

Breaking Idioms with Right Node Raising

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As is well-known, certain movements such as raising preserve idiomatic interpretation of idioms:

- (1) The cat seems to be out of the bag.

As shown in (1) (with parts of the idiom underlined). (1) is at least one example where surface discontinuity is not sufficient to break idioms. In this study I look at one example where it does: Right Node Raising (RNR) is a construction where material (referred to as the pivot) is shared between two or more conjuncts, as in (2):

- (2) Ramona wrote, and Juan reviewed, *an abstract*.

Specifically, I look at cases of RNR where the pivot constitutes part of an idiom. In (3-5), idiomatic interpretation is not available. I use the symbol [⊖] as the diacritic indicating idiomatic interpretation is unavailable, while the [⊕] diacritic indicates idiomatic interpretation is available.

- (3) ⊖ John kicked, and Mary filled, the bucket.
(4) ⊖ Erick must not let the cat, but it doesn't matter whether Tomas will let the dog, out of the bag.
(5) ⊖ Linda's boss forgot to bring, so she did not end up getting the axe.

The example in (5) shows that the effect of RNR blocking idiomatic interpretation persists even when the idiom is continuous.

Here are other cases, along with (1), where idioms aren't contiguous. Even with material intervening it is possible to get an idiomatic interpretation for the following:

- (6) ? Chad kicked, while sleeping, the bucket. [Adjunct]
(7) ? Chad kicked, yesterday, the bucket. [HNPS]
(8) ? Chad kicked, or so I heard, the bucket. [Parenthetical]

This suggests that there is something about the structure of RNR that is putting a constraint that prevents idiomatic interpretation.

This raises the following questions: Why should RNR destroy idiomatic interpretation? What do these cases tell us about the structure of RNR, and possibly, about the structural conditions on the interpretation of idioms?

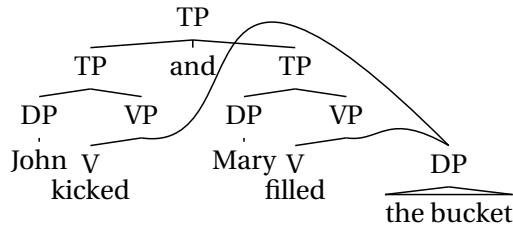
I propose that the absence of idiomatic interpretation in RNR provides evidence in favor of a multidominant account and against an ellipsis account.

The various existing proposals for the structure of RNR usually take one of three positions: RNR is derived by ellipsis (Wexler and Culicover 1980, Ha 2008), movement (Sabbagh 2007, Clapp 2008, Abe and Hornstein 2012), or multidominance (McCawley 1982, Wilder 1999, Bachrach and Katzir 2009, Grosz 2015, Kluck 2009). There exist also proposals that RNR is a heterogeneous phenomenon (Barros and Vicente 2011, Valmala 2013, Chaves 2014) not unifiable to a single type of derivation. I set these aside for now and focus on distinguishing between multidominance and ellipsis accounts.

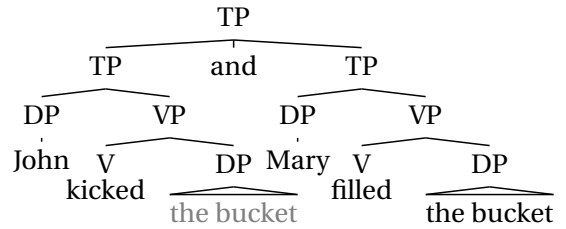
I am following the general idea from proposals about the structure and interpretation of idioms such as O'Grady (1998), Svenonius (2005) and explicitly adopting the analysis of idiom formation in the Minimalist program proposed by (Bruening 2010). What these proposals all have in common is that idioms must at some point in the derivation be contiguous. Bruening bases his theory on selection: if X is idiomatic and X selects Y, then X and Y may be interpreted idiomatically.

For RNR, I take as representative of ellipsis accounts the detailed theory given in Ha (2008). I assume the multidominance theory proposed in Wilder (1999). These are sketched below, using (3) as an example, simplifying many details and glossing over structural assumptions not central to our current discussion.

(9) Multidominance analysis



(10) Ellipsis analysis



I argue that the loss of idiomatic interpretation is the problematic for the ellipsis structure in (10), which deletes the first copy of the pivot under identity with the second. This predicts that (11) and (12) should behave the same way since there's a copy of *the bucket* in both conjuncts.

- (11) ⊕ John kicked the bucket, and ⊖ Mary filled the bucket.
(‘John died, and there was a bucket that was filled by Mary.’)
- (12) ⊖ John kicked the bucket, and Mary filled the bucket.
(intended ‘John died, and there was a bucket that was filled by Mary.’)

Another problem for an ellipsis account is that in uncontroversial instances of ellipsis, such as VP-ellipsis, the idiom survives, as in (13).

- (13) ⊕ John kicked the bucket, and ⊕ Bill did kick the bucket too.
(‘John died, and Bill died.’)

By contrast, in a multidominance account (MD), there is only one multiply-dominated copy of the pivot, as in (9). I propose that the multiply dominated pivot must be *fully dominated* by idiomatic structure in order to allow idiomatic interpretation. Following Wilder’s notion of *full dominance*, originally proposed for linearization purposes:

- (14) X fully dominates α iff X dominates α and X does not share α (Wilder 1999: 6, ex. 18)

This explains the loss of idiomatic interpretation in (3-5). A consequence of this is that the relationship between idiomatic material and dominating material can be bidirectional. That is, consider cases of idiomatic extension, where the first conjunct is idiomatic but the second is not, but potentially could be:

- (15) ⊕ Leonard was quick to spill, but Perry came around to help clean up, the beans.
- (16) ⊕ By working on binding theory Kristen has a tiger, but by working on coordination Heather has a whole pride of lions, by the tail.

To *spill the beans* means ‘divulge a secret’. The phrase *clean up the beans* is not an idiom. We would expect, given the proposal above this sentence to lose its idiomatic interpretation, but it instead persists and *extends* to the second conjunct. It is easy to see (15) can mean that Leonard divulged a secret and Perry is the PR agent who swooped in to do damage control.

Ellipsis accounts would have trouble with this. The interpretation of the two conjuncts should be independent of each other, as in (11), where the first conjunct is idiomatic but the second is only literal. What’s left to explain is why in (15) we can extend and why in (3) we cannot. Experimental work on idioms, including the study in (Hamblin and Gibbs 1999), have demonstrated there is a difference between decomposable idioms like *spill the beans* in (15), where extension is possible, and nondecomposable idioms like *kick the bucket* in (3), where extension is not possible. In either case, multidominance provides a mechanic for us to explain the possibility of this interpretation, where ellipsis does not.

Selected references: BRUENING, B. 2010. Ditransitive asymmetries and a theory of idiom formation. *Linguistic Inquiry* 41:519:562. GROSZ, P. 2015. Movement and agreement in right-node raising constructions. *Syntax* 18:1-38. HA, S. 2008. Ellipsis, Right Node Raising, and Across-the-Board Constructions. PhD diss., Boston U. HAMBLIN, J. AND GIBBS, R. 1999. Why you can’t kick the bucket as you slowly die: Verbs in idiom comprehension. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 28. WILDER, C. 1999. Right node raising and the LCA. *Proceedings of WCCFL* 18:586-598.