

ON THE SYSTEMATIC ASPECT OF  
IDIOMS

Martha McGinnis  
University of Calgary

It has traditionally been assumed that the meaning of some or all phrasal idioms is noncompositional. However, I will argue here that the aspectual meaning of idioms is completely systematic: there are no special aspectual restrictions on idioms, and moreover, the aspect of an idiom is compositional, combining the aspectual properties of its syntactic constituents in the usual way. I will show that this observation supports the theory of Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz 1993).

### 1 Aspectual Classes of Idioms

First, 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). However, the aspectual parallelism between idiomatic and nonidiomatic 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.

- (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.

- (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

Thanks go to Danny Fox, Heidi Harley, Norbert Hornstein, Alec Marantz, Ora Matushansky, and two *LI* reviewers for useful discussion of this work.

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

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

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, (7a) could mean that Harry did not climb the mountain, while (7b) entails that Hermione noticed the painting. Moreover, if VP is an achievement, *X stopped VPing* carries an iterative implicature. For example, (7b) suggests that Hermione noticed the painting several times.

- (7) a. Harry stopped climbing the mountain. (accomplishment)  
 b. #Hermione stopped noticing the painting. (achievement)

Idiomatic VPs can 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 (8a), as can the idiomatic achievement *strike paydirt* ('gain something valuable') (8b).

- (8) 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 (9)–(10). I leave the details for the reader to verify.

- (9) a. Hermione paid her dues for ten years. (accomplishment)  
 b. Hermione stopped paying her dues.
- (10) a. #Harry struck paydirt for an hour. (achievement)  
 b. #Harry stopped striking paydirt.

In short, any aspectual class of nonidiomatic VPs also contains idiomatic VPs. In this sense idiomatic VPs are aspectually systematic.<sup>1</sup> More intriguingly, as I will show, idiomatic VPs have syntactically derived aspectual properties.

## 2 Aspectual Compositionality in Idioms

The issue of whether 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 Levin and Rappaport Hovav (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 (RM), 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 (DM; Halle and Marantz 1993) maintains that structural components of meaning are bundled into lexical items manipulated by the syntax, while idiosyncratic components are added postsyntactically from 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 nonidioms in the mapping to interpretation. In RM terms the head V of a nonidiomatic 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, and the syntactic arguments of the verb need not map onto argument slots (Jackendoff 1997:162). 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* (1997:169).

In short, RM 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. Thus, aspectual meaning

<sup>1</sup> More examples 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*), and achievements (*drop the ball, kick the bucket*).

is predicted to be noncompositional in idioms. It should be noted that there is nothing incidental about Jackendoff's claim that CS encodes structural meaning. Jackendoff argues explicitly against a syntactic level of structural meaning, such as Logical Form, and states that "it is impossible to isolate a coarse semantic structure that idealizes away from the details of LCSs" (1997:50).

In DM, however, the structural components of meaning are assembled in the syntax. This theory predicts that the syntactic derivation of idioms has semantic consequences. Marantz (1997:212) suggests that one such consequence is aspectual. He argues that *kick the bucket* cannot mean 'die', because it "carries the semantic implications of a transitive VP with a definite direct object." Thus, (11b) is not idiomatic.

- (11) 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 noncompositional 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, e.g., Tenny 1987). For example, when the verb *climb* takes a singular DP complement, the VP is generally telic, allowing *in*-phrase modification. When it takes no complement, the VP is atelic, disallowing *in*-phrase modification.

- (12) Hermione climbed #(a mountain) in ten hours.

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, including the choice of determiners. They also affect aspect. For example, when the complement of *hang* is a singular DP, the VP is telic (13a); when it is a bare plural or mass DP, the VP is atelic (13b).

- (13) a. Hermione hung a picture in five minutes. (telic)  
 b. Harry hung pictures/laundry for/#in an hour. (atelic)

If idioms have compositional aspect, the structure of an idiom should also have aspectual consequences. This prediction is confirmed. *Hang a left* ('turn left') has the aspectual properties of the nonidiomatic *hang a picture* (14a), while *hang fire* ('wait') has the aspectual properties of *hang laundry* (14b).

- (14) a. Hermione hung a left in five minutes. (telic)  
 b. Harry hung fire for/#in a week. (atelic)

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

This claim has implications for an account of the passivizability of idioms. It has long been noted that some idioms can passivize, while others cannot (Katz and Postal 1964, Fraser 1970, Katz 1973, Fiengo 1974, Newmeyer 1974). For example, (15a) retains the idiomatic meaning of the active, while (15b) has only a literal meaning.

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

Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow (1994) propose that this difference arises in part from a distinction between compositional and noncompositional idioms. They argue that cases like (15a) 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 many unpassivizable idioms like (15b) 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 (14) cannot be passivized and retain their idiomatic interpretations, as shown here:

- (16) a. #A left was hung (by Hermione).  
 b. #Fire was hung (by Harry).

