

From Idioms to Construction Grammar

Notes on Croft and Cruse (2004), *Cognitive Linguistics*, Chapter 9

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I. Preface: Two Meanings of *Conventional*

A. **Computed (inferred) meaning vs. conventional meaning.** This distinction is owed to Grice (1975), who distinguished between natural and nonnatural meaning; what is meant and what is said. An example of implicature:

- (1) a. I was sick for two weeks.
- b. Conventional: lower bound fixed (at least two weeks)
- c. Computed (via quantity maxim): upper bound fixed (at most two weeks)

All meaning that is conventional is in the domain of linguistic semantics, whether or not that meaning involves discourse function (deixis, modality, information structure).

B. **Word meaning (arbitrary) vs. phrase/sentence meaning (computed from the meanings of the parts).** In this usage, conventional meaning (rote) is contrasted with compositional meaning (rule). Compositional meaning arises via composing semantics of phrase-structure rules and/or lexical entries.

C. Jackendoff (1990, 1997) on compositionality:

- Jackendoff (1990: 9), “It is widely assumed, and I will take for granted, that the basic units out of which a sentential concept is constructed are the concepts expressed by the words in the sentence, that is, lexical concepts.”
- A more recent version of this principle is stated by Jackendoff as the principle of **syntactically transparent composition**: “All elements of content in the meaning of a sentence are found in the lexical conceptual structures of the lexical items composing the sentence” (1997: 48)
- Jackendoff (1997) views syntactically transparent composition as a default within a wider array of options that includes **enriched composition**, as in cases of coercion.

II. The Knowledge that People Need to Understand Sentences

- (2) The words of the language (including their subcategorization requirements or valence frames)
- (3) The grammatical principles—the basic constructions—which make it possible to combine words into phrases and sentences (linking, subject-predicate, determination, modification, conjunction)
- (4) The semantic principles that assign interpretations to the complex objects

However, complex expressions can mean what they mean in the same way that words do. Complex expressions with holistic meanings are **idioms**.

Fillmore (1987): “Idiomaticity is best defined negatively: expressions in a language can be thought of as idiomatic if there are aspects of their *form*, their *meaning* or their *use* which could not have been predicted by someone who knew [2-4] for a given language”.

*Example: How do you do? (*In what manner do you do? *She is wondering how I do.)*

III. How do Idioms Challenge Theories of Syntax?

- A. If the lexicon is the repository of all arbitrary meaning, where do idioms belong? Words are atoms as far as syntax is concerned, but phrases are not in general (e.g., *passers by*, *take advantage of*).
- B. Idioms challenge the separability of syntactic levels, since they are pieces of syntax but, like words, they cannot be defined in a level-independent way, e.g., syntax and phonology: *Fancy meeting YOU here*, *Believe you ME*, *How are YOU?*
- C. Idioms are in many ways just as productive as the canonical phrase structure rules:

The correlative conditional: *The longer we wait, the worse it gets.*

Hypotactic apposition: *That’s the real problem is that you have to take the lawyers out of it.*

Ample negatives: Not in my house you don’t.

Preemptive negation: *Not that I’m interested or anything, but how much do you want for it?*

Just because: *Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not all out to get you.*

Inverted pseudocleft: *We stayed home is what we did.* (*We stayed home surprised everyone.)

Nominal Extraposition: *It’s amazing the paper that can pile up in one’s office.*

IV. Ways of Distinguishing Idioms from one another (Fillmore, Kay and O’Connor 1988)

- A. **Decoding vs. encoding idioms.** Decoding idioms are idioms whose meanings you couldn’t figure out by knowing the words and grammar of the language (*kick the bucket*, *pulls someone’s leg*, *let the cat out of the bag*). Encoding idioms are expressions that make sense given the meanings of the words, but which one wouldn’t *a priori* know are ways of conveying those meanings in the language (*answer the door*, *perform surgery*, *wide awake*, *heavy smoker*, *deep voice*, *bright red*, *mindless chatter*, *distinct possibility*, *healthy attitude*, *blow one’s nose*).
- B. **Substantive vs. formal idioms.** Substantive idioms are lexically filled; formal idioms are lexically open. Substantive examples: *hit the nail on the head*, *by the skin of x’s teeth*, *take x to task*. Formal examples: the ‘correlated scales’ or *the...the* construction (*The faster we run, the slower they run*), the WXDY construction (*What’s that fly doing in my soup?*), the double is and hypotactic apposition constructions (*The problem is is you never really know*, *Here’s my issue is that they’re not informed voters*), the ‘irony’ construction (*Watch me drop it, Watch him be handsome*).

