

# How to modify idioms

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40th Annual DGfS Meeting

Workshop 4:

One-to-many relations in morphology, syntax, and semantics

March 7-9, 2018

# One-to-many relations in idioms

- ▶ Idioms are excellent examples of **one-to-many relations**:

In most cases, the morphosyntactic string that can be interpreted as an idiom can also be interpreted literally  $\Rightarrow$  one form to several meanings.

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In most cases, the morphosyntactic string that can be interpreted as an idiom can also be interpreted literally  $\Rightarrow$  one form to several meanings.

- ▶ This becomes especially obvious in so-called **conjunction modification**:  
The modifier modifies the literal meaning of the idiom's nominal part, while the idiom as a whole is still understood in its idiomatic meaning.

# Idioms and modification

- ▶ At least two groups of idioms:
  - ▶ Non-decomposable, e.g. *tighten one's belt* ( $\approx$  'economize') ( $\approx$  'idiomatic phrases' in Nunberg et al. 1994)
  - ▶ Decomposable, e.g. *jump on the bandwagon* ( $\approx$  'join a movement') ( $\approx$  'idiomatically combining expressions' in Nunberg et al. 1994)

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- ▶ Both types of idioms allow for modifiers (and other intervening material); e.g. examples in Ernst (1981):
  - (1) a. With the recession, oil companies are having to tighten their **Gucci** belts.
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    - (1) a. With the recession, oil companies are having to tighten their **Gucci** belts.
    - b. In spite of its conservatism, many people were eager to jump on the **horse-drawn Reagan** bandwagon.
- ⇒ Neither of the two groups of idioms can be seen as fixed morphosyntactic expressions without internal structure.

# Goals of the talk

1. Take a closer look at Ernst's (1981) three-way distinction of modification in idioms: internal, external, conjunction.
2. Zoom in on conjunction modification with non-decomposable idioms: corpus examples.
3. Raise issues for a clear categorisation of some of these modifiers.
4. Point out other idiom examples (beyond modification) that raise similar and possibly even more severe issues.

[WORK IN PROGRESS]

Ernst (1981)



# Ernst (1981)

- ▶ Modifiers in idioms are principally three-way ambiguous.
  1. External modification
  2. Internal modification
  3. Conjunction modification
  
- Context / world knowledge narrows down the interpretative options given the meaning of the adjective and the internal semantic structure of the idiom.

(For further discussion of modification in idioms, see also Stathi 2007, Cserép 2010, McClure 2011, Sailer 2017, among others)

## External modification (Ernst 1981)

- ▶ The modifier modifies the idiom as a unit (as a whole).  
→ The modifier allows for an adverbial paraphrase: (2)
- (2) He came apart at the **political** seams. (p. 51)  
~ **Politically**, he came apart at the seams.  
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- ▶ Many “domain delimiters”, but also other modifiers that are not lexically of the same class but can be used as such:

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→ External modification is not restricted to one lexical class of adjectives.

# Internal modification (Ernst 1981)

- ▶ The modifier modifies the N on its idiomatic meaning.
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~ to join the outdated Reagan movement
- ⇒ Our observation (implicitly already in Ernst): Access to the idiomatic meaning of the noun should only be possible with decomposable idioms.

# Conjunction modification (Ernst 1981)

▶ The modifier modifies the literally interpreted noun.

▶ “in each case there is an additional proposition” (p. 59)

▶ “a literary device” (p. 52)

- (5) a. (from an article on the making of the movie *Jaws*)  
 Bruce, a shark, found it a part he could really sink his  
*three rows of teeth* into. (p. 52)  
 (*sink one's teeth into* ≈ ‘become fully engaged in’)
- b. In spite of the treatment the other refugees received from the  
 rescue party in the desert, he bit his *thirst-swollen* tongue  
 and kept to himself. (p. 59)  
 (*bite one's tongue* ≈ ‘stop oneself from saying sth.’)



