

Verb meaning and the ‘no agent idioms’ effect*

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1 Introduction

The distribution of flexible idioms (partially fixed form–meaning correspondences above the word level, with at least one open argument slot) has proven to be a surprisingly rich source of hypotheses about the architecture of the grammar. This is largely due to Marantz (1984), who demonstrated an asymmetry between external and internal arguments with respect to the determination of ‘special meaning’ of V (that is, idiomatic interpretation triggered by other linguistic material in context, as opposed to the ‘regular meaning’ of a lexical item out of context). In many cases, like (1), the internal argument can condition the interpretation of V, but the external argument cannot (see (2)).

- (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)

Recently (Anagnostopoulou & Samioti 2013, Harley & Stone 2013), a consensus has emerged that contrasts like (1)–(2) inform us about phases as domains of special meaning, or ‘contextual alloosemy’ in the sense of Marantz (2013). The internal argument can influence the interpretation of V in (1) because it is spelled out in the same phase as the verb, but the external argument cannot influence the interpretation of V because a phase boundary falls between external arguments (particularly agents) and V.

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This paper will argue for a different construal of the distinction between (1) and (2), one based on the thematic role of AGENT rather than the syntactic notion of external argument. The evidence for this reinterpretation comes from a double dissociation between phrase-structural remoteness from V and participation in idiomatic interpretation: constituents which asymmetrically c-command agents can form part of flexible idioms, while aspects of verb meaning, uncontroversially determined within the first phase, systematically fail to participate in idiom formation.

The problematization of the phase-based approach to idiomatic interpretation of course raises the question of what *is* going on. I propose, reinterpreting insights from Nunberg, Sag & Wasow (1994) and Harley & Stone (2013), that there is a systematic conflict between the thematic role of AGENT and the proverbial nature of idioms. For a large class of cases, independently motivated constraints on verb meaning motivate a ban on agents in flexible idioms.

Below, Section 2 describes the state of the art concerning constraints on idiomatic interpretation. Section 3 spells out the challenges to the phase-based approach to idiomatic interpretation. Section 4 sketches a semantic alternative, and Section 5 concludes.

2 Background

Since Nunberg et al. (1994), debate over flexible idioms has centred on three related questions:

1. What is the relevant difference between (1) and (2) (subject/object; external argument/internal argument; agent/other)?
2. Is the difference categorical or gradient?
3. Is the basis for the difference syntactic or semantic?

The answers implied by Marantz (1984) and subsequent work in the same vein (Kratzer 1996, Anagnostopoulou & Samioti 2013, Harley & Stone 2013) are as follows:

1. The relevant difference between (1) and (2) is external argument vs. internal argument.
2. The difference is categorical: external arguments are too phrase-structurally remote from V to trigger special meaning.
3. The basis for the difference is syntactic, or specifically, height of attachment.

This now-standard interpretation of Marantz's data concerning special meaning comes from Kratzer (1996). Kratzer associated external arguments with a functional head, Voice⁰, c-commanding V. This allowed the stipulation that only material c-commanded by Voice⁰ could trigger special meaning of V. The data in (1) then becomes of a piece with a range of other configurations in which material close to V licenses idiomatic interpretation within VP. In each case, the VP-internal material other than X is fixed: any changes to it will make the idiomatic interpretation disappear.

- (3) a. Take *X* to the cleaners
- b. Run *X* ragged
- c. Butter *X* up

In (1), the special meaning was a 1-place predicate, with an empty argument slot to be filled by the subject. In (3), the special meaning is a 2-place predicate, with empty argument slots to be filled by the subject and the object (marked by *X* in (3)). I will call examples like (3) ‘flexible-object’ idioms. In contrast, examples like *kick the bucket* are ‘fixed-object’ idioms. This terminology will be extended to subjects, and also agents, etc., in the obvious way. The lack of special meaning in the case of (2) can then be construed as a special case of a broader phenomenon:

- (4) **The no agent idioms effect (1st version):¹**
 There are no fixed-external-argument, flexible-internal-argument idioms.

This paper will investigate the nature of this effect, mainly through comparison with a class of fixed-subject, flexible-object idioms.

The postulation of Voice⁰ by Kratzer resonated with the use of VP-shells by Hale & Keyser (1993) to capture relations between verb meaning and argument structure, and the use of *v*⁰ by Chomsky (1995) to account for various locality effects in case and agreement. With the introduction of phases in Chomsky (2000), it became natural to reinterpret Kratzer’s analysis as a claim that a phase boundary intervened between external arguments and V, and that idiomatic interpretation was phase-bounded.

Given the proliferation of functional heads between the verbal root and aspectual operators, there was some debate concerning precisely which head was the phase head responsible for separating external arguments from the verb, with the two main candidates being the first categorizing head, and the head introducing agents. Marantz (1997) originally proposed that the head in question was the head responsible for introducing agents. Although Marantz (2001) disagreed, Anagnostopoulou & Samioti (2013) and Harley & Stone (2013) provided apparently decisive evidence in favour of this analysis.

The arguments concern cases of nested special meanings. Harley & Stone (2013: 258) discuss the root $\sqrt{\text{nat-}}$, visible in the different forms in (5).

- (5) a. nat-ion
- b. nat-ion-al ‘of a nation’ (not an antonym of *private*)
- c. nat-ion-al-ize ‘government takeover of business’ (antonym of *privatize*)

Nationalize appears to have been categorized three times, as noun, then, adjective, then finally verb. And yet its meaning is not predictable from the meaning of *national*. This rules out the competing hypothesis that the first categorizing head puts an end to special

¹Given that the formulation here refers to ‘external arguments’ rather than ‘agents’, the ‘no agent idioms effect’ might appear to be a misnomer. In fact, as will shortly become clear, there is no agreement at present as to whether the proper generalization should refer to agents or all external arguments. As the analysis I propose motivates a ban specifically on agent idioms, I will continue to refer to the phenomenon at hand as the ‘no agent idioms’ effect, following Harley & Stone (2013), regardless of whether a given theory actually predicts a ban on fixed-agent, flexible-object idioms, or a ban on fixed-external-argument, flexible-internal-argument idioms.

meaning, leaving the agent-introducing head as the most likely culprit.

Nunberg et al. (1994) proposed very different answers to the three questions above:

1. The relevant difference between (1) and (2) is agent vs. other.
2. The difference is gradient: agents are less likely than other thematic roles to trigger special verb meaning.
3. The basis for the difference is semantic: idioms are proverbial, in that they tend to use concrete terms to express abstract emotional states. Proverbial expressions tend not to select for agents.

Although all three points of disagreement are significant, the empirical discussion has tended to focus on point 2: is there a categorical prohibition against agents in flexible idioms, or a statistical tendency? In principle, a single counterexample should be sufficient to decide in favour of Nunberg et al.'s approach, but these very different claims have nevertheless coexisted for decades partly because of an ambiguity in the use of thematic role labels like 'agent' with respect to idioms: the label could refer to the thematic role associated with a given argument of the 'regular meaning' of the verb in question, or about the interpretation of an argument relative to the 'special meaning' of the predicate. Examples of flexible idioms containing a fixed constituent corresponding to an agent in the 'regular meaning' are widespread: (6) gives representative examples from English, and (7) from other languages (both lists are mainly due to Harley & Stone 2013).

- | | | | |
|-----|----|--|-------------------------|
| (6) | a. | What's eating X? | (Bresnan 1982) |
| | b. | God help X | (Baltin 1989) |
| | c. | The vultures circle X | (Manaster Ramer 1993) |
| | d. | A little bird tell X Y | (Nunberg et al. 1994) |
| | e. | Wild horses couldn't drag X away | (O'Grady 1998) |
| | f. | Lady Luck smile on X | (Horvath & Siloni 2002) |
| (7) | a. | German:
Ihn reitet der Teufel
Him rides the devil
'He is going crazy' | (Manaster Ramer 1993) |
| | b. | Hebrew:
Ha-ru'ax nasa oto
the-wind carried him
'He disappeared' | (Horvath & Siloni 2002) |
| | c. | Hungarian:
Rájár a rúd
Onto-him-goes the shaft
'He's having a series of misfortunes' ² | (Horvath & Siloni 2002) |
| | d. | Russian: | |

²This is discussed by Horvath & Siloni as an example of an idiom with fixed external argument, albeit apparently not an agent.

