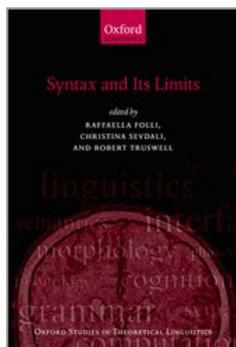


The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

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The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

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Abstract and Keywords

The generative literature on idiomaticity often discusses constraints on the structural contexts in which special idiomatic meanings can arise. This chapter focuses on one such proposed constraint, the 'No Agent Idioms' hypothesis of Marantz. It argues that this hypothesis is tenable, in spite of several proposed counterexamples to the generalization. Many apparent counterexamples are not true counterexamples as their argument structure has significantly different properties than that of agentive structures. Some have external objects with the properties of Causers rather than Agents, while others appear to be idiomatic DPs rather than subject-verb idioms. In addition, the chapter argues that a context-dependent, structural approach to idiomatic meaning such as the one taken here is more consistent than a 'phrasal lexicon' approach with a central tenet of linguistic theory, namely the

compositionality hypothesis. This suggests that the context-dependent meaning view of idioms has some advantages over the 'phrasal lexicon' approach.

Keywords: idioms, agentivity, compositionality, thematic structure, lexicon

13.1 Introduction: Interface-Related Questions Raised by Idioms

Every language contains phrasal expressions whose meanings must be learned by rote, idioms like the English phrases *chew the fat* 'chat, gossip' or *eat crow* 'be proven wrong'. There are two major families of thought concerning the best way to model idiomatic interpretations in the grammar. According to one approach, the entire phrasal structure is listed as bearing a meaning, considerably expanding the purview of the 'lexicon'. The second approach treats idiomatic meanings as properly belonging to individual words within the idiom, which are endowed with very specific context-dependent interpretations in addition to their 'regular', context-independent meaning.

Given modern syntactic notions about the cyclic nature of the relationship between the syntactic computation and semantic interpretation, the context-dependent approach suggests the existence of constraints on the structural contexts on which such special meanings can depend. For example, if the syntactic computation is interpreted in 'chunks', as in phase theory, we might expect that a particular lexical item's special meaning can be dependent on contexts no larger than a phase (Stone 2009), since that is the maximum amount of material that can be semantically interpreted at a single time.¹ In this chapter we explore the status of one such proposed constraint, the 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis of Marantz (1984, 1997), and conclude that it has some substance. We argue that a class of counterexamples to the hypothesis are not true counterexamples, as their argument structure has significantly different properties from that of agentive structures. In addition, we argue that a context-dependent approach is more consistent than a stored-structure approach with a central tenet of linguistic theory, namely the compositionality

hypothesis. We take this to indicate that (p.252) the context-dependent meaning view of idioms has some advantages over the 'phrasal lexicon' approach.

In section 13.2, we point out the different consequences for compositionality of the two hypotheses. In section 13.3, we discuss whether there are structural constraints on idiomatic meanings, and if so, what these might be. We dismiss one overly restrictive proposal, and in section 13.4 we pursue the No Agent Idioms hypothesis, arguing against an alternative explanation for the paucity of agent-verb idiom combinations, and that one class of counterexamples to the hypothesis are in fact object-experiencer constructions, lacking true Agent subjects. Other counterexamples have atypical syntactic properties, which we take to indicate the possibility that they contain derived, rather than base-generated, subjects. Section 13.5 concludes.

13.2 Compositionality

Below, we introduce the two conceptions of the nature of idioms described above and discuss the relationship of each to the compositionality hypothesis. The first, we argue, treats idioms as true exceptions to compositionality and opens the door to a general re-evaluation of basic compositionality as a fundamental tenet of the theory. The context-dependent meaning approach, on the other hand, maintains compositionality in its traditional form.

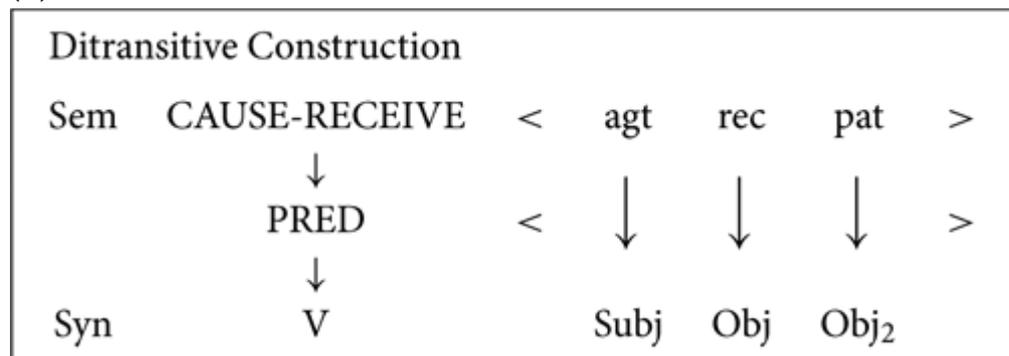
The compositionality hypothesis states that the meaning of a complex expression is constructed from the meanings of its parts and the combinatoric structure imposed on them by the syntactic computation. Discussions of compositionality frequently feature a disclaimer about idioms: idiomatic expressions are thought of as cases in which strict compositionality breaks down. The meaning of *chew the fat* 'chat, gossip', for example, cannot be computed from the context-independent meanings of *chew*, *the*, and *fat*. This VP has two distinct interpretations: one which is computed from such context-independent meanings and an idiomatic one which is not.

13.2.1 Listing phrases

A typical way of thinking about the problem of idiomatic phrases such as *chew the fat* is to allow complex syntactic structures to be listed as lexical items, with idiosyncratic meanings analogous to those of basic Saussurean signs (see e.g. Williams 1994, Goldberg 1995, Jackendoff 1997). These structures enter into the syntactic computation directly as verb phrases, not as word-sized objects. Once in the syntactic frame, however, they subsequently behave as regular verb phrases: the verb is independently inflected and these expressions are often able to participate in regular syntactic processes such as passivization and relativization. On such an approach, compositionality does truly break down within an idiomatic structure: there is more to its meaning than that contributed by the individual lexical items and their mode of composition.

(p.253) Construction-based approaches to grammar take this to the next level: phrase structures entirely devoid of lexical content can have idiosyncratic meanings attached to them. Thus, for instance, in construction grammar (e.g. Goldberg 1995: 77) the double object construction contributes an interpretation ('cause-receive') entirely on its own, prior to any particular lexicalization; the PRED relation fills in with whatever lexicalization is chosen:

(1)



On this view, a language's grammar is nothing but a collection of forms or templates (i.e. 'constructions'), with idiosyncratic meaning attached. Constructions can vary in their generality. Consider the examples below, the first three from Williams (1994) and the others modelled on his notation. In this

The ‘No Agent Idioms’ Hypothesis *

construction-type view, the structures that bear special meanings range all the way from the very general, as in (2a), to the very specific, as in (2e):

(2)

| | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| a. [Wh-phrase] [...] _S | ←: ‘embedded question’ |
| b. [V S] | ←: ‘yes/no question’ |
| c. Ns | ←: ‘lower trunk wear’ |
| d. [kick the bucket] _{VP} | ←: ‘die’ |
| e. [cat] _N | ←: ‘cat’ |

On such a view, in which structures themselves can be Saussurean signs, there is no necessary connection between a given structure and the meaning it can convey. Structural meanings are able to vary without limit in the same way that monomorphemic lexical items’ meanings can. Compositionality as traditionally understood is no longer a desideratum in such theories.

13.2.2 Context-dependent meanings

Given that idioms represent a key case which has been taken to support the necessity of listing structurally complex items in the lexicon, we might want to ask if preserving strict compositionality, in the traditional sense, is an option. Does the meaning of the VP in *John kicked the bucket* involve more than the meanings of *kick*, *the*, and *bucket*?

In fact, a well-established alternative to the construction-based view exists. If the ‘special meaning’ is attached to one or more of the lexical items used in the idiom, and conditioned by a lexical or syntactic context, then, technically, idioms are (p.254) compositional: their meanings are computed from the meanings of their parts and the way they are put together. It’s just that the meanings of their parts are potentially dependent on the syntactic and lexical context.

