

Syntacticizing agentivity effects

Prospects and problems

Rob Truswell

`rob.truswell@ed.ac.uk`

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Outline

- ▶ There appears to be a constraint on agent idioms (Harley & Stone 2013).
- ▶ Such a constraint could in principle be cashed out:
 - ▶ Semantically (something special about agents), or
 - ▶ Syntactically (something special about heads which introduce agents).
- ▶ Given the intellectual environment surrounding claims about agent idioms (Marantz 1984, Kratzer 1996), people have tended towards the syntactic approach.
- ▶ But current proposals seem both too flexible and too constrained.
- ▶ This is similar to the current state of the debate over constraints on extraction from adjuncts.
- ▶ I'll investigate the possibility that a model of event structure developed to capture patterns of extraction from adjuncts can also tell us something about the special status of agents in idioms.

Section 1

No agent idioms

The original claim

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

- (2) a. The policeman threw NP
- b. The boxer threw NP
- c. The social director threw NP
- d. Aardvarks throw NP
- e. Throw NP!

(Marantz 1984: 25, 27)

A clarification

- ▶ Idioms can be very big indeed.

(3) I hope your rabbit dies and you can't sell the hutch.

- ▶ By any sensible measure, that means we're not looking for absolute syntactic constraints on the size of idioms.
- ▶ Rather, what is at stake is limits on **flexibility**.
- ▶ Three variants (from stronger to weaker) of a single claim:

No idioms with fixed $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} 1. \quad \text{subjects} \\ 2. \quad \text{external arguments} \\ 3. \quad \text{agents} \end{array} \right\}$

... and variable VP-internal elements.

- ▶ Also a slightly different claim (Nunberg et al. 1994): animate entities don't really belong in the fixed part of idiom meaning.

A menace of potential counterexamples (English)

Mainly collected in Harley & Stone (2013)

- (4) What's eating NP? (Bresnan 1982)
- (5) God help X (Baltin 1989)
- (6) The vultures circle NP (The Manaster-Ramer email)
- (7) The spirit move NP (The Manaster-Ramer email)
- (8) A little bird tell X Y (Nunberg et al. 1994)
- (9) Wild horses couldn't drag X away (O'Grady 1998)
- (10) Lady Luck smile on X (Horvath & Siloni 2002)

A menace of potential counterexamples (Non-English)

Collected in Harley & Stone (2013)

- (11) Ihn reitet der Teufel
Him rides the devil
“He is going crazy” (The Manaster-Ramer email)
- (12) Ha-ru'ax nasa oto
the-wind carried him
“He disappeared” (Horvath & Siloni 2002)
- (13) Rájár a rúd
Onto-him-goes the shaft
“He's having a series of misfortunes”
(Horvath & Siloni 2002)
- (14) Ivana chut' KONDRASHKA ne (s)xvat-il
Ivan.ACC almost Kondrashka.NOM not grabbed
“Ivan was frightened to death” (Chtareva 2003)

The question

- ▶ Everyone agrees that such examples are rare.
- ▶ But the fact they exist already casts doubt on variant 1 above:

No idioms with fixed { 1. **subjects** }

... and variable VP-internal elements.

- ▶ The question is:
 - ▶ Are they rare because facts about idiom use (e.g. dispreference of NPs with animate reference, Nunberg et al. 1994) militate against them?
 - ▶ Or is there still a real “no agent idioms” constraint?

Harley & Stone's (2013) reply

- ▶ There are no genuine examples of an idiom where the subject **is interpreted as** an agent (see also Anagnostopoulou & Samioti 2013 on special word meaning).
- ▶ The counterexamples fall into two main classes:
 1. The verb isn't part of the idiom;
 2. Although the verb in the idiom takes an agent in its literal use, it doesn't do so in the idiom.
- ▶ Immediate corollaries:
 - ▶ flexible model of argument structure (Marantz 1997, Borer 2005a,b, Ramchand 2008);
 - ▶ the “idiomatic” argument structure isn't necessarily available non-idiomatically.

(15) a. I wanted the Earth to swallow me up.

b. #The Earth swallowed the rain up.

(16) a. He was consumed by hunger.

b. #The soup was consumed by hunger.

Harley & Stone's (2013) reply

Evidence 1

- ▶ No agent-oriented adverbs.

(17) *Ivana spetsial'no chut' KONDRASHKA ne (s)xvatil.
Ivan.ACC on purpose almost Kondrashka.NOM not grabbed
"Ivan was frightened to death on purpose."

- ▶ Psych-verb binding patterns.

(18) Strax za armii drug druga ovladel Novgorodem i
fear for armies each other captured Novgorod and
Pskovom
Pskov
"Fear of each other's armies seized Novgorod and Pskov."

- ▶ OVS order in broad-focus contexts.

Harley & Stone's (2013) reply

Evidence 2

- ▶ Adjectival rather than verbal passives.

(19) So mancher Motorradfahrer scheint vom Teufel
So many motorbikers seem by the devil
geritten zu sein.
ridden to be
“So many motorbikers seem to be ridden by the
devil.”

- ▶ Conclusion: these are object-experiencer predicates.
- ▶ Therefore, they are not counterexamples to the “No agent idioms” claim.

Comments

- ▶ Harley & Stone actually argue for a stronger claim than “No agent idioms” (variant 2 rather than 3):

No idioms with fixed $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} 2. \text{ external arguments} \\ 3. \text{ agents} \end{array} \right\}$

... and variable VP-internal elements.

- ▶ This is not explicit in their text, but crucial to their argument.
- ▶ Their analysis: the vP phase is the domain of special meaning, and agents are too high for that (see also Svenonius 2005).

Comments

Greek participles

- ▶ Anagnostopoulou & Samioti (2013): Greek *-menos* participles have two interpretations:
 1. Target state, reversible, incompatible with agents except “event kind” readings.
 2. Resultant state, irreversible, compatible with agents.
- ▶ Prediction: can't combine *akoma* ('still', diagnoses target state) with agent-oriented adverb (diagnoses resultant state).

(20) *To thisavrofilakio itan akoma prosektika anigmeno
the safe was still cautiously opened
'The safe was still cautiously opened'.

- ▶ Only target state *-menos* participles have idiomatic interpretations.


(21) a. travigmenos 'pulled/far-fetched'
b. prosektika travigmenos: 'carefully pulled'

Matters arising

- ▶ This sets an agenda, with at least four immediate empirical questions.

1. Where's the edge of the vP phase?
2. What about larger (fully fixed) idioms?

(22) That's the pot calling the kettle black.

3. How pervasive is phase-internal contextual alloosemy?
4. What about larger, partially flexible idioms? 

Where's the edge of the vP phase?

- ▶ Harwood (2015): Progressive and passive markers are included within the lower phase; higher auxiliaries aren't.
- ▶ Evidence from VP-ellipsis and fronting.

- (23)
- Goofy was being chastized, and Pluto was (*being) too.
 - Bob might have been in the garden, and Morag might *(have), too.
- (24)
- Also being examined for body parts is the tonnes of rubble being removed from the site.
 - *Also examined for body parts is being ...
 - Also examined for body parts will have been ...

Where's the edge of the vP phase?

- ▶ Harwood also cites a number of progressive idioms (some from Svenonius 2005) as corroborating evidence:

- (25)
- a. *X* be dying to meet *Y*
 - b. Something be eating *X*
 - c. *X* be pushing up the daisies
 - d. *X* be cruising for a bruising
 - e. *X* be chomping at the bit

- ▶ Punske & Stone (2015): not all of these strictly require the progressive, according to Google.

- (26)
- a. How to write blog titles people will die to click
 - b. Ned would be free to enjoy Sally and her newly acquired saloon while me and Bart pushed up daisies east of camp
 - c. Hillary Clinton engaged for lowans ... in a roundtable discussion ... while camera shutters clicked and reporters chomped at the bit to ask her questions.

What about larger fully fixed idioms?

- ▶ Larger fully fixed idioms clearly exist.

