An Idiomatic Argument for Lexical Decomposition

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1. Boots, creeps, flak, and verb parts

Idioms have long been regarded as conforming to some kind of requirement of locality constraining the relations between their parts. This requirement has taken various forms in the literature(cf. Marantz 1996, Nunberg et al 1994, and references cited there), and it will not be important here to develop a specific version of it; in the interests of concreteness, we might assume (1), adopted from Koopman and Sportiche (1988):

(1) If X is the minimal constituent containing all the idiomatic material, the head of X is part of the idiom.

Requirements like (1) have sometimes been used to argue that certain kinds of sentences involve more structure than is immediately apparent on the surface. For instance, given an assumption like (1), the data in (2) have been used to argue for the existence of NP-raising:

(2) a. The cat is out of the bag

b. The cat seems __ to be out of the bag

If (1) must hold in (2b) at D-structure (or at LF following reconstruction, depending on one's additional assumptions), then the well-formedness of (2b) is evidence that the idiom chunk *the cat* begins the derivation somewhere lower in the tree, closer to the rest of the idiom with which it is associated.

A similar argument was given by Koopman and Sportiche (1988) for the VP-internal subject hypothesis, based on alternations like those in (3):

(3) a. The shit hits the fan

b. The shit has hit the fan

c. The shit should have hit the fan

The alternations in (3) show that inflectional elements (e.g., tense and agreement morphology) are not part of the idiom in question; the idiom contains only the material that all the sentences in (3) have in common, namely *the shit hit the fan*. If (1) is correct, then, the idiom chunk *the shit* must have begun lower in the structure than its surface position, perhaps in the specifier of the constituent headed by *hit*. Crucial to this account is the belief that *hits* in (3a) is syntactically as well as morphologically complex; the verb *hit* is part of the idiom in question, but the affix *-s* is not, and is generated in a syntactically higher head.

In this squib I would like to develop an argument of a similar form, based on alternations like those in (4-6) (6 is adapted from Larson 1988, 341):

(4) a. Mary gave Susan the boot

b. Susan got the boot (from Mary)

(5) a. Bill gave John flak (about his behavior)

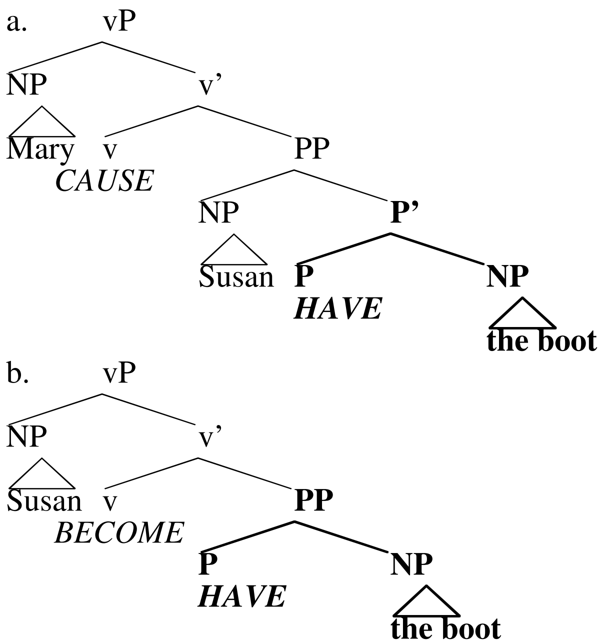
b. John took flak from Bill (about his behavior)

(6) a. The Count gives everyone the creeps

b. You get the creeps (just looking at him)

I would like to suggest that the reasoning employed in (3) be used here as well. We decided to regard the sentences in (3) as involving an idiom consisting of the structure which all the sentences had in common. Applying this reasoning to (4-6), we might conclude that the idioms in these sentences involve a noun phrase together with a portion of verbal structure which the verbs *give*, *get*, and *take* all have in common; I will refer to this verbal structure, following Harley (1995, 1997, 1999), as *HAVE*. Thus, the idioms in (4-6) would be *HAVE the boot*, *HAVE flak*, and *HAVE the creeps*, respectively. *HAVE* can combine with other material to form verbs; we might regard *give* as *CAUSE+HAVE*, and *take* and *get* as *BECOME + HAVE*, for example[1]. On this theory, (4a) and (4b) might be diagrammed as having (partial) underlying structures like those in (7), with the idiom boldfaced (following Harley 1995, 1997, 1999, I represent *HAVE* as a preposition):

(7) a. b.



