



On pronominalization and ellipsis in clausal idioms

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Nick Huang & Gesoel Mendes
znhuang@umd.edu gsmendes@umd.edu

1 Introduction

Pieces of idioms can participate in anaphoric relations: pronominalization and ellipsis. Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994; Bruening 2015; etc.

We discuss a novel paradigm involving anaphoric relations in clausal idioms.

Claims

- (Some) pronouns are derived from DPs. Lees & Klima 1963; Postal 1969, Elbourne 2001
- The identity condition on ellipsis can refer to a constituent containing the ellipsis site. Rooth 1992; Gengel 2007; pace Merchant 2001
- Pronominalization and VPE interact, giving rise to pragmatic inferences (focus or simply emphasis) that can disrupt the idiomatic interpretation.

2 Paradigm

Clausal idioms: pronoun subjects and VP ellipsis (VPE) seem to need to co-occur.

- (1) Alex: When the news got out, the shit hit the fan.
Ben: No, ...
- ... the shit didn't hit the fan. [-Pron., -VPE]
 - ... it didn't. [+Pron., +VPE]
 - ... #it didn't hit the fan. [+Pron., -VPE]
 - ... #the shit didn't. [-Pron., +VPE]

Non-idioms: Pronoun subjects and VPE can freely occur.

- (2) Alex: The red balloon hit the ceiling.
Ben: No, ...
- ... the red balloon didn't hit the ceiling. [-Pron., -VPE]
 - ... it didn't. [+Pron., +VPE]
 - ... it didn't hit the ceiling. [+Pron., -VPE]
 - ... The red balloon didn't. [-Pron., +VPE]

Generalization

In dialog contexts, the idiomatic reading of a clausal idiom is best preserved when the whole idiom is repeated or when it is entirely omitted under anaphoric relations.