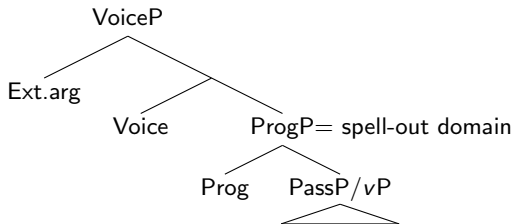
- (27)
- a. I hope your rabbit dies and you can't sell the hutch.
 - b. The pot calling the kettle black.
 - c. Look what the cat dragged in.
 - d. Is the Pope Catholic? (Harwood 2015)
 - e. Do bears shit in the woods? (Harwood 2015)

- ▶ Although this has generated much hand-wringing, it may not be a serious problem. “Successive-cyclic contextual allosemy”: a phase has a special meaning in context of the next phase.
- ▶ Something like this is necessary anyway if DP phases can be fixed parts of idioms. It could also model compositional idioms.
- ▶ Prediction: fully fixed idioms can be as big as you like (merging into proverbs?).

- (28) See all, hear all, say nowt; eat all, drink all, pay nowt; and if e'er tha does owt for nowt, do it for thissen.

How pervasive is phase-internal contextual allosemy?

- ▶ Recap: we're in (something like) this situation:



- ▶ The prediction is that meaning of lexical material within this domain can be influenced by any other material within this domain, down to the next phase head (D, C, etc.).
 - ▶ Specifically, non-idiomatic argument structure doesn't carry over to idiomatic interpretation.
- ▶ One likely case where this is too flexible: inner aspect.

How pervasive is phase-internal contextual allosemy?

- ▶ McGinnis (2002): aspectual class of idioms is determined by aspectual class of the “regular” lexical items that they are composed of (see also Nunberg et al. 1994).

(29) a. Hermione was the cat's pyjamas for years.
b. #Hermione is being the cat's pyjamas.

(30) a. Harry jumped through hoops for years.
b. Harry is jumping through hoops.

(31) a. Hermione paid her dues in ten years.
b. Hermione stopped paying her dues.

(32) a. Harry struck paydirt in an hour.
b. #Harry stopped striking paydirt.

How pervasive is phase-internal contextual allosemy?

- ▶ McGinnis took this as an argument *for* a DM approach to idioms.
- ▶ From the present perspective, I'm not so sure.
- ▶ Key ingredients of Harley & Stone (2013) include these:
 - ▶ Argument structure is represented syntactically (at the least, the external argument is outside the lower phase).
 - ▶ Argument structure (at least, whether the subject is external or internal) cannot be predicted on the basis of V's regular behaviour.
- ▶ It is therefore striking that aspectual class *can* be predicted on the basis of V's regular behaviour.

What about larger, partially flexible idioms?

- ▶ Harwood (2015): (33) look like counterexamples to his generalization about progressives and flexible idioms.

- (33)
- a. (i) John has been to Rome
 - (ii) *John is to Rome.
 - b. (i) John has been around the block a few times.
 - (ii) *John might be around the block a few times.

- ▶ Harwood suggests that this is something special about *been* without a lexical verb.
- ▶ But the problem is more pervasive.

What about larger, partially flexible idioms?

Flexible possessors

- ▶ In (34), the possessor is flexible but other aspects of DP are fixed.

- (34)
- The cat's got *X*'s tongue
 - X* twiddle *X*'s thumbs
 - X* give *Y* a piece of *X*'s mind

- ▶ If DP is a phase and idiomatic flexibility is phase-bound, this would require some combination of possessor raising (or edge position?) (a) and reflexive magic (c).

- (35)
- $[_{VP}$ the cat got *X* $[_{DP}$ (*X*)'s tongue]]
 - $[_{VP}$ *X* give *Y* $[_{DP}$ a piece of $[_{DP}$ *self*'s mind]]]

What about larger, partially flexible idioms?

Idioms undisturbed by obligatory control

- (36)
- a. Every dog expects to have its day.
 - b. An old dog never wants to be taught new tricks.
 - c. Birds of a feather like to flock together.
 - d. The early bird [always – RT] hopes to get the worm.
- (Nunberg et al. 1994: 517)

- ▶ Not clear why this is so restricted (cf. **The shit wants to hit the fan*).
- ▶ Idiomatically combining expressions with subjects corresponding to sentient individuals?
- ▶ Why do they all involve universal/generic quantification??
- ▶ Regardless, the phenomenon exists.

What about larger, partially flexible idioms?

Irrealis idioms

- ▶ Certain idioms resist realis vP-external contexts.

(37) a. $X \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{would} \\ \text{is ready to} \end{array} \right\} \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{kill} \\ \text{give } X\text{'s right arm} \end{array} \right\} \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{to} \\ \text{for} \end{array} \right\} Y$
b. (X wants to have X's cake and eat it)

- ▶ Some simple past versions of (37b) (though not in my idiolect).
- ▶ Simple past versions of (37a) are beautiful illustrations of the “play on words” effect.

