

Syntactic Inflexibility or Contextual Non-Conformity? The Case of Idioms

Anna Kutscher & Jana Häussler*

Abstract

In this paper, we examine Fanselow's 2018 research on syntactic flexibility of idioms in German. Fanselow suggests that the ability of an idiom to undergo syntactic operations may be impacted by its decomposition property, particularly, if it has an interpretative component. We will argue that the syntactic flexibility of idioms is more likely to be due to contextual interpretations than to their pre-defined decomposability status. This argument is supported by evidence from German web corpora.

1. Introduction

Idioms, as a subcategory of *multi word expressions*, present various challenges in linguistic theories due to several reasons. Formally, idioms appear in schematic patterns and regular syntactic structures, but they can also have irregular forms (e.g. *by and large*, *all of a sudden*). Semantically, their interpretation does not conform to compositional principles. Especially within the generative framework (cf. Kiparsky (1976), Chomsky (1980), Marantz (1981)), idioms were often considered holistic parts of the lexicon. According to this monolithic view, idioms are distinct from other phrasal expressions as they are not formed through combinatory principles of grammar and lexicon. Instead, they are self-contained units within the lexicon. As a result they resist syntactic operations like passivization as well as internal modification.¹

Perhaps the most influential work breaking with the monolithic view in the generative framework is a 1994 paper by Nunberg et al. on decomposition properties of idioms. According to the authors, the nature of idioms

*We would like to thank the audiences at the Workshop on Gisbert Fanselow's Contributions to Syntactic Theory (April 2023) and the Linguistics Colloquium at Bielefeld University (June 2023) for critical questions and valuable comments.

¹Other frameworks, such as Construction Grammar or HPSG, have proposed deviating views for idioms and their modification potential (cf. Erbach and Krenn (1993), Riehemann (2001), Soehn (2006)).

is primarily characterised by **conventionality** and **figuration**, i.e., they are typically formed of metaphors, metonyms, or hyperboles to express semantic concepts, but these are not ad hoc constructions. Rather, they have a conventionalised and unpredictable meaning that is independent of the conventions of compositionality. Furthermore, the authors claim that idioms are part of a relatively informal, colloquial register of the oral culture, that is used to implicitly explain a recurring situation of particular social interest in relation to a scenario involving familiar, concrete things and relations. By using idioms, speakers imply a certain evaluation or affective attitude towards the things that idioms denote. Speakers use idiomatic forms to express activities that are sufficiently charged with social meaning to be worthy of idiomatic reference. In sum, idioms are primarily defined by semantic and pragmatic parameters (conventionality, figuration, proverbs, informality and affect). There is only one feature in Nunberg et al.'s list that refers to the form of the idiom: **syntactic inflexibility**. Compared to regular syntactic phrases, idioms are found only in a limited number of syntactic frames and constructions and do not undergo the full amount of syntactic operations. For example, passivisation as one syntactic operation is not always possible for idioms. Idioms that can be semantically decomposed, such as *spill the beans*, can appear in passive forms, while those that cannot, such as *kick the bucket*, do not allow passivisation, e.g. *#The bucket was kicked*. The question is whether it is the idiom itself that blocks the passive form, or whether there are some other factors involved in the operation that do not apply to the idiomatic form.

Refining Nunberg et al.'s hypothesis, Fanselow (2018) argues that decomposability is a prerequisite only for certain syntactic operations, namely those that have an interpretative component, i.e., that are semantically constrained, e.g., plural formation or *wh*-movement. For non-decomposable idioms, that lack components in their conceptual representation to which the interpretative effect of a syntactic operation could apply, such syntactic operations are blocked. In the following, we will briefly outline Fanselow's approach and go on to argue that the syntactic inflexibility of idioms is not primarily a matter of syntax. We will present examples from the German web corpus (COW²) that

²COW-Corpus by Roland Schäfer's DFG-funded project "Web characterisation". Supported by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) (<https://corporafromtheweb.org/category/corpora/german/>).

evidence an unexpected high degree of flexibility even for idioms that are considered nondecomposable.

2. Syntactic Flexibility and the Role of Interpretation

In his paper, Fanselow examines decomposable ([+decomp]) and non-decomposable ([−decomp]) German idioms with respect to their ability to undergo a variety of syntactic operations. Due to space limitations, we will focus on a subset: pluralisation, passivisation and adjectival modification.

2.1. Pluralisation

Pluralisation is clearly an operation with interpretative effect and semantic constraints. With [+decomp] idioms, speakers have access to the parts and can interpret them as singular or plural. But this is not possible where the idiom is [−decomp], so the pluralisation should not be possible. Fanselow illustrates this with the unacceptable plural in (1).