In (3a) above, the properties of the idiom in question suggest that the phonological word *hits* should be divided into two parts, one of which is part of the idiom while the other is not. Similarly, on this theory, the idioms in (4-6) show that verbs like *give*, *get*, and *take* should be divided into several parts, one of which is part of the idioms (and is a part that these three verbs all have in common). To the extent that this account of these idioms is convincing, then, we have an argument for lexical decomposition. The argument is thus very similar in spirit to that of Binnick (1971).

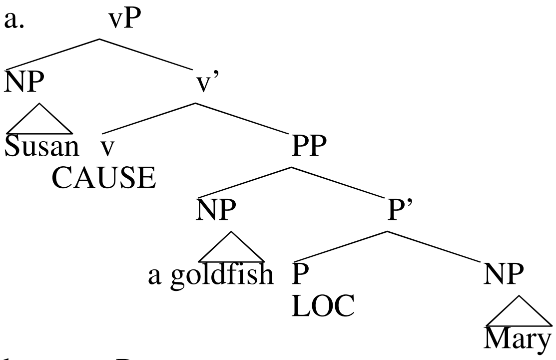
2. Giving and getting

Harley (1995, 1997, 1999) argues convincingly that sentences like those in (8) should not be transformationally related. She posits distinct structures something like the ones in (9a) and (9b)[2] for (8a) and (8b) respectively:

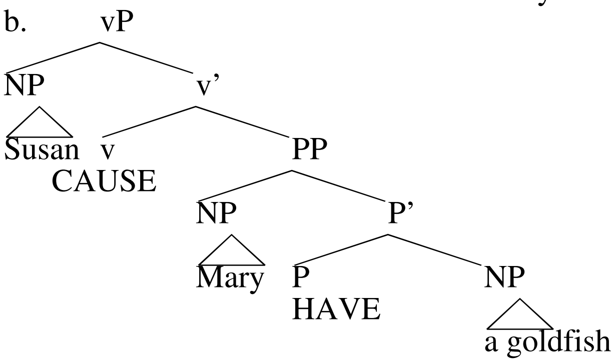
(8) a. Susan gave a goldfish to Mary

b. Susan gave Mary a goldfish

(9) a.



b.



Interestingly, English idioms with *give* seem to divide into two types, one corresponding to each of Harley's structures. There is a set of idioms which obligatorily appear in a form corresponding to (9a):

(10) a. Laura gave birth to Nolan

b. *Laura gave Nolan birth

Other idioms of this type include those with *chase*, *rise*, *way*, and *the lie*[3]. If we assume the structures in (9), these idioms must involve enough structure to uniquely identify (9a); the idiom in (10) might be listed in the lexicon as *CAUSE birth LOC*, for instance.

There is also a set of idioms which obligatorily involve the structure in (9b)[4, 5]:

(11) a. The Count gives Mary the creeps.

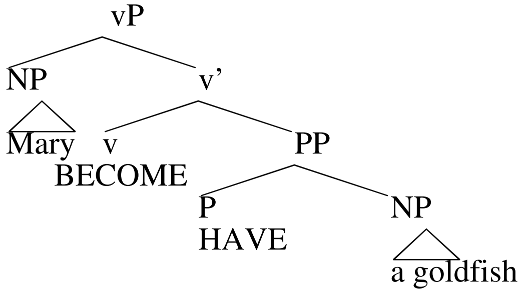
b. *The Count gives the creeps to Mary.

Other idioms like this one include those with *flak*, *shit*, *the sack*, *the boot*, *what for*, and *butterflies in one's stomach*. The idiom in (11) could be represented as *HAVE the creeps*.

