

Idioms: Phasehood and Projection

Abstract

This paper examines idiomatic expressions in light of the hypothesis that the vP-phase boundary defines a size limitation for verbal idioms. Under this analysis, a problem arises when one considers that the most canonical verbal idioms contain a DP-object. Given that DPs are also claimed to be phases, the question arises of why verbal idioms can straddle the DP- but not the vP-phase boundary. Our solution to this problem is twofold. We show first of all that not all idioms are actually confined to a single phase: whilst *idiomatic phrases* are restricted to the vP-phase, *idiomatically combining expressions* are not. Hence, the DP-phase problem is only relevant for idiomatic phrases. Secondly, we propose that in these instances the determiner, which does not contribute referentiality to the object, actually does not project. Without a DP, there is no DP-phase, and it is the vP-phase that determines the upper limit for the idiom.

Keywords: idioms, DP-phase, vP-phase, compositionality, projection

1. *Introduction*

In this paper, we discuss idiomatic expressions in light of the claim that the vP-phase boundary defines an upper limit on the size of verbal idioms, i.e. verbal idioms are confined to syntactic material found within the vP-phase (Svenonius 2005; Harwood 2013, 2015; Kim 2015). Under this analysis, a problem arises when one considers that the most canonical verbal idioms (e.g. *kick the bucket*) contain a DP-object. Given that DPs are also claimed to act as phases (Chomsky 2005; Svenonius 2005), the question arises of why verbal idioms can straddle the DP-phase boundary, but not the vP-phase boundary. This paper aims to solve this issue.

Our solution to this problem is twofold. First, we show that not *all* idioms are actually confined to a single phase. We follow the proposal (e.g. Nunberg et al. 1994) that there are two types of idioms: *idiomatically combining expressions* and *idiomatic phrases*. We show that the former are not phase-bound, and only the latter are restricted to a single phase (vP). Hence, the DP-phase problem is only relevant in the latter case (i.e. for *idiomatic phrases*). We then show that in these instances, the determiner lacks a direct referent in the discourse. This leads us to claim that, while D is present in the direct object of an *idiomatic phrase*, it does not project. In the absence of a DP, there is obviously no DP-phase either. Consequently, the direct object of the *idiomatic phrase* directly forms part of the vP-phase, rather than projecting its own phasal domain. As a result, we will be able to uphold the hypothesis that phase boundaries define an upper limit on the size of verbal idioms.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we first define what we take a verbal idiom to be. In section 3, we provide an overview of the literature claiming that idioms are confined to single phases, and outline the main issue that this paper intends to solve. The analysis is then presented in sections 4 and 5. In section 4, we introduce

the distinction between idiomatic phrases and idiomatically combining expressions, and show that only idiomatic phrases are confined to the vP-phase. In section 5, we argue that the determiner of the direct object does not project in idiomatic phrases, and that there is thus no DP-phase in such expressions. Finally, section 6 concludes the paper.

2. *What is a verbal idiom?*

An idiom is an expression with a non-compositional interpretation. That is, its meaning as a whole is not derivable from the literal meanings of its parts. For instance, *shoot the breeze* means 'chat', even though none of the lexical items that comprise it convey this meaning independently. Despite this, the figurative interpretation of the idiom is dependent upon these specific lexical items. If any of the component parts are replaced, the idiomatic interpretation is lost and only the literal meaning is available:¹

- (1) a. #Let's shoot the wind.
- b. #Let's shoot a breeze.
- c. #Let's kill the breeze.

Thus, it can be said that the idiom *shoot the breeze* is dependent upon the items *shoot*, *the*, and *breeze* in order to access its figurative interpretation.

As is well known, 'idiom' is still a broad term covering many types of expressions. Therefore, it is crucial, before going any further, that we provide a more precise definition of the types of figurative expressions that this paper is concerned with.

¹ Throughout the paper, # is used to indicate loss of the idiomatic meaning.

