from English, in that, in addition to exhibiting idioms that are reliant on progressive aspect, it also has idioms that are dependent on perfect aspect:

- (6) a. *Z'heit teigen den hoek van een ronne tafel geloeipen.*
 she-has against the corner of a round table run
 'She is pregnant and she doesn't know who the father is.'
 b. # *Ze liep teigen den hoek van een ronne tafel.*
 she ran against the corner of a round table ≠ 'she is pregnant' [Aalst Dutch]

However, there appear to be no idioms in Dutch or its dialects that are dependent on particular tense forms. Thus it can be concluded that, in varieties of Dutch, the perfect layer constitutes the upper boundary for verbal idioms. The implications of our findings are therefore (i) that verbal idioms are larger than simply the verb and its arguments as standardly assumed, and (ii) that the size of verbal idioms is subject to cross-linguistic variation.

5 Conclusion Our research focuses on the systematic study of the syntax of idioms in Dutch and its dialects, and compares them to their more well-known English counterparts. Regarding the internal syntax of idioms, our data show that the definite determiner functions as a trigger for idiomaticity cross-linguistically. On the other hand, macro-variation in the external syntax of idioms points out that the upper boundary for verbal idioms is not absolute cross-linguistically. When taken together, these data, and the findings drawn from them, demonstrate that reasonable conclusions about the syntax of idioms cannot be drawn from pure informal judgments based on a limited set of poster-children. Rather, only through thorough systematic study of the data can any reliable conclusions be drawn.

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