

# **Not a penny: Triggers of idiomatic expressions**

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# Triggers of idioms

- Elements or features in a semi-flexible group of words which provoke the idiomatic reading
- In other words: restrictions which must be satisfied to trigger an idiomatic reading
- Focus on two elements:
  - a. Negation
  - b. Dative genitives or accusatives (clitic pronouns in Greek)

# Triggers of idioms

## Negation

- EN: I don't have a penny

## Reflexive + prepositional object

- SPA: Me                      parto de      risa  
REFL.PRO.1.SG break PREP laughter  
I break myself from laughter  
“I'm cracking up”

# Negation (I)

- If you take out the negation, the meaning becomes compositional

SPA: No tener pelos en la lengua

ITA: Non avere peli sulla lingua

NEG have hair(s) on the tongue

“Not to be afraid of saying what you think”

# Negation (II)

- Negation also alters the polarity or the meaning of the expression → Idioms with negation become positive
- SPA: no ver la hora
- IT: non vedere l'ora
- GR: δεν βλέπω την ώρα  
NEG see the hour  
“to look forward”

# Negation (III)

- FR: ne rien faire de ses dix doigts  
NEG nothing do of one's ten fingers  
“to be lazy”
- FR: ne pas être sorti de l'auberge  
NEG not be out of the inn  
“to face a complicated problem”

# Negation (IV)

- GR: (δεν) πατάω γερά στα πόδια μου  
(not) step.1.SG firmly on feet my  
I'm not stepping firmly on my feet  
“I am (not) sure about sth”

# Reflexive pronouns (I)

- Some idiomatic expressions need a reflexive pronoun as dative genitive or accusative
- Idiom disappears if you take out the reflexive pronoun or replace it with a free genitive



# Reflexive pronouns (II)

GR: **Τον** κοβει η λορδα

3SG.ACC cuts the hunger

The hunger cuts him “He is hungry”

\*Η λορδα κοβει τον Κωστα

\*The hunger cuts the Kosta.ACC

\*“Kostas is hungry”

ITA: **rendersi**                      **conto**  
give back.REFL account

“To realize”

**rendere**      **conto (a qualcuno)**

give back      account (to someone)      “to be accountable”

SPA: **darse**                      **cuenta**  
give.REFL account

“to realize”

**dar cuenta (a alguien)**

give account (to someone) “to be accountable”

# Exceptions

Τον ρίχνει το κρασί

3SG.ACC throws the wine

“Wine dampens him”

Το κρασί ρίχνει τον Κώστα

The wine throws the Kosta.ACC

“Wine dampens Kosta’s mood”

# How to treat these idioms?

- Identify and encode rules and restrictions that determine idiomatic meaning
- Generate a list of idioms, look for (ir)regularities

# Encoding restrictions in LFG

*Holde øye med*

Keep eye.SG.INDEF with

“keep an eye on”

@(VPIDIOM-INDEF OBJ-POBJ holde holde øye med)

(^ OBJ NUM)=c sg };

When *holde* (keep) is main verb, there is an idiomatic reading if:

*Øye* (eye) is indef Object and sg

*Med* (with) is the preposition in Pobj

# Some preliminary findings

- The negative idioms are less fixed, more different which may require manual tagging
- The reflexive pronouns idioms appear to have more restrictions: reflexive verb (or verbs that accept clitics), prepositional complement, etc.