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Some Remarks on Idioms (with Examples from Polish and English)

In the present paper we try to deal with two problems involved in any attempt at study of idiomaticity within a generative framework; the problem of the status of idioms within the lexicon of a transformational generative grammar, and the problem of transformational deficiencies exhibited by idioms.

Generally, by an idiom will be meant a sequence of words whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the words themselves! However, the idiomatic status of an expression like e.g. Polish czarna rozpacz (lit. 'black despair') is somehow different from that of biały kruk (lit. 'white raven' = a curio). According to Lewicki (1976), it is the constant lexical context (kontekst leksykalny stały) that separates idioms and phrasemes ('frazem') from other phraseological expressions. If the constant lexical context is unilateral, as in czarna rozpacz, where the exceptional meaning of czarna ('desperate') is realized only in conjunction with rozpacz ('despair'), we are dealing with phrasemes. If the constant lexical context is bidirectional, as in biały kruk, where the exceptional meaning of biały is determined by kruk, and the exceptional meaning of kruk is determined by biały, we are dealing with idioms.

A similar definition of idiom comes from Weinreich (1969):

1) 'A phraseological unit that involves at least two polysemous constituents, and in which there is a reciprocal contextual selection of subsenses, will be called an idiom. [...] Expressions that are not phraseological units we will call free constructions.' (p. 42).

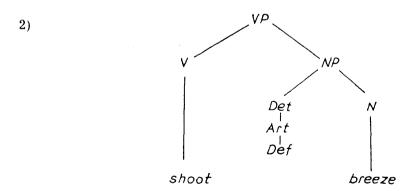
Consider for instance the phrase red herring. If no subsenses are selected, a red herring is a certain kind of fish. If a subsense of red is

¹ For an account of idiomaticity see also Chafe (1970), Makkai (1972), Newmeyer (1972).

selected, the phrase means something like 'a herring that is smoked and cured with saltpeter'. However, red herring can also be paraphrased as phony issue. The last reading of the phrase red herring is idiomatic because the selection of the subsenses phony and issue is bidirectional.

As it has been mentioned at the outset there are two main problems which arise as for the treatment of idioms within a generative framework. We repeat them here quoting Frazer (1970) according to whom , first is the question of how to represent the meaning of an idiom in the deep structure representation of a sentence. Inherent in answering this question is one involving the introduction of an idiom into the base P-marker generated by a set of context-free phrase structure rules. Second is the question of how to account for the recalcitrance of idioms to undergo particular syntactic transformations". (p. 104).

Two plausible solutions to both problems can be found in Weinreich (1969) and Frazer (1970). According to Weinreich listing idioms in the lexicon either as wholes (lexical units) or dissolved into their constituents with arbitrarily assigned subsenses has great disadvantages on morphophonemic and semantic levels respectively (Weinreich, 1969: 55—60). Thus, in addition to the lexicon the description of a language is to contain an idiom list. "Each entry in the idiom list is a string of morphemes which may be from two morphemes to a sentence in length, with its associated phrase marker and a sense description." (pp. 57—58). The entry should also contain contextual features and instructions for prohibited and obligatory transformations. For instance:



Within this entry an animate plural noun is specified for the subject, the passive morpheme is prohibited as well as of-nominalization.

If the entry in the idiom list is not distinct from all or part of the terminal string, an idiom comparison rule (which matches a terminal string against the idiom list) deletes the semantic features of the matched fragment of the terminal string and inserts instructions from the idiom list instead. The idiom comparison rule is optional, because for each idiomatic expression there is assumed a homophonous literal counterpart.

