LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS OFIDIOMS

Eren Pultar '97

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1 INTRODUCTION

Language comes out of our mouths without us giving it much thought. We rarely pay attention to the sentences we utter or to the words we choose. Idioms constitute one of the interesting features of language which we use in our daily conversations but we do not necessarily notice them when we resort to them. We may not realize that, in uttering an idiom, we are saying something that we do not actually mean literally—it is only in a figurative sense.

In this paper, I explore the various linguistic aspects of idioms in order to examine the specific traits that make them “special,” separating them from the rest of the language. In order to establish a set of criteria that would define the boundaries of idioms, I start with the working definition Drew and Holt (1988) provide in their study “Complainable Matters: The Use of Idiomatic Expressions in Making Complaints” in which they perform a conversational analysis of “idiomatic, clichéd, and proverbial expressions.” They loosely define these expressions as “recognizably formulaic and largely figurative.” In the first section, I open up the meaning of the term “largely figurative” in order to analyze why idioms are understood figuratively instead of literally, which is their most salient characteristic. The next section deals with what is meant by “recognizably formulaic” and to what extent this term may be correct. Once the implications of these two phrases are explored in detail and linguistic issues such as metaphoricity, transparency, compositionality and analyzability are defined and examined, the two phrases are combined, allowing us to make a categorization of idioms in the English language lexicon. Next, I briefly discuss psycholinguistic studies of idioms that have not been incorporated in the earlier sections. The final section investigates the possibilities for sociolinguistic studies of idioms and the ramifications of the findings in understanding the use of idioms in context. Many of the examples in this last section come from Turkish, my native tongue, because they are what got me interested in the subject in the first place.
II METAPHORS: The Semantics of Idioms

Any language has numerous fixed phrases and clichés in its lexicon. Some examples in English would include ladies and gentlemen, have a nice day, every now and then, etc. We know that they are fixed because alternative forms e.g. ladies and gentlemen such as gentlemen and ladies or gentle women and gentlemen sound strange to the native speakers of the language. These phrases are only formulaic, however. What distinguishes idioms from a larger class of fixed, formulaic phrases involves the figurative meaning that the idiom conveys. Each idiom thus will have two possible readings: a literal one and a figurative one. For example, to kick the bucket can be understood literally, meaning to hit the bucket with one’s feet, or figuratively, meaning to die. The idiom will get its meaning through the figurative reading. In other words, the comprehension of an idiom will involve a metaphor which sets up the relationship between the figurative sense and the literal meaning in a manner that allows us to attain the target meaning. This figurative reading that the metaphor becomes fixed over time, placing idioms into the larger class of fixed phrases.

Lakoff and Johnson in their influential book Metaphors We Live By (1980) dwell on our metaphorical way of thinking in our daily lives. They argue that much of our conceptual system is based on metaphorical thinking. The way we conceptualize and shape abstract ideas and structures depends largely on some conceptual metaphor. They provide many examples of simple sentences that we are likely to utter in our everyday conversations. For instance, they contend that the following sentences demonstrate that our concept of argument depends on the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR:

He attacked every weak point in my argument.
I demolished his argument.
If you use that strategy, he’ll wipe you out.

These examples show that it is not simply that (at least when speaking in English) we liken arguments to wars, that “we do not just talk about arguments in terms of war” (p. 4), but that, in considering the implications of these examples further, we can actually see that we shape our
whole conception and framework on arguments based on how wars are structured. Similarly, our concept of time for example is shaped by the conceptual metaphor TIME IS MONEY, which can be demonstrated in examples like “I’ve invested a lot of time in her,” “How do you spend your time these days?”, “You’re running out of time,” etc. (p. 8). So whenever we think about time, the framework with which we think about it is structured by the way we think about money, how it is spent, saved, wasted, etc. Conceptual metaphors, then, are not simply one-time analogies but actually reflect our thinking.

Lakoff and Johnson argue for the basicness of the metaphorical nature of our conceptual system, and extend their argument in many other directions, touching upon abstract thinking being generally based upon our physical, bodily experiences and upon how even simple and ubiquitous parts of our language, like the preposition in, support the framework of metaphorical thinking and so on. In fact, Lakoff and Johnson have later on taken these ideas much further and made stronger claims with further evidence (See Lakoff, 1987; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff and Kövecses in Holland and Quinn, 1987).

Since we are interested here in the metaphoricity of idioms as one of their distinguishing features, we will not delve into Lakoff and Johnson’s argument about the basicness of metaphorical thinking. Instead, we will only extract their ideas on conceptual metaphors and consider the ways in which they apply to our understanding of idioms.

