

## Idioms: Phasehood and Compositionality

### *Abstract*

This paper examines idiomatic expressions in light of the hypothesis that the vP-phase boundary defines a size limitation for verbal idioms. Under this analysis, a problem emerges when one considers that the most canonical verbal idioms contain a DP-object. Given that DPs are also claimed to be phases, the question arises of why verbal idioms can straddle the DP- but not the vP-phase boundary. Our solution to this problem is twofold. We show first of all that not *all* verbal idioms are actually confined to a single phase: whilst *idiomatic phrases* are restricted to the vP-phase, *idiomatically combining expressions* are not. Hence, the DP-phase problem is only relevant for the first type, idiomatic phrases. Secondly, we assume that, in the case of idiomatic phrases, the object lacks a direct discourse referent (Fellbaum 1993; Grégoire 2009), meaning it behaves more akin to indefinite nominals, which are also non-referential. According to Chomsky (2007), amongst others, indefinite nominals are structurally distinct from definite nominals in that they lack n\*P, which is necessary for projecting the nominal phase. If the DP-object of an idiomatic phrase is non-referential, it follows that it too lacks n\*P, just like indefinites, and so does not project the phase. This explains why idiomatic phrases seem to be able to straddle the DP-phase boundary: there simply is no DP-phase boundary to begin with.

**Keywords:** idioms, vP-phase, DP-phase, compositionality, referentiality

## 1. *Introduction*

In this paper we discuss idiomatic expressions in light of the claim that the vP-phase boundary defines an upper limit on the size of verbal idioms, i.e. verbal idioms are confined to syntactic material found within the vP-phase. We will refer to this claim throughout as the *Idioms As Phases* hypothesis. Since first proposed by Svenonius (2005) (following work by Marantz 1984, 1997, 2001), many authors have adopted the Idioms As Phases hypothesis in their discussion of verbal idioms (Harley & Stone 2013; Harwood 2013, 2015; Harwood & Temmerman 2015; Kim 2015), despite the fact that a rather obvious problem arises when one considers that the most canonical verbal idioms (e.g. *kick the bucket*) contain a DP-object. Given that DPs are also claimed to act as phases (Heck & Zimmerman 2004; Svenonius 2004; Bošković 2005; Chomsky 2005; Hinzen 2012), the question arises of why verbal idioms can straddle the DP-phase boundary, but not the vP-phase boundary, which would be problematic for the Idioms As Phases hypothesis. This paper aims to solve this issue.

Our solution to the problem is twofold. First, we show that not *all* idioms are actually confined to a single phase. We follow the proposal (e.g. Nunberg et al. 1994) that there are two types of idioms: *idiomatically combining expressions* (ICEs) and *idiomatic phrases* (IdPs), and show that only the latter are restricted to a single phase (the vP-phase). ICEs can freely straddle multiple phase boundaries. Hence, the DP-phase problem is only relevant in the case of IdPs. Secondly, we claim that in the case of IdPs, the DP-phase does not actually project, due to the fact that the object lacks referential properties in such contexts. That is, since the definite determiner in an IdP does not pick out a unique referent in the discourse (cf. Fellbaum 1993; Grégoire 2009), as it would in non-idiomatic expressions, the object DP in an IdP is non-referential. Following the approach to nominal phrases as outlined in Chomsky (2007), amongst others, according to which indefinite nominal phrases lack both referentiality and the  $n^*$  head present in definite nominals, we take it that objects in IdPs also lack  $n^*$ . It follows that if it is  $n^*P$  that otherwise constitutes a phase in non-idiomatic definite nominal phrases (as Chomsky suggests), then in the absence of  $n^*$ , there is no phase present. This is why IdPs seem to be able to straddle the DP-phase boundary: there simply is no phase boundary to begin with.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2 we first define what we take a verbal idiom to be. In section 3 we provide an overview of the literature claiming that idioms are confined to single phases and outline the main issue that this paper intends to solve. The analysis is then presented in sections 4 and 5. In section 4, we introduce the distinction between idiomatic phrases and idiomatically combining expressions, and show that only idiomatic phrases are confined to the vP-phase. In section 5, we argue that the direct object in idiomatic phrases does not constitute a phase, and thus does not present a problem for the Idioms as Phases hypothesis. Section 6 then explores a number of further issues that follow from the analysis. Finally, section 7 concludes the paper.

## 2. *What is a verbal idiom?*

The following phrases are all commonly cited examples of idiomatic expressions:

- (1) a. Bite the dust = die
- b. Shoot the breeze = chat
- c. Spill the beans = reveal the secret
- d. Hit the roof = get angry
- e. Cut the mustard = meet expectations

In a nutshell, an idiomatic construction is typically defined as an expression with a non-compositional interpretation. That is, its meaning as a whole is not derivable from the literal meanings of its parts (Katz & Postal 1963; Fraser 1970; Chomsky 1980; Marantz 1984, 1997; Cacciari & Tabossi 1988; Fillmore et al. 1988; Nunberg et al. 1994). *Shoot the breeze* in (1)b above, for instance, means 'chat', even though none of the lexical items that comprise it convey this meaning independently:

- (2) a. Shoot = launch/fire a projectile
- b. The = definite article
- c. Breeze = light wind

Despite this, the figurative interpretation of the idiomatic expression is nevertheless dependent upon these specific lexical items. If any of these elements are replaced, the idiomatic meaning is lost and only the (sometimes rather strange) literal meaning is available:<sup>1</sup>

- (3) a. # Let's shoot the wind for a while.
- b. # Let's shoot a breeze.
- c. # Let's kill the breeze.

Thus it can be said that the idiom *shoot the breeze* is dependent upon the items *shoot*, *the*, and *breeze* in order to access its figurative interpretation.

Of course, "idiomatic construction", along with its basic definition, is a broad term covering many types of expressions. It is crucial therefore, before going any further, that we provide a more thorough and formal definition of the types of idiomatic expressions that this paper is concerned with.

Throughout this article we will concentrate on the most canonical idiom type, verbal idioms, which are typically comprised of a lexical verb and its direct object, as was already illustrated in (1). Marantz (1984), Kiparsky (1987), Fillmore et al. (1988), Nunberg et al. (1994), Croft & Cruse (2004), Svenonius (2005) and Evans & Green (2006) have collectively identified a number of criteria which help to define exactly what a verbal idiom is:

- (4) a. It must contain a lexical verb.
- b. It must have a non-literal interpretation.
- c. It must be able to interact with productive syntax.
- d. It must be comprised of lexical items that are found outside of the context of the idiom.
- e. It must be formed in a manner which obeys the regular syntactic rules of the language.

