Idioms: what you see is what you get?

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1. Propositions

(i) I take a 'liberal' interpretation of what an idiom is: a collocational restriction (cf. 1); I don't want to make a priori distinctions within this set of constructions.

(ii) It is not possible to use compositionality as a a way to make a distinction between 'compositional/semantically transparant' and 'noncompositional/ semantically nontransparant' idioms.

(iii) Idioms are normal phrases with all the morpho-syntactic flexibility connected to to the constituting words, phrasal structures, were it not that there is collocational restriction between the lexical elements.

2. Re (i)

(1) Idioms are conventionalized linguistic expressions which can be decomposed into potentially meaningful components and exhibit co-occurrence restrictions that cannot be explained in terms of rule-governed morpho-syntactic or semantic restrictions.

⟹ in this definition (non-)compositionality is not taken as a defining feature of an idiom. Idioms are *conventionalised* co-occurrence restrictions, i.e. idioms are firstly and foremost defined in terms of E-language:

(2) **a. I-language** (internalized language) refers to the study of the competence of a native speaker
b. E-language (externalized language) is any concept of language that is detached from and independent of the mental concept of competence. If we take expressions of a language and consider them without any reference to the knowledge of speakers, they are expressions of an E-language.

(3) **a.** The notion 'convention', 'conventionalized' cannot be defined with an I-language vocabulary (for syntax, or the lexicon). Whether a linguistic coomunity 'has decided' that *kick the bucket* is a special form or not is invisible to syntax.
b. For syntactic purposes lexical items are 'empty placeholders' and only formal features are visible, legible for syntax; the specific phonetic/ phonological/morphological form is not.

3. Re (ii)

(4) **(Non-)compositionality**
The meaning of a complex expression is a function of the meaning of its parts and the mode of composition.

(5)　**a.** '...the principle of compositionality is not an empirical hypothesis. Rather, it must be viewed as a methodological principle, one that represents a choice to do? semantics in a particular way.'
(Groenendijk & Stokhof 2005, based on Janssen (1983)).
b. 'the principle [of compositionality] can be made precise only in conjunction with an explicit theory of meaning and of syntax, together with a fuller specification of what is required by the relation "is a function of". If the syntax is sufficiently unconstrained and meanings are sufficiently rich, there seems no doubt that natural languages can be described compositionally.' Partee (1984)

(6)　Everaert (2003; 2010); Boas & Sag (2012)
　　a. *kick$_1$*　　MEANING:　KICK
　　　　　　　　SYNTAX: [- NP]
　　b. *kick$_2$*　　MEANING:　DIE
　　　　　　　　SYNTAX: [- *the bucket$_2$*]
　　c. *bucket$_1$*　　MEANING:　BUCKET
　　　　　　　　SYNTAX: -
　　d. *bucket$_2$*　　MEANING:　-
　　　　　　　　SYNTAX: [*kick$_2$* -]
　　e. literal: <6a+6c>; idiomatic: <6b+6d>

(7)　Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994) argue for a distinction between
　　- non-compostional idioms (*kick the bucket*): **idiomatic phrases** (IP), and
　　- compositional idioms (*pull the strings*): **idiomatically combining expressions** (ICE)

(8)　**a.** This distinction is problematic: 'the relation between idiomatic and literal meanings is so unsystematic as to deserve no place in the theory. It is an essential arbitrary relation, which looks plausible only in retrospect' Weinreich (1969); and this statement is reflected in dictionaries over and over again.
b. The distinction is based om the assumption that one can formalize the notion partial function introduced in GPKS (cf. 10); but note this semantic approach has never materialized (vd Linden 1993, Schenk 1995)

(9)　GPKS : "The account they suggest [Wasow, Nunberg, Sag 1982) is to make use of the notion of partial function. To illustrate, the verb *spill* might be assigned two senes (perhaps by the same mechanism introduced in section 4 for multiple lexical translations), which we can represent as two distinct expressions of intensional logic; **spill**' (representing the literal sense) and **spill**'' (representing the idiomatic sense – roughly (but not exactly) the sense of *divulge*). Similarly, beans is assigned two senses **beans**' and **beans**''. The latter of which has roughly (but not exactly) the senses of *information*. [….] This approach to the semantics of idioms requires a fine-grained theory of word meaning, one quite in the spirit of Goodman (1949), and Bolinger (1965), which in general eschews complte synonymy. [… and so one] p.238 – 242]

