



The lexical nature of idioms



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ABSTRACT

In recent work, idioms have in many traditions been assimilated to the study of metaphor. An idiom such as ‘spill the beans’ is understood against the conceptual metaphors, THE MIND IS A CONTAINER and IDEAS ARE ENTITIES for instance. Such a treatment implies that idioms are processed online, calling up in their production the conceptual metaphors which support them. In this article an alternative treatment is put forward whereby idioms are lexical in nature. The argument has two parts. First, the constituent collocates of idioms share a number of key grammatical properties with non-idiomatic lexemes. Even in their idiomatic usage they must in some sense be normal lexemes. Secondly, at the same time, idioms are shown to be distinctive in terms of their discourse properties, in particular the fact of idiomaticity restricting the referentiality of idiomatic nouns. Drawing broadly on ideas developed within psycholinguistic treatments of idiomaticity, a model of idioms is developed whereby idioms are seen as lexically compositional against a rich polysemy of their stipulated, constituent lexemes. While, it may be inferred, metonymic and metaphoric associations led to the lexical polysemy of the constituent collocates, metonymy and metaphor play no necessary role in their online production and processing. The argument is developed on the basis of a detailed discussion of idioms in Nigerian Arabic. The data derives from a large, oral corpus (400,000 words), in which the conventional nature of idiomaticity is underscored by the quantitative preponderance of idiomatic meanings among basic body part nouns such as *raas* ‘head’ and *galb* ‘heart’.

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1. Idioms and online processing¹

With one significant exception, which will be discussed in 2.2 below, in recent linguistic theory the analysis of idioms has largely been assimilated to a broader theory of metaphor. Thus, while Lakoff and Johnson makes reference to idioms in his work (e.g. 1980: 46), he does not present a systematic analysis of them, and often what he terms “metaphoric expressions”, “linguistic expressions” or simply “expressions” (1980: 7, 14, 54) could equally be analysed as idioms.² Lakoff (1987: 446–53) sets the tone for later treatments of idioms in CL with the assumption that they are licensed by conceptual metaphors. ‘Spill the beans’ is interpretable in the context of metaphors THE MIND IS A CONTAINER and IDEAS ARE ENTITIES, for instance. Against what he terms ‘traditional’ treatments which saw idioms as totally arbitrary, Lakoff emphasizes that the meaning of

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¹ Abbreviations are standard, except for: CL ‘Cognitive Linguistics’, DM ‘discourse marker’, EA ‘Egyptian Arabic’, NA ‘Nigerian Arabic’, RC ‘relative clause marker’ RT ‘reaction time’, STA ‘southern Tunisian Arabic’.

² For instance (1980: 8) the metaphorical expressions, ‘You’re running out of time’, ‘He’s living on borrowed time’, ‘Is it worth your while’.

the idiom is motivated by the link provided by the metaphor. It is these metaphors which sanction the mapping of elements from source to target domain. ‘Beans’ in the literal, source domain are mapped on to ‘information’ or ‘ideas’ in the target. In one instance when he does explicitly treat idioms (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999: 68) he recognizes a class of “metaphorical idioms”, suggesting that idioms are mediated by an online processing procedure involving conceptual metaphor.

Clausner and Croft (1997), which draws out parallels between basic CL concepts such as entrenchment, productivity and schematicity in semantic and morphological processes, situate idioms on a three-point scale of figurative language defined by metaphor, idiom and frozen idiom. The one extreme is populated by non-productive idioms such as ‘kick the bucket’, while the other is filled by the conceptual metaphor, which itself can have graded degrees of productivity. The middle category, the idiom, exemplified by ‘spill the beans’, still involves a source-target mapping embedded in a conceptual metaphor (e.g. THE MIND IS A CONTAINER), but it is semantically and collocationally fixed. In Clausner and Croft’s terms, such “transparent idioms” (1997: 225) are semi-productive because the metaphor which motivates them sanctions only a limited number of idioms (‘spill the beans, let the cat out of the bag, blow the lid off a matter’).

