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IDIOMS BETWEEN INFLEXIBILITY AND CREATIVITY

Seen as stable linguistic units – "*Speakers use idiomatic expressions […] as though they were words or phrases that have become frozen into a single form with a special meaning*" (P. N. Johnson, *Laird in Cacciari and Tabossi*, 1993: viii), idioms appear to be prototypical exemplars of non-creative language. Contrary to this view, it has long become a truism that idioms are often varied in discourse and may also have variants. Moon (1998:120), for instance, finds that in her corpus of English phraseological constructions 40% have "*lexical variations or strongly institutionalised transformations, and around 14% have two or more variations on their canonical forms.*" Idiom variation is thus a counterweight that works against the phraseological tendency towards stability.

Variability is bound to the concept of linguistic creativity which, according to Carter (2004: 148), presupposes several motivating factors:

> "offering some new way of seeing the content of the message; making humorous remarks; underlining what is communicated; expressing a particular attitude, including negative and adversarial attitudes; making the speaker's identity more manifest; playing with language form to entertain others; ending one bit of talk and starting another; or simply oiling the wheels of the conversation [...]."

While these factors constitute its socio-pragmatic dimension, linguistic creativity includes another dimension, that of adapting the linguistic expression to various situations. In other words, the cline of creative linguistic practices ranges from the systematic productivity of grammatical patterning to the creativity underlying, for instance, poetry or linguistic humour (cf. Carter 2004: Chapter 2).

Idiomatic usage-event vs. creative usage-event

In order to illustrate the two dimensions, which he calls "idiomatic usage-event" and "creative idiomatic usage-event," Langlotz (2006: 185) discusses the use of *grasp the nettle* in context:

> The proposed reform of nurse education in the UK, which received approval in principle from the Conservative government in May 1983, promises a period of tremendous upheaval as the delicate balance of educational and service priorities is carefully weighed and restructured. But with upheaval comes renewal, and an unrivalled opportunity to *grasp the nettle* nursing's leaders have talked about for years: an opportunity to redefine and reshape the parameters of nursing itself. (*Returning to nursing – a guide for nurses and health visitors*)

Since *grasp the nettle* means "deal with a difficult problem firmly; use bold measures to rid oneself of an obstacle, solve a problem" (Cowie et al, 1994: 245), this idiom expresses the actual target-meaning; thus, dealing with the nursing reform problem is a subtype of dealing with a difficult problem. To put it differently, this target-meaning works as the "contextual referent onto which the

entrenched denotation of *grasp the nettle* is projected" (Langlotz, 2006: 185). Perceiving the problem metaphorically, as a stingy nettle which is unpleasant to approach, the writer concretizes it, making it more appealing to the reader. In this case the idiom does not need any adaptions because it functions according to its base-form.

In contrast, the following example shows creative idiomatic variation:

> The Government has shown in the past that it is willing *to grasp nettles* that others have shied away no doubt we shall *grasp this one* if we have to. (Langlotz, 2006: 190)

Variation here involves pluralisation (*nettles*), corresponding article variation (*grasp Ø nettles*, i.e. the use of a zero article to mark an indefinite plural), and post-modification by a restrictive relative clause (*that others have shied away from*). In addition, the variant features anaphora (*grasp this one*).

From parameters to classification

The question is: to what extent are idioms open to creative variation and to what extent are such alternatives blocked? Naturally, one cannot expect that all idioms have the same variation potential or that they are subject to the same variation restrictions. Rather, their variability is dependent on the idiom's formal and semantic organisation and the way this complex configuration is adapted to a concrete discourse.

To make the distinction between systematic variation and simple wordplay, Langlotz (2006: 198) resorts to Burger's classification of alternative types of idiom variants (1998: 25–27), finding three parameters (the degree of an idiom's conventionality; the degree of an idiom's frequency and institutionalization; and the degree of an idiom's intentionality) which help him provide his own classification: usual and occasional variation; intentional vs. non-intentional variation (Langlotz, 2006: 199-205).