(4)a rules out nominal idiomatic expressions such as *the apple of one's eyes* since such phrases lack a lexical verb. (4)b rules out similes such as *work like a beaver*, collocations such as *break the law*, and aphorisms such as *absolute power corrupts absolutely*, since these all only denote predictable, derivable meanings. (4)c rules out sentential idioms such as *Do bears shit in the woods?* or *Does the Pope wear a funny hat?* since these are completely frozen, fixed expressions which cannot interact with

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<sup>1</sup> \* is used throughout this article to indicate ungrammaticality, whilst # indicates loss of the idiomatic interpretation.

productive syntax. That is, they cannot be embedded in subordinate clauses, undergo clause-type shifting, or undergo other syntactic operations such as relativisation:

- (5) a. # I wonder whether bears shit in the woods.  
 a'. # I wonder whether the Pope wears a funny hat.  
 b. # Bears shit in the woods.  
 b'. # The Pope wears a funny hat.  
 c. # The bear that shits in the woods...  
 c'. # The Pope, who wears a funny hat...

(4)d rules out idioms containing irregular lexical items, such as *hoisted by his own petard* ('defeated by his own plot intended for another'), since *petard* (an extremely archaic word for 'bomb') is never used in contemporary English outside of the context of the idiom itself. Because this lexical item has no real contemporary meaning outside of the idiom, it is impossible to tell whether the interpretation of the idiomatic expression is genuinely figurative rather than literal.<sup>2</sup> Finally, (4)e rules out expressions with irregular syntax such as *be that as it may*. Verbal idioms are typically well-formed grammatical sentences that obey the syntactic structure building mechanisms of the language. It is only at the syntax-semantics interface that idioms behave non-standardly, flouting the language particular rules of semantic composition. Expressions such as *be that as it may* however, appear to flout the normal morpho-syntactic rules of the language, suggesting them to be a separate phenomenon entirely. Moreover, because they violate the rules of syntactic composition, it is difficult to ascertain whether the meaning that they denote is figurative or literal.<sup>3</sup>

Verbal idioms such as those in (1) are ruled in by the criteria in (4). *Cut the mustard*, for instance, contains a lexical verb *cut*, and has a non-literal interpretation 'meet expectations', thus satisfying (4)a and (4)b. It also interacts with productive syntax, satisfying (4)c, as shown in (6), all attested examples (found through Google). Moreover, the items *cut*, *the*, and *mustard* are common words of English found outside of the context of the idiom, satisfying (4)d.

- (6) a. This version certainly seems to cut the mustard.  
 b. Will Conte cut the mustard in the Premier League though?  
 c. It might be difficult for the school to evaluate whether you cut the mustard.  
 d. All these explanations have been seriously advanced by those who cut the mustard in lexicology.

Finally, despite having a non-compositional interpretation, it can be argued that idioms such as those in (1) are formed by normal syntactic structure building mechanisms, like any other fully regular VP (a.o. Fellbaum 1993; Nunberg et al. 1994; McGinnis 2002; Everaert 2010; Stone 2013), satisfying (4)e. This is illustrated by several properties that such expressions exhibit. Taking the idiom *bite the dust* as an example, note first that the expression as a whole conforms with the phrase structure rules of standard English verb phrases like *bite the bread* or *sweep the dust*.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'figurative interpretation/meaning' will be used synonymously throughout this paper with the term 'idiomatic interpretation/meaning'.

<sup>3</sup> Certain types of expressions are actually ruled out by multiple criteria. Irregular syntactic expressions such as *be that as it may*, for instance, are simultaneously ruled out by (4)c, since such terms of phrase cannot interact with productive syntax either.

Secondly, the aspectual properties of an idiom mirror those of its literal counterpart. In (7)a, for instance, the combination of a transitive verb and a definite singular object leads to an interpretation of telicity, completely as expected (cf. McGinnis 2002). Moreover, the verb *bite* is open to the same range of inflectional affixes as its non-idiomatic counterpart. That is, the temporal, aspectual and agreement specifications of the verb can vary freely, as shown in (7)b-c-d. These data show that these idioms are built up by the same regular structure-building mechanisms that create non-idiomatic syntactic structures.

- (7) a. My iMac bit the dust today.  
 b. He is the first major character who bites the dust in this episode.  
 c. Who will bite the dust?  
 d. So many Starks have bitten the dust over the course of six seasons.

Hopefully this section has provided a clear definition of what we take a verbal idiom to be. In the next section we discuss the Idioms As Phases hypothesis.

### 3. *The Idioms As Phases hypothesis*

Chomsky (1980, 1981) Marantz (1984, 1997) and Svenonius (2005) have noted that verbal idioms appear to be subject to a limitation with regards to the syntactic material they can be composed of. That is, verbal idioms appear to only be built from the verbal predicate and its arguments. This was already illustrated in (1) with regards to the lexical verb and its direct object, and is demonstrated below for idioms involving subjects:<sup>4</sup>

- (8) a. The shit hit the fan = chaos ensued  
 b. All hell broke loose = chaos ensued  
 c. Heads will roll = people will be punished  
 d. The jig is up = the deception has come to an end

If the verbal predicate or any of its arguments are altered in the expressions in (1) and (8), the figurative interpretation is altogether lost, showing these idioms to be genuinely dependent upon these lexical items:

- (9) a. # Bite the dirt  
 b. # Shoot the wind  
 c. # Drop the beans  
 d. # Kick the roof  
 e. # Cut the honey
- (10) a. # The excrement hit the fan  
 b. # Damnation broke loose  
 c. # Craniums will roll  
 d. # The dance is up

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<sup>4</sup> Though as Marantz (1984, 1997) notes, none of the idioms such as those in (8) involve Agentive subjects. This conforms with Marantz's (1984, 1997) 'No Agent Idioms' hypothesis which postulates that there are no verbal idioms involving Agentive subjects. We will not get into this point in this paper. See Nunberg et al. (1994), Marantz (1997), Svenonius (2005) and Harley & Stone (2013) for discussion.

Given that the verbal predicate and its arguments are standardly taken to all be first merged within the vP-domain (Zagona 1982; Kitagawa 1986; Speas 1986; Contreras 1987; Kuroda 1988; Koopman & Sportiche 1991), it seems safe to say that verbal idioms are typically comprised of material contained within the vP-domain (Chomsky 1980, 1981; Marantz 1984, 1997).

Moreover, Kitagawa (1986), Ifill (2002), and Svenonius (2005) note that whilst syntactic material beyond vP – such as tense, modality, and aspect – is obviously compatible with idiomatic expressions, the idiomatic interpretation is never dependent upon the presence of such material. That is, if the tense, modal, or aspectual information is altered, the figurative interpretation remains intact:

- |         |   |                                   |
|---------|---|-----------------------------------|
| (11) a. | The game is up.                             | [Tense]                           |
|         | b.  | We told him that the game was up. |
| (12) a. | I think that he might just cut the mustard. | [Modality]                        |
|         | b.  | He cut the mustard.               |
| (13) a. | The shit has already hit the fan.           | [Perfect Aspect]                  |
|         | b.  | The shit hit the fan.             |
| (14) a. | All hell is breaking loose.                 | [Progressive Aspect]              |
|         | b.  | All hell broke loose.             |

Therefore, material from the TP-domain is standardly taken to not be crucial for the accessibility of the idiomatic interpretation.