This intuition about the relationship of idiomatic interpretations to individual lexical entries is reflected in the organization of idioms in English-language dictionaries. The

special meanings for idioms are typically listed as submeanings under the headword for the head of the phrase, not as separate headwords themselves. For example, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* list *chew the fat* under the headword *chew*. On this conception of idiomatic interpretation, compositionality holds, albeit in a rather indirect way. The verb *chew* is polysemous, just like, for example, the noun *mouth*. The catch is that one of its senses is only available when it appears in combination with a certain DP object, *the fat*, which presumably also is polysemous and receives a special interpretation in combination with *chew*.^{2,3}

We consider the fact that the context-dependent meaning approach allows us to preserve a traditional notion of compositionality to be a significant argument in its favour. It therefore seems important to explore further implications of this view of idiomatic meaning within modern syntactic theory. In particular, in the next section we turn to the question of the existence of structural constraints on idiomatic domains.

13.3 Structural Constraints on Idioms

As noted above, within Minimalist syntactic theory, the syntactic computation is interpreted cyclically, in strict chunks, or phases, as the derivation is built up (Chomsky 2000, 2001, 2008). If this is the case, it is plausible that phase-based interpretation may place a strict constraint on the conditioning domain for lexical items’ special interpretations. It seems intuitively correct to assume that, at the point of interpretation, lexical entries must be accessed to construct the semantic representation, (p.255) and only information within the phase that is being interpreted could condition the selection of the appropriate truth-conditions needed for this representation; this is a consequence of the Phase Impenetrability Condition of Chomsky (2000). We thus predict that there should be strict structural limitations on the domain relevant for idiomatic interpretations. In this section we review some proposals concerning the structural constraints on idioms and identify one that appears to have the properties predicted by phase theory.

13.3.1 The structure-dependence of idiomatic interpretations

Tellingly, idioms first received extensive attention within generative syntactic theory as diagnostics for underlying constituent relations. For example, idiomatic interpretations played an important diagnostic role in Chomsky’s (1981) distinction between raising and control infinitives. The availability of an idiomatic interpretation for *the cat BE out of the bag* in (3a) and its unavailability in (3b) below was taken as evidence for the hypothesis that the NP *cat* was base-generated in a local relation with *be out of the bag* in (3a) but not (3b).

(3)

- a. [The cat]_i seems *t*_i to be out of the bag.
- b. #[The cat]_i wants PRO_i to be out of the bag.

This reflects an underlying hypothesis about idiomatic interpretations: in order for an idiom to receive its idiomatic reading, it has to have all its parts in an appropriate local configuration at D-structure. In modern terms, we could understand this as a claim that all the parts of an idiom must be accessed within a single interpretive domain (e.g. within a single phase) in order for the idiomatic interpretation to obtain. In (3b), the lexical entry for *cat* is never part of the same phase as the rest of the idiom, and therefore the interpretive component cannot access the mutually dependent conditioned interpretations.⁴

Another structural condition on idiomatic interpretations was identified by Koopman and Sportiche (1991: 224). They observe that while idioms frequently comprise constituents with open positions contained within them, as in (4) below, the open position never corresponds to the structural head of the idiomatic constituent. No idiomatic interpretation can depend on, for example, a pair of cooccurring words one of which is a modifier of the subject and the other a modifier of the VP. They give the example in (5) as a case of an impossible idiom, where special interpretations of *pale* and *slowly* depend on their cooccurrence in these positions:

(4)

- (p.256) a. *get DP's goat*
b. *crane anaphor's neck*
c. *send DP to the showers*

(5) The *pale* man *slowly* put flowers next to John.

They write:

Assume the following: only if *pale* modifies a subject and *slowly* co-occurs in the same proposition does the following idiomatic interpretation arise: *pale* means 'unknown to the speaker' and [*slowly* means] the action was done in a roundabout way. In other words, when uttering [(5)], the speaker means that the man unknown to me put flowers next to John in a roundabout way. More generally, *pale X slowly verbed ...*, stands for *X unknown to speaker verbed in a roundabout way*.

In order to rule out the occurrence of such patently impossible idioms, Koopman and Sportiche propose the following structural constraint on idiomatic interpretations:

(6) If X is the minimal constituent containing all the idiomatic material, the head of X is part of the idiom.

This, in a sense, represents a formalization of the intuition that drives lexicographers to often list idiomatic interpretations as subentries of a single lexical item. See Horvath and Siloni (2009, to appear) for a formal treatment of idioms as stored under heads of phrases. Further, while Koopman and Sportiche do not seek to place limits on the size of the constituent which can bear idiomatic meaning, their constraint does reflect the fact that local relations between idiomatic constituents are of paramount importance.

13.3.2 The Categorization Hypothesis

Before turning to the generalization about Agents and their (non-)participation in idiomatization which will be our central focus below, we pause here to discuss another recent proposal about the locus of idiomatic interpretations which we might

call the 'First Merge' or 'Categorization' Hypothesis (Marantz 2002, Arad 2003, 2005). This proposal is couched within a framework of assumptions about the syntactic nature of lexical structure, which crucially includes the existence of acategorical roots. These roots acquire their syntactic category by merger with a little x^0 head, a categorizing element drawn from the set n^0 , a^0 , or v^0 (e.g. Marantz 1997).

According to the Marantz–Arad First Merge Hypothesis, the only true domain of idiosyncratic meaning assignment occurs at the moment of categorization. When n^0 or a^0 or v^0 , considered to be phase heads under this proposal, are merged with a root, this constitutes both the first phase and thus the first semantic cycle, and the interpretation of the root in the environment of this categorizing head is thereafter fixed. For example, the acategorical root \sqrt{spec} occurs merged with v^0 in *spec-ify* and (p.257) with n^0 in *spec-ies*, but the interpretations of the two are only tangentially related. On the Categorization Hypothesis about idiomatic meaning, \sqrt{spec} only acquires specific meanings as the result of such categorization, and such a meaning, once acquired in a given structure, should carry through for the rest of the derivation.

Obviously, on this view idiomatic interpretations of phrasal constituents must be a different phenomenon entirely, perhaps simply an extreme form of metaphorical or figurative language use (Alec Marantz, p.c.). As such, the Marantz–Arad proposal is of perhaps limited relevance to the issues being addressed here. However, as a concrete structural proposal concerning the appropriate domain for idiomatic interpretation, we feel it appropriate to address the question of whether there is a qualitative difference between the idiosyncratic meanings assigned at the first merge of an acategorical root with its categorizing head, and idiosyncratic meanings that arise later. In particular, we find it implausible to suggest that meanings acquired upon first merge must persist in the interpretation throughout the derivation. It seems clear that truly idiosyncratic semantics can be assigned following the first cycle of categorization, as also argued by Borer (2009) and Anagnostopoulou and Samioti (2009, Chapter 12 above).

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

Consider, for example, the cases in (7) below. In each group of words based on a common root, there is at least one word derived from a derivation of that root which bears a meaning that does not obviously arise from the meaning of the derived stem plus the meaning contributed by the affix; this meaning is presented in boldface:

(7)

a. *edit*

edit-or 'one who edits'

edit-or-ial 1. 'of or relating to the editor'

2. '**opinion article**'

b. *nature*

natur-al 'of nature'

natur-al-ized 1. 'made natural'

2. '**became a citizen by
residing in country**'

c. √sanit-

sanit-ary 'clean'

sanit-ari-um '**institution for mentally ill**'

d. √audit-

audit-ory 'to do with audition'

audit-ori-um '**large performance space**'

e. *class*

class-ify 'sort'

class-ifi-ed 'sorted'

class-ifi-ed-s '**small newspaper
advertisements**'

(p.258) f. √nat-

nat-ion 'community of people possessing a
territory and government'

nat-ion-al 'of a nation' (not an antonym of
private)

nat-ion-al-ize 1. 'make national'

2. **‘government takeover of business’**

(antonym of *privatize*)

g. √domin-

domin-ate ‘rule or control’

domin-at-rix **‘female top in ritualized sexual domination’**

h. √instit-

instit-ute ‘put a system into place’

instit-ut-ion 1. ‘a system that has been put into place’

2. ‘an organization or building, especially a public care facility’

instit-ution-al 1. ‘of a system that has been put in place’

