On the syntactic regularity of idioms
New evidence from Dutch dialects

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joint work with
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CRISSP/KU Leuven & UiL OTS/Utrecht
Overview

★ What is an idiom?
  › Inflexibility
  › Regularity
★ The project
★ Findings - Idioms in Dutch dialects: regular syntax
  › Determiner drop
  › Possessive alternation
  › Perfect doubling
★ Why inflexibility?
★ Summary
Overview

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What is an idiom?

- An idiom = an expression with a non-compositional interpretation

  — its meaning as a whole is not simply predictable/derivable from (the combination of) the literal meanings of its parts

(1) *Ned Stark bit the dust.* = Ned Stark died.
What is an idiom?

• None of the lexical items that comprise the idiom in (1) correspond to its idiomatic meaning:
  
  • *bite* = use your teeth to cut into something
  
  • *the* = definite article
  
  • *dust* = fine, dry powder consisting of tiny particles of earth or waste matter
Non-compositionality

• The Fregean principle of compositionality: the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts and the rules used to combine them

• Given their non-compositionality, idioms appear to directly violate this principle (cf. i.a. Katz & Postal 1963; Fraser 1970; Katz 1973; Chomsky 1980; Machonis 1985; Schenk 1995; Grégoire 2009)

• Question: How can idioms be reconciled with this principle?
Non-compositionality

• One possible answer:
  idioms are stored in our mental lexicon
  as single, atomic items
  (cf. i.a. Jackendoff 1997; Everaert 2010)

• 2 other possible arguments
  (> inflexibility)
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Lexical inflexibility

• If any of the lexical items that make up the idiom in (1) are replaced, even by synonyms, the figurative interpretation is lost (# = loss of idiomatic interpretation):

(2) a. Ned Stark bit the dust.
    b. # Ned Stark bit the dirt.
    c. # Ned Stark bit some dust.
    d. # Ned Stark chewed the dust.
Syntactic inflexibility

- **Some idioms: syntactically inflexible [English]** (cf. i.a. Newmeyer 1974; Nunberg et al. 1994)

(3) *bite the dust* = *die*
   a. # The dust was bitten by Ned. *passivisation*
   b. # The dust, Ned has bitten. *topicalisation*

(4) *shoot the breeze* = *chat*
   a. We shot the breeze for hours.
   b. # The breeze was shot by us. *passivisation*
   c. # The breeze, we shot yesterday. *topicalisation*
What is an idiom?

Lack of
• a compositional interpretation
• lexical flexibility
• syntactic transformations

follows automatically if an idiom is syntactically atomic?
i.e. if an idiom = a multiword expression that …
… functions as a single word in syntax
… is stored wholesale as a unit in the lexicon
(cf. i.a. Gibbs & Gonzales 1985; McGlone et al. 1994)
What is an idiom?

• However:

   in general, idiomatic VPs - such as *bite the dust* in (1) - are formed in a manner which obeys the **regular syntactic rules of the language**, like any other **fully regular VP**

   (cf. i.a. Fellbaum 1993; Nunberg et al. 1994; Ifill 2002; McGinnis 2002; Svenonius 2005; Everaert 2010; Stone 2013)
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Syntactic regularity

• idioms conform with the regular phrase structure rules of the language

(5)  a.  *Ned Stark bit the dust.*
     b.  *Ned Stark bit the bread.*
     c.  *Ned Stark swept the dust.*
Syntactic regularity

• idioms behave as expected re. their aspectual properties (telicity)

(6)  *Ned Stark bit the dust.*
     =   Ned Stark died.

