

Trip the freaking light fantastic: Syntactic structure in English verbal idioms

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In past scholarship, idioms have been discussed from a mostly semantic perspective; authors have been primarily concerned with how idiomatic meaning is composed and stored (Swinney and Cutler 1979; Gibbs 1980; 1986). This article investigates idioms' syntactic behavior and concludes that all verbal idioms of English have stored, internal syntactic structure. Vacuous modification (i.e. modification that does not contribute to the semantics of the phrase), metalinguistic modification (i.e. modification that indicates non-literal readings), aspect, and subject-oriented adverbs (SOAs) are used to test a variety of idioms for evidence of syntactic structure. There are restrictions on the syntactic processes some idioms can undergo (i.e., passivization and raising constructions). However, this is not due to their lack of internal syntax, but how their meaning is mapped onto the internal syntax.

1. Introduction

Idioms have been a focus of linguistic interest for quite some time (Weinreich 1969; Chomsky 1980; Gibbs & Nayak 1989). Roughly speaking, they are phrases within a language whose primary meanings are not straightforwardly predictable from their constituent parts. The literal meanings of *bite*, *the*, and *dust*, for example, do not predict “die” as a meaning for the idiom *bite the dust*. The relationship between these expressions and their meanings stands in stark contrast to that of non-idiomatic phrases. Without additional context, *bite the apple*, which is not an idiom, has only a literal meaning, something like “sink one’s teeth into a small round fruit”. It is this discrepancy between form, as in the words that make an idiom, and meaning that has caught the attention of linguists. This article seeks to provide evidence and argumentation for the, admittedly sizeable, claim that all idioms have internal, hierarchical syntax. Arguing for a fully articulated structure requires more than a plausible explanation for why some idioms do not work in some syntactic operations; the inability of an idiom to undergo a certain process is not

conclusive. It requires a positive argument for the existence of internal syntax. To do this, I use subject-oriented adverbs to argue for the presence of a stored, articulated syntax for all verbal idioms.

2. Background

Chomsky (1955, 1956) used his famous sentence *colorless green ideas sleep furiously* to argue for an independent, syntactic component of the language faculty. Speakers judge the sentence to be perfectly grammatical from a syntactic perspective but semantically odd at best, suggesting two separate systems: one syntactic, the other semantic. This divide is relevant in regards to idioms. Crucial to the argument that idioms are stored with internal, hierarchical structure is the assertion that idioms have syntactic complexity. That is, it is a debate as to whether the syntax of an idiom is stored in individual parts or as a singular whole. This is a separate issue from whether or not idioms have semantic complexity. Preexisting scholarship thus far has primarily asked whether an idiom is assigned a single, whole meaning or if the meaning can be built from the constituent parts, that is, if idioms are semantically complex. This article focuses on the syntax and whether idioms have a full, articulated syntactic structure, as I claim, or if they are flat, concatenated strings. The issue here is the degree to which idioms are syntactically complex. Clear pictures of both meaning and structure, are integral to a comprehensive understanding of the nature of idioms.

Researchers (Nunberg, Wasow & Sag 1994; Gibbs & Nayak 1989) have used different terms to classify idioms depending on their semantic complexity, but, despite what term is used, they describe the same features. Semantic complexity, termed compositionality by Nunberg, Wasow, and Sag (1994:498), is “the degree to which the phrasal meaning, once known, can be analyzed in terms of contributions to the parts.”. Idioms that are semantically complex, that is, the meaning of the idiom relies, usually figuratively, on the parts that constitute the idiom, are “idiomatically combining” expressions (Nunberg et al. 1989:507), also referred to as decomposable (Abel 2003). Idioms that have a meaning assigned to the whole idiom, that is, idioms where the meaning cannot be distributed across the parts, are “idiomatic phrases”, referred to as nondecomposable by others. These above terms classify idioms by their distribution of the meaning across constituent parts. An idiom like *spill the beans* “reveal the secret” is idiomatically combining, or decomposable, because the meaning of “reveal” and “secret” can be understood as

distributing to *spill* and *beans*, respectively. An idiomatic phrase, such as *kick the bucket* “die”, on the other hand, has no such semantic distribution; the meaning of “die” is applied wholesale to the phrase *kick the bucket*, not individual parts.