II. 1. Conceptual Metaphors in Idioms

The idea of conceptual metaphors has often been taken up in the literature on idioms (e.g. Gibbs, 1995; Gibbs, 1992; Gibbs et al., 1989; Keysar and Bly, 1995). The common underlying assumption in the psycholinguistic literature on idioms accepts that one or more conceptual metaphors are involved in the construction of an idiom. In other words, in order to attain the target meaning from the idiomatic phrase, we must have the knowledge and understanding of the conceptual metaphors the idiom is based on. Let us consider the idiom to spill the beans as an
example. The idiom means "to reveal some secret information" and we can point to the component metaphors: Information is likened to 'beans' by the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE PHYSICAL OBJECTS and talking, that is revealing something that is in your head, is metaphorized into 'spilling' through the conceptual metaphor THE MIND IS A CONTAINER. Once we have an understanding of these conceptual metaphors, we grasp that to spill the beans is not meant literally but in a figurative sense and that the target meaning of this specific idiom is 'to reveal information.' The figurative meanings of all idioms, whether or not we can actually explain what the roots are, come about through a similar mapping from the actual figurative phrase, through the conceptual metaphors involved, to the target meaning.

Not all idioms behave in the same way, however, with respect to the extent to which metaphors are involved. Consider these idioms: to kick the bucket, to carry coals to Newcastle, to pop the question. The first one is commonly referred to in the literature as being a typical idiom with two possible readings. Nevertheless, it cannot be representative of idioms in general because it is what is called a dead metaphor (See Gibbs, 1992 for dead metaphors): the conceptual metaphors which created the idiom and which enable the mapping from the literal meaning to the target meaning are 'dead' and therefore no longer available to us. All that we can claim by saying that we know the meaning of to kick the bucket is that we know that it refers to dying in a figurative manner.¹ This one example should suffice to demonstrate that knowledge or understanding of the metaphors involved in an idiom is not at all necessary for claiming to know an idiom. We can use the idiom to kick the bucket to mean 'to die' and be understood each time without ever needing to find out why the specific idiom means what it does.

In fact, with most idioms, metaphoricity never comes up as an issue in any way crucial for

¹ There are several explanations for how this phrase came to have the figurative meaning it does. One argues for the bucket as a metaphor for life that one gets rid of by kicking. Another refers to the practice of hanging in which the person dies when the bucket s/he is standing on is kicked off the feet. But all of these are speculations, the origin of the idiom to kick the bucket is not known any longer with certainty. The Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins, for example, concludes that the source is unknown.
learning or understanding them. For example, in the second example, *to carry coals to Newcastle*,
more metaphoricity is involved; the idiom is more transparent to us and should we need to, most of
us would be able to come up with an argument as to why this idiom means ‘to do something very
useless.’ Even though we might never be aware of the conceptual metaphor when we use the
idiom, it is still available since we can analyze it. In other words, even if we know nothing about
Newcastle except that it is a place, even if we do not know that coal is plentiful in Newcastle, the
literal meaning of the words and the target meaning still allows us to work our way through the
idiom and figure out that carrying coal to Newcastle must be an instance of redundant activities.
Most idioms would lie in the same domain as this second example in terms of how much
metaphors are involved in the shaping and understanding of idioms. Other examples such as *to
spill the beans, to lock the barn/stable door after the horse is bolted*, etc. can be included in this
group.

The third example, *to pop the question* involves metaphors to a lesser extent than the above
examples. While ‘to pop’ can be taken to refer metaphorically to ‘asking suddenly,’ there are no
conceptual metaphors involved in understanding *the question* as referring to ‘the marriage
proposal.’

So although the phrase is definitely not to be understood literally, this idiom is to be
considered as less metaphorical than *to kick the bucket* and *to carry coal to Newcastle* and thus
closer to literal language. Consideration of these three examples demonstrates that idioms can vary
in terms of metaphoricity; some may depend heavily on a number of conceptual metaphors while
the meanings of others are less figurative and thus closer to literal language.

Although conceptual metaphors do, one way or another, play into the creation and thus the
identification of an idiom, the involvement of metaphors in learning and processing idioms has

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2 The relationship here between the question and the marriage is not metaphorical but only metonymic. Metonymy refers to
instances where we use “one entity to refer to another that is related to it” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 35). For example,
we commonly utter sentences like “The sax is sick today” for “The saxophone player is sick today” through the metonymy
OBJECT FOR USER or “Wall Street is in a panic,” through the metonymy THE PLACE FOR THE INSTITUTION (ibid, p.
38). Many such phrases that could be considered metaphorical in that they are not literal fall into this category.
often been questioned, as we would expect with the above examples. Glucksberg et al. (1993), for example, argue that conceptual metaphors do not play a crucial role in idiom comprehension and that they are not automatically accessed during idiom comprehension. According to their view, while most idioms are more transparent to us than dead metaphors (like to kick the bucket with which there are no conceptual metaphors available to us), we do not always access the metaphors and we can still understand the idiom. They conclude that “conceptual analogies play little, if any, role in idiom comprehension unless people have the time (and motivation) to make considered judgments.”