Ivana chut' KONDRASHKA ne (s)xvat-il
 Ivan.ACC almost Kondrashka.NOM not grabbed
 'Ivan was frightened to death' (Chtareva 2003)

However, Harley & Stone (2013) demonstrate that the no agent idioms effect is compatible with these examples, because none of them includes a fixed agent in the idiomatic interpretation. Harley & Stone claim instead that the no agent idioms effect is really about special meanings.

(8) **The no agent idioms effect (2nd version):**

There are no idioms whose special meaning has a fixed external argument and flexible internal argument.

This claim presupposes that it is possible to differentiate regular meaning and special meaning with respect to argument structure. The presupposition is indeed warranted. Reinhart (2002) discusses the linguistic significance of verbs, such as *consume*, that subcategorize specifically for agents, as opposed to verbs that subcategorize more broadly for any kind of initiator.

(9) The soup was consumed by the farmer/#the spoon/#hunger.

However, idioms involving *consume* can take nonagent causers.

(10) He was consumed by hunger.

This demonstrates that the argument structure of idiomatic verbs can differ from the argument structure of nonidiomatic verbs, and more specifically that selection for an agent by the regular meaning does not guarantee selection for an agent by the special meaning.

Several pieces of evidence from Harley & Stone (2013) corroborate the claim that the regular agent does not correspond to an agent in the special meaning of idioms with fixed subjects and flexible objects. Agent-oriented adverbs are incompatible with the idiomatic interpretation.

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

In Russian, the backwards-binding pattern characteristic of psych-predicates is permitted on the idiomatic interpretation — as we will discuss below, psych-predicates do not select for an agent.

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

Also in Russian, OVS order is preferred for the relevant class of idioms in broad-focus contexts, whereas agent–patient predications prefer SVO order.

(13) a. What happened?

- b. Ivan-a zajela sovest'.
 Ivan-ACC ate-up conscience-NOM
 'Ivan is eaten up by his conscience' = 'Ivan had a guilty conscience.'

Finally, in the German example (7a), the adjectival passive (14) is preferred over the verbal passive. This is significant because adjectival passives are taken to be incompatible with agents (other than 'event kind' readings of the sort discussed by Gehrke 2015, irrelevant to our concerns here).

- (14) So mancher Motorradfahrer scheint vom Teufel geritten zu sein.
 So many motorbikers seem by the devil ridden to be
 'So many motorbikers seem to be ridden by the devil.'

Exactly the same conclusion was reached by Anagnostopoulou & Samioti (2013) concerning special meanings of Greek participles. Greek participles formed with *-menos* have two interpretations: they can describe resultant states (which are irreversible, and compatible with agents) or target states (which are reversible, but only allow agents in the 'event kind' readings mentioned above). Reversibility can be forced by including *akoma* ('still'), while agentivity can be diagnosed using agent-oriented adverbs. As expected, *akoma* and agent-oriented adverbs cannot both modify the same *-menos* participle

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

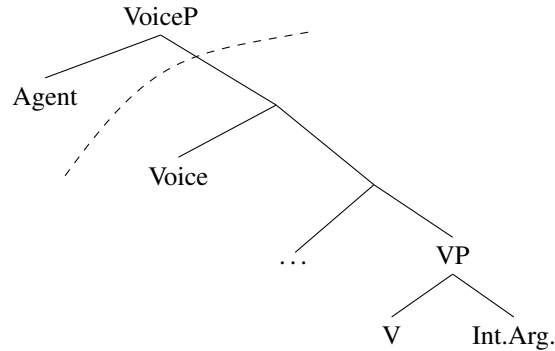
Idiomatic interpretations of the participle are only available in the absence of an agent-oriented adverb to force an agentive interpretation.

- (16) a. travigmenos 'pulled/far-fetched'
 b. prosektika travigmenos 'carefully pulled/#far-fetched'

All of these phenomena suggest that agentivity is incompatible with fixed-subject flexible-object idioms: if anything forces an agentive interpretation of a fixed NP, interpretation as a flexible idiom is impossible.