Consider now the representation of a verb like *get* in Harley's approach. A sentence like (12) might involve the (partial) structure in (13)[6]:

(12) Mary got a goldfish (from Susan)

(13)



Note that the structure of the sentence in (12), on this account, involves a constituent of the form [HAVE NP]. Returning to the two classes of idioms discussed above, then, we are led to expect that idioms in the second class could have alternatives with verbs like *get* or *take*. That is, an idiom of the form *HAVE NP* can combine with *BECOME* to yield *get/take NP*, or with *CAUSE* to form *give NP*. Idioms of the form *CAUSE NP LOC*, on the other hand, cannot be part of the structure in (13). This prediction appears to be well-founded; the only idioms with *give* which have a paraphrase involving *take* or *get* are those which participate in the double object construction:

(14) a. The Count gives Mary the creeps

b. *The Count gives the creeps to Mary

c. Mary got the creeps

(15) a. Mary gave John the sack

b. *Mary gave the sack to John

c. John got the sack

(16) a. Bill gave Susan flak (about her behavior)

b. *Bill gave flak to Susan (about her behavior)

c. Susan took (a lot of) flak (about her behavior)

Idioms which cannot use the double object construction, on the other hand, also have no paraphrase with *take* or *get*:

(17) a. Laura gave birth to Nolan

b. *Laura gave Nolan birth

c. *Nolan got birth

(18) a. The Romans gave way to the Visigoths

b. *The Romans gave the Visigoths way

c. *The Visigoths got way

Thus, the hypothesis that idioms can have part of a verb as one of their components combines with a particular hypothesis about verbal structure (namely, that of Harley (1995, 1997, 1999)) to yield an interesting and apparently true prediction about the behavior of idioms involving words like *give* and *get*

3. Some alternatives

In this section I will briefly consider some alternatives to the theory developed here, and will try to show them to be less attractive.

3.1. NP

Larson (1988) suggested that idioms like those in (4-6) (repeated here as (19-21)) involve a simple NP. On this theory the idiom in (19), for instance, is *the boot*, rather than *HAVE the boot* as it is in the theory developed in the preceding section.

(19) a. Mary gave Susan the boot

b. Susan got the boot (from Mary)

(20) a. Bill gave John flak (about his behavior)

b. John took flak from Bill (about his behavior)

(21) a. The Count gives everyone the creeps

b. You get the creeps (just looking at him)

This theory does not derive the generalization described above about the correlation between ability to appear in a double object form and having a paraphrase involving *get* or *take*. Moreover, it appears to make false predictions about how freely an NP like *the boot* may be used in its idiomatic meaning. Consider the NP *white elephant*, with the idiomatic meaning "expensive object of little value". This NP can have this meaning regardless of its position in the sentence:

(22) a. John is buying another white elephant.

b. White elephants have ruined many a company.

c. A white elephant's legacy is often financial ruin.

No such freedom is found with *the boot*, which can only have its idiomatic meaning in sentences like those in (19):

(23) a. *I was sorry to hear about the boot.

b. *The boot has ruined many an employee's Christmas.

c. *The boot's legacy is often severe psychological problems.

3.2 VP

An alternative strategy would be to claim that the sentences in (19-21) involve six different idioms, rather than three; we could posit distinct idioms *get the boot*, *give NP the boot*, etc. This strategy suffers from the flaw of being uninteresting; presumably we should prefer a theory which unifies these idioms to one which simply lists all the options. Listing all the attested idioms would also lose the generalization outlined in the last section; if there is no connection between idioms with *give* and superficially similar idioms with *take*, then there is no reason for these idiom pairs to exist only when the *give* counterpart can occur in the double-object form.

4. Conclusion

In this squib I have suggested that there exist idioms which consist of an NP along with part of a verb. I tried to show that this hypothesis makes an interesting and apparently true prediction about the distribution of idioms with *give* and *take*, and is more attractive than various alternative hypotheses that might be entertained. To the extent that this argument is convincing, it provides us with an argument in favor of lexical decomposition; the elements of idioms may include not just words, but parts of words.

Appendix: A Possible Further Expansion

The idiom *give NP a hard time* can only appear in the double-object form, which suggests, in terms of the theory developed here, that the relevant idiom is actually *HAVE a hard time*:

(24) a. They gave John a hard time.

b. *They gave a hard time to John.