- (1) Nach Wochen mühsamen Verhandeln haben Merkel, Seehofer, Özdemir, Lindner und Co. *das Handtuch* /***die Handtücher** geworfen.
'After weeks of painstaking negotiations, Merkel, Seehofer, Özdemir, Lindner and Co. *have thrown in the towel* / **the towels** (gave up).'

In line with Nunberg et al. (1994), Fanselow (2018) argues that the idiom *das Handtuch werfen* 'throw in the towel' is inflexible because it is [−decomp]. More specifically, Fanselow argues that the plural *Handtücher* 'towels' is unacceptable in (1) because the semantic concept of *give up* does not involve individually interpretive parts in the idiom. However, we could question the lack of an internal argument in the conceptual structure of *das Handtuch werfen* 'throw the towel'. Note that the non-idiomatic equivalent *aufgeben* 'give up' allows for an object (*etwas aufgeben* 'give up sth.'). Furthermore, the use of the idiomatic expression seems to imply preceding to attempts or real effort to achieve before giving up. In this sense, an appropriate paraphrase for *das Handtuch werfen* might be 'give up a fight or struggle' rather than just 'give up'. This would make *das Handtuch werfen* not necessarily decomposable, at least not what Nunberg et al. (1994) call "normally decomposable", but it would provide a conceptual argument. If so, *das Handtuch werfen* should be accessible to pluralisation. And in fact, we find instances as in (2).

- (2) Damit *wirft* nach Lütkestratkötter und Noe der dritte Vorstand innerhalb

weniger Wochen *das Handtuch*. Die Branche ist sehr gespannt darauf, wie es nun weitergeht, dies zum einen in Bezug auf Neubesetzungen im Vorstand und zum anderen, ob noch weitere *Handtücher* geworfen werden.³

‘After Lütkestratkötter and Noe, this is the third board member to throw in the towel within a few weeks. The industry is very curious to see what will happen next, on the one hand with regard to new appointments to the board and on the other hand whether more *towels* will be thrown.’

In contrast to (1), (2) does not describe a situation where several individuals jointly give up, but a series of giving-up events with each having its own series of preceding problem-solving attempts. Although (1) might also involve a multitude of attempts to solve the given problem, these attempts are subevents of the same struggle, whereas the attempts in (2) form separate sequences each having an endpoint.

We would like to make two points here: (i) determining decomposability is not straightforward, and (ii) contextual factors may change the interpretation. The first point is supported by the observation that inter-rater agreement on decomposability is rather low (Tabossi et al. 2008, Titone and Connine 1994). Decomposability is a complex notion and hard to operationalize, which probably contributes to the disagreement (for a methodological criticism see Fellbaum 2019 and Wierzba et al. 2023 among others).

Note that the second occurrence of *das Handtuch werfen* in (2) does not only involve pluralisation but also passivisation, which we take up in the following.

2.2. Passivisation

Within the syntactic frameworks, passivisation has always served as a test operation for [–decomp]-idiomaticity, because a change in the argument structure presupposes that the elements involved actually occur in the argument structure of the predicate. Since [–decomp] idioms have no internal argument structure, they theoretically do not undergo this process. The prototype of the example is *kick the bucket*, where *the bucket* has no referring arguments in the paraphrase *to die*, so there is no passive like **The bucket was kicked*. The same argument could be put forward to *ein Licht* in the idiom *Jmd. geht ein Licht auf* (‘understand’, lit. ‘a light comes on for sb.’) in (3) taken from Fanselow (2018) (his modification and rating, our highlighting).

³Cf. <http://www.witthaus-gmbh.de/>.

- (3) Als die Professorin die ersten Experimentaldaten sah, *ging ihr ein Licht auf* / ***wurde** ihr von einem Licht **aufgegangen** (= hat sie begriffen).
 ‘When the professor saw the first experimental data, a light came on for her / (ungrammatical passive version)’ (= she has understood)

Though attributing the ungrammaticality of the passive in (3) to the lack of an argument for *ein Licht* seems plausible, Fanselow points out that the blocking effect is not syntactically driven. For his German examples, he argues that the semantics of the verb is responsible for the lack of passivisation in the idiom, since the same verbs do not undergo passivisation in regular, i.e., non-idiomatic, sentences either.