Both Harley & Stone and Anagnostopoulou & Samioti propose a syntactic explanation for this generalization: special meanings of a head *X* can only be triggered by constituents within the same phase as *X*. The head that introduces agents is a phase head; agents, as specifiers of that head, are in the edge of the phase, outside the body which is interpreted by the interfaces. As a consequence, agents are too remote from *V* to trigger, or participate in, special meanings.

(17)



Although I am persuaded by the evidence that agents do not participate in flexible idioms, I believe that the syntactic reduction of this fact sketched in (17) cannot be accurate. Section 3 demonstrates that no independently motivated syntactic unit or relation groups together all the elements that can participate in flexible idioms, while still excluding agents. Section 4 then suggests an alternative explanation for the same fact, grounded in constraints on verb meaning.

3 Syntactic size does not predict idiomatic interpretation

Despite the empirical evidence supporting the no agent idioms effect, there are two problems with the syntactic analysis of that effect developed in Harley & Stone (2013). The claim that material in the same phase can trigger flexible interpretation is too weak, and the claim that material outside the same phase cannot trigger flexible interpretation is too strong. These problems, taken together, strongly suggest that the explanation for the effect must be elsewhere.

In the following subsections, I discuss these problems in turn. Section 3.1 summarizes evidence from McGinnis (2002) that lexical aspectual properties of V are preserved under idiomatic interpretation. This is surprising, as those properties are certainly not specified by heads above Voice^0 . Section 3.2 demonstrates that modals can participate in flexible idioms. This is surprising, as modals certainly do c-command Voice^0 , and therefore are separated from V by a phase boundary.

3.1 Lexical aspect and idiomatic interpretation

McGinnis (2002) demonstrated that the aspectual class of a VP is preserved under idiomatic interpretation. (18)–(21) show a state, an activity, an accomplishment, and an achievement, respectively, as diagnosed by the classical diagnostics from Vendler (1957): the *infor*-test (the (a) examples: states and activities take *for*-PPs, while accomplishments and achievements take *in*-PPs), and the progressive test (the (b) examples: activities and accomplishments allow the progressive, while states and achievements resist the progressive). Crucially, the judgements are the same regardless of

whether (18)–(21) are interpreted literally or idiomatically.

- (18) a. Hermione was the cat’s pyjamas for years.
b. #Hermione is being the cat’s pyjamas.
- (19) a. Harry jumped through hoops for years.
b. Harry is jumping through hoops.
- (20) a. Hermione paid her dues in ten years.
b. Hermione stopped paying her dues.
- (21) a. Harry struck paydirt in an hour.
b. #Harry stopped striking paydirt.

McGinnis took this persistence of aspectual class as evidence for a Marantzian approach to idiomatic interpretation. Within the assumptions of Harley & Stone (2013) or Anagnostopoulou & Samioti (2013), though, this is not so clear. Aspectual class is determined by material within the first phase (particularly the verb and internal argument). A crucial part of Harley & Stone’s interpretation of the no agent idioms effect is the demonstration that argument structure within the first phase is not preserved under idiomatic interpretation. Therefore, the preservation of aspectual information under idiomatic interpretation is unexpected. We conclude that, even within the first phase, the relationship between regular meaning and special meaning is not as arbitrary as might be expected.

3.2 Flexible idioms straddling phase boundaries

Perhaps more damaging to the phase-based interpretation of the no agent idioms effect is the existence of examples of flexible idioms which undeniably cross phase boundaries. Before demonstrating that such cases exist, I will discuss some superficially relevant examples that ultimately do not provide convincing evidence against the phase-based account. This will help us to recognize genuine counterevidence when we see it.

First, only flexible idioms are able to constitute counterevidence to the phase-based approach. The core assumption of contextual allophony is that a constituent can have a special meaning licensed by some other, appropriately local constituent. There is no reason why this licensing of special meanings should not be iterated ‘successive-cyclically’, across multiple phase boundaries: the meaning of a phase ϕ_0 is determined in the context of the immediately higher phase ϕ_1 , and the meaning of ϕ_1 is determined in the context of ϕ_2 and so on. The regular, compositional interpretation of ϕ_0 is lost when the special meaning is licensed in the immediately superordinate ϕ_1 , and ϕ_1 ’s regular meaning is lost when the special meaning of ϕ_1 is triggered within ϕ_2 .

On the increasingly common assumption that DPs are phases, something like successive-cyclic determination of special meanings must be assumed. Idioms like (22) contain DP phases, whose regular interpretation is lost as a result of licensing of special meaning in the immediately superordinate VoiceP phase.

- (22) a. [_{VoiceP} kick [_{DP} the bucket]]
b. [_{VoiceP} take *X* [to [_{DP} the cleaners]]]

If this can happen once, it can most likely happen more than once. This can explain the existence of fixed multi-phase idioms like (23).

- (23) a. [DP the pot [VoiceP calling [DP the kettle] black]]³
 b. [VoiceP Look [CP [DP what] [DP the cat] [VoiceP dragged *t* in]]]
 c. [CP Is [DP the Pope] Catholic]? (Harwood 2015)
 d. [CP Do bears [VoiceP shit [in [DP the woods]]]]? (Harwood 2015)

In fact, idioms, construed in this way, shade naturally into proverbs and curses: the Yorkshire curse (24) is idiom-like in that it can be uttered to someone who is known to own neither rabbit nor hutch, but is almost completely fixed, and contains around 11 phases, depending on precisely how you count.⁴

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

This is enough to establish that phases do not limit the size of fully fixed idioms.

What phases may do is limit the flexible argument structure of idioms. Perhaps the most suggestive evidence in favour of this possibility comes from possessors. It is usually assumed that constituents in edge positions are not spelled out with the body of the phase. Indeed, this assumption is central to the phase-based understanding of the no agent idioms effect: Voice is taken to be a phase head, and agents (in Spec, VoiceP) are in the edge of that phase, while verbs (c-commanded by Voice) are in the body of the phase. This means that agents and verbs are not spelled out together, and therefore agents cannot participate in idiomatic interpretation of the verb.

Exactly the same logic predicts that constituents in the edge of the immediately subordinate phase *can* license special meanings. This prediction appears to be correct: idioms such as (25a) are reasonably common, but (25b), with a more remote open position, are unattested to my knowledge.

- (25) a. The cat's got [X ['s tongue]]
 b. The cat's got [[the mouse]'s X]

Although the details are less clear, it is plausible that the same reasoning could explain the possibility of reflexive possessors in idioms (e.g. (26a)), though (26b) is likely to be more challenging, given that at least one phase boundary appears to intervene between the two instances of *X*.

- (26) a. *X* twiddle [DP *X* ['s thumbs]]
 b. *X* give *Y* [DP a piece of [DP *X* ['s mind]]]

Although it was generally supposed that Voice⁰ was the head of the 'first phase' (in the sense of Ramchand 2008), asymmetrically c-commanded by all aspectual auxiliaries,

³I have no evidence that the reduced relative clause in this example actually is a VoiceP. However, given the range of aspectual operators and adverbs available within reduced relatives, it is natural to assume that reduced relatives are at least VoicePs and possibly larger. Similar comments apply to some of the other examples given here.

⁴The example is only almost completely fixed because of variation in the realization of 2sg pronouns in Yorkshire, where there is still a somewhat archaic T/V distinction.

Harwood (2015) demonstrated that the progressive head, but not the perfect head, belongs in the same phase as V according to a range of diagnostics. For instance, the progressive form *being* (assumed by Harwood to be in Prog⁰) must be elided in (27a), while the perfect auxiliary *have* in Perf⁰ must not be elided in (27b). Harwood argues that this is because ellipsis sites are determined by phases: on this logic, Prog⁰, but not Perf⁰, must be within the first phase.

- (27) a. Goofy was being chastized, and Pluto was (*being) too.
 b. Bob might have been fired, and Morag might *(have), too.

Harwood also demonstrates that the progressive auxiliary, but not other auxiliaries, must be piedpiped in predicate-fronting contexts.

