

# SYNTACTIC CONSTRAINTS ON IDIOMS (DO NOT INCLUDE LOCALITY)

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## 1 Introduction

Some recent work has argued that special interpretations like those found in phrasal idioms are subject to locality constraints. In particular, Marantz (1997) proposes that idiomatic interpretations are bounded by functional heads like *v*, the head that introduces the external argument of a verb. A similar restriction is proposed by Svenonius (2005), who claims that idioms cannot cross phase boundaries. In the phase theory of Chomsky (2000), the two important phase boundaries within a clause are CP and *v*P.

I show here that these putative locality restrictions on idiomatic interpretations are violated in a good number of cases. There is no locality restriction on idioms. I suggest instead that the selection theory of idioms proposed in Bruening (2010) correctly captures possible and impossible forms that idioms can take, and elaborate on this proposal to further explicate how it works. I also show that there is no reason to distinguish idioms from other sorts of fixed expressions; all obey the same principles and constraints, namely those proposed by Bruening (2010).

## 2 Evidence Concerning Locality

### 2.1 Marantz 1997

Marantz (1997) attempts to provide some evidence for his contention that the external-argument-introducing head is a cut-off point for special interpretations. For instance, he claims that any idiom with a fixed subject must be non-agentive. Idioms like *the shit hit the fan*, according to Marantz, do not have agentive subjects.

There are very few idioms in English that include fixed subjects, too few to really evaluate this claim (but see Williams, 2007:361 on *cat got X's tongue*, and Horvath and Siloni, 2016:161 on other languages). However, there are many idioms that include a full embedded clause. Some of these embedded clauses necessarily have null subjects (“PRO”), and those null subjects can be agentive:

- (1) a. NEG have a pot [PRO to piss in] (‘lack any standing’)

- b. have an axe [PRO to grind] ('have a (quarrelsome) reason')
- c. a tough row [PRO to hoe] ('is very difficult')
- d. a bitter pill [PRO to swallow] ('is unpleasant but must be accepted')
- e. play hard [PRO to get] ('be coy')

All of these embedded verbs can be passivized (*this pot was pissed in*), indicating that they are agentive. These idioms are then doubly problematic for the claim that agentive *v* imposes a boundary on idiomatic interpretations: they include not just an agentive subject, but go far beyond that in combining two clauses.

## 2.2 Svenonius 2005

Svenonius (2005) proposes that phase boundaries are absolute barriers to idiomatic interpretations. That is, all parts of a phrasal idiom must be minimally dominated by the same phasal node. The two phasal nodes in the clause are *vP* and *CP*.

Svenonius attempts to provide some evidence for this claimed locality constraint on idioms, but in fact his data seem to point in the opposite direction. He notes the existence of idiomatic expressions that consist of a modal and a main verb, which would have to cross the *vP* phase boundary (I show in section 3.2 that these expressions are relevant even if they are mostly literal):

- (2) a. the **will-call** window
- b. a **can-do** attitude
- c. a **must-have** item
- d. a **Devil-may-care** attitude

To these we can add idioms that include tense and aspect together with a main verb:

- (3) a. an **also-ran** ('a candidate who lost'; necessarily past)
- b. a **has-been** ('someone who is no longer great'; necessarily perfect)

There are numerous other idioms that would have to cross phase boundaries, as well. Many include a full finite *CP*:

- (4) a. strike [while the iron is hot] ('act before it is too late')
- b. close the stable door [after the horse has bolted] ('act after it's too late')
- c. (Neg) count X's chickens [before they hatch] ('plan on something that might not happen')
- d. X cross that bridge [when X comes to it] ('wait to act until it is necessary')
- e. X bite off more [than X can chew] ('take on more than one can handle')
- f. be that [as it may] ('that is true, but it does not change things')
- g. [when hell freezes over] ('never')
- h. [until the cows come home] ('for a very long time')

Others include a non-finite *CP* (some of these were shown above):

