

On A Systematic Component of Meaning in Idioms

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Abstract

It has traditionally been assumed that the meaning of some or all phrasal idioms is non-compositional. However, I argue here that the aspectual meaning of idioms is completely systematic: there are no special aspectual restrictions on idioms, and moreover, the aspectual properties of an idiom are compositional, combining the aspectual properties of its syntactic constituents in the usual way. I show that this observation supports the theory of Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1994).

1 Aspectual Classes of Idioms

It is worth noting that all aspectual classes contain idiomatic VPs. In what follows, I will assume the familiar Vendlerian classes (states, activities, achievements, and accomplishments), identified by an array of tests from the literature (see Vendler 1967, Dowty 1979, Mittwoch 1991, among many others). Subclasses of achievements and accomplishments will also be distinguished. However, the aspectual parallelism between idiomatic and non-idiomatic VPs is independent of this classification.

States and activities are atelic predicates, which can be modified by adverbial PPs with *for*, but not by adverbial PPs with *in*, at least not with the sense that the state of affairs denoted by the VP ends in the time specified:

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| (1) | a. | Harry knew the truth for years/#in an hour. | ATELIC |
| | b. | Hermione pushed the cart for an hour/#in an hour. | ATELIC |

The crosshatch (#) indicates the availability of an alternative reading. For instance, the examples with *in*-phrases in (1) are marginally acceptable on the interpretation that the state of affairs denoted by the VP begins, rather than ends, when an hour has elapsed.

In English, states and activities can be distinguished using the progressive: states generally cannot occur in the progressive, while activities can:

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|-----|----|-------------------------------|----------|
| (2) | a. | *Harry is knowing the truth. | STATE |
| | b. | Hermione is pushing the cart. | ACTIVITY |

The same classes can be identified in idiomatic VPs. The idiomatic state *be the cat's pyjamas* ("be terrific") can occur with a *for*-phrase, but not with an *in*-phrase (3a) — except on the marginal reading noted above — or with the

progressive (3b).

- (3) a. Hermione was the cat's pyjamas for years/#in an hour. STATE
b. *Hermione is being the cat's pyjamas.

On the other hand, the idiomatic activity *jump through hoops* ("try to meet exacting expectations") can occur with a *for*-phrase and the progressive, but not with an *in*-phrase:

- (4) a. Harry jumped through hoops for years/#in an hour. ACTIVITY
b. Harry is jumping through hoops.

Unlike states and activities, accomplishments and achievements are telic: they allow modification by *in*-phrases. (5a) is true if Harry finished climbing the mountain within an hour after he started. The event in (5b) both begins and ends in an instant.

- (5) a. Harry climbed the mountain in an hour. ACCOMPLISHMENT
b. Hermione noticed the painting in an instant. ACHIEVEMENT

Several tests have been used to distinguish achievements from accomplishments. For example, accomplishments (6a), but not achievements (6b), generally allow modification by a *for*-phrase. Moreover, accomplishments can occur in the progressive (7a), while achievements generally cannot (7b).

- (6) a. Harry climbed the mountain for an hour. ACCOMPLISHMENT
b. #Hermione noticed the painting for an hour. ACHIEVEMENT

- (7) a. Harry was climbing the mountain. ACCOMPLISHMENT
b. #Hermione was noticing the painting. ACHIEVEMENT

The examples in (6b) and (7b) may marginally allow an iterative reading, in which Hermione kept noticing the painting again and again.

Another difference is that accomplishments, but not achievements, can be halted in midstream. If VP is an achievement, then *X stopped VPing* entails that *X VPed*. If VP is an accomplishment, this entailment does not hold: instead, *X stopped VPing* can mean that the event stopped before it was completed. For example, (8a) could mean that Harry did not climb the mountain, while (8b) entails that Hermione noticed the painting. Moreover, if VP is an achievement, *X stopped VPing* carries an iterative implicature — for example, (8b) suggests that Hermione noticed the painting several times.

- (8) a. Harry stopped climbing the mountain. ACCOMPLISHMENT
b. #Hermione stopped noticing the painting. ACHIEVEMENT

Idiomatic VPs also show the characteristics of accomplishments and achievements. For example, the idiomatic accomplishment *pay one's dues* ("earn one's right to something") can be modified by an *in*-phrase (9a), as can the idiomatic achievement *strike paydirt* ("gain something valuable") (9b).

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| (9) | a. | Hermione paid her dues in ten years. | ACCOMPLISHMENT |
| | b. | Harry struck paydirt in an hour. | ACHIEVEMENT |

Idiomatic achievements and idiomatic accomplishments can also be distinguished from each other, as illustrated in (10)-(11). I leave the details for the reader to verify.