- (4) a. *Der hat eine lange Leitung*/*Von ihm **wird** eine lange Leitung **gehabt** (= er begreift schlecht)
 ‘He has a long line’ (= he understands badly)
 b. *Weil sein PC so weit von der Steckdose entfernt steht, hat er eine lange Leitung*/***wird** von ihm eine lange Leitung **gehabt**
 ‘Because his PC is so far from the socket, he has a long line.’

In other cases, such as *kick the bucket* or its German equivalent *das Zeitliche segnen*; *lit. to bless the temporal*, it is not the verb of the idiom which has no passive, but the figurative meaning of *die*. For example, the verb *sterben/die* denotes a non-iterative achievement and has no regular passive, even when it is used metaphorically as in (5a). However, depending on the context, corpus data prove that speakers produce the passive forms of the verb and the idiom. According to this, there is no particular need to distinguish the idioms in [\pm decomp] in order to explain their passivisation properties. Either the semantics of the verb blocks passivisation, or it is the contextual circumstances that allow a passive interpretation. With this observation we extend Fanselow’s analysis and assert that the capability for passivisation is not only influenced by the verb’s semantics but also its contextual embedding: Non-recurring events of *dying* as seen in (5a) disallow passivisation, whereas a passive form of *dying* in recurring contexts as seen in (5b) is wholly acceptable.

- (5) a. Trauermeldung: Mein i7 6700K *segnet* jetzt wohl *das Zeitliche*.⁴ /

⁴<https://forum.linuxguides.de/index.php?thread/2178-trauermeldung-mein-i7-6700k-segnet-jetzt-wohl-das-zeitliche-aber-worauf-umsteige/>.

**Das Zeitliche wird* von meinem i7 6700K *gesegnet*.

‘News of grief: My i7 6700K is now probably at the end of its life.’

- b. Habe im Multiplayer-Modus einige Male eine Einladung zu einem Duell angenommen, da *wird andauernd das Zeitliche gesegnet*.⁵
 ‘I’ve accepted an invitation to a duel in multiplayer mode a few times, but one always end up getting killed.’

2.3. Adjective insertion

Fanselow (2018) offers further arguments to demonstrate the distinction between formal-syntactic licensing and semantic well-formedness, using adjective modification as in example (6). According to him, there is no syntactic process that exclusively determines adjunction of an adjective to a noun. This is simply a general process of structure building, and does not involve semantic information (Fanselow 2018: 119). Assuming that idioms are fully decomposable, adjectives should always be able to function as attributes of the noun. However, idioms that are not decomposable should not permit additional adjectives. Objects in non-decomposable idioms, such as (6a), lack referential meaning, so that adjectives have no starting point from which to contribute to the meaning of the sentence. In (6a), the sentence’s structure is flawed due to the inclusion of non-contributory words. To put it simply, the structure cannot be constructed because the noun lacks a contextual referent. Only meta-linguistic adjectives in the sense of Stathi (2007) are acceptable in this position, such as *sprichwörtlich* (‘proverbal’) in (6b).

- (6) a. Nach dem letzten Streit hat das Ehepaar *das Handtuch* / **das alte Handtuch* *geworfen*. (Fanselow 2018: 119)
 ‘After the last quarrel, the couple threw in the towel / *threw in the old towel’
- b. Nach dem letzten Streit hat das Ehepaar *das sprichwörtliche Handtuch* *geworfen*.
 ‘After the last quarrel, the couple threw in the proverbial towel.’

Again, a look into natural data proves the opposite. As in (7), we find evidence for adjectives in [–decomp] idioms that are not meta-linguistic. Moreover, the adjective in (7) contributes not only to the meaning of the noun, but also to the

⁵<https://forums.elderscrollsonline.com/de/discussion/544315/ork-dame-sucht-gilde>.

characterisation of the agent of the whole sentence. The compositional parts of *angstschweißnass* fit semantically with both arguments: *fear-sweat* modifies the agent,⁶ namely, the football player Meyer, and *wet* as a regular property of *towels*, the noun of the idiom.

(7) Könnte also sein, dass "Medienliebling" (Tagesspiegel) Meyer, der einst in Gladbach *das angstschweißnasse Handtuch warf*, [...] ziemlich auf die käufliche Nase fällt.⁷

'So it could be that "media darling" (Tagesspiegel) Meyer, who once threw in the fear-sweat-wet towel at Gladbach, [...] falls pretty much on his venal nose.'

Fanselow's analysis leads to the conclusion that the syntactic flexibility of idioms does not depend directly on their decomposability. Rather, the various properties of syntactic operations, which are more or less sensitive to semantics, determine the outcome of idioms' flexibility. In other words, whenever there is an interpretative effect or semantic constraint of the syntactic operation on the informative contribution of the sentence, the syntactic operation on idioms may or may not be blocked. As long as the operation does not conflict semantically with the idiom or its parts, there is no restriction on the syntactic operations.

