

## ON COMPOSITIONALITY OF IDIOMS

RAGNĖ RACEVIČIŪTĖ

### Traditional theories of idiom

Traditional theories dealing with the linguistic phenomenon of idiom describe it as a reproducible word group with a stable syntactic structure whose meaning cannot be derived from the individual meanings of its constituents. This unpredictability of idiomatic meaning has been seen as the central characteristic of idioms, where the syntactic and lexical frozenness correlate with the semantic properties to a degree.

More recently the criterion of *idiomaticity* has been established to account for the semantic property of idioms, i.e. for the fact that “the meaning of an idiom is *not* the result of the compositional function of its constituents” (Fernando & Flavell 1981, 17). Based on this understanding of idiomaticity, linguists have proposed various classifications of idioms focusing on a variety of semantic and syntactic criteria, such as the degree of motivation (Fernando & Flavell, 1981), the type of meaning transfer (Weinreich, 1972; Glaser, 1988), syntactic stability, or “transformational defectiveness” (Fraser, 1970; Makkai, 1972), etc.

The Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English vol. 2 (1983) (ODCIE) has developed a scale of idiomaticity that takes into account both the semantic properties and syntactic behavior of idioms. According to ODCIE, there are four categories along the idiomaticity continuum: *pure idioms*, *figurative idioms*, *restricted collocations* and *open collocations*. As is typical of this approach, “idioms in the strict sense” are identified as pure idioms, however scanty, and are viewed historically as the end product of the process of idiomatization – that is, as “petrified” or “congealed” word-combinations (e.g. *blow the gaff*, *kick the bucket*). At the other end of the spectrum

we find open collocations which are defined as phrases with freely recombinable elements used in their literal senses. Since open collocations are devoid of idiomaticity, they are not included in the dictionary (ODCIE 2. 1983, XII ff).

### **Compositionality proposal**

This view of idiomaticity has recently come under criticism by proponents of cognitive linguistics. In contrast to the usual characteristics of idioms such as semantic and syntactic frozenness, cognitivists have put forth **compositionality**, or **analizability**, as the most important property of idioms, claiming that to a large extent *the components of an idiom bear functional relations to its meaning*. For example, Nunberg (1979) underscores the need to recognize that idioms can be partially analyzable and that there are idioms for which a synchronic relationship between their literal and figurative meanings can be perceived. The compositionality of idioms is therefore directly related to the issue of their motivation. If the literal meanings of the constituents play an important role in constructing the figurative meaning of an idiom, then this functional relationship can be understood as the motivation for the figurative meaning. Thus cognitivists understand idioms as metaphorically motivated units of language with a functionally productive semantic structure.

From a linguistic point of view, **compositionality** can be regarded as an attempt to merge both syntactic and semantic criteria. As has been mentioned before, the assumption that idioms are frozen linguistic units (and the numerous classifications of idioms according to their frozenness) has led linguists into an impasse where important language usage data have been ignored. Thus the new theory had to match the peculiarities of idiom composition – the syntactic and lexical rigidity – with the new understanding of the analyzable character of their meaning. The transparency of idiomatic meaning has long been an issue in linguistics, e.g. Cruse, a proponent of the non-compositional view of idioms, goes to an extreme in regarding “as non-idiomatic (or semantically transparent) any expression which is divisible into semantic constituents”. For Cruse, a pure idiom is a lexical complex which is *semantically simplex*, e.g. *to cook someone's goose, to pull someone's leg* (Cf. ODCIE 2.

1983). As a result, transparent idioms of various types and, specifically, the idioms based on metaphor (so-called dead metaphors) are either left out of the scope of idiomaticity or termed transitional categories towards free word groups. In contrast, the proponents of **compositionality** view a compositional idiom as a typical example of the corpus of idioms, by defining compositionality as *the relation between the semantics of the idiom and its composition*. In other words, it is maintained that there exists a *functional relationship between the meanings of the parts of the idiom and the overall meaning of the idiom*, moreover, it is possible to determine the extent and the way in which the two are related.

