Inner Aspect and the Verbal Typology of Idioms[1]

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0. The Problem

Within many recent approaches to the connections between idiomaticity and syntax, the idea of a phase-bound structure has started to emerge in various forms (Svenonius 2005, Stone 2009, Harwood 2013, Harley and Stone 2013, Punske and Stone 2014).

> We may term this the *No Larger Idioms Hypothesis.*

> In this talk, we explore maximally *v*(oice)P idioms (see Svenonius 2005 for other phase domains).

As noted explicitly in Harwood (2013), an apparent sub-class of idioms challenges this idea by requiring the progressive, which is outside this maximal domain:

(1) Bob is dying to meet you.   (cf. Harwood 2013: 161)

(2) Bob is pushing up daisies.   (Harwood 2013: 162)

(3) They were chomping at the bit.   (Harwood 2013: 163)

(4) Something is eating Bob.   (Harwood 2013: 162)

(5) He is cruising for a bruising.   (Harwood 2013: 163)

While we dispute the requirement of the progressive for some of these forms, we investigate the apparent progressive requirement for others..

In particular, we pay special attention to the '*eating* X'-idiom as in (4).

We note that the '*eating* X'-idiom exhibits a pattern of related and unusual behaviors beyond just the progressive requirement.

It appears to have both a subject requirement (cf. Bresnan 1982) and a progressive aspect requirement (cf. Svenonious 2005 and Harwood 2013).

(6) Something/nothing is eating Bob/ What's eating Bob?

(7) #The issue is eating Bob.

(8) #Something/#what will eat/eats/ate Bob.

However, as observed in O'Grady (1998), the presence of the conative particle *at* relaxes the subject requirement[2]:

(9) Remorse over the accident is really eating at Harry.   (O'Grady 1998: 296)

We further observe that the apparent progressive restriction is lost when the conative particle is present:

(10)   The issue will eat/eats/ate at Bob.

(11)   Lingering questions about his father's death have eaten at Bob for years.

Why these two apparent requirements would vanish when the particle appears is something of a mystery.

We argue that this pattern strongly suggests that idioms are, in fact, phase-bound and that apparent progressive requirements are an artifact of a deficient realization of Inner Aspect.

We (somewhat tentatively) conclude that this pattern broadly supports two strands of phase-based syntax: *relativized phases* and *phases as mapping domains.*

We argue that *eating X*-type idioms are Inner Aspect Idioms (further expanding the typology from Punske and Stone 2014).

When the Inner Aspect head is not realized by *at*, the higher progressive satisfies the featural requirement.

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[2] Harwood also notes (p. 162, fn. 3) that some speakers may prefer the particle *at*.

This relationship delays the Spell Out of the *voice*P phase and alters the Nuclear Scope Domain—producing the subject restriction.

1. Background

It has long been noted that idioms do not behave uniformly with respect to their syntactic flexibility (Weinreich 1969, Fraser 1970, Katz 1973, Fiengo 1974, Newmeyer 1974).

Punske and Stone (2014, in prep) provide a typology of idiomatic structures (based on Fraser's 1970 "Frozenness Hierarchy") which conforms to the principles of the *Strong Compositionality Hypothesis.*

In this typology, the non-uniform behaviors are still predictable based on particular form requirements.

We are concerned with why certain idioms can appear in certain syntactic configurations, while others cannot.

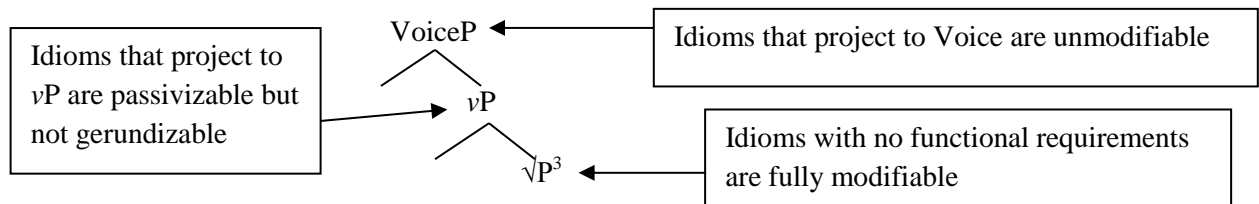In particular, we examine passivization and nominal gerundization.