Also, not all conceptual metaphors are available to everyone. We must keep in mind that the importance of conceptual metaphors in idioms goes halfway, that there is no simple system of mapping that applies to all idioms. People will have different intuitions about the extent of metaphor involvement. Familiarity, then, is a crucial factor to consider when making claims about idioms and their comprehension. Familiarity of users to idioms will be addressed in more detail once we have studied all other aspects involving the definition of idioms.
III. FLEXIBILITY AND COMPOSITIONALITY: The Syntax of Idioms

III. 1. The Non-Compositionality Theory

The other, perhaps more salient feature of idioms is their fixedness. Fixedness roughly means that the idiom is learned in one “chunk” and all the specific components that make it up must always go together in a certain order. Our general intuition says that idioms are fixed formulas, learned as chunks, and even that they can be treated as one lexical item. Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994) and Gibbs (1995) point out that linguists have generally equated idioms with “non-compositionality.” This term simply means that the meaning of the whole idiom is not distributed among its parts and cannot be arrived at by “composing” the meaning of its individual components.

The simple test to assess the compositionality or non-compositionality of an idiom requires altering the idiom slightly by substituting a synonym for one of its components. If the phrase can still be understood idiomatically, then it is compositional. For instance, if we change the idiom to fasten one’s lips to to button one’s lips, the meaning is altered only slightly and we can still understand it to mean ‘not to say anything’ in a figurative manner. In other words, the meaning of the idiom depends on the meaning of its components and is thus composed by putting the meanings of button/fasten and lips together. This is what is meant by ‘compositional.’

There are nevertheless idioms which are non-compositional. The classical example of to kick the bucket and others like to saw logs cannot be altered in such a manner. That is, they will no more be considered as idiomatic if they are changed to forms like to punt the bucket, to kick the pail, to cut logs or to saw wood. This difference allows us to distinguish compositional idioms from non-compositional ones.

Looking at examples such as to kick the bucket or to saw logs, syntacticians beginning with Chomsky have traditionally suggested that idioms be treated as lexical items, thus allowing

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3 Alternatives for this term in the literature include ‘decomposable’ (Gibbs and Nayak, 1989) and ‘idiomatically combining’ (Nunberg, Sag and Wasow, 1994).
them to move around in sentences and in syntactic trees as one chunk without having to break them down further. Then we would not have to account for why "the meaning of an idiom is not a function of the meaning of its parts" (Gibbs, Nayak and Cutting, 1989). While the literal reading of the phrase *to flip your lid* would be explained by the meaning of its parts, we would understand the idiomatic phrase to have a different, figurative meaning because *to flip your lid* would, according to the non-compositionality theory, be learned and stored in the lexicon as one big chunk. Idioms, with such a solution, do not burden syntactic theories with their internal syntactic features.

III. 2. Syntactic and Lexical Flexibility

Fortunately, idioms are not that boring. The non-compositionality view on idioms has been to a large extent abandoned because it has been recognized that not all idioms are fixed the way *to kick the bucket* is. In building a framework for idioms that brings to the fore the compositionality of idioms, Gibbs and Nayak stress two aspects about compositional idioms: syntactic productiveness and lexical flexibility (Gibbs et al., 1989 and Gibbs and Nayak, 1989). If an idiom is perceived to be compositional, if the speaker believes that the meaning of components play a role in understanding an idiom, then the idiom will be syntactically productive and lexically flexible for them.

The first thing to note about compositional idioms is that we can make changes in their syntax. For example, a passive construction like *The law was laid down by John*, for example, is a perfectly fine use of the idiom *to lay down the law*. Other changes are also possible: Gibbs and Nayak (1989) point out that "idioms should be capable of being freely modified. The *trail of blaze a trail* and the *strings of pull strings* can be modified in any number of ways, as in *John blazed an (important, pioneering, valuable) trail in linguistics*, and *John had to pull some (powerful, secret, illegal) strings to get the job." Gibbs has dubbed the term "syntactically productive" for such idioms that can be altered syntactically.
Another reason for abandoning the non-compositionality view concerns the "lexical flexibility" of idioms. Although, as we have pointed out earlier in our discussion, idioms like to kick the bucket or to saw logs cannot be altered lexically, many idioms will allow for such changes. To fasten one's lips can be changed to to button your lips, or to go out on a limb to to go out on a branch without disrupting the overall figurative meaning. The lexical items of some idioms can be flexible to the extent of being interchangeable.4

Although the syntax of idioms is a large and complicated issue, our main concern here is not about syntactic theories and the specific problems idioms present. All that we need to recognize at this point is that syntactically speaking, idioms are generally fixed in form but they have syntactic and lexical flexibility. Also, idioms demonstrating such flexibility are compositional.

