Systematic Flexibility in Verb-Object Idioms

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While it is generally acknowledged that some idioms are syntactically flexible while others are not (Katz & Postal 1963; etc.), the existence of variation within the class of flexible idioms—specifically the fact that there is systematicity within this variation—has received relatively little attention, though Fraser (1970) is a notable exception.

I present data from the Corpus of Contemporary American (COCA; Davies 2008-) and Google Books that further elucidate the typology of flexible idioms. These data reveal that if a verb-object idiom can undergo nominal gerundization, it will also participate in object incorporation; and if it undergoes object incorporation, it will participate in passivization. This suggests at least a four-way distinction among idioms, as shown in (1) – (4) below (grammatical examples from COCA). I argue that a structural account of idioms (Folli & Harley 2007; Punske & Stone 2014), in which each idiom is associated with a particular functional structure, best accommodates these results.

(**1**) *draw the line* ('set a limit')
   a. She kept everything in its place, and **drew the line** at frills and knickknacks.
   b. The **line was drawn**, and I think it was a turning point for the president…
   c. Cases that fall between the poles may present hard **line-drawing** questions…
   d. I'm seeking some -- a **drawing of the line** by the companies themselves, some degree of self-regulation…

(**2**) *steal the show* ('be the center of attention')
   a. But when the sax player added his harmonic flavor, he nearly **stole the show**.
   b. But **the show is stolen** by Michal Kocab, a young composer famous throughout Europe…
   c. Witt…sees herself as fortunate not to be thrown in with **show-stealing** "clowns and dogs."
   d. #Marsha's **stealing of the show** made Jan jealous.

(**3**) *make a killing* ('have great financial success')
   a. If you played a short-term gold game recently, you **made a killing**.
   b. There's **a killing to be made**. New York has it all.
   c. *Ralph's **killing-making** investment in the stock market meant that he never had to work again.
   d. *There was an unprecedented **making of a killing** by a group of venture capitalists.

(**4**) *hit the sack* ('go to bed')
   a. If I don't **hit the sack** now, I may as well pull an all-nighter.
   b. #Once **the sack was hit** by Janice, her eyes closed almost immediately.
   c. #With three children in the house, there's always a lot of **sack-hitting** after dinner and bath time.
   d. #My **hitting of the sack** is never a good indication of when I will actually fall asleep.

For the Google Books corpus study, 38 verb-object idioms were investigated in five syntactic configurations: object modification (5a); object quantification (5b); passivization (5c); nominal gerundization (5d); and object incorporation (5e). An idiom was coded "yes" for each construction where at least one example was found. For the COCA corpus study, 40 verb-object idioms were investigated, including 32 from the Google Books study. The same constructions were investigated, and the same procedure was used for coding.

(**5**) *break the ice* ('initiate conversation')
   a. …break the thin ice of informality
   b. …break some ice and get the party started
   c. The ice was broken.
   d. …a breaking of the ice between passengers
   e. …the ice breaking question

Both studies found an implicational relationship among three of the constructions: If an idiom was found in the nominal gerundization construction, it was also found in object incorporation; if it was found in object incorporation, it was found in passivization. This implicational relationship remains unexplained in most theories of idiomaticity, including the lexical item approach (e.g. Katz & Postal 1963), semantic mapping, (e.g. Nunberg, Sag, & Wasow 1994), the partial function approach (e.g. Gazdar, Klein, Pullum, & Sag 1985), and quasi-inference (e.g. Pulman 1993). Only structural approaches (e.g. Folli & Harley 2007) can account for these intricate relationships.

On the structural distinction approach, idioms can be sensitive to varying levels of syntactic structure (c.f. Punske & Stone 2014). For instance, if an idiom is sensitive to active Voice, it will not retain its interpretation in the passive. And if that level of structure is fixed, nothing below can be modified either, for example, by nominalizing the structure with nP in place of vP. By this logic, then, there must be some level of functional structure, call it FP, which intervenes between VoiceP and vP, which conditions object licensing, and which is affected in object incorporation structures.
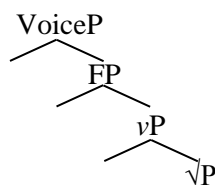
Theories which hold that idioms are complex lexical items must stipulate which constructions each idiom allows. On this approach, any implicational relationship between the constructions allowed by flexible idioms is purely accidental. The semantic mapping approach, which maintains that the parts of a flexible idiom correspond to components of its figurative meaning, cannot make distinctions within the class of flexible idioms. Similarly to semantic mapping, the partial function approach proposes that the pieces of a flexible idiom are free in the syntax but are limited semantically as partial functions with highly restricted (in most cases unary) combinatory possibilities. The semantic nature of this approach fails to account for the syntactic distinctions revealed in this corpus study. Finally, the quasi-inference approach suggests that the constructions allowed by flexible idioms are related via entailment rather than syntax. Again, this approach does not accommodate any differences among flexible idioms, let alone systematically related ones.

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