(7)  *Robert Baratheon kicked the bucket.*
     =   Robert Baratheon died.
Syntactic regularity

• idioms interact with productive syntax
  ‣ raising/control
  ‣ clause-type shifting
  ‣ embedding in subordinate clauses
  ‣ other syntactic operations, e.g. relativisation

(8) a. Another promising company seems to bite the dust.
    b. Who will bite the dust?
    c. They want you to think that a big character bit the dust.
    d. He is the first major character who bites the dust in this episode.
Morpho-syntactic regularity

- idioms show the normal range of inflexional affixes
  - temporal, aspectual, agreement specifications vary freely
  - finite and non-finite forms

(9) a. *My iMac** bit** the dust today.*
    b. *Another one** bites** the dust.*
    c. *Littlefinger will surely** bite** the dust.*
    d. *So many Starks have** bitten** the dust over the course of six seasons.*
Morpho-syntactic regularity

• idioms seem to be built up by the same normal, regular (morpho-)syntactic structure-building mechanisms that create non-idiomatic structures

• these data suggest that the idioms are not stored as single, atomic units (cf. i.a. Stone 2013, 2015)
Ongoing debate

- **inflexibility ~ lexicon**
  - idiom = stored wholesale as a single unit in the mental lexicon
  - idiom = syntactically atomic, a multiword expression functioning as a single word in syntax

- **regularity ~ syntax**
  - idiom = has structure, has a regular (morpho-)syntax, is built up by the normal (morpho-)syntactic structure-building mechanisms of the language
  - idiom = not stored as a single, atomic unit
Inflexibility vs. regularity? Lexicon vs. syntax?

- **this talk: contribution to this debate**

  further demonstration that idioms are built up by the same regular structure-building mechanisms that create non-idiomatic syntactic structures

- **empirical basis:**

  new data from idioms in non-standard varieties of Dutch
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The project

- idiomatic expressions in 13 non-standard varieties of Dutch (in both The Netherlands and Flanders)
- analysing idioms from available dialect dictionaries
- acquiring native speaker judgments on syntactic manipulations of idioms (formal interviews, with judgment tasks)
The project

- Electronic database of non-standard Dutch idioms
  
  http://languagelink.let.uu.nl/idioms
  (under construction! available to the public January 2017)

  ❖ two (sub)parts:
    ‣ idioms collected from dialect dictionaries + glosses, translations, POS-tagging, syntactic properties
    ‣ selected idioms in each variety + judgments on syntactic manipulations (min. 6 speakers per dialect)

  ❖ allows for the presentation of gathered data and facilitates searches

  ❖ serves as a search tool for systematic investigation into the syntax of idioms
The project

The Netherlands
- Deventer
- Groesbeek
- Hogeland
- Drenthe
- Utrecht

Belgium
- Aalst
- Brugge
- Wambeek
- Tessenderlo
- Bree
- Dendermonde
- Leuven
The project
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Findings

If the syntax of idioms is completely regular…

• Prediction:
  ‣ if: a language (variety) exhibits a syntactic phenomenon that is ‘peculiar’/uncommon (i.e. that seems to be a cross-linguistic or cross-dialectal ‘rarity’)
  ‣ then: this same syntactic phenomenon will also be found in the idioms of that language (variety)

• This is exactly what we found in our research on Dutch dialects.
  ➤ we discuss 3 cases in 3 different Dutch dialects
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Determiner drop

- many dialects spoken in the Dutch province of Groningen, e.g. Hogelandsters

- **definite/specific nouns** occur without an overt article in contexts where other varieties of Dutch require a definite determiner

  (cf. i.a. Schuringa 1923; Ter Laan 1929, 1953; Apotheker 1980; Reker 2005; Bloemhoff et al. 2008; Oosterhof 2008)
## Determiner drop

(10) dropping of non-neuter definite determiners  (Ter Laan 1953:35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groningen</th>
<th>Standard Dutch &amp; other dialects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **a.** Man het geliek.  
*man has right*  
'The man is right.' | De man heeft gelijk.  
*the man has right*  
'The man is right.' |
| **b.** Jong het bok verkòft.  
*boy has goat sold*  
'The boy has sold the goat.' | De jongen heeft de bok verkocht.  
*the boy has the goat sold*  
'The boy has sold the goat.' |
| **c.** Kou staat in sloot.  
*cow stands in ditch*  
'The cow is standing in the ditch.' | De koe staat in de sloot.  
*the cow stands in the ditch*  
'The cow is standing in the ditch.' |
| **d.** Dou deur dicht.  
*do door closed*  
'Close the door.' | Dou de deur dicht.  
*do the door closed*  
'Close the door.' |
Determiner drop