Giving one's right arm



Interim summary

- ▶ The No Agent Idioms constraint seems real.
- ▶ It may even be a No External Argument Idioms effect.
- ▶ But the reduction to phase-bound contextual alloosemy is untenable.
 - ▶ Phase-internal material is interpretively fixed by “regular” meaning.
 - ▶ Phase-external material can be fixed while phase-internal material varies.

Section 2

Extraction from adjuncts

Events and extraction

- ▶ Truswell (2007, 2011): event-structural factors condition extraction from adjuncts.
- ▶ Events are maximally decomposable into:
 - ▶ Process + culmination (physical events)
 - ▶ Process + goal (agentive events, see also Truswell 2015)
- ▶ Event grouping: Set of spatiotemporally overlapping events, ≤ 1 of which is agentive.
- ▶ Single Event Grouping Condition: the minimal constituent containing a *wh*-movement chain must describe a single event.

Relevant phenomena

- (38)
- What did John drive Mary crazy whistling?
 - ??What did John paint that picture whistling?
 - What did John arrive whistling?
 - ??What does John work whistling?
 - What does John lie around reading all day?
- (39)
- What did you come here to talk about?
 - *What are whales fat to conserve?
 - ??What narrative effect did the heroine die to achieve?
- ▶ Agentivity is visible in several places.
 - ▶ (38d–e): *work* and *lie around* both describe activities, but only *work* is agentive.
 - ▶ (38a–b): *drive NP crazy* and *paint NP* both describe accomplishments, but only *paint NP* entails an agentive preparatory process. *Drive NP crazy* behaves more like achievement *arrive* in (38c).
 - ▶ (39): rationale clauses only allow extraction if the agent whose goal is described is also the subject.

Syntacticizing all this

- ▶ Occasional attempts to reduce these effects to phrase structure (Narita 2011; see also Boeckx 2012).
- ▶ The gist: make the relevant event-structural units correspond to phases; make the locality constraint relate to the Phase Impenetrability Condition.
- ▶ E.g. Narita: extraction is possible from adjuncts within vP .
- ▶ This is possible, but judgements don't fully align with other phasehood tests as used e.g. by Harwood (2015).

- (40)
- I travelled to Potsdam to talk about idioms, and you did so too.
 - ?I travelled to Potsdam to talk about events, but you did so to talk about idioms.

- (41)
- The hero dies to heighten dramatic irony, and the heroine does so too.
 - The hero dies to heighten dramatic irony, and the villain does so to introduce some comedy.

We've been here before

- ▶ Hornstein & Weinberg (1981) had a theory of reanalysis that predicted that P-stranding should only be possible with VP-internal PPs.

(42) a. Who did you write about?

b. *What time did John arrive at?

(Hornstein & Weinberg 1981: 56, original judgements)

- ▶ As with Narita's approach, the theory is elegant and makes largely correct predictions.
- ▶ But the P-stranding facts don't align with other VP constituency tests (e.g. (42b) is fine for many speakers).
- ▶ Hornstein & Weinberg therefore advocate a double dissociation between grammaticality and acceptability.
- ▶ ...

Second interim summary

- ▶ Agents feature prominently in the individuation of events.
- ▶ Although there is some scope for syntacticization of the notion of “single event”, proposals currently on the table don't capture all the details.
- ▶ Conclusion 1: To this extent, the problems with syntacticizing “no agent idioms” are similar to the problems with syntacticizing the Single Event Grouping Condition.
- ▶ Conclusion 2: If event-structural treatments of the latter have empirical advantages, maybe we should investigate event-structural treatments of the former.

Section 3

Events and idioms

Back to Nunberg et al. (1994)

- ▶ Current syntactic accounts of the “no agent idioms” constraint seem too weak at times and too strong at others.
- ▶ So it’s worth revisiting Nunberg et al.’s semantic approach.
- ▶ Their claim: “no agent idioms” is:
 - ▶ A tendency with exceptions;
 - ▶ Part of a larger tendency to avoid animate expressions in idioms;
 - ▶ A result of the proverbiality of idioms (talk about abstract eventualities in metaphorical concrete terms);
 - ▶ A result of the tendency for animate NPs to have animate metaphorical reference.
- ▶ My claim (following Harley & Stone): there are no exceptions (certainly, the putative exceptions in Nunberg et al. have been explained away).
- ▶ The proverbiality of idioms can help explain why.
- ▶ Perhaps the correct generalization is “no fixed components of idioms with animate reference”, but I’ll explore an agent-specific alternative.