C. **Regular idioms vs. extragrammatical idioms.** This is the distinction between idioms that are licensed by a construction of the language and those that are not.

- Regular: *spill the beans*, *put someone out to pasture*, *watch it rain* (on the irony meaning), *look at the snow on the ground* (on the exclamative meaning).
- Extragrammatical: *by and large*, *long live the king*, *look who's here* (vs. **I looked who was there*), *atta boy*, *all of a sudden*, *long time no see*, *easy does it*. Formal idioms may be extragrammatical: the correlative conditional, nominal extraposition, hypotactic apposition.

V. Properties of Idioms

- A. **Conventionality:** The meaning of idioms cannot be predicted from knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another.
- B. **Inflexibility:** Idioms typically appear only in a limited number of syntactic frames or constructions. **The breeze was shot*, *The breeze is easy to shoot with him*, *??Whose eyes was the wool pulled over?* **What ate Harry?* **Someone has cooked my goose.*
- C. **Figuration:** Idioms typically involve metaphors (*take the bull by the horns*), metonymies (*lend a hand*, *count heads*), hyperboles (*not worth the paper it's printed on*). Sometimes it's hard to know the precise figure involved (e.g., as in *kick the bucket*).
- D. **Proverbiality:** Idioms are typically used to describe a recurrent situation of particular social interest (becoming restless, talking informally, divulging a secret). The situation is compared to a folksy, familiar image (climbing walls, chewing the fat, spilling beans).
- E. **Informality:** Idioms, like proverbs, are associated with informal or colloquial registers.
- F. **Affect:** Idioms are typically used to imply a certain evaluation or affective stance toward the things they denote. "A language doesn't ordinarily use idioms to describe situations that are regarded neutrally—buying tickets, reading a book—although of course one could imagine a community in which such activities were sufficiently charged with social meaning to be worthy of idiomatic reference". (p. 493)

NB: "Idioms are not after all a linguistically natural kind, in the sense of being candidates for a category of universal grammar, and for theoretical purposes, the category can be defined in different ways for diverse purposes" (p. 494)

VI. Partial Compositionality?

- A. NSW argue that it is a mistake to equate idiom meaning with noncompositional meaning. Many apparent substantive decoding idioms look motivated/nonarbitrary in a *post hoc* way. Compare (5) and (6):

- (5) a. He kicked the bucket. (*The bucket was kicked)
 b. He was sawing wood (*Wood was sawed)
 c. You've hit the nail on the head. (*The nail was hit on the head)
 d. They shot the breeze. (*The breeze was shot)
- (6) a. She spilled the beans. (The beans were spilled last night)
 b. Pat took advantage of the situation. (Advantage was taken)
 c. I let the cat out of the bag. (The cat got let out of the bag)
 d. My goose is cooked.
 e. They kept tabs on Harry (Tabs seem to be being kept on Harry)

B. The main idea: when the elements of the idiom map in a one-to-one fashion to the situation metaphorically described by the idiom, then the idiom is compositional, making a passive or raising construct possible. Note also that aspectual features are preserved: *He sawed wood all night* = *He snored all night* (activity); *He let the cat out the bag* = *He told our secret* (achievement).

C. But there are funny constraints on idiom behavior:

- Idioms chunks rarely denote animates: *throw the baby out with the bathwater*, *have an albatross around one's neck*, *kill two birds with one stone*, *let sleeping dogs lie*.
- Idioms rarely 'freeze' subject position: *A little bird told me*.

VII. Syntactic Argumentation and Idioms

A. Internal and external passive. Note the following contrast:

- (7) a. Harry was taken advantage of.
 b. Advantage was taken of Harry.
- (8) a. Considerable advantage was taken of Harry.
 b. *Harry was taken considerable advantage of.

For Bresnan, there are two lexical entries: a unitary transitive verb *take advantage of*, and a verb *take* plus an object, *advantage*, and a P' *of X*.

B. An argument for transformations: We need D-structure to account for the fact that the expression in (3) instantiate the same idiomatic pattern, which gets rearranged at S-structure:

- (9) a. The beans seem to have been spilled.
 b. She has spilled the beans.

The elements that are contiguous in D-structure are broken apart at S-structure. McCawley shows that this argument is specious, note:

- (10) The strings which Pat pulled t got Chris the job.

C. Reconstruction and idioms (Chomsky 1992):

(11) Moe_i wonders which pictures of himself_i/j Bill_j took t.

Ambiguity is contingent on a nonidiomatic reading of *take pictures of x*: literal taking rather than photographing. If the idiomatic reading is present, then only Bill can be the antecedent for *himself*. We must assume a structure at LF in which *Bill took which pictures of himself* is a unit (IP).