Careful: in Standard Dutch (and dialects in other regions than Groningen)

- singular countable nouns in argument position: always an overt article, e.g. (10)
- uncountable and plural nouns do occur without article, cf. (11)

(11) (Oosterhof 2008:75)

a. De jongen heeft water gedronken. ('The boy has drunk water."

b. De jongen heeft bokken verkocht. ('The boy has sold goats."

c. Koeien eten graag gras. ('Cows like to eat grass."

burst: these constituents have an indefinite/generic reading

- they do NOT have a definite/specific reading, unlike the Groningen examples in (10)
Determiner drop

Some more details:

the **definite/specific non-neuter** determiner \( (de = \text{‘the.NON-NEUT’}) \) is dropped

- obligatorily in certain Groningen dialects (+)
- optionally in others (⚫)
- never in others (―)

map *Reeks Nederlandse Dialectatlassen* for dropping of ‘de’
Determiner drop

what about the **definite/specific neuter** determiner *(het or ’t =‘the.NEUT’)*?

→ **standard assumption**: it is never dropped

(12) (Ter Laan 1953:35)

*’t*  Peerd lópt in *’t*  laand.
*the.NEUT horse runs in the.NEUT land*

*’t*  Vool is bie hom.
*the.NEUT foal is with him*

'The horse is running on the meadow.
The foal is with him.'
Determiner drop

what about the **definite/specific neuter** determiner (*het* or ’t = ‘the.**NEUT**’)?

➡ **more recent observation:**
(Apotheker 1980; Barbiers et al. 2005-2008; Oosterhof 2008)

it is dropped

- obligatorily in certain Groningen dialects (+)
- optionally in others (●)
- never in others (—)

map *Syntactische Atlas Nederlandse Dialecten* for dropping of ’het’
Determiner drop - idioms

• data from our fieldwork discussed here:
  idioms in the Hogelandsters dialects (dialects spoken in Hogeland)
Determiner drop - idioms

- places of birth of our informants

1. Uithuizermeeden
2. Uithuizen
3. Stedum
4. Oosterwijdwert
5. Zuidbroek
Determiner drop - idioms

- **our observations:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Dropping of Non-Neuter Definite Determiner in Non-Idiomatic Contexts</th>
<th>Dropping of Neuter Definite Determiner in Non-Idiomatic Contexts</th>
<th>Dropping of Non-Neuter Definite Determiner in Idioms</th>
<th>Dropping of Neuter Definite Determiner in Idioms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uithuizermeeden, Uithuizen</td>
<td>obligatory</td>
<td>never</td>
<td>never</td>
<td>never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stedum, Zuidbroek, Oosterwijdwert</td>
<td>optional</td>
<td>never</td>
<td>never</td>
<td>never</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Determiner drop - idioms

Non-neuter definite determiner dropping: obligatory or optional

(13) Hai veegde mie (*de) / (de) mantel oet.
    *he swept me the the coat out*
    'He punished me severely.'

(14) Hai het et an (*de) / (de) loop.
    *he has it on the the run*
    'It's going smoothly for him.'

(15) Hai draaide mie (*de) / (de) rogge toe.
    *he turned me the the back to*
    'He turned his back on me.'
Determiner drop - idioms

Neuter definite determiner dropping: disallowed

(16) Hai ken *(t) gras heuren wassen.
   he can the.neut grass hear grow
   'He’s very conceited, cocky.'

(17) Hai bindt *(t) vour an.
    he binds the.neut forage on
    'He’s launching something.'
Determiner drop

• **Observation**
  ‣ dialects in the province of Groningen (more specifically, in Hogeland) exhibit determiner drop
  ‣ this same syntactic phenomenon is also found in the idioms of these dialects
  ‣ the patterns of determiner drop in idioms are perfectly in line with the dialects’ regular syntax
    ➡ non-neuter definite determiner drop (vs. no neuter determiner drop)
    ➡ obligatory vs. optional determiner dropping

• **Conclusion**
  ‣ the idioms are built up by the regular structure-building mechanisms of the dialects under scrutiny
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Possessive alternation

- many Dutch dialects, e.g. Leuvens (province of Flemish Brabant, Belgium)

- inalienable possession can be marked with different syntactic alternations
  - the possessor can also appear outside of the possessum DP
    (cf. i.a. Vandeweghe 1987; Burridge 1990; Vergnaud & Zubizarreta 1992; Broekhuis & Cornips 1994, 2015; Cornips 1998; Guéron 2006; Hole 2006; Lee-Schoenfeld 2006; Deal 2013a,b; Haegeman & Danckaert 2013)
Possessive alternation

- **Internal possession: \([_{TP} \ldots [_{DP} \text{possessor} \text{possessum}] \ldots]\)**

  - Possession is expressed internally in the possessive DP, e.g. with a possessive pronoun or a genitive nominal
  - The possessor nominals are encoded syntactically as dependents of the possessum nouns

\[(18)\]

a. Hij sloeg op \([_{DP} \text{Marie’s / haar} \text{ arm}]\).
   \(he \; \text{hit} \; \text{on} \; \text{Mary’s} \; \text{her} \; \text{arm}\)

b. Ik gooi een krant naar \([_{DP} \text{Jefs / zijn} \text{ hoofd}]\).
   \(I \; \text{throw} \; \text{a} \; \text{newspaper} \; \text{to} \; \text{Jeff’s} \; \text{his} \; \text{head}\)
Possessive alternation

• External possession: \([\text{TP} \ldots [\text{DP} \text{ possessor}] \ldots [\text{DP} \text{Ddef } \text{possessum}] \ldots]\)

  a nominal is

  ‣ syntactically encoded as a verbal dependent

  ‣ but semantically understood as the possessor of an inalienable noun (preceded by a definite article) in one of its co-arguments

(19) a. Hij sloeg [\text{DP haar }] op [\text{DP de arm }].
  he hit her on the arm

  b. Ik gooi [\text{DP Jef }] een krant naar [\text{DP het hoofd }].
  I throw Jeff a newspaper to the head

  c. [\text{DP Hij }] sluit [\text{DP de ogen }].
  he closes the eyes
Possessive alternation

• "Doubly marked" possession:

\[ [\text{TP} \ldots [\text{DP} \text{possessor}]\ldots[\text{DP} \text{poss.pron.} \text{possessum}]\ldots] \]

(Lee-Schoenfeld’s 2006 terminology)

  ‣ with both external and internal possession
    (coreferential possessors)

(20) a. Hij sloeg [\text{DP Marie}] op [\text{DP haar} arm].
       he hit Mary on her arm

b. Ik gooi [\text{DP hemi}] een krant naar [\text{DP zijn} hoofd].
    I throw him a newspaper to his head

c. [\text{DP Joni}] sluit [\text{DP zijn} ogen].
    Jon closes his eyes
Possessive alternation - idioms

• data from our fieldwork discussed here:
  idioms in the Leuvens dialect
  (dialect spoken in Leuven)
Possessive alternation - idioms

- the possessive alternation with inalienable nouns

Our observations in the Leuvens dialect:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal possession</th>
<th>External possession</th>
<th>'Doubly-marked' possession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In non-idiomatic contexts</td>
<td>In idioms</td>
<td>In non-idiomatic contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Possessive alternation - idioms

(21) **External possession (subject)**

Ik zat met de dood op het lijf.

I sat with the dead on the body = 'I was terrified.'

(22) "Doubly-marked" possession (subject)

Ik zat met de dood op mijn lijf.

I sat with the dead on my body = 'I was terrified.'

(23) **External possession (subject)**

Ik keer hem de rug toe.

I turn him the back to = 'I don't want anything to do with him.'

(24) "Doubly-marked" possession (subject)

Ik zat met de dood op mijn rug toe.

I sat with the dead on my back to = 'I don't want anything to do with him.'
Possessive alternation - idioms

(25) **External possession (indirect object)**
Ik ga *hem* zand in *de* ogen strooien.
*I go him sand in the eyes strew = 'I am going to fool him.'*

(26) **"Doubly-marked" possession (indirect object)**
Ik ga *he mi* zand in *zijn* ogen strooien.
*I go him sand in his eyes strew = 'I am going to fool him.'*

(27) **Internal possession**
Ik ga zand in *zijn* ogen strooien.
*I go sand in his eyes strew = 'I am going to fool him.'*
Possessive alternation - idioms

(28) **External possession (indirect object)**
Ik ga hem de prang op de keel zetten.  
* I go him the clip on  the  throat put  = 'I am going to pressure him.'