Given that verbal idioms seem to be exclusively comprised of the verb and its arguments, i.e. material from the vP-phase, Svenonius (2005) has arrived at the conclusion that idioms are restricted to the vP-phase. That is, verbal idioms can only be constructed from syntactic material located within the vP-phase and nothing beyond that. In other words, verbal idioms cannot straddle the vP-phase boundary.<sup>5</sup> That is not to say that idioms must be comprised of *all* the material found within the vP-phase. Indeed, verbal idioms can be smaller than or equal to the vP-phase boundary, they just cannot extend beyond it.<sup>6</sup> That is, the vP-phase boundary provides a limit on the maximal size of the syntactic constituent from which a verbal idiom can be formed.

This is an intuitive claim, since, under a compositional view of idioms (which this paper follows), idioms are constructed from the regular structure building mechanisms of syntax (a.o. Fellbaum 1993; Nunberg et al. 1994; McGinnis 2002; Everaert 2010; Stone 2013) and it is only at the syntax-semantics interface (SEM) that something "special" happens in order for the non-compositional/figurative interpretation to arise (see Jackendoff (1997), Marantz (2001), and Svenonius (2005), among others, for various proposals as to how idiomatic meanings are primed at the

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<sup>5</sup> Hoeksema (2010) gives examples of Dutch idioms that are larger than CP, e.g. *vriezen dat het kraakt* 'freeze that it cracks, i.e. there is a sharp frost', *maken dat je wegkomt* 'make that you away come, i.e., get out of here', (*niet*) *weten hoe hij het heeft* '(not) know how he it has, i.e. not know how to handle himself'. We take them not to be counterexamples to the restriction, given that these fixed expressions are very much transparent. If they were to be considered verbal idioms, then they would be classified as idiomatically combining expressions, in which case it would not be surprising that they can span several phase boundaries (see section 4.2 below for details).

<sup>6</sup>In this paper, we abstract away from notions of spell-out domains and phase edges since recent discussion in the literature has argued that there is good reason to believe that the entire phase can be spelled out (cf. Fox & Pesetsky 2005; Richards 2011; Harwood 2013, 2015; Bošković 2014).

syntax-semantics interface).<sup>7</sup> Given that phases are shipped off independently to the interfaces for pronunciation and interpretation (Chomsky 2000, 2001), it seems reasonable that an expression can only be interpreted idiomatically if it is shipped off 'wholesale' to SEM, i.e. as one single phase. If an expression were to straddle the vP-phase boundary, then only part of the idiom would be sent off to SEM, stranding the other part in the syntax. Given that each phase is interpreted independently at the interface, the idiomatic interpretation could not be accessed since material crucial to the figurative interpretation is not available to SEM at that moment. Instead, the entire expression must be contained inside a single phase so that it can be shipped off in one go to the syntax-semantics interface in order for the idiomatic meaning to be primed. This explains why verbal idioms are confined to material contained within the vP-phase.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, if the phase represents an isolated domain of meaning that is independently interpreted at SEM (Chomsky 2000, 2001), and idioms form a single semantic unit, then it is logical for verbal idioms and the vP phase to be aligned (Marantz 1997, 2001; Svenonius 2005). This is what we refer to as the Idioms As Phases hypothesis.

Since its inception, the Idioms As Phases hypothesis has been widely adopted by many researchers working in the field (see e.g. Svenonius 2005; Harley & Stone 2013; Harwood 2013, 2015; Harwood & Temmerman 2015; Kim 2015). As appealing as this proposal is, however, it faces a rather crucial problem which, until now, appears to have been overlooked. As was previously mentioned, verbal idioms most typically involve a DP-object in addition to the lexical verb (cf. (1)). However, Heck & Zimmerman (2004), Svenonius (2004), Bošković (2005), and Hinzen (2012), amongst others, suggest that, in addition to CPs and vPs, DPs also act as phases (cf. also Chomsky 2005:17). If this is the case, then most verbal idioms seem to actually be comprised of (at least) two phases: the vP-phase and a DP-phase, contra the proposal outlined above.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the following question arises: how can verbal idioms straddle the DP-phase boundary when they are supposed to be restricted to a single phase, namely the vP-phase?

This forms the central issue that this paper is dedicated to solving. In the following section we first show that not all idiomatic expressions are necessarily confined to a single phase.

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<sup>7</sup> This paper generally tries to remain neutral with regards to exactly how the idiomatic interpretation of an expression is accessed at SEM, though if forced to choose we subscribe to Jackendoff's (1997) theory that idiomatic interpretations are the result of chunks of syntactic structure being stored in the post-syntactic lexicon.

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, in the case of idioms involving subjects such as those in (8), an additional complication arises given that subjects in English typically A-move out of the vP-phase to Spec-TP. The question therefore arises as to how the subject can be shipped off together with the rest of the idiomatic material inside the clause-internal phase. The answer is relatively simple: it is only necessary that a copy of the subject remains internal to the clause-internal phase so as to allow the subject to be interpreted low. It does not matter that the subject is spelled-out as part of the CP-phase; it was first merged within the clause-internal phase and so can be interpreted within that position.

More generally, movement out of the vP-phase appears, on the whole, to be unproblematic for idiomatic interpretation if the movement involved is for formal reasons (i.e. A-movement of the subject in idioms such as *the shit hit the fan*, or head-movement of the copula auxiliary in idioms such as *the cat is out of the bag*). As will be seen later, it is only when the movement involved changes the information structure of the sentence (i.e. passivisation, topicalisation, etc.) that the idiomatic interpretation might become inaccessible.

<sup>9</sup> If a subject or indirect object is also included in the idiom, then there would be multiple DP-phases involved.

#### 4. *Idiomatic phrases vs. idiomatically combining expressions*

In section 4.1 we first explain the distinction between idiomatic phrases and idiomatically combining expressions, and in section 4.2 we discuss the implications of this distinction for the Idioms As Phases hypothesis.

##### 4.1. *The idiomatic phrases and idiomatically combining expressions distinction*

Nunberg et al. (1994) argue that not all verbal idioms are alike and that they can essentially be classified into two distinct types: *Idiomatically Combining Expressions* (ICEs) and *Idiomatic Phrases* (IdPs) (see also Nunberg 1978; Wasow et al. 1984; Gazdar et al. 1985; Fillmore et al. 1988; Ruwet 1991; Pulman 1993). These two sub-classes of idioms are distinguished along three lines: conventionality, opacity, and compositionality. Conventionality refers to the discrepancy between the figurative reading and the predicted literal meaning of the expression. Opacity (vs. transparency) refers to the ease with which the motivation for the use of a particular idiomatic interpretation can be recovered. IdPs are typically highly conventionalised and opaque, whereas ICEs are less conventionalised and more transparent.

The most important distinction between IdPs and ICEs, however, is compositionality, which refers to the degree to which the phrasal meaning, once known, can be analysed in terms of the contributions of the sub-parts of the expression. ICEs are taken by Nunberg et al. (1994) to be more compositional than IdPs. This might seem somewhat contradictory, given that idioms in general are defined as expressions with a non-compositional interpretation. However, this is not to say that ICEs are as fully compositional as a standard verb phrase with a literal interpretation such as *sing a song*, only that they are more compositional than IdPs.