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|------|----|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| (10) | a. | Hermione paid her dues for ten years. | ACCOMPLISHMENT |
| | b. | Hermione was paying her dues. | |
| | c. | Hermione stopped paying her dues. | |
| (11) | a. | #Harry struck paydirt for an hour. | ACHIEVEMENT |
| | b. | # Harry was striking paydirt. | |
| | c. | #Harry stopped striking paydirt. | |

Actually, the three tests just given to distinguish achievements from accomplishments do not yield exactly the same results. For the sake of exposition, let us assume that the *X stopped VPing* test is diagnostic of the split between accomplishments and achievements. So stated, there is a subclass of accomplishments that cannot be modified by a *for*-phrase, and a subclass of achievements that combines more easily with the progressive. An example of the "*for*-less" accomplishment (FLA) subclass is given in (12). As with other accomplishments, the *X stopped VPing* context does not entail that this accomplishment was completed (12a). Furthermore, this VP allows modification by an *in*-phrase (12b), and can be used in the progressive without an iterative meaning (12c).

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| (12) | a. | Hermione stopped burying the treasure. |
| | b. | Hermione buried the treasure in five minutes. |
| | c. | Hermione was burying the treasure. |

However, unlike other accomplishments, this VP does not allow a *for*-phrase:

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| (13) | #Hermione buried the treasure for five minutes. | FLA |
|------|---|-----|

More precisely, the *for*-phrase cannot modify the burying process, but in some cases can modify the result of this process. For example, (13) would be true if Hermione dug up the treasure five minutes after burying it.

As the reader may confirm, there are idiomatic VPs with the same

characteristics as these *for*-less accomplishments, for example *get one's act together* ("get organized") (14). Again, (14d) is fine if Harry got disorganized a month after getting organized.

- (14) a. Harry stopped getting his act together. FLA
 b. Harry got his act together in one semester.
 c. Harry was getting his act together.
 d. # Harry got his act together for a month.

The achievement class is also divided into subclasses, one of which is more compatible with the progressive. With this "*prog*-ful" subclass of achievements (PFA), as with other achievements, the *X stopped VPing* context entails that the VP event was completed, with an implicature that it was completed iteratively (15a). This subclass likewise allows modification by an *in*-phrase (15b), but not by a *for*-phrase (15c). Nonetheless, in this subclass the progressive does not imply an iterative reading. Instead, (15d) seems to mean something like "Hermione was searching for the exit."

- (15) a. #Hermione stopped finding the exit. PFA
 b. Hermione found the exit in ten minutes.
 c. #Hermione found the exit for ten minutes.
 d. Hermione was finding the exit.

Idiomatic VPs also occur in this subclass, such as the VP *get to first base* ("kiss someone"). Again, the reader may verify the parallels between (15) and (16).

- (16) a. #Harry stopped getting to first base. PFA
 b. Harry got to first base after one date.
 c. #Harry got to first base for one evening.
 d. Harry was getting to first base.

To summarize, any aspectual classification of non-idiomatic VPs also applies to idiomatic VPs. In this sense, idiomatic VPs are aspectually systematic.¹ More intriguing is the observation that the aspectual properties of idiomatic VPs are, at least in part, syntactically derived. I turn to this issue now.

¹ Additional examples of each class are readily available: states (*have bigger fish to fry, take the cake*), activities (*beat around the bush, push one's luck*), accomplishments (*run X into the ground, climb the ladder of success*), achievements (*drop the ball, kick the bucket*), *for*-less accomplishments (*make a name for oneself, go around the bend*), and *prog*-ful achievements (*hit one's stride, find one's tongue*).

2 Aspectual Compositionality in Idioms

The claim that idioms are aspectually compositional bears on a recent debate concerning the correspondences between syntax and meaning. It is generally acknowledged that words are associated with two types of semantic information, which Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998) call the *structural* and *idiosyncratic* components of meaning. The structural component of meaning interacts with the syntax, while the idiosyncratic component makes fine-grained distinctions that are irrelevant to the syntax. In Jackendoff's theory of Representational Modularity, both types of meaning are encoded at Conceptual Structure (CS); structural meaning is "visible" to correspondence rules between syntax and CS, while idiosyncratic meaning is not (1997:220). By contrast, the theory of Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1994) maintains that structural components of meaning are bundled into lexical items manipulated by the syntax, while idiosyncratic components are added post-syntactically, by reference to a list known as the Encyclopedia.