(12)   John kicked the bucket. [John died]

(13)   The bucket was kicked by John. [#John died]

(14)   Mary regretted John's kicking of the bucket. [#John died]

(15)   John spilled the beans. [John revealed the secret]

(16)   The beans were spilled (by John). [The secret was revealed]

(17)   Mary fretted John's spilling of the beans. [John revealed the secret]

(18)   The comedian killed the audience with impeccable timing. [The audience laughed a lot]

(19)   The audience was killed (by the comedian). [The audience laughed a lot]

(20)   Carson appreciated the comedian's killing of the audience. [#The audience laughed a lot]

Typology of Idioms

Idiom	Passive	Gerund
Kick the bucket	No	No
Kill the audience	Yes	No
Spill the beans	Yes	Yes

Punske and Stone argue for this three-way distinction:

(21)   *Schematic representation of idiom structure*

Idioms that project to *v*P are passivizable but not gerundizable

VoiceP

Idioms that project to Voice are unmodifiable

*v*P

√P[3]

Idioms with no functional requirements are fully modifiable

The syntactic behavior of English idioms can be attributed directly to requirements for independently motivated functional structure.

- Idioms that project to Voice are "frozen"—may not be passivized or gerundized.

- Idioms that project to *v* may be passivized but not gerundized.

- Root-level idioms are fully modifiable.

Note that no idioms in the typology extend beyond the *Voice*P.

> That idioms are (phase)-bound to *voice* (or some variant) is explicitly argued in: Svenonius 2005, Stone 2009, Harwood 2013, Harley and Stone 2013, Punske and Stone 2014.

2. Bresnan (1982) Revisited

As noted above, Bresnan (1982) claims that (22) (along with several other idiomatic forms) is a subject idiom with a free non-subject argument, contra Marantz's (1981/1984) claim that such idioms do not exist.

(22)   What's eating x?   (Bresnan 1982: 350)

O'Grady (1996) accepts examples like (22) (along with others) as counter-examples to the overall claim:

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[3] See van Cranenbroeck (2014) for arguments against root level selection.

- "I take such patterns to be bona fide counterexamples to the proposed constraint, effectively undermining its status as an absolute restriction on idioms." (O'Grady 1996: 296)
    - Though see O'Grady for the more nuanced discussion/his remarks on the relevant example above.

Svenonius (2005), who offers a solution to a number of O'Grady's examples, still views *eating X* as a true challenge

- "Free object idioms which are more difficult to explain away are *something's eating DP…* and *A little bird told me…*, if me can be replaced by other DPs. However, their very rarity is quite striking, and so I concur with Marantz (1984) that a fundamental subject–object asymmetry should be recognized in the analysis of idioms." (Svenonius 2005: 232)

What is immediately striking about the *eating*-type idioms in contrast to the *little bird*-type idioms is the variation in available subjects:

(23)   What's eating x?

(24)   Something's eating x.

(25)   Nothing's eating x.

(26)   #A little eagle told x.[4]

We may then be tempted to dismiss the *eating*-type idioms as counterexamples; however, the subjects are indeed restricted in a fundamental way:

(27)   #Everything is eating x.

(28)   #What problem is eating x?

While the subject is not restricted to a particular lexical item, it is necessarily a non-specific/variable reading.

Thus, it is clear that a true subject restriction does exist in these cases, which would contradict the overall hypothesis.

Therefore, unless a clear, independent motivation for the subject restriction can be found, the hypothesis needs to be rejected.

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[4] See Harley and Stone (2013) for a discussion of *A little bird told X* and other potential counterexamples to the *No Larger Idioms Hypothesis*.

3. Some notes on Harwood

Harwood provides five idioms that are said to require the progressive to retain their idiomatic interpretation:

(29)   Bob is dying to meet you.   (cf. Harwood 2013: 161)

(30)   Bob is pushing up daises.   (Harwood 2013: 162)

(31)   They were chomping at the bit.   (Harwood 2013: 163)

(32)   Something is eating Bob.   (Harwood 2013: 162)

(33)   He is cruising for a bruising   (Harwood 2013: 163)

However, we are uncertain that the constraint on (29)-(31) is as strong as stated.

