Construction Grammar

2017 LINGUISTIC INSTITUTE
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LECTURE 2: IDIOMS (WITH THANKS TO LAURA MICHAELIS FOR ALLOWING ME TO USE MATERIAL FROM HER LECTURE NOTES)
Two meanings of conventional

A. Inferred meaning (implicature) vs. conventional meaning.
This distinction is owed to Grice (1975), who distinguished between what is said and what is inferred from the Cooperative Principle and its maxims. An example of implicature:

A: Did you see Joe at the party?
B: Yes, he was with a woman.

- Conventional: The person Joe was with could be any woman.
- Inferred (via Quantity 1 maxim): The woman was not known to the speaker and likely was not Joe’s wife or relative

Words, phrases, and sentences all have conventional meaning in this sense, in addition to whatever inferred meaning they might have in a given context.

Conventional meaning in this sense is in the domain of linguistic semantics, whether or not that meaning involves discourse function (deixis, modality, information structure).
Two meanings of *conventional*

B. Word meaning (arbitrary and conventional) vs. phrase/sentence meaning (computed from the meanings of the parts)

- **Word meaning:** *cat, chase, mouse*
  - must be learned and memorized

- **Sentence meaning:**
  - *The cat chased the mouse*
  - *The mouse chased the cat.*
  - *The cat was chased by the mouse.*
  - *The mouse was chased by the cat.*
  - can be computed based on word meanings and general rules of syntax-semantics mapping

In this usage, conventional meaning (rote) is contrasted with compositional meaning (rule).

Compositional meaning arises via composing semantics of syntactic rules and lexical entries.
What must we know to interpret a sentence?

Example:  

John *let the cat out of the bag* and told me that house has already been sold.

As a first approximation:

- Lexical information about the phonological form, grammatical category, and meaning of each word and morpheme
- Inflectional forms of words and what structural contexts they occur in
- Systematic grammatical patterns and their associated principles of semantic composition
- Discourse context and principles for interpreting meaning in context
- Real-world knowledge

But what about “let the cat out of the bag”?

Complex expressions can mean what they mean in much the same way that words do. Such complex expressions are known as idioms.
What are idioms?

“Idioms are, by definition, grammatical units larger than a word which are idiosyncratic in some respect” (Croft & Cruse 2004: 230)

Thus idioms are conventional in our second sense: something about them must be learned and memorized, and can’t be fully predicted based on general principles

(11)  
a. It takes one to know one.  
b. pull a fast one  
c. bring down the house  
d. wide awake  
e. sight unseen  
f. all of a sudden  
g. (X) blow X’s nose  
h. Once upon a time . . .

How do idioms challenge theories of syntax?

A. If the lexicon is the repository of all arbitrary meaning, where do idioms belong?

• Words are atoms as far as syntax is concerned, but phrases are not in general (e.g., passers by, take advantage of).

B. Idioms challenge the separability of syntactic levels, since they are pieces of syntax but, like words, they cannot be defined in a level-independent way

• E.g., syntax and phonology: Fancy meeting YOU here, Believe you ME, How are YOU?
How do idioms challenge theories of syntax?

C. Idioms are in many ways just as productive as the canonical phrase structure rules:

- **The correlative conditional**: *The longer we wait, the worse it gets.*
- **Hypotactic apposition**: *That’s the real problem is that you have to take the lawyers out of it.*
- **Ample negatives**: Not in my house you don’t.
- **Preemptive negation**: *Not that I’m interested or anything, but how much do you want for it?*
- **Just because**: *Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not all out to get you.*
- **Inverted pseudocleft**: *We stayed home is what we did.* (*We stayed home surprised everyone.*)
- **Nominal Extraposition**: *It’s amazing the paper that can pile up in one’s office.*
Different types of idioms (Fillmore, Kay, and O’Connor 1988)

A. **Decoding** vs. **encoding** idioms

**Decoding** idioms are idioms whose meanings you probably couldn’t figure out just by knowing the words and grammar of the language
- *kick the bucket, pulls someone’s leg, let the cat out of the bag*

**Encoding** idioms are expressions that you can probably understand based on the meanings of the words, but which one wouldn’t *a priori* know are ways of conventionally conveying those meanings in the language
- *answer the door, perform surgery, wide awake, heavy smoker, deep voice, bright red, mindless chatter, distinct possibility, healthy attitude, blow one’s nose*
Different types of idioms  (Fillmore, Kay, and O’Connor 1988)