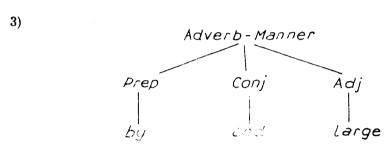
Frazer (1970), on the other hand, suggests that all lexical units of a language (i. e. idioms as well) can be dealt with without any additional components. The only modification that is needed to achieve this task is to permit the complex symbol2 to consist of a string of complex symbols. For instance the idiom hit the sack will have the lexical entry consisting of "(1) insertion restrictions specifying that the entry must occur after an adult human subject noun phrase [...]; (2) three complex symbols, the first containing the syntactic feature [+V] and the phonemic string for hit, the second containing the syntactic feature [+DET] (determiner) and the phonemic string for the, and the third containing the syntactic feature [+N] and the phonemic string for sack; and (3) a set of semantic markers which has the semantic reading 'go to bed'." (p. 108). The transformational deficiencies of idioms are not, as in Weinreich (1969), assigned individually to lexical entries of idioms, but they fall into a hierarchy (frozenness hierarchy) organized in such a way that idioms by being characterized as belonging to some level in the hierarchy, they automatically are characterized as belonging to each lower level. In short, the higher up on the hierarchy, the more syntactically unfrozen the idiom." (p. 123).

Both linguists assume that idioms have the same deep structure analysis as their literal counterparts. The obvious consequence of such a treatment of idiomatic expressions is that all transformational deficiencies of idioms are dealt with as their idiosyncratic properties which must be somehow marked within the lexical entries of idioms. In Weinreich (1969) each entry is marked individually as prohibiting a particular type of transformation. In Frazer (1970) the instructions for prohibited transformations are simplified to a syntactic feature indicating the level on the 'frozenness hierarchy' to which it belongs. For instance, in Weinreich's analysis the idiom kick the bucket would be marked as prohibiting passivization and of-nominalization, whereas in the analysis developed by Frazer the lexical entry of the idiom would be marked as [+L1],

² As conceived of in Chomsky (1965).

meaning that the idiom belongs to the first level on the hierarchy. Idioms belonging to this level can undergo only such operations as the gerund nominalization.

Expressions of the type by and large or to kingdom come are treated differently by both linguists. For Weinreich "they would not be idioms [...] because they do not have any literal counterparts and cannot have them in view of their ill-formedness" (Weinreich, 1969: 68). For Frazer they are "idioms which do not have any literal counterpart". (Frazer, 1970: 112). However, regardless of whether they are idiomatic or not in both analyses the lexical entries of such constructions are dominated by syntactic categories reflecting their syntactic behaviour, and not their structure. Consider:



It is difficult to treat idioms with literal counterparts in such a way. For instance if the dictionary entry of the adjective-plus-noun idiom like bialy kruk ('white raven' = a curio) were dominated by the category Noun in inflected languages (as Polish) the full morphophonemic specifications of the literal constituents of the idiom would have to be repeated under the entry. The alternative analysis (as suggested by Weinreich, 1969) in which the adjective-plus-noun idioms are derived from the underlying relative clauses with the adjectives preposed obligatorily accounts for the fact that the adjectives which are constituents of such idioms cannot be used predicatively if the idiomatic sense is required, but it does not handle the loss of idiomaticity of the adjective-plus-noun idioms if the adjectives are nominalized, e.g.

- 4) *Kruk jest biały.
 - The raven is white.
- 5) *The hat is red.
 - red hat the cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church
- 6) *Białość/biel kruka...
- 7) *The redness of the hat...

Frazer (1970) on the other hand treats the adjective-plus-noun idioms as Noun Phrases and says that "although we recognize that the

noun phrase [...] does have a literal counterpart which can be derived from a relative clause, we must forgo this analysis and choose a less appealing one, but one which can account for the facts." (p. 112). If we accept this view the problem of the loss of idiomaticity in the nominalized versions of the idioms under 6) and 7) will remain unsolved, unless the deficiency is treated as an idiosyncratic feature of such idioms. Notice, however, that the adjective-plus-noun idioms' resistance to this type of nominalization is a general rule, and the idiosyncratic treatment of this deficiency seems to be unmotivated. Such a treatment would require, quite redundantly, the repetition of the instruction prohibiting the operation within each lexical entry of this type of idioms³.