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*(bite one's tongue*  $\approx$  ‘stop oneself from saying sth.’)
- ▶ In some cases, MOD + N can then be interpreted non-literally again:
- (6) With the recession, oil companies are having to tighten their **Gucci** belts. (p. 60) (reminder: *tighten one's belt*  $\approx$  ‘economize’)

## Ernst's analysis: Two levels of interpretation

- ▶ Simultaneous representation of idiomatic and non-idiomatic meaning, with links between these.
  - ▶ Conjunction modification: (7) & (8) (cp. p. 59f.)

(7) CHECK SPEAKING-CAPACITY  
 BITE HIS THIRST-SWOLLEN TONGUE  
 $\wedge$  HE HAS A THIRST-SWOLLEN TONGUE.  
 He bit his thirst-swollen tongue. (surface string)

(8) ECONOMIZE  
 TIGHTEN THEIR GUCCI BELTS  $\wedge$  THEY HAVE GUCCI BELTS.  
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- ▶ Internal modification: (9) (cp. p. 58)

(9) JOIN CAUSE/MOVEMENT  
 JUMP ON [THE HORSE-DRAWN REAGAN BANDWAGON]  
 Jump on the horse-drawn Reagan bandwagon.

- ▶ no illustration of external modification

# Conjunction Modification

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  - ▶ And even if conjunction modification is “word play”, it is still part of language, and the question of how the A-N composition leads to the interpretation(s) that we get remains.
    - ▶ “Word play” should not be a sign on a linguistic trash can.



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- ▶ If conjunction modification, as Ernst claims, adds an additional proposition, conjunction modification should be non-restrictive.
- ▶ Non-decomposable idioms should only allow for conjunction and external modification, as internal modification requires access to the idiomatic meaning of the noun, which non-decomposable idioms cannot offer.

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  - ▶ If conjunction modification, as Ernst claims, adds an additional proposition, conjunction modification should be non-restrictive.
  - ▶ Non-decomposable idioms should only allow for conjunction and external modification, as internal modification requires access to the idiomatic meaning of the noun, which non-decomposable idioms cannot offer.
- ⇒ Let’s take a set of idioms where people tend to agree that they are non-decomposable and check which modifiers we can interpret as conjunction modification.

## Our set of non-decomposable idioms

- ▶ We chose two English and two German non-decomposable idioms. All of them mean 'die':

- (10) a. kick the bucket  
 b. bite the dust

- (11) a. den Löffel abgeben  
 the.ACC spoon on-pass  
 b. ins Gras beißen  
 in-the.ACC grass bite

We searched for occurrences of these idioms in combination with modifiers using the COW corpora at [webcorpora.org](http://webcorpora.org).

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1. There is a main proposition  $p_1$ , which includes DIE(x).  
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→*id*

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  - ▶ x has an A N.
  - ▶ N is A.
  
3. Sometimes, one or two further steps are necessary:
  - ▶ Interpreting 'A N / N is A' figuratively (e.g. *Gucci belts*)  $\rightarrow fig$
  - ▶ and/or drawing inferences from 'A N / N is A'  $\rightsquigarrow inf$



## Fairly clear cases of conjunction modification

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(similar to the Gucci belt example)

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- (13) It was the great Trinity of the French Revolution, and you can still see it carved in stone over town halls and elsewhere in France: 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. But the greatest of these, it turns out, is 'Equality'. 'Liberty' soon **bit the blood-spattered dust** along with 'Fraternity' as the drive to the unattainable goal of 'Equality' took over as it was bound to do.

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$p_1$ : ‘Liberty’ soon bit the dust.

$\rightarrow_{id}$  ‘Liberty’ soon died.

(interpreted as ‘was soon given up as a goal’)

$p_2$ : The dust was blood-spattered.

$\rightsquigarrow_{inf}$  (in the French Revolution context:) Many people died.

## Fairly clear cases of conjunction modification

(Background: Vincent Raven is a 'mentalist' who can bend spoons by sheer mental power, and ProSieben is a German TV channel.)

- (14) Oder Vincent Raven aus Uri Gellers ProSieben-Sendung, der einen Unfall hatte und beinahe **den verbogenen Löffel abgegeben** hätte.  
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$p_1$ : Vincent Raven almost passed on the spoon.  
 $\rightarrow_{id}$  Vincent Raven almost died.