(29) **"Doubly-marked" possession (indirect object)**
Ik ga hem hem de prang op zijn zijn keel zetten.  
* I go him their the clip on his  throat put = 'I am going to pressure him.'

(30) **Internal possession**
Ik ga de prang op zijn keel zetten.  
* I go the clip on his  throat put  = 'I am going to pressure him.'
Possessive alternation

• **Observation**
  ‣ in the dialect of Leuven, inalienable possession can be marked with different syntactic alternations
  
  ‣ this same syntactic phenomenon is also found in the idioms of the dialect

  ‣ the pattern of the possessive alternation in idioms is perfectly in line with the dialect’s regular syntax
    
    *(pace Fellbaum 1993; Sailer 2015 on English and German!)*
    
    ➡ internal possession
    ➡ external possession
    ➡ "doubly-marked" possession

• **Conclusion**
  ‣ the idioms are built up by the regular structure-building mechanisms of the dialect under scrutiny
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Perfect doubling

• South-eastern dialects of Dutch, e.g. Loois (Tessenderlo, province of Limburg, Belgium)

• compound tenses featuring an additional, participial *have* (or *be*)
  (cf. i.a. Barbiers et al. 2009; Koeneman et al. 2011; Cornips & Broekhuis 2015)
Perfect doubling

• South-eastern dialects
  ‣ (a) simple past
  ‣ (b) simple (present/past) perfect
    ➡ have/be
    + past participle
  ‣ (c) perfect doubling
    ➡ have/be
    + past participle
    + past participle of have/be
Perfect doubling

(31) a. Ik beet in de boterham.
   I bit in the sandwich
   = 'I bit the sandwich.'

   b. Ik heb in de boterham gebeten.
      I have in the sandwich bitten
      = 'I have bitten the sandwich.'

   c. Ik heb in de boterham gebeten gehad.
      I have in the sandwich bitten had
      = 'I have bitten the sandwich.'

(32) a. Ik viel twee keer.
   I fell two time
   = 'I fell twice.'

   b. Ik ben twee keer gevallen.
      I am two time fallen
      = 'I have fallen twice.'

   c. Ik ben twee keer gevallen geweest.
      I am two time fallen been
      = 'I have fallen twice.'
Perfect doubling

- the double perfect appears in similar contexts as its non-doubling counterpart
- the double perfect is not sensitive to the semantic properties of the main verb
- the double perfect has the so-called ‘superperfect use’ (Carruthers 1994)
- the double perfect can involve a ‘reversal’ interpretation
  - e.g. in Ik heb de fiets gestolen gehad (‘I have the bike stolen had’), the implication can be that the bike is no longer missing

(Barbiers et al. 2009; Koeneman et al. 2011 (and confirmed in our fieldwork))
**Perfect doubling - idioms**

- **our observations in the Loois dialect:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>regular perfect</th>
<th>perfect doubling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>in non-idiomatic contexts</td>
<td>in idioms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1 (age +60)</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2 (age -60)</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perfect doubling - idioms

idioms dependent on perfect aspect
(cf. Harwood & Temmerman 2015; Harwood et al. 2016)

(33) a. Ze hebben in zijn gat gebeten \textit{(gehad).} [Group 1]
    Ze hebben in zijn gat gebeten \textit{(*gehad).} [Group 2]
    \textit{they have in his ass bitten had}
    'He is angry.'
    b. # Ze beten in zijn gat.
    \textit{they bit in his ass \(\neq\) 'He is angry.'}

(34) a. Het is van het camion gevallen \textit{(geweest).} [Group 1]
    Het is van het camion gevallen \textit{(*geweest).} [Group 2]
    \textit{it is from the truck fallen been}
    'It was stolen.'
    b. # Het viel van het camion.
    \textit{it fell from the truck \(\neq\) 'It was stolen.'}
Perfect doubling

• **Observation**
  ‣ the dialect of Tessenderlo exhibits perfect doubling
    ➔ optional for speakers aged 60+
    ➔ disallowed for speakers aged 60-
  ‣ this same syntactic phenomenon is also found in the idioms of the dialect
  ‣ the pattern of perfect doubling in idioms is perfectly in line with the dialect’s regular syntax
    ➔ optional (60+) vs. disallowed (60-)

• **Conclusion**
  ‣ the idioms are built up by the regular structure-building mechanisms of the dialect under scrutiny
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Why inflexibility?