While the progressive seems unquestionably preferred, "in the wild" examples of non-progressive, idiomatic versions can be found.

(34)   How to write blogs titles people **will die to** click[5]

(35)   10 companies people would die to work for[6]

(36)   It wasn't at all the best way to go, but then none of the Sons **have pushed up daisies** in a very peaceful manner.[7]

(37)   Ned would be free to enjoy Sally and her newly acquired saloon while me and Bart **pushed up daisies** east of camp.[8]

(38)   Hillary Clinton engaged four Iowans on Tuesday in a roundtable discussion about small businesses and community banks while camera shutters clicked and reporters **chomped at the bit** to ask her questions.[9]

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[5] Headline; Shafee, Abrar. 27 March 2015. How to write blog titles people will die to click. *Bloggingspell.* www.bloggingspell.com/write-blog-titles/

[6] Headline; Coyle, Emily. 19 October 2013. 10 companies people would die to work for. *USA Today.* http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2013/10/19/google-apple-attractive-companies/3009263/

[7] Venable, Nick. 4 November 2014. Sons Of Anarchy Season 7 Episode 9 Watch: Jax Is Between An R.I.P. And A Hard Place. *CinemaBlend.* http://www.cinemablend.com/television/Sons-Anarchy-Season-7-Episode-9-Watch-Jax-Between-An-R-I-P-Hard-Place-68221.html

[8] p. 34; Lendennie, Gary. 2012. *The Potentate of Walking Horse.* XLIBRIS

In contrast, (32)-(33) don't seem to exhibit this behavior—with the exception of the conative version of (32) outlined above.

>(39)   #Something will eat John.

>(40)   #Something would eat John.

>(41)   #Something has eaten John.

This opens two very important questions:

>i) How do (32) and (33) differ yet from each other?

>ii) If the phenomenon is not widespread (potentially covering a single English idiom), how reasonable is it to draw overarching conclusions?

To answer (i), the biggest difference between (32) and (33) is the presence of an NP object in (32) versus a PP in (33).

- Thus, the lack of the conative alternative may simply be reduced to the event/argument structure of the idiom.

Some speakers also show a preference for the alveolar *–in'* in (33) and the velar *–ing* in (32).

>(42)   John is crusin' for a bruisin'.

>(43)   ?/%Somethin' is eatin' John.

Further, the rhyme in (33) should not be ignored.

At this time, we will set aside (33) because, while it ultimately will be consistent with the analysis we develop here, we cannot currently make any predictions about it.

With regard to (ii), the question is really one of the philosophy of science.

Without an alternative analysis, the idioms in (32) and (33) would falsify the *No Larger Idioms Constraint.*

Thus, we argue, even a single exceptional form requires a robust analysis.

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[9] Martosko, David. 19 May 2015. As Hillary Clinton avoids bruising media questions on the campaign trail, one colorful Iowa activist says 'she knows where lots of bodies are buried'. *Daily Mail. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3088088/As-Hillary-Clinton-avoids-bruising-media-questions-campaign-trail-one-colorful-Iowa-activist-says-knows-lots-bodies-buried.html#ixzz3b57kPg5p*

- While we may be wrong about the analysis presented here, an analysis is certainly demanded.

4. The Role of Aspect

The (non-)role of aspect in idiom interpretation is an area of some contention.

- See McGinnis (2002) for a nice overview.

We are largely going to side-step that conversation and follow McGinnis (2002) in assuming that idioms have compositional aspect based on their syntax.

This is clearly seen in the contrast between (44) and (45) (from McGinnis 2002, p. 668):

(44)   Hermione was dying for weeks.

(45)   #Hermione was kicking the bucket for weeks.

However, when we consider the Punske and Stone (2014) version of the *No Larger Idioms Constraint,* we should note that there is no reason why other *voice*P internal heads should not be the locus of idiomatic interpretation.