⟹ Problems with the idiomatic phrases (IP) - idiomatically combining expressions (ICE) distinction (cf. 7)

<u>Conceptual</u>

(10) If we take an expression X and want to decide whether X is in ICE or an IP, how we would go about? Can we say, X is an ICE, given some independent criterium, and predict such-and-such syntactic behaviour?

    a. We cannot: we don't have grammaticality judgements on compositionality. We would not be able to decide whether X is an IP or an ICE independent from what the facts tell us. Only when we see that X allows no syntactic flexibility, we can say that it is an IP. When flexibility would be possible, it would have to be an ICE.

    b. We might. But then we have to be more precise than saying that something is +/- compositional. Perhaps the worrk of Aguilar (2014) (& Zwarts) can help us out here. (But I haven't don the work).

<u>'Empirical': synonyms</u>

(11) **a.** Hij *let/#past op de kleintjes*
he takes care of the little ones
'He is careful with his money'
    b. It is *raining/#snowing cats and dogs*
'It rains very heavily'
    c. He *dressed/#clothed the part*
'to clothe oneself suitably for the role or function one has to perform'
    d. *De dader/#de schuldige ligt op het kerkhof*
The offender/the culprit lies on the churchyard
'The offender is not known'/'The cat has done it'.
    e. te veel van het goede   e'. #te veel van het slechte
too much of a good thing   too much of a bad thing
    f. twee weten meer dan één   f'. #drie weten meer dan één
two heads are better than one three heads are better than one
    g. samen uit, samen thuis   g'. #samen weg, samen thuis
together out, together home   together away, together home
we're in this together
    h. Ik stelde hem de vraag/#het verzoek hiermee akkoord te gaan
I put him the question/the request to agree with this

<u>'Empirical': examples of unexpected differences in movement</u>

(12) a. Ik *gaf* hem *een koekje van eigen deeg*
I gave him a biscuit of own dough
'I gave him a taste of his own medicine'
#*Een koekje van eigen deeg gaf* ik hem (topicalization)
#Ik *gaf* hem *een* <u>verdiend</u> *koekje van eigen deeg* (modifcation: 'deserved')
#*Een koekje van eigen deeg* werd hem *gegeven* (passive)

    b. Zij *haalt* mij *het vel over de oren*
She pulls me the skin over the ears
'She fleeces me' (trick someone as a way of getting their money)
#*Het vel haalde* zij me *over de oren* (topicalization)
#Zij *haalt* me *het* <u>totale</u> *vel over de oren* (modification: 'completely')
Het vel wordt mij *over de oren gehaald* (passive)

4. Re (iii)

⟹ normal morpho-syntactic flexibility

<u>Words retain their properties</u>

(13) a. #He *kicked the bucket* slowly   (Nunberg 1978)
     b. He died slowly
     c. #He kicked the ball slowly

(14) a. Zij <u>is</u> vertrokken   (Everaert 1995)
        'She has left'
     b. Zij <u>heeft</u> *haar biezen gepakt*
        She has her bags packed
        'She left'
     c. Zij heeft/*is haar boeken gepakt
        'She packed her books'

(15) a. *heilig boontje*   *heilige boontje*-<u>s</u>
        holy little bean
        'a goody-goody'
     b. *vrolijke Frans*   *vrolijke Frans*-<u>en</u>
        happy Frans
        'happy person'
     c. *een lulletje rozewater*   *lulletje*-<u>s</u> *rozewater*
        a little prick rose water
        'a wally'
     d. *een heilig boontje*   *heilige boontje*-<u>s</u>
        a holy little bean
        'a goody-goody'

(16) a. Het hart zinkt hem in de schoenen.
        the heart sank him into the boots
        'his heart sank into his boots'
     b. Het hart zonk hem in de schoenen.
     c. Het hart is hem in de schoenen gezonken.

