

Modification in non-combining idioms*

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Abstract This squib discusses metalinguistic modification, expressives, domain modification, hypallage, and conjunctive modification within verb phrase idioms. The examples presented here show that non-combining idioms, to use terminology based on that of Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994, allow for modifiers on their internal constituents, but only in certain circumstances. This observation is shown to be derived from the fact that the idiomatic reading of these non-combining idioms is associated with the entire verb phrase.

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As Nunberg, Sag & Wasow (1994) point out, not all idiomatic expressions behave in exactly the same way. According to the terminology that they introduce, certain phrases, such as *give/take flak*, *keep tabs on*, and *spill the beans* can be termed “idiomatically combining expressions”, because in these expressions the semantics of the full idiom can be distributed among its constituent parts.

These expressions stand in contrast with idioms such as *kick the bucket*, *pull someone’s leg*, *saw logs*, and *shoot the breeze*, in which the meaning of the idiomatic verb phrase cannot be distributed among its constituents. For the purposes of this squib, we can call these expressions “non-combining idioms”. In general, the former class of idioms allows modification on the object of the verb in a way that is consistent with the meaning of the parts

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of the idiomatic expression. For example, in *give flak*, the word *flak* is understood as meaning “criticism”. It is also appropriate to modify *flak* as though it were a stand-in for “criticism”, as in (1):

- (1) Bugsy gave Cici well-deserved flak.

It is not, however, usually appropriate to introduce modification on the object of the verb in a non-combining idiom such as *kick the bucket* or *shoot the breeze*. In these expressions, the meaning of the idiom cannot be decomposed into its constituents, and modifying the direct object is often inconsistent with the idiomatic interpretation of the verb phrase:

- (2) #Bugsy kicked the rusty bucket.

Certain modifiers are allowed on the object of non-combining idioms, however. Nicolas (1995) identifies *proverbial* as one such modifier which is allowed to appear in non-combining idioms, but in fact there are several others:

- (3) a. Bugsy kicked the proverbial bucket.
 b. Bugsy kicked the metaphorical bucket.
 c. Bugsy kicked the figurative bucket.
 d. Bugsy kicked the old bucket.
 e. Bugsy kicked the goddamned bucket.
 f. Bugsy kicked the goddamned, mother-fucking bucket.

Notice that *old*, *goddamned*, and *mother-fucking* qualify as “expressives”, according to the terminology of Potts 2007 and Potts et al. 2009. Expressives form a class of expressions which carry a high degree of connotative or affective content, but which have little, if any, impact on the truth conditions of a sentence. As Potts et al. (2009) observe, expressives tend, cross-linguistically, to be allowed to appear in many constructions which do not admit other kinds of modifiers.

Stathi (2007) classifies modifiers such as *proverbial*, *metaphorical*, and *figurative* as “metalinguistic”, since they comment on the status of bucket as a linguistic object, rather than a physical object. Notice that there are many contexts in which an expressive is permitted, but in which this particular kind of metalinguistic modification is not well-formed:

Modification in non-combining idioms

- (4) a. Bugsy ate a pizza.
- b. Bugsy ate a goddamned pizza.
- c. #Bugsy ate a proverbial pizza.

This is not to say that all metalinguistic modification is prohibited when we are dealing in the literal realm—it simply needs to be consistent with the status of the objects in the physical world:

- (5) Bugsy ate a literal pizza, not a metaphorical pizza!

Expressives, such as *goddamned* and *mother-fucking*, may truly be devoid of truth-conditional meaning, but metalinguistic modifiers certainly do impact the truth conditions of a sentence, at least insofar as they can force a literal or non-literal reading. It seems fair to say that (6) is true if and only Bugsy is deceased:¹

- (6) Bugsy kicked the metaphorical bucket.

We note in passing that this description of *proverbial*, *metaphorical*, and *figurative* as metalinguistic modifiers is related to the discussion of metalinguistic negation in Horn 1985 and Horn 1989: the metalinguistic modification discussed here and Horn's metalinguistic negation both comment primarily on the language used in the utterance.

There are at least two more contexts in which non-combining idioms appear to allow for modification on an internal constituent. One of these contexts, identified by Ernst (1981), is modification which, from a syntactic point of view, appears to attach to the object of the verb, but which is semantically associated with the verb phrase. This kind of construction is often used to express some fact about the domain in which the idiom is meant to apply:

- (7) Bugsy kicked the social bucket (when s/he committed that faux pas at the party).

In this example, modified slightly from an example in Nicolas 1995, *social* is syntactically part of the noun phrase *the social bucket*, but it is interpreted in such a way as to express Bugsy's social, rather than literal, death. A similar meaning could be expressed in the following way:

¹ This observation is due to an anonymous reviewer.

- (8) Socially, Bugsy kicked the bucket (when s/he committed that faux pas at the party).

Zwicky (2007) identifies the device deployed in (6), wherein a modifier which would ordinarily attach at a much higher level, instead appears attached to a noun phrase within the non-combining idiom, as a form of “hypallage” (also known as “epithet transfer”).