• **discussed in this talk:** several cases of idioms (in dialects of Dutch) built up by the regular structure-building mechanisms of the dialect

• **this suggests:** these idioms are
  — completely regular in their morpho-syntax
  — not stored wholesale in the lexicon as single, atomic units

• **remaining puzzle:** if idioms are not syntactic atoms, why do “stock and standard” syntactic manipulations (topicalisation, passivisation) sometimes destroy idioms?
Why inflexibility?

- also the case for some of the dialectal idioms discussed earlier

(16) Hai ken *(t) gras heuren wassen.  
he can the.NEUT grass hear grow   
'He’s very conceited, cocky.'

(35) **No passivisation**
# 't Gras ken (deur hom) wassen heurd worden.  
the grass can by him grow heard become  
≠ 'He’s very conceited, cocky.'

(36) **No topicalisation**
# Ja, 't Gras kon hai wis heuren wassen!  
yes the grass could he certainly hear grow  
≠ 'He’s very conceited, cocky.'
Why inflexibility?

• also the case for some of the idioms discussed earlier

(33) Ze hebben in zijn gat gebeten (gehad).

they have in his ass bitten had

'He is angry.'

(37) No passivisation

# Er is in zijn gat gebeten (geweest/geworden).

there is in his ass bitten been become

≠ 'He is angry.'

(38) No topicalisation

# Amai, in zijn gat hebben ze zeker gebeten (gehad)!

gosh in his ass have they certainly bitten had

≠ 'He is angry.'
Why inflexibility?

- the most well-known account: **Semantic Mapping**

- **2 types of idioms**
  ‣ **idiomatically combining expressions (ICEs):**
    individual elements of the literal expression can be mapped onto individual elements of the figurative meaning
    e.g. *spill the beans*

  ‣ **idiomatic phrases (IdPs):**
    the expression as a whole is mapped onto the figurative meaning
    e.g. *kick the bucket*

  `spill   the beans   kick the bucket`
  `divulge  the secret  die`
Why inflexibility?

• **ICEs = flexible**, can undergo topicalisation and passivisation  
  > an ICE is decomposable  
  > its component parts are referential

(39) a. *The beans, Bob has most certainly spilled.*  
    b. *The beans were spilled (by Bob).*

• **IdPs = inflexible**, cannot undergo topicalisation and passivisation  
  > an IdP is not decomposable  
  > its component parts are not referential

(40) a. # *The bucket, Bob has gone and kicked.*  
    b. # *The bucket was kicked (by Bob).*
Why inflexibility?

• an interesting extra hypothesis (Trotzke 2015)
  ★ morpho-syntactic manipulations are licit
  ★ information-structural modifications sometimes aren’t

➤ constraints on word order variation (topicalisation, passivisation)
  ‣ are not only due to the ICE-IdP divide
  ‣ are also due to syntax-external factors at the level of pragmatics
Why inflexibility?

- Trotzke (2015:225) observes the following tendency (‘accessibility’ vs. ‘bizarreness’):
  - “when the literal reading is not accessible/plausible to the hearer (when it is ‘bizarre’), the hearer infers, due to a relevance implicature, that the idiomatic reading should be chosen”
  - these syntax-external pragmatic factors may overwrite ordering constraints, and hence play a role in idiom flexibility
  - according to Trotzke, this is why IdPs with a bizarre literal reading can still show up in e.g. topicalisation constructions, while IdPs with a plausible literal reading cannot
• an idiom such as *pop one’s clogs* (*die* = IdP) has a bizarre literal reading, a non-idiomatic reading is not easily available
  ‣ topicalisation/passivisation is possible

(41) a. *Amy Winehouse sang that song before her clogs were popped.*
    b. *Her clogs, Amy most certainly popped.*

• an idiom such as *kick the bucket* (*die* = IdP) has an accessible plausible literal, non-idiomatic meaning
  ‣ topicalisation/passivisation is impossible, cf. (40)
Why inflexibility?

