

# The Syntax of Idioms (WG1)

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The expression as a

whole is mapped to

the figurative

· There is no referent

available in the

discourse

Syntactically

determiner is

unexpected and

The use of a definite

triggers an idiomatic

disappears when the

definite determiner

is replaced by an

#John kicked a

bucket

indefinite one, e.g.

interpretation; the

idiomatic reading

inflexible

meaning

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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://languagelink.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 userfriendly 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 Idiomatic Phrases Expressions (ICEs) (IdPs)

- 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

### 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:

leder 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 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 lèze '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

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