



**The Syntax of Idioms**

(an NWO/FWO-funded project)

**RQ1:** What is the internal syntax of idioms? What characterizes their internal organization and makeup?

**RQ2:** What is the external syntax of idioms? How does material contained within the idiom interact with material outside the expression?

**Contribution to existing literature**

- Focus on functional projections
- Broad variety of verbal idioms rather than English poster children
- Systematic study of syntactic flexibility of idioms rather than single-speaker claims

**Methodology**

- Standard Dutch + 13 Dutch dialects (cross-dialectal differences in syntax may result in cross-dialectal differences in idioms)
- Analyzing idioms from available dialect dictionaries
- Acquiring grammaticality judgments on syntactic manipulations of idioms, so as to systematically test syntactic flexibility



**Data presentation**

- Acquired data are made available online in a database: <http://languageink.let.uu.nl/idioms>
- The database consists of two parts: (i) idioms collected from dialect dictionaries + their syntactic properties (ii) selected idioms in the 14 varieties + judgments on their syntactic flexibility (min. 6 speakers per dialect)
- The database allows for user-friendly presentation of gathered data and facilitates searches

**Two types of (verbal) idioms**

(cf. Wasow et al. 1984, Nunberg et al. 1994, a.o.)

**Idiomatically Combining Expressions (ICEs)**

- Individual elements of the literal expression can be mapped onto individual elements of the figurative meaning
- The DP actually has a referent, the noun is used metaphorically and collocates with a particular verb
- Syntactically flexible
- The use of determiners is predictable, can be either definite or indefinite, depending on the referential properties (i) definite = referent is pre-established in the discourse, inferable, unique ... e.g. *spill the beans* (ii) indefinite = introduces a new referent to the discourse, e.g. *have a bone to pick*

**Idiomatic Phrases (IdPs)**

- The expression as a whole is mapped to the figurative meaning
- There is no referent available in the discourse
- Syntactically inflexible
- The use of a definite determiner is unexpected and triggers an idiomatic interpretation; the idiomatic reading disappears when the definite determiner is replaced by an indefinite one, e.g. *#John kicked a bucket*

**Referentiality & flexibility: Some Dutch data**

**1 – Idiomatically Combining Expression from Aalst**  
*ne metten schieten* ‘to make a mistake’ (lit. ‘to shoot a young calf’)

- The ICE is syntactically flexible:
- *Ieder jaar op da congrès schiet Piet ne metten, mor deis jaar schoet Jan de metten.* ‘Every year at that conference Piet makes a mistake, but this year Jan made a mistake.’
  - *A schiet ne gralèke metten.* ‘He makes a huge mistake.’

→ Referent available (viz. ‘mistake’), allows for topicalization and modification, idiomatic interpretation retained

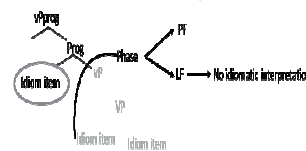
**2 – Idiomatic Phrase from Deventer**  
*de Battemse krante lêze* ‘to nap’ (lit. ‘to read the newspaper from Bathmen’)

- The IdP is inflexible:
- *#Ja, de Battemse krante leest hij elke dag!* (‘Yes, the newspaper from Bathmen he reads every day!’)
  - *#Hij las de hele Battemse krante.* (‘He read the entire newspaper from Bathmen.’)

→ No referent available, idiomatic interpretation lost after topicalization and modification

**Syntactic differences (RQ1)**

- A definite determiner when there is no referent (i.e. in IdPs) signals an idiomatic reading (cf. Fellbaum 1993)
- Idiomatic expressions are built by the same abstract mechanisms, and so appear syntactically identical to their literally interpreted counterparts (Fellbaum 1993, Nunberg et al. 1994, Ifill 2002, Svenonius 2005, a.o.)
- However, we claim there to actually be a subtle structural difference in IdPs: the determiner makes no semantic contribution as there is no definiteness effect. We take it that the determiner does not project a DP in the syntactic structure
- It is impossible for idioms to stretch across phase boundaries (cf. Svenonius 2005, Harwood 2013, 2015):



- DPs have also been suggested to constitute a phase (Chomsky 2005), thus posing a problem for the single-phase restriction above
- Our approach where the determiner phrase in IdPs does not project voids this problem

**The size of idioms (RQ2)**

- Idioms are traditionally restricted to the clause-internal phase, i.e. the verbal predicate and its internal arguments (cf. Chomsky 1980, Svenonius 2005, a.o.)



- Some English idioms, however, are dependent on additional material: (a) *Bob is pushing up daisies.* (b) *#Bob pushed up daisies.*
- Dutch idioms may also be larger than vP, and dependent on progressive aspect (as English above) or even perfect aspect or modality (i.e. larger than English). Example with perfect aspect from Aalst: (a) *den heif opgeiten emmen* ‘to be the scapegoat’ (lit. ‘to have eaten the sourdough’) (b) *#A at den heif op.* (‘He ate the sourdough.’)
- Theoretical implication: phase size may vary cross-linguistically