2. **‘grim, like a public care facility’**

instit-ution-al-ize 1. ‘make institutional’

2. **‘commit to a care facility’**

i. *universe*

univers-ity **‘institution of higher learning’**

j. √ hospit-

hospit-al ‘institution for medical care’

hospit-al-ity **‘welcomingness’**

It should be clear, for example, that the root of *national* has merged with at least two categorizing heads, realized by the suffixes *-tion* and *-al*. On the Marantz–Arad hypothesis, then, the meanings associated with *national* should figure compositionally in the meaning of *nationalize*. However, on at least one of its uses, *nationalize* has a considerably distinct range of interpretations which are not compositionally related to the meaning of *national*. For example, we can speak of a ‘national company’, intending to refer to a company with

operations throughout the country. However, to 'nationalize' a company is not necessarily to cause it to have operations throughout the country, but rather to implement a government takeover of the company. In this sense, *nationalize* is the antonym of *privatize*. If the meaning of *national* figured in the meaning of *nationalize*, and the same held true for *private* and *privatize*, we would expect *private* and *national* to be antonyms. Other similar cases might include the pairs *conserve*~*conservation*, *relate*~*relation*, *deduce*~*deduction*, *protect*~*protector*~*protectorate*, *economic*~*economical*, *specify*~*specifier*.

Furthermore, there are clear cases of roots which have no independent meaning following merger with the first categorizer. The meanings of these roots are (p.259) instead wholly dependent on occurrence in a bigger syntactic and lexical conditioning context:

(8)

- a. *kit* and ***caboodle***
- b. *run* the ***gamut***
- c. by ***dint*** of
- d. in ***cahoots*** with
- e. ***kith*** and *kin*
- f. ***vim*** and *vigour*
- g. *high* ***jinks***

It would seem logical on the Marantz-Arad story that if these roots are assigned semantically independent compositional meaning at the first categorizer, they should be able to occur independently and contribute that meaning in distinct syntactic contexts. However, none of these items has a recognizable meaning or occurs freely in other appropriate syntactic environments; utterances such as 'What vim he has!' or 'Those jinks were lower than the ones we got up to yesterday!' would qualify as metalinguistic play.

Of course, on any account involving acategorical roots, the interpretation of the first combination of a root with a categorizer will *have* to be 'idiosyncratic'; roots don't occur in

isolation. In that sense, all root meanings will have to be context-dependent. In support of this view, it is patently the case that some identifiable roots seem entirely meaningless outside the first merge context (see also Baeskow 2006, Harley 2008):

(9)

a. *-ceive*

deceive, receive, conceive, perceive

b. *-here*

adhere, inhere

c. *-port*

comport, deport, report, import, support

d. *-pose*

suppose, depose, compose, repose, propose

These cases, and others like them, are clearly diagnosable as roots by an acquiring child or linguist, as they exhibit contextual allomorphy and morphological selectional restrictions regardless of the context they appear in, and furthermore would do so productively in a nonce-form containing the root:

(10)

a. *-ceive ~ -cept + ion*

deception, reception, conception, perception

b. *-pose ~ -pos + ition* (not *-ation* or *-ion...*)

composition, supposition, proposition, deposition

(p.260) The First Merge Hypothesis is correct in the sense that no root will contribute a meaning entirely independently of the syntactic context, given that all roots must be categorized. What we wish to emphasize here, however, is that idiosyncratic interpretations of complex constituents created after the first categorizer has merged arise in exactly the same way and are phenomenologically indistinguishable from the idiosyncratic interpretations assigned at the first categorizing node. The main point is that interpretations of complex constituents even after the first categorizer can still be

idiosyncratic, and need not contain the meaning specified at the first categorizer as a proper subpart. The more structure a given phrase contains, the less likely it is to be idiosyncratically interpreted, simply because of the increasing number of pieces involved. However, the data do not suggest the existence of a qualitative difference between an idiomatic phrase and an idiomatic word—that is, until we arrive at the domain of the external argument.⁵

13.3.3 Marantz (1984): the special status of Agents

The strongest claim that we know of concerning the availability of idiomatic interpretations is that first articulated in Marantz (1984). Marantz pointed to an apparent asymmetry in the frequency with which verbs receive special interpretations which depend upon the identity of one of their arguments. He observed that, while it is extremely common for a verb to receive a special interpretation based upon the identity of its internal argument, it is vanishingly rare for a verb to receive a special interpretation based upon the identity of its external argument. He gives the examples in (11), (12), and (13) below. In all these cases, the truth-conditions given by the verb vary significantly depending on the denotation of the internal argument: throwing a boxing match involves a significantly different set of activities from throwing a party, and neither of them bears much similarity to throwing a baseball.

(11)

- a. throw a baseball
- b. throw support behind a candidate
- c. throw a boxing match
- d. throw a party
- e. throw a fit

(12)

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| a. kill a bug | = cause the bug to die |
| b. kill a conversation | = cause the conversation to end |

- c. kill an evening = while away the time span of the evening
- d. kill a bottle = empty the bottle
- e. kill an audience = entertain the audience to an extreme degree

(13)

- (p.261) a. take a book from the shelf
- b. take a bus to New York
- c. take an aspirin
- d. take a nap
- e. take a letter in shorthand

It is worth underlining the point that these are not 'fixed' in the sense that we normally understand idioms to be fixed (for discussion of this point see e.g. Williams 1994). The particular identity of the object can vary, as shown in (14):

(14)

- a. kill the bottle/the peanuts/the casserole/the wine
- b. kill an hour/a few minutes/time

We can think of these as idiomatic interpretations of the verb that arise when its object is a member of a specific class, not necessarily when its object is a specific word or phrase. The beauty of these examples is that it is easy to see the subject/object contrast, given the ubiquity of cases depending on the semantic class of the internal argument and the absence of such cases with external arguments.⁶

Marantz's claim was that this is completely general, i.e. that special interpretations involving a fixed verb and constrained Agent, with the object position being unconstrained/variable, do not exist. Marantz (1997) revisits and reiterates this claim. If he was correct, there should exist no idioms of the following form:

(15)

- a. *The elephant kicked DP.* = 'An employer fired DP.'
- b. *[Timespan] killed DP.* = '[Timespan] made DP leave.'

A more spectacular kind of evidence that has been adduced in favour of this hypothesis involves examples where otherwise readily available idiomatic meanings become systematically unavailable when Agents are included in the structure; see Anagnostopoulou and Samioti (2009, Chapter 12 above) for a convincing example of such a case from Greek.

Kratzer (1996) provides a formal proposal about the special structural and interpretive properties of Agents which is intended to explain the generalization. Before proposing theories about why Marantz's generalization might be true, however, we must first be sure that it is in fact true, since numerous works have presented counterexamples and considered the empirical basis for the claim to be fundamentally flawed. We turn to this issue in the next section.

(p.262) 13.4 Is the No Agent Idioms Hypothesis True?

We are asking what can be the conditioning context which triggers a special interpretation for a particular lexical item. Candidates for 'special interpretations' range all the way from interpretations completely dependent upon a single lexical item, as in a fixed idiom such as *kick the bucket*, to the kind of truth-conditional variation (as in (11)–(13) above) that was the topic of Marantz's original observation, which was conditioned by the semantic category of some element in the context, but not its particular lexical identity. The question is: what kind of syntactic relation can the conditioning element bear to the conditioned element? Marantz's observation, restricting 'conditioned element' to the case of verbs, is that it is relatively common for the conditioning element to be the direct object of the conditioned verb, and his claim is that it is

impossible for the conditioning element to bear an external argument/Agent relation to the conditioned verb.

It seems clear that there are plenty of verb-object idioms or idiomatic templates, and comparatively fewer, possibly no, subject-verb idioms or idiomatic templates. What are some of the alternative explanations that have been advanced for this relative distribution? We turn to this below.

13.4.1 Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow (1994): interacting prohibitions

Nunberg et al. dispute the claim that the prohibition on subject-verb idioms is categorical in character; rather, they ascribe it to the interaction of two independent tendencies in figurative uses of language. First, when used figuratively, animate NPs tend to refer to animate entities (as in figurative uses of *dog*, *chicken*, *monkey*, etc.). Second, phrasal idioms typically describe an abstract situation in concrete terms. These two tendencies are in conflict when it comes to the occurrence of animate NPs in idioms, because animates are necessarily concrete. Therefore, they write, 'literally animate NPs are rare in idioms, and since Agents and Goals are characteristically animate, they too are rare' (Nunberg et al. 1994: 531).