We have been talking about flexibility and compositionality as evidence against the non-compositionality of idioms. In order to make the distinction clear and to establish the relationship between the two, we must turn to some psycholinguistic studies at this point. Gibbs, Nayak and Cutting (1989) came up with findings that support the argument that the lexical flexibility of idioms depend on people's assumptions about how compositional the idioms are. Similarly, with syntactic productiveness, "speaker's beliefs about the analyzability of idioms, whether an idiom has separate, meaningful units contributing to its overall figurative interpretation, directly influences people's perception of the syntactic versatility of idioms" (Gibbs and Nayak, 1989). Therefore, how compositional an idiom must be taken to be is a function of people's intuitions about it and of their understanding of how the component parts contribute through the use of conceptual metaphors to the overall meaning. Whatever this degree of compositionality turns out to be then determines the lexical flexibility and the syntactic productiveness of the specific idiom.

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4 To fasten/button one's lips and to take with a grain/pinch of salt are examples of idioms where speakers might not be sure which alternative is the original even if they have preferences. This observation supports all the more the idea that most idioms are compositional, that the meaning of the component parts are crucial to the overall meaning of the idiom.
IV A CATEGORIZATION OF IDIOMS

In the previous sections, we have stated that idioms involve metaphors and that most idioms are compositional and can be syntactically and lexically flexible. In doing so, we have noted that not all idioms are the same with regards to how much metaphoricity is involved or how flexible they can be. Now, we must look into why this is so. By classifying idioms, we will attempt to account for the differences, for the reason why compositionality is a matter of degree and the reason why different people might have differing intuitions about the compositionality and flexibility of idioms.

Gibbs and Nayak (1989) state: “In general, idiom phrases exist on a continuum of analyzability ranging from those idioms that appear to be highly decomposable (e.g. pop the question) to those that cannot be viewed as semantically decomposable (e.g. kick the bucket).” This statement seems to account for much of the perceived differences, although I believe it is insufficient. The main problem stems from the unfortunate fact that to kick the bucket has come to be the classical example in the literature causing two separate issues on idioms to be collapsed into one. One issue concerns metaphoricity and compositionality and the other involves our knowledge and familiarity with idioms.

IV. 1. Continuum of Metaphoricity and Compositionality

The first issue, that of metaphoricity and compositionality, has already been outlined briefly in section II, on metaphors. We have stated that idioms vary in terms of the degree of dependence on conceptual metaphors. If we think of the varying degrees as on a continuum, on the one extreme will be idioms in which the overall meaning might be only partially metaphorical, as in to pop the question or to crack a joke. Not all the components that contribute to the meaning of the idiom are metaphorical (question and joke are understood literally). Most idioms lie further down along this continuum: they are compositional and the overall meaning of the idiom depends on the
figurative meanings that the components have. *To spill the beans* is a good example here because we can clearly see that the figurative meaning depends on *to spill* being taken as meaning ‘to reveal’ and *beans* being taken as ‘secret information’. This kind of compositionality is what allows for lexical flexibility: as long as synonyms also convey the figurative meanings, the idiom can be understood. With this group of idioms, even if you do not understand part of the idiom or what the figurative meaning is supposed to be, even if you are not sure that the specific conceptual metaphor the component *to spill* is intended to invoke ‘revealing’ in a figurative manner, you can still compose the components of the idiom that you understand and take a guess at what it means.

The third group of idioms, which would be placed at the other extreme of the continuum, are those which depend on conceptual metaphors as a whole. *To kick the bucket* is one example: the target meaning is not obtained by putting together metaphors about kicking and metaphors about buckets. The whole activity of kicking the bucket is supposed to have a figurative meaning through a conceptual metaphor for dying. With *to saw logs*, the mapping from the figurative meaning of sawing lows to the target meaning of snoring is one-to-one and not a compositional mapping that puts together a conceptual metaphor for sawing and another conceptual metaphor for logs. Notice here that we understand that it is the whole idiom that is metaphorical because synonym substitutions neither help nor prevent our comprehension. Unless a metaphor is available to us that will enable us to understand the target meaning, substitution for components, that is, alternative forms like *to cut logs, to saw wood* or *even to cut wood*, will not make any difference precisely because it is not the meanings of the components that matter to the conceptual metaphor. This also explains why these idioms are not perceived as flexible: they are learned as chunks, not as a composition of components. It is crucial to distinguish between this group of idioms and compositional ones. This group has most accurately been named ‘idiomatic’ by Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1995) as distinguished from the compositional or ‘idiomatically combining’ idioms. The whole idiom *to saw logs* is a metaphor for snoring and therefore the phrase is ‘idiomatic.’ Other examples that fall into this category include *to say cheese, to push up daisies* and *to pay the piper.*
As we have stated earlier, this third group of idioms is most dependent on conceptual metaphors because none of the components are understood literally and there is no combining of components that the figurative meaning can depend on.

