

Content matching in idioms and compounds: a comparative analysis

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It is generally known that certain compound types have an idiomatic reading, i.e. English *red neck*, *pick pocket*, *egg head*, *green back*, *walk man*, *sit-in* ... Characteristic of all these is that their meaning cannot be compositionally derived from the meaning of the component parts, nor can the syntactic category of the compound necessarily be derived from the categories of the component parts: e.g. [sityv inP]N. The same can be found in many other languages (cf. e.g. the examples in (1) in Chinese from Zhang 2007):

- (1) a. yi ge hen bao-shou de ren
one CL very keep-defend mod person
'a very conservative person'
b. hen mao-dun
very spear-shield
'very contradictory'
c. zhe zhang zhuozi de da-xiao
this CL table mod big-small
'the size of this table'
d. yi ge kai-guan
one CL open-close
'a switch' (e.g. 'a power switch')

These compounds can be analyzed in terms of a content matching analysis (cf. Borer 2013). According to this analysis meaning assignment in compounds can either be to the individual roots, which leads to a compositional interpretation, or to both roots in a compound frame, where meaning is assigned to the whole compound as a single unit and a non-compositional interpretation results. So for the English compound *fish slice* content matching can either assign meaning to the two roots separately (with the interpretation: *a slice of fish*) or it can be, as a unified *en-search*, to the whole complex (with the interpretation of: *a kitchen utensil used for tossing food in pans*). Both versions are schematically illustrated in table 1:

Table 1.

<i>en-searches (domains boxed)</i>	Content and Composition		
i. en-search 1	[C [C ₂ $\pi\sqrt{\text{FISH}}$] $\pi\sqrt{\text{SLICE}}$]	FISH	$[\pi\sqrt{\text{SLICE}}]$
ii. en-search 2	[C ₁ [C ₂ $\pi\sqrt{\text{FISH}}$] $\pi\sqrt{\text{SLICE}}$]	FISH	SLICE
unified en-search	[C ₁ [C ₂ $\pi\sqrt{\text{FISH}}$] $\pi\sqrt{\text{SLICE}}$]	FISHSLICE	

In this respect compounds seem to pattern with idioms where we can also observe meaning that cannot be compositionally derived from the meaning of the elements that constitute the idiom and where the category is also not necessarily derivable from the categories of the elements that constitute the idiom. This is, however, not unproblematic, because idioms in contrast to compounds are partially compositional in the sense that they allow internal modification, pronominal reference, contrastive focus, etc. (cf. e.g. Nunberg et al. 1994, Kovecses & Szabó 1996, Borer 2013). All of these properties presuppose the existence of functional structure inside idioms, which makes them unavailable for a content matching along the lines described for

compounds, because content matching can only operate on roots and not on functional structure.

In my talk I investigate one type of construction in German that straddles the line between idiom and compound in that it shows non-compositional content and categorial unfaithfulness, while it allows some modification that seems to presuppose functional structure. The construction is exemplified in (2):

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|---------------------|------------------------|
| (2) a. Mäuse melken | b. Eier legen |
| mice milking | eggs laying |
| 'frustrating' | 'wonderful' |
| c. Bäume ausreißen | d. junge Hunde kriegen |
| trees tearing | young dogs having |
| 'fit, vigorous' | 'exasperating' |

These constructions are problematic for a content matching analysis, because they all involve plural forms - which clearly indicate functional structure. What is striking about these forms though is that their occurrence is strictly limited to nominalized infinitives with *zum* (resembling nominal gerunds in English):

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| (3) a. Die Situation ist zum Mäuse melken |
| 'The situation is frustrating' |
| b. Das Wetter ist zum Eier legen |
| 'The weather is wonderful' |
| c. Er fühlt sich zum Bäume ausreißen |
| 'He feels vigorous' |
| d. Der Vortrag war zum junge Hunde kriegen |
| 'The talk was very exasperating' |

This is very much reminiscent of another rather huge set of *zum* + infinitive constructions, which also have an idiomatic interpretation:

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| (4) zum Wiehern/Brüllen/Kugeln/Schreien/Kringeln/Quieken,... |
| neighing/yelling/rolling/screaming/curling/squeaking |
| 'very funny' |

These latter forms can be interpreted straightforwardly under a content matching analysis, where content matching must take place when the roots are merged with the nominalizer *zum* at the latest. (Alternatively content matching takes place at the root, leading to the literal interpretations). For the forms in (2/3) this means that content matching can likewise be delayed until merger of *zum*, where the merger of the roots e.g. *Maus* and *melken* is an instantiation of a compound frame, thus alining the derivation of these idioms to a compound interpretation in a compound frame. Plural assignment can be derived from remerging one of the constituents (*Maus* in this case) under the relevant functional structure, i.e. adjoined to *zum* - a nominalizer!

With this much in place, the system kann be easily extended to further idiom types:

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|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| (5) zum Greifen nahe | zum Affen machen | zum Zuge kommen |
| to grab close | to mokey make | to move get |
| 'within easy reach' | 'to disgrace oneself' | 'become active' |

References:

- Borer, H. 2013. *Taking form*. Oxford: OUP. Kovecses, Z. & Szabó, P. 1996. 'Idioms a view from cognitive semantics. Applied Linguistics 17: 326-55. Nunberg, G., et al. 1994. 'Idioms'. *Language* 70: 491-593. Zhang, N. 2007. Root merger in Chinese compounds. *Studia Linguistica* 6: 170-84.