The Syntax of Idioms (WG1)
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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://language-link.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 schieter ‘to make a mistake’
(lit. ‘to shoot a young calf’)
The ICE is syntactically flexible:
  • Ieder joor op da congres schiet Piet ne metten, mor deis joor schoet Jan de metten. ‘Every year at that conference Piet makes a mistake, but this year Jan made a mistake.’
  • A schiet Piet, ‘He makes a huge mistake.’
- Referent available (viz. ‘mistake’), allows for topicalization and modification, idiomatic interpretation retained

2 – Idiom Phrase from Deventer de Battemse krante lèze ‘to nap’
(lit. ‘to read the newspaper from Battem’) The IdP is inflexible:
  • #Ja, de Battemse krante leez hij elke dag! ‘(Yes, the newspaper from Battem he reads every day!’)
  • #Hij las de hele Battemse krante. ‘(He read the entire newspaper from Battem.’)
- 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):
  • 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 hef opgeen emmen ‘to be the scapegoat’
  (lit. ‘to have eaten the sourdough’)
  (b) #At den hef op. (‘He ate the sourdough’)
- Theoretical implication: phase size may vary cross-linguistically

References: