

# The syntax of idioms

## Macro-variation in the size of verbal idioms

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Idioms are expressions with a non-compositional interpretation: their meanings are not simply predictable from (the combination of) the literal meanings of their parts. A canonical example is *kick the bucket* ('to die'), the meaning of which has nothing to do with either kicking or buckets. Crucially, if any of the parts are altered, the figurative interpretation is lost: neither *kick the can* nor *knock the bucket* means 'to die'.

It has long been noted (cf. e.g. Chomsky, 1980, 1981; Marantz, 1984) that verbal idioms are typically comprised of the verbal predicate and its arguments: *bite the dust* (DP-theme), *come to the point* (PP-goal), *all hell breaks loose* (DP-theme subject). Kitagawa (1986), McGinnis (2002) and Svenonius (2005) observe that although verbal idioms can co-occur with other syntactic material, such as voice, aspect, modality, or tense (e.g. *he kicked the bucket* in the past tense or *they are bringing down the house* with progressive aspect), the idiomatic reading is never dependent on the presence of these items. Thus, with regard to the size of a verbal idiom, there seems to be a strict separation between the vP and TP domain: a verb does not form an idiom with material generated outside of the vP domain. This has led Svenonius (2005) to claim that the size/boundary of verbal idioms is constrained by phases (postulated for independent reasons in Chomsky 2000, 2001): an idiom can be smaller than a phase, but can never be larger than it.

However, there seems to be cross-linguistic variation with regards to the size of verbal idioms. In recent literature, it has been noted that certain idioms *are* reliant on additional syntactic material. In English, idioms exist that are dependent on passive voice or progressive aspect (Bowers, 2010; Harwood, 2015). (Dialectal) Dutch also exhibits idioms that are reliant on passive voice and progressive aspect. Going one step further, Dutch dialects have a plethora of idioms that are dependent on perfect aspect or modality.

If verbal idioms are indeed constrained by the size of the clause-internal phase, then these data imply that the clause-internal phase in English extends as far as the progressive layer, and as far as the modal layer in Dutch and its dialects. There thus appears to be cross-linguistic variation with regards to the size of the clause-internal phase. This subsequently means that phases are not rigid and absolute, as Chomsky (2000, 2001) claims, but rather are flexible across languages and perhaps context sensitive, as proposed in the dynamic phase approach (cf. Bobaljik & Wurmbrand 2005; Wurmbrand 2013; Boskovic 2014; Harwood 2014).

This claim can be backed up by using evidence from VP ellipsis. It has been claimed that verbal ellipsis privileges the clause-internal phase (Gengel 2007; Holmberg 2001; Chomsky 2001, 2005). In English, said phenomenon targets as much as the progressive aspectual layer, and as much as the modal layer in Dutch, implying, once again, that the clause-internal phase in English extends as far as progressive aspect, and as far as modality in Dutch.

In this talk, I also discuss methodological issues that arise in researching the syntax of dialectal idioms, focusing, specifically, on Dutch dialects.