However, paraphrases with *get* or *take* sound awkward:

(25) *John got/took a hard time (from them)

Free rein has similar properties:

(26) a. They gave Mary free rein

b. *They gave free rein to Mary

c. *Mary got/took free rein (from them)

Both of these idioms do appear to have equivalents with *have*, however:

(27) a. John had a hard time

b. Mary had free rein

We might try to assimilate this problem to an existing problem. The idioms discussed in the body of the paper often idiosyncratically require *get* rather than *take*, a fact for which I have not attempted to provide an account[7]:

(28) a. John got the boot

b. *John took the boot

The theory developed here is one in which the verbs *give*, *take*, and *get* all have some syntactic atom in common, which I have represented here as *HAVE.* We might assume that *HAVE* can also combine with other syntactic atoms to form the verb *have*, and that the idiom *HAVE a hard time*, for some reason, can only combine with the atoms that yield the verbs *give* and *have*, just as the idiom *HAVE the boot* can only yield the verbs *give* and *get*. Several (though not all) of the other ditransitive idioms have versions with *have*, while none of the non-ditransitive ones do:

(29) a. I have the creeps

b. He has butterflies in his stomach

(30) a. *He had birth

b. *They had way

More research into which verbs appear in the simple transitive version is clearly called for[8]. Note, however, that the descriptive generalization developed in section 2 seems to be intact; only idioms that appear in the double-object form have corresponding idioms with transitive verbs like *get*, *take*, and *have*. The account developed here of this fact is that ditransitive idioms crucially involve a structure in which the Goal c-commands the Theme, and such a structure is also involved in verbs like *get*, *take*, and *have*.

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[1] I leave aside here the question of how to distinguish *take* from *get*. A reviewer suggests that *get* should be taken as the core case of an unaccusative of *give* (see also footnotes 6, 7), and that *take* is ambiguous, with one reading as a transitive, agentive verb which can use the HAVE element to introduce benefactives:

(i) Sue took her mother a piece of pie

(ii) Sue CAUSE her mother HAVE a piece of pie

The other reading of *take* is unaccusative, on this view, and this is the *take* used in idioms.

[2] These structures are somewhat simplified, in ways which will be unimportant for the theory under development here.

[3] An interesting fact about these idioms, not captured in the theory developed here, is that most of them involve a bare NP (with the possible exceptions of *give the lie* and the British idiom *give a false colour*). Not all idioms with bare NPs are of this type, however; *give flak*, for instance, falls in the other class of idioms.

[4] See Oehrle (1976) and Pesetsky (1995) for related observations.

[5] The requirement that the structure in (9b) be used can be suspended if the Goal NP is "heavy" in the syntactically relevant sense. Thus, (11b) contrasts with (i):

(i) The Count gives the creeps to [anyone who talks with him for five minutes]

Some speakers apparently also allow this structure when the Goal NP is wh-extracted:

(ii) Who does the Count give the creeps to __ ?

Thanks to Alec Marantz for these observations. These data raise interesting questions about the nature of heavy NP shift, which I will not explore here.

[6] In fact, Harley (1999) argues, following Pesetsky (1995), that *get* is unaccusative; on this theory, *Mary* would begin the derivation in the specifier of the PP headed by *HAVE*, and subsequently raise. I omit this here for reasons of space.

[7] The only idiom (with an alternate with *give*) which requires *take* and excludes *get* seems to be *take heart*, a fact which is presumably relevant for the eventual solution to this question. *Take heart* is also unusual in that it can appear in all of the frames discussed:

(i) a. Mike took heart

b. The birth of his son gave Mike heart

c. The birth of his son gave heart to Mike

For speakers that allow all of the examples in (iv), we might have to regard this idiom as syntactically ambiguous, being doubly listed in the lexicon as *HAVE heart* and *CAUSE heart LOC*. For speakers that reject (31c), the idiom would have to be *HAVE heart*. If there are speakers who prefer (31c) to (31b), they are problematic for the theory discussed here.

[8] The idiom *give pause* presents a similar problem; this idiom can only have a double-object form (suggesting that the idiom is *HAVE pause*), but it has no paraphrases with *get*, *take*, or *have*:

(i) The accident gave John pause

(ii) *The accident gave pause to John

(iii) *John got/had/took pause

One possibility is that the relevant idiom in this case is actually larger than the ones considered in the text, perhaps *CAUSE HAVE pause* (thanks to Martha McGinnis for this suggestion),