- (5) a. NEG have a leg [to stand on] ('have no standing')  
 b. NEG have a pot [to piss in] ('have no standing')  
 c. have an axe [to grind] ('have a quarrel')  
 d. a tough row [to hoe] ('is very difficult')  
 e. a bitter pill [to swallow] ('is unpleasant but must be accepted')  
 f. play hard [to get] ('be coy')  
 g. a wannabe (a want [to be]; = 'someone who is not something but (pathetically) wishes they were')

Other idioms include both a main verb in the vP phase and high functional material outside of that phase, because they obligatorily include that material:

- (6) a. Break a leg! (obligatorily imperative; = 'give a good performance')  
 b. No can do. (Neg Modal V; = 'that's impossible')

Note also the numerous examples of idioms that obligatorily include negation along with a lexical verb, for instance (5a–b), as well as the following:

- (7) a. NEG stop at anything ('be relentless')  
 b. NEG breathe a word about X ('keep X secret')  
 c. (can/could) NEG help it/Xself ('unable to stop oneself')  
 d. NEG see the forest for the trees ('focus on details and fail to see the big picture')

Harwood (2015) argues that certain idioms include progressive aspect. He gives the following examples (his example 83):

- (8) a. Something is eating X. ('something is obsessively bothering X')  
 b. X is pushing up daisies ('is dead')  
 c. X is cruisin' for a bruisin' ('is acting in such a way as to invite retribution')  
 d. X is chomping at the bit ('is impatient to start')

I find numerous examples on the internet of *push up daisies* and *chomp at the bit* in the simple past or in other forms besides the progressive. The other two do seem to only occur in the progressive (but *cruisin' for a bruisin'* might just to maintain the rhyme). In any event, Harwood argues that the progressive is included in the vP phase, and so these are not problematic for the claim that idiomatic interpretation is limited to a single phase. However, he also cites an idiom that seems to include perfect aspect, in (9a). To this we can add the two in (9b–c), from Lebeaux (2009:65):

- (9) a. X has been around the block a few times ('X is very experienced')  
 b. X has had it ('X is done/has lost all patience')  
 c. X has gone to the dogs ('X has declined in quality')

All of these obligatorily include the perfect aspect, which would have to be outside the vP phase on Harwood's assumptions. There does not seem to be a difference between progressive (one to two idioms) and perfect (four idioms, including *a has-been* from above) in this regard; in fact there are *more* idioms that include the perfect than include the progressive.

To summarize, idioms can cross the vP phase boundary by involving modals, aspect, negation, imperatives, and other functional material in addition to lexical material inside the VP. They can also embed full CPs, meaning that they can cross the CP phase boundary.

### 2.3 Summary

The specific claims of Marantz (1997) and Svenonius (2005) regarding a strict locality constraint on idioms are not borne out by the data. Idioms can be quite large, even including embedded clauses within them. They may tend to be small, and they may tend to exclude functional material like tense and aspect, but this is only a tendency, not a grammatical constraint.

It is also not clear why there would be a locality constraint on special interpretations. Numerous other aspects of interpretation must be able to involve agents and must be able to cross the vP phase boundary. For instance, an agent must be interpreted with respect to a lexical verb. Aspect, mood, negation, and so on must be able to operate on VP material. Association with focus can certainly cross phase and clause boundaries. So can quantifier scope. Why should idiomatic interpretations be different, such that only they cannot cross phase boundaries or the head v?

I conclude that there are no locality constraints on special interpretations like those found in idioms. This does not mean that there are no constraints at all on idiomatic interpretations, however. In the next section, I elaborate on a theory of the syntactic form of idioms that permits them to be quite large but also constrains them appropriately.

## 3 The Selection Theory of Idioms

There are several theoretical approaches to idioms and the structures they can be composed of. A commonly assumed one says that phrases that are interpreted idiomatically must be deep structure constituents, excluding all non-idiomatic material. This approach has been shown to be incorrect. For instance, Ernst (1981), Nunberg et al. (1994), Nicolas (1995), O'Grady (1998), and others have pointed out that quantifiers, adjectives, and possessors that are not part of an idiom can come in between a verb and NP that are interpreted idiomatically:

- (10) Before the symbolic shit hit the colonial fan recently at the University of Cape Town, . . .  
(<http://www.thejournalist.org.za/spotlight/we-love-uct-says-student-who-covered-rhodes-in-shit>)
- (11) I've seen you beat around more bushes than a landscaper.  
(<http://www.kungfumagazine.com/forum/showthread.php?42550-OT-9-11-Truth-Symposium/page5>)
- (12) lose X's cool, get X's goat, fill X's shoes, . . . (O'Grady, 1998:(4c-e))

Adjectives, quantifiers, and possessors form constituents with nouns; there is no constituent in these examples consisting of all and only the idiomatic material. Therefore, the underlying constituent view must be rejected.

The second approach, which I will adopt and elaborate on, says that idiomatic interpretation is dependent on selection (Bruening, 2010):<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Various versions of this have been proposed. For instance, Baltin (1989) says that idioms involve only the head of a phrase and the head of one of its complements. This is not quite right, because specifiers can also be selected; see Bruening (2010). van Gestel (1995) says that idioms consist of the selection of a lexical head by another lexical head. Again, this is not quite right, because idioms can include functional material. According to Koopman and Sportiche

(13) The Principle of Idiomatic Interpretation:

X and Y may be interpreted idiomatically only if X selects Y. (Bruening, 2010:532, (24))

In the above examples, *get* selects *goat*, and so the two can be interpreted idiomatically; *lose* selects *cool*; and so on. Non-selected elements, like adjectives and possessors, can appear in between pieces of idioms, because they do not disrupt this selection. Adjectives and adverbs *may* be part of an idiom, as in *beat a dead horse* or *bite the big one*, because they select for the projections they adjoin to. This is made clear by the difference between adverbs and adjectives, where adjectives adjoin only to nominal projections but adverbs adjoin to other categories. This could only be an instance of categorial selection, but it would not be correct to say that the adjoined-to category selects the adjunct. It must therefore be that adjuncts select the categories they adjoin to (and projection is not determined by selection; see Bruening, 2010:533–534). So, in *beat a dead horse*, *beat* selects an NP headed by the N *horse*, and *dead* selects a nominal projection, here one headed again by *horse*. Note that in the case of idioms, selection is for particular lexical items (the “l-selection” of Pesetsky, 1992). Note also that some idioms permit more than one word; for example, *clutch at straws* is also attested as *grasp at straws*. L-selection can specify a list of lexical items in addition to a single lexical item, or even a semantic class of lexical items, as in “families of idioms” like *beat the crap out of*. Here the verb can be one of several verbs like *beat* and *kick*, and the noun can also vary within a limited range, as *crap*, *shit*, *tar*, etc. A particular verb or class of verbs can select a list of particular lexical items, or a class of lexical items, with the result that the particular words chosen can even be somewhat productive (see McGlone et al. 1994).

There is also a third approach to idioms, the dependency theory of O’Grady (1998). In O’Grady’s formulation, this is mostly equivalent to the selection theory. However, it has been altered slightly in the notion of the *catena* in Osborne et al. (2012). I will not adopt this theory, because it introduces a syntactic notion, the *catena*, that I believe syntactic theory can do without. Similarly, the fourth approach posits phrasal *constructions* as primitives in grammar and views phrasal idioms as examples of these constructions (e.g., Riehemann, 2001). I also believe that syntactic theory can and therefore should do without the formal notion of a construction. In contrast, every theory needs selection in some form or other.

### 3.1 Building Idioms

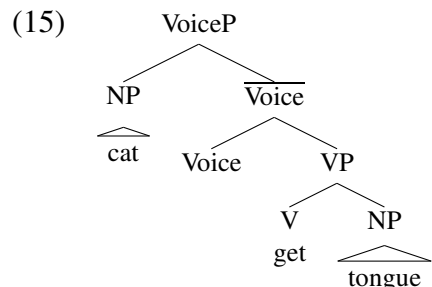
As was described briefly above, phrasal idioms can include more than two items by building a chain of selection. So long as each item either selects or is selected, the whole can constitute an idiom. I will go through a few of the longer idioms from above to illustrate the workings of the system, specifically the following:

- (14) a. The cat (has) got X’s tongue. (‘X is speechless’)  
 b. NEG have a pot [PRO to piss in] (‘lack any standing’)  
 c. X cross that bridge [when X comes to it] (‘wait to act until it is necessary’)

The idiom *the cat got X’s tongue* seems to involve a verb, a subject, and an object. To be concrete, I suppose that external arguments are selected by a head Voice (Kratzer, 1996) and are projected in that head’s specifier:

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(1991:224) a necessary condition on idioms is that, if X is the minimal constituent containing all the idiomatic material, the head of X is part of the idiom. This is correct, but it is too weak and is subsumed by the Principle of Idiomatic Interpretation in the text.



I will assume that non-selected material is generally irrelevant to the idiom. Many functional elements are also not part of idioms, for instance the definite article. Possessors may or may not be; here I assume it is not (note that many instances of this idiom without the possessor, for instance “cat got the tongue,” are attested). In the tree above, Voice selects an NP headed by *cat* and a VP headed by *get*. *Get* selects an NP headed by *tongue*. The entire phrase satisfies the Principle of Idiomatic Interpretation, and so it can be interpreted idiomatically.

In the idiom *NEG have a pot to piss in*, the non-finite clause is probably an infinitival relative modifying *pot*. As adjuncts, relative clauses select phrases of category N to adjoin to. Here, the relative clause selects a nominal headed by *pot*. Within the infinitival relative clause, I assume that a null C selects infinitival *to*, which in turn selects a VoiceP. Voice selects PRO as its specifier and a VP headed by *piss*. *Piss* selects a PP headed by *in*, while *in* selects a null operator which moves to Spec-CP. In the main clause, the verb *have* selects an NP headed by *pot*. As for negation, I will assume that it is a feature that can be specified on various syntactic categories, including clauses and VPs. This [Neg] feature is spelled out in different ways; in English, it is often spelled out as the adverb *not* adjoined to the highest VP of the clause. Idioms with negation often surface in different forms; for instance, *leave no stone unturned* is also robustly attested as *NEG leave any stone unturned*; the same is true for various other idioms with negation and an existential (e.g., *stop at nothing* ~ *NEG stop at anything*). Negative quantifiers are the combination of an existential and this abstract NEG (see, e.g., Penka 2012).

Finally, we have the interesting example of *X cross that bridge when X comes to it*, where the subject of the embedded clause is obligatorily covalued with the matrix subject. I assume that the idiom includes matrix Voice, which selects an external argument. The embedded clause adjoins to a projection of Voice and selects Voice, further specifying that the selected external argument of Voice must control the subject of the embedded clause. I will assume that this is an example of a switch-reference system, which must be mediated by C (e.g., Finer 1985). C selects both the higher Voice, and through a chain of selection selects the subject embedded within it. Note that the embedded object pronoun *it* is also obligatorily covalued with a matrix argument (the object); this will also have to be specified.

### 3.2 Syntactic Constraints on Idioms

Section 2 showed that there is no syntactic locality condition on idioms, and we have also seen quite large idioms, which can include multiple clauses. This does not mean that there are no syntactic constraints on idiomatic phrases.