To give a concrete example, consider the archetypical ICE *spill the beans*, which means 'divulge the secret', in comparison with the archetypical IdP *kick the bucket*, which means 'die'. The ICE *spill the beans* is more compositional than the IdP *kick the bucket* in that the individual components of the literal expression can be directly mapped onto individual elements of the figurative reading. That is, the lexical verb of the expression *spill* directly corresponds to the lexical verb 'divulge' in the figurative interpretation, and the direct object *the beans* is straightforwardly mapped onto 'the secret'. With IdPs, however, the expression as a whole is mapped onto the figurative reading. In the case of *kick the bucket*, for instance, neither *kick* nor *the bucket* can be uniquely mapped onto the idiomatic reading. Instead, the entire term of phrase must be mapped onto 'die':

(15) a. ICE

spill      the beans  
 ↓            ↓  
 divulge    the secret

b. IdP

kick the bucket  
 X  
 die

Informally put, one could think of IdPs as single, complete idiomatic expressions, whilst ICEs can actually be decomposed into a series of smaller, inter-linked idiomatic or metaphorical expressions. In other words, individual elements of ICEs have (some degree of) semantic autonomy, whereas the individual syntactic elements of an IdP exhibit no autonomy from one another whatsoever (Stone 2016).

Due to their more compositional nature, ICEs tend to exhibit a degree of lexical substitution, whereas IdPs are generally entirely resistant to any such alterations (Gibbs 1995). With ICEs such as *spill the beans*, for instance, the object DP *the beans*

can sometimes be substituted for closely related lexical items (related to the figurative reading) – see e.g. Nunberg et al. (1994) and Gibbs (1995) for more examples:

- (16) a. Come on, spill the **details**!  
 b. Come on, spill the **news**!  
 c. Come on, spill the **gossip**!

Other lexical items can be altered as well, as is shown in (17) for the lexical verb in the ICE *pass the hat around* 'collect money'

- (17) a. I will **send** the hat around to ensure you get the best defense possible.  
 b. There's the Queen, the Agha Khan, a sheikh or two, but none who need to **take** the hat around.  
 c. I'm sure that all of us can also **throw** the hat around and help out in some way.

If the object DP or the lexical verb of an IdP such as *kick the bucket* is replaced, however, even with closely related lexical items, the idiomatic interpretation is altogether lost:

- (18) a. # He kicked the **tub**.  
 b. # He kicked the **bin**.  
 c. # He **struck** the bucket.  
 d. # He **booted** the bucket.

A further common property of ICEs is that they can allow for open object positions, whereas with IdPs every available slot is fixed (Nunberg et al. 1994; Espinal & Mateu 2010). This is easily exemplified with the following ICEs (examples from Harley (2003), cf. Nunberg et al. (1994) and Svenonius (2005) for more examples):<sup>10</sup>

- (19) a. take x to the cleaners = cheat x out of his/her money  
 b. send x to the showers = remove/expel x from a position/job/activity  
 c. knock x over with a feather = surprise x  
 d. put x on a pedestal = hold x in very high esteem
- (20) a. read x the riot act = give x a severe scolding  
 b. lend x an ear = listen sympathetically or attentively to x  
 c. show x the ropes = explain to x how to do a job/activity  
 d. give x the boot = stop employing x

The ICEs in (19) are comprised of a lexical verb and a thematic PP-goal/oblique, with an open position for the theme; the ICEs in (20) are comprised of a lexical verb and a theme, with an open position for the thematic goal. In all these ICEs, the open position can be filled with a noun that refers to some direct referent in the discourse, namely e.g. the individual who is to be swindled out of his/her money in (19)a or the individual who is being given a severe scolding in (20)a. This instantly makes the expressions more compositional. It should therefore not come as a surprise that IdPs with open positions are not found.

<sup>10</sup> See section 6.2 for some more discussion of idioms like those in (19).

Wasow et al. (1984), Fillmore et al. (1988), Nunberg et al. (1994) and Everaert et al. (1995) note that the distinction between IdPs and ICEs correlates with certain syntactic properties that these idioms exhibit, namely the extent to which they can be syntactically manipulated. That is, if an ICE is syntactically transformed, through operations such as passivisation, topicalisation, and adjectival modification, the idiomatic interpretation remains intact:<sup>11</sup>

- (21) a. The beans were spilled (by Bob). [ICE: Passivisation]  
 b. The beans, Bob has most certainly spilled. [ICE: Topicalisation]  
 c. Bob spilled the juicy beans. [ICE: Modification]

If an IdP, on the other hand, undergoes similar transformations, the idiomatic reading is altogether lost and only the literal interpretation remains:<sup>12</sup>

- (22) a. # The bucket was kicked (by Bob). [IdP: No passivisation]  
 b. # The bucket, Bob has gone and kicked. [IdP: No topicalisation]  
 c. # Bob kicked the rusty bucket. [IdP: No modification]

The following table summarises the differences between IdPs and ICEs:<sup>13</sup>

(23)

<i>Idiom</i>	<i>Conventionality</i>	<i>Opacity</i>	<i>Compositionality</i>	<i>Lexical Variation</i>	<i>Open Slots</i>	<i>Syntactic Flexibility</i>
<i>IdP</i>	High	Opaque	Non-compositional	No	No	No
<i>ICE</i>	Low	Transparent	More compositional	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1: properties of IdPs and ICEs

Having outlined the distinction between ICEs and IdPs, we show in the next sub-section how only IdPs are subject to the Idioms As Phases hypothesis.

<sup>11</sup> Technically speaking, adjectival modification of a nominal constituent is not, under standard assumptions, actually a syntactic transformation in the same way that passivisation or topicalisation are. Nevertheless, Nunberg et al. (1994) recognize it as a diagnostic for ICEs since it is a requirement that an object be semantically autonomous for it to be modified by an adjective. For pure ease of exposition we will continue to refer to adjectival modification as a syntactic transformation so that it can be referred to alongside tests such as passivisation and topicalisation.

<sup>12</sup> As mentioned in footnote 8, formal movement operations such as A-movement or head-movement do not appear to affect the accessibility of the idiomatic meaning. Only movement which changes the information structure of a sentence, such as passivisation or topicalisation, seems to block access to the figurative reading. This, we assume, is because such movement forces the moved element to be interpreted high, external to the vP-phase, preventing the IdP to be interpreted as one whole.

<sup>13</sup> Espinal & Mateu (2010) suggest that the ICE/IdP distinction is not absolute. This is argued for on the grounds that certain ICEs do not survive every single syntactic transformation. *Laugh one's head off*, for instance, is initially classified by Espinal & Mateu as an ICE, but fails syntactic transformation tests such as passivisation:

(i) # Our heads were laughed off (by us).