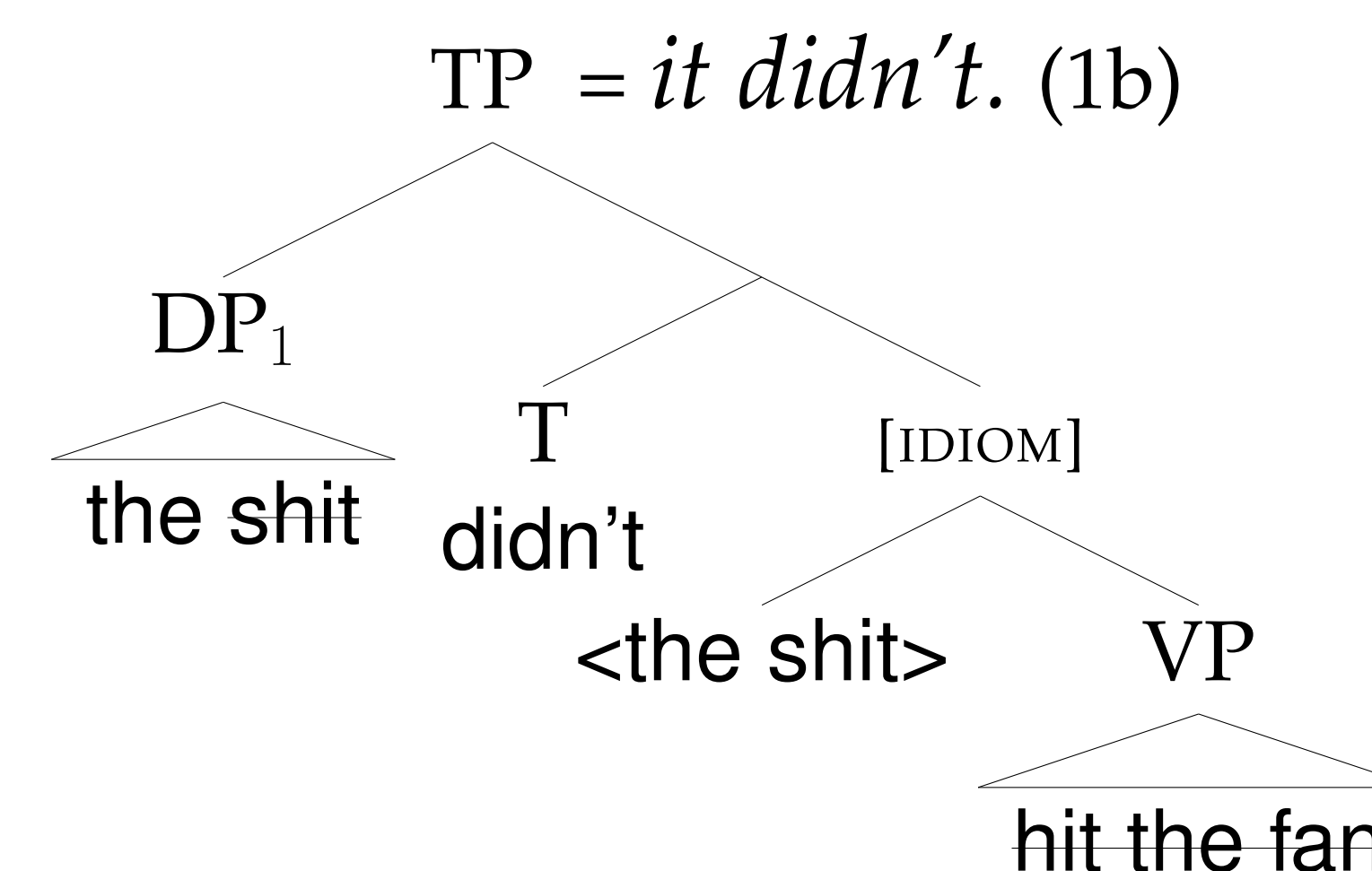
3 Pronouns can be derived from full DPs

- For concreteness: Idioms are complex lexical items.

Katz and Postal 1963; Fraser 1970

- Idiomatic reading is available because both pronominalization and VP ellipsis involves unpronounced syntactic structure. Lees and Klima 1963; Postal

1969, Elbourne 2001; Ross 1969; Lasnik 1999; Merchant 2001, etc.



3.1 The pronoun is not base-generated / referential

The idiom subject doesn't introduce a discourse referent that could be easily picked up by a pronoun.

- If the subject pronoun is referential, the idiom subject should introduce a discourse referent.

- Generally, a pronoun can pick out such a referent.

- Suppose *the shit* means "a (serious) problem" or "chaos."

- (3) The shit hit the fan. We suspect that {#the shit/#it/the problem/the chaos} was planned by Mary.

3.2 The pronoun is not an expletive *it*

Incorrect prediction: Expletive *it* should be available with clausal idioms with plural subjects.

- (4) Alex: The chickens have come home to roost.
Ben: Yes, I'm afraid {#it has/they have}.

4 Implications for the identity condition

Merchant (2001): a constituent XP can be elided if it is e-GIVEN; essentially, XP and its antecedent mutually entail.

Puzzle: If clausal idioms are not compositional and their subparts lack denotations, the elided *shit* and its antecedent cannot mutually entail (same goes for *hit the fan*).

Solution: Partially disentangle ellipsis site from identity calculation. Rooth 1992; Fiengo & May 1992; Gengel 2007, etc.

- (5) **Revised e-GIVENness condition:** XP is e-GIVEN iff XP is (reflexively) dominated by a Y_{PE} , s.t. Y_{PE} has an antecedent Y_{PA} , and modulo existential type-shifting, Y_{PE} entails F-closure(Y_{PA}) and Y_{PA} entails F-closure(Y_{PE}).

- (6) a. $\overbrace{[[\text{the shit}] [\text{VP hit the fan}]]}^{Y_{PA}} = \text{The shit hit the fan.}$
b. NEG $\overbrace{[[\text{the shit}] [\text{VP hit the fan}]]}^{Y_{PE}} = \text{It didn't. (1b)}$

5 Deriving the empirical generalization

If the speaker decides to pronounce something that could be elided, the hearer assumes that the repeated piece is contrastive.

- #*It didn't hit the the fan* (1c) → *the shit* did something else.

- #*The shit didn't* (1d) → something else *hit the fan*.

- No plausible predicates to consider, if *the shit* and *hit the fan* both lack denotations.

Conclusions and future directions

- Clausal idioms help adjudicate between competing theories of pronouns and ellipsis.
- Interaction between anaphoric relations can affect the availability of idiomatic interpretation.
- Future work: what about clausal idioms in null subject languages?

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