



Agnieszka Ziarkowska-Robak

State School of Higher Education, Chełm

Event Structure: Setting Parameters on Idiomatic Expressions

Abstract

The paper develops an analysis of idiomatic expressions in English. Rejecting the generative stance, we embrace a cognitive approach, according to which linguistic structures are composed of gradable elements forming a parametrized continuum or set. Based on the concepts of energy chains and event structure frames, this paper examines a parametrized "cline" of idiomatic expressions, each either conforming to or departing from given event schemas, thereby representing the varying degrees of idiomaticity.

Keywords: *cognitive linguistics, idiomaticity, parametrisation, event structure, energy chain.*

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia analizę wyrażen idiomatycznych w języku angielskim. Zgodnie z podejściem kognitywnym przyjmuje się, że im mniejszy stopień analizowalności danego wyrażenia, tym bardziej jest ono prototypowe jako idiom. Bazując na koncepcji łańcucha energii oraz pojęciu struktury zdarzenia, praca ukazuje sparometryzowany trzon wyrażen idiomatycznych – pokrywających się jak i naruszających schematy wydarzeń – ukazując przez to różne stopnie idiomatyczności.

Słowa kluczowe: *językoznaństwo kognitywne, idiomatyczność, parametryzacja, struktura zdarzenia, łańcuch energetyczny.*

Introduction

The general framework of cognitive linguistics adopted in this paper allows us to treat linguistic structures as gradable units forming a continuum of linguistic elements in the sense that "there is a lot of variation within the domain of the unit (...) and difficulty setting the boundaries of the unit" (Bybee, 2010, p. 2). This continuum (the main object of this cognitive linguistic model) is subject to cognitive parameters and thus, in contrast to the claims made by earlier approaches¹, is analysable to some extent. That natural languages are bound in a sense by formulaic expressions can hardly be questioned. The specific nature of phraseology is evident, especially when idiomatic expressions fall under scrutiny. Thus, just as there exists a natural gradation between literal and figurative meaning, a similar gradation, we believe, should exist in the case of formulaicity. We can reasonably speak of parametrisation of all grammatical constructions, irrespective of their morphological or syntactic nature.

Specifically,

"morphology is ... described by schematic assemblies (like N+less) whose instantiations are no larger than words, and syntax by assemblies (like N1+less N2) with multiword instantiations. Even so the boundary is fuzzy, if only due to expressions (such as compounds) that are intermediate between single words and multiword sequences." (Langacker, 2008, p. 24)

This passage exemplifies the standard cognitive line of argument in favour of a gradable character of virtually all language structures. Specifically, some idioms are "more idiomatic" than other idioms, whereby the degree of idiomaticity could be measured along a parametrized number of dimensions on the idiomaticity scale. One such dimension we propose in the paper is a violation of an event schema which provides a viable theoretical and descriptive tool to characterize formulaic expressions.

However, there are some tenets that distinguish cognitive grammars, and indeed, any model of language pursued in the framework of cognitive linguistics, from the main-stream models of language. For example, one may consider the claim about the prototypical organization of categories that are said to be graded, each displaying the varying degrees of membership, fuzzy boundaries and central members. Based on the above assumptions, this paper offers a cognitive linguistic analysis of idiomatic expressions violating and

¹See a traditional, objective stance towards language structure.

conforming to the prototypical structure of events in described in terms of Ronald Langacker's (Langacker, 1991a) cognitive grammar; itself combined with the approach proposed by Dirven and Verspoor (Dirven, Verspoor, 2004).

An event and action chain

A vital dimension of cognitive organization is determined by the role referents play with respect to the profiled process. Semantic roles (e.g. agent, patient) and their mapping onto grammatical roles (subject, object), the existence of basic clause types (distinguished by perfective/imperfective contrast or relation to such aspects as action, motion) as well as clauses' function in discourse (e.g. grounding, active vs. passive constructions) are of prime importance. Along similar lines, event schemas, (Dirven, Verspoor, 2004) introduced by certain prototypical verbs, combine types of action or state with their most salient participants of various roles. With respect to idiomatic expressions, it cannot be overlooked that event schemas are one of the ways that exhibit the relations existing within and among versatile phraseological units. Put differently, the schemas constitute the ways idiomatic language is coded. However, one must admit that apart from prototypical instances of phraseological units complying with the schemas, the latter become frequently violated, to a greater or lesser extent, by idioms themselves. Consequently, observable differences in schema violations demonstrate degrees of atypical character of the phraseological units and can therefore be presented along a continuum, with the most prototypical units occupying one pole (the first group to be examined), while only partially irregular schemas (the second group investigated) reside lower on the scale, followed finally by the units exemplifying totally non-prototypical behaviour (the third group under scrutiny), which are lowest and closest to the second pole.