The above describes semantic complexity. Now, consider syntactic complexity. Syntactic complexity is concerned with whether or not there is an internal, hierarchical structure. There is the possibility that idioms are complex phrases with internal syntax, and there is the possibility that idioms are completely without structure, just flat phrases. While a phrase can be both semantically complex and syntactically complex, they are still separate domains of complexity, one concerned with if and how meaningful parts are distributed and one concerned with the internal organization of structure. However, semantic complexity does help one derive predictions regarding the likelihood of syntactic complexity, although that is not to say that syntactic complexity depends upon semantic complexity. Literal phrases, phrases uttered non-idiomatically, definitely have syntactic structure. Therefore, idioms that are the closest approximates to literal phrases would be most likely to have syntactic structure. In non-idiomatic phrases, such as *spill the sauce*, each individual word has an associated meaning. This is to be expected, as this is how language works; the verb *spill* means “spill”, the noun *sauce* means “sauce” and so on. Idioms that are idiomatically combining or decomposable come closest to achieving this compositional nature of literal phrases because even though their meaning is idiosyncratic and therefore unpredictable, that meaning can still be distributed across constituent parts in a close approximation to how meaning is distributed in literal phrases. *Spill the beans*, despite the fact that *spill* does not mean “spill”, still has a meaning of “reveal” tied to it. If any idiom were going to have syntactic structure, it would be this class that behaves most similar to the literal phrases.

Nondecomposable idioms, on the other hand, have meanings that cannot be distributed across constituent parts. These are less likely to have syntactic structure than the decomposable idioms, as there is no way to assign individual meaning to the constituent parts, but rather a meaning applied to the entire idiom. However, both decomposable and nondecomposable idioms are still syntactic phrases. The phrase *drop the mic* can be used literally to mean “drop a piece of sound equipment” or idiomatically “do something impressive”, and *spill the beans* can still mean, non-idiomatically, to “let loose legumes.” In this sense, decomposable and nondecomposable idioms are different from the third

class of idioms that lack both semantic complexity and, as argued by Nunberg et al., syntactic complexity. Referred to by Nunberg et al. (1994:515) as “idioms which do not ‘have the syntactic form of nonidiomatic expression’”, these non-canonical idioms have meanings that cannot be distributed to their parts, and their syntactic structure does not follow the rules of the grammar. Examples of these types of idioms include *trip the light fantastic*, *by and large*, *believe you me*, and *would that it were*. Non-canonical idioms are phrases that would never be produced by a native speaker in a literal context and are thus the least likely to have internal syntactic structure. However, they are perfectly acceptable when used idiomatically.

Semantic complexity and syntactic complexity are separate components of idioms, each concerned with different features. However, it is the correspondence between these separate features, meaning and structure, that allows for predictions on the likelihood of internal syntax. These predictions are important for two reasons. First, it creates a range of data that must be thoroughly investigated. The predictions of syntactic likelihood generated from meaning-structure correspondence are predictions that must all be satisfied if an argument regarding internal syntactic structure of idioms is to be truly comprehensive of all idioms. Second, and somewhat more importantly, is that it highlights the significance of the meaning-structure correspondence. Not all meanings are stored in the same way, as shown by the different idiom classifications discussed above. Different types of meaning storage results in a difference in how that meaning is mapped to structure. Therefore, idioms will exhibit different behavior in how the meaning-structure corresponds, which helps shed further light on the different syntactic behavior idioms exhibit. This thesis aligns more with the claims of Nunberg et al. in that there are different classifications of semantic complexity, and it does agree that there is semantic storage. This semantic storage may not be the same for all idioms, though. It depends on how the meanings are distributed across the parts, on their semantic complexity, but it is still stored.

3. Vacuous and Metalinguistic Modification

Let us first begin with a measure of syntax, that is, a process sensitive to syntax, that is applicable across all types of idioms. The following sections introduce evidence showing that certain types of modifications, vacuous and metalinguistic, are possible for all types of idioms. Adverbial modification of this type is particularly useful because it (1) modifies the

verb—in this case the idiom—directly and (2) is limited to specific placements in the structure, as adverbs cannot be placed randomly.

3.1 Vacuous Modification

Introduced by McClure (2011), vacuous modifiers are modifiers that do not contribute semantic content to the sentence. Referred to as “expressives” by McClure, they have a “high degree of connotative or affective content” but do not affect “the truth conditions of a sentence” (2). Examples of these types of modifiers are words like *freaking*, *goddamn*, *motherfucking*, and *old*¹. Non-vacuous modifiers, in contrast, do add semantic content to the sentence. These have the power to change the meaning of a sentence.