- (28) a. Also being examined for body parts is the tonnes of rubble being removed from the site.
 b. *Also examined for body parts is being ...
 c. Also examined for body parts will have been ...

On a phase-based approach to the locality of contextual allophony, this predicts that flexible-object idioms should be able to display sensitivity to progressive aspect. Indeed, Harwood, building on Svenonius (2005), argues that flexible-object idioms like (29) apparently require use of the progressive.⁵

- (29) a. X be dying to meet Y / #X died to meet Y.
 b. Something be eating X / What's eating X? / #What ate X?

Nevertheless, Harwood noted that a class of examples with main-verb *be* appear to be sensitive to the perfect/nonperfect distinction, despite the fact that the perfect auxiliary is higher than the progressive.

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

Although it is not clear that these examples are idioms according to the usual criterion of apparently noncompositional interpretation, they have something in common, in that there is no obvious reason why a compositional interpretation of (30a) or (31a) should not be straightforwardly extensible to (30b) or (31b). This implies that (30) and (31) are similar to idioms in that they are not generated by free, productive combination of words into phrases and compositional interpretation of the result.

For Harwood, given the evidence in (27)–(28), the data in (30)–(31) cannot be analysed as a case of phase-bounded special meaning. Rather, Harwood proposes that the idiosyncratic properties of (30) and (31) may be related to properties of *be* without a main verb. Although Harwood does not develop this suggestion, to the extent it is

⁵See Punske & Stone (2015) for some attested counterexamples. Nevertheless, even Punske & Stone agree that some idioms require progressive aspect.

tenable, (30) and (31) are not counterexamples to the phase-based interpretation of the no agent idioms effect.

In sum, we have seen three possible ways to finesse a putative generalization that contextual alloosemy is phase-bound. Special meanings can be concatenated successively-cyclically to produce very large fixed idioms; possessors, in the edge of a lower phase, can participate in special meaning; and certain lexical items like *be* in (30)–(31) may exhibit a different type of exceptional behaviour.

However, even granting all of these ways to explain away counterexamples, there are still two sets of cases where idioms with flexible internal arguments are clearly not phase-bound. The first, following Nunberg et al. (1994, see also Gazdar, Klein, Pullum & Sag 1985) concerns idiomatic interpretation across control dependencies, as in (32).

- (32) 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] hopes to get the worm. (Nunberg et al. 1994: 517)
e. The piper always wants to be paid. (Gazdar et al. 1985)

The existence of these examples is surprising, as failure to preserve idiomatic interpretation is frequently cited as a diagnostic for the raising/control distinction. ‘Standard’ judgements are found in other cases like (33) — we will return to special properties of (32) in Section 4.⁶

- (33) *The shit wants to hit the fan.

Although they are not flexible idioms in the sense we have discussed until now, in that they do not have a flexible argument position, examples like (32) are counterexamples to the putative phase-bound nature of special meaning because the constituents that participate in special meaning are necessarily distributed over multiple phases, separated by a control dependency. Each example in (32) corresponds to a ‘canonical’ idiom in (34); the preservation of the idiomatic interpretation in (32), across at least one phase boundary, is direct evidence that contextual alloosemy is not phase-bound.⁷

- (34) a. Every dog has its day.
b. You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.
c. Birds of a feather flock together.
d. The early bird always catches the worm.

⁶However, we have no explanation for the apparent fact that examples like (32) tend to involve universal or generic quantification.

⁷A possible example of a flexible idiom that requires an obligatory control complement is in (i).

- (i) a. *X* wants to have *X*’s cake and eat it.
b. ?*X* had *X*’s cake and ate it.

However, there are two confounds here. First, the flexibility is limited to the reflexive element, a pattern already discussed with reference to (26). Second, examples of the form of (ib) are widely attested in Google searches, even if ungrammatical for the author.