Usual and occasional variation

Usual variation is produced without a context-specific discursive intention; it is recurrent and institutionalised and can thus be recorded lexicographically. For instance, the lexical variation between *bleed somebody dry* and *bleed somebody white* (take away almost everything somebody possesses, often by drastic, unfair, or deceptive means, A. P. Cowie et al, 1994: 69) is usual and predictable.

Occasional variation is created for the discursive purpose of one specific usage-event. It is transitory and restricted to the context in which it appears.
e.g. *Covers a multitude of chins*. (Advertising slogan for WILLIAMS SHAVING CREAM quoted in Langlotz, 2006: 199)
This slogan modifies the idiom *cover a multitude of sins* (compensate for, or serve as a mask for sins, faults, shortcomings, A. P. Cowie et al, 1994: 120) to create a pun-variant through lexical substitution. Here *chins* is quasi-homophonous to *sins*. This makes it most likely for the reader to still recognise the base-form.

Intentional vs. non-intentional variation

In his typology of idiom variation, Dobrovol'skij (1997: Section 2.3) stresses intentionality as the most important interpretative parameter for idiom variation.

On the basis of this criterion, three general variation classes can be proposed: systematic variation, wordplay, and erroneous variants.

A variant can be interpreted as wordplay if it reflects the speaker's conscious intention of creating specific perlocutive effects. Dobrovol'skij (1997:74–78) compares two global subtypes of wordplay. On the one hand, idiomatic wordplay is produced by ambiguation (see the slogan above). On the other hand, Dobrovol'skij points to uses of the image evoked by an idiom's literal meaning. This can be illustrated by the following example taken from Glucksberg (2001:73):

> Speaker A: Did the old man *kick the bucket* last night?
> Speaker B: Nah, he barely nudged it.

In the reply, speaker B plays with the image evoked by the literal meaning of *kick the bucket*. Instead of negating the idiomatic meaning ("no, he didn't die"), the negation is effected by manipulating the literal scene in terms of an inferential analogy: *kick the bucket : not nudge the bucket = die : not die*. Thus, in contrast to the processes of ambiguation, this variational process does not create a striking semantic effect; the idiomatic meaning is fully preserved.

Obviously, erroneous slips-of-the tongue such as the examples below must be excluded from an analysis of regular variability:

> a. the dust clears (the dust settles + the fog clears)
> b. plain as day (plain as a pikestaff + clear as day) (Langlotz, 2006: 201)

Such contaminations of two synonyms or quasi-synonymous idioms can be commonly encountered in spoken discourse. Usually, they are negligible as momentary deviations.

Langlotz's principles of idiom variation (2006: 205-15)

1. *Constructional adaptations* include modifications of the base-form that change the inflectional and syntactic structure of an idiom in a systematic way. For instance, the variants of *walk a tightrope* (have to act in a situation where there is little scope for manoeuvre or adjustment and where an exact balance must be preserved):

> A. Two young cops *walk a tightrope* in the world of crime, starring Paul Michael Glaser as "Starsky" and David Soul as "Hutch."

> B. Not since Charles Blondin crossed the Niagara Falls in 1885 can there have been a piece of *tight-rope walking* to rival Mr. Healey's performance yesterday afternoon. (Cowie A.P. et al, 1994: 576)

While A involves a fully grammatical use of the idiom, B substantivizes it. The variants are consistent with the motivated and isomorphic association of *walk a tightrope* with "acting in a difficult situation."

2. *Literal-scene manipulation* triggers a contextually motivated adaptation of the idiomatic meaning by adapting the literal scene in order to code the target conceptualisation efficiently. Thereby, the variation is comprehensible on the basis of the idiomatic configuration alone.

> e.g. Secondly, the law centres *walk a* precarious *tight rope* between pure case work and more active involvement in the community's problems. (Cowie A.P. et al, 1994: 576)

The alteration of *walk a tightrope* involves adjectival pre-modification. *Precarious* functions as an adjective of quality and is fully compatible with the literal scene, evoking an image that is richer than the standard one.

3. *Topic indication* is context-specific and characterised by the absence of a consistent literal meaning.