For the purpose of this paper we leave idioms such as these, which seem to occupy a grey area or middle ground between ICEs and IdPs, aside. They remain a problem for the field in general, and will be returned to in future research. See also Trotzke (2015) for pragmatic restrictions on syntactic transformations in idioms.

#### 4.2. *IdPs, ICEs, and phases*

We claim that it is only actually IdPs which are confined to a single phase. ICEs, we argue, can straddle the phase boundary.

As was stated in section 3, if the first phase is an isolated domain of meaning (Chomsky 2000, 2001), and idioms form a single semantic unit, then it is logical that verbal idioms and the clause-internal phase should be aligned (Marantz 1997; Svenonius 2005).<sup>14</sup> However, the only idiom type that actually forms a single semantic unit is that of IdPs, as the whole phrase is mapped to a single meaning. ICEs do not form a single semantic unit because individual parts of the expression are mapped to separate elements of the figurative reading, meaning their interpretation is more compositional. That is, ICEs can be sub-divided into autonomous idiomatic chunks whereas IdPs form one complete idiomatic expression. Therefore, it seems logical to conclude that only IdPs are limited to material found in the first phase. ICEs, with their more fragmented, compositional interpretation, can be expected to be less restricted: they can straddle the boundary of the vP phase and be comprised of syntactic material beyond it (i.e. aspect, modality, and tense).

Recall that an available idiomatic interpretation of an expression is primed only at the point when the expression in question is shipped off to SEM (see Jackendoff 1997; Marantz 1997, 2001; Svenonius 2005). Recall furthermore that the syntax-semantics interface is only accessed through phasal spell-out and that each phase feeds into SEM separately. Given that an IdP is interpreted as a single semantic entity, it is therefore logical that all of the syntactic material that is crucial for its figurative reading be contained within a single phase, so it can be shipped off wholesale to the interface.

Where ICEs are concerned, however, it is not necessary that the entire expression be contained within a single phase, since ICEs are not interpreted as a whole. That is, ICEs do not form a single semantic entity since they can be further decomposed into smaller idiomatic chunks. At SEM, the figurative reading can be built up incrementally over the course of the entire derivation. It does not need to be accessed in one go.

To summarise, we claim that IdPs are confined to a single phase, namely the clause-internal phase, whereas ICEs are able to span multiple phase boundaries (though it is not necessarily required). Indeed, this is what we find for English, since, as Harwood & Temmerman (2015) have noted,<sup>15</sup> there exist several idioms that actually depend on material external to the vP-phase, namely modality and aspect (*contra* Kitagawa 1986; Ifill 2002; Svenonius 2005). That is, perfect aspect is crucial to the verbal idioms in (24)-(28), and modality is crucial to the idioms in (29)-(32): without the relevant aspectual form or modal, the figurative meanings are altogether lost:

- (24) a. Have had enough = to have reached the end of one's tolerance or patience.  
 b. # I will soon have enough of all your whining.
- (25) a. Those birds have flown = the person one is looking for has escaped.  
 b. # Q: Where are the prisoners? A: # Sorry, but those birds flew.

<sup>14</sup> Marantz (1997) obviously predates the inception of phase theory (Uriagereka 1999; Chomsky 2000, 2001) but nevertheless identifies the vP domain as a special domain for idiomatic interpretation.

<sup>15</sup> The existence of a subtype of idioms that extend beyond the vP has also been acknowledged by Horvath & Siloni (2014, 2015, 2016). They discuss and analyse the properties of what they label “clausal idioms” (vs. “verb-phrase idioms”), but do not discuss these with regard to phases.

- (26) a. Have had one's chips = to have completely failed at something.  
 b. # We tried to keep the business going, but we had our chips already.
- (27) a. Have seen better days = to be old and/or in poor condition.  
 b. # That old ramshackle place certainly saw better days.
- (28) a. Have had a bellyful = to have had more than you can deal with of someone or something bad or annoying.  
 b. # Don't tell me she's run off. I had a bellyful of cops yesterday saying she'd run off with some older fellow.
- (29) a. Could murder a drink/cigarette = to really want a drink/cigarette.  
 b. # I murdered a drink.
- (30) a. Can't make head nor tails of x<sup>16</sup> = to not understand something at all.  
 b. # I don't make head nor tails of this map.
- (31) a. Could cut the atmosphere with a knife = the atmosphere in a place is extremely tense or unfriendly.  
 b. # I cut the atmosphere with a knife.

In what follows, however, we show that all such idioms turn out to satisfy the diagnostics for ICEs, which, recall, we claim to be able to span multiple phases.<sup>17</sup>

In establishing whether a given idiom is an ICE or IdP we focus mainly on the diagnostic of syntactic flexibility, that is whether a verbal idiom can undergo passivisation, topicalisation, or adjectival modification, since these tests produce the most categorical results. Tests such as the conventionality or opacity of an idiom are far more equivocal and so will not be utilised in our assessment of the idioms. Furthermore, whilst compositionality is one of the most defining distinctions between ICEs and IdPs, it will not be discussed often in this section since the extent to which an idiom can be decomposed depends on how one paraphrases the figurative meaning of the expression, which is very much open to interpretation. However, whether lexical variation is exhibited or whether open slots are permitted *can* shed light on the compositionality of an idiom, so these criteria will occasionally be discussed.

Beginning with idioms involving perfect aspect, we see that such expressions all exhibit characteristics typical of ICEs in that they are syntactically flexible:

- (32) a. Enough has been had of your ghoulish antics and scornful insolence.<sup>18</sup>  
 b. If you ask me, I think that enough, the people have had of sleazy politicians and corrupt bankers.  
 c. The people have had more than/quite enough.
- (33) Those pesky birds have flown.<sup>19</sup>
- (34) a. Sorry mate, but your chips have been had. The game is up.  
 b. If you ask me, I think that his chips, he has definitely had.  
 c. You've had your lucky chips, but your little charade is over now.

<sup>16</sup> This is Horvath & Siloni's (2016) example (37).

<sup>17</sup> As will be discussed in section 6, the fact that (30) and (31) contain a PP is also indicative of their ICE-status.

<sup>18</sup> Example from *MichiganEnsign*, Volume 43, page 202.

<sup>19</sup> Since *fly* is an intransitive verb with nothing in its complement, neither passivisation nor topicalisation are applicable. Only modification of the subject DP is possible.

- (35) a. Better days have certainly been seen here.  
 b. If you ask me, I think that better days this house has seen.  
 c. This house has seen much/far better days.
- (36) a. A bellyful has been had of all your whining and bitching.  
 b. If you ask me, I think that a bellyful, the class has had of all your whining and bitching.  
 c. The class has had more than bellyful of all your whining and bitching.

This indicates that all the idioms featured in (24)-(28), i.e. all those with a dependence on perfect aspect, are ICEs.

Similar to idioms dependent on perfect aspect, all verbal idioms in English which feature modality are syntactically flexible, indicating them to be ICEs:

- (37) a. Neither head nor tails could be made of the doctor's handwriting.  
 b. If you ask me, I think that neither head nor tails, you could make of the doctor's handwriting.  
 c. I could make neither head nor scaly tail of the doctor's handwriting.
- (38) a. The atmosphere could be cut with a knife.  
 b. I reckon that that with a knife, you could cut the atmosphere.  
 c. You could cut the atmosphere with a blunt carving knife.