D. Raising structures vs. Control (Equi) structures

(12) Raising

- a. Tabs are likely to be kept on Harry. (raising to subject)
- b. I expected tabs to be kept on Harry. (raising to object)

(13) Equi

- a. *Tabs are eager to be kept on Harry. (subject-control equi)
- b. *I forced tabs to be kept on Harry. (object-control equi)

A specious argument, again, if we simply acknowledge that there are unmet animacy requirements in (13), along with the fact that idioms chunks rarely refer to animates (cf. *pay the piper, a little bird told me, don't look a gift horse in the mouth, let sleeping dogs lie, a horse of a different color, take the bull by the horns*.)

E. The empty slots in idioms are largely animates and largely possessors, recipients, agents or themes. A mixed bag of examples:

y light a fire under x
 y take x to task
 y give x a break
 y make x eat crow/humble pie
 x have egg on x's face
 y bust x's chops
 y burst x's bubble
 y read x the riot act
 y rain on x's parade
 y push x over the edge/brink
 y drive x up a wall
 y give x the heebie jeebies/creeps
 y twist x's arm
 x do y with both hands tied behind x's back
 y whip x into a frenzy
 y add fuel to the fire

y muddy the waters
y have x eating out the palm of x's hand

VIII. Most Constructions Resemble Idioms more than they do Syntactic Rules

A. Constructions may have special pragmatic properties. Scalar operators like *even*, *only*, *let alone* and (concessive) *still*, link two propositions within a scalar model. A scalar model is a pragmatic scale along which individuals are ranked with respect to some property.

- (14) She was very accommodating. She **even** made us coffee.
- (15) I'm not 5'10"! I'm not even 5'8"!
- (16) She can't speak English, **let alone** French.
- (17) Even if you only pay him a buck, he'll **still** do it.
- (18) I'm not 5'10". I'm **only** 5'7".

C(ontext) P(roposition): I'm not 5'10".

T(ext) P(roposition): I'm not 5'8".

In the case of *even*, the TP unilaterally entails the CP in a scalar model. The TP is more informative than the CP.

Shared material: I'm not x

Focus (selected by even): 5'8'

FK&O (1988) argue for a constructional account of the conjunction *let alone*: In *let alone* coordinate structures, the first clause is more relevant. The clause introduced by *let alone* is more informative.

B. Constructions have special syntactic properties.

- (19) **Subject-auxiliary inversion**: ??*Did that she left early upset you?*
- (20) The **transformation** pattern: **She made some pipecleaners into it.*
- (21) The **ditransitive** pattern: **They gave the reporter it.*

C. Constructions have special semantic properties:

- (22) **Nominal Extraposition**: *It's amazing the books that pile up.* (Metonymy, whereby *the books* stands for their number, variety, volume).
- (23) **Passive**: Two languages are spoken by everyone in the room. (Specific reading for subject)

IX. Construction Grammar Captures Properties of Formal Idioms

- A. CG eschews two assumptions common to competing phrase-structure grammars: local licensing and head-driven category determination.
- B. Since constructions have daughters, and daughters may have daughters, constructions can be used to represent niece licensing: a situation in which a construction's daughter calls for a sister with a daughter of a particular type:

(24) That's the real problem is that you never really know.

Phrase-structure rules of English do not permit the adjunction of a nonsubordinate finite clause and a finite VP. Representing hypotactic apposition requires appeal to niece licensing because the construction requires not simply a VP daughter but one whose head daughter is, in turn, a finite form of the copula.

- C. Other formal idioms violate head-driven syntactic category determination: the head of the phrase determines the syntactic distribution of the phrase. An example: adjective phrases with degree word *as*, e.g., *as competent as she was*. These are APs in contexts like (25a), but act like concessive clauses in contexts like (25b):

- (25) a. She was *as competent as she was*.
 b. *As competent as she was*, she wasn't able to find work.

- D. Inheritance also captures semantic and syntactic relationships between idiomatic patterns and more regular patterns. Fillmore (1986): the correlative conditional has numerous idiomatic properties but shares syntactic and semantic properties with the general conditional sentence type, e.g., both have an antecedent clause that is a polarity context.
- E. Relationships of this nature are represented in CxG by **inheritance networks**, in which like constructions have partially overlapping representations (Goldberg 1995: Chapter 3).
- F. Inheritance networks have been used to capture syntactic and semantic commonalities among deictic and existential *there*-constructions (Lakoff 1987), exclamatory constructions (Michaelis and Lambrecht 1996), subject-auxiliary constructions (Fillmore 1999) and resultative constructions (Goldberg and Jackendoff 2004).