

The Role of Metaphor in Idiom Interpretation: Further Ruminations

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Abstract. One of the primary concerns of English linguistics regarding idioms and idiomaticity consists in finding grounds for divorcing idioms from the generative grammar theory (Fraser, 1970; Katz, 1973; Swinney and Cutler, 1979; Wood, 1986). According to this strand of thought, idiomatic expressions are semantically non-compositional and fully fixed in their lexico-grammar representations. Quite possibly, credit is due to cognitive grammar (Langacker, 1987; 2008) and construction grammar (Fillmore, 1988; Goldberg, 1995; 2006; Hilpert, 2014; Herbst, 2015) for providing the backdrop against which the compositional model of idiomaticity (Gibbs, 1990; 1995; 2007; Cacciari and Glucksberg, 1991; Glucksberg, 1993; Cacciari, 2014) has emerged. It argues that many idioms, contrary to generative linguistics vantage point, are flexible and amenable to lexical and syntactic transformations. This paper explains theoretical concepts along with practical examples, which may shed light on the role of metaphor in the analyzability and decomposability of idiomatic expressions. Firstly, we explain how the concept of metaphorical regularity vs. metaphorical irregularity, applied to the study of idioms, allows distinguishing between regular and irregular metaphors incorporated by idiomatic expressions. Secondly, we analyze the notion of metaphorical asymmetry, which, as regards idioms and idiomaticity, refers to uneven distribution of figurative meanings among idiom parts. Thirdly, we focus on some particular facets of conceptual metaphor, such as cross-domain mappings, metaphorical concepts, and metaphorical entailments. We conclude the discussion with extended idiomatic metaphor, which is an amalgam of micro-metaphors bundled around the base metaphor of an idiom in a literary text. Hence, our principal argument is that the aforementioned metaphor-based linguistic concepts are important idiom processing tools in psycholinguistics. Language users may find them advantageous when trying to work out the meaning of unfamiliar metaphor-derived idiomatic expressions in discourse.

Keywords: *idiom, interpretation, compositionality, metaphorical regularity, metaphorical asymmetry, conceptual metaphor, extended idiomatic metaphor.*

Introduction. To date and prior to the rise of the corpus linguistics proper, idioms, of all types of formulaic language, have arguably received a lion's share of linguists' attention. As befits a notion that often finds itself embedded in a plethora of linguistic, cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary frameworks, idiom is a word with a number of definitions. The most authoritative and, quite importantly, far-reaching is the one advanced by the Oxford English Dictionary: *a form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of a language, and often having a signification other than its grammatical or logical one* (Oxford English Dictionary Online).

In essence, the above definition advocates both a phraseological view of language comprising idiomatic expressions and word-formation products, as well as a 'Construction Grammar' approach to language focusing on 'non-lexical idioms' and constructions. On the contrary, the traditional and hence 'received wisdom' approach to idioms and phraseology entrenched in mainstream linguistics holds that an idiom *'is a complex expression which is wholly non-compositional in meaning and wholly non-productive in form'* (Wood, 1986: 2). Put another way, one could reasonably posit that what Wood calls 'non-compositional in meaning', can otherwise be termed 'non-literal' or 'semantically opaque'; what Wood describes as 'non-productive in form', can be referred to as 'conventionalized' in linguistics. Furthermore, the descriptor 'wholly', as in 'wholly non-compositional' and 'wholly non-productive', implies extreme forms of 'semantic opacity' and 'conventionalization', respectively. That, as surprising as it may seem, is rarely the case with idioms of all types. In order to facilitate this proverbial definition, English textbooks, academic papers and dictionaries abound with boilerplate examples such as *spill the beans, kick the bucket, beat around the bush, rain cats and dogs, cost an arm and a leg*, etc. Delving into a dictionary of idioms,

however, one is bound to discover, apart from *traditional idioms*, such as *throw the baby out with the bathwater*, *idiomatic compounds*, such as *turkey shoot*; *similes* and *comparisons*, such as *swear like a trooper*; *exclamations* and *sayings*, such as *over my dead body!*, and *clichés*, such as *all part of life's rich tapestry*' (CIDI, 2002: 7). This leaves us in a position of suggesting that expressions like *kill two birds with one stone* or *wear your heart on your sleeve* are only 'a tip of phraseological iceberg' (Boers, 2014: 193), so to speak. Moreover, idiomaticity, as it appears, is a semantic continuum ranging from idiomatic (non-compositional) to collocational (compositional) phrases. When it comes to psycholinguistics, a number of studies have been carried out (Gibbs, 1995; Gibbs, 2007; Glucksberg, 1993) in an effort to refute the generally accepted theory of idioms grounded in non-compositionality. This brings us to the research questions attended to in the present paper:

- What is the role of metaphor from the standpoint of psycholinguistics?
- What metaphor-derived strategies can help users apprehend the meaning of an unknown idiom in and beyond discourse?

Consequently, **the aim** of the research is to explore the analyzability of idioms in light of the compositional model of idiomaticity. In so doing, we seek to illuminate to what extent English idioms appear analyzable and thus decomposable from the user perspective.

Data and methods. Before we proceed with the results and the discussion, some remarks on data and methodology are in place. The data for the analysis was retrieved from *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (CIDI) (2002 edition), comprising approximately 7,000 idioms from British, American and Australian English. The usage of idioms was verified in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which is a large text collection (over 560 million words) that documents the usage of

American English from the early 2000s and up to the present. For the purposes of this paper, the compositional model of idiomaticity is employed. The compositional model (Cacciari and Tabossi, 1988; Cacciari, 2014; Glucksberg, 1991, 1993; Keysar and Bly, 1999; Gibbs, 1990, 1995, 2007 and others) questions the conventional view of idioms as non-compositional phrases originating from generative grammar (Fraser, 1970; Katz, 1973; Swinney and Cutler, 1979 and others). Along this line of thought, many idioms are considered flexible and amenable to lexical and syntactic transformations, as opposed to a few ‘fossilized’ idiomatic expressions. The research also rests on the general theory of idioms and idiomaticity (Nunberg et alii, 1994; Moon, 1998; Gibbs, 2007; Naciscione, 2010; Boers, 2014; Dąbrowska, 2018).

Results and Discussion. The role of metaphor in language and cognition as a primary tool of conceptualizing human experience has been discussed time and again in Steen, 2009; Semino, 2013; Kövecses, 2010; 2015 and Gibbs, 2012; 2017, among others. Indeed, owing to its ubiquity in the lexicon, metaphor is ‘one of the chief motivating forces which underlies the development of polysemy’ (Moon, 1998: 200). Idioms are generally distinguished from metaphor or metonymy (Gibbs, 2007: 699). Yet, many idioms, conversely, often ‘incorporate’ (Moon, 1998; Gibbs, 2007) metaphor, metonymy and other kinds of figurative language. This idea provides ample room for linguistic enquiry as to the analyzability and decomposability of idioms. The discussion in the present paper will therefore revolve around the following key issues: metaphorical regularity vs. metaphorical irregularity, metaphorical asymmetry, conceptual metaphor, and extended idiomatic metaphor.

Metaphorical regularity vs. metaphorical irregularity. Metaphorical regularity is here referred to the use of an idiomatic component in its original metaphoric sense. In other words, an idiom conveys an established metaphor ad hoc. A classic example would involve delexical verbs, such as *give*, *take*, and *make* featuring in *give (one) the kiss of life*, *take someone’s point*, and *make a name for yourself*, accordingly. One could reasonably posit that the overall meanings of the above idioms are analyzable by first turning to the metaphorically regular meanings of the verbs in question. Native speakers are expected to be aware that *give* metaphorically corresponds to ‘*administer as medicine*’, *take* stands for ‘*adopting as one’s own*’, and *make* can also mean ‘*produce as a result of action, effort or behavior with respect to something*’. As a result, these meanings come embedded in the meanings of the idiomatic expressions cited above, as in ‘*to administer artificial respiration, that is, the blowing into the mouth of a person who has stopped breathing so as to force air in and out of their lungs*’ (CIDI), ‘*accept the validity of someone’s idea or argument*’ (CIDI), and ‘*do something very well so that it makes you famous*’ (CIDI), respectively. Metaphorical irregularity, in our opinion, arises from the discrepancy between the metaphorical meaning of a word and its meaning in an idiom. An excellent example is the byword idiomatic expression *to spill the beans*. The collocation of *spill* and *the beans* produces meanings otherwise unfamiliar to language users beyond this idiom. Thus, *spill* is assigned the meaning of ‘*reveal*’ and *beans* that of ‘*confidential information*’ in the expression. Considering the above, the