Throughout this paper, we will concentrate on the most canonical type, verbal idioms, which are most typically comprised of a lexical verb and its direct object. Marantz (1984), Kiparsky (1987), Fillmore et al. (1988), Nunberg et al. (1994), Croft & Cruse (2004), Svenonius (2005) and Evans and Green (2006), have collectively identified a number of criteria that help to define exactly what a verbal idiom is:

- (2) a. It must contain a lexical verb.
- b. It must have a non-literal interpretation.
- c. It must be able to interact with productive syntax.
- d. It must be comprised of lexical items that are found outside of the context of the idiom.
- e. It must be formed in a manner that obeys the regular syntactic rules of the language.

Let us consider what types of expressions are excluded by these criteria: (2)a rules out nominal idioms such as *the apple of one's eye*, since such phrases lack a lexical verb. (2)b rules out similes such as *work like a beaver*, collocations such as *strong tea*, and aphorisms such as *absolute power corrupts absolutely*, since these all have predictable, literal meanings. (2)c rules out sentential idioms such as *Is the Pope Catholic?* since these are frozen expressions that do not interact with productive syntax, e.g. they cannot be embedded in subordinate clauses (*#I wonder whether the Pope is Catholic*), or undergo clause-type shifting (*#The Pope is Catholic*). (2)d rules out idioms containing irregular lexical items, such as *hoisted by his own petard* ('defeated by his own plot intended for another'), since *petard* is never used in contemporary English outside of the context of the idiom itself. Finally, (2)e rules out

expressions with irregular syntax such as *be that as it may*. Verbal idioms are typically well-formed grammatical sentences that obey the structure building mechanisms of the language.

3. *Idioms and phases*

Chomsky (1980, 1981), Marantz (1984, 1997), and Svenonius (2005) have noticed that verbal idioms are subject to a size limitation: they seem to only be built from the verbal predicate and its arguments. This is illustrated by *cut the mustard* (meaning 'meet the standards') with regards to the lexical verb and its direct object, and by expressions like *the shit hit the fan* (meaning 'chaos ensued') with regards to verbal idioms containing subjects. If the verb or any of its arguments are altered, the figurative interpretation is altogether lost, showing these idioms to be genuinely dependent upon these lexical items.

- (3) a. #slice the mustard.
- b. #The shit hit the propeller.

Moreover, whilst syntactic material beyond the vP-domain, such as tense, modality, and aspect, is obviously compatible with idioms, the figurative interpretation is never dependent upon the presence of such material (Kitagawa 1986; Ifill 2002; Svenonius 2005). That is, if the tense, modal or aspectual information is altered, the idiomatic interpretation remains intact:

- (4) a. He shot the breeze. [Tense]
- b. He shoots the breeze daily.

- (5) a. I think that he might just cut the mustard. [Modality]
 b. He most certainly cut the mustard.
- (6) a. The shit has hit the fan. [Aspect]
 b. The shit hit the fan.

In other words, material from the TP-domain is standardly taken not to be crucial for the accessibility of the idiomatic interpretation.

Given that verbal idioms seem to be exclusively comprised of the verb and its arguments, i.e. material from the vP-phase, Svenonius (2005), Harwood (2013, 2015) and Kim (2015) have arrived at the conclusion that idioms are restricted to the vP-phase.² That is, verbal idioms can only be constructed from syntactic material located within the vP-phase and nothing more. Put differently, verbal idioms cannot straddle the vP-phase boundary.³

This is an appealing hypothesis, since it is most standardly assumed that the figurative interpretation of an idiom is accessed at the syntax-semantics (LF) interface (cf. Jackendoff 1997; Marantz 2001; Svenonius 2005; among others). Given that

² Hoeksema (2010) gives examples of Dutch idioms that are larger than CP, e.g. *vriezen dat het kraakt* 'freeze that it cracks, i.e. there is a sharp frost', *maken dat je wegkomt* 'make that you away come, i.e., get out of here', *(niet) weten hoe hij het heeft* '(not) know how he it has, i.e. not know how to handle himself'. We take them not to be counterexamples to the restriction, given that these fixed expressions are very much transparent. If they are to be considered as verbal idioms, then they would qualify as idiomatically combining expressions (ICEs), in which case it would not be surprising that they can span several phase boundaries (see section 4 below for details).