If we adopt the thesis that the adjective-plus-noun idioms are actually nouns we solve the problem of the nominalized adjectives, but we return to the point of departure and face the problem of the repeated inflectional information for purposes of the surface structure.

The viscious circle we are dealing with seems to spring from somehow one-sided, oversimplified treatments of idiomaticity. Idioms are viewed either as ambiguous linguistic constructions (i. e. having homophonous literal counterparts), or as constructions totally independent of the literal constructions, "regardless of appearance". (G u m p e l, 1974: 32). In the first case the structure of a literal construction is imposed on the structure of an idiom and, as a result, the syntactic "misbehaviour" of idioms must be treated as idosyncratic in reference to the literal expression (e. g. the idiom red hat treated as a NP). In the alternative case we are not able to handle the fact that the constituents of the whole construction behave phonologically and inflectionally in the same way as the "independent" constituents of the literal constructions (e. g. the idiom red hat treated as a N).

In the present paper we shall not treat idioms as, strictly speaking, ambiguous. It seems that they are some particular type of construction that receives two semantic interpretations simultaneously. According to Liselotte G u m p e l (1974) a sentence operates either idiomatically or not, "unless deliberately cleaved in punning are aesthetic word play" (p. 32). Notice, however, that idioms (those which have literal counterparts) seem to function exclusively as puns or wordplays when used in an actual communication act. It is hard to imagine an idiom to communicate only its idiomatic sense (i. e. the lexical semantic reading). Nobody would probably use the idiom kick the bucket with the intention to communicate that 'someone has died'. There is always "something more" about the

³ Notice that the adjective-plus-noun idioms cannot take comparatives or superlatives either.

meaning of an idiom than can be found in the semantic description of it. In our view the "something more" is the literal meaning of the constituents of the idiom coupled to the meaning of the idiom itself. In other words, idioms are interpreted semantically both as literal constructions and as constructions whose meaning is not the compositional function of their constituents. Put simply, an idiomatic expression means two things simultaneously.

The relation holding between the two semantic interpretations can hardly be explicitly formulated. The actual interpretation of an idiom (i. e. the interpretation of its both meanings) is an act that involves not only linguistic factors, but also some pragmatic factors of the "external world" such as situational context, or even individual's sense of humor. Such an interpretation goes beyond the scope of a transformational generative grammar whose main interest is linguistic competence, not performance. If it is so, idioms are not ambiguous, because the meaning of a literal construction is always coupled to the total meaning of an idiom⁴.

The above suggestions might sound awkward if, to quote Weinreich (1969), "the doubling up of functions were not so familiar in other fields of human endeavour. I take a hammer and use it as a paperweight; [...] A statue of a goddess holds up the roof of the temple" (p. 76). Thus, it doesn't mean that a hammer used as a paperweight is not a hammer, but rather that it is both, a hammer, and a paperweight.

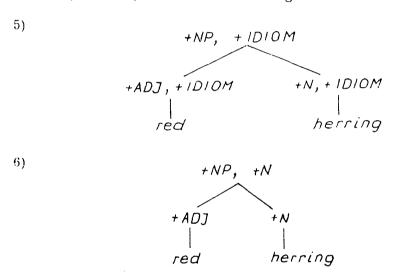
To account for the suggested treatment of idioms the complex symbol of the lexical entry of an idiom has to be extended so that the double semantic interpretation of such an entry is possible. Following Frazer (1970) we permit a complex symbol to consist of a string of complex symbols. However, unlike in Frazer, with each complex symbol within the string there will be associated a set of semantic markers to enable the semantic interpretation of the literal string. In addition a syntactic feature associated with the category of the idiom, established independently of the literal construction on the basis of the idiom's syntactic behaviour, will be introduced in the lexical entry. In the case of adjective-plus-noun idioms the syntactic feature will be [+N]. The entry will also contain a set of semantic markers associated with the idiomatic reading.

