

Negative Idioms

The meaning of complex idiomatic expressions cannot be fully derived from the meaning of their parts. Thus, (1a)'s meaning is not derived by semantic composition of *{me}*, *{vale}* and *{madre}*. Additionally, idiomatic expressions are partially syntactically active: (1a) can be clitic left-dislocated with a 3pl. clitic (cf. (1b)), allows for a pl. NP (cf. (1c)), but not a full DP (cf. (1d)). Given the non-compositionality of idiomatic meaning, idioms must be stored as lexical units (i.e. word-like units) in the lexicon.

- (1) a. Me vale madre (Mexican Spanish)
 CL.1sg is.worth mother 'I don't give a shit.'
- b. A ellos les vale madre.
 to them CL.3pl is.worth mother 'They don't give a shit.'
- c. Me vale madres
 CL.1sg is.worth mothers 'I don't give a shit.'
- d. Hoy me valen madres
 today CL.1sg are.worth mothers 'Today I don't give a shit.'
- e. *Me valen {la/una} madre famosa
 CL.1sg is.worth the/a mother famous

One particular class of idioms (henceforth N-idioms) have the following properties: 1) they require syntactic negation, as seen indicated by *(no) in (2)), 2) they have idiomatic meaning (cf. the translations of (2), 3) they are not fully syntactically productive (cf. (3), only possible in the somewhat absurd literal meaning).

- (2) a. Anoche *(no) pegué ojo.
 last night not stuck eye 'Last night I didn't sleep at all.'
- b. *(No) pega/da (ni) una.
 not hit/give (not even) one 'S/he doesn't do a thing right.'
- c. *(No) es nada del otro mundo.
 not is nothing-of-the other world 'Be nothing out of the ordinary.'
- d. *(No) es moco de pavo.
 not is snot of turkey 'It's not a piece of cake.'
- e. *(No) tiene pelos en la lengua
 not have hairs in the tongue 'S/he will call a spade spade'
- (3) a. #Mi colega no tiene pelo en la lengua
 mi colleague not has hair on the tongue
- b. ??Anoche, no fue pegado ojo por parte de Pedro
 last night, not was stuck eye on Pedro's part
- c. Terminé la tarea, #lo que no es moco verde de pavo!
 finished the homework, which is no green snot of turkey

4) Negation must c-command the idiomatic expression (cf. (4)-(5)). In (4), the idiomatic VP is embedded in the infinitival subject clause, where it cannot be c-commanded by negation. In (5a), a fronted VP idiom is also not licensed by negation that doesn't c-command it. As a conclusion, the N-idiom must be c-commanded by negation.

- (4) *[Dar/pegar (ni) golpe] no le molesta a Juan.
 give/hit (not-even) stroke not CL bothers to Juan
- (5) a. *Pegar/dar una, el presidente no pudo.
 hit/give one, the president not could
- b. No Pegar/dar una, el presidente pudo.
 not hit/give una, the president could 'Not do a thing right, the president could.'

5) Strict N-Idioms are not licensed in other downward entailing contexts (*few*, *if* conditionals, questions, imperatives and subjunctive complements), whereas weak N-idioms (*pedir peras al olmo* 'expect beyond reason') are by questions and conditionals:

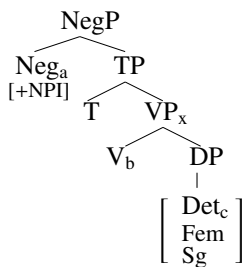
- (6) a. #Si pegas/das una, vives tranquilo.
if hit/give one, live peacefully
b. #¿Quién ha pagado una para vivir tranquilo?
who has hit/given one to live peacefully
- (7) a. Si le pides peras al olmo, nada sale bien.
if CL ask pears to-the elm, nothing turns right 'If you expect beyond reason, nothing works out'
b. ¿Para qué pedirle peras al olmo?
for what ask.CL pears to-the elm 'Why expect beyond reason?'

At the same time, negation does not translate as a logical operator \neg that applies to the positive counterpart of the proposition, because the positive counterpart is ungrammatical, as suggested. This raises two questions: a) what is this kind of negation, and b) what is the lexical representation of the negative idiom (does it have a negation as its lexical entry)? As an answer to a), we suggest that strict N-idioms are polarity items. As an answer to b), we adopt Jackendoff's (1997) representation in (8), where the full conceptual constituent maps to the VP (as indicated by the x subscript), but subparts in the syntactic tree don't match to subparts of the conceptual structure. Three aspects of (8) stand out: first, negation has an NPI feature, second, negation is not part of the conceptual structure, and third, therefore, the conceptual meaning includes an implicature (see below).

- (8) _ano _bpegar/dar _cuna
not hit/give one.FEM 'Not to do a thing right.'

Syntactic structure

Conceptual structure



[Event [GET ([]_{B'}, [Y]_C []_A RIGHT)]]_x + **implicature**

The presence of the NPI feature triggers a scalar implicature (following Israel (1996, 2004), a.o): polarity expressions induce a scale that designates a higher or lower edge, with the implicature that the proposition does not hold of any items lower (or higher) than the edge:

- (9) More likelihood \rightarrow
Scale: < get all things right < get a few things right < **get a thing right** >
Implicature: P holds of members to the left of (low, minimal) m (m = "get a thing right")

Thus, the conceptual structure in (8) provides the content of the scale that will be interpreted as the basis for the implicature in (9). In support of the idea that negation is semantically inert, consider the scope facts in (10): regular negation has ambiguous scope over a universally quantified temporal adverbial, but with the N-idiom, no scope ambiguity arises, as one would predict if negation is not a true operator.

- (10) a. No comía carne todos los días (\neg) \forall or \forall > *neg*)
'S/he didn't eat meat every day.'
b. No daba/pegaba una todos los días (not scopally ambiguous)
not gave/struck one every day

Strict and weak N-idioms differs with respect to the presence of syntactic Neg (+NPI): the latter lack it (like English NPIs). The presence of a syntactic Neg head with strict N-idioms overtly signals the scalar implicature. By contrast, scalar implicatures are licensed with weak N-idioms in much wider downward entailing contexts (i.e. not syntactically).

References

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