### **Evidence for compositionality**

Evidence for **compositionality** of idioms comes from two sources: psycholinguistics and linguistics. A substantial part of psycholinguistic research focuses on idiom comprehension and interpretation. Under experimental conditions, researchers have tried to establish differences in processing literal word groups vs. decomposable idioms vs. non-decomposable idioms, by measuring the time informants take to verify the meaningfulness of the respective phrases (e.g. *spill the beans* vs. *cook the beans* and *kick the bucket* vs. *empty the bucket*). The results of a couple of studies (Gibbs & Gonzales, 1985; Gibbs, Nayak and Cutting, 1989; Gibbs, 1993) show that informants respond faster to compositional idioms than to their matched literal control strings (phrases with literal meanings similar in structure and lexical composition to their respective idioms) and faster to literal control strings than to non-decomposable idioms.

The questions to be answered are: how do people understand idiomatic language compared to literal language and what properties of idioms speed up their understanding. Gibbs and Gonzales (1985) suggest that idiom processing depends on the syntactic productivity of the phrases; however, their results were put to the test by Gibbs, Nayak and Cutting (1989), who maintain that compositionality is a relevant property in idiom comprehension. They conclude that “people process semantically non-decomposable idioms most slowly precisely because it is difficult to assign independent meanings to the-

se phrases' individual parts" (Gibbs, Nayak and Cutting, 1989, 583). Therefore, these experiments seem to suggest that people do *not* arrive at idioms' figurative meanings *directly* by looking them up in their mental lexicon (supposedly because initially they have failed to perform a literal analysis of a phrase), instead, they first grasp the literal and/or metaphorical meanings of certain components of idioms which in turn suggest the presence of a figurative interpretation for the phrase as a whole.

The novelty of this model of idiom comprehension, called the *idiom decomposition hypothesis*, lies in the idea that idiom processing is performed in a compositional manner. Thus, the main role is assigned to the processing of the *individual meanings* of the components, and not to that of the whole idiom, to the extent that the idiom is high on the compositionality scale (Gibbs, Nayak and Cutting, 1989, 588). The term '*phrase-induced polysemy*' is introduced to account for the fact that the components of frequently used idioms develop additional figurative meanings as a result of functioning within the idiom. According to this view the new idiomatic meanings of a constituent word are added to its set of possible meanings, thereby expanding its polysemy and providing ready-made links between the word and the respective idiom in the language user's mental lexicon. For example, the verb and the noun in the idiom *to spill the beans* each have at least two meanings: their default context-free literal meanings and the meanings induced by the idiom context. In nonidiomatic contexts, the verb *spill* has the meaning "to be lost from a container" and the word *beans* the meaning of "edible legumes". In the idiom context, these words have dual meanings retaining their literal meanings, while also acquiring their idiomatic meanings of "reveal" and "information-that-should-have-been-kept-confidential" (Glucksberg, 1993, 17).

### Classifications

Numerous attempts have been made to classify idioms according to this new criterion of compositionality. It is generally agreed that compositionality varies on a scale, and that the other semantic and syntactic criteria are more or less correlated with an idiom's place in this typology. For example, Nun-

berg (1978) and later Gibbs, Nayak & Cutting (1989), all proponents of the idiom decomposition hypothesis, classify idioms into *normally* and *abnormally decomposable* and *non-decomposable* based on speakers' assumptions about idiom analizability and the results of idiom processing experiments. The ideal decomposable idiom, being both transparent and syntactically flexible, is understood much like literal language by performing compositional analysis and making the necessary motivating literal – figurative links. Examples of such idioms are *to spill the beans*, *to button one's lips*, *to follow one's nose*. The case for the non-decomposable idiom is more complicated, and the easiest answer to the question of how non-decomposable opaque idioms are understood is probably the old one, that is, that individual speakers need to memorize the stipulated meanings of these expressions (e.g. *to chew the fat*, *to pay through the nose*)(Gibbs & Nayak, 1989; Gibbs, Nayak & Cutting, 1989).