Due to the doubling of syntactic markers the idiom's main syntactic

⁴ The seemingly idiomatic constructions of the type *by and large* will be treated as non-idiomatic, because it is impossible to assign any literal meaning to them. Syntactically they do not pose any problem because they are hardly liable to syntactic changes.

marker ([+NP] in the case of adjective-plus-noun idioms) will ascertain its (the idiom's) appropriate phonological and inflectional processing while the additional ('idiomatic') syntactic marker will determine the idiom's behaviour with respect to the transformational component of the grammar.

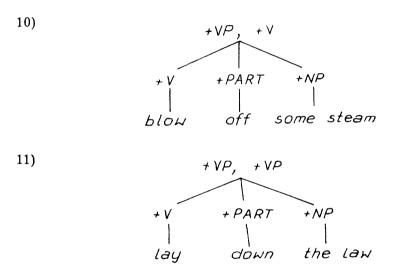
The additional syntactic feature will be introduced into the preterminal string in the way K at z (1973: 364) suggests to insert the syntactic feature [+IDIOM]. The only difference would be that the syntactic feature is attached to the highest node dominating an idiom. Thus, in K at z (1973) the terminal string of an idiom like red herring would look like 5) below, whereas, in our view the string would look something like 6):



The function of the syntactic feature [+IDIOM] under 5) is to block the application of a transformation to a phrase marker if "the structural change of the transformation specifies a formal operation on a component of the substring that is marked [+IDIOM], regardless of the fact that it otherwise satisfies the structural analysis of the transformation" (K a t z, 1973: 365). For instance the particle movement in blow off some steam is blocked, because the particle of the idiom is marked [+IDIOM]. In case of lay down the law the transformation will apply due to the particle's being unmarked with respect to idiomaticity. Since there are no independent grounds for establishing the idiomatic vs. non-idiomatic status of some particular part of an idiom, the procedure suggested by Katz turns out to be yet another idiosyncratic treatment of transformational deficiencies of idioms. Moreover, if some part of an idiom is treated as non-idiomatic it is necessary to provide it with a lite-

ral semantic interpretation, which is not possible within the model outlined by Katz.

Within our proposal the idiom blow off some steam (see 10 below) will be marked by the additional syntactic feature [+V] which will clearly determine the unitary status of the idiom simultaneously blocking the particle movement operation in a natural way. At the same time every constituent of the idiom will be granted its idiomatic status, and the idiomatic sense will be carried by the whole expression. In case of an idiom like lay down the law the additional syntactic feature [+VP] will be attached to the syntactic category dominating the literal expression. In this case both categories will be identical and the second occurrence of [+VP] will not block the particle movement because the idiom will be treated as a phrase rather than as a unit. Consider:



Notice that the suggested procedure accounts correctly for the fact that the idiom under 10), interpreted as a verb, cannot passivize while it is possible with the idiom under 11). Notice also that the "transformational deficiency" of the idiom under 10) is not actually its idiosyncratic deficiency, but a natural consequence of the structure of the idiom. It is a verb, and there is neither NP to prepose, nor a particle to move. The idiom under 11), on the other hand, quite accidentally has the structure of the literal expression, and is subject to its transformational modifications.

It must be pointed out here that no subsenses of an idiom are assigned to the literal constituents of it. In other words, no part of the literal construction contributes to the semantic interpretation of the

idiom. This fact seems to explain why idioms cannot be topicalized⁵, or take a restrictive relative clause. Consider:

- 12) *It was the bucket that John kicked, not the pail.
- 13) *The bucket that John kicked made Mary sad.

Finally, let us consider briefly the syntactic behaviour of verbal idioms following the pattern "V+Art+N/NP" with respect to passivization⁶ and nominalization. Consider.