Nunberg et al.'s prediction is thus that animate NPs should be rare in idioms in general, and they do provide significant evidence in favour of this hypothesis. They show that verbs which overwhelmingly tend to take animate objects in normal discourse (like *hit* or *kiss*) surprisingly nearly always occur with inanimate objects when used idiomatically. Their examples with *hit* and *kiss* are given below:

(16) *Idioms based on hit + NP:*

- hit the ceiling (get very angry)
- hit rock bottom (reach the lowest point/worst situation)
- hit the bottle (drink excessively)
- hit the bull's-eye (get something exactly right)
- hit the deck (take cover)
- hit the hay (go to sleep)

(p.263) hit the headlines (become public in media)
hit the jackpot (win)
hit the mark (get something right)
hit the nail on the head (guess right, express the precise truth)
hit the spot (something, such as food or drink, being enjoyable)
hit the road (get going)

(17) *Idioms based on kiss + NP:*

kiss the canvas (in boxing: fall down)
kiss the dust (fall down due to being shot/hit, be slain)
kiss NP's ass (flatter somebody), (Imperative form: curse)
kiss the cup (drink)
kiss the ground (admire, be grateful)
kiss the rod (accept chastisement submissively)
kiss something goodbye ((will) lose it)

Similarly, it is relatively rare for an idiom to feature a fixed Goal or Possessor argument. This, like the paucity of fixed Agent arguments, also follows from their generalization, given that Goals and Possessors tend to be animate.

However, while it seems clear that the tendency for animates not to occur in idioms is exactly that—a (robust) tendency—in the case of internal arguments such as Goals and Possessors, the prohibition on Agents in idioms seems to be much more of a categorical contrast.⁷ Even without looking in an idiom database, it is quite easy to come up with idioms involving animate NPs in internal argument position. Some examples are provided below, a few of which are noted by Nunberg et al.:

(18)

a. ... send X to the devil

- b. ... throw X to the wolves
- c. ... get X's goat
- d. ... give the devil his due
- e. ... put the cart before the horse
- f. ... catch a tiger by the tail
- g. ... bell the cat
- h. ... let the cat out of the bag
- i. ... beard the lion in his den
- j. ... look a gift horse in the mouth
- (p.264) k. ... pay the piper
- l. ... separate the men from the boys
- m. ... keep the wolf from the door
- n. ... kill the goose that lays the golden egg

None of these involve Agents. Even allowing for Nunberg et al.'s observation about the infrequency of animate NPs in phrasal idioms, the contrast between internal and external arguments still seems clear. Indeed, if we expect the proportion of fixed NPs in idioms to roughly mirror the proportion in normal discourse, subject to the distorting effect of the no-animates tendency, we would expect it to be easier to come up with Agent-V idioms than V-Goal idioms, given that the proportion of animate NPs in normal discourse which are Agents is significantly larger than the proportion of animate NPs which are Goals. Yet it is easier to find such examples with Goals than with Agents. According to Nunberg et al.'s predictions, there shouldn't be any substantive difference between the Agent and Goal positions with respect to the ease of idiomatization of animate NPs.⁸

Therefore, even assuming that Nunberg et al. are correct about why there are fewer animate NPs than inanimate ones in idioms in general, we feel that there still is a significant puzzle about the paucity of fixed Agents in idiomatic expressions. Indeed, we believe that the prohibition is categorical and should be explained by appeal to fundamental properties of the grammatical system and its interface with encyclopedic/cognitive knowledge. To justify this position, however, we must carefully consider the data that have been presented as counterexamples to the generalization, that is,

the cases of subject-V idioms, or interpretive idiosyncrasies dependent on the identity of the subject, that have appeared in the literature.⁹

13.4.2 Counterexamples: are there Agent-V idioms?

On various occasions when Marantz’s generalization is discussed, putative counterexamples are identified. Nunberg et al. present one example, [*A little bird tell X Y*]. Another English example is provided by Horvath and Siloni (2002), [*Lady Luck smile on X*]. Nunberg et al. contend that these expressions are genuine idioms, not proverbs or some other type of fixed expression, because they can occur in any tense or mood, as shown in (19) below:

(19)

- a. Did a little bird tell you that?
- b. A little bird must have told her.

(p.265) Nunberg et al. also describe and give the date of a 1993 Linguist List post by Alexis Manaster-Ramer, saying he gives ‘a number of other idioms of this type (in several languages) (Nunberg et al. 1994: 526)’; we reproduce Manaster-Ramer’s post in full here, thanks to the archival powers of the Internet:

Date: Thu, 28 Jan 93 21:15:18 EST

From: [log in to unmask]

Subject: Subject-Object Asymmetry and Idioms (A Query)

The latest issue of US News and World Report has a nice example of an apparent subject-verb idiom:

the vultures appear to be circling FBI Director Wm Sessions.

Another such idiom is:

The spirit move- NP (where move- means you can have different tenses).

What I am wondering is

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

(a) whether anybody still believes the subject-object asymmetry thesis in connection with idioms (Chomsky, Marantz) or any of the other theories about idioms which would prevent such idioms from being possible, and

(b) whether anybody has noted other such examples (N.B. we want idioms consisting of just subject+verb, not subject+verb+ other stuff).

Also, I have a small number of examples of subject-verb idioms in Polish, Hindi, and German, and in all three languages it appears that the idiomatic subject cannot normally come first and the non-idiomatic must precede it, e.g.,

Ihn reitet der Teufel (lit. Him rides the devil) 'He is going bonkers'

Now, I think that these word order facts probably fall out of the normal rules for "topic" fronting in these languages, but I am wondering if some people would argue that the idiomatic subject is not really a subject in such cases.

Horvath and Siloni (2002) give additional examples in Hebrew and Hungarian:

(20)

a.

| | | | |
|---|--------------|-----------|---------------|
| <i>Ha-goral</i> | <i>he'ir</i> | <i>lo</i> | <i>panim.</i> |
| the-fate | lit up | to | face |
| | | +him | |
| 'He had good luck.' (lit: 'Fate lit up its face to/on/at him.') | | | |

b.

| | | |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|
| <i>Ha-ru'ax</i> | <i>nasa</i> | <i>oto.</i> |
| the-wind | carried | him |

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

'He disappeared.' (lit: 'The wind carried him.')

c.

Bal'a oto ha-adama.

swallow him the-earth

'He disappeared.' (lit: 'The earth swallowed him.') (Hebrew)

(21)

a.

Elkapta pro a gépszíj.

caught. him the driving belt
3PL.DEF.DO

'He got roped in.' (lit: 'The driving belt caught him.')

b.

Rájár a rúd.

onto him goes the shaft

'He's having a series of misfortunes.' (lit: 'The shaft goes onto him.') (Hungarian)

(p.266) The most extensive set of such examples that we know of are given by Chtareva (2003, 2005), in Russian.¹⁰

(22)

a.

Ivana chut' KONDRASHKA ne (s)xvat-il.

Ivan.ACC almost Kondrashka.NOM not grabbed

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

'Ivan was frightened to death.' (lit. 'Ivan was almost grabbed by paralysis.')

b.

| | | |
|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| <i>Ivana</i> | <i>zajela</i> | <i>sovest'</i> |
| Ivan.ACC | ate up | conscience.NOM |

'Ivan had a guilty conscience.' (lit. 'Ivan is eaten up by his conscience.')

c.

| | | |
|--------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Ivana</i> | <i>zamuchali</i> | <i>somnenija.</i> |
| Ivan.ACC | tortured | doubts.NOM |

'Ivan experienced serious doubts.' (lit. 'Doubts tormented Ivan.')

d.

| | | |
|--------------|----------------|---------------|
| <i>Ivana</i> | <i>oxvatil</i> | <i>strax.</i> |
| Ivan.ACC | seized | fear.NOM |

'Ivan experienced fear.' (lit. 'Fear seized Ivan.')