$p_2$ : Vincent Raven has a bent spoon.  
 $\rightsquigarrow_{inf}$  Vincent Raven bends spoons.

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- (15) Der vorbedachte Hauswirt hat für die Bedürfnisse seiner Gäste bestens gesorgt. Mehrere Häslein mussten fürs Bauerngericht **ins schneeige Gras beißen** und ein Schwein und Kalb das Leben lassen.
- ‘The thoughtful landlord took perfect care of his guests’ needs. For the farmer’s dish, several little rabbits had to **bite into the snowy grass**, and a pig and a calf had to give their lives as well.’

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$p_1$ : Several little rabbits had to bite into the grass.

$\rightarrow_{id}$  Several little rabbits had to die.

$p_2$ : The grass was snowy.

$\rightsquigarrow_{inf}$  It was cold and wintry outside.

# Conjunction modification with relative clauses

(non-restrictive relative clauses)

- (16) Und während die ausgesperrten siebenunddreißig Reiter ein zorniges Geschrei erhoben, kam es innerhalb des Tores zwischen der Besatzung des Grenzwalles und den drei Abgeschnittenen zu einem Scharmützel, in dem der heilige Zeno Sieger blieb; aber zwei von seinen Soldknechten mußten **ins Gras beißen, das bei dieser mitternächtigen Finsternis kaum zu sehen war.**

‘And while the locked out thirty-seven horsemen clamored furiously, there was a skirmish within the gateway between the garrison of the boundary wall and the three horsemen that had been cut off, in which Saint Zeno was victorious; but two of his mercenaries had to **bite into the grass, which was hardly visible in this midnight darkness.**’

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 →<sub>id</sub> Two of his mercenaries had to die.

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$p_1$ : Two of his mercenaries had to bite into the grass.

$\rightarrow_{id}$  Two of his mercenaries had to die.

$p_2$ : The grass was hardly visible in this midnight darkness.

$\rightsquigarrow_{inf}$  It was midnight and very dark.



## Not clear: external, conjunction, both, neither?

(Background: Gid as a hypothetical God-like creature)

- (17) He is presumably mortal himself; at least, being a creature of this universe, when (if) it collapses back to a mathematical point again (called the “Big Crunch”), Gid would die then, if he hasn't already **kicked the celestial bucket**.

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Sascha’s & Frank’s interpretation:

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Berit’s interpretation:

... if Gid hasn’t already kicked the bucket in the celestial domain.  $\sim$  ... if he hasn’t already ceased to exist as a celestial entity. (external modification)

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Frank’s additional interpretation possibility:

... if Gid hasn’t died a very special, celestial death (not your ordinary, run-off-the-mill death, but much more spectacular). (external?)

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(Background: BJU is Bob Jones University, a Christian university)

- (18) BJU may soon join the ranks of “former” Fundamentalist schools that have **bit[ten] the New-Evangelical dust**, a position that eventually winds up at the door of apostasy!

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$\rightarrow_{id}$  Fundamentalist schools have died.

(interpreted as ‘have ceased to be Fundamentalist’)

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$p_{-mod}$ : Fundamentalist schools have bitten the dust.

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(interpreted as ‘have ceased to be Fundamentalist’)

Sascha’s interpretation:

$p_2$ : The dust was New-Evangelical.

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(Background: giardia are pear-shaped parasites)

(19) Hi, die Giardien sollen doch bei 60-70 °C **ihren birnenförmigen Löffel abgeben**. Warum muss ich dann meine Bettwäsche bei 90 °C kochen?

Hi, the giardia are supposed to **pass on their pear-shaped spoon** at 60-70 °C. Why do I have to wash my sheets at 90 °C then?

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*p-mod*: The giardia are supposed to pass on the spoon at 60-70 °C.

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How do we compositionally get from the giardia (literally or metaphorically) having pear-shaped spoons to them being pear-shaped (without spoons now)?

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Yet, the meaning we get is still: And, by the way, the giardia are pear-shaped.  
 $\rightarrow$  non-restrictive, but does not fit into any of the three categories.

