Definiteness as a trigger of idiomaticity

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Acknowledgments

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NWO Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research · fwo

Figurative language

Idioms:
"a string of words whose semantic interpretation cannot be derived compositionally from the interpretation of its parts" (Cacciari and Tabossi 1988)

- Non-compositionality (e.g. Fraser 1970, Katz 1973 a.m.o.)
- Ambiguity (e.g. Weinreich 1969)
  - Literal meaning and idiomatic meaning

Markedness

- Markedness bridges literal to figurative meaning
  - Intonation
    het is je van het (lit. it is you of it; 'it's awesome!'), *de man zijn* (lit. be the man; 'be tough')
  - Determiners
    - Lack of a determiner:
      bal zijn (lit. there is ball; 'there is a fight')
    - Definite possessors
      het hoofd boven water houden (lit.: keep the head above water, 'make ends meet financially'), *de handen uit de mouwen steken* (lit.: get the hands out of the sleeves, 'work hard'),

Definiteness and idioms

- Frequent (Fellbaum 1993, Gregoire 2009):
  de broek aanhebben (lit. wear the pants), *de bloemetjes buiten zetten* (lit. put the flowers outside, 'to party'), *het haasje zijn* (lit. be the hare +dim, 'be in trouble'), *het hoekje omgaan* (lit. go around the corner +dim, 'die')
- Less transparent (Fellbaum 1993: 286)
  kick the bucket, chew the fat, bite the dust, shoot the breeze
- Less flexible (Fellbaum 1993)
  #*As for the bucket, John kicked it last week*
- Idiomatic meaning disappears when the definite determiner is replaced by an indefinite one
  #John kicked a bucket

Violation of familiarity

Definiteness

Definite: the existence of the referred to entity has been pre-established in the discourse

Indefinite: introduces a new referent to the discourse

(Heim 1982)

Kinds

- Idiomatic definite descriptions refer to kinds
  (cf. Aguilar and Zwarts 2011 on weak definites)
- Modification with 'new' out
  #Jan miste de nieuwe boot (lit. John missed the new boat)
  Jan miste de spreekwoordelijke boot (lit. John missed the proverbial boat)
- The referent cannot be pluralized
  de boot missen (lit. to miss the boat, 'be late'), *#boten missen doet Jan niet graag* (#to miss boats is not something John likes to do), *de boot missen doet Jan niet graag* ('to miss the boat is not something John likes to do')

Definiteness = Markedness

- Using a definite NP when no familiar referent has been established in discourse triggers an idiomatic meaning (a proverbial kind)
- Using an indefinite NP forces the listener to introduce a new discourse referent, and as such, it creates a more decomposable meaning

Research Question

If participants are forced to give a meaning to a "new idiom", will they give more idiomatic meanings for idioms that include a definite description than to the same idiom with an indefinite description?

Method

- New VP idioms were created
  offer the/a strawberry, clean the/a table, use the/a knife
- Idioms (new and existing) were presented in a story

'Frank has been a college student of law for several months now and he thinks the whole endeavour is pretty tough. [...] When he was browsing the internet for information on an assignment, he came across a piece of work that exactly fit the assignment he was supposed to hand in. [...] He uploaded the assignment as being his own assignment to the course website. The course website however, was very good at detecting plagiarism and he thus soon received an email indicating that he needed to come see the dean. [...] Lucky for him, he wasn't expelled right away. Frank was told to clean the table, after which it would be decided whether he could continue his studies '

Meaning

- Open answers
- Coded as Abstract vs. Concrete
  Concrete
  offer a strawberry – offer a gift; clean a table – make a replacement assignment; use a knife – use physical violence
  Abstract
  Offer the strawberry - make a change/get married; clean the table – start over; use the knife – react in an extreme way

Definite idioms give rise to more idiomatic meanings than indefinite ones

(F=9.493, p<.005)

Research question

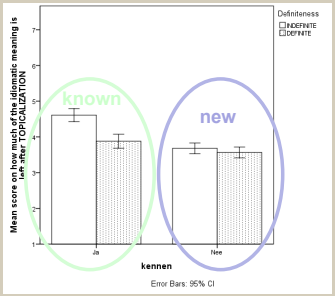
- Do definite descriptions give rise to less morpho-syntactically flexible idioms?

Morpho-syntactic flexibility

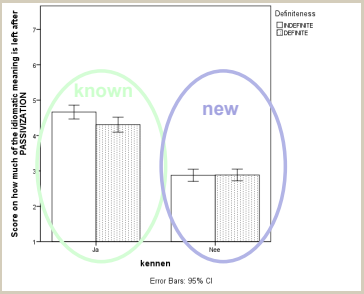
- Related to decomposability (e.g. Nunberg at al. 1994)
- Some operations require a unique, specific discourse referent:
  - Topicalization
  - Pluralization
- Some operations don't:
  - Passivization

(cf. Schenk 1995)

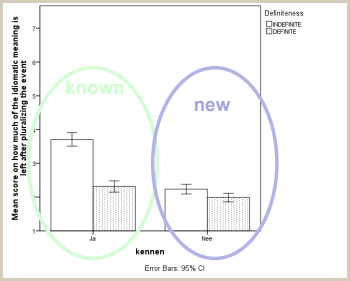
Flexibility – topicalization



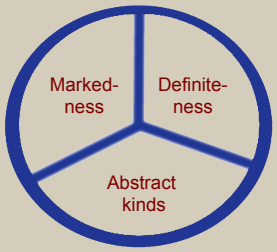
Flexibility – passivization



Flexibility – pluralization



Flexibility

- Idioms with a definite NP have less morpho-syntactic flexibility
- Much more so in the idioms that the participants know
  - Effect of familiarity?

Conclusion