The second set of counterexamples to phase-boundedness of contextual allosemy is in (35).

$$(35) \quad X \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{would} \\ \text{is ready to} \end{array} \right\} \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{kill} \\ \text{give } X\text{'s right arm} \end{array} \right\} \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{to} \\ \text{for} \end{array} \right\} Y$$

The challenge posed by these examples is slightly different: the inclusion of modal *would* or semantically modal-like *is ready to* is obligatory (cf. (36), a particularly clear example of the ‘play on words’ effect that can arise when the locality of a flexible idiom is stretched so far that the idiomatic interpretation disappears), and yet modals have been taken since Chomsky (1957) to be generated above the full range of aspectual auxiliaries, including those argued above to be outside the first phase. There is therefore no hope of extending Harwood’s argumentation concerning progressives and the first phase to cover these cases.

- (36) Aron Lee Ralston (born October 27, 1975), credited as Aron “I Gave My Right Arm Up To Be On The Simpsons” Ralstump, is an American engineer, motivational speaker, and mountaineer, best known for having to amputate his own right arm to free himself from a boulder.
(https://simpsonswiki.com/wiki/Aron_Ralston)

Although the flexibility in these examples is of a different nature from the control cases discussed above, the conclusion is the same: the first phase cannot be the boundary for flexible idioms.

This poses a real problem for syntactic approaches to the locality of flexible idioms. Agents must be excluded from flexible idioms, but elements that asymmetrically c-command VoiceP can be included in flexible idioms. Moreover, other external arguments (e.g. causes) can be included within flexible idioms, but elements they c-command (e.g. inner aspect, as determined by verb and internal argument) are invariant under idiomatic interpretation.

The natural conclusion to draw from this double dissociation is that syntactic height does not predict participation in flexible idioms. In Section 4, I sketch an alternative, semantically grounded, conception of the no agent idioms effect.

4 Too much psychologization

In the previous sections, I have upheld the claim (Harley & Stone 2013, Anagnostopoulou & Samioti 2013) that there are no fixed-agent, flexible-object idioms, but disputed the further claim that this reflects syntactic limits on contextual allosemy. In this section, I suggest that the no agent idioms effect instead results from a combination of a generalization about the interpretation of flexible idioms, and an independently motivated constraint on verbal argument structure.

First the generalization about the interpretation of flexible idioms. This comes from Nunberg et al. (1994), who note (pp. 529–30) that idioms are proverbial. That is, they ‘invoke[. . .] 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).⁷

The abstractness which Nunberg et al. mention is, of course, not very abstract: there are no idioms which metaphorically invoke passages of algebra or C. Rather, the abstractness of idioms is really the metaphorical description of psychological states. Indeed, Harley & Stone argue that idioms with fixed (non-agent) subjects, as in (37), are interpreted as object-experiencer predicates. These examples typically do not entail the existence of a mind-external individual corresponding metaphorically to the subject.⁸

- (37) a. What's eating *X*?
b. God help *X*.
c. The vultures circle *X*.
d. The spirit move *X*.
e. Lady Luck smile on *X*.

Indeed, even inflexible idioms that appear to describe events can often be shown to have a psychological component to their meaning. Consider (38).

- (38) On the tiny, uninhabitable island of Rockall,⁹
a. something terrible happened.
b. #the shit really hit the fan.
c. #it all went tits up.

The interpretation of the idioms in (38b–c) is fairly close to the non-idiomatic (38a), but the idioms are much less natural in this context. Plausibly, this is because of the absence of any experiencers on Rockall: something can happen on Rockall that is terrible in the *speaker's* opinion, but for the shit to hit the fan, something must happen that is terrible to an *experiencer*. Indeed, to the extent that (38b–c) are interpretable, they involve contexts in which humans visit Rockall.

I want to claim that the absence of agents in flexible-object idioms reflects the fact that flexible-object idioms are interpreted as object-experiencer predicates, together with a general constraint on argument structure:

- (39) No verb selects for an agent and an experiencer.

In the terms of Reinhart (2002, 2016), this can be reformulated as follows:

⁸An apparent counterexample is (i), where *a little bird* represents the information source.

- (i) A little bird tell *X Y*.

This is an Idiomatically Combining Expression, in Nunberg et al.'s terms: there is significant flexibility in both the choice of main verb and grammatical function of *a little bird*.

- (ii) a. A little bird whispered in my ear that *P*.
b. I heard from a little bird that *P*.

In that case, (i) is actually not a fixed-subject idiom.