She also gives a number of examples involving an external argument containing a variable genitive or dative possessor and a fixed body part, which often involve unergative verbs:

(23)

a.

| | | | |
|----------------|-------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>U Ivana</i> | <i>ruka</i> | <i>ne drognet</i> | <i>(chto-to sdelat')</i> |
| at Ivan.GEN | hand.NOM | not shake | (to-do something) |

'Ivan won't hesitate to do something.'

b.

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>U Ivana</i> | <i>ruki</i> | <i>cheshutsja</i> | <i>(chto-to sdelat')</i> |
| at Ivan.GEN | hands.NOM | itch | (to-do something) |
| 'Ivan can't wait (to do something).' | | | |

c.

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

| | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|----|--------------|------------|-------------|----------------|----------------|
| Kak | u | <i>teb'a</i> | yazyk | povernulsja | <i>skazat'</i> | <i>takoye?</i> |
| how | at | you | tongue.NOM | turned | to say | that |
| 'How could you say that?' | | | | | | |

d.

| | | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------------------|
| <i>U Ivana</i> | <i>murashki</i> | <i>po</i> | <i>spine zabegali.</i> |
| at Ivan.GEN | goosebumps.NOM | along | spine ran |
| ‘Ivan got the goosebumps.’ | | | |

e.

| | | | |
|---|----------------|---------------|---------------------|
| <i>U Ivana</i> | <i>serdtse</i> | <i>krov’u</i> | <i>oblivaets’a.</i> |
| at Ivan.GEN | heart.NOM | blood.INST | pour over |
| ‘Ivan is suffering.’ (lit. ‘Ivan’s heart is bleeding.’) | | | |

f.

| | | | | |
|---|----------------|-----------|------------|------------------|
| <i>Ivanu</i> | <i>medved’</i> | <i>na</i> | <i>uxo</i> | <i>nastupil.</i> |
| Ivan.DAT | bear.NOM | on | ear | stepped |
| ‘Ivan can’t hear music.’ (lit. ‘A bear stepped on Ivan’s ear.’) | | | | |

(p.267) For most of these cases, we will argue below that there is either solid evidence or suggestive evidence pointing to the idea that the subjects of these idioms are not true Agents. Alternatively, for a few of the cases, we will argue that the verb is not involved in the idiom. Before proceeding to this discussion, however, it behoves us to explain in what sense the subject of a verb like *oxvatil* ‘seized’ or *zamuchali* ‘tortured’ may not be an Agent. In their non-idiomatic uses, the subjects of these verbs are indeed typical, even prototypical, Agents. In a theory in which the lexical content of the verb fully determines its theta grid, this would be enough to justify identifying these cases as counterexamples to Marantz’s generalization. However, as has long been recognized, verbs are often not tied to a unique theta grid, and often exhibit alternating argument structure frames with different interpretations. In modern syntactocentric approaches to this phenomenon, the consensus solution has been to divorce verbal content from argument structure frames to a certain degree, either radically, as in the work of Borer (1994, 2005), or partially, as in Ramchand (2008), among others. Within

such a framework, it is possible to ask, are these idiomatized verbs occurring in syntactic frames where their external argument is an Agent, or have they been subject to an argument structure shift, appearing in a frame in which the external argument is no longer in fact agentive, or external? Our argument below, following Chtareva’s insightful work, is that these idioms, although they use agentive verbs, do not actually involve any Agent arguments; in the idiomatic structure, they (p.268) are internal arguments.¹² We will discuss each set of examples from above in inverse order, beginning with Chtareva’s observations about Russian.

Chtareva argues that in all these cases of subject-verb idioms, the external argument is a Cause, rather than an Agent (despite the fact that all the verbs in (22) can have an Agent subject in non-idiomatic uses), and that in all the cases in (22), the open object variable bears an Experiencer, rather than a Patient, role. She demonstrates that the examples in (22) exhibit the syntactic behaviour associated in Russian with psych-predicates, rather than the behaviour typically associated with agentive verbs. We summarize her discussion below.

Chtareva shows that none of the structures in (22) can undergo passivization, or be modified by an agent-oriented adverbial like *on purpose*, although non-idiomatic interpretations of the same predicates can do so, as shown in examples (24c,d) below:¹³

(24)

a.

| | | | | |
|--|---------------------------|--------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| <i>*Ivana</i> | <i>spetsial’no</i> | <i>chut’</i> | <i>KONDRASHKA</i> | <i>ne (s)xvatil.</i> |
| Ivan.ACC | on purpose | almost | Kondrashka.NOM | not grabbed |
| ‘Ivan was frightened to death on purpose.’ | | | | |

b.

| | | |
|--------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>*Ivan</i> | <i>byl svach-</i> | <i>Kondrashkoi.</i> ¹⁴ |
| | <i>en</i> | |

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

Ivan.NOM was grabbed- Kondrashka.INSTR
P.PRT

'Ivan was frightened to death.'

c.

*Kondrashka spetsial'no chut' ne (s)xvatil Ivan.*¹⁵

Kondrashka.NOM on purpose almost not grabbed Ivan.ACC

'Kondrashka almost grabbed Ivan on purpose.'

d.

Ivan byl svach- Kondrashkoi.
en

Ivan.NOM was grabbed- Kondrashka.INSTR
P.PRT

'Ivan was grabbed by Kondrashka.'

Chtareva shows that the reciprocal binding possibilities mirror those of object-experiencer predicates like *radujut* 'gladden', as can be seen by comparing (25a) and (26a). They do not parallel the binding possibilities of normal transitive agentive predicates like *priglasili* 'invite', illustrated in (25b) and (26b):

(25)

a.

Ivana i Mariju radujut uspexi drug drugi.

[Ivan.ACC and Mary.ACC]_i gladden.PL success.NOM.PL [each other]_i

'Each other's success gladden Ivan and Mary.'

b.

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

| | | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------|-----------|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| <i>*Roditeli</i> | <i>drug druga</i> | <i>ne</i> | <i>priglasili</i> | <i>Ivana</i> | <i>i</i> | <i>Mariju.</i> |
| parents.NOM | [each other] _i | not | invite | [Ivan.ACC | and | Mary.ACC] _i |
| 'Each other's parents didn't invite Ivan and Mary.' | | | | | | |

(26)

a.

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

| | | | | | | | |
|--|-----------|--------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Strax</i> | <i>za</i> | <i>armii</i> | <i>drug druga</i> | <i>ovladel</i> | <i>Novgorodom</i> | <i>i</i> | <i>Pskovom.</i> |
| [fear.NOM for armies each other _i] | | | captured | [Novgorod | and | Pskov] _i .INST | |
| 'Fear of each other's armies seized Novgorod and Pskov.' | | | | | | | |

The ‘No Agent Idioms’ Hypothesis *

b.

| | | | | | |
|---------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------|-----------------|
| <i>*Armii</i> | drug | <i>ovladeli</i> | <i>Novgorodom</i> | <i>i</i> | <i>Pskovom.</i> |
| | druga | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|-------------|------|----------|----------------------|-----|--------------------------|
| [armies.NOM | each | captured | [Novgorod.INST | and | PSKOV.INST] _i |
| | | | other _i] | | |

‘Each other’s armies captured Novgorod and Pskov.’