> e.g. That sum may seem like a lot of lei but it still left the Romanians treading a *financial tightrope*. (Langlotz, 2006: 210)

In contrast to *precarious tightrope*, *financial tightrope* does not create a meaningful literal scene. *Financial* cannot be understood as an inherent, qualifying adjective. Rather, when considering the literal scene only, its semantic contribution is ungrammatical. It does not modify the literal sense of *tightrope*, but it specifies its figurative sense ("unstable basis / difficult situation").

4. *Topic-related literal-scene manipulation* relates the literal scene to the informational structure of the target conceptualisation.

> e.g. His old friend and partner in crime Georgio Bertoli (Steve O'Donnell) talks to the police in return for personal immunity and a Continental breakfast. Alarmed by this turn of events the Grand Master of the Freemasons (Nosher Powell) employs two inept hit men, Mig (Tim McInnerny) and Mog (Alexei Sayle), to kill Bertoli before he can *spill the pasta*. (Moon 1998: 51)

Here, the literal scene of *spill the beans* is adapted to the Italian mafia context. The substitution of *pasta* for *beans* relates the literal meaning to the actual context of the target conceptualisation (Georgio Bertoli reveals information about the Italian gangster-scene to the police). This topic-related form of literal-scene manipulation does not alter the idiomatic meaning. Moreover, this variation preserves the conceptual integrity of the literal scene: *spill the pasta* denotes a process that is fully consistent in itself. In other words, the variational strategy involved with this type of idiom variation consists in finding a linguistic unit that can be associated with both the usage-context and the conventional literal scene.

5. *Ambiguation and punning* involve the creative evocation of multiple referentiality. Therefore, it is a form of word-play.

> e.g. In the dying minutes Bradford had Lee Sinot send off for arguing, but by then Swindon were *home and well almost dry*. (Langlotz, 2006: 214)

This sentence concludes the report of a football match which took place under very bad weather conditions. The meteorological context provides the motivating ground for the pun variant *home and almost dry*. *Home and dry* (safe and successful after a struggle or negotiation to achieve something – A.P. Cowie et al, 1994: 288) can be viewed as an opaque idiom with a non-isomorphic semantic structure. Having no figurative-level correspondents, the constituents cannot be modified systematically. In the present case, however, *dry* is qualified by the adverbial

almost. *Almost dry* can be interpreted literally as an ironic description of the players' physical condition after the match. This literal meaning is activated through semantic priming. The bad-weather context brings the literal meaning of the constituent *dry* to the foreground. This ironic resemantisation triggers ambiguity: "Swindon were successful, but the team's players were drenched because of the terrible weather." The variant thus creates an unconventional and humorous semantic-effect and is wordplay.

Constraints on idiom variation

According to Langlotz (2006: 215-224), there are several cognitive factors that make idiom variation subject to relative stability.

1. ***Recognisability*** applies to all types of idiom variation and defines the boundary between idiom variation and pseudo-variation, stating the maximum degree to which the variant may deviate from the base-form, while still performing its idiomatic function.

1.1. *Activation probabilities* pattern an idiomatic configuration as an entrenched network of mental substructures and make it possible to recognise an idiom even if the lexical stimuli evoked by the variant do not fully correspond to the base-form.

e.g. When in Rome … (Langlotz, 2006: 217)

If one is able to complete this string by adding *do as the Romans do*, one has attested the existence of the corresponding proverb in one's cognitive grammar and experienced its representation as a probabilistic unit.

1.2. *Salient idiomatic substructures* are the most distinctive features of idiomatic activation-sets.

e.g. mountain + molehill (→ make a mountain out of molehill)
bark + tree (→ bark up the wrong tree),
hand + till (→ have your hand in the till)
sweat + blood (→ sweat blood) (Langlotz, 2006: 218-219)

If a lexical constituent alone is insufficient to unfold the idiomatic configuration, its well-entrenched co-occurrence with a co-constituent creates a high potential to activate it.