- (1) Yulia kicked the goddamn bucket.
‘Yulia died (emphatic)’
- (2) Yulia kicked the rusty bucket.
‘Yulia struck a rusty pail’

(1), which contains a vacuous modifier, still maintains its idiomatic reading. (2), however, containing a non-vacuous modifier, can no longer mean “die”, having lost its idiomatic reading. While these vacuous modifiers work with all idioms, the more pertinent question is why they do so. The only difference between the modification in (1) and (2) is that the first modification has an actual impact on the truth condition of the sentence. A person kicking a rusty pail is not the semantic equivalent to a person kicking a pail; the modification produces a difference in meaning. The vacuous modifier, on the other hand, does no such thing. There is perhaps an emotive or pragmatic difference, but not a semantic one. This holds true across all idioms.

3.2 Metalinguistic Modification

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It should be noted that in this case, as a vacuous modifier, *old* is not contributing semantic meaning to the sentence. This differs from the other use of *old* where it actually refers to something of advanced age. How speakers interpret the usage of *old* depending on the context remains to be seen.

Similar to vacuous modifiers, metalinguistic modifiers are modifiers that “comment on the status of the [item] as a linguistic object, rather than a physical object” (McClure 2011:2). These include words like *metaphorical*, *proverbial*, and *figurative*. Unlike the vacuous modifier, these metalinguistic modifiers do impact the truth condition of a sentence, as idiomatically “kicking a metaphorical bucket” is quite different than idiomatically “kicking the bucket”; it indicates a sense of removal from the literal. Like the vacuous modifiers, these metalinguistic modifiers work with all idioms.

- (3) Geri pulled the proverbial strings to get Loretta that swanky, new job.
- (4) Jason ate metaphorical crow after seeing the inaccurate spreadsheet.
- (5) Aysha buried the figurative hatchet and let Fatima have her book back.
- (6) Beth tripped the metaphorical light fantastic when out with Yael this weekend.

Metalinguistic modifiers do change the truth conditions of the sentence, but they are still felicitous with all types of idioms. These types of modifiers do not need the individual pieces to have an assigned meaning. They can, as seen in (3), but it is not a necessary requirement. The function of these modifiers is to express a degree of removal from the literal world, in a sense making the meaning even more idiomatic. In doing this, they address the whole, idiomatic meaning, not just individual parts.

4. Measures of Syntax: Aspect

The bulk of literature on idioms centers on the semantic. McGinnis’ (2002) article is one of the first to focus purely on the syntactic complexity of idioms, specifically on aspect. McGinnis claims that aspect is compositional and systematic in all idioms. McGinnis (2002:667) is a proponent of Distributed Morphology (henceforth DM), which argues that “structural components of meaning are bundled into lexical items manipulated by the syntax, while idiosyncratic components are added post-syntactically from a list known as the Encyclopedia”. For McGinnis,

the presence of aspect that matches the literal counterpart in idioms shows that aspect is a component of structural meaning, which is derived from the syntax, not the conceptual system. Zeno Vendler (1957) discusses aspect in terms of activity, achievement, accomplishment, and state. Verbs fall into these different classes; for example, *writing a letter for an hour* is perfectly felicitous, while *reaching the top for an hour* is not. The first is an accomplishment, while the latter is an achievement. The class a verb belongs to is mediated in part by its own semantic meaning but also, crucially, in how the meaning interacts with the time schemata. Did action occur over a span of time or just once, upon completion? In this sense, Vendler is describing the aspect of a verb; that is, how the verb itself situates the action it describes as it develops over time.

Aspect, the author argues, is a part of the structural component of meaning, not the idiosyncratic because it “interacts with structural components of the sentence” (McGinnis 2002:668) and is built by the syntax. For example, *hang laundry*, with a bare plural or mass complement, has a different aspect than *hang the picture*, which has DP complement. The atelic reading, states and activities, is possible with *hang laundry*, as in *Hermione hung laundry for/*in an hour*. The telic reading, accomplishments and achievements, is possible with *hang a picture*, as in *Hermione hung a picture in/*for five minutes*. There is a structural difference that is reflected in the aspect. The actual structure of the phrase, singular DP complement vs. bare plural or mass DP complements, impacts aspect even though the meaning of the verb *hang* is maintained. This is maintained in idiomatic phrases.

4.1 Is Aspect Enough

McGinnis argues that all idioms fit within the DM paradigm: all idioms have syntactic structure that is composed separately from their idiosyncratic meanings. However, Glasbey (2006) brings into question the applicability of such an argument across all idioms. Glasbey agrees with McGinnis in that her argument is applicable to some idioms; some idioms do have compositional aspect, but not all. Those that fall into this latter category, idioms without compositional aspect, instead have their aspectual information stored with the idiom, rather than computed.

(7) Mary and her friends painted the town red for a few hours.
 ‘Mary and her friends partied in a wild manner for a few hours.’

(8) ?Mary and her friends painted the town red in a few hours.
 ‘Mary and her friends partied in a wild manner in a few hours.’

Based on the judgments of Glasbey’s informants, (8) does not combine easily with *in*-adverbials, as *paint the town red* “party in a wild manner” aligns more closely to a state or activity. Following from McGinnis, the aspect found in this idiom should be the same as in the literal interpretation if, as she claims, all aspect is compositional in idioms. Next consider the below examples where *paint the town red* has been modified for a clearer literal meaning, with *shed* replacing *town* and *green* replacing *red*.

(9) Mary and her friends painted the shed green for a few hours.
 ‘Mary and her friends covered the shed with green paint for a few hours.’

(10) Mary and her friends painted the shed green in a few hours.
 ‘Mary and her friends covered the shed in green paint for a few hours.’

These judgements differ from the ones found in (8). It appears that the literal reading is more felicitous with *in*-adverbials, those that usually work with accomplishments and achievements. The aspect of the idiom is different from that of the literal phrase, contra McGinnis. Other examples of idioms that differ from their literal counterpart in terms of aspect can be found below.

Despite these differing results, Glasbey does not completely disregard McGinnis’ argument; compositional aspect is still a possibility. When aspect is composed for some idioms, the process results in an aspect that is the same as the literal counterpart, for others, the process results in an aspect that differs from the literal counterpart, one that relies on the idiosyncratic meaning. Where these differences arise, according to Glasbey, is the input into that process. Glasbey follows Krifka (1992) in describing the process of compositional aspect, which considers thematic relations as input. As Glasbey notes, in the literal phrase *paint the town red* (or, for ease, *paint the shed green*) there is a thematic relation of “gradual patient” that indicates “a gradual change in state of one of the participants in the eventuality” (Glasbey 2006:8). This thematic relation, however, is not present in the input of the idiom *paint the town red*. There is no sense of gradual change for the idiomatic phrase; it is closer to a state or activity than an accomplishment. Thus, compositional aspect can be

impacted by information on thematic relations. Consider the below example.

- (11) *hang an arse* ‘loiter’ (obsolete)
- a. Charlie hung an arse for five minutes outside the pub.
 - b. *Charlie hung an arse in five minutes outside the pub.

Per McGinnis, *hang* and a complement DP should produce a telic reading, one that is compatible with *in*-adverbial modification. The example above is, however, more compatible with the atelic reading. The combination of *hang* and a DP complement, non-idiomatically, denotes accomplishment or achievement, such as *hanging a towel* or *hanging the curtains*. Despite its appearance with this form, (11) actually describe a state or activity; this is the same issue described by Glasbey with *paint the town red/paint the shed green*. For idiomatically combining expressions, i.e. decomposable idioms, Glasbey predicts that they can have compositional aspect. Since their meanings can be distributed across their constituent parts, the meaningful parts can act as input in the composition process. In some cases, this produces aspect that is the same as the non-idiomatic counterpart, and in others it does not; the thematic relations of the idiom can match or not match the thematic relations of the non-idiom (10). Compositional aspect is maintained, but only for a specific type of idiom, only for idioms where there is a full correspondence between meaning and structure, and, even then, the aspect is still derived in part from thematic relations, such as “gradual patient” as seen above in *paint the shed green*, determined by how the meaningful parts are distributed across the constituents. As the thematic relations reflect, to some degree, the semantic role of a constituent, it is unsurprising that idioms and their literal counterparts differ in the way they carve up the meaning. This difference then influences the compositional aspect of the entire phrase.

Both McGinnis and Glasbey support compositional aspect, but even if McGinnis and Glasbey agreed completely on compositional aspect for idiomatically combining phrases, there is still an entire class of idioms found by Glasbey that do not work under McGinnis. It is impossible to argue that all idioms have internal syntax based on the aspectual argument, for there appears to be at least some idioms that fail the test. Therefore, another test is needed. Like aspect, it must be something assumed to be structural, something that could reliably suggest syntactic structure. Furthermore, it would have to work with all classes of idioms, critically

those identified by Glasbey that fail McGinnis' aspect test, idioms that have a different aspect than their literal counterparts.

5. Measure of Syntax: Subject-Oriented Adverbs

Using subject-oriented adverbs (henceforth, SOAs), I claim that all idioms have internal, hierarchical syntax. SOAs are, as the name suggests, adverbs that relate attributes to the subject. Words such as *willingly*, *calmly*, and *wisely* are some commonly used SOAs that add further description to a characteristic maintained by the subject, whether it be the surface-subject or the logical subject. For example, in the sentence *Isadore directed Phillip willingly*, the subject, *Isadore*, is the one with the *willing* attribute. In the passive sentence, *Isadore was willingly directed by Phillip*, however, either Isadore could be willing to be directed by Phillip or Phillip could be directing Isadore in a willing manner. In idioms, these SOAs work just as well, examples being *Creta willingly shot the breeze* and *Justine wisely spilled the beans*. It would appear, then, that subjecthood is maintained, as SOAs work perfectly well with idioms. Assuming a syntactic position for the subject, following perhaps from internal subject hypotheses, this suggests that idioms have a position in the syntax for subjects, indicating an articulated internal structure.

Critical to this argument, is the idea that subjecthood is a syntactic, and therefore structural, notion. For SOAs to be diagnostic of structure, the component they are sensitive to, that is, subjecthood, must be a structural position. An example of this can be seen in the interpretation of passive structures containing SOAs. In the sentence above, *Isadore was willingly directed by Phillip*, there are two possible interpretations. The non-passive equal, *Phillip directed Isadore willingly*, where only Phillip is the one who is willing, there is only one interpretation. Therefore, a change in structure (i.e. passivization) has an impact on the reading of the SOAs, indicating that this is likely a structural effect. The finer details of subjecthood as a structural component continue to be debated, and there are those against the idea, but for the purposes of this paper, subjecthood is considered positional, and, therefore, syntactic.

If SOAs, as I claim, can be used as an indicator of internal structure, and all idioms have internal, hierarchical structure, then SOAs should behave the same as their non-idiomatic counterparts. For example, the sentence *John has gladly prepared dinner for Kat* has two readings: (1) John was glad to prepare dinner for Kat and (2) James made the dinner for

Kat in a glad manner. Change the placement of the SOA, as in *James gladly has prepared dinner for Kat* and only one reading is available: James was glad to prepare dinner for Kat. These same effects can be seen in idioms as well. Take the idiom *shoot the breeze*. In *Elia has gladly shot the breeze with Marc all afternoon* there are still two possible readings: (1) Elia was glad to shoot the breeze (i.e. converse idly) with Marc all afternoon and (2) Elia shot the breeze (i.e. conversed idly) with Marc in a glad manner. When the placement changes, *Elia gladly has shot the breeze with Marc all afternoon*, only the former reading remains, just as in the non-idiomatic sentences. SOAs, which are sensitive to the syntactic position of subject, appear to behave the same in idiomatic and non-idiomatic sentences. Idioms, therefore, must have syntactic structure in order to produce the same differences in reading as the non-idiomatic sentences, which definitely have internal syntax.

5.1 Subjecthood in Subject-Oriented Adverbs

As briefly mentioned, I agree with others who are in support of subjecthood as a syntactic notion. This is, in part, because of the range of facts that can be accounted for if one conceptualizes subjecthood as a matter of syntax. First, consider passivization, a process that requires the movement of syntactic parts. Regardless of whether semantics plays a role, passivization necessitates movement within the syntax. Thus, this process becomes particularly interesting when considered with SOAs.

(12) Clythia followed Alexi contentedly.

(13) Alexi was contentedly followed by Clythia.

In (12) only *Clythia*, as the subject, is given the *content* attribute by the SOA. In (13), either *Alexi* or *Clythia* could be *content*. In both sentences, *Clythia* as *content* remains a possible reading. This is true even in (13) when *Clythia* no longer remains in the subject position; *Alexi* occupies it. The same cannot be said for (12) where under no reading would Alexi be considered *content*. Only in (12) is it possible that *Alexi* or *Clythia* be *content*. The only distinction between (12) and (13) is that in (13) *Alexi* is acting as the surface subject, as it has now been moved into the subject position through passivization. However, *Clythia*, as seen in (12), is the logical subject, and occupied that same subject position before the passivization process. This is why, in (13), both readings are possible.