The only slightly problematic case is *could murder a drink/cigarette*, which can be easily topicalised and modified, but not passivised:

- (39) a. # A drink could be murdered right now.  
 b. I don't need much right now, but a drink I could definitely murder.  
 c. I could just murder a good strong pint of whisky.

However, George Walkden (p.c.) points out that this particular expression for some reason seems to force attachment to the speaker, as evidenced by the fact that the verbal idiom is infelicitous when uttered in the third or second person:

- (40) a. # You could murder a drink.  
 b. # He could murder a drink.

It is only when some assessment is made on the part of the speaker that the expression becomes felicitous again:

- (41) a. You look like you could murder a drink.  
 b. I reckon he could murder a drink right now.

This explains why this particular verbal idiom does not permit passivisation, despite permitting topicalisation and modification: because passivisation forcefully removes attachment to the speaker. Note also that this idiom has an open object position (which, recall, is another common property of ICEs), as illustrated by the fact that the DP-object can easily be substituted for a variety of drugs or beverages:

- (42) I could murder a coffee/tea/hot chocolate/whisky/cigar/joint/bong hit.

We therefore conclude that all verbal idioms which require modality are also ICEs.

The fact that all the verbal idioms featured in this section are dependent upon material external to the vP-phase, and satisfy the tests for ICEs, confirms our hypothesis that ICEs are not restricted to a single phase. Despite extensive searching, no IdPs have been found in English with a dependence upon material merged beyond the clause-internal phase.

To summarise this section, we have introduced the concept of ICEs and IdPs. With ICEs, individual components of the syntactic phrase can be mapped to separate parts of the figurative reading, thus yielding a more compositional interpretation than IdPs, in which the entire phrase must be mapped wholesale to the idiomatic reading. Turning back to how this relates to phases, we have claimed that ICEs can in fact span multiple phase boundaries, whereas IdPs conform with the Idioms As Phases hypothesis in that they are restricted to a single phase, namely the clause-internal phase. This was illustrated with the idioms listed in (24)-(31), which were shown to genuinely be dependent on specifications for modality or aspect for their figurative interpretation, material which is typically merged external to the vP-phase.<sup>20</sup> All these expressions satisfied the tests for ICEs, however, confirming our claim that ICEs are not restricted to a single phase. Despite extensive searching, no IdPs were found with a dependence on syntactic material merged external to the clause-internal phase, leading us to conclude that IdPs are genuinely subject to the Idioms As Phases hypothesis.

Therefore, the fact that ICEs include an additional DP-phase is immaterial, since we have argued that such expressions can freely straddle phase boundaries anyway. IdPs, on the other hand, cannot straddle phase boundaries and are indeed restricted to the vP-phase. This implies that the DP-phase problem introduced in this paper remains intact for IdPs. That is: if IdPs cannot straddle the vP-phase boundary, why can they apparently straddle the DP-phase boundary? We address the issue in the following section by claiming that the DP-phase does not project in IdPs.

## 5. *DP-phases and referentiality*

We propose that the answer to the question under scrutiny (why can IdPs apparently straddle the DP-phase boundary?) lies in the nature of the definite determiner in IdPs and, consequently, the structure of the object DP in question itself. First, in section 5.1, we briefly discuss the claim that only in ICEs, not in IdPs, object DPs have a unique referent. Secondly, in section 0, we discuss the implications of this for the phasal status of DPs in IdPs.

### 5.1. *IdPs, ICEs, and referentiality*

Consider again the figurative interpretation of IdPs such as *kick the bucket* ('die'), *bite the dust* ('die'), *shoot the breeze* ('chat'), or *chew the fat* ('chat'). Fellbaum (1993) and Grégoire (2009) note that in such idioms, the nouns (*bucket*, *dust*, *breeze* or *chat*) do not have generic, unique, specific, known or inferable referents. More specifically, Fellbaum (1993) talks about 'nondenoting nouns', Grégoire (2009) says that there is 'no identifiable idiomatic referent'. According to Fellbaum (1993) and Grégoire (2009), in such instances, the definite determiner does not pick out a unique referent in the discourse (as it would in a non-idiomatic expression): no discourse referent is available for the DP, and the direct object cannot be mapped to an individual

<sup>20</sup> Espinal (2005) has also shown that certain Catalan idioms (e.g., *no mata* 'middeling') are restricted to third person singular of present indicative and imperfect indicative. At present it is unclear whether such idioms are IdPs or ICEs in status.

component of the figurative reading. The object DP in an IdP is thus non-referential.<sup>21</sup> ICEs such as *spill the beans* ('reveal the secret') or *pass the hat around* ('collect money') are different: here, a discourse referent of the object DP can be identified (*the beans* corresponds to a certain secret which is identifiable in the discourse, or *the hat* corresponds to some kind of object (like an envelope), identifiable in the discourse, to pass around in order to collect money). The object DP in an ICE is thus referential.

One of the consequences of this difference in referentiality, is that it is only the object DP occurring in an ICE, not in an IdP, that permits a coreferential pronoun. This is an old observation (cf. Dickinson 1969; Gorbet 1973; Chomsky 1981, *pace* Bresnan 1982; Marcus et al. 1983): "there are some idiom chunks which cannot be antecedents for anaphora (including parts of idiomatic phrases, e.g. *the bucket* in *kick the bucket*) but [...] at least some idiom chunks are possible antecedents for pronouns" (Nunberg et al. 1994:502).

- (43) (Nunberg et al. 1994:502, (10))
- a. We thought tabs were being kept on us, but they weren't.
  - b. Kim's family pulled some strings on her behalf, but they weren't enough to get the job.
  - c. Pat tried to break the ice, but it was Chris who succeeded in breaking it.
  - d. We worried that Pat might spill the beans, but it was Chris who finally spilled them.
  - e. Once someone lets the cat out of the bag, it's out of the bag for good.

The same is true for the ICEs discussed in section 4.2 (those depending on aspect and modality), as can be seen in the following examples (all attested through Google):

- (44) a. Once those birds have flown, you're never getting them back.  
 b. I have seen better days. I long for them...  
 c. Rucker Albert Hammond Jr has had his chips and eaten them.

- (45) a. We could murder a beer, drink it boiling!  
 b. You could cut the atmosphere with a knife. It was so tense and cold.

We conclude that parts of ICEs are referential and carry parts of their idiomatic meanings. Parts of IdPs, on the other hand, are not referential; they are not possible antecedents for pronouns:

- (46) a. # After John kicked the bucket, his wife got rid of it.  
 b. # I'm sure he'll bite the dust if he keeps on eating it.  
 c. # They really like to shoot the breeze while sitting in it.  
 d. # Let's first chew the fat and then eat it.

The fact that the object DP in an IdP is non-referential is crucial to explaining how IdPs can apparently straddle the DP-phase boundary.