An event, in turn, is a part of a physical process or an action characterized by properties that are specific and common for an observer. Globally, it can be viewed from two perspectives: the force dynamic and the zero (absolute) construal, termed otherwise an energetic and non-energetic slant. Whereas under the absolute construal there is no energy flow assumed since its participant merely occupies some place (e.g. They are there) or possesses some feature² (e.g. He is amazing), the former perspective presupposes

²Interestingly, as Yuan argues: "a process could be perceived as autonomous without energy transmission although the real situation does involve energy flow. For instance, we could simply say *The tree fell over* instead of *The wind has caused the tree to fall over*, if we do not want to mention the agent, which is the wind in this case. ... Only four semantic

a flow of energy from one participant to another³ and encompasses two major constructs of Cognitive Grammar, the framework adopted in the study and the conception of the billiard-ball model and the action chain.

"Owing to the pioneering accomplishments such as Leonard Talmy (1985), William Croft (1991) and Ronald W. Langacker (1987, 1991), the linguistic research has gained the BILLIARD-BALL MODEL, an event model which can account in a unified fashion for various facts of event expressions ..." ⁴ (Sadanobu, 1995, p. 57)

Most globally the elements included in the Langacker's (Langacker, 1991) billiard-ball model are space, time, matter and energy since in his conception of the world, discrete physical objects move around in space thanks to some form of energy acquired through interactions with other objects, energy transmission, or absorption in time. Specifically, the objects are represented by circles and the interactions between them as marked by lines connecting the objects, whereas space and time are represented by the frame, as can be illustrated in the following fashion⁵:

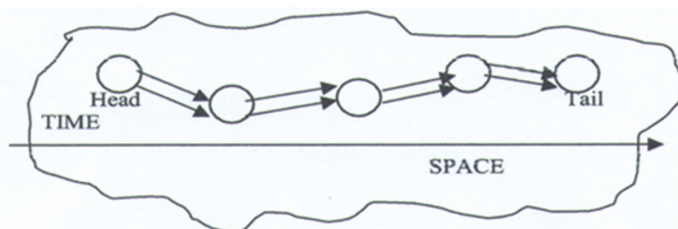


Figure 1: The billiard-ball model

roles could be found in such construal: zero, mover, patient and experiencer. The reason why agent and instrument are excluded is that they indicate the conception of energy transmission". (Yuan, 2010, p. 3).

³As Kardela specifies: "whereas in the energetic chain the energy flows "down-stream", from the agent to the patient, the energy in the absolute construal flows "up-stream". This is so because the causer which "dynamicises"the event comes "from the outside". (Kardela, 2007, p. 154)

⁴Interestingly, Sadanobu claims that "there seems to be some part left unclear, however, about the BILLIARD BALL MODEL. To put the assertion more concretely, the inter-relationship between the BILLIARD BALL MODEL and our event conception processes is not completely evident. Therefore...I would like to ...suggest a new event model complementary to the BILLIARD-BALL MODEL. I call it the MOLDGROWTH MODEL..." (Sadanobu, 1995, p. 97-98)

⁵Cf. Kardela (2005).

The chain of action that pertains to the construal model of event structure within Cognitive Grammar (Fig. 2) is a crucial phenomenon related to Langacker's concept of transitivity. The scholar maintains that an object transfers energy to another object which interacts with the next entity until it reaches a participant whose reaction does not trigger further transfer of energy. In Langacker's model, the arrow to the right stands for an asymmetrical relationship between various objects. Importantly, the model constitutes the basis for such grammatical categories as a noun or a verb. "In the theory of harmonic vectors, the increased use of the right arrow, associated with dominant vectors, represents the asymmetry of root progression. These are two aspects of the same concept of transitivity". (Guillotet-Nothmann, 2010, p. 5)

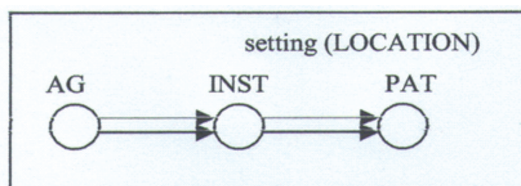


Figure 2: The action chain (Cf. Langacker (1991b).)

A more concrete form of the energetic chain constitutes the canonical event model which reflects a normal course of a prototypical action⁶. Specifically, in an event structure, Langacker distinguishes such semantic role archetypes (i.e. pre-linguistic conceptualisations, see Langacker 1991) as agent, patient, instrument, experiencer, mover, and zero, each of which appear in a force-dynamic event. Interestingly, a more developed form of an archetypal role model proposed by Langacker is a model of a scene⁷. The agent is an entity that is a source of energy instigating the verb-expressed action. A patient absorbs the energy and is affected by the activity. Next, an instrument is acts as a tool used by the agent to manipulate the patient. While the experiencer undergoes any mental experience, the mover acts as an entity that changes a location. Lastly, zero is conceived

⁶The model constitutes the basis for a prototypical sentence which encompasses a transitive verb, agent and patient (see Langacker, 1991a; Langacker, 1991b).

⁷This is a second archetypal conception, the result of our ability to interact perceptually with other entities. As Langacker puts it "the model idealizes our role of an ongoing experience: the observation of sequences of external events, each involving the interactions of participants within a setting". (Langacker, 1990, p. 210) This model underlies a prototype of a simple sentence with a transitive verb and two basic archetypal roles: agent and patient.

as a participant that occupies a location or exhibits some static property. Connected with this theory are also the referent types relating to objects, events or humans. Specifically, the referential perspective presumes a certain order of elements that can be depicted in the following manner:

PERSON → ANIMAL → OBJECT → PROCESS → SPACE → TIME → QUALITY.

The prototype theory

Two central notions of cognitive linguistics are the theory of prototype (see Rosch, 1977) and basic-level categories. Accordingly, some categories may have a prototypical member⁸, but no cognitive visual representation, whereas other basic categories⁹ are full of informational content and can easily be categorised in terms of gestalt and semantic features.¹⁰ A prototype is a typical instance of a given category with classified degrees of membership based on degrees of similarity. Categories are thus said to be graded, having varying degrees of membership, fuzzy boundaries, and central members. Specifically, one can distinguish better (prototypical) and worse (less prototypical) elements. Together they form the so-called network model, in which the categories are related by two types of categorizing relationships: categorization by schema (elaborations) and categorization by prototype (extensions). The prototype theory and the chain of action described above are so tightly interconnected that – in order to determine the degree of prototypicality of a given element – one must refer to the concepts of an action chain and role archetypes.

Event schemas-analysis

Since a vital dimension of a cognitive organization is determined by the role referents play with respect to the profiled process specific steps must be taken. In order to assign a degree of an idiom prototypicality, one must refer to a concept of an event during which participants that perform various roles are moved by some form of energy. Semantic roles (e.g. agent, patient) and their mapping onto grammatical roles (subject, object),

⁸Categories in the centre are the most basic and relative to such criteria as: motor interactions, ease of learning and usage, gestalt perception or the ability to form a mental image.

⁹The basic level depends upon perceived part-whole structure and corresponding knowledge about how the parts function in relation to the whole.

¹⁰Categories are organized into systems with elements being in contrast with one another; at least some categories are embodied.

the existence of basic clause types (distinguished by perfective/imperfective contrast or relation to such aspects as action, motion) as well as clauses' function in discourse (e.g. grounding, active vs. passive constructions) are of prime importance. Along similar lines, event schemas (see Dirven, Verspoor, 2004) introduced by certain prototypical verbs, combine types of actions or states with their most salient participants of various roles. With respect to idiomatic expressions, it cannot be overlooked that event schemas are one of the methods of exhibiting the relations existing within and among versatile phraseological units. Put differently, the schemas constitute the ways idiomatic language is coded. However, one must admit that apart from prototypical instances of phraseological units complying with the schemas, the latter become frequently violated, to a greater or lesser extent, by idioms themselves. Consequently, due to observable differences in schema violations, the degrees of atypical character of the phraseological units can be presented along the continuum, with the most prototypical units occupying one pole (the first group to be examined), through partly irregular schemas residing lower on the scale, to the units exemplifying totally non-prototypical behaviour (the second group under scrutiny), located lowest and closest to the second pole.