To sum up the continuum of dependence on metaphoricity: on the one extreme are idioms that are partially literal, involving metaphors to a lesser degree than typical idioms; then further along the continuum are idioms whose figurative meanings are composed by the metaphors of the individual components; at the other extreme are non-compositional idioms that are metaphors as a whole and not composed from its components. Note that compositionality is used here in a somewhat more limited sense than our earlier definition. At this point, we see compositionality only in relation to the formation of the idiom and only after some further considerations can we broaden its meaning to include and explain flexibility.

IV. 2 Continuum of Transparency and Familiarity

This second classification integrates most of the issues related to idioms. Our knowledge of the world and our familiarity with certain aspects of idioms result directly in our intuitions about how they are formed, what they mean, what events they refer to and what kinds of conceptual metaphors they are shaped by. We bring in a certain cultural background when learning, uttering or understanding an idiom and the more informative this background is, the more easily we master an idiom.

Idioms are generally transparent to us and given time, we would be able to come up with good arguments for why certain idioms are metaphors for what they mean. We might not necessarily access the metaphor when understanding it (Glucksberg et al. 1993), we might not visualize the literal reading during each comprehension (Cacciari and Glucksberg, 1995), but a certain cultural knowledge is available for analyzing most idioms. For instance, with *to flip your lid*, we can easily analyze this into its components and see that it is a metaphor for getting angry suddenly. Although we might not be conscious of it at first, we can figure out the conceptual
metaphors THE MIND IS A CONTAINER and ANGER IS A HEATED LIQUID which enable us to draw the mapping between flipping your lid and the target meaning, getting angry suddenly. Also, we have no problem in understanding the literal meaning of flipping a lid.

Nevertheless, we cannot analyze all idioms in such a manner because some problems arise. If we look at *to saw logs*, one of the problems becomes evident: we understand the literal reading, we know the figurative meaning and we might possibly understand the conceptual metaphors involved. Yet we do not know what specifically those conceptual metaphors are, we cannot see why sawing logs and snoring must be related metaphorically.\(^5\) Possibly, we lack some sort of knowledge about the world, about sawing logs that prevent us from figuring out how our conceptual metaphors can make the mapping probable. Or to take another example, we might be able to compose the overall meaning of *to pass muster* if we knew the meaning of the word *muster*. It does become more analyzable when we substitute the word *inspection* for *muster*. These problems are not necessarily cognitive; the tools that we are missing for the analysis of the idioms are somehow cultural.

The continuum that explains our intuitions about idioms and thus their compositionality and flexibility is therefore based on each person’s linguistic and cultural familiarity with idioms. The more familiar we are, the better we can analyze it, then the more compositional and the more flexible we will perceive the idiom to be. If we are not sure why an idiom means what is does, we will not be so comfortable and will therefore abstain from making any analyses or lexical or syntactic alterations.

### IV. 3. Dead Metaphors

At this point we can discuss in detail the notion of dead metaphors. We had stated in \(^5\) The general explanation for this idiom is that the sound of snoring resembles that of sawing logs but I am assuming for the sake of the argument here that the connection is unknown. Although most people believe that they can confidently explain the connection between the figurative meanings of idioms and their target meanings, Keysar and Bly (1995) challenge this view by showing how people’s after-the-fact intuitions about such connections are often incorrect.
passing that the conceptual metaphors are no longer available to us. This statement turns out to be quite accurate and now we are able to explain the factors that make the conceptual metaphors unavailable. The metaphor involved in an idiom is dead when its conceptual metaphors are not available for analysis because we do not have the cultural or linguistic familiarity that allows us to analyze the mapping between the literal meaning and the figurative meaning which is structured by the use of conceptual metaphors. In other words, the conceptual metaphors might be ones we understand perfectly and possibly use in other idioms but some aspect of the idiom does not permit us to see how they can be used in this particular instance. If we look once again at the example to saw logs, what makes it dead is our ignorance about and unfamiliarity to the resemblance between the sound of sawing logs and snoring. Once we have this knowledge, we have no problem is using our conceptual metaphors to map the meaning of the idiom.