Both occupied the subject position at some point, thus allowing for multiple readings from the SOAs.

SOAs, then, can be thought of as a diagnostic of subjecthood, and, if subjecthood is syntactic, a diagnostic of syntactic structure. This allows for clear predictions regarding the syntactic structure of idioms. If all idioms have internal syntax, then they should all behave the same as their non-idiomatic counterparts with SOAs, even the ones determined by Glasbey to fail McGinnis's aspect test. All types of idioms, even the non-canonical ones, should act the same. Furthermore, the differences in meaning produced by changing the position of an SOA (i.e. *John has gladly prepared dinner for Kat* and *John gladly has prepared dinner for Kat*) should be reflected in idioms as well. The following sections will look at data from all types of idioms to investigate this claim.

5.2 Positional Differences in SOAs

Different interpretations are available depending on where the SOA is placed in the sentence. Below are six examples grouped according to their possible interpretations creating three different groups. The main verb is bolded, the auxiliary is italicized, and the SOA is underlined.

Pre-Verbal: Subject oriented reading	Post-Verbal: Manner reading	Intra-Verbal: Both readings
<u>Gladly</u> , James prepared dinner for Kat.	James prepared dinner for Kat <u>gladly</u> .	James <u>gladly</u> prepared dinner for Kat.
James <u>gladly</u> <i>has</i> prepared dinner for Kat.	James <i>has</i> prepared dinner for Kat <u>gladly</u> .	James <i>has</i> <u>gladly</u> prepared dinner for Kat.
'James was glad to prepare dinner'	'James prepared dinner in a glad manner'	'James prepared dinner in a glad manner' or 'James was glad to prepare dinner'

Table 1. Positional variation in SOAs

As shown above, depending on the placement of the SOA, one or two readings may be available. When the SOA comes before the verb, the SOA relates an emotional state or attitude to the subject. When it comes after, the only reading is one that describes the manner in which the subject did something. Lastly, when the SOA is intra-verbal, that is,

between the auxiliary and the main verb, both meanings are possible interpretations. If, as I claim, all idioms have syntactic structure, and SOAs, which are sensitive to subject, are acceptable with idioms, then idioms of all types should produce the same nuances in meaning as their literal counterparts.

6. SOAs in Idioms

Decomposable idioms are the starting point of this current section, since they are the most likely to have internal, syntactic structure. They are successful with the subject-oriented adverbs. It should be noted that these, like the term non-canonical, are terms referring to the semantic complexity of the idiom. However, as discussed earlier when considered with syntactic complexity, these two separate features can create predictions regarding the internal structure of idioms.

spill the beans ‘reveal secrets’		
Post-VP	Letha spilled the beans <u>foolishly</u> to Carl	Manner reading: Letha told Carl a secret in a foolish manner
	Letha had spilled the beans <u>foolishly</u> to Carl	
Pre-VP	<u>Foolishly</u> , Letha spilled the beans to Carl	Subject-oriented reading: It was foolish of Letha to tell Carl the secret
	Letha <u>foolishly</u> had spilled the beans to Carl	
Intra-VP	Letha <u>foolishly</u> spilled the beans to Carl	Both readings available
	Letha had <u>foolishly</u> spilled the beans to Carl	
learn the ropes ‘learn the basics’		
Post-VP	Richard learned the ropes <u>willingly</u>	Manner reading: Richard learned the basics in a willing manner
	Richard had learned the ropes <u>willingly</u>	
Pre-VP	<u>Willingly</u> , Richard learned the ropes	Subject-oriented reading: Richard was willing to learn the basics
	Richard <u>willingly</u> had learned the ropes	
Intra-VP	Richard <u>willingly</u> learned the ropes	Both readings available

	Richard had <u>willingly</u> learned the ropes	
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Table 2. Decomposable idioms with SOAs

Nondecomposable idioms are less likely than decomposable idioms to have syntactic structure. They are normal phrases of the language but differ in that they have a single idiosyncratic meaning attached to them. Unlike decomposable idioms, their meanings cannot be distributed across the constituent parts, making them less like literal phrases than decomposable idioms. However, the examples below provide evidence that these idioms can still maintain their idiomatic meaning when used with SOAs.