(p.269) She also shows that the word order of such idioms in broad-focus contexts mandatorily differs from that of agentive verbs, patterning instead with the ‘backwards’ word order typical of object-experiencer verbs in the same context.¹⁶

(27) Broad-focus environment: ‘What happened/is happening?’

a. Regular transitive verb

| | | |
|-------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| <i>Ivan</i> | <i>poluchil</i> | <i>telegrammu.</i> |
|-------------|-----------------|--------------------|

| | | |
|----------|----------|--------------|
| Ivan.NOM | received | telegram.ACC |
|----------|----------|--------------|

‘Ivan received a telegram.’ (Nom-V-Acc)

b. Object-experiencer transitive verb:

| | | |
|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Ivana</i> | <i>rasstroili</i> | <i>novosti.</i> |
|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|

| | | |
|----------|----------|-------------|
| Ivan.ACC | upset.PL | news.PL.NOM |
|----------|----------|-------------|

‘The news upset Ivan.’ (Acc-V-Nom)

c. Subj-V idiom:

| | | |
|--------------|---------------|-----------------|
| <i>Ivana</i> | <i>zajela</i> | <i>sovest’.</i> |
|--------------|---------------|-----------------|

| | | |
|----------|--------|----------------|
| Ivan.ACC | ate up | conscience.NOM |
|----------|--------|----------------|

‘Ivan had a guilty conscience.’ (lit. ‘Ivan is eaten up by his conscience.’) (Acc-V-Nom)

Chtareva’s conclusion, with which we concur, is that these idiomatic external arguments are Causers, not Agents.¹⁷ It has long been established that Causer subjects of object

experiencer verbs are base-generated VP-internally (Belletti and Rizzi 1988, Pesetsky 1995). Therefore, such subjects are not base-generated as external arguments, (p.270) but rather acquire their subject hood via movement.¹⁸ Since the important conditioning factor in idiomatic interpretations is the configuration of the base-generated structure, not the derived structure, idioms involving such subjects do not count as counterexamples to Marantz's generalization; indeed, they are predicted to exist, since the surface subject is base-generated as an internal argument. Within a syntactocentric theory of argument structure, it is not particularly surprising to see normally agentive verbs used in such object-experiencer frames. It should be clear that when they are used in such frames, idiomatization is predicted by Marantz's theory to be possible.

A similar set of potential counterexamples in Spanish were brought to our attention by Violeta Vázquez-Rojas (p.c.), and are illustrated in (28) below. These involve transitive verbs with fixed nominative subjects and accusative objects. Very tellingly, however, they all contain the reflexive clitic *se*, and exhibit unusual word order: the nominative subject is mandatorily sentence-final, and the accusative object must be in preverbal position.

(28)

a.

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

| | | | | | | | | |
|--|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| <i>A</i> | <i>Juan</i> | <i>se</i> | <i>lo</i> | <i>va</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>cargar</i> | <i>el</i> | <i>payaso.</i> |
| DAT | Juan | se | ACC.3SG | go | to | carry | the | clown |
| 'Juan is going to be in deep trouble.' (lit. 'The clown is going to carry Juan away.') | | | | | | | | |

b.

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

| | | | | | | |
|---|-------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|-----------|----------------|
| <i>A</i> | <i>Juan</i> | <i>se</i> | <i>lo</i> | <i>llevó</i> | <i>la</i> | <i>trampa.</i> |
| DAT | Juan | se | ACC.3SG | carried | the | trap |
| 'Juan underwent a terrible fate.' (lit. 'The trap took Juan away.') | | | | | | |

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

Omission of *se* renders the idiomatic reading unavailable, as illustrated in (29):

(29)

a.

| | | | | | | | |
|-----|------|-------------|-----------|-----|--------------|-----------|----------------|
| ? | #A | <i>Juan</i> | <i>lo</i> | | <i>llevó</i> | <i>la</i> | <i>trampa.</i> |
| DAT | Juan | ACC.3SG | carry | the | trap | | |

b.

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

| | | | | | | | |
|---|-------------|-----------|-----------|----------|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| <i>A</i> | <i>Juan</i> | <i>lo</i> | <i>va</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>cargar</i> | <i>el</i> | <i>payaso.</i> |
| DAT | Juan | ACC.3SG | go | to | carry | the | clown |
| ‘The clown is going to carry Juan away.’ (only literal meaning) | | | | | | | |

We take the reflexive morphology and the word order preference to indicate again an internally base-generated position for the subject in the syntax for these examples as well.

(p.271) Turning now to the cases discussed by Horvath and Siloni from Hebrew and Hungarian, we have not yet pursued a systematic investigation of their properties along the lines of the Russian cases discussed above, but an informal discussion with Edit Doron seems to point in the same direction. None of Horvath and Siloni’s cases in (20) can be passivized, although their non-idiomatic counterparts can be (again, this may be due to their not being Idiomatically Combining Expression idioms, rather than to their non-agentive status: see footnote 13 above). Further, the word order in (20c) is typical for these expressions; Doron comments that (20b) is more felicitous in the inverted order of (20c), with the purported idiomatic external argument *ha-ru’ax* ‘the wind’ appearing at the end of the sentence. This VOS word order is quite atypical for Hebrew, which most frequently exhibits SVO or VSO order. Although further investigation is required, these idioms do seem to have a syntax that is atypical for agentive expressions in the language, which is at least consistent with the possibility that they involve derived, rather than base-generated, subjects.¹⁹

We know even less about the Hungarian examples; however, judging by their translation, they appear to exhibit the semantic qualities of object-experiencer psych-predicates. An investigation of their syntactic properties will have to await future work. It is also worth recalling Manaster-Ramer’s remarks concerning word order in his example from German and parallel cases he doesn’t give from Polish and Hindi:

Also, I have a small number of examples of subject-verb idioms in Polish, Hindi, and German, and in all three languages it appears that the idiomatic subject cannot normally come first and the non-idiomatic must precede it, e.g.,

Ihn reitet der Teufel (lit. Him rides the devil)

‘He is going bonkers’

Florian Schäfer (p.c.) provides the following definition of this idiom from a German source: If 'the devil rides someone', this person acts 'blindfold, imprudent or stupid[ly]; the person is obsessed (by the devil) and wanton.' Semantically, then, this is similarly non-agentive in character, like a causative object-experiencer psych-predicate; interestingly, however, Schäfer points out that the expression does passivize:

(30)

The 'No Agent Idioms' Hypothesis *

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------|------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------|--------------|
| <i>So</i> | <i>mancher</i> | <i>Motorradfahrer</i> | <i>scheint</i> | <i>vom</i> | <i>Teufel</i> | <i>geritten</i> | <i>zu</i> | <i>sein.</i> |
|-----------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------|------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------|--------------|

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|------|-------------------|------|--------|-------|-----------|----|----|
| so | many | motorcycle riders | seem | by the | Devil | be ridden | to | be |
|----|------|-------------------|------|--------|-------|-----------|----|----|

'Many motorcycle riders seem to be ridden by the devil.'

(p.272) Berit Gehrke (p.c.) notes that this passive is adjectival rather than verbal; if *sein* ‘be’ is replaced with *werden* ‘become’ here, the idiomatic reading is lost. See Gehrke (Chapter 10 above) for discussion of the absence of agentive content with adjectival, but not verbal, passives in German. It does seem that active versions of this idiom are possible; Martin Weigand (p.c.) suggests that questioning the identity of the devil makes the active particularly felicitous: *Welcher Teufel hat dich geritten* ‘Which devil has ridden you?’

That leaves us with a few English examples to think about, which we collect below for convenience:

(31)

- a. Lady Luck smiled on him. (Horvath and Siloni)
- b. The vultures are circling him. (Manaster-Ramer)
- c. The spirit moved him. (Manaster-Ramer)
- d. A little bird told me. (Nunberg et al.)

We suggest that neither (31a) nor (31b) qualify as idiomatic DP-V combinations, for the following reason: insofar as they are idiomatic rather than metaphorical, they are clearly DP idioms, like *The Big Apple*, not Subj-V idioms. Both *Lady Luck* and *vultures* can occur with other verbs in other positions, and still receive the same interpretation: *I hate those payday loan vultures; He has never once been visited by Lady Luck, Lady Luck laughed in his face.*²⁰

The case in (31c) is perhaps more of a challenge, but it seems plausible to consider it to fall within the range of object-experiencer constructions, at least semantically. The subject is clearly a Causer, not an Agent, and the object seems equally clearly to be an Experiencer. In addition, it is not clear that the DP_{Causer} + V combination is necessarily linked by idiomaticity, rather than simple compositionality, once *the spirit* is understood in an idiomatic/metaphoric way. Parallel structures with different subjects which receive this (object-experiencer) meaning for *move* are perfectly fine:

(32)

- (p.273) a. Her plight moved him (to tears/to speak out).
b. The attack moved him to enlist.