One view on the analyzability of idioms states that “the older an idiom is, the colder, or more syntactically frozen, it will be” (Gibbs and Nayak, 1989). This makes sense because an idiom which has been coined much earlier than our time will depend on cultural knowledge of daily practices and possibly on obsolete conceptual metaphors, both of which will no longer be available to us. If the idiom to kick the bucket does really come from the practice of hanging people, now we can see that the idiom is considered dead, not because we are not able to make the connection between kicking the bucket in order to hang someone and dying and not because the conceptual metaphor is not available to us, but because we no longer witness hangings where we see buckets being kicked from people’s feet and we therefore do not understand the phrase in any figurative sense that would allow us to make the metaphorical mapping.

Similarly, idioms with unknown words become frozen because the unknown word is either obsolete or not in our domain of life. People in the military might still be required literally to pass
muster⁶ but the idiom *to pass muster* is dead for those of us who only know the meaning of the idiom but not the word *muster*.

IV. 4. The two continuums combined

We are now sufficiently equipped to analyze why *to kick the bucket* having become a classical example is an unfortunate incident. On the continuum of metaphoricity and compositionality, it lies on the non-compositional extreme and on the continuum of transparency and familiarity, it lies on the dead, un-analyzable extreme. Because both continuums run from analyzable/flexible to un-analyzable/fixed, they have been collapsed in accounts of analyzability and flexibility.

The best way to grasp the combination of the two continuums is through a diagram. The following diagram, as a rough representation, illustrates why the two issues of metaphoricity and familiarity must be considered separately--although it might prove to be an insufficient account of the analyzability of idioms and might therefore present further complications:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continuum of Metaphoricity and Compositionality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partially Metaphorical</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old/ Unfamiliar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Continuum of Familiarity and Transparency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Less Familiar</td>
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<td>New/ Familiar</td>
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⁶ Webster's New World Dictionary of American English defines muster as "a gathering together or assembling, as of troops for inspection." So, the phrase "to pass muster" in its literal meaning refers to a quite specific event. The idiom *to pass muster* has the broader meaning of 'to measure up to the required standards.'
This diagram can now account for the behavior of idioms which were previously obscure. For example, *to say cheese* is non-compositional but the metaphoricity as well as any lexical or syntactic alterations can be analyzed because it is not opaque, because we still say cheese and smile while taking pictures. The fixedness of *to run amok* can also be accounted for: even though it is an idiomatically combining phrase, it is fixed for us because the unknown word *amok* makes it opaque and dangerous to play with. The diagram also allows us to see that the continuum that Gibbs and Nayak suggest, which range from “those idioms that appear to be highly decomposable (e.g. *pop the question*) to those that cannot be viewed as semantically decomposable (e.g. *kick the bucket*)” would run diagonally from unfamiliar idiomatic idioms like *to kick the bucket* to familiar and partially metaphorical ones like *to pop the question*. This representation of range of idioms causes the two separate continuaums to collapse into one.
V OTHER PSYCHOLINGUISTIC ISSUES OF IDIOMS

While idioms play an important role in purely linguistic issues such as syntactic theories, a large part of the studies that we have been mentioning, which bear on issues like the metaphoricity, analyzability, transparency, etc. have been carried out by psychologists and cognitive scientists. The reason why idioms are of interest to the field of cognition is that doing experiments on idiom processing enables us to figure out issues like the comprehension of figurative meanings, whether visual imaging is involved, whether we try to understand an idiom in its literal sense as well as its figurative meaning, at what point and due to which aspect of the idiom we realize that the phrase is meant figuratively, how transparent the metaphor seems (Keysar and Bly, 1995), how often the literal meaning of the idioms are visualized in processing (Cacciari and Glucksberg, 1995). The ultimate motive in such experiments lies in the domain of the mind and mental processes rather than getting the grammar straight.
VI TOWARDS A SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF IDIOMS

VI. 1. The Field of Sociolinguistics and Idioms

Sociolinguistics, one of the many fields of linguistics, has a very different approach to language that is often incompatible with the assumptions of the Chomskian linguistics. Very generally, sociolinguists concentrate on de Saussure's parole as opposed to langue. In other words, they believe that the methodology that will lead to understanding language must centralize on studying language in context. Who we are, who we talk to, where we are, what situation we are in, what point of the conversation we have reached, etc. are the types of factors that must be considered in the analyses of language (For background on these issues, see Gumperz, 1972; Hymes, 1974; Giglioli, 1972).