3. Flexibility of Idioms – Not Directly a Matter of Syntax

Extensive research across numerous disciplines has demonstrated that the creation and employment of idioms is often influenced by socio-cultural variables (cf. Piirainen (2015)). From the linguistic point of view, the level of pragmatics is of paramount importance when using idioms for two main reasons. Firstly, there is a pragmatic relevance to the use of a formally more complex form and hence the figurative idiom instead of regular expressions. For instance, there may be advantages to using *das Handtuch werfen* ('throwing in the towel'), instead of the lexical entry for comparable circumstances as *aufgeben*, 'give up'. We will not go into details on these benefits, but conventional implicatures such as evaluation or polarity, as well as a presupposition of a prior attempt to resolve something, can lead to a quicker consensus or agreement between the interlocutors than long exchange of

⁶For further readings on modification types of adjectives in idioms see Ernst (1982).

⁷See <http://www.football-crazy.de/web/archiv04/1104sp17.htm>.

background information. The second reason why pragmatics overrides syntax is the necessity for contextual adaptation of idioms to enhance explicitness and accuracy of the expression. Speakers add adjectives or perform syntactic operations to provide supplementary information on the levels of semantics and pragmatics, rather than fulfilling any structural requirement. Thus, depending on the context, example (8) – in passive, and plural, embedding an adjective – may be considered acceptable or not.

- (8) ?Die angtschweißnassen Handtücher wurden geworfen.
 ‘the fear-sweat-wet towels were thrown in’

In addition to pragmatic considerations, semantic restrictions can greatly affect inflexibility. For instance, the adjective *wet* in (8) matches with the noun, even outside of the idiom and is thus in line with semantic requirements. However, other adjectives such as temporal ones do not match with *towel* and are less acceptable within the idiom even though they accurately modify the paraphrased procedure of *giving up* as in (9).

- (9) #ein schnelles/stundenlanges Handtuch werfen
 ‘to throw a fast / hours lasting towel’

Aside from the semantic and pragmatic levels, the difficulty to undergo syntactic operations can be explained by processing effects. For understanding the modified version, listeners need to recognize the underlying conventional form of the idiom. For instance, lexical keywords as *Handtuch* facilitate a more rapid understanding of the figurative connotation of *give up*. Substituting the keyword with a *wh*-phrase as in (10) renders idiom’s comprehension arduous, if not impossible. Again, the inflexibility of idioms to undergo syntactic operations is not syntactically driven.

- (10) Was hast du geworfen? - #Das Handtuch!
 ‘What have you thrown in? - #The towel!’

Recent psycholinguistic theories of idiom representation and processing typically pursue a hybrid approach, i.e., mental representations and lexical access that involve both the entire idiom as single unit and its constituents (e.g., Cutting and Bock 1997, Sprenger 2003, Sprenger et al. 2006), or assume no representation at all for the idiomatic expression (Tabossi et al. 2008). Based on the evidence for access to individual words in an idiom and to the syntactic

den Brocken hinschmeißen ‘to throw the chunk’
 den Laden hinschmeißen ‘to throw the shop’
 etwas über Bord werfen ‘to throw something overboard’
 die Fahnen strecken ‘to stretch the flags’
 die Flagge/die Segel streichen ‘strike/drop the flag/sail(s)’

Although we have already discussed the levels of pragmatics, semantics, and language processing, it is essential to consider the prosodic level as a determinant for syntactic operations. Even though the number of cases in which this applies may be minimal, there are still notable effects at the interface between prosodic and structural elements.⁸ If we examine a set of idioms that is determined by rhyming or metrical configurations, for example, the substitution of lexemes is not as simple as it might be in other sets of idioms. Take for instance example (12a), which features the lexically fixed alliteration *Kind und Kegel*; substituting the words within the semantically connected field is not straightforward. Nonetheless, the context may permit it, as long as *Wind und Segel* fits the phonotactics of the underlying form. Alongside this, the phonetically similar proper names of the expression *Hinz und Kunz*, used to derogatorily refer to any person, cannot be replaced by any average proper name. However, it is acceptable if these names are also phonetically alike, as shown in (12b). Additionally, we can explain the monitoring function of prosody for morphological operations. For example, in (12c), the phrase *klipp und klar* is a chunk of a bound lexeme *klipp* and a general adjective *klar*. Interestingly, the morphological marking for the comparative form spreads from the standard adjective to the bound lexeme, although the form *klipper* does not exist in the German language. This means that the idiom can undergo an irregular operation to preserve the phonotactic structure of its underlying form.

