Syntactic Flexibility of Non-decomposable Idioms

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Abstract   Nunberg et al. (1994) observe that English non-decomposable idioms show very little syntactic flexibility, whereas their German counterparts are significantly more flexible. In addition to verb placement and constituent fronting in German main clauses, we will look at the contrast between English and German non-decomposable idioms in terms of passivization and other syntactic processes. We hope that the interaction with other PARSEME members will lead to evidence for the syntactic flexibility of non-decomposable idioms coming from languages other than German. We will discuss the implications of these data for the linguistic representation of idioms.

Syntactic and Semantic Flexibility   Nunberg et al. (1994) (NWS, p. 531) state programmatically: "We predict that the syntactic flexibility of a particular idiom will ultimately be explained in terms of the compatibility of its semantics with the semantics and pragmatics of various constructions." In their discussion of primarily English MWEs, they argue that those MWEs whose parts can be attributed a semantic contribution (decomposable idioms like *spill the beans*) show a considerable degree of syntactic flexibility, whereas those that have a monolithic semantics (non-decomposable idioms like *kick the bucket*) are also syntactically monolithic. This classification relies on testing (via determiner variation, internal modification, and pronominalization) whether idiom parts have an independent meaning contribution.

NWS suggest an analysis that treats decomposable MWEs as consisting of individual parts that have an idiom-specific semantics and a strong collocational requirement to co-occur with the other parts of the particular MWE. Syntactically, however, such MWEs combine like free expressions. For non-decomposable MWEs, they favor a syntactically and semantically monolithic encoding via a phrasal lexical entry.

However, NWS also discuss data that challenge this alleged syntax-semantics correspondence: In German, MWEs that do not pass the tests for being semantically decomposable may nonetheless undergo syntactic processes, in particular dislocation of the finite verb to the second position (V2, see (1-a)) and dislocation of idiom chunks to the initial position (the *Vorfeld*, see (1-b)):

(1)   a. Dann gab   Alex den Löffel ab.   b. Den Löffel hat Alex abgegeben.
          then passed Alex the spoon on   the spoon has Alex passed on
          'Then Alex died.'   'Alex died.'

Also, morphological flexibility in English non-decomposable MWEs shows that their components lead an independent life as words, and metalinguistic and external modification in these MWEs prove at least a limited degree of syntactic flexibility (see (2), Ernst 1981, and Stathi 2007). Thus, both the German data in (1) and the English data in (2) show that a monolithic syntactic analysis of non-decomposable MWEs is not feasible.

(2)   a. Kim kicks/-ed the bucket.   b. Kim kicked the proverbial/social bucket.

Construction-specific Restrictions   V2 is obligatory in German main clauses and semantically neutral. Therefore, it does not impose any semantic constraints on the verb, so that even verbs in non-decomposable MWEs show V2. Similarly, all main clauses require a *Vorfeld* constituent. Which constituent ends up in the *Vorfeld* is optional, though. Trotzke (2010) explores the semantic and pragmatic conditions on *Vorfeld* placement. They are compatible with constituents that do not have a referent, such as parts of non-decomposable MWEs.

We add passivization, which is non-obligatory and truth-conditionally neutral. Therefore, we expect it to be freely applicable to non-decomposable MWEs. This prediction is largely born out for German and French. Abeillé (1995) lists French MWEs that do not permit internal modification but passive (such as *faire un carton* = 'hit the bull'). A German example is in (3).

(3)   Bei den Grünen wird der politische Löffel schon   vor   Amtsabschied abgegeben.
        with the Green is   the political   spoon already before resigning   passed on
        'In the Green party, people die politically already before resigning from their office.'

Why are there no similar examples for English non-decomposable MWEs like *kick the bucket*? The answer to this question cannot be found in the phrasalhood of the MWE, it rather lies in the discourse properties of English passives. Kuno & Takami (2004) argue that subjects of English passives are topics. Consequently, we do not expect to find semantically vacuous material there.

However, if the discourse conditions on passive subjects are met, passive is possible even in English. In (4), *kick the bucket* is topical, only the tense and the result state are new. We conclude that the relation between semantic decomposability and syntactic flexibility from NWS cannot be maintained but that there is an important effect of the constraints on the syntactic constructions.

(4)   When you are dead, you don't have to worry about death anymore. . . .
        The bucket will be kicked. (J. Pascha & M. Louis, *The Single Man*, iUniverse. p. 195)

Extension to Other Languages   Depending on the available interaction within PARSEME, we will discuss the syntactic flexibility of non-decomposable MWEs in languages other than English and German. We will test the passivizability of non-decomposable MWEs in these languages and relate it to general properties of the passive. We expect to find data similar to German in languages which have an impersonal passive and/or information-structure-determined word order.

Analysis   To capture the syntactic flexibility of non-decomposable MWEs, we will provide an analysis in which the component parts combine in a regular way but do not make unique semantic contributions. The framework of *Lexical Resource Semantics* (LRS, Richter & Sailer 2004) is a promising model of the syntax-semantics interface for this purpose, as it has been applied to MWEs (Soehn, 2006) and to constructions that show semantically-motivated syntactic restrictions, such as cognate object constructions (Sailer, 2010).

Conclusion   NWS and other publications have led to a shift in perspective from a monolithic, fully phrasal view of MWEs to a more lexical approach for decomposable MWEs. We propose to extend this lexical approach to non-decomposable MWEs. To provide a solid motivation for this step, it is essential to look at a larger set of languages, in particular languages that differ in the semantic and pragmatic properties of morpho-syntactically similar constructions, such as passive.

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