Moreover, *kick the bucket* (an achievement) and *saw logs* (an activity), which cannot passivize, are aspectually identical to their nonidiomatic counterparts, except that an iterative reading of the idiomatic *kick the bucket* is pragmatically unavailable. The nonidiomatic *kick the hand grenade*, which also disfavors this reading, is completely parallel to the idiom. Thus, the impossibility of passivization cannot be attributed to the storage of an idiom as a whole in a presyntactic Lexicon.<sup>2</sup>

The claim that idioms have systematic structural aspect predicts that for any idiomatic VP with a verb  $V_n$ , there will be a nonidiomatic VP with  $V_n$  that has the same aspectual properties. However, since not all VPs with the same verb are aspectually identical, a given nonidiomatic VP with  $V_n$  may have aspectual properties different from those of an idiomatic VP with  $V_n$ .<sup>3</sup> For example, *The mouse got the cheese* is an accomplishment, so (17a) allows an interrupted reading,

<sup>2</sup> If the idiosyncratic meaning of idioms is assigned postsyntactically, as in DM, an alternative worth exploring is that an idiom can be passivized if its idiosyncratic meaning is assigned to a thematic representation, but not if it is assigned to a morphosyntactic representation. A similar proposal is made by Lebeaux (1988). For Lebeaux, however, the thematic representation is in a presyntactic Lexicon.

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to a reviewer for raising this issue and the subsequent examples.

where the mouse stopped in the midst of getting the cheese. By contrast, the idiom *The cat got X's tongue* ('X was unable to speak') is an achievement, which allows only an iterative reading in (17b).

- (17) a. The mouse stopped getting the cheese. (accomplishment)  
 b. #The cat stopped getting Harry's tongue. (achievement)

This difference can be attributed to the ambiguity of *get*, which has both agentive and nonagentive readings. These two readings arise from differences in clause structure (cf. Arad 1998:240, Harley 1998). When *get* is agentive, as in (17a), an accomplishment reading can result, but when it is not, this reading seems to be unavailable (17b). The nonidiomatic (18) also has nonagentive *get*, and also disallows the interrupted reading.

- (18) #The teacher stopped getting Harry's homework. (achievement)

Another case of verb ambiguity arises in (19). The nonidiomatic (19a) allows an iterative reading, where Hermione took the powder repeatedly. By contrast, the idiomatic *take a powder* ('leave the scene') in (19b) allows only a result modification reading, where Hermione stayed away for an hour.

- (19) a. On her doctor's advice, Hermione took a powder for several weeks.  
 b. When the ogre arrived, Hermione took a powder for an hour.

This contrast can be attributed to an ambiguity of *take*, which in (19a) is a verb of ingestion with an agentive subject, and in (19b) is a light verb with a theme subject. The nonagentive use of *take* is also shown in the nonidiomatic (20), which has the same aspectual properties as the idiomatic (19b).

- (20) When the class ended, Hermione took a break for an hour.

In some cases idiomatic and nonidiomatic counterparts may have the same grammatical aspect, but a particular reading may be ruled out for pragmatic reasons. One such case, noted above, is the pragmatic unavailability of an iterative reading for *kick the bucket*. A reviewer notes a parallel contrast between the idiomatic *Harry kicked* ('Harry died'), which pragmatically cannot be iterative, and the nonidiomatic *The horse kicked*, which can. A similar contrast can be seen in (21). (21a) has a temporary-result reading, where the dog bites the speaker's leg and then hangs on for an hour before letting go. The temporary-result reading is pragmatically odd for (21b), since Hermione cannot come to life again after an hour.

- (21) a. The dog bit my leg for an hour.  
 b. #Hermione bit the dust for an hour.

Because these restrictions are pragmatic, not syntactic, they do not apply to a creature that dies and is repeatedly reborn, like the legendary phoenix.

- (22) a. The phoenix kicked (the bucket) every five hundred years for millennia.  
 b. The phoenix bit the dust for three days, then rose again from its ashes.

In summary, 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 composed in the syntax.

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AGAINST SUBSEGMENTAL GLIDES  
 Jerzy Rubach  
 University of Iowa/University  
 of Warsaw

This squib claims that subsegmental glides should be eliminated as licit representations in phonology. Section 1 asks whether segmental glides are necessary, a question that is answered affirmatively in section 2. Sections 3 and 4 consider the evidence for subsegmental glides and conclude that there is none. Section 5 summarizes the conclusions and compares the predictions made by subsegmental and segmental representations of glides.

The illustrative material presented here is drawn primarily from Ukrainian and Dutch because these languages show directionality effects and thus bear in a crucial way on the potential evidence for subsegmental glides. In addition, the choice of Ukrainian is rewarding in one more way: the data have never been discussed in the generative literature to date.

### 1 Representations

The idea that glides can be subsegmental originated with McCarthy and Prince (1986) and stems from their effort to reconcile the Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP) with the moraic skeleton (see also Hayes 1989, Rosenthal 1994). Subsegmental glides do not have a Root node of their own. Rather, they share a Root node with the high vowels that spawn them and, consequently, they do not violate the OCP. This is illustrated in (1), which shows instances of glide insertion spawned

I would like to thank Jill Beckman and Cathie Ringen for discussion. I am also very grateful to the three *Linguistic Inquiry* reviewers for their criticism of earlier versions of this squib, which led to a number of improvements in both the content and the presentation of my analysis.