³ In this paper, we abstract away from notions of spell-out domains and phase edges since recent discussion in the literature has argued that there is good reason to believe that the entire phase can be spelled out (cf. Fox & Pesetsky 2005; Richards 2011; Harwood 2013, 2015; Bošković 2014).

phases are shipped off independently to PF and LF for pronunciation and interpretation (Chomsky 2000, 2001), then it seems reasonable that an expression can only be interpreted idiomatically if it is shipped off 'wholesale' to LF, i.e. as one single phase. In other words, if an expression were to straddle the vP-phase boundary, then only part of it would be sent off to LF, stranding the other part in the syntax, and the idiom would not be able to receive its non-compositional meaning. This explains why verbal idioms are confined to material contained within the vP-phase. Indeed, if the vP-phase is an isolated domain of meaning that is independently interpreted at LF (Chomsky 2000, 2001), and idioms form a single semantic unit, then it is logical for the two to be aligned (Marantz 1997, 2001; Svenonius 2005).

As appealing as this proposal is, however, it faces a rather crucial problem. As was previously mentioned, verbal idioms most typically involve a DP-object in addition to the lexical verb. However, Svenonius (2004) and Heck & Zimmerman (2004) suggest that, in addition to CPs and vPs, DPs also acts as phases (cf. also Chomsky 2005:17). If this is the case, then most verbal idioms seem to actually be comprised of (at least) two phases: the vP-phase and a DP-phase, contra the proposal outlined above.⁴ Therefore, the following question arises: how can verbal idioms straddle the DP-phase boundary when they are supposed to be restricted to a single phase?

The remainder of this paper is dedicated to solving this issue. In the following section, we first show that not all idiomatic expressions are necessarily confined to a single phase.

4. Idiomatic phrases and idiomatically combining expressions

⁴ If a subject or indirect object is also included in the idiom, then there would be multiple DP-phases involved.

Wasow et al. (1984), Fillmore et al. (1988), and Nunberg et al. (1994) argue that not all verbal idioms are alike and that they can essentially be classified into two distinct types: *idiomatically combining expressions* (ICEs) and *idiomatic phrases* (IdPs). With ICEs, individual components of the expression can be directly mapped onto parts of the figurative reading. A canonical example is *spill the beans*, meaning 'divulge the secret', in which the lexical verb of the expression *spill* directly corresponds to the lexical verb 'divulge' in the figurative interpretation, and the direct object *the beans* is straightforwardly mapped onto 'the secret'. With IdPs, however, the expression as a whole is mapped onto the figurative reading. *Kick the bucket*, which means 'die', is one such example, since neither *kick* nor *the bucket* can be uniquely mapped onto the idiomatic interpretation. Instead, the entire phrase must be mapped wholesale onto 'die'.

The same authors note that this distinction correlates with certain syntactic properties that these two types of idioms exhibit, namely the extent to which they can be syntactically manipulated. That is, if an ICE is syntactically transformed, the idiomatic interpretation remains intact:

- (7) a. The beans, Bob has most certainly spilled. [Topicalisation]
- b. Bob spilled the juicy beans. [Modification]
- c. The beans were spilled (by Bob). [Passivisation]

If an IdP, on the other hand, undergoes similar transformations, the idiomatic reading is altogether lost and only the literal interpretation remains:

- (8) a. #The bucket, Bob has gone and kicked. [Topicalisation]

- b. #Bob kicked the rusty bucket. [Modification]
- c. #The bucket was kicked (by Bob). [Passivisation]

In what follows, we claim that it is only IdPs that are confined to a single phase. ICEs, we argue, can straddle the phase boundary.

As was stated in the previous section, if the vP-phase is an isolated domain of meaning (Chomsky 2000, 2001), and idioms form a single semantic unit, then it is logical for the two to be aligned (Marantz 1997, 2001; Svenonius 2005). However, the only idiom type that actually forms a single semantic unit are IdPs, where the whole phrase is mapped to a single meaning. ICEs do not form a single semantic unit because individual parts of the expression are mapped to separate elements of the figurative reading, making their interpretation more compositional in nature. Therefore, it seems logical that only IdPs would be limited to material found in a single phase. ICEs, with their more piecemeal, compositional interpretation, are less restricted: they can straddle the boundary of the vP-phase and be comprised of syntactic material beyond it.