This classification has been criticized by Glucksberg for the irrelevance of the subtypes of normally and abnormally decomposable idioms (Glucksberg, 1993). Here the criterion of relevance is decisive: whether or not the character and degree of metaphoricity in the idiom should be reflected in the typology. Gibbs et al. maintain that in *normally* decomposable idioms certain constituents have more or less literal meanings (e.g. *pop the question* and *button your lips*), while in *abnormally* decomposable idioms the meaning relations are metaphorical (e.g. *spill the beans* and *bury the hatchet*). According to Glucksberg, this difference is not directly relevant to idiom compositionality since both types of idioms are analyzable in a similar way.

Thus Glucksberg and Cacciari propose a different, *functional* typology of idioms, employing, again, the criteria of compositionality and transparency. They look at how constituent word meanings can map onto the stipulated meaning of an idiom, and classify idioms accordingly into (1) compositional-opaque (Type CO), (2) compositional-transparent (Type CT), and (3) quasi-metaphorical (Type M) (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991; Glucksberg, 1993, 17).

In compositional-opaque idioms (e.g. *kick the bucket*) there exists no apparent relationship between the constituents of an idiom and the stipulated meaning of the idiom, however the constituents' meanings still play a certain role in its comprehension and usage patterns. As for compositional-transparent idioms, there is a one-to-one mapping between the constituent words

and the components of the idiom's meaning and, in most cases, phrase-induced polysemy has developed (e.g. *spill the beans*, *break the ice*). The third type appears to be more problematic, for it introduces the criterion of metaphoricality. While quasi-metaphoric idioms are compositional and transparent, they differ significantly from the other two types in that the metaphorical transfer of meaning is deemed relevant to explain their functioning. Examples of such idioms are *give up the ship*, *carry coals to Newcastle*, and *bury the hatchet*. According to Glucksberg, in such idioms "the literal referent of the idiom is itself an instance of the idiomatic meaning; for example, giving up the ship is simultaneously an ideal or prototypical example of the fact of surrendering and a phrase that can refer to any instance of complete surrender". In other words, the metaphorical meaning transfer takes place on a different level here than in the other two types: not at the level of separate words as components of an idiom, but at the level of the phrase as a whole. Glucksberg also holds that the literal meaning of the idiom is related to its stipulated figurative meaning via *allusion* to a particular, "stereotypical" instance of the category.

Moreover, Glucksberg's typology analyzes the source domain of the metaphors employed in idioms only for the third, quasi-metaphorical type of idioms, but makes no mention of the semantic structure of metaphors in idioms of CO and CT types. However, a closer look at more diverse examples shows that some idioms included, supposedly, in type CT, such as *carry the torch for somebody* or *grease the wheels*, can also refer to ideal examples of an event, situation, etc. In the case of *carry the torch* the action of carrying the torch for someone, it could be said, is a prototypical example of devoted behaviour towards a person. In fact many CT type idioms have different allusional relationships between their literal and figurative meanings.

Conversely, the idioms included by Glucksberg and Cacciari into the quasi-metaphorical type exhibit little similarity among themselves with respect to their metaphorical basis: *to carry coals to Newcastle* works through an allusion to a situation involving a particular singular referent, Newcastle, whereas *to bury the hatchet* makes an allusion to a historical custom, and *to count your chickens before they are hatched* refers to a hypothetical situation, which, of course, is also an instance of the broader, figurative meaning of the idiom.

Given this spectrum of different allusional relations and types of metaphors, to which class could we assign the idiom *to burn one's bridges*, or *to twiddle one's thumbs*? The problem is that the criterion of metaphoricality could prove to cut across different compositional types of idioms, as the patterns of meaning transfer are so diverse and elusive.