In the rhetorical technique of epithet transfer, a modifier on one noun phrase in an utterance can be transferred to another. A traditional example of this device is found in Thomas Gray’s “Elegy written in a country churchyard”:

- (9) The ploughman homeward plods his weary way . . .

In this case, it is literally *the ploughman* which is weary, not *his way*, but we tolerate and even relish this kind of transfer. Indeed, non-combining idioms also participate in this kind of noun phrase-to-noun phrase epithet transfer:

- (10) a. After years of alcohol abuse, Bugsy finally kicked the gin-soaked bucket.
b. The Mountie cooked his own Canadian goose the moment he first accepted that bribe.

In reality, of course, *the Mountie* is Canadian, not *the goose*, and *Bugsy* is gin-soaked, not *the bucket*.

The transfer of a modifier from the sentence-level or verb phrase-level to the level of a noun phrase contained within is a related phenomenon, and not one that is encountered only in idiomatic expressions — examples such as *cock an inquisitive eyebrow* for *cock an eyebrow inquisitively* demonstrate the use of this kind of hypallage outside of a verb phrase idiom. Zwicky (2007) gives an in-depth discussion of several different kinds of epithet transfer that appear in English, but for the present purposes the key fact is that this form of verb phrase-to-noun phrase hypallage allows another means by which adjectives can come to appear within non-combining idioms.

Ernst (1981) also points out that meaningful internal modification is, in fact, sometimes allowed in these non-combining idioms. Example (11) is drawn directly from Ernst 1981:

Modification in non-combining idioms

- (11) Malvolio deserves almost everything he gets, but ... there is that little stab of shame we feel at the end for having had so much fun pulling his cross-gartered leg for so long.

Ernst (1981) describes sentences such as this as examples of “conjunctive modification”. They are “conjunctive” in the sense that the word *leg* in (11) is participating in two conjoined propositions — first, the proposition that Malvolio is being teased, as part of the idiom *pull someone’s leg*, and second, the proposition that Malvolio is clad with crossed garters.

Similar examples can be constructed for at least some other non-combining idioms:²

- (12) a. On a languid night in New Orleans, we sat on a veranda in the Garden District shooting the jasmine-scented breeze.
b. It was the chef’s own unbridled ego that cooked his organic free-range goose.

It is not clear exactly what licenses conjunctive modification, but it is plausible to think that it depends upon coercion, and that this coercion is only permitted when a component of the non-combining idiom can be tied to some other proposition by participating in it literally, as a referent.

Note that this approach does not require us to revise the notion that non-combining idioms are, in fact, non-combining. In *pull Malvolio’s leg*, the noun phrase *Malvolio’s leg* cannot be associated with any sub-part of the gloss “tease Malvolio”. Nevertheless, *Malvolio’s leg* can be tied to a very literal referent in a proposition about Malvolio’s garters, and *pull Malvolio’s cross-gartered leg* is permitted, with two conjoined readings: “tease Malvolio” and “Malvolio’s leg was cross-gartered”.

These facts about metalinguistic modification, expressives, domain modification, hypallage, and conjunctive modification indicate that non-combining idioms do, in fact, allow for modifiers to associate with their internal constituents. These modifiers can be vacuous from the point of view of the sentence’s truth conditions (as is the case with expressives) but they can also modify the semantics of the larger verb phrase (as is the case with domain modification) or some noun phrase outside of it (as is the case with the epithet transfer in *kick the gin-soaked bucket*).

² I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these particular examples.

The surprising fact about the data presented in this squib, however, is that these modifiers can also operate on the semantics of the internal constituent directly, even when the internal constituent is part of a non-combining idiom. This is exactly what happens when metalinguistic modification or conjunctive modification appears in one of these idioms. The metalinguistic modifiers discussed above are only allowed when a metaphor or proverb of some kind is deployed; the conjunctive modifiers are only allowed when when some noun in the non-combining idiom can be associated with a relevantly salient literal referent in the real world. Furthermore, this correspondence may be easier to set up in the case of idiomatically combining idioms, but as example (12) shows, it can still be finessed in cases where an object in the literal realm can be denoted with a term that appears in the non-combining idiom.

The key observation is this: non-combining idioms allow for modifiers to attach, syntactically, to their internal constituents while, at the same time, the modifier operates on the internal constituent's semantics. In this regard, non-combining idioms are just like combining idioms — the only difference is that the internal constituents of combining idioms are associated with a particular meaning under the idiomatic reading, whereas in non-combining idioms there is no such association. This association between the internal constituents of a combining idiom with a particular gloss under the idiomatic reading is what permits these idioms to take on a large set of modifiers on their internal constituents. On the other hand, non-combining idioms can only take on modifiers that are compatible with the internal constituent being semantically vacuous under the idiomatic reading. Hence, metalinguistic commentary and conjunctive modification are allowed in non-combining idioms.

In other words, the distinction between non-combining and combining idioms in terms of the modifiers that they allow on their internal constituents follows directly from the fact that the elements within a combining idiom can be associated with semantic content under the idiomatic reading, whereas this is not the case with non-combining idioms. As a result, the internal constituents of a non-combining idiom can be modified, but not in such a way as would demand that they have any semantic content under the idiomatic reading.

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