Indeed, this is what we find for English, since there exist several idioms that actually depend on material external to the vP-phase, namely modality and aspect (*contra* Kitagawa 1986; Ifill 2002; Svenonius 2005 – cf. section 3). That is, modality and aspect are crucial to the verbal idioms in (9) and (10): without the relevant modal or aspectual form, the figurative meaning is altogether lost:

- (9) a. I could murder a cigarette. = I would like a cigarette. [Modality]
- b. #I murdered a cigarette.

- (10) a. I have had enough. = I have reached the end of my patience.

[Aspect]

- b. #I'm pretty sure I will soon have enough of your stupid antics.

Interestingly, however, all such idioms turn out to satisfy the diagnostics for ICEs. First of all, note that the figurative interpretation can be decomposed into smaller elements, each of which corresponds to a unique part of the expressions. *Could* in (9), for instance, maps onto the modal *would* in its figurative interpretation, while *murder* maps onto *like*. Similarly, *had* in (10) is mapped onto *reached* in the idiomatic meaning, and *enough* is mapped onto *the end of my patience*.⁵

Turning to syntactic transformations, we see that the idioms in (9) and (10) once again pass the diagnostics for ICEs: when syntactically manipulated through topicalisation and modification, the idiomatic interpretation remains intact.⁶

⁵ Note that *enough* cannot be further decomposed to denote individual elements of *the end of my patience*, suggesting that there might actually be a gradient with regards to the extent to which an ICE can be decomposed. See Espinal & Mateu (2010) for discussion.

⁶ Espinal & Mateu (2010) note that ICEs do not uniformly survive every single syntactic transformation. *Laugh one's head off*, for instance, is classified by Espinal & Mateu as an ICE, but fails the passivisation test. The same goes for the *could murder* idiom, which also cannot be passivised:

- (i) a. #Our heads were laughed off (by us).
b. #A cigarette could be murdered (by me).

Why idioms such as these satisfy certain tests for ICEs but not others is an ongoing issue for the field in general and a matter that we leave for future research. For now, we will work under the assumption that as long as an idiom satisfies most of the tests for ICEs or IdPs, it should be classified as such, and that it only fails in certain tests due to independent factors.

(11) a. I could really murder a nice strong whisky.

[Modification]

b. I don't need much right now, but a cigarette I could definitely murder. [Topicalisation]

(12) a. I have definitely had quite enough of your whining.

[Modification]

b. Enough, I have most definitely had. [Topicalisation]

The fact that these verbal idioms above are dependent upon material external to the vP-phase, and satisfy the tests for ICEs, confirms our hypothesis that ICEs are not restricted to a single phase. Therefore, the fact that these idioms include an additional DP-phase is immaterial, since such expressions can freely straddle phase boundaries anyway.

IdPs, on the other hand, cannot straddle phase boundaries and are indeed restricted to the vP-phase. This implies that the DP-phase problem introduced above remains intact for IdPs. That is: if IdPs cannot straddle the vP-phase boundary, why can they apparently straddle the DP-phase boundary? We address the issue in the following section.

5. The DP-phase in IdPs: to project or not to project?

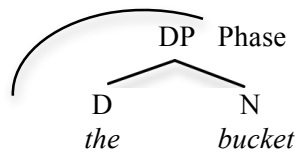
Consider again the figurative interpretation of an IdP such as *kick the bucket*, which means 'die'. Fellbaum (1993) and Grégoire (2009) note that in such instances, the definite determiner does not pick out a unique referent in the discourse, since the direct object *the bucket* cannot be mapped to an individual component of the

figurative reading. This fact is crucial to explaining how IdPs can apparently straddle the DP-phase boundary.

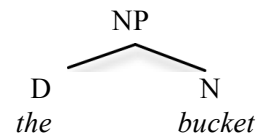
As stated previously, the syntax of an idiom obeys the normal structure building mechanisms of the language, and so appears syntactically identical to its literally interpreted counterpart (Fellbaum 1993; Nunberg et al. 1994; Ifill 2002; Svenonius 2005; among others). However, we claim there is actually a subtle structural difference between IdPs and their literal counterparts.