meaning of the string appears completely non-compositional. However, two remedies can be proposed to address this issue. In the first case, we would like to subscribe to a position similar to that put forth by Nunberg et alii (1994). In their analysis of idioms, they maintain that even if the meanings of idioms cannot be derived from the meanings of their parts, a semantic analysis of idioms can be made a posteriori. For example, if one comes across the sentence *the man confessed to the computer theft and then spilled the beans on the luxury car theft scheme*, Wodnicki said, and provided the sentence is heard in a specific context, one will be able to deduce a meaning ‘*reveal the truth about something secret or private*’ (CIDI) of the expression *to spill the beans*, even though one might not have been able to predict that the phrase had this meaning if one had heard it in isolation. At this point, so Nunberg and associates argue, one will be able to establish correspondences between the parts of the structured denotation of the idiomatic expression (*the act of revealing a secret*) and the parts of the idioms (*spill* and *the beans*), in such a way that each constituent will be seen to refer metaphorically to an element of the interpretation (Nunberg et alii, 1994: 496). The second remedy is supposedly more straightforward than the first one. It comes down to the fact that dictionaries, such as *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, for example, now codify idiom-derived meanings of some words. Thus, in the case of *to spill the beans*, one may look up the definition of *spill*, which is ‘*let out*’ or ‘*divulge*’ (Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary), and then work out the meaning of the rest of the expression.

Metaphorical asymmetry. Metaphorical asymmetry in application to idioms and idiomaticity refers to uneven distribution of figurative meanings among idiom parts. In this vein, *strings*, for instance, appears more metaphorical in the expression *pull the strings* than *pull*. Moon rightly observes that ‘users tend to look up idioms under component nouns, as if latently aware that the nouns are the items which centrally hold the key to the metaphor’ (Moon, 1998: 201). Said another way, noun components will likely be more ‘salient’ as opposed to the remaining parts of an idiom. Moreover, in the case of an unfamiliar idiom, ‘the constituent words have individual salience, while the idiomatic meaning is non-salient’ (Philip, 2011: 21). Such individual salience may be ascribed to idiom components stemming from the source domains of body parts, money, and food, among others. To demonstrate the analyzability of idioms containing the aforementioned components, let us look at the following examples. Expressions like *have a lump in one’s throat*, *stick in (someone’s) throat*, *jump down (someone’s) throat* and some other ‘*throat*’ idioms in English are stipulated by common knowledge that *throat* is a repository of negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, hostility, etc. In a similar vein, when one encounters such idiomatic expressions as *bean counter* or *not have a bean*, one is expected to know that *bean* also means ‘*a banknote*’ or ‘*a small amount of money*’. These meanings are apparently retained, or somewhat modified, in the above idioms, i.e. ‘*one who is only interested in how much money a business makes and spends*’ (CIDI) and ‘*have no money*’ (CIDI), accordingly. The same holds for the *finger in every pie* idiom. In the Anglo-Saxon culture, *finger* metonymically stands for *hand*, which, in its turn, is ‘motivated by our shared understanding that we typically use our

hands (rather than other body parts) to manipulate things' [Boers, 2014: 188]. Similarly, the dictionary data reveals that pie also has the meaning of 'an activity or affair' (Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary). Hence, the idiom meaning reads as 'involvement in many different activities or affairs' (CIDI).