It seems that for a truly functional typology of idioms relying on the criterion of semantic compositionality a detailed semantic analysis of the metaphorical processes would be required. Some areas for the study could be the source and target domains of the metaphor, distances between the domains, grounds for the metaphor, and existence of concrete unitary referents (like Newcastle) and cultural references (such as the habit to bury the hatchet).

### **Syntactic and lexical flexibility**

It is obvious that idioms vary in their syntactic stability as well as in the rigidity of their lexical composition. In order to identify certain guidelines in idiom variation, numerous syntactic and lexical transformation tests have been devised which allow to classify idioms according to their "transformational defectiveness", such as substitution, permutation, predication, nominalization and passivization tests (Cf. Fraser, 1970; Fernando & Flavell, 1981; Glaser, 1988).

In comparison with the traditional negative "defectiveness" perspective, the compositionality view uses the "positive" terms of flexibility and productivity to refer to the syntactic and semantic properties of idioms. Taking compositionality as the basis of the classification of idioms, a number of studies have attempted to establish the relationship between compositionality and the other syntactic and semantic criteria. Integrated results of idiom comprehension experiments indicate that there is a correlation between the semantic compositionality of idioms and their syntactic and lexical flexibility (Gibbs & Gonzales, 1985; Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989), which facilitates the processing of idioms. It follows that decomposable idioms, in which the meanings of the constituents map directly onto the stipulated meaning of the idiom (e.g. *to pop the question*), allow more syntactic and lexical variation

while still retaining their idiomatic meanings than less decomposable idioms (e.g. *by and large*).

Cacciari and Glucksberg (1991) have adopted a pragmatic approach to the semantic and discourse productivity of idioms, where the semantic productivity of idioms is understood as “the use of lexical and syntactic operations to create new idiomatic meanings from the old ones”, *vis-a-vis* flexibility tests only verifying the extent to which the original meanings of idioms are retained. The authors found that when an idiom is high on the compositionality scale then modification, quantification, negation, antonymy, and other operations will be productive provided that a plausible communicative intent can be inferred. The results of their studies, in which contextualized examples were drawn to test the productivity of a semantic modification of an idiom, showed that people could easily interpret variants of idioms, especially in motivated specific contexts. In fact, some of the idioms classified as non-decomposable (e.g. *to speak one’s mind*) were highly productive, suggesting that the semantic productivity of idioms is not entirely dependent on their compositionality and flexibility. These results may suggest that the classification of idioms along compositionality lines should be revised according to their productivity. E.g. the idiom *by and large*, initially classified as non-compositional, can be modified to *by and not-so-large*, which is meaningful in certain contexts, and thus the idiom can be reclassified as ‘partially compositional’.

Other variations of idioms in contexts are literalization, slips of the tongue, and semantic productivity in discourse (that is, generation of further conversation using the elaboration of the variant idiom (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991; Glucksberg, 1993)). The study of the discourse productivity of idioms is of particular interest, as it shows that compositionality is not a universal answer to the question of how idioms function in actual language usage.

### Conclusion

The development of the compositionality view of idioms has raised as many new questions as it has answered. As much of the evidence supporting the idiom compositionality claim comes from psycholinguistic studies of idiom



comprehension, it would seem valid to ask the question whether the speed of idiom processing could be influenced by other factors (the character of motivation, idiom recognizability, image vividness in metaphorical idioms, etc.).

It seems undeniable that idiom compositionality/analizability has been established as a valid criterion for a typology of idioms. However, it is also apparent that compositionality alone cannot fully explain how people produce or understand idioms, nor can it encompass all the diverse idioms that exist in various languages. Thus it should serve as a springboard for further research on idioms, focussing on other functional parameters.

One of the objectives of idiom studies is to challenge the traditional view of metaphorical idioms as “dead metaphors”. Given the mechanism of metaphorical mapping of compositional idioms, it is possible to prove that the metaphorical motivation of idiomatic meaning is very much alive. Following this path, certain linguists have argued that the structure of the motivation of idiomatic meaning is the key to a deeper understanding of how idioms are interpreted and produced. Some studies have investigated the associated images that speakers seem to have and use to understand idioms.