If an expression is literally interpreted, then each of the components contributes to its semantics. With respect to the direct object DP, this means, first of all, that it functions as an argument of the verb, i.e. it carries a theta role (Theme). Secondly, the definite determiner of the direct object picks out a unique referent. For example, if someone literally *kicks the bucket*, the determiner in this instance picks out one unique bucket in the discourse. Because the determiner is referential, D projects, and so the DP-phase is formed, as is standard, cf. (13)a. In an IdP, however, the nominal expression *the bucket* behaves completely differently. First of all, the paraphrase of the idiom, 'to die', already suggests that the verb *kick* has somehow lost its transitivity; specifically, the bucket does not act as a true argument (Theme) of the verb. Secondly, the definite article does not denote a unique discourse referent. In a way, the DP-layer is semantically vacuous. The question, obviously, arises where this semantic vacuity comes from. We propose it follows from syntax, and, more specifically, from projection and labelling (Chomsky 2013, 2015). The Syntactic Object (SO) *the bucket* is structurally ambiguous; that is, after binary Merge has applied to D (*the*) and N (*bucket*), yielding the SO [_s D N], either D or N can project and label the whole SO. In an IdP, it is N (here *bucket*) that projects and becomes the head of the projection. The result is labelled as NP, cf. (13)b.

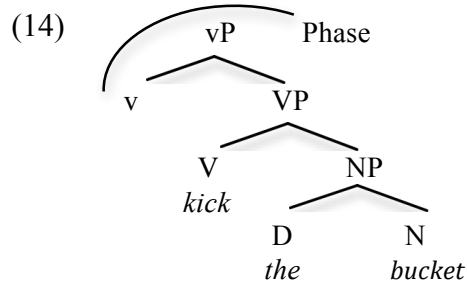
(13) a. referential D



b. non-referential D



Crucially, if the DP usually acts as the phase for the direct object, then in its absence, no phase is projected. This means that the nominal expression (NP) is not spelled out independently, but will be spelled out as part of the vP-phase:



This explains why IdPs seem to be able to straddle the DP-phase boundary: there simply is no DP-phase boundary in IdPs to begin with.

Note, however, that in IdPs the nominal expression cannot become an argument, given that it has been claimed that only a referential category, i.e. only DPs, can occur in argument positions (Stowell 1991; Longobardi 1994; Szabolcsi 1994). If D(P) is typically associated with argumenthood (i.e. it receives the theta-role), one could argue that the determiner in IdPs (i.e. *the* in *kick the bucket*) actually 'absorbs' the theta-role that the transitive verb (in this case, *kick*) normally assigns.⁷ The nominal

⁷ This proposal is reminiscent of an analysis of passive constructions proposed by Baker, Johnson & Roberts (1989). In their account, the passive suffix (-ed) gets assigned, or 'absorbs' the theta-role, which changes the syntax of the construction.

expression can then survive by forming an intransitive complex predicate (i.e. a single meaningful unit) with the verb.

An advantage of this proposal is that it also explains why an object in an IdP cannot undergo adjectival modification, as was illustrated in (8)b. According to Schoorlemmer (2009), in Germanic languages, attributive APs must c-command the D head and are thus adjoined at the DP level (see the original work for the fully worked out analysis). With that in mind, and given that the object in an IdP lacks a DP, there is nowhere for the adjective to adjoin to.⁸

6. *Conclusion*

This paper started from the claim that the vP-phase imposes an upper bound on verbal idioms. A problem that this analysis faces is that since most verbal idioms include a DP direct object, and DP has been claimed to project a phase, verbal idioms seem to actually straddle the DP-phase boundary. The aim of this paper was therefore to explain why verbal idioms can be bigger than the DP-phase, but not the vP-phase. In accounting for this, we showed that not all idioms are actually confined to a single phase. Whilst IdPs are restricted to the vP-phase, ICEs can straddle phase boundaries. Therefore, the issue of the DP-phase is only relevant for IdPs. Given that the determiner in IdPs does not denote a unique referent in the discourse, however, we argued that D does not project in IdPs. This means that there is no DP-phase in IdPs,

⁸Note that the mechanism developed in this section for voiding the DP-phase (the projection of N instead of D) similarly cannot apply to the vP-phase, for structural reasons: the v-head is merged with the VP, and in that case it is always the head that projects. As a result, the vP-phase boundary is never voided and always serves as an upper bound for IdPs.

and that the direct object is spelled out together with the rest of the idiomatic vP-phase.

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