Table 3. Decomposable idioms with SOAs

In Table 4 are the idioms identified by Glasbey that fail McGinnis' aspect test. Their idiomatic aspect is different than that of their literal aspect. While many of these types of idioms are nondecomposable, not all nondecomposable idioms have differing aspectual properties, as evidenced by the previous section.

build castles in the air 'daydream'		
Post-VP	Ellie built castles in the air <u>contentedly</u>	Manner reading: Ellie daydreamed in a content manner
	Ellie had built castles in the air <u>contentedly</u>	
Pre-VP	<u>Contentedly</u> , Ellie built castles in the air	Subject-oriented reading: Ellie was content to daydream
	Ellie <u>contentedly</u> had build castles in the air	
Intra-VP	Ellie <u>contentedly</u> built castles in the air	Both readings
	Ellie had <u>contentedly</u> built castles in the air	
hit the sack 'go to sleep'		
Pre-VP	Lia hit the sack <u>eagerly</u> after studying for days	Manner reading: Lia went to bed in an eager manner
	Lia had hit the sack <u>eagerly</u> after studying for days	

Post-VP	<u>Eagerly</u> , Lia hit the sack after studying for days	Subject-oriented reading: Lia was eager to go to bed
	Lia <u>eagerly</u> had hit the sack after studying for days	
Intra-VP	Lia <u>eagerly</u> hit the sack after studying for days	Both readings
	Lia had <u>eagerly</u> hit the sack after studying for days	
cut a rug ‘dance’		
Post-VP	Lois cut a rug at the afterparty <u>gleefully</u>	Manner reading: Lois danced at the afterparty in a gleeful manner
	Lois had cut a rug at the afterparty <u>gleefully</u>	
Pre-VP	<u>Gleefully</u> , Lois cut a rug at the afterparty	Subject-oriented reading: Lois was gleeful to dance
	Lois <u>gleefully</u> had cut a rug at the afterparty	
Intra-VP	Lois <u>gleefully</u> cut a rug at the afterparty	Both readings
	Lois had <u>gleefully</u> cut a rug at the afterparty	
deliver the goods ‘keep a promise’		
Post-VP	Theo delivered the goods <u>anxiously</u> after many years	Manner reading: Theo kept the secret after many years in an anxious manner
	Theo had delivered the goods <u>anxiously</u> after many years	
Pre-VP	<u>Anxiously</u> , Theo delivered the goods after many years	Subject-oriented reading: Theo was anxious to keep the secret after many years
	Theo <u>anxiously</u> had delivered the goods after many years	
Intra-VP	Theo <u>anxiously</u> delivered the goods after many years	Both readings
	Theo had <u>anxiously</u> delivered the goods after many years	

Table 4. Glasbey’s Gap idioms with SOAs

Lastly, there are the non-canonical idioms. If any idiom were to be saved as a single whole, sans internal syntax, it would be these. They are phrases that the grammar would never produce under in non-idiomatic

circumstances. These idioms are fairly rare and somewhat difficult to classify, perhaps unsurprisingly given their ungrammatical nature. The examples below use only the verbal idioms.

trip the light fantastic ‘dance nimbly’		
Post-VP	Esperanza tripped the light fantastic in the club <u>eagerly</u>	Manner reading: Esperanza danced nimbly in an eager manner
	Esperanza had tripped the light fantastic in the club <u>eagerly</u>	
Pre-VP	<u>Eagerly</u> , Esperanza tripped the light fantastic in the club	Subject-oriented reading: Esperanza was eager to dance nimbly
	Esperanza <u>eagerly</u> had tripped the light fantastic in the club	
Intra-VP	Esperanza <u>eagerly</u> tripped the light fantastic in the club	Both readings available
	Esperanza had <u>eagerly</u> tripped the light fantastic in the club	
make believe ‘pretend’		
Post-VP	Helene made believe that she didn’t hear Duncan <u>gladly</u>	Manner reading: Helene pretended she didn’t hear Duncan in a glad manner
	Helene had made believe that she didn’t hear Duncan <u>gladly</u>	
Pre-VP	<u>Gladly</u> Helene made believe that she didn’t hear Duncan	Subject-oriented reading: Helene was glad to pretend she didn’t hear Duncan
	Helene <u>gladly</u> had made believe that she didn’t hear Duncan	
Intra-VP	Helene <u>gladly</u> made believe that she didn’t hear Duncan	Both readings available

	Helene had <u>gladly</u> made believe that she didn't hear Duncan	
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Table 5. *Non-canonical idioms with SOAs*