(46)   *Schematic representation of idiom structure with IAspP*
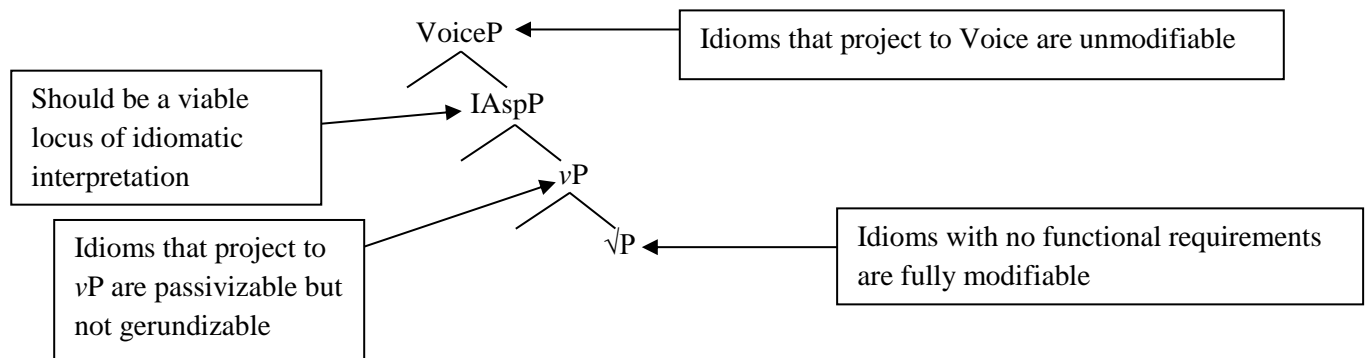
We argue that '*eating* X'-idioms are exactly such idioms.

Recall that the basic problem has two parts:

i)   The idiom *X eat Y* meaning to trouble, nag or annoy requires either the progressive or the conative particle *at.*

ii)   When the conative is missing, the subject is restricted to a variable-type subject (e.g., *something, nothing, what*).

In this section we address (i), the solution to which directly informs the solution to (ii) offered in the following section.

We argue that the structure required to get the idiomatic interpretation is the following:

(47)   *Structure of the idiom 'eat X'*

IAspP
├── u[-telic]
└── vP
    ├── v
    └── √EAT
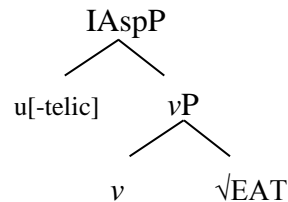
The uninterpretable feature in IAsp can either be valued by the particle *at* or later by the progressive—if the former, other consequences will follow.

If *eating X*-type idioms are IAspP idioms, we would expect them to exhibit the following properties given the above typology:

- Should be passivizable
- Should not be gerundizable
- Should have stable inner aspect (as we've seen)

And, indeed, these predications are confirmed:

(48)   John was eaten at by the issue until the solution became apparent.

(49)   #Something's eating (at) of John caused trouble for the team.

It is worth noting that IAspP Idioms appear to be relatively less common in English.

Other idiomatic uses of consumption verbs that occupy a similar idiomatic space seem to exhibit some of the same properties.

(50)   The problem gnawed at John, keeping him awake most nights.

(51)   John was gnawed at by the problem for several weeks.

(52)   *Something's gnawing at of John proved to be the final straw.

However, unlike *eating X,* the particle *at* is always required.

(53)   *What's gnawing John?

It is certainly fair to question why IAspP idioms are potentially so uncommon in English.

We cannot, at this time, provide an explanation beyond speculation—however, we certainly predict that languages that have more robust realizations of inner aspect should exhibit more IAspP idioms.

5. The Role of Phases

Recall that idioms like (54) challenge the *No Larger Idioms Hypothesis* because they need to extend beyond the *voice*P phase to contain the required progressive.

> (54)   Something is eating John.

The realization approach outlined above argues that the progressive is there to value the uninterpretable IAsp feature required for the idiomatic interpretation.

One problem is that valuation crosses an apparent phase boundary.

Harwood (2013) argues that v_{prog} is the real phase boundary.

Even if we accept this position, the problem is not fully resolved, since that still doesn't provide a solution to the subject-restriction problem.