The first constraint is imposed by the Principle of Idiomatic Interpretation, which requires selectional relations between all items of an idiom. This rules out discontinuities in idiomatic phrases, where X selects Y and Y selects Z but only X and Z are part of the idiom. For instance,

in contrast with *X has gone to the dogs*, where Perf selects *go* which selects *to* and so on, it would be impossible to have a similar idiom where the main verb is free to vary, something like *\*X has V-en an old shoe*, perhaps with a meaning like ‘X has V-en every conceivable thing’. Similarly ruled out would be an idiom like *\*NEG V the golden goose*, to mean something like ‘don’t V a profitable thing’. Because verbs do not select adjuncts to their objects, it is also impossible to have an idiom consisting of a V plus an adjunct to the V’s object, while the object NP itself is free. This would look like *\*play the devil’s X* (O’Grady, 1998:287), or *\*beat a dead X* or *\*be in hot X*. There are no idioms of this form. (In *play devil’s advocate*, the possessor is a selected argument of the N *advocate*, which itself is selected by the V.)

The second constraint that idioms are subject to is the Constraint on Idiomatic Interpretation proposed by Bruening (2010:532, (25–26)):

(16) Constraint on Idiomatic Interpretation:

If X selects a lexical category Y and X and Y are interpreted idiomatically, all of the selected arguments of Y must be interpreted as part of the idiom that includes X and Y.

(17) Lexical categories are V, N, A, Adv.

This constraint captures the fact, first noted by Marantz (1984), that there are many verb-object idioms, with an open slot for the subject (like *kick the bucket*), but there are no subject-verb idioms with an open slot for the object. Following Kratzer (1996), external arguments are arguments not of the verb, but of a higher functional head Voice. If an idiom were to include an external argument and a verb, that idiom would also have to include Voice. Voice would select the external argument and the V, but by the Constraint on Idiomatic Interpretation, all of V’s arguments would then have to be included in the idiom as well. Hence there can be no idiom that includes a subject and verb and has an open slot for an object. Putative counterexamples to this restriction are not actual counterexamples. For example, phrases like *a little bird told X Y* are not idioms with fixed subjects, since the NP *little bird* can occur with this meaning with other verbs or even no verb. See Bruening (2010:533), O’Grady (1998:295–297), and <http://lingcomm.blogspot.com/2011/01/idioms-and-by-phrases.html> on other putative counterexamples. The only potentially valid counterexample that I am aware of is the example cited above as including the progressive aspect, *something is eating X*. However, notice that the verb *eat* in this idiom is a psych verb, meaning something like ‘bother (obsessively or to an extreme)’. Psych verbs are known to behave unusually, and have been analyzed as having no subject underlyingly. That is, they have two objects, one of which becomes the surface subject (e.g., Belletti and Rizzi, 1988). In current terms, both arguments are arguments of the V, and neither is an argument of Voice. I tentatively adopt this analysis for this particular idiom, so that the idiom is simply the V and one of its selected arguments.

The reason to exclude *functional* categories from (16) is that prepositions are often part of an idiom, while their complement is not. For instance, there are idioms like *throw the book at X*, *build a fire under X* (O’Grady, 1998:300–301). (Note that this is true of I-selection generally, as discussed by Pesetsky 1992: numerous verbs I-select their complement P but leave P’s complement open.) In these cases, V selects N and P, so all three can form an idiom; since P is not a lexical category, its selected arguments do not need to be part of the idiom.

Turning back to the subject-object asymmetry, consider proverbs, many of which are complete sentences. Moon (1998:115) notes that proverbs that are full sentences often lose their subject to become VP idioms (note that determiners can also change, from *a straw* to *straws*):

- (18) a. a drowning man will clutch/grasp at a straw → to clutch/grasp at straws  
 b. don't look a gift horse in the mouth → to look a gift horse in the mouth  
 c. don't put the cart before the horse → to put the cart before the horse  
 d. You can't have your cake and eat it, too → to have one's cake and eat it, too  
 e. the pot can't call the kettle black → to call the kettle black

It never happens that the object becomes the open slot, while the subject is retained. In my judgment, turning *the pot can't call the kettle black* into *call the kettle black* is perfectly natural, but turning it into *the pot can't call X black* is entirely unnatural. Hence the Constraint on Idiomatic Interpretation captures something important about native speaker competence.