<sup>21</sup> See Espinal (2001) and Mateu & Espinal (2007) for an approach in which object nominalsof idiomatic constructions are taken to be property denoting expressions rather than entity-denoting expressions.

## 5.2. *DP-phases, referentiality, and IdPs*

We follow the analysis of nominal phrases as outlined in Chomsky (2007), according to which indefinite nominals differ structurally from definite ones in that they lack the  $n^*$  head present in definite nominals. Chomsky (2007) likewise suggests that only definite nominal phrases (which are in fact  $n^*$ P<sub>s</sub> in this view) constitute a phase, and that indefinites lack referentiality encoded on D. Similar ideas can, for instance, be found in Adger (2003), who entertains the possibility that indefinite DPs are not phases, and Radford (2004), who directly argues for that same view.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, according to Arsenijević (2007) and Hinzen (2012) only complete referential expressions are phasal. We assume that objects in IdPs, which share non-referential properties with indefinites (cf. the previous subsection), also lack  $n^*$  in their structure the same way indefinites do.<sup>23</sup>

It follows that if it is  $n^*$ P that otherwise constitutes a phase in non-idiomatic definite nominal phrases, then in the absence of  $n^*$  there is no phase present. This means that the object of an IdP will not be spelled out independently, but as part of the vP-phase instead, enabling the verb-object combination to be assigned an idiomatic interpretation. This explains why IdPs seem to be able to straddle the DP-phase boundary: there simply is no DP-phase boundary (or, more precisely, no  $n^*$ P-phase boundary, in Chomsky's terms) in IdPs to begin with.

By now, we have solved the main question of this paper, i.e. how it is possible that verbal idioms can straddle the DP- but not the vP-phase boundary. As we have shown, ICEs are actually not constricted to the vP-phase, so that they are free to straddle phase boundaries ( $n^*$ P, vP ...), while IdPs have no  $n^*$ P-phase so that there is no boundary to straddle. We have based our line of reasoning on idioms with DP-objects, but there are more types of idioms that may be argued to contain phase boundaries, such as idioms with DP-subjects, PPs, and possessives. In the next section, we will address these different types of idioms and show how the proposed analysis is able to account for their syntactic behaviour.

## 6. *Further issues*

### 6.1 *Possessive idioms*

Idioms containing a possessive relation in their DP-objects show mixed behaviour with respect to their ICE/IdP status. Whereas idioms such as those in (47) and 0 display ICE-behaviour (they allow the syntactic transformations of passivisation, topicalisation and modification), idioms such as those in 0 and (50) are clear cases of IdPs.

- (47) clip x's wings (restrict x's freedom)
- |   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| a. My wings were clipped.                 | [Passivisation]  |
| b. His wings, we are going to clip.       | [Topicalisation] |
| c. We're going to clip his lengthy wings. | [Modification]   |

<sup>22</sup> Already pre-phase era literature discusses the status of subject islands in English depending on the definiteness of the subject, e.g. Fiengo & Higginbotham (1981) and Diesing (1992).

<sup>23</sup> This is also in line with the idea that APs are not autonomous phases given that properties do not refer, cf. Arsenijević (2007) and Hinzen (2012).

- (48) *cramp x's style (make x look uncool)*
- |                                    |                  |
|------------------------------------|------------------|
| a. My style was being cramped.     | [Passivisation]  |
| b. His style, you are cramping.    | [Topicalisation] |
| c. Don't cramp my reputable style! | [Modification]   |
- (49) *bend x's ear (talk to x)*
- |                                   |                     |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| a. # My ear was bent.             | [No passivisation]  |
| b. # His ear, I'm going to bend.  | [No topicalisation] |
| c. # I need to bend your big ear. | [No modification]   |
- (50) *break x's balls (make x look uncool)*
- |                                      |                     |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| a. # My balls were being broken.     | [No passivisation]  |
| b. # His balls, you are breaking.    | [No topicalisation] |
| c. # Don't break my reputable balls. | [No modification]   |

Interestingly, there is a significant difference between the possessive idioms that behave as ICEs and the ones that are IdPs: the ICEs all involve cases of alienable possession, whereas the possessive IdPs contain an inalienably possessed noun (*ear, balls*).<sup>24</sup> Several authors have proposed that alienable and inalienable possession have different underlying syntactic structures (e.g. Español-Echevarria 1997; Castillo 2001; Alexiadou 2003; Lin 2007). These analyses have in common that alienable possession requires more functional structure than inalienable possession. The analysis proposed by Alexiadou (2003) and Lin (2007) is that inalienable nouns subcategorise for a possessor argument. Alienable nouns do not subcategorise for an internal argument. The possessive relation between an alienable noun and a possessor is constructed by means of a higher functional head. In line with the analysis proposed in section 5, this could be reformulated by saying that  $n^*$  is present in the structure of alienable possessive structures, but not in that of inalienable possession. Chomsky (2007) wanted to draw a parallel between VPs and NPs:  $n^*$  is like  $v^*$  and D is like N. Now, what is so typical about  $v^*$ ?  $v^*$  is the head that is needed to introduce the (agentive) subject. This is basically what Alexiadou (2003) wanted to encode for alienable possession, i.e. that there is a subject/agent relation between the possessor and the possessed noun. This would then justify the presence of  $n^*$  in an alienable possessive structure, in line with  $v^*$  in the verbal domain. One could then say that  $n^*$  is missing in inalienable possession, where there is no such relation between possessor and possessed.

Such an analysis ties in well with our analysis in section 5, which postulates that nominal phrases in IdPs lack  $n^*$ , and are therefore not phasal. In the same way, if the NP of an inalienably possessed noun does not have an  $n^*$ -head, and hence does not constitute a phase, it is perfectly able to be part of an IdP. Alienable possessed nouns, on the other hand, form independent  $n^*$ Ps and constitute phases, which entails that they can be part of ICEs, but not of IdPs. Indeed, we encountered no IdPs with alienable possession.

## 6.2 PP-phases in idioms

Another type of structure that may potentially project a phase and is thus relevant in the context of our analysis is prepositional phrases (see claims made, amongst others, by Koopman (2010) and Aelbrecht & Den Dikken (2013)). It turns out that instances

<sup>24</sup> Another example of an ICE possessive idiom is *drown x's sorrows* (drink to relieve depression). Other examples of IdP possessive idioms are *breathe down x's neck* (put pressure on x) and *get under x's nose/skin* (irritate x).

of idioms containing a PP all display ICE properties, in that they allow the syntactic manipulations of passivisation, topicalisation and modification. Since ICE-type idioms can straddle phase boundaries, the purported presence of a PP-phase is not a problem for the proposed analysis.

Firstly, examples (51) through (53) give a number of idioms with a PP-goal/oblique, and the idioms can undergo the transformations typical for ICEs (note that in some cases it is difficult to find a modifier that would fit the context). In addition, as was already discussed in section 4.1, these idioms involve an open object position, which is another hallmark of ICEs.