Conceptual metaphor. There exists ample body of literature on the topic of conceptual metaphor, which we will not address here. Let it suffice to say that the Theory of Conceptual Metaphor and Metonymy in its earliest (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff, 1995; Johnson, 1987, for a review) and latest (Kövecses, 2015; Takács, 2016; Gibbs, 2017; Prandi, 2017; Amin and Jeppson, 2018, for a review) versions provides a solid theoretical foundation for language study with regard to its experiential and cultural dimensions. In terms of analyzability and decomposability of idioms, Conceptual Metaphor Theory is expedient in that it maintains that idiomatic expressions represent embodied experience (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 52; Lakoff, 1987: 448-453). That is to say, one can perceive a certain domain of experience through another one. Driven by the idea that thoughts are deeply metaphoric or metonymic by nature, it postulates that humans tend to map their concrete experiences onto abstract ideas. The domain of experience is typically more physical, more directly experienced, whereas the domain to be perceived is less directly experienced, and less known (Kövecses 2015: 2). To illustrate, consider the ARGUMENTS ARE WARS metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 4; Kövecses 2010: 6; Gibbs 2017: 3). It can be realized through a number of run-of-the-mill idiomatic expressions like *take someone by the throat*, *put someone's nose out of joint*, *fight like a cat and dog*, *the gloves are off*, *lock horns*, *cross swords*, *shoot down in flames*, *go to the mat*, *part brass rags with*, and *battle of the giants* (CIDI).

The ARGUMENTS ARE WARS conceptual metaphor comprises a number of fixed directionality-based cross-domain mappings. Essentially, these correspondences arrange ideas inherent of the more abstract domain of ARGUMENTS through concepts pertaining to the concrete domain of WARS. In a point of fact, the domain of ARGUMENTS is locus of quite a number of concepts. These have to do with *assertively taking control of a situation or task*, *upsetting one*, *usually through actions or words*, *constant fighting or arguments*, *beginning to behave in a more hostile or tenacious way*, *getting into an argument*, *having an argument or dispute*, *bringing about someone or something's failure*, *vigorously engaging in an argument or dispute*, *typically on behalf of a particular person or cause*, *quarreling and breaking off a friendship with someone*, and *a contest between two pre-eminent parties*, respectively. Moreover, the concepts for arguments and their derivatives – parties of an argument, their actions or inactivity, argument causes, progression and outcomes, evidently inhere in the domain of ARGUMENTS, too. Similarly, and in line with the principle of bi-directionality, it can be argued that arguments represent actions in a war or conflict. These are *grabbing your opponents by the throat in an attempt to defeat or deal with them*, *dislocating one's nose as in a fight*, *maintaining belligerent relationship likened to that of cats and dogs*, *removing your boxing gloves in an attempt to inflict more damage to your adversary*, *acting like bulls by using horns to win a female*, *waging an ancient form of*

combat using swords, *bringing down an aircraft or missile by shooting at it*, *engaging in a combat sport*, *such as wrestling*, *involving grappling type techniques*, *(of sailors) keeping brass work cleaning rags in a joint ragbag to prove the brotherly love*, and *the battle between the giants and gods in Greek mythology*. What the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENTS ARE WARS demonstrates is a set of mappings from the domain of WARS onto equivalent ideas in the domain of ARGUMENTS. Put differently, ideas in the domain of ARGUMENTS are arranged in terms of information from the domain of WARS. To exemplify, parties in the ARGUMENTS domain are conceived in terms of combatants, fighters, domestic animals, such as cats and dogs, (professional) boxers, bulls, medieval knights, artillerymen, wrestlers, sailors, and Greek mythology giants and gods, among others. It should also be noted that the cross-domain mappings of the ARGUMENTS ARE WARS metaphor can communicate additional relevant information known as metaphoric entailment. When we look at the idiom *take someone by the throat*, for example, we may infer that taking assertive control of a situation or task may or may not bring about the desired result. In addition, one may fail to maintain the control over a situation for as long as needed.

Extended idiomatic metaphor. The given term is adapted from Naciscione (2010), c.f. *extended phraseological metaphor*. Extended idiomatic metaphor is a string of tied-together micro-metaphors, which are clustered around the base metaphor of an idiom and run through a literary text (Kövecses 2010; Naciscione 2010). To illustrate this idea, let us examine the following snippet from COCA:

At a party recently, a woman I have known for years told us about her new romance. With a married man. Who she said was planning to leave his wife in a year or so. 'He's not going to leave his wife,' I said. Because they never do and to think otherwise is just sad and an even bigger recipe for heartache than having the affair in the first place. She said she doesn't care, though I don't believe her.