As Bruening (2010) shows, the Constraint on Idiomatic Interpretation also accounts for asymmetries in idioms built with ditransitives. V X NP idioms are common (*give X the boot*), but there is no V NP X idiom (*\*throw the wolves X*). This follows from the analysis of ditransitives put forward in Bruening (2010), in conjunction with the Constraint on Idiomatic Interpretation. Briefly, the second object is what is selected by the V, while the first object is selected by another head, Appl(icative). If an idiom includes the first object, it necessarily includes Appl selecting that object and V, but then by (16) the argument of V must be included as well. See Bruening (2010) for details.

## 4 Other Fixed Expressions

An important issue in any discussion of the syntax of idioms is how one defines and identifies an idiom. This is important, because one might object to some of the examples that violated the putative locality conditions discussed above on the grounds that they are not actually idioms. For instance, in *a can-do attitude*, *can* and *do* are interpreted purely literally.

However, it is not clear that it is necessary or desirable to distinguish literal from non-literal words in fixed expressions. Riehemann (2001) distinguishes *idiomatic words* from *non-idiomatic words* within idioms, but makes no distinction between idioms that contain the two categories. For instance, in *get X's goat* ('irritate X'), neither *get* nor *goat* have their literal interpretation. They are both idiomatic words. However, in *miss the boat* ('miss an opportunity'), *miss* is a non-idiomatic word, because it has its literal meaning. Nevertheless, this idiom only occurs with these particular words; *the boat* does not occur with the same meaning with other words (e.g., *caught the boat* does not mean that the opportunity was seized). Nicolas (1995) makes the same distinction, but with a different name, but then also views them as essentially identical.

Moreover, most of the literature on idioms does not draw a sharp distinction between idioms and other fixed expressions, including collocations and proverbs or sayings (in fact Schenk, 1995 argues explicitly that they all obey the same syntactic constraints). I believe that they all work in the same way, via selection. In fact this is how purely literal, non-fixed language works, so this is no surprise. Other than their fixedness, the one way idioms are special is that they obey the Constraint on Idiomatic Interpretation outlined in the previous section. Recall that this constraint bans idioms with a fixed subject and a verb but an open slot for an object. This same ban seems to be at work in fixed expressions of all types. There are numerous fixed expressions consisting of a verb and object (e.g., *make an effort*), but I am not aware of any collocation, or any proverb or saying, that includes a subject and verb but an open slot for an object. If the subject is included, the object always is as well. Often, there is no object, and none can be added. So, in the examples above, like *a can-do*



*attitude* and *a devil-may-care attitude*, no object is possible (*\*a can-do-macramé attitude*). The same holds for *a has-been* and *a wannabe*; *\*a has-been-a-rockstar* and *\*a wannabe-a-rock-star* are not possible. Similarly, there is no fixed expression consisting of a verb and first object with an open slot for a second object, but V X NP collocations are common (e.g., *give X a round of applause*, *pay X a compliment*).

This means that expressions like *a can-do attitude* and *a has-been* are relevant for putative locality constraints on special interpretations, as they obey all of the constraints on expressions with special interpretations. Fixed expressions in general obey these constraints. The Principle of Idiomatic Interpretation and the Constraint on Idiomatic Interpretation are now much more general, and hold also of literal fixed expressions in addition to idiomatic ones.

## 5 Conclusion

I have shown in this paper that claims of locality constraints on idiomatic interpretations are not supported. Phrasal idioms and fixed expressions in general can be quite large, even crossing clause boundaries. The selection theory of idioms proposed by Bruening (2010) correctly captures the syntactic forms idioms can take, without a locality condition. These same constraints hold of fixed expressions generally, even ones that are interpreted purely literally.

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