<u>But there seems to be exceptions</u>

(17) a. Het mes snijdt aan twee kanten.
        The knife cuts on two sides
        'It works both ways'
     b. Het mes sneed aan twee kanten.
     c. #Het mes heeft aan twee kanten gesneden.

(18) a. Praatjes vullen geen gaatjes.
        Talks fill no holes
        'The greatest talkers are the least doers.'
     b. #Praatjes vulden geen gaatjes.
     c. #Praatjes hebben geen gaatjes gevuld.

(19) a. Zij zien door de bomen het bos niet meer
        They see through the woods the forest not any more
        'They can't see the wood for the trees.'
    b. Zij zagen door de bomen het bos niet meer
    c. #Zij hebben door de bomen het bos niet meer gezien

(20) #Het water heeft in de zon geglinsterd
     The water has glistened in the sun

<u>Movement (passive), as expected</u>

(21) a. Zij kocht het boek/een boek
        She bought the book/a book
    b. Het boek/?een boek werd gekocht
        Er werd een boek/*het boek gekocht
        'The book/a book was bought'

(22) a. Ik draaide hem *een loer*
        I turned him a 'loer'
        I played a nasty /dirty trick on him
    b. #*Een loer* werd hem *gedraaid*
    c. Er werd hem *een loer gedraaid*

(23) a. Hij zette de bloemetjes buiten.
        He put the little flowers outside
        'He paint the town red, he had a ball'
    b. En vanavond worden de bloemetjes buiten gezet.
    c. #Er wordt/worden de bloemetjes buiten gezet.

(24) a. *kick the bucket*
    b. "When we do talk about death, we are trained to hold euphemisms like
        shields. Far more people pass on, push up daisies, *kick buckets*, visit Davy
        Jones locker, or journey to the great beyond, than simply die. In fact,
        linguistically speaking, we are close to overcoming death."
        http://scicom.ucsc.edu/SciNotes/9502/Death.html
    c. Dead Apple Tours runs trips throughout the week—check the schedule for
        available dates and times. Tours depart from 36th & Madison, across from
        the Morgan Library. Corral fellow thanatologists and let Dead Apple Tours
        showcase sites where *buckets were kicked*, *dust was bitten*, and mortality
        sponges were squeezed dry.Tour-takers must be at least 13 years old.
        https://www.groupon.com/deals/dead-apple-tours
    d. "Say Hallelujah; Throw up your hands; *The bucket is kicked*; The body is
        gone" [*Say Hallelujah*, Tracy Chapman]
    e. Vaughn Whiskey @VaughnWhiskey 02:11 - 28 apr. 2016
        I think @PurrKitty_Purr *kicked the bucket*.
        Charis @PurrKitty_Purr 29 apr. 2016
        @VaughnWhiskey haha *no buckets were kicked* in the making of this
        announcement

<u>but only to some extent</u>

(25) a. Ik *jaag* hem *de stuipen op het lijf*
     I drive/rush the fits on the body
     I give him a fit / I scare the (living) daylights out of him
   b. #*De stuipen* werden hem *op het lijf gejaagd*
   c. #Er werd hem *de stuipen op het lijf gejaagd*

(26) a. Zij staken de draak met haar.
     They poked the dragon with her
     'They poke fun at her'
   b. #De draak schijnt met haar te worden gestoken.
   c. Er schijnt de draak met haar te worden gestoken.

<u>wordplay: literal and 'metaphoric' are simultaneosly available</u>

5. A way to approach the problem (if one wants to): L-selection (building on a long tradition, Bresnan 1982, Baltin 1989, Vergnaud 1985)

(27) An idiom is a syntactic constituent X such that there is a set of terminal elements Q, $Q = (\alpha_1,..,\alpha_i,..,\alpha_n)$ for n≥2, for which it holds that α_i is the head of X and for all α_j, j≠i, α_j is L-selected by α_i.

(28) **a.** L-selection involves the selection by one terminal element α of another terminal element β where the projection of β is in the syntactic domain of α.
   b. The syntactic domain of head α is the set of nodes contained in Max(α) that are distinct from and do not contain α.