Idioms, being a part of language, may also be studied from a sociolinguistic approach. Such an approach requires that we look at specific instances, at conversations where idioms are used and analyze them by taking into account all sorts of contextual factors. However, since our main goal in this paper is not to do a sociolinguistic analysis, in this section we will instead concentrate on how all of the above discussion might bear on analyzing the use of idioms in context. The discussions in the previous sections now permit us to claim two things about idioms: i) that they are indeed "recognizably formulaic and largely figurative," as Drew and Holt stated and ii) that their "formulaic-ness," i.e., their syntactic and lexical fixedness and their figurativeness, i.e., the degree of metaphoricity are the factors determining people's intuitions about the idioms' analyzability and flexibility. If this can be taken to mean that people unconsciously recognize the "special status" of idioms, it should not be surprising if we found out that this intuitive recognition played a role in the choice people make in their conversations of using idioms instead of saying things literally. To go back to the question we posed in the introduction, the "special" features of the idiom 'a piece of cake' might explain why we would prefer it over saying 'very easy.'

Unfortunately, the sociolinguistic/conversation analytic approach to idioms is almost non-
existent. While psychologists, syntacticians and lexicographers have worried extensively about idioms, they seem to have been of little interest to sociolinguists. This comes as a surprise if we consider the various possible studies that can be done on idioms. Firstly, an ethnographic study that would map out the range of contexts that idioms are used in would allow us to figure out the kinds of factors such as region, register, age, gender, type of conversation, participants in the conversation etc. that determine when idioms are used. Such a study might allow us to answer questions such as: Are certain idioms culture-specific, used only in some regions? Do all age classes use them with the same frequency? What are the kinds of register restrictions on the use of idioms that would explain why we do not use the idiom to screw up in a formal conversation? Does our familiarity with the concepts and cultural practices in idioms affect our probability of using an idiom? More specifically, does knowing what a gauntlet is make us more or less willing to use the idiom to run the gauntlet?

Another type of study that would bear on the use of idioms is historical: how an idiom is born, how it becomes fixed, how it travels and becomes widely used, whether it travels from language to language, how it dies, etc. Idioms seem to be more "packed" culturally than other types of lexical items, although we have not considered any evidence in support of this. For example, analyzing the idiom to kick the bucket from a sociological/sociolinguistic perspective is likely to reveal much more about the culture than analyzing the words ‘to kick’ and ‘bucket’ separately. In that case, the historical study of idioms would have to be different than that of idioms.

In spite of the deep potential of idioms for sociolinguistic studies, I have been able to find only two studies along these lines. Drew and Holt have been the pioneers in doing a conversational analysis of idioms in order to “see whether, instead of occurring just anywhere in conversation, idioms might have some kind of orderly sequential positions” (Drew and Holt, 1988). Their findings (Drew and Holt, 1988; Drew and Holt, 1995) suggest that transition, expression of complaints and termination of topics in conversation are a few of the many instances of idiom use.
In “Complainable Matters: The Use of Idiomatic Expressions in Making Complaints,” they look at conversations in which one of the participants is expressing a complaint. After explaining what happened, what the matter is about, the complainant uses an idiom to actually state what his/her complaint is, regarding the matter at hand. In “Idiomatic Expressions and Their role in the Organization of Topic Transition in Conversation,” they analyze recordings of phone conversations of a British family and show that participants use an idiom at the end of a topic, to sum up their comment which in turn allows them to move on to a new topic. They also demonstrate that topic termination is another point in conversations where people are likely to use idioms.

VI. 2. Examples towards a Sociolinguistics of Idioms

Although I will not attempt any similar analysis, I would like to demonstrate through some examples how our findings about people’s intuitions about idioms might play a role in their conversations. Most of the examples come from Turkish and as they are merely examples, they do not show in any conclusiveness that there are any patterns the way Drew and Holt’s studies do, but they accomplish the more important goal of suggesting that contextual choices of idioms are based largely on our intuitive knowledge about them.

The first example comes from a wall-to-wall carpeting commercial on a big panel. It reads:

Yerden duvara kadar haklisiniz.
ground-from wall-to (extent) correct-2ndPL
“You are correct from the ground to the wall.”

The original idiom which has been taken and subverted is yerden göge kadar hakli olmak, “to be correct from the ground to the sky” whose literal paraphrase would be “to be obviously correct, without leading to any doubt.” This idiom is quite fixed, both lexically and syntactically. Forms such as topraktan göge kadar “from the soil to the sky,” yerden gökyüzüne kadar “from the ground to the sky” (gök and gökyüzü are largely interchangeable synonyms in Turkish) or
syntactic variations like gökten yere kadar "from the sky to the ground" do not convey the
figurative meaning of "without leading to any doubt." Also, since the word "correct" is literal, one
would expect other adjectives to be substitutable, but they are not. Not even the negation is
acceptable. In short, this idiom is fairly fixed.