Having suggested that there is doubt concerning the status of (31a-c) as counterexamples, we are left with (31d). It seems to meet one of the requirements needed in a genuine counterexample: the subject is clearly an Agent, and is clearly interpreted idiomatically. Bruening (2010), arguing along the same lines for this idiom as we have done for (31a,b) above, claims that (31d) also is a DP idiom, citing examples such as *A little bird whispered/emailed it to me*, *A little bird is broadcasting that*, and *I heard it from a little bird*. To these observations we will add the point that in this expression, the head verb *tell* still means literal *tell*, unlike the typical idioms discussed above where the verb’s literal meaning is clearly absent (*kick, keep, take, throw, hit, kiss...*). (It is worth noting that two other English examples mentioned by Bruening clearly fall into the object-experiencer category: *The love bug bit X* and *What’s eating X?*, further confirmation of the susceptibility of the Experiencer thematic structure to idiomatization.)

To summarize, we have argued that there are at least reasonable grounds for suspicion that all counterexamples to the No Agent Idioms Hypothesis admit of one of two principled analyses. Either they are derived-subject structures, in which the subject is actually a promoted VP-internal Causer argument, or the idiomatic status is limited to the subject DP alone, and the verb itself is not fixed in the expression, nor is its interpretation special to that subject.

It is worth emphasizing again that if Belletti and Rizzi (1988) and Pesetsky (1995) are correct concerning the VP-internal status of subjects of object-experiencer predicates, cases of such predicates with idiomatic subjects, rather than being counterexamples, are actually predicted to exist by Marantz’s generalization. We expect the verb to potentially enter into an idiomatic relationship with its internal arguments, and it

would be suspicious, given the independent grounds for believing that such Causer arguments are indeed internal, if there were no idioms which involved such arguments.

13.5 Conclusions

We conclude that Marantz's generalization remains empirically unchallenged, and that it is reasonable to take it as the foundation from which to draw theoretical conclusions about the status of Agent arguments in syntax and semantics. In this section, we consider the implications of this conclusion for theories of the syntax–semantics interface, and predictions for various domains of investigation that seem to us to be indicated.

Above we have suggested that the explanation for the distribution of idiomatic domains could be the status of the phase as a Spell-out domain; interpretations can (p.274) only depend on constituents contained within a single phase (Stone 2009). Kratzer (1996) proposes a more purely semantic account. Below, we sketch Kratzer's proposal and draw attention to a theoretical consequence which contrasts with that of the phase-based approach.

Kratzer's (1994, 1996) account of Marantz's lists of special Verb+Object interpretations treats verbal idiomaticity as contextually dependent polysemy, as described above, putting the idiomatic meaning entirely in the truth-conditions specified in the verb's semantics. As noted above, this move is justified on conceptual grounds if we want to preserve compositionality and avoid construction grammar-style listing of phrasal meanings. Idiomatic interpretation must be linked to individual lexical items. Context-dependent meanings for individual lexical items are justified independently on empirical grounds, for items like *jinks*, *caboodle*, and *gamut* (see (8) above), which only occur in particular lexical and structural contexts. Phrasal meaning remains a function of the meaning of the lexical items in the sentence and the way they are put together.²¹

Kratzer's semantic proposal restricts the verbal truth-conditions from referring to the content of the external

argument by proposing that the external argument is not directly semantically selected by the verb, but rather is introduced by a separate predicate, a Voice predicate. In other words, context-dependent meanings in her approach can only be conditioned by arguments which are directly semantically selected by the relevant head. As Harley (2012) notes, this has a significant consequence for the syntax of internal arguments: if dependent idiomatic semantics can be conditioned only by arguments of the relevant head, this entails that internal arguments must be direct arguments of their verb roots, contra several proposals according to which internal arguments, like external ones, are introduced by dedicated functional projections (e.g. Ramchand 2008, Borer 1994, 2005, Basilico 2008). This contrasts with the phase-based domains of interpretation view, where selection of the conditioning constituent need not be relevant at all; rather, any constituent contained within the same phase as the idiomatically interpreted head is accessible to provide the relevant conditioning, regardless of whether it is selected for by the head in question. The different empirical predictions made by these two approaches to conditioning of special meanings is an area ripe for further investigation. For example, it is worth asking whether (p.275) non-s-elected adjuncts within the vP may condition special interpretations for the verb; this would be possible on the phase-based approach, though perhaps not on Kratzer's.

Whether the conditioning environment for the idiomatically defined head is constrained via semantic composition or via syntactic Spell-out, the basic context-dependent meaning approach comports well with several other ideas about the relationship of meaning to structure from various theoretical domains. For example, the notion that idiomatic interpretation is crucially dependent on the idiosyncratic content of one or more heads is consistent with Koopman and Sportiche's proposal concerning the headedness of idioms.

Another promising connection can be found in the treatment of lexical meaning in the Distributed Morphology framework. In the DM view, Root elements are the only locus at which linguistic structure interfaces with encyclopedic knowledge. If

contextually-dependent special truth-conditions are encyclopedic in nature, they should only be storable for Roots. Idioms, then, should *have* to contain Roots, and be unable to consist purely of functional structure. The location of idiomaticity in Root elements entails that functional material in the clause will still necessarily contribute its compositional content to the interpretation of the sentence, exactly as argued by McGinnis (2002).²²

Locating idiomatic meaning in truth-conditions associated with Roots also makes predictions in the psycholinguistic domain. It entails that activation of a root's lexical entry will at least temporarily activate all its interpretations, idiomatic as well as literal, until the conditioning environment is detected and the system settles on the most likely licensed interpretation. Early activation of multiple meanings of this kind has been detected both behaviourally and in imaging studies in the case of homophones like *bat* *Animal* and *bat* *SportingEquip*; see e.g. Gunter, Wagner, and Friederici (2003). We consider that investigation of such activation with idiomatic interpretation is a promising direction for future research.

Another open research question is whether there are other syntactic constraints on idiomatic structures. We have argued that the No Agents constraint holds for idioms with open variables which must then compose with other, non-idiomatic material. However, in proverbial expressions, where the whole sentential structure is fixed, as in *That's the pot calling the kettle black*, it seems to be the case that a genuinely agentive argument receives an idiomatic interpretation in the context of the whole. Pending a satisfactory definition of what it means to receive an idiomatic interpretation, it could be that such fully fixed expressions are relevant to the debate concerning the nature of the No Agent constraint, bearing, perhaps, on whether it is a syntactic or semantic effect.

Notes:

(*) We would like to thank the audience at OnLI II and the participants in the Fall 2010 Compositionality Seminar at the University of Arizona for helpful discussion. We would also like to thank Tal Siloni and Julia Horvath for important commentary, and an anonymous reviewer for many

clarifications and improvements. All shortcomings remain entirely our own responsibility.

(1) As a reviewer points out, the existence of such constraints is not proof that the context-dependent approach is on the right track.

(2) Note that this idea that individual lexical items contribute content to the interpretation of the idiom is similar to, but crucially distinct from, the concept of ‘Idiomatically Combining Expressions’ of Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow (1994). Their Idiomatically Combining Expressions are restricted to cases where a clear metaphorical analogue for each subpart of the idiom exists, as in *spill the beans*, where ‘spill’ corresponds to ‘tell’ and ‘the beans’ corresponds to ‘a secret’, in which it seems very reasonable to attach these interpretations as individual subentries in the polysemous semantics for each of these subparts. In our conception here, however, the same contextually dependent interpretations are employed in idioms where no such neat correspondence exists between subparts of the idiom and the content it expresses, as in *kick the bucket* for ‘die’ or *chew the fat* for ‘chat’—what Nunberg et al. term ‘Idiomatic Phrases’. The catch in the present treatment is that in such expressions the special meaning contributed by the lexical items *bucket* or *fat* will be effectively zero. See Stone (in preparation) for further discussion, and Horvath and Siloni (to appear) for arguments against mutually dependent listing of information concerning a single idiomatic interpretation in multiple entries (e.g. under both *chew* and *fat*).

(3) See Anagnostopoulou and Samioti (Ch. 12 above) for a relevant discussion of polysemy and idiomaticity. Specifically, they discuss how locality restrictions on idiomaticity and polysemy differ.

(4) As noted by a reviewer, alternative possibilities exist. For example, a constraint of the type, ‘Idiom constituents cannot receive a theta-role from an idiom-external predicate’ would predict the absence of idiomaticity in (3b) as well. It is perhaps worth noting that the phase-based interpretive constraint described above, however, is more general; it follows as a consequence of how the ‘phase’ construct is

intended to function in the theory, and is straightforwardly connected to the other roles phases play in non-idiomatic domains.