(29) [*decide*]; V
   a. Phonological representation: /dɪsaɪd/
   b. C-selection: [___ PP]
   c. L-selection: [___ [on]]
   d. Semantics: 'choose someone or something from a number of possible choices'

(30) [*kick*]   V
   a. Phonological representation: /kɪk/
   b. C-selection: [___ NP]   b'.   C-selection: [___]
   c. Semantics:
     - aspectual marking: + semelfactive
     - lexical semantics:
     (1) 'hit something/someone with your foot'
     (2) 'move your legs as if you were kicking something'
     (3) 'stop doing something that is bad for you'
     (4) 'hit a horse's sides with your heels to make it move forward' .
     (5) 'die', L-selection: [___ [*bucket*, sem:(3), +def]]

(31) [*bucket*] N
   a. phonological representation: /bʌkɪt/
   b. semantics
      (1) 'round open container with a handle, used for carrying liquid and substances such as sand or soil'
      (2) 'a part of a machine shaped like an open container with a handle, used for moving soil, stones etc.'
      (3) 'Ø', L-selection [[kick, sem:(30, c5)] ___]

⟹ (some) consequences

(32) a. Idioms are always headed: A lexical item could not be L-selected if there was not a lexical item to L-select it in the first place.
      [$_{VP}$ V NP_{OBJ} PP_{LOC}]   [$_S$ NP_{SUBJ} [$_{VP}$ V NP_{OBJ}]
   b. The restriction needs not to be stated by a separate principle (cf. O'Grady (1998), Koopman and Sportiche (1991)).
   c. Kuiper & Everaert (2000):
      a [-]$_N$ *of the first water*   (but there are more)

(33) We might use the 'head selects complement' and 'complement selects head' features of the lexical analysis to account for restrictions on movement (following Vergnaud 1985)

⟹ Downside: introduction of an extremely powerful instrument in our grammar: (i) it will allow you to do too much, (ii) you have to tweak the notion 'selection'.

6. Alternative?
⟹ From a syntactic point of view, there is no fundamental difference between:
      The strings were pulled
      The bucket was kicked
If it is odd, syntax is not blame, and semantics has to clean up the mess, so to say.

⟹ Contrary to Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994), and many others, I suggest that that doesn't mean that in order to account for the morphosyntactic behaviour of idioms "we have to appeal not just to the semantic properties of idioms, but to the figurational processes that underlie them and the discursive functions that they generally serve." (p.494).

⟹ Yes, the syntactic flexibility of a phrase will "ultimately be explained in terms of the compatibility of its semantics with the semantics and pragmatics of various construction." (p.531) but we do that by separating syntax and semantics on this point, and move it outside the domain of compositional semantics. (I am aware that for many this a rather extreme position wrt the syntax-semantics interface; this statement is triggered by Gehrke & McNally 2016)

⟹ Idioms are the domain of 'distributional semantics': *linguistic items with similar distributions have similar meanings*. "the research area that develops and studies theories and methods for quantifying and categorizing semantic similarities between

linguistic items based on their distributional properties in large samples of language data. "

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Idioms: what you see is what you get?

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Preliminary 1

Cognitive scientists need to be explain that a phrase is not simply a string of words but a structured set of words: *what you see is not what you get*. I will argue for you (linguists) that an idiom is just a string of words: *what you see is what you get* (but I'll explain)

Preliminary 2

I am repeating the point I have been making for the past 10-15 years, and I am heavily relying on my 2010-paper.

Preliminary 3

I am living in a bubble, for the moment; I am well aware that there is literature out there that is relevant. I will incoporate it; don't feel offended if I am not quoting you.

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Defining properties of idioms: traditional

- An idiom is a grammatical form - single morpheme or composite form - the meaning of which is not deducible from its structure. (Hockett 1956: 222)
- The term idiom is used to refer to any expression (even a single word or subpart of a word) whose meaning is not wholly the predictable from its morphosyntactic structural description. Noyer http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~rnoyer/dm/

- *to have other fish to fry*, etc.
- *All's fair in love and war*, etc.
- *a family man*, etc.
- *for the time being*, etc.
- *to follow* someone*'s lead*, etc.