1.3. *Conceptual priming* is based on the meaning of a stimulus and is enhanced by semantic tasks. In a previous example,

Speaker A: Did the old man *kick the bucket* last night?
Speaker B: Nah, he barely *nudged* it.

the possibility to negate the idiom *kick the bucket* by altering its lexico-grammatical structure points to the importance of the literal scene for the creation of a variant. More specifically, on the basis of the literal conceptualisation, the idiomatic meaning can be altered by coding the literal scene differently. The variant *he barely nudged it* reconceptualises it by changing the forcefulness implied in the concept *kick*. This reconceptualisation is then coded by the formal structure of the variant *barely nudge* it, which is completely different from *kick the bucket* on the level of form. In other words, for this specific instance of variation to work, the

recognition of *kick the bucket* in the variant is mediated on purely conceptual grounds.

2. *Functionality* limits the intentional adaptation of an idiom to fulfil a specific communicative purpose in a given communicative situation. Reconsider the pun variants *cover a multitude of chins* and *home and almost dry* that were created for perlocutive effects: the advertising slogan *covers a multitude of chins* was presumably designed to provoke surprise in order to communicate the positive attributes of the product; for *home and almost dry* the author's intention was to create ironic humour to reduce the soberness of the reported match result. Functionality, therefore, leads to the qualitative distinction between non-intentional, non-functional slips-of-the-tongue and idiomatic wordplay, which must always be functional by definition. It is dependent on considerable overlap between the speaker's and the hearer's cognitive environments. If similar cognitive effects underlie the speaker's intention and the hearer's derived implicatures, then the variants functionality becomes mutually manifest. If, however, the hearer derives contextual effects that were not intended by the speaker, their impressions of the variant's functionality can diverge.

3. *Compatibility* points to the requirement that any formal modifications of the literal scene must be in accordance with the idiomatic meaning. For instance, *kick* in *kick the bucket* is a verb that prototypically describes a momentary action. In contrast, *die* refers to a transitional event. This semantic discrepancy between the two processes blocks certain tense and aspect adaptations of the verb on the literal level. While it is possible to say *John is dying*, the adaptation of *kick* to fit this conceptual refinement is not acceptable; the continuous form *is kicking the bucket* can only be used to describe the repeated, iterative recurrence of this momentary action. However, repetition does not make sense relative to the process of dying. Therefore, the idiom cannot appear in the progressive (cf. Glucksberg, 1993: 20).

4. *Non-ambiguity, non-conspicuity and evocational autonomy*

To exclude patterns of ambiguation and conjunction variation from systematic idiom variation, the (pseudo-)literal scene of the idiom variant must not establish direct reference to the target conceptualisation. On the basis of this constraint, wordplays such as *covers a multitude of chins* and *home and almost dry* can be described as unsystematic because they are multi-referential.

5. *Grammaticality* demands that the formal structure of an idiom variant must accord with the general constructional patterns provided by the language. Grammaticality thus amounts to the constructional and conceptual consistency of the literal scene.

Conclusions

Idiom variation is the process of adapting an idiomatic construction in order to encode a context-specific target conceptualisation in a communicatively functional and relevant way. Depending on their internal semantic structure, idioms function as alternative types of cognitive micro-model. Idiom variation is the process by which an idiomatic construction is adapted to the usage-context to fulfill its cognitive modelling function. However, this adaptation process is not a homogeneous phenomenon. To account for this heterogeneity, five alternative principles of idiom variation were described: constructional adaptation, literal-

scene manipulation, topic indication, topic-related literal-scene manipulation and ambiguation/punning. These principles define salient areas on a cline of idiomatic creativity that ranges from fully systematic alterations to strikingly conspicuous forms of wordplay. Correspondingly, the principles constitute alternative strategies to adapt an idiomatic construction to the discursive context.

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Abstract: *Idiom-variation data question the strict dichotomy between the creativity principle and the idiom principle. Rather than leading to a strict opposition between regular standard constructions and irregular idiomatic constructions, idiomatic creativity implies that idiom production and comprehension are subject to a dynamic tension between the two principles. This further suggests that idioms cannot merely be described as lexical items; rather, they seem to occupy a position between the lexicon and syntax, leading to a fuzzy dividing line between the productive and reproductive aspects of linguistic competence.*

Key words: *variation, idiomatic usage-event, creative usage-event, classification, constraints*