As for expressions that appear to fully abide by the event schema rules, the prototypical functions performed by their participants with different thematic roles are basically in accordance with the schemas evoked by the most typical verbs (expressing the flow or absence of energy). In other words, the particular sort of word order, namely an idiom pattern, matches near flawlessly with the general event type. Each formulaic expression respectively fulfils the function required by the appropriate event schema. Thus, further analysis of the phrases seems to give us little additional or relevant data with respect to the subject. The roles of participants in schemas as well as the construction of events, as presented in Dirven and Verspoor (2004), remain unaltered and comply strictly with the grammatical requirements imposed by the language structure and the table below (Dirven, Verspoor, 2004, p. 86).

	Participants		
	First	Second	Third
1. "Being" schema	Patient	Essive	
2. "Happening" schema	Patient	(Patient)	
3. "Doing" schema	Agent	(Patient)	

4. "Experiencing" schema	Experiencer	Patient	
5. "Having" schema	Possessor	Patient	
6. "Moving" schema	(Agent)	Patient	Goal
7. "Transferring" schema	Agent	Receiver	Patient

Figure 3: Event schemas and their participants.

Since an event encompasses processes and relations among its participants, the fewer arguments are realised, the more prototypical character an expression as an idiom displays. Thus, we still encounter expressions whose componential makeup goes counter to the requirements imposed by specific schemas, resulting in the violation of the prototypical language structure.

Consider the following lists of phraseological expressions grouped according to the type of an event schema as well as their prototypical and non-prototypical character with respect to the language requirements.

Consider first the most typical and "atypical" exemplars of the "being schema": be neither one thing nor the other

be a public person

be at the very end

vs

be at daggers drawn with sb (to quarrel with sb)

be gone on sb (to fall in love with sb)

be big on sth (to be very interested in sth)

According to the schema denoting a state, an Essive role is related to a Patient (least involved in any type of relationship) via a being link. However:

- non-prototypically here the targets denoted by the prepositional phrases are neither locations, nor identifiers, nor attribution kinds and consequently the meaning is active;
- non-typical presence of an additional Patient (Complement) totally violates regular language structure;
- it is not possible to change the order of the elements without the alternation of the sense, e.g. *be at drawn daggers with sb, *be on sth big.

Let's turn now to the following set of formulaic expressions, obeying by and violating the "happening schema":

the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing

be dropping like flies

vs

be going beginning (available)

be going great guns (to do sth very successfully)

be gunning for sb (to try to harm sb)

The prototypical schema highlights both the ongoing process and a passive entity (Patient) involved in or undergoing it. The expressions violate the "happening schema" since:

- the verbs appearing in them contain non-prototypically complements (beginning, great guns, for sb);
- there are no participants – Patients normally associated with this schema.

Consider now two groups of expressions without or with "enforced participants"

make a comparison

take the bad with the good

have control

vs

sth runs its course (sth continues naturally)

get/pull oneself together (become calm after being angry)

walk the plank (to be forced to leave the job)

jump sb (to attack sb)

talk turkey (to discuss sth honestly, directly)

sb sits the fence (sb supports both sides of the conflict)

Prototypically, in the "doing schema", one entity is the source of energy and thus it instigates the action expressed by the verb. This energy may either be directed inwards or be transmitted to a Patient. Violations of the schema are the following:

- Agent is not a person (sth runs);
- Agent is Patient at the same time (oneself);
- a transitive verb pattern has been employed with prototypically intransitive verbs that require no direct objects (jump, walk, sit);
- the verbs are reconceptualised as "verbs of action", as the typical prepositions accompanying the predicates have been dropped (e.g. in, into, to);
- a verb requiring an animate complement is used to talk about an animate item (talk).