So I think, the advertisers are aware of the fixedness of this idiom and they intentionally
pick it and turn it into a form that is unacceptable not simply because of any lexical or syntactic
changes but because the word gök "sky" has been replaced by duvar "wall" which makes the
phrase lose its idiom status. The idiom is still recognizable but the obvious and unacceptable twist
forces the reader to acknowledge the fixedness of the idiom and draws his/her attention to the
newly introduced word duvar. This substitution, which contradicts people's intuition about the
flexibility of this idiom, invokes the reader to notice the word duvar and to visualize, for a split
second, wall-to-wall carpeting. Glucksberg et al. (1993) suggest that metaphors are not always
visualized during the comprehension of an idiom and if that is the case for this particular idiom,
then the advertisers' choice of using an idiom instead of a literal phrase and their subsequent
"twist" on the idiom now forces people who read the commercial to visualize the metaphor.

Another example comes from a song from the popular Turkish singer Baris Manço:

Iste hendek iste deve... sana kolay kolay kiz vermeyiz.
Here ditch here camel...you-to easy easy girl give-NEG-3rdPL
"Here is the ditch and here is the camel...we won't let you marry our daughter so easily."

The idiom deveye hendek atlamaktan daha zor ("more difficult to do than to make a camel
jump over a ditch," meaning something that is almost impossible) is taken, broken apart so that all
that is left is the camel and the ditch. We can see that this particular idiom is especially alive and
transparent because citing only parts (hendek 'ditch' and deve 'camel') suffice to conjure up the
whole idiom. The singer, in realizing that saying "Here's the ditch and here's the camel" will
remind the listener of the idiom, manipulates the listener's attention and directs him/her towards the
target meaning and the force of the conceptual metaphor that the idiom is based on. The idea of
extreme difficulty is thus highlighted making the argument about not giving away the daughter much more convincing.

Another contextual use for idioms that our discussions suggest has do to with the group of idioms such as *to pass muster* which we claimed are dead metaphors because they contain unknown words. If these idioms are the only contexts that the unknown words appear in and they are on their way to being considered obsolete, then recognition of this phenomenon of one’s language can be used to perform conversational means. By opening up the idiom, explaining the meaning of the unknown word and thus making the idiom somewhat transparent, the speaker can make a somewhat implicit reference to the common background of speaker and listener. For example, *çileden çıkmak* is an idiom that means “to be very discouraged, to go crazy about something that one cannot control” the literal reading of which is “to come out of the çile.” Most speakers of Turkish would know that *çile* refers to a discouraging and no-exit type of situation so the idiom will be largely transparent. What most people would not know is that *çile* was originally a forty day period of willing imprisonment practiced by Muslim mystics during their quest for the love of Allah (Gölpinarlı, 1977). Therefore, when this etymological information is revealed by the speaker to someone with a similar background, someone who is likely to know about the whole Anatolian mystic tradition in which *çile* takes place, the speaker will be able to use this acknowledgement of similar backgrounds for the specific context to invoke the listener to cooperate and agree to what s/he will be saying.

Our last example is based on a commercial from American television. The product being advertised is a gift of flowers in the shape of a cake. The images show flowers which very much resemble a nice, colorful and round cake coming out of a box. After trying to convince the viewer that it would make a good gift, the person who talks says that it is very easy to order these flowers, that all you have to do is to call 1-800-FLOWERS. The commercial ends with the phrase “It’s a piece of cake!” What is interesting is that after the way in which the commercial is set up, the phrase *can* have two readings both of which have referents in this case: the literal reading refers to
the flowers and the figurative reading refers to how easy it is order. So the phrase isn’t just
ambiguous; the advertisers purposefully want it to have two readings. The choice of using this
specific idiom at the end depends on two contextual factors. First of all, the advertisers choose to
stress how easy it is to call precisely because they will be able to use this idiom that has double
meaning; otherwise, the ease of calling might not have been an issue to stress and there would not
be a choice to make between ‘very easy’ and ‘a piece of cake.’ Another factor is that due to the
particular nature in which the commercial is set up, it is ‘a piece of cake’ that is chosen over other
possible idioms that have the meaning ‘very easy.’

In this section I have attempted to demonstrate how linguistic knowledge of idioms can
guide us in analyzing what people do with idioms when they use them in context. They can use
them to perform particular conversational work by making use of their intuitional knowledge about
their analyzability and flexibility. Of course, to make such claims with any strength, the use of
idioms in context must be studied systematically.

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7 Although I cannot think of any alternative idioms and even though it is possible that there aren’t any, this
element illustrates a situation where there is good contextual reason to choose between alternatives.
References