- (12) a. Kind und Kegel - Wind und Segel – #Baby und Würfel
 Child and cone – wind and sail - #baby and cube
 ‘with kith and kin’
- b. Hinz und Kunz – Hanni und Nanni – #Peter und Klaus
 (coordinated proper names; nick names in the idiomatic cases)
 ‘the butcher, the baker, (and) the candlestick-maker’

⁸Compare also the phonological priming effects on production latencies of idioms in Sprenger et al.’s (2006) experiments.

- c. klipp und klar – Noch klipper und klarer kann ich es nicht sagen
clip and clear – I can't say it any more clippily and clearly
'clear as daylight'

4. Conclusion

Nunberg et al. (1994) argued that not all idioms are alike and proposed a division into decomposable and non-decomposable idioms. By linking syntactic flexibility to semantic decomposability, they essentially restricted the monolithic view of idioms to a subset of idioms, namely non-decomposable idioms. Fanselow (2018) pointed out that grammatical operations are not all the same either and argued that decomposability only matters for operations that have an interpretative component, thereby further restricting the monolithic view. In this paper, we have shown that even within this confined area (non-decomposable idioms, grammatical operations with an interpretative component), there is more flexibility than expected. Though not anything goes, the data suggest that interpretative flexibility may come with greater syntactic flexibility.

References

- Chomsky, Noam (1980): 'Rules and representations', *Behavioral and brain sciences* **3**(1), 1–15.
- Cutting, J. Cooper and Kathryn Bock (1997): 'That's the way the cookie bounces: Syntactic and semantic components of experimentally elicited idiom blends', *Memory & Cognition* **25**, 57–71.
- Erbach, Gregor and Brigitte Krenn (1993): *Idioms and support-verb constructions in HPSG*. CLAUS-Report, Universität des Saarlandes, Vol. 28.
- Ernst, Thomas (1982): 'Grist for the linguistic mill: Idioms and 'extra' adjectives', *Journal of Linguistic Research* **1982**(1(3)), 51–68.
- Fanselow, Gisbert (2018): Zur Flexibilität von Idiomen im Deutschen. In: *Colloquia Germanica Stetinensia* 27. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, pp. 115–134.
- Fellbaum, Christiane (2019): 'How flexible are idioms? A corpus-based study', *Linguistics* **57**(4), 735–767.
- Kiparsky, Paul (1976): 'Oral poetry: Some linguistic and typological considerations', *Oral literature and the formula* **10**, 73.
- Kuiper, Koenraad, Marie-Elaine van Egmond, Gerard Kempen and Simone Sprenger (2007): 'Slipping on superlemmas. Multi-word lexical items in speech production', *The Mental Lexicon* **2**, 313–357.

- Marantz, Alec (1981): On the nature of grammatical relations. PhD thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Nunberg, Geoffrey, Ivan A. Sag and Thomas Wasow (1994): 'Idioms', *Language* **70**(3), 491–538.
- Piirainen, Elisabeth (2015): "Widespread idioms in Europe and beyond" New insights into figurative language. In: *Linguo-Cultural Research on Phraseology*. Vol. 3, Peter Lang, pp. 17–36.
- Riehemann, Susanne Zalta (2001): *A constructional approach to idioms and word formation*. Stanford University.
- Soehn, Jan-Philipp (2006): 'On idiom parts and their contexts', *Linguistik online* **27**(2).
- Sprenger, Simone A (2003): Fixed expressions and the production of idioms. PhD thesis, Radboud University Nijmegen Nijmegen.
- Sprenger, Simone A, Willem JM Levelt and Gerard Kempen (2006): 'Lexical access during the production of idiomatic phrases', *Journal of memory and language* **54**(2), 161–184.
- Stathi, Katerina (2007): A corpus-based analysis of adjectival modification in German idioms. In: C. Fellbaum, ed., *Idioms and collocations: Corpus-based linguistic and lexicographic studies*. Continuum Press.
- Tabossi, Patrizia, Rachele Fanari and Kinou Wolf (2008): 'Processing idiomatic expressions: Effects of semantic compositionality', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* **34**(2), 313–327.
- Titone, D.A. and C. M. Connine (1994): 'Comprehension of idiomatic expressions: Effects of predictability and literalness', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* **20**(5), 1126–1138.
- Wierzba, Marta, J. M. M. Brown and Gisbert Fanselow (2023): 'Sources of variability in the syntactic flexibility of idioms', *Glossa* **8**, 1–41.