B. **Substantive** vs. **formal** idioms

**Substantive** idioms are lexically filled:
- *hit the nail on the head, by the skin of x’s teeth, take x to task*

**Formal** idioms have open slots:
- The Xer the Yer: *The faster we run, the slower they run.*
- What’s X Doing Y: *What’s that fly doing in my soup?*
- Double *is*: *The problem is is you never really know*
- Hypotactic apposition: *Here’s my issue is that they’re not informed voters*
- Pseudo-imperative: *Watch me drop it. / Watch him turn out to be handsome.*
Different types of idioms (Fillmore, Kay, and O’Connor 1988)

C. **Grammatical** idioms vs. **extragrammatical** idioms.

**Grammatical** idioms display ordinary phrasal syntax:
- *spill the beans, put someone out to pasture, a doozy of a winter, give someone a hand*

**Extragrammatical** idioms display idiosyncratic syntactic properties:
- *by and large, long live the king, atta boy, all of a sudden, long time no see, easy does it*

• Some formal idioms are extragrammatical: the correlative conditional, nominal extraposition, hypotactic apposition
Properties of idioms  (Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994)

A. Conventionality: The meaning of idioms cannot be predicted from knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another

This is the only essential property of idioms. The rest are only typical properties.

B. Inflexibility: Idioms are often limited in their syntactic distribution:
   - They shot the breeze $\rightarrow$ *The breeze was shot
   - It’s easy to shoot the breeze with him $\rightarrow$ *The breeze is easy to shoot with him
   - The wool was pulled over their eyes. $\rightarrow$ ??Whose eyes was the wool pulled over?
   - What is eating Harry $\rightarrow$ *What ate Harry?
Properties of idioms  (Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994)

C. Figuration: Idioms typically involve metaphors (take the bull by the horns), metonymies (lend a hand, count heads), hyperboles (not worth the paper it’s printed on).

Sometimes it’s hard to know the precise figure involved (e.g., as in kick the bucket).

D. Proverbiality: Idioms are typically used to describe a recurrent situation of particular social interest (becoming restless, talking informally, divulging a secret).

The situation is compared to a folksy, familiar image (climbing walls, chewing the fat, spilling beans).
Properties of idioms  (Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994)

E. **Informality**: Idioms, like proverbs, are associated with informal or colloquial registers.

F. **Affect**: Idioms are typically used to imply a certain evaluation or affective stance toward the things they denote.

“A language doesn’t ordinarily use idioms to describe situations that are regarded neutrally—buying tickets, reading a book—although of course one could imagine a community in which such activities were sufficiently charged with social meaning to be worthy of idiomatic reference.”  (Fillmore et al 1988: 493)
Partial compositionality (Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994)

While some idioms are very limited in their syntactic distribution (1), others occur in a wider range of constructions (2). Idioms such as those in (2) have meanings which are idiosyncratic but compositional, contributing to their ability to occur in a wider range of structures.

(1)  
  a. He kicked the bucket. \(\rightarrow\) *The bucket was kicked.
  b. He was sawing wood \(\rightarrow\) *Wood was sawed.
  c. You’ve hit the nail on the head. \(\rightarrow\) *The nail was hit on the head.
  d. They shot the breeze. \(\rightarrow\) *The breeze was shot.

(2)  
  a. She spilled the beans. \(\rightarrow\) The beans were spilled last night.
  b. Pat pulled some strings to get him the job. \(\rightarrow\) Some strings were pulled to get him the job.
  c. I let the cat out of the bag. \(\rightarrow\) The cat got let out of the bag.
  d. They kept tabs on Harry \(\rightarrow\) Tabs seem to be being kept on Harry.
Partial compositionality (Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994)

Besides active and passive, there are other constructions in which semantically compositional idioms can often occur:

Modification:  
*Leave no legal stone unturned*

Quantification:  
*It touched a couple of nerves*

Topicalization:  
*Those strings, he wouldn’t pull for you*

VP Ellipsis:  
*My goose is cooked, but yours isn’t*

Anaphora:  
*We thought tabs were being kept on us, but they weren’t*

Wh-question:  
*How many strings did they have to pull?*
Idioms in generative grammar

Syntactic flexibility of some idioms has been used as an argument that parts of an idiom occur together before movement applies. This allows for one listing of the idiom in the lexicon, which can be inserted into d-structure as a whole.