- (51) take to the cleaners ('swindle/defeat')
- a. Bob was taken to the cleaners. [Passivisation]
  - b. To the cleaners, I'm going to take Bob. [Topicalisation]
  - c. I'm going to take him/Bob/you/them to the cleaners. [Open object]
- (52) knock over with a feather ('surprise')
- a. He could be knocked over with a feather. [Passivisation]
  - b. With a feather he could be knocked over. [Topicalisation]
  - c. You could have knocked me over with a tiny feather [Modification]
  - d. You could have knocked me/him over with a feather. [Open object]
- (53) fend for yourself ('take care of yourself')<sup>25</sup>
- a. For yourself, you will have to fend! [Topicalisation]
  - b. You will have to fend for your good self. [Modification]
  - c. Have to fend for himself/yourself/themselves. [Open object]

Secondly, there is a range of idioms with a PP-argument which follow the same pattern, i.e. display properties shared by ICEs:

- (54) hit the nail on the head ('be exactly correct')
- a. The nail was hit on the head with that question. [Passivisation]
  - b. I think that on the head you really hit the nail when you asked that question. [Topicalisation]
  - c. You really hit the rusty nail on the head with that question. [Modification]
- (55) snatch victory from the jaws of defeat ('win at the last moment')
- a. Victory was snatched from the jaws of defeat. [Passivisation]
  - b. From the jaws of defeated we snatched victory. [Topicalisation]
  - c. We snatched victory from the vicious jaws of defeat. [Modification]

Many in addition also feature an open position, as in the examples below:

- (56) haul over hot coals ('reprimand someone')
- a. He was hauled over hot coals. [Passivisation]
  - b. Over hot coals we hauled him. [Topicalisation]
  - c. We hauled him over burning hot coals. [Modification]
  - d. We will haul Bob/him/her/you over hot coals. [Open object]
- (57) keep tabs on X ('keep apprised of X's actions')
- a. Tabs were kept on him. [Passivisation]
  - b. On Bob we are keeping tabs. [Topicalisation]

<sup>25</sup> In this example, passivisation is excluded for independent reasons, given that it is impossible to passivise a reflexive.

- c. We are keeping plenty of tabs on Bob. [Modification]
- d. We are keeping tabs on him/her/you. [Open object]

Finally, idioms with a PP embedded in a DP are ICEs as well, (58) being a case in point.

- (58) open a can of worms ('create a problematic or unpleasant situation')
- a. A can of worms was opened by my brother. [Passivisation]
  - b. A can of worms, my brother certainly opened that night. [Topicalisation]
  - c. My brother opened a can of nasty worms that night. [Modification]

We have not encountered any IdPs containing a PP-phase, as is to be expected under the proposed analysis.<sup>26</sup>

### 6.1 Idioms with a DP-subject

Our discussion of DP-arguments in idioms has mostly been restricted to DP-objects, but as shown at the beginning in (8), idioms exist containing a (non-agentive) subject DP. This raises the question whether subject DPs behave the same as object DPs when it comes to phasehood. As the examples (59) through (62) show, subject DP idioms are somewhat of a mixed bag in terms of syntactic flexibility. An idiom such as the one in (59) fulfils the diagnostics of an ICE, given that it allows for syntactic manipulations.

- (59) Rome wasn't built in a day ('it takes a long time to do an important job')
- a. They didn't build Rome in a day, you know. [Activisation<sup>27</sup>]
  - b. In a day, Rome wasn't built. [Topicalisation]
  - c. Rome wasn't built in a single day. [Modification]

As explained above, the appearance of a DP-phase in an ICE is not problematic: since ICEs are not restricted to a single phase, it is perfectly possible for the idiom to straddle a DP-phase boundary, whether the DP is an object, or a subject as in (59). Note also that the idiom chunk *Rome* is a possible antecedent for pronouns, confirming its referentiality:

- (60) Rome wasn't built in a day. It wasn't built in a week, month, year, or decade, either!

On the other hand, idioms such as those in (61) and (62) are syntactically inflexible and thus appear to be IdPs:

- (61) The shit hit the fan ('chaos ensued')
- a. # The fan was hit by the shit [No passivisation]
  - b. # The fan, the shit hit. [No topicalisation]
  - c. # The shit hit the plastic fan. [No modification]

<sup>26</sup> Some other idioms with a PP that likewise all pass the diagnostics for ICEs include *put X on a pedestal*, *throw caution to the wind*, *put the cat among the pigeons*, *close the door on X*, *close ranks behind X*, *hold a candle to X*, and more.

<sup>27</sup> Since the default form of this idiom is passive, testing its syntactic flexibility involves testing its ability to appear in the active voice.

- (62) All hell breaks loose (‘suddenly there is a pandemonium’)
- a. # All hell was broken loose by his actions. [No passivisation]
  - b. # Loose, all hell has broken. [No topicalisation]
  - c. # Some hell broke loose. [No alternative quantifier]

We have argued that IdPs are restricted to the vP-phase and should not be able to contain a DP-phase. As explained in section 5, the object DPs encountered in IdPs are non-referential, which entails that they lack an  $n^*$ -head and, hence, do not constitute phases.

However, the subject DPs in (61) and (62) *are* referential: ‘the shit’ referring to some kind of a problem, ‘all hell’ to a pandemonium. This is also confirmed by the fact that they are possible antecedents for pronouns:

- (63) a. All hell broke loose and it’s still breaking loose!  
 b. Regardless of how the shit hit the fan, it did!  
 c. The shit hit the fan. It absolutely hit the fan.

Such idioms constitute an unresolved puzzle. Their verb-object DP part, as demonstrated, shows IdP properties, while the subject DP is referential and would thus be expected to be part of an ICE rather than an IdP. We leave the analysis of this seemingly protean class of idioms for future research.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper started from the claim that the vP-phase imposes an upper bound on verbal idioms. A problem that this analysis faces is that since most verbal idioms include a DP direct object, and DP has been claimed to project a phase, verbal idioms seem to actually straddle the DP-phase boundary. The aim of this paper was therefore to explain why verbal idioms can be bigger than the DP-phase, but not the vP-phase. In accounting for this, we showed that not all idioms are actually confined to a single phase. Whilst IdPs are restricted to the vP-phase, ICEs can straddle phase boundaries. Therefore, the issue of the DP-phase is only relevant for IdPs. In the case of IdPs, we claimed that the DP-phase does not project since it is non-referential (Fellbaum 1993 and Grégoire 2009). According to Chomsky (2007), amongst others, nominal phrases that have no direct referent in the discourse fail to project  $n^*$ P, which typically acts as the phase. A nominal phrase without an  $n^*$ P therefore does not constitute a phase and so cannot be spelled out independently. It therefore follows that the DP-object of an IdP fails to project  $n^*$ P. This means that there is no DP-phase in IdPs, and that the direct object is spelled out simultaneously with the rest of the idiomatic vP-phase. In the last section, we also discussed possessive idioms, idioms with PP-objects, and idioms with DP-subjects, and showed how these fit our analysis.

## Acknowledgements

[Anonymized]

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