- 14) a. John kicked the bucket.
 - b. *The bucket was kicked by John.
- 15) a. Janek zalał robaka. ('John swamped the worm'.)
 - b. *Robak został zalany przez Janka. ('The worm was swamped by John'.)

zalać robaka ('to swamp the worm' = to get drunk)

The b. versions of idioms under 14) and 15) lose their idiomatic senses when passivized. According to Makkai (1972: 150) the idiom drop a brick can be passivized and still communicate the meaning of the idiom clearly:

16) The brick had been dropped but Peter did not get offended.

Passivization seems to be possible with certain Polish idioms as well. Consider:

17) Pierwsze lody zostały skruszone⁸. ('The first ices have been broken'.) skruszyć pierwsze lody ('to break the first ices' = to break the ice) According to Lewicki (1976) a phraseological unit in which a noun in the accusative or in the genitive is involved (i. e. direct object phrases, e. g. zalać robaka) cannot be passivized. Cases like skruszyć pierwsze lody, which are borrowings, constitute exceptions (Lewicki, 1976: 53—54).

There are many cases, however, where direct object idiomatic phrases which are not borrowings can be passivized. Consider:

On jest w gorącej wodzie kapany

('He is bathed in hot water = He is quick tempered)

⁵ According to Frazer (1970) ,,to topicalize one part of the idiom [...] is to impute to the noun phrase some semantic integrity which it does not have. A clefted noun phrase must have some interpretation and this violates the notion of an idiom consisting of components without interpretation." (p. 114).

⁶ An interesting suggestion concerning the passivization of idioms comes from Zabrocki (1981) who maintains that in Polish such idioms should be specified twice in the lexicon, both in their active and passive forms. The suggestion is supported by the existence of numerous exclusively passive idioms, e.g.

The presence of such idioms in Polish serves as an argument against a transformational derivation of literal passives in Polish (see Zabrocki, 1981: 109—112, 130—131).

 $^{^{7}}$ It seems that the sentence loses its idiomatic meaning if the agent is not deleted.

⁸ The passive form of the idiom seems to be primary in this case.

- 18) Nie spodziewaliśmy się, że haczyk zostanie połknięty. ('We didn't expect that the hook would be swallowed'.)
- 19) Sidła na Janka zostały zastawione przez jego wrogów. ('The snare for John has been set by his enemies'.) zastawić sidła ('to set the snare' to expose sb. to defeat)

In English there are some idioms which take both gerund and action nominalizations (see Stockwell et al., 1973). In Polish there is no evidence for the existence of these two types of nominalization (see Fisiak et al., 1978: 149). In the present paper the term "nominalization" (in the discussion of Polish idioms) will refer to deverbal -nie, -cie forms. Consider:

- 20) John's spilling of the beans made Mary ashamed. (act. nom.)
- 21) John's spilling the beans was impolite. (ger. nom.)

 Some idioms accept the gerund nominalization, but not the action one, e.g.
- 22) a. *The boys' shooting the breeze. (ger. nom.)
 - b. The boys' shooting of the breeze. (act. nom.)

Notice that those idioms which do not allow the action nominalization prohibit passivization.

23) *The breeze was shot by the boys.

According to Frazer (1970) those idioms which allow the action nominalization, can also undergo passivization and the gerund nominalization. Such idioms are the least restricted syntactically. Those which allow for the gerund nominalization, but which prohibit the other operations are the most restricted ones.

Those of the Polish verbal idioms which can be passivized can also undergo nominalization, e.g.

24) Skruszenie pierwszych lodów jest najważniejsze.

('Breaking the first ices is the most important thing'.)

Some of the idioms (in Polish) which cannot be passivized are also acceptable when nominalized:

25) Każdemu może przytrafić się strzelenie byka.

('Shooting the bull may befall anyone'.)

strzelić byka ('to shoot the bull' = to make a mistake)

26) Twoje kręcenie gitary denerwuje mnie.

('Your turning the guitar makes me nervous'.)

kręcić gitarę ('to turn the guitar' = to grumble)

It is difficult to find in Polish any verbal idioms that cannot be nominalized, and thus, the most restricted of the Polish idioms are those which prohibit passivization.