Raising (movement) vs. control (no movement)

Raising
- a. **The cat** is likely __ to get out of the bag. (raising to subject)
- b. I expected **the cat** __ to get out of the bag. (raising to object)
- C. **Tabs** ought to be kept __ on Harry. (raising to subject)

Control
- a. *The cat*₁ is eager **PRO**₁ to get out of the bag. (subject control)
- b. *I persuaded** the cat₁ **PRO**₁ to get out of the bag. (object control)
- c. * Tabs₁ like **PRO**₁ to be kept __ on Harry. (subject control)
Idioms in generative grammar

Syntactic flexibility of some idioms has been used as an argument that parts of an idiom occur together before movement applies. This allows for one listing of the idiom in the lexicon, which can be inserted into d-structure as a whole.

A major problem with this argument is that some idioms can’t occur in d-structure position:

- What the hell did you buy? (wh-fronting is obligatory)
- I wonder who the hell bought what.
- *I wonder who bought what the hell.

- Is the Pope Catholic? (subject-aux inversion is obligatory)
- *The Pope is Catholic.

- He was fit to be tied. (passive is obligatory)
- *He was fit for someone to tie him. (idiom interpretation not possible)
Idioms in generative grammar

Returning to the Raising and Control examples, these are easy to account for semantically without appeal to d-structure position. ("The cat" and "tabs" are inanimate in their idiomatic interpretation.)

Raising
- a. **The cat** is likely __ to get out of the bag. (raising to subject)
- b. I expected **the cat** __ to get out of the bag. (raising to object)
- C. **Tabs** ought to be kept __ on Harry. (raising to subject)

Control
- a. **The cat_i** is eager **PRO_i** to get out of the bag. (subject control)
- b. *I persuaded **the cat_i** **PRO_i** to get out of the bag. (object control)
- c. * **Tabs_i** like **PRO_i** to be kept __ on Harry. (subject control)
Idioms in Construction Grammar

The case of *let alone* (Fillmore et al 1988)

- *Joe doesn’t get up in time for lunch, let alone breakfast.*
- *I didn't have enough space for one fruit tree, let alone a whole orchard.* (COCA corpus)
- *Chips have become so intricate that no one person can see, let alone understand, every detail of their architecture.* (COCA Corpus)

Main idea:

- The idiomatic expression *let alone* has syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties that do not conform to the general rules of English grammar.

- However, it is rule-governed within the context of the *let alone* construction and certain related constructions.
As a first approximation, *let alone* is a type of coordinating conjunction that joins two prosodically focused constituents of the same syntactic category.

(22) He doesn’t like shrimp, let alone squid.
(23) Who could imagine such a thing, let alone do it?
(29) a. They couldn’t make John eat the shrimp, let alone Lucille the squid.

Conjunction *and* behaves similarly, but lacks prosodic focus.

- *He doesn’t like shrimp and squid.*  
- *Who could imagine such a thing and do it?*  
- *They couldn’t make John eat the shrimp and Lucille the squid.*
Syntax of *let alone* (Fillmore et al. 1988)

However the distribution of *let alone* differs from that of *and* with respect to topicalization, it-clefts, and VP-ellipsis.

(31) a. Shrimp and squid Moishe won’t eat.
    b. *Shrimp let alone squid Moishe won’t eat.
    c. *Shrimp Moishe won’t eat and squid.
    d. Shrimp Moishe won’t eat, let alone squid.

(33) *It’s shrimp let alone squid that Max won’t eat.
(34) It’s shrimp and squid that Max won’t eat.

(40) Max won’t eat shrimp but Minnie will.
(41) *Max won’t eat shrimp let alone Minnie will.
Syntax of *let alone* (Fillmore et al 1988)

*Let alone* is a paired focus construction. Other similar constructions exist in English.

Each construction contains [full clause + connective + fragment], with prosodic prominence on both focused elements.

(47) He doesn’t get up for lunch, let alone breakfast.
(48) He doesn’t get up for lunch, much less breakfast.
(49) She didn’t eat a bite, never mind a whole meal.
(50) She didn’t eat a meal, just a snack.
(51) She beat Smith at chess, not to mention Jones.
Syntax of *let alone* (Fillmore et al 1988)

*Let alone* is a **negative polarity item**. Similar to *any*, it typically requires the first clause to provide an affective context.

(62) He didn’t reach **Denver**, let alone **Chicago**.
(63) I’m too tired to **get up**, let alone **go running with you**.
(64) She gave me more candy than I could **carry**, let alone **eat**.
(65) Only a linguist would **buy** that book, let alone **read** it.
(66) I barely got up in time for **lunch**, let alone **breakfast**.