⁹Rockall (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rockall>) is a small rock over 200 miles west of the Outer Hebrides in Scotland. It is acknowledged to be a 'rock which cannot sustain human habitation'.

(40) **Only one mental state**

A verb selects for at most one [+m] argument.

For Reinhart, θ -roles are complexes of [c] features (causation) and [m] features (mental state). Each type of feature can be positively or negatively valued, or absent. This yields $3^2 = 9$ possible θ -roles. The three [+m] θ -roles are Agent ([+c + m]), Experiencer, ([-c + m]), and Sentient ([+m]). (40) claims that no verb selects for more than one of these three.

This appears to be plausible. To be sure, certain object-experiencer predicates are *compatible* with agentive subjects, as in (41a), but they do not *select* for a subject, and are equally compatible nonagentive subjects like (41b).

- (41) a. The doctor deliberately terrified the chain smoker.
b. The bad news terrified the chain smoker.

With fixed-subject, flexible-object idioms, the question of compatibility with an agentive subject does not arise, because the fixed subject is the only one compatible with the idiomatic interpretation, by definition. Therefore, ‘no selection for an agent’ is indistinguishable from ‘no agent’ in this case.

In other words, if flexible-object idioms are interpreted as object-experiencer predicates, and if object-experiencer predicates never select for agents, the ‘no agent idioms’ effect is predicted, independently of the syntactic structure in which the arguments are realized.

One idiom may provide indirect support for this approach, in that it apparently selects for a single argument both as agent and experiencer. This is (42), interpreted as roughly ‘*x* tried something that was very unlikely to work, but it worked, and *x* is happy about that’.

- (42) (S)he shoots, (s)he scores!

In contrast, the exceptional examples of idiomatic interpretations preserved across control dependencies in (32), repeated as (43), are arguably subject experiencer predicates, or at the very least the subject is a [+m] argument. They are also idiomatically combining expressions: the metaphorical interpretation of *an old dog* and *taught new tricks* within the idiomatic whole is clear. Uniquely, this combination (idiomatically combining expression with experiencer subject) is well-suited to obligatory control constructions: the [+m] argument can act as controller, and the compositional nature of the idiom means that the special meaning can be preserved despite the intervening syntactic material. It is hard to imagine that a purely phrase-structural account of the no agent idioms effect could match this prediction, given that control complements are taken to be at least TP, significantly larger than the size of the minimal constituent including an agent.

- (43) 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] hopes to get the worm.

(Nunberg et al. 1994: 517)

- e. The piper always wants to be paid. (Gazdar et al. 1985)

5 Summary

The ‘no agent idioms’ effect is real. None of the proposed counterexamples from Nunberg et al. (1994) or elsewhere hold water, particularly when attention is restricted to the idiomatic interpretation, rather than the argument structure associated with the regular interpretation.

However, the phase-based etiology of the no agent idioms effect proposed by Harley & Stone (2013) and Anagnostopoulou & Samioti (2013) cannot be sustained. Not all phase-internal material is susceptible to idiomatic interpretation (in particular, aspectual class is preserved in idioms), while some material external to the first phase (modal expressions and even control complements) can participate in idiomatic interpretation.

I suggested an alternative based on the interaction between a hypothesis about idiomatic interpretation and a hypothesis about verb meaning. The hypothesis about idiomatic interpretation, from Nunberg et al. (1994), is that idioms are proverbial. More specifically, following Harley & Stone (2013), fixed-subject flexible-object idioms are interpreted as object-experiencer predicates. The hypothesis about verb meaning is simply that no verb selects for both an agent and an experiencer. This entails that object-experiencer predicates, including the relevant class of idioms, cannot also select for an agent.

The major point of this paper, then, is that an argument-structural generalization can account for constraints on the mapping between form and interpretation, without a phase-theoretic implementation. This does not invalidate the Distributed Morphology approach to idiom chunks or to contextual allosemy. Nor does it vindicate the more flexible approach to special meanings advocated by Nunberg et al. It does not even provide particularly strong evidence for or against any particular theory of argument structure. It *does* strongly suggest that contextual allosemy is not phase-bounded, though: a thematic role is more than just a position in a tree.

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