The procedure which we have outlined earlier in this paper seems

to be capable of explaining all these facts, and not only of classifying idioms among appropriate levels of some frozenness hierarchy⁹. The idioms under 14)b and 15)b would simply have the syntactic feature [+V] attached to their lexical entries, and, as a consequence, neither the passive transformation nor the of-nominalization (as far as English idioms are concerned) could apply due to the lack of objects in the underlying structures of the idioms. In Polish the nominalization transformation would apply freely to all verbal idioms since in literal constructions the transformation is not restricted to verb phrases with objects.

The scope of the present work does not allow for a more detailed analysis of transformational "defects" of idioms. Those properties of idioms that have been discussed are the most general ones in both languages, and numerous problems concerning idiomaticity have not even been mentioned¹⁰. It seems, however, that it is possible to handle the problem of idioms in a general manner and to avoid treating their deficiencies taxonomically as exceptions or as idiosyncratic properties.

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⁹ Some problems may arise, however, if we accept the assumption that lexical insertion takes place in surface structure (see Chomsky and Lasnik, 1977: 432)

¹⁰ For instance the way in which definite versus indefinite articles occur in idiomatic expressions seems to be worth investigating, as well as the problem of resistence of some idioms to what Lakoff (1965) calls ungoverned rules (e.g. yes-no questions, imperatives, negation placement). Some attempts toward the explanation of the former problem can be found e.g. in Chafe (1970), Gumpel (1974). The problem of idioms' resistence to ungoverned rules is briefly discussed in Frazer (1970).

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Tadeusz Rachwał

KILKA UWAG O IDIOMACH (Z PRZYKŁADAMI Z JĘZYKA POLSKIEGO I ANGIELSKIEGO)

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszej pracy jest ustalenie statusu wyrażeń idiomatycznych w modelu interpretacyjnym gramatyki transformacyjno-generatywnej. Podejmujemy próbę usystematyzowania "defektów" transformacyjnych idiomów (rozumianych jako konstrukcje, których znaczenie nie jest funkcją znaczeń ich składników). Przez defekt transformacyjny rozumiemy tu utratę znaczenia idiomatycznego przez idiom na skutek zastosowania transformacji (np. Janek zalał robaka — Robak został zalany przez Janka). Defekty te traktowane są przez wielu językoznawców (Weinreich. 1969; Frazer, 1970; Katz, 1973) jako idiosynkratyczne cechy wyrażeń idiomatycznych.

Proponujemy także, by idiomy nie były traktowane jako konstrukcje dwuznaczne, czyli takie, które otrzymują jedną z dwóch możliwych interpretacji semantycznych (dosłowną lub idiomatyczną), lecz żeby otrzymywały dwie interpretacje semantyczne równocześnie.

Тадеуш Рахвал

НЕСКОЛЬКО ЗАМЕЧАНИЙ ОБ ИДИОМАХ (С ПРИМЕРАМИ ИЗ ПОЛЬСКОГО И АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКОВ)

Резюме

Целью настоящей работы является определение статуса идиоматических выражений в интерпретационной модели трансформационно-генеративной грамматики. В статье предпринимается попытка систематизировать "дефекты" трансформационных идиомов (понимаемых как конструкции, значение которых не является суммой зна-

чений их компонентов). Под трансформационным дефектом понимается потеря идиоматического значения идиомом вследствие применения трансформации (напр. Janek zalał robaka — Robak został zalany przez Janka). Дефекты эти трактуются многими языковедами (Вайнрсйх, 1968; Фрейзер, 1970; Кац, 1973) как идиосинкретическое признаки идиоматических выражений.

В статье предлагается также, чтобы идиомы не рассматривались как двусмысленные конструкции, т. е. такие, которые получают одну из двух возможных семантических интерпретаций (буквальную или идиоматическую), а чтобы они получали две семантические интерпретации одновременно.