Defining properties of idioms: lexicographic

'An idiom is a multilexemic expression E whose meaning cannot be deduced by the general rules of the language in question from the meaning of the constituent lexemes of E, their semantically loaded morphological characteristics (if any) and their syntactic configuration.'
(Mel'čuk 1995:167)

'... any expression in which at least one constituent is polysemous, and in which a selection of a subsense is determined by the verbal context, is a phraseological unit.'
'A phraseological unit that involves at least two polysemous constituents, and in which there is a reciprocal contextual selection of subsenses, will be called an idiom.'
(Weinreich 1969: 42)

- **I-language**
  What could be said
  Syntax, Semantics

- **E-language**
  What is said
  Spelling, Stylistics, Lexicography

- In morphology it has been proposed to distinguish:
  <u>possible words</u>, result of morphological rules:
      "O here is a Bed; *Shrinkproofer* than that
      A floatier, *boatier*; Bed than that!" S. Plath
  <u>actual words</u>
      bulletproof, handier

- One could, likewise, take idioms as
  <u>actual phrases</u> (*kick the bucket*), part of the lexicon,
  compared to
  '<u>possible phrases</u>' (*kick the man*), result of syntax

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Defining properties of idioms: conventional

'Idioms are <u>conventionalised</u>: their meaning or use can't be predicted, or at least entirely predicted, on the basis of a knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another.' (Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994: 492).

black coffee, bacon and eggs, etc.
dag en nacht / #nacht en dag
day and night / night and day
peper en zout / #zout en peper
salt and pepper / #pepper and salt

Notion of convention used, based on Lewis (1969):

'A regularity R in the behaviour of members of a population P when they are agents in a recurrent situation S is a *convention* if and only if it is true that, and it is common knowledge in P that, in any instance of S among the members of P,

(1) everyone conforms to R;

(2) everyone expects everyone else to conform to R;

(3) everyone prefers to conform to R on condition that the others do, since S is a coordination equilibrium and uniform conformity to R is a coordination equilibrium in S.

(4) everyone prefers that everyone conforms to R, on condition that at least all but one conforms to R;

(5) everyone would prefer that everyone conforms to R', on condition that at least all but one conforms to R'.

where R' is some possible regularity in the behaviour of members of P in S, such that almost no one in almost any instance of S among members of P could conform both to R' and to R.

Discussion on the Linguistlist in 1993 on 'subject idioms'. Given the Marantz claim that there are no subject idioms, Bresnan gave several counterexamples. Cases like:

What's eating NP   *A little bird told* NP (that S)

Marantz dismisses such cases on the following ground (a.o.): it's not an idiom, but something else, because the semantics is not truly non-compositional. Unless one carefully defines what ones means with "not truly non-compositional" such discussions become meaningless. Likewise Horvath (1987) argued against non-configurationality (contra È Kiss) and also used idiom data. She notes that it is difficult to give any weight to arguments based on "genuine, clearly non-compositional idiomatic expressions" since the "idiom interpretation rules are so far insufficiently understood".

wordplay:

• *Picky bank* [Bank advertisement showing a pig, and adding: 'We only choose sound and ethical investments'.]

• *The King requests your company on the big day* [Advertisement of the Pub chain *Green King* inviting us to celebrate the wedding of William & Kate in their pubs.]

• With over 500 kitchen appliances online you'll find one that is just *your cup of tea*. [Tesco advertisement for their online shop]

• beautifuel [Advertisement by car company for an environment-friendly car]

wordplay:

- *Voetbal is oorlog*
  Soccer is war
  'In order to win, everything is allowed in playing soccer'
- De andere *oorlog* in Irak: *voetbal*
  The other war in Iraq: soccer

- *Kind, je eet toch wel goed he?*
  Child, you do eat well, don't you (what parents say to children that are not living at home any more)
- *Kind, je leest toch wel goed he?*
  Child, you do read well, don't you
  Advertisement for NRC Handelsblad (quality newspaper) for studenst (15 years old!)

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<u>wordplay:</u>

- Iemand is *in alle staten*
  Someone is in all states (state of mind)
- *Lufthansa en United airlines zijn in alle staten!*
  Lufthansa and United airlines are in all states
  [Advertisement Reclame for (new) flights to the US]