**modification of the possessor?** (how would that work compositionally?)

## Ernst's (1981) 'displaced epithets' (p. 66)

(20) I balanced a **thoughtful** lump of sugar on the teaspoon.  
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- ▶ From this example we conclude that the speaker was thoughtful (not the lump of sugar).



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- ▶ But also then: How would this work compositionally?
  - ▶ How do we get from the speaker having (as part of balancing) a thoughtful lump of sugar to the speaker being thoughtful?
  - ▶ How do we get from the giardia having pear-shaped spoons to the giardia being pear-shaped?

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- (21) Auch die deutsche Geschichte mag im Gesamten alles Andere als rosig sein, doch ich lebe in diesem Staate und somit MIT seiner Vergangenheit, seiner Gegenwart und höchstwahrscheinlich auch zukünftig, was da heissen wird, dass ich eines Tages **in deutsches Gras beissen** werde.

German history as a whole may be anything but rosy as well, but I live in this country and thus WITH its past, its present and most likely also in the future, which means that one day I will **bite into German grass**.

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Frank's additional interpretation possibility: ... and one day I will die as a true German. **external?** (in the domain of all things truly German?)

More problematic data



## Substitution of the N: How to analyse this?

(Background: comment on *The Descent Part 2*, a 2009 British horror film)

(22) [...] wieder ist es in der Höhle meist viel zu hell, und schon wieder mutieren die überlebenden Damen zu wahren Kampfmaschinen, nur um dann doch allesamt **ins Gras respektive ins Höhlengestein beißen** zu müssen.

‘Again, it is way too bright inside the cave most of the time, and again the surviving ladies mutate into true battle machines, but in the end they still have to **bite into the grass, respectively the cave rock(s)**.’

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(23) Das soll er doch gesagt haben, der gute Caesar[,] bevor er **statt ins Gras in den Marmorboden vom Senat gebissen hat**.

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# Conclusion

# Summary

- ▶ We found some clear examples for **conjunction modification**:
  1. Main proposition: DIE(x) (literally or metaphorically)
  2. Secondary proposition due to modification – two forms:
    - ▶ x has an A N. (literally)
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  3. Sometimes, one or two further steps are necessary:
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- ▶ However, a number of examples were less clear.
  - ▶ Controversy among the authors: conjunction modification + additional inferences, or external modification that is, however, unlike Ernst’s examples?
- ▶ Finally, we discussed data beyond conjunction modification which show the need for drawing additional inferences and which we do not know how to analyse compositionally. (recall Caesar biting the marble floor)

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- ▶ Given that Berit has thought a lot more about modification of the external type (mostly outside of idioms), she sees more options for external modification (but not necessarily in the same way Ernst 1981 does).
  - General idea: If external modification is on a par with adverbial modification, we should also get the whole range of possibilities we get with adverbs (heterogeneous group) (on which see, e.g., Geuder 2000, Ernst 2002, Maienborn 2003, Schäfer 2005)
    - ▶ Ernst's "domain delimiters" (~ frame setters)
    - ▶ Spatial modification of the event (e.g. *bite into the German grass*)
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    - ▶ ...
- ▶ Given that Sascha has thought a lot more about conjunction modification and about idioms in general, he draws more additional inferences necessary for interpreting some of the data.

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- ▶ Nevertheless, we should not discard conjunction modification but should analyze how it comes about compositionally.
  - ▶ Step 1 (DIE(x)) and step 2 (‘N is A / x has A N’) are fairly straightforward.
  - ▶ The challenge is to integrate the additional inferences from ‘A N’ to then decide how the composition of idiom + modifier should be analyzed exactly.

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  - ▶ The challenge is to integrate the additional inferences from ‘A N’ to then decide how the composition of idiom + modifier should be analyzed exactly.
- ▶ Given that also for our final examples it was necessary to draw additional inferences, even without conjunction modification, we have to bite this bullet anyways.
- ▶ Finally, we think that our data also show that in the end the distinction between decomposable and non-decomposable idioms might not be as categorical as Nunberg et al. (1994) initially thought (see also Bargmann and Sailer to appear, for further discussion).

# How to modify idioms

Thanks !

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