

Idiom Licensing in Non-restrictive Relative Clauses

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Relevant for Working Group 1 (and 2)

Since Vergnaud (1974), it has been a commonplace that, in English, syntactically flexible idioms (SFIs) like *pull strings* can be split up by restrictive relative clauses (RRCs) but not by non-restrictive relative clauses (NRCs), compare (1a) and (1b).

- (1) a. The strings that Kim pulled for me got me this job. [RRC]
b. * (The) strings, which Kim pulled for me (by the way), got me this job. [NRC]

No detailed formal explanation is usually given, but the assumptions are (i) that the parts of SFIs (here *pull* and *strings*) have to be adjacent at some level of the syntactic (!) derivation and (ii) that RRCs and NRCs differ with regard to their syntactic integration: Whereas RRCs are generally considered to be syntactically integrated, so that the adjacency requirement of SFIs can be met at some level of the derivation, NRCs are often analyzed as syntactically more or less independent, so that the adjacency requirement of SFIs cannot be met (e.g. Fabb 1990 or Espinal 1991).

On our poster, we will combine an account of SFIs that argues against assumption (i) and is much better suited for discourse-oriented phenomena than syntactically oriented approaches, namely Bargmann (2014)'s semantic representation (SR) account, and an analysis of NRCs that argues against assumption (ii), namely Arnold (2007). Both analyses are discourse-oriented and take their respective subject matter to be completely normal syntactically. Arnold (2007) analyzes NRCs as syntactically fully integrated units that are semantically equivalent to main clauses (MCs) with an anaphoric pronoun. Bargmann (2014) analyzes SFIs as syntactically regular and semantically compositional.

We will assume a DRT-like architecture in which a semantic representation of the preceding discourse is available, but the semantic representation of the current sentence is still set apart from it. In the latest version of Bargmann's SR account, the SFI *pull strings* consists of the following two lexical entries:¹

1. Idiomatic *pull*: SYN = [_V pull]. SEM = $pull_{id}'$. Constraint: Idiomatic *pull* is licensed in a sentence entering the discourse iff, after resolving all anaphoric relations, the variable in the second argument position of *pull*'s SEM-value $pull_{id}'$ is predicated over by idiomatic *strings*' SEM-value $strings_{id}'$ in the semantic representation of that sentence.
2. Idiomatic *strings*: SYN = [_N strings]. SEM = $strings_{id}'$. Constraint: Idiomatic *strings* is licensed in a sentence entering the discourse iff (i) *strings*' SEM-value $strings_{id}'$ predicates over the variable in the second argument position of idiomatic *pull*'s SEM-value $pull_{id}'$ in the semantic representation of that sentence, or (ii) $strings_{id}'$ is already present and salient in the discourse.

¹That the second word-level lexical entry of the idiom *pull strings* consists of the idiomatic plural noun *strings* is a simplification. It excludes all those cases in which the idiomatic noun occurs in its singular form, as for instance in *pull a string or two* or *pull string after string*, see Bargmann (2015) for details.

Neither of these two lexical entries refers to the syntax (SYN) of the other, and they combine according to standard syntactic rules. However, both entries contain a specific constraint on the semantic representation (SEM) of the sentence containing them. These constraints ensure that when one part of the idiom is present in a well-formed discourse, then so is the other.

As regards NRCs, Arnold (2007) argues that they are syntactically integrated in just the same way as RRCs. He also assumes that NRCs are semantically independent from their host clause and that the relative pronouns that introduce them behave just like normal anaphoric pronouns. In combination, these analyses predict (1b) to be as bad as (2) and for the same reason.

(2) * (The) strings got me this job. Kim pulled them for me (by the way).

In both (1b) and (2), there is an occurrence of idiomatic *strings* and an occurrence of idiomatic *pull*. This means that both the constraint in 2. (henceforth ‘constraint 2’) and the constraint in 1. (henceforth ‘constraint 1’) apply. In (1b), constraint 2 has to be met when the host clause enters the discourse, in (2) when the first of the two MCs does. In both cases, the constraint is violated, because there is no *pull_{id}’* in the semantic representation of these sentences. Ergo, the occurrences of idiomatic *strings* are not licensed, which causes the occurrences of idiomatic *pull* to be unlicensed as well, as the relative pronoun *which* and the anaphoric pronoun *them* have no meaningful antecedent.

Now consider the sentences in (3).

- (3) a. Kim pulled some strings for me, which no one else could have pulled (by the way).
b. Kim pulled some strings for me. No one else could have pulled them (by the way).

In (3a), we have an MC including a canonical occurrence of *pull strings* followed by an NRC including idiomatic *pull* but not idiomatic *strings*. In the MC, both constraint 1 and constraint 2 apply. In the subsequent NRC, it is only constraint 1. In the MC, the constraints are fulfilled directly. In the NRC, constraint 1 is fulfilled through the relative pronoun *which*, which is interpreted as *strings_{id}’* since—via co-indexation with its antecedent—it is associated with the same discourse variable.

(3b), which is the two-independent-clauses version of (3a), functions in a parallel fashion.

On our poster, we will provide formal representations of the prose in this abstract.

References

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