Most of the research in the direction of semantic – metaphorical structure of idioms has been inspired by cognitive linguistics, more specifically by the findings of Lakoff and Johnson on the role of metaphor in language. It seems that their approach could be fruitfully combined with the compositionality claim to probe deeper into the intricate and elusive work of the idiom.

## REFERENCES

- Cacciari, C. The place of idioms in a literal and metaphorical world // *Idioms: Processing, Structure and Interpretation* / Eds. C. Cacciari & P. Tabossi. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1993.
- Cacciari, C. & Glucksberg, S. Understanding idiomatic expressions: The contribution of word meanings // *Understanding word and sentence* / Ed. G. B. Simpson. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elsevier Science Publishers (North Holland), 1991. 217–240.
- Cowie, A. P., Mackin, R. & McCaig, I. R. *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*. Oxford University Press, 1983.

- Cruse, D. A. *Lexical semantics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Fraser, B. Idioms within a transformational grammar // *Foundations of Language*. 1970. 6(1). 22–42.
- Gibbs, R. W. Why idioms are not dead metaphors // *Idioms: Processing, Structure and Interpretation* / Eds. C. Cacciari & P. Tabossi. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1993.
- Gibbs, R. W. & Nayak, N. Psycholinguistic studies on the syntactic behavior of idioms // *Cognitive Psychology*. 1989. 21. 100–138.
- Gibbs, R. W., Nayak, N., & Cutting, C. How to kick the bucket and not decompose: Analizability and idiom processing. *Journal of Memory and Language*. 1989. 28. 576–593.
- Glaser, R. The Grading of Idiomaticity as a Presupposition for a Taxonomy of Idioms // *Understanding the Lexicon* / Eds. Hüllen, Werner & Rainer Schulze. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1988.
- Glucksberg, S. Idiom meanings and allusional content // *Idioms: Processing, Structure and Interpretation* / Eds. C. Cacciari & P. Tabossi. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1993.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago; London, 1980.
- Makkai, A. *Idiom Structure in English*. The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1972.
- Nayak, N. P. & Gibbs, W. R. Conceptual knowledge in the interpretation of idioms // *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. 1990. 119. 115–130.
- Nunberg, G. *The Pragmatics of Reference*. Bloomington: Indiana Linguistic Club, 1978.
- Weinreich, U. Problems in the analysis of idioms // *Substance and Structure of Language* / Ed. J. Puhvel. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969.

## FRAZEOLGIZMŲ VIDINIAI SEMANTINIAI RYŠIAI

Ragnė Racevičiūtė

Re z i u m ė

Straipsnyje aptariamos naujausios Vakarų kalbotyrininkų frazeologizmų semantikos teorijos. Per pastaruosius dvidešimt metų atlikta nemažai psicholingvistinių eksperimentų, tyrinėjančių frazeologizmų supratimo būdus. Sukurta keletas frazeolo-

gizmų supratimo teorijų, teigiančių, kad frazeologizmų reikšmė yra sudėtinė, t. y. atskiri, sudarantys frazeologizmą žodžiai nepriklausomai prisideda prie bendros frazeologizmo reikšmės kūrimo. Ši prielaida tiesiogiai prieštaruoja įsitvirtinusiai nuostatai, kad frazeologizmų reikšmė yra nedaloma ir neišvestinė iš atskirų komponentų reikšmių.

Remiantis naujausiais duomenimis apie frazeologizmų komponentų vidinius semantinius ryšius, aptariamos ir įvertinamos naujos frazeologizmų klasifikacijos ir jų principai. Pagrindinis dėmesys skiriamas frazeologizmų semantikos ypatumams ir metaforiniam reikšmės formavimo procesui.

Vilniaus universiteto  
Anglų filologijos katedra

Įteikta  
1998 m. sausio 20 d.