Was I unwise, undiplomatic? Perhaps.

I get upset when I know someone is about to commit a huge mistake or be sold a bill of goods. It's as if my thoughts build and build and take up so much space in my head until they bubble over and I end up speaking them, like steam escaping a boiling tea kettle. (COCA)

As evidenced from the passage, abstract entities are characterized in terms of physical objects: 'thoughts build and build', 'thoughts take so much space in my head', 'thoughts bubble over', and 'I end up speaking them, like steam escaping a boiling tea kettle'. The process of animation is at work here, in which some properties of a mental activity are described in terms of the properties of a physical reaction. One could suggest a number of specific 'micro-metaphors' to explicate the concrete linguistic examples. To this end, we may assume that thoughts are viewed as water in a tea kettle, human head as a tea kettle, thoughts building and building ... and taking so much space like steam escaping a boiling tea kettle. This, however, will not guarantee a sure-fire explanation as to why all the physical properties of water in a boiling tea kettle are attributed to such mental activity as thinking, such as 'building and building', 'taking so much space', 'like steam escaping a boiling tea kettle', etc.

According to Naciscione, there is an extended idiomatic metaphor here: *relationships are commercial activities*, as instantiated by the idiom *be sold a bill of goods*. This metaphor provides the backdrop against which the individual metaphors develop in the text. Yet, from the standpoint of analyzability of idioms, we may theorize that readers, when presented with an unknown idiom such as *be sold a bill of goods* for the first time, will initially deliberate the micro-metaphors identified above. Thus, conceiving human feelings (I get upset) and cognitive activities (my thoughts build) in terms of physical reactions will lead the reader up to the mega-metaphor incorporated in the idiom. Further, the contextual cues, such as *I know someone is about to commit a huge mistake* and the literal reading of the idiomatic expression will indicate that it comes from the source domain of economics. It is common knowledge that commercial activities, such as selling goods or rendering services, involve exchange of money between the buyer and the seller. The seller agrees to deliver a consignment of salable items or a bill of goods to the buyer upon the receipt of payment by the latter. Any failure to deliver the goods in form and quantity as described by the seller, or their non-delivery, results in fraud, deception, or scam, to name a few. The same holds true for relationships. Relationships are akin to commercial transactions in that they are normally based on connections or agreements between people. Such agreements are generally of emotional nature. Judging from the extract above, these emotional agreements can entail verbal promises. Any failure to deliver on a verbal promise before another person, such as deception or dishonesty, puts the relationship or affair under a serious threat, as can be inferred from the passage. Appreciating these correspondences between the source and target do-

mains of the extended idiomatic metaphor, as well as pinpointing the micro-metaphors and cues outlined in the text, apparently inconspicuous for the reader in the first place, will lend him a helping hand in processing the meaning of *sell a bill of goods* as 'to get someone to believe something that is not true' (CIDI).

Conclusion. In the final analysis, it has been demonstrated that the compositional model of idiom interpretation does offer a fresh look at the problem of decomposability and analyzability of idiomatic expressions. Metaphor, both as a figure of speech and a vehicle 'for the creative potential of human imagination' (Lakoff, 1987: 11), fits seamlessly in this framework. Albeit unrelated and, perhaps even distal, in some sense, the metaphor-based linguistic concepts, such as metaphorical regularity vs. metaphorical irregularity, metaphorical asymmetry, conceptual metaphor, and extended idiomatic metaphor, suggested in the present paper are indispensable from the perspective of idiom interpretation. When dealing with unfamiliar idioms for the first time, language users can benefit from herein laid out strategies to figure out how they actually mean. In addition, it should be noted that not all idioms are based on metaphors. Expressions like *swallow the dictionary* or *would awaken the dead*, for instance, have little to do with metaphor. They probably are best characterized as 'exemplary' hyperboles. With this in mind, under no condition can I claim that the account presented above is conclusive, which evidently opens up future avenues of research. Thus, it will surely serve as a point of departure for exploring the ways in which metonymy, simile or, hyperbole, among others, contribute to the processing of idioms in and beyond discourse.

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