On the syntactic regularity of idioms
New evidence from Dutch dialects

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Idioms are expressions that have a non-compositional interpretation: their meanings are not simply predictable from the literal meanings of their parts. An example is *bite the dust* ('die'): its meaning has nothing to do with either biting or dust.

(1) Ned Stark bit the dust. = 'Ned Stark died.'

One aspect of idioms that has received ample attention in the literature concerns the question of whether they are stored in our mental lexicon (a.o. Jackendoff 1995; Everaert 2010). It is well-known that idioms sometimes show signs of being syntactically inflexible. As soon as one of its component parts undergoes passivisation or topicalisation, the idiomatic meaning disappears (# = loss of idiomatic interpretation) (for similar examples, cf. a.o. Newmeyer 1974; Nunberg et al. 1994).

(2) a. #The dust was bitten by Ned. c. #The dust, Ned has bitten.

One could argue that lack of syntactic transformations automatically follows if an idiom is syntactically atomic, i.e. a multiword expression that functions as a single word in syntax, that is stored wholesale as a unit in the lexicon (e.g. Gibbs & Gonzales 1985; McClone et al. 1994).

However, it can also be argued that the idiom *bit the dust* in (1) is a fully regular English VP (a.o. Fellbaum 1993; Nunberg et al. 1994; McGinnis 2002; Everaert 2010; Stone 2013). For example, the verb *bite* in (1) receives the same irregular past tense form as it would in a non-idiomatic context. Moreover, the temporal, aspectual and agreement specification of the idiomatic verb can vary freely, as shown in (3). These data suggest that the idiom's (morpho-)syntax is completely regular, and that it is not stored as a single, atomic unit (Stone 2013).

(3) a. Ned bites the dust. b. Ned will bite the dust. c. Ned has bitten the dust.

This talk contributes to this ongoing debate and further demonstrates that idioms are built up by the same regular structure-building mechanisms that create non-idiomatic syntactic structures. If the syntax of idioms is completely regular, the following prediction should be borne out: when a language (variety) exhibits a syntactic phenomenon that is 'peculiar' (i.e. that seems to be a cross-dialectal 'rarity'), then this same syntactic phenomenon will also be found in the idioms of that language (variety). This is exactly what we find in Dutch dialects. I discuss 3 of these cases in 3 different Dutch dialects.