As for an "experiencing schema", an entity involved is neither passive-Patient, nor active-Agent, but it constitutes the "registration centre" of the perceptions, being termed the Experiencer. For instance:

know a thing or two

think long and hard

feel hot and cold

However, in the following expressions:

see red (to become very angry)

think big (to have great plans)

see sb right (to help sb)

feel put upon (to be treated badly by sb)

- there is a non-prototypical Patient that regularly is an animate or inanimate item (red, big, right, put upon);
- there is atypical flow of energy since the meaning becomes active (help, become angry) and is not connected with the sense expressed by the main verb (see, think etc.)

Examine now a group of phraseological expressions, some conforming and others strongly violating the prototypical "having schema":

have a wide choice

have courage

vs

have an eye for sth (to be good at noticing a particular type of thing)

have sb taped (to be able to deal with sb)

have a bone to pick with sb (to want to talk to sb about sth annoying they've done)

This schema normally refers to human Possessor (Patient) object possessed or an affected entity to its cause of affection and can therefore be paraphrased by means of "with" or "of" phrase. Here, though:

- there is no possibility of applying the transformational with or of schema;
- the unprototypical presence of the human Patient (sb) makes the verb fail to lexically elaborate the meaning assigned to the construction- Agent performs an action on Patient, as a result of which the latter participant is affected, in the wake of which the change is brought about.
- the meaning does not refer to a possessing relationship.

As far as the "moving schema" is concerned, the expressions that strongly conform to it are the following:

go from bad to worse

smile from ear to ear

be from top to bottom

However, the structure is most strongly bereft of its prototypical characteristics with respect to units such as:

be a home from home (to feel as if in one's home)

a weight was lifted from one's heart (to feel much more relaxed, relieved)

fall foul of sb (to upset sb)

go through the roof (get very angry)

Here:

- unprototypically the source and the goal become seemingly the same entity – home – (i.e. they are unanimously termed) and, consequently, the concept of path disappears entirely;
- the idioms violate the "goal over source", principle since at some instances the former notion turns out to be irrelevant and is omitted;
- the action expressed by the formulaic expressions have no connection with the actual meanings of the whole phrases, there is no transfer, no actual motion.

Finally, let us consider instances of the most prototypical instances and blatant violations of the "transferring schema":

give sb a good example

give one's all to sb

vs

give voice to sth (to express your thoughts in words)

give sth a miss (to miss, not to take part in)

give sb a turn (to frighten sb)

give yourself away (betray yourself)

According to Dirven and Verspoor (2004), this schema implies two states: an initial state (with one participant having sth and passing it onto another person) and the resulting state (implying the actual possession of sth by the second participant). Here, non-prototypically:

- expressions of the transferring schema, include a Receiver that is non-human;
- one can observe here a goal-to-patient conversion, since typically the affected entity related to the verb give is the goal, yet in the context above the entity becomes the patient;
- the process of reification takes place here, transforming the verb (expressing an action) into a noun (naming a state), which imposes a more self-contained and discrete construal of the event which is designated by it.

Conclusions

Summing up, the data presented here argues strongly for the relationship between the extent of event schema violations and our capacity to analyse and comprehend phraseological units. In a sense, this may seem to be surprising as schemas are, as a rule, associated with sentence structure, not the structure of phrases. This analysis, we believe, can offer a better insight into the structure and meaning of phraseological units.

Bibliography

- Dirven, R., Verspoor, M. (2004). *Cognitive Explorations of Language and Linguistics*. 2nd ed. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Kardela, H. (2007). "Event Structure: A Force Dynamics/Absolute Construal Account." In: Chłopicki, A. Pawelec, A. Pokojska (eds.). *Cognition in Language. Volume in Honour of Professor Elżbieta Tabakowska*. Kraków: Tertium.
- Langacker, R. W. (1991a). *Concept, Image and Symbol. The Cognitive Basis of Grammar*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Langacker, R. W. (1991b). *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Vol 2. Descriptive Application*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Agnieszka Ziarkowska-Robak, M.A. in English Philology – a faculty member of the English and American Studies Department (State School of Higher Education, Chełm, Poland).

E-mail: agafonz@wp.pl