(5) On the Marantz–Arad approach to idiosyncratic meaning, the question of what an idiom is, and how to identify one in the wild, does not arise; there just aren’t any phrasal idioms with linguistically interesting properties. For us, an important question is how to distinguish idioms and metaphors. One useful criterion, first mentioned to us by Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini, is (un)interpretability of a given phrase by second language speakers with similar cultural backgrounds (cf. e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980 on widely understood metaphorical mappings from physical to abstract domains, among others).

(6) See the appendix of Horvath and Siloni (to appear) for some suggested counterexamples involving unergative verbs with different types of subject. The examples (*run, fly*) that they discuss in detail are verbs of motion, however, which have been extensively shown to alternate between unergative and unaccusative structures (see e.g. Hoekstra and Mulder 1990, among many others; Folli and Harley 2006 provide a recent overview). *Fly*, for example, undergoes lexical causativization (*The pilot flew the plane to New York*), not usually considered possible for unergative verbs (**The boy laughed the baby*).

(7) Horvath and Siloni (to appear) argue that Nunberg et al.’s observation about animates should be recast as an observation concerning NPs referring to *human* entities, which strictly preserve animacy, hence concreteness, and are therefore less likely to occur in idioms describing abstract situations; thus, they claim, the paucity of Agent NPs in idioms is attributable to the cognitive bias against abstract interpretations of human-denoting NPs.

(8) Idiomatization may require construing an animate NP as having an inanimate referent, as in (18c,e,f), but that should be just as unlikely as using an animate-referring NP in an abstract context, so either way, these are predicted to be rare cases, according to Nunberg et al.’s hypothesis. Yet rare and non-existent are still distinct.

(9) In what follows, we omit discussion of subject-V idioms involving derived subjects, e.g. with unaccusative verbs, as it should be clear in the theory presented below that they are predicted to exist. See Chtareva (2003) and Everaert (1992) for examples of this type.

(10) The idiomatic quality of these examples varies from case to case, but in all cases the verb's interpretation is recognizably distinct from its 'literal' or typical interpretation, in a way that depends on the semantic category of its external argument. 'Fear seized him', for example, involves a special interpretation of 'seize' which is triggered by the fact that the external argument denotes an emotional state. In this sense, we believe these examples to be parallel to Marantz's.

(11) About this idiom, Chtareva writes: '*Kondrashka* is a personal male name, but in case of this idiom it does not refer to a person. In its archaic idiomatic usage the word used to refer to paralysis, but most native speakers are not aware of this meaning anymore. In the 19th century literature, the word appears in an idiom *X xvatil Kondrashka* meaning "X was paralysed". The idiom in (22a) is a modern day variant of this archaic idiom. It is resistant to any word order variations other than OSV with the focus stress on *Kondrashka*, since it immediately follows the focus marker *chut*'. It is a "frozen" idiom in terminology of Nunberg et al. (1994).'

(12) Nunberg et al. (1994: 525, n. 39) note that the literature has not been clear on the point of 'whether the relevant thematic role [of the subject] should be determined relative to the literal meaning of the expression, or to its idiomatic meaning'. It should be clear from the preceding discussion that we are using the latter.

(13) As noted by a reviewer, the failure of passivization could be alternatively explained if these idioms don't fall into Nunberg et al.'s class of Idiomatically Combining Expressions; there are, of course, many non-passivizable idioms. The failure of passivization, then, is not diagnostic of these idioms' non-Agentive status; rather, it is merely consistent with it.

(14) According to Chtareva adverbial *chut' ne* ‘almost’ generally does not appear in passive constructions. Since it is not part of the idiom, it is omitted in (24b).

(15) The word order differences between agentive vs. non-agentive sentences will be discussed below.

(16) The idiom involving *Kondrashka* ((24) above) shows mandatory Acc-Nom-V order. Of this, Chtareva writes: ‘The [Kondrashka] idiom ... is a “frozen” idiom in that it resists scrambling and can only appear in Acc-NOM-V order with a focus stress on the subject. This focus stress is not identificational in the sense of É. Kiss (1998) since it doesn’t involve picking an element out of a set, but rather emotive in the sense of King (1995), who describes it as emphatic stress on a constituent in “emotive” speech. Such focused elements are “marked with sentence stress and occur immediately before the verb, following preverbal topic”, which is exactly the case [in this idiom].’

(17) Chtareva argues that the accusative case on the Experiencer object is inherent rather than structural, and the absence of a true external argument is a Burzio’s generalization effect, following Belletti and Rizzi (1988).

(18) A reviewer notes that Pesetsky (1995) establishes a distinction between two classes of object-experiencer verbs, ones whose subject is a Cause (*worry*-type) and ones whose subject is a Theme (*appeal*-type), and wonders which class the Experiencer interpretations of the idioms here fall into. This would matter if either of the classes had base-generated external arguments in Pesetsky’s analysis. In fact, it does not matter. In Pesetsky’s analysis, even the Causer subject of PsyCaus object-experiencer verbs is base-generated *internally* to the VP, as the object of a CAUS preposition in the complement of V. It then raises to the external (thematic) Cause position. Its internal base-generation thus explains its backward binding properties. Pesetsky’s analysis is thus compatible with the No Agent hypothesis of idiom formation for both classes of object-experiencer verbs.

(19) Note that there are many different classes of verbs which have derived subjects; object-experiencer verbs are only one such class. Our claim here is not that all these idioms have the semantics of object-experiencer structures. Rather, it is that they do not have base-generated Agents—their subjects are derived. For the Hebrew, Hungarian, and German examples we do not have the diagnostics yet to establish this conclusively. Here we are merely claiming that the atypical word order patterns evident in these expressions are suggestive that something unusual is going on syntactically—something which is consistent with, though not diagnostic of, a derived subject status for these purported Agents. More broadly, we can ask why all these purported counterexamples to the No Agent Idioms Hypothesis have such unusual syntactic structures. If Agent-dependent idiomatic interpretations are in principle freely available in the language faculty, why aren't there more examples that have a syntax that is typical for agentive verbs?

(20) A reviewer asserts that although *Lady Luck* can have independent uses, *Lady Luck smiled on X* nonetheless requires listing as an idiomatic expression, as the same meaning cannot be expressed by other verbs with literal content similar to *smile*: **Lady Luck grinned at him*, for example. However, this is expected: *smile (on)* has a ‘conferred favour’ meaning that *grin*, *laugh*, etc. do not—and it has this meaning quite independently of cooccurrence with *Lady Luck*. We can say, with a similar ‘conferred favour’ meaning: *The fates smiled on him*, *The king smiled on him*, etc. (**The king grinned at him* does not have the meaning ‘conferred favour’ either). Consequently, the DP *Lady Luck* is expected to be able to occur (compositionally) with the verbal expression *smile on*. No idiomaticity is necessary to explain the meaning of this expression, as the context-independent meanings associated with each of the elements account for the meaning of the expression. Similarly, whatever meaning *Lady Luck grinned at him* has, it has by virtue of the meanings of the individual components, *Lady Luck* (a personification of fate, fortune, etc.) and *grinned at him* (which can suggest an implication of mockery, perhaps). Again, no idiomatic listing for the whole

collocation is necessary (or, according to the hypothesis here, possible).

(21) Note that Kratzer's polysemous analysis is motivated by the original 'light verb' kinds of cases discussed by Marantz, where the particular identity of the object is not fixed, but the idiomatic interpretation is conditioned by objects which are members of a particular semantic class. This approach allows for a kind of 'continuum' of idiomaticity, according to which fixed idioms are subject to exactly the same kind of interpretive process but simply more constrained in the specification of their triggering environment, which is dependent on a particular DP, rather than on a particular semantic class of DPs. *Caboodle* items are the logical extreme, where no context-independent interpretation exists. Note that it is very likely that *caboodle* items are very common in the I-language of speakers, where an unfamiliar lexical item is learned within a particular collocation and is only used by that speaker in that context, although in E-language as a whole it might have an independent existence. See the Eggcorn Database (<http://eggcorns.lascribe.net/>) for several plausible cases.

(22) Though see Glasbey (2003) and McGinnis (2005) for further debate.



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