Proverbiality

“Typically, a proverb or proverbial expression invokes a concrete situation (pulling strings, showing a flag, breaking ice) as the metaphorical model for a recurrent, culturally significant situation involving abstract relations or entities (e.g. exerting influence, making one’s opinions known, easing the formality of a social encounter).”

(pp.529–30)

- ▶ The “abstract relations or entities” aren’t very abstract. There are no idioms for metaphorical expression of passages of algebra or C.
- ▶ I suggest that proverbiality is psychologization: alluding to experiential impact in terms of physical relations.

Whose experience?

- ▶ As recognized by Harley & Stone, fixed-subject idioms are interpreted as object-experiencer predicates. They don't typically entail the existence of a (mind-external) individual corresponding to the subject.

(43) What's eating / God help / The vultures circle / The spirit
move / Lady Luck smile on X

- ▶ Just occasionally, though, they do.

(44) A little bird tell X Y

This seems like an Idiomatically Combining Expression, in Nunberg et al.'s terms.

- ▶ Even idioms which appear to describe (and evaluate) result states are psychologized in this way (though the experiencer isn't overtly realized).

(45) On the uninhabited island of Rockall, something terrible
happened / ?The shit really hit the fan / ?*It all went tits up.

Reference and predication

- ▶ One attempt which ultimately doesn't work: treat *God help* etc. as (simple) predicates:
 - ▶ **[God help]** = $\lambda x.x$ is in trouble

Then attribute the ban on agents to the reference–predication constraint.

- ▶ Problem is, idioms *can* be compositional (Nunberg et al.).
- ▶ And we have lots of idiomatic NPs referring to potential agents.

(46) The powers that be, his nibs, (add a very long list of noncompositional insults).

- ▶ So why no idiomatically combining expression of the following form?

(47) *The beans are grinding NP (= Someone with a lot of power is planning to make NP feel worthless).

Agents and event size

- ▶ Truswell (2011, 2015): agentive events are delimited by an agent's goals (mental states).
- ▶ Other events are delimited by (direct) causation (among other things).
- ▶ We can see this by looking at progressive forms.

(48) Context: the wind is picking up, and the ball is teetering on the edge of the hill. It will inevitably roll down the hill any minute, but hasn't yet moved.

#Hey look! The ball is rolling down the hill.

(49) Context: a very round man in a special suit is limbering up at the top of the hill. The combination of suit, exercises, and location make it clear what he intends to do, but he hasn't yet moved (limbering up aside)

Hey look! The round man is rolling down the hill.

Too much psychologization

- ▶ So part of what distinguishes agents from other external arguments is reference to mental states.
- ▶ And part of what distinguishes flexible arguments of idioms is reference to mental states.
- ▶ Natural conjecture: that's too many mental states.

Only one perspective

Agents and experiencers both impose “perspectives” on an event, but you can only construe an event from one perspective.

- ▶ A kind-of-minimal contrast: fully fixed except gender, refers to x as agent and experiencer.

(50) (S)he shoots, (s)he scores! “ x tried something that was very unlikely to work, but it worked, and x is happy about that”.

Problems

- ▶ How to sharpen this?
- ▶ Agents and experiencers aren't normally this mutually exclusive.

(51) The doctor deliberately frightened the patient.

So what's different in the idiom case?

Summary

- ▶ No flexible agent idioms: if an idiom contains a constituent interpreted as an agent, it is fully fixed.
 - ▶ Possible extension 1: No flexible animate idioms.
 - ▶ Possible extension 2: No flexible external argument idioms.
- ▶ Syntactic treatments show a fair amount of promise, but ultimately don't yield the distinctions we need.
- ▶ Previous semantic treatments based on proverbiality are expressed as tendencies, but don't offer genuine counterexamples.
- ▶ I have suggested an alternative based on a conflict between agents and experiencers as imposing two conflicting perspectives on a single event.

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