Compare similar sentences with *any*:

- He didn’t reach **any** destination.
- I’m too tired to eat **any** breakfast.
- She gave me more candy than **any** of my friends.
- Only a linguist would buy **any** books like that.
- I barely got up in time for **any** of my appointments.
Syntax of *let alone* (Fillmore et al 1988)

Fillmore et al found examples in which the affective context was not overtly present in the sentence. They suggested that sometimes the affective context can be given pragmatically by the context.

In (73), B’s denial of A’s assertion apparently provides the necessary affective context for licensing *let alone*.

(73) a. A: I doubt I have enough material here for a week.  
    B: You’ve got enough material there for a whole SEMESTER, let alone a WEEK.

In contrast, denial of the previous assertion does not appear to license *any*.

A: I doubt I have enough material here for *any* lessons.  
B: *I disagree— you have plenty of material for *any* lessons.
Syntax of *let alone* (Fillmore et al 1988)

*Let alone* allows for multiple paired foci.

(76) You couldn’t get a poor man to wash your car for two dollars, *let alone* a rich man to wax your truck for one dollar.

(77) You couldn’t get a poor man, *let alone* a rich man, to wash, *let alone* wax, *let alone* your car, *let alone* your truck, for two dollars, *let alone* for one dollar.

In this respect *let alone* is similar to *not...but*

(84) Ivan sent, not an album to Albania for Anna on *her anniversary*, but a book to *Bulgaria* for Boris on his birthday.

(85) Ivan sent, not an album *but* a book, (and) not to Albania for Anna on *her anniversary*, but to *Bulgaria* for Boris on his birthday.
Semantics of *let alone* (Fillmore et al 1988)

Examples from COCA corpus:
- *I didn't have enough space for one fruit tree, let alone a whole orchard.*
- *The deputies in this case were not trained investigators, let alone homicide investigators.*

- Two propositions are conjoined and asserted: [not P] *let alone* [not Q]

- A scalar model is invoked, which ranks the two propositions on a single scale
  - the scale of adequate space for growing trees
  - the scale of competence to conduct criminal investigation

- The two propositions must be of the same polarity (either negative or positive)

- The first conjunct is stronger or more informative on the scale than the second conjunct
  - not having enough space for a single fruit tree entails not having enough space for an orchard, but not vice versa
  - not being trained as an investigator entails not being trained as a homicide investigator, but not vice versa
Pragmatics of *let alone* (Fillmore et al 1988)

Example from COCA corpus:

- *The day was a turning point for me. From then on all I could do was think about planting my own orchard. I wanted to start straight away, but I didn't have enough space for one fruit tree, let alone a whole orchard.*

- The second conjunct accepts or rejects something in the context sentence (here, it rejects the possibility to start planting an orchard).

- The first conjunct provides a stronger, more informative statement which accepts or rejects the context sentence more emphatically (planting an orchard would be absurd, given the limited space), in accordance with Quantity maxim.

- The result is that the speaker expresses more emphatic acceptance or denial of the weaker second proposition than would be expressed using the second proposition by itself.

- Compare: *I wanted to start right away, but I didn’t have enough space for a whole orchard.*
Let alone as a construction

- The constellation of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties associated with let alone is not fully predictable from general syntactic and semantic rules.

- However let alone is related to other constructions that share certain properties of syntax, semantics, and/or pragmatics.
  - Other coordinating conjunctions
  - Other paired-focus constructions
  - Other negative polarity items
  - Other items that require a scalar model for their interpretation

- These conclusions suggest that the syntactic, semantic, lexical, and pragmatic properties of formal idioms are stored together in memory in the form of a construction.
- Formal idioms such as let alone are related to other constructions through a structured inheritance network.
- Idioms represent productive, rule-governed linguistic behavior, albeit limited to a particular construction or network of related constructions.
Idiomaticity continuum

Exercise

Take these and other common English idioms and translate them into another language. Does your language also use an idiom to express the same idea?

(11)  

a. It takes one to know one.  
b. pull a fast one  
c. bring down the house  
d. wide awake  
e. sight unseen  
f. all of a sudden  
g. (X) blow X’s nose  
h. Once upon a time . . .
Exercise

What are some common idioms in a language other than English?
What do they mean and what seems to be their origin?

How should they be classified according to:

◦ Encoding / decoding
◦ Grammatical / extra grammatical
◦ Substantive / formal