With Harwood, we argue that progressive may have special status, but we derive these properties differently.

We suggest that the Spell-Out of a phase need not always be immediate—rather a phase may delay Spell-Out until it is a complete structural complex.

A phase with an uninterpretable feature cannot, by definition, be a complete structural complex.

> Thus, the *voice*P phase in a structure like (55) cannot be spelled out until the higher (outer) aspect is introduced.
>
> (55)   *voice*P
>
> IAspP
>
> u[-telic]   *v*P
>
>   *v*   √EAT
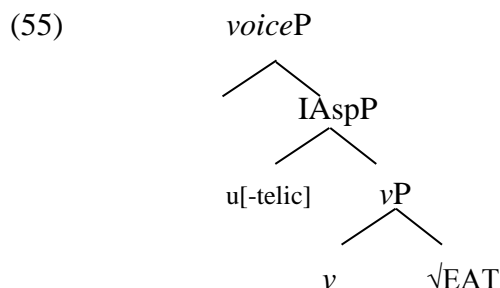
While there are undoubtedly many concerns with this modification to the theory, when we connect it to approaches that tie phases and Diesing's (1992) Mapping Domains, [10] an explanation for the bothersome subject restrictions becomes apparent.

[10] eg., Carnie and Barss 2003 or Jackson 2007

In particular, we argue that Nuclear Scope Mapping Domain (the locus of non-specific interpretations) has the following properties:

Nuclear Scope Domain: highest level of *voice*P structure, such that some structure remains outside the domain.

Thus the relative timing of Spell-Out will generate two different Nuclear Scope Domains.

The Nuclear Scope Domain is computed relative to the available structure at Spell Out.

(56)   Scope Domain in a progressive-restrictive *eat* idiom:
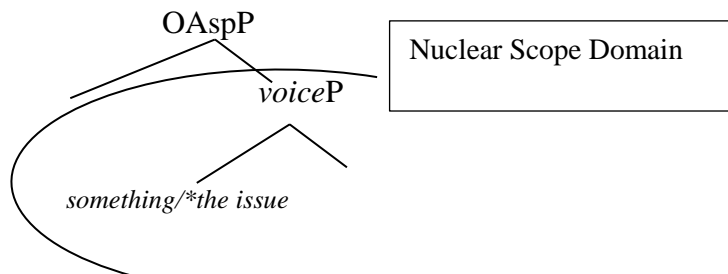
Since Spell-Out is delayed in (56), the Nuclear Scope Domain will necessarily include the subject, forcing the non-specific reading.

(57)   Scope Domain in an *eat at* idiom:
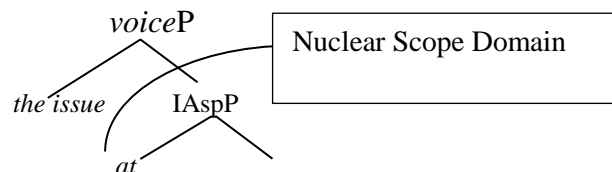
Since Spell-Out is not delayed in (57), the Nuclear Scope Domain excludes the subject, as the domain cannot consume the entire structure.

Thus, with these modifications, the subject restriction and progressive requirements are permanently linked.

6. Conclusions

We explored the challenges that *eating X*-type idioms pose for many syntactic approaches to idioms. Since:

- They may extend beyond the *voice*P Phase

- They have restricted subjects (in some cases)

- They exhibit a link between the lack of a conative particle and the availability of subjects

We have presented an analysis for *eating X*-type idioms which:

- Preserves Marantz's observation about the non-existence of subject-restrictive idioms (to the exclusion of objects).

  - The apparent subject restrictions are derived properties based on the relative ordering of Spell-Out and Nuclear Scope mapping.

- Preserves the *No Larger Idioms Hypothesis* in a fundamental way.

To do this we proposed the following mechanisms:

- The possibility of delayed Spell-Out of phases in certain conditions (i.e., when they are "incomplete")

- Relative phase Spell-Out impacting mapping domain size (later Spell-Out, larger domain)

The further ramifications of these proposals need to be explored in greater detail.

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