7. Discussion

In their discussion on the semantic complexity of idioms, Nunberg et al. (1994) address how the idea of semantic compositionality (i.e. complexity) allows for idioms to function in syntactic operations, such as passivization. The authors are mostly pushing back against the idea that idioms, or at least the idiomatically combining expressions, lack semantic complexity, and, particularly, that the “relationship between meaning and form in idioms is arbitrary” (Nunberg et al. 1994:515). As discussed in Section 2, there are classes of idioms, idiomatically combining (decomposable idioms) expressions, where this relationship is not arbitrary, and the meaning is purposefully distributed across the constituent parts, usually metaphorically. The mapping between the meaning of the idioms and the structure of the idiom is what creates restricted behavior (i.e., inability to passivize) on certain idioms. The meaning alone is not what drives the different behavior but rather how that meaning maps to the parts of the idiom that constitute its structure. It is possible, then, that many idioms are syntactically complex, only some idioms are semantically complex. Certain processes, such as passivization or raising constructions, appear to be sensitive to the semantics of the phrase they are operating on; they not only require movable pieces, but meaningful pieces as well.

- (14) The cat was let out of the bag by Georgina.
The cat seemed to be let out of the bag by Georgina.
- (15) The strings were pulled by crafty, old Trent.
The strings seemed to be pulled by crafty, old Trent.
- (16) ?The bucket was kicked by Toby.
?The bucket seemed to be kicked by Toby.

Only some idioms maintain their idiosyncratic meaning under passive and raising constructions. As shown above, (16) does not have the same idiomatic meaning in a passive construction as it does in an active one. This is not the case for (14) and (15).

Vacuous and metalinguistic modification are possible for all idioms. Therefore, it is not that idioms lack an internal, syntactic structure which disallows them from undergoing some processes that, on the surface, appear to be syntactic, but rather some processes rely on parts having individual

meanings. All idioms have internal syntax. The trouble arises when the idiosyncratic meaning of the idiom is mapped to that internal syntax. Modifications that do not upset or impact the meaning of the sentence, like vacuous and metalinguistic modifiers, work across all idioms because they do not interact with the semantic meaning. They either apply wholesale to the meaning of the idiom, as vacuous modifiers do, or operate of a different level of meaning, one concerned with the literal vs. non-literal interpretation, as metalinguistic modifiers do. Passivization and raising constructions, despite their syntactic movement, are concerned with meaning to a degree. These processes use movement, which is syntactic, but the parts they are moving must have an individual meaning, which is semantic. Therefore, the meaning-structure correspondence differs across different types of idioms, thus leading to the variation seen in the processes all idioms can do and the processes only some idioms can do.

8. Conclusion

Past research regarding idioms has mostly focused on the semantics of idioms, but their syntax is equally as important. Understanding the syntactic structure of idioms is crucial to fully understanding idioms themselves. The main goal of this thesis was to present evidence to support the claim that all idioms of English are stored with internal syntax. Using subject-oriented adverbs as a measure that is sensitive to syntax, I tested a variety of idioms to determine if they were acceptable in such a construction. Finding that they were, I considered this strong evidence to support the claim idioms have internal syntactic structure. Furthermore, an idiom's inability to function in certain syntactic constructions, such as passivization and raising, did not indicate a lack of structure, but rather a difference in how the meaning mapped to the structure. Both semantics and syntax contribute to making idioms as interesting as they are, so having an articulated understanding of the syntax in idioms is essential.

This article makes a strong claim regarding the storage and structure of idioms. Therefore, there are many areas of further research that could be

thought-provoking and illuminating. First, testing the acceptability across a wide variety of speakers is imperative in further illuminating whether the SOA manipulations are truly indicative of syntactic structure. Second, one could consider the validity of this claim cross-linguistically. This research focused purely on English idioms, using verbal idioms as the examples. Furthermore, the use of subject-oriented adverbs as an indication of syntactic structure may be limited to English. In different languages, other constructions could act as a useful metric. Investigating these differences would contribute to a greater understanding of syntax cross-linguistically. Another area of interest, mentioned briefly in earlier sections, is understanding how non-canonical idioms are analyzed. As I argued, these idioms, despite their non-canonical form, still have stored internal syntax through reanalysis. This leaves the questions of not only how speakers are reanalyzing these types of idioms, but whether or not speakers are reanalyzing them in the same way. Further investigation into this process is needed.

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