These two approaches make different predictions for the interpretation of idioms. Jackendoff argues that idioms are syntactically complex, but differ from non-idioms in the mapping to interpretation. In Representational Modularity terms, the head V of a non-idiomatic VP maps to a lexical conceptual structure (LCS), while its arguments map onto slots in this structure. For example, the LCS of a transitive verb like *kick* would have two argument slots. In the case of an idiomatic VP, however, the whole VP maps to an LCS, while the syntactic arguments of the verb need not map onto argument slots. For example, *kick the bucket* has no slot for *the bucket*; the idiomatic LCS of this VP is the same as the LCS for the intransitive verb *die* (Jackendoff 1997:169). In short, Representational Modularity treats idioms as involving an arbitrary mapping between CS and syntactic structure. Since this theory encodes both structural and idiosyncratic meaning at CS, both types of meaning are predicted to be subject to arbitrary mapping.

In Distributed Morphology, however, the structural components of meaning are assembled in the syntax. This theory predicts that the syntactic derivation of idioms has semantic consequences. Marantz (1997) suggests that one such consequence is aspectual. He argues that *kick the bucket* cannot mean "die", because it has the punctual aspect of a transitive VP with a definite complement. Thus, though (17a) is fine, (17b) is out.

- (17) a. Hermione was dying for weeks.
 b. * Hermione was kicking the bucket for weeks.

If this analysis is correct, it predicts that even if a VP has a non-compositional idiosyncratic meaning, it will have a compositional structural meaning. Specifically, it will have the same aspectual properties as any VP with the same syntactic properties.

One reason to suppose that aspect is a structural component of meaning is that it interacts with structural properties of the sentence (see Tenny 1987, among others). For example, when the verb *eat* takes a DP complement, the VP is generally telic, allowing *in*-phrase modification and disallowing *for*-phrase modification (18a). When it takes no complement, the VP is atelic, disallowing *in*-phrase modification, and allowing *for*-phrase modification (18b).

- (18) a. Hermione ate her vitamins {in two seconds flat/*for five minutes}.
b. Harry ate for/*in a week.

The semantic properties that distinguish bare plural and mass DPs from other DPs also seem to be structural components of meaning, since they affect the formal expression of DPs, the choice of determiners, and so forth. When the complement of *eat* is a bare plural or mass DP, the VP has the same atelic aspectual properties as with intransitive *eat*:

- (19) Harry ate turkey (sandwiches) for/*in a week.

If idioms have compositional aspect, the structure of an idiom should also have aspectual consequences. This prediction is confirmed. *Eat one's words* ("admit to being wrong") has the telic aspectual properties of the non-idiomatic *eat one's vitamins* (20a), while *eat crow* ("lose one's pride") has the atelic aspectual properties of *eat turkey* (20b).

- (20) a. Hermione ate her words {in two seconds flat/*for five minutes}.
b. Harry ate crow for/*in a week.

These facts suggest that, even in idiomatic VPs, the structural component of meaning is not arbitrarily related to the syntax, as Representational Modularity predicts, but instead is derived from it.

This observation also has implications for an account of the passivizability of idioms. It has long been noted that some idioms may passivize, while others cannot (Katz & Postal 1964, Fraser 1970, Katz 1973, Fiengo 1974, Newmeyer 1974). For example, (21a) retains the idiomatic meaning of the active, while (21b) has only a literal meaning.

- (21) a. The beans were spilled (by Hermione).
b. # The bucket was kicked (by Hermione).

Nunberg et al. (1994) propose that this difference arises from a distinction between compositional and non-compositional idioms. They argue that cases like (21a) are composed of subparts with idiosyncratic meanings. For example, in *spill the beans*, *spill* takes on a special meaning like "divulge", and *beans* takes on a meaning like "secret". On the other hand, they claim that cases like (21b) are

lexically stored as a whole, and thus cannot undergo syntactic operations.

However, the aspectual facts suggest that the structural component of meaning is always compositionally derived from the syntax. Thus, even idiomatic VPs that cannot undergo passivization have compositional aspect. For instance, the VPs in (20) cannot be passivized and retain their idiomatic interpretations:

- (22) a. #Her words were eaten (by her/Hermione).
b. #Crow was eaten (by Harry).

Moreover, *kick the bucket* (an achievement) and *saw logs* (an activity), which cannot passivize, are aspectually identical to their non-idiomatic counterparts, except that an iterative reading of the idiomatic *kick the bucket* is pragmatically unavailable. The non-idiomatic *kick the hand-grenade*, which also disfavors this reading, is completely parallel to the idiom. Thus the availability of passivization cannot be tied to a distinction between compositional and non-compositional idioms. One alternative worth exploring is that an idiom is passivizable if its idiosyncratic meaning is assigned to a thematic representation, but not if it is assigned to a morphosyntactic representation (Lebeaux 1988).

The facts presented above demonstrate that the meaning of idioms is not entirely arbitrary: the structural component of meaning (specifically, aspect) is both systematic and compositional. This observation supports the claim of Distributed Morphology that structural meaning, but not idiosyncratic meaning, is built in the syntax.

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