Nunberg, Sag and Wasow’s study of idioms (1994) looks at idioms from a general linguistic, syntactic and cognitive linguistic perspective. From a general linguistic perspective they offer a broad characterization of properties which characterize idioms. They are collocationally fixed and collocationally unpredictable. Other key properties of idioms are their opacity, compositionality and conventionality (1994: 498). Opacity measures the disjunction between the idiomatic meaning and “the meaning we would predict for the collocation if we were to consult only the rules that determine the meanings of the constituents in isolation”. Compositionality refers to the individual lexemic senses of keyword + collocate accessed in order to compose a given idiomatic meaning.

Compositionality is a key issue, and will be elaborated on in detail in Sections 4–6 below. It would appear that by compositionality Nunberg et al. intend compositionality relative to the literal meanings of the constituent lexemes. This indeed is the basis of their second parameter, opacity. In this sense, ‘spill the beans’ is non-compositional, since ‘spill – the – beans’ does not obviously compose to ‘reveal secret’. Clearly, however, compositionality could imply figurative meanings of the constituent keywords. If ‘beans’ in ‘spill the beans’ accesses a non-literal extension of ‘beans’, say ‘secrets’ or ‘small relatively undetectable items’ or the like, the idiom comes closer to being compositional. As will be seen in detail in section 5, as soon as one departs from the literal meaning of a lexeme, the constructs opacity and compositionality beg the question of the extent to which idiomatic meanings themselves presuppose a structured representation of the constituting lexemes.³

While Nunberg et al. do not attempt to embed their study explicitly in a CL framework, they appear to take for granted that idioms involve systematic mappings of the same order as metaphors. In this they are broadly in keeping with Lakoff’s treatment.

To say that an idiom is an idiomatically combining expression is to say that the conventional mapping from literal to idiomatic interpretation is homomorphic with respect to certain properties of the interpretations of the idiom’s components. (1994: 504)

‘Spill the beans’ is interpreted as a mapping from a literal source to an abstract target, ‘beans’ mapped on to ‘important information’, ‘spill’ on to ‘reveal’. One possible nuance differentiating Nunberg et al. from Lakoff is that the predicate ‘homomorphic’ is stative, versus Lakoff’s processual ‘mapping’, leaving open the possibility that the idiom is in some sense a fixed entity. I return to this general point in 5.3 below.

In all three approaches⁴ idioms are sanctioned to one degree or another in that they instantiate a general conceptual metaphor. Probably because of this assumed association between metaphor and idiom, the interpretation of idioms is described in terms of the same online mapping procedures which characterize conceptual metaphors. I will term this the “online mapping” approach to idiom interpretation.

Finally, in a study which will be examined in greater detail in 8.3 below, Svanlund (2007) introduces what he terms “lexical metaphors”. While in his long article he does not actually define what he means by this concept, the idea behind it is that individual lexemes themselves can “... be said to actually instantiate a specific conceptual pattern and activate associations from a specific source domain” (2007: 53). He illustrates this idea with a detailed corpus comparison between two Swedish words from the same domain, *vikt* ‘weight’ and *tyngd* ‘weight’. Svanlund shows how *vikt* and *tyngd* activate different lexical associations. *Tyngd*, to a far greater degree than *vikt* calls up non-metaphorical concepts (such as ‘weight of a book’), and when they both call up metaphorical meanings, they largely call up different lexemes, even for a very similar concept. ‘Light’, for instance, is generally *liten* when collocating with *vikt*, but *lätt* when collocating with *tyngd*. For present purposes the key point is that these associations are conceived of as calling up concepts online, in the same way conceptual metaphors do.

³ Taken at face value, opacity and compositionality imply the need to form some sort of baseline of expectations for what idiom collocates call up for native speakers. Note however, that Nunberg et al. do not themselves propose a baseline of expectation even for their study of American English, instead relying on their own intuitions in their analysis. The problems for establishing a baseline of expectations for languages with a cultural background quite different from English are all the more problematic.

⁴ As well as other work on the topic. Goossens (2002: 364) in his analysis of idioms such as ‘catch someone’s ear’, for instance speaks of a metonymy in a metaphor. In his analysis, ‘ear’ undergoes metonymic extension, to ‘attention’, and the entire phrase is given a metaphoric interpretation ‘get someone’s ear’. A structural account as in Horn (2003) will not be treated here.

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