- the data discussed today are in line with (and support for?) the idea that
  - morpho-syntactic manipulations in idioms are **allowed**
    (cf. interaction with productive syntax (e.g. V2, embedding), cf. free variation of temporal-aspectual-agreement specifications)
  - modifications that have **information-structural** impact
    (topicalisation, passivisation) are sometimes **not allowed**
  - it seems that **determiner drop** (Oosterhof 2008), **possessive alternations** (Deal 2013a) and **perfect doubling** (Koeneman et al. 2011) do not have an information-structural impact (at least, in the dialects under scrutiny), and can be classified as run-of-the-mill morpho-syntactic manipulations
Overview

★ What is an idiom?
  ‣ Inflexibility
  ‣ Regularity
★ The project
★ Findings - Idioms in Dutch dialects: regular syntax
  ‣ Determiner drop
  ‣ Possessive alternation
  ‣ Perfect doubling
★ Why inflexibility?
★ Summary
Summary

• **ongoing debate: inflexibility vs. regularity ~ lexicon vs. syntax**
  ‣ are idioms stored wholesale as single, atomic units in the mental lexicon?  
    cf. idiom inflexibility
  ‣ are idioms built up by the regular structure-building mechanisms of the  
    language?  
    cf. idioms with regular (morpho-)syntax

• **this talk:** idioms are built up by the same normal (morpho-)syntactic  
  structure-building mechanisms that create non-idiomatic structures

• **evidence:** new data from idioms in dialectal Dutch
  ‣ determiner drop in Hogelandsters
  ‣ possessive alternation in Leuvens
  ‣ perfect doubling in Loois
Thank You

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Thank You

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don’t you ever find idioms with a syntactic structure that doesn’t fit in with the general grammar of the system?


> e.g. **iemand de ogen uitsteken** (stab someone the eyes out = 'make someone jealous'), **iemand op de hielen zitten** (sit someone on the heels = 'follow someone closely'), **iemand op het hart trappen** (step someone on the heart = 'hurt someone'), **iemand de oren wassen** (wash someone the ears = 'tell someone what they did wrong'), **iemand de mond snoeren** (lace someone the mouth = 'silence someone')

> careful: discussion in the literature whether or not it is indeed the case that Standard Dutch lacks external possession with an IO-possessor (e.g. Fox 1981; Vandeweghe 1987, recent work by J. Scholten (Utrecht)) + unclarity about the judgments (Boef et al. 2015) — needs to be tested systematically!
don’t you ever see syntactic irregularities in idioms?

irregular syntax (Harwood et al. 2016)

e.g. English  
be that as it may
Dutch  
schoon schip maken (clean ship make = 'leave the past behind, start anew')

proverbs, full sentential idioms: do not interact with productive syntax  
(Horvath & Siloni 2015, 2016; Harwood et al. 2016)

- The early bird catches the worm.
- People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.
- You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.
- Do bears shit in the woods?
- What’s cooking?
- Where’s the beef?
- Cry me a river!
- Eat my shorts!

The elephants in the room
Horvath & Siloni (2015, 2016): we need to distinguish between two types of idioms

- **phrasal idioms** (regular syntax)

- **clausal idioms** (no interaction with productive syntax)

  - the latter are stored wholesale in the lexicon as independent entries on their own, as single units, as "big units" (i.e. syntactically atomic, multiword expressions functioning as a single "word" in syntax)
Selected references


Selected references


Horvath, Julia & Tal Siloni. 2014. Idioms: The type-sensitive storage model. Paper presented at *TAU-GU Workshop on Relative Clauses*, November 2014, Goethe University, Frankfurt Sponsored by the Strategic Partnership Program (DAAD) and the DFG (FOR 1783).


Selected references


