

On pronominalization and ellipsis in clausal idioms
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Introduction. Pieces of idioms can undergo pronominalization and ellipsis, as many have observed (Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994; Bruening 2015; a.o.). Building on these observations, we present and analyze a novel paradigm involving anaphoric relations in clausal idioms. We argue that this paradigm informs theories of pronouns and ellipsis: it lends new support (i) for the idea that pronouns can be derived from full noun phrases (Postal 1969, Elbourne 2001), and (ii) for an identity condition on ellipsis that takes into account the content of a syntactic chunk larger than the elided constituent (e.g. Gengel 2007, *pace* Merchant 2001). We conclude with a pragmatic account of this paradigm.

New empirical generalization. The dialog in (1), where Ben denies Alex’s claim, shows that in general, pronominalized subjects and VP ellipsis (VPE) can freely occur, when antecedents are available.

- (1) Alex: The green balloon hit the ceiling.
 Ben: No, {the green balloon/it} didn’t {hit the ceiling/∅}.

Consider (2). That Ben’s response in (2a) has an idiomatic interpretation is not surprising, since the whole idiom is repeated. Curiously, (2b) shows that neither a subject pronoun nor VPE cancels the idiomatic interpretation, even though no part of the idiom is present on the surface. Even more interestingly, in (2c-d), when parts of the idiom are repeated, the idiomatic interpretation is harder to get. Other clausal idioms, like *the cat is out of the bag*, show the same contrast. The data suggest the generalization in (3).

- (2) Alex: When the news got out, the shit hit the fan.
 Ben: No, ...
- | | | |
|----|---|----------------|
| a. | ... <u>the shit</u> didn’t <u>hit the fan</u> . | [–Pron., –VPE] |
| b. | ... it didn’t. | [+Pron., +VPE] |
| c. | ... #it didn’t <u>hit the fan</u> . | [+Pron., –VPE] |
| d. | ... # <u>the shit</u> didn’t. | [–Pron., +VPE] |
- (3) **Generalization:** in dialog environments, the idiomatic interpretation of clausal idioms is best preserved when the whole idiom is repeated or when it is entirely omitted under anaphoric relations.

The pronoun subject. We make the standard assumptions that (i) idioms are introduced in the syntax (Katz and Postal 1963; Fraser 1970) and (ii) elided material is present in the syntax but unpronounced (Ross 1969; Lasnik 1999; Merchant 2001, a.o.).

To account for the fact that the idiomatic interpretation is preserved in (2b), we propose that the entire idiom is actually present in the syntax; the pronoun *it* in (2b) is derived from *the shit*. We adopt Postal’s (1969) and Elbourne’s (2001) proposals to derive (some) pronouns from full-fledged DPs by NP ellipsis, thus providing new support for these proposals.

- (4) [_{DP} the ~~shit~~] didn’t [_{VP} ~~hit the fan~~]. = *It didn’t*. (strikethrough = elided) (=2b)

The pronoun is unlikely to be base-generated like a referential pronoun. In clausal idioms, positively identifying a referent for the subject is often difficult. If the subject does not refer, then nor does the pronoun. For instance, although *the shit hit the fan* seems to mean “a (serious) problem appears” or “chaos breaks out,” (5) shows neither *the shit* nor *it* can replace *the problem* or *the chaos*. If the pronoun were base-generated, the idiomatic interpretation should not be available, as the idiom would be absent in the syntax.

- (5) The shit hit the fan. We suspect that {#the shit/#it/the problem/the chaos} was caused by Mary.

Against an expletive pronoun account. For the sake of argument, suppose that clausal idioms enter the derivation as *vPs*. In (2b), *vP* is elided and an expletive *it* inserted to satisfy the EPP, i.e. [_{TP} *it_{exp}* didn’t [_{vP}

~~the shit hit the fan~~]]. This analysis would predict the idiomatic reading to be preserved, not least because expletive *it* is not referential. This analysis however incorrectly predicts that expletive *it* should be available with clausal idioms with plural subjects (6).

- (6) Alex: The chickens have come home to roost.
 Ben: Yes, I'm afraid {#it has/they have}. (note: the plural *they have* retains the idiomatic reading)

Against an “activation” account. Bruening (2015, p. 25) suggests that contexts like (2b) allow an idiomatic interpretation because processing the pronoun *it* “activates” the lexical items that constitute the idiom subject, i.e. *the shit*, which in turn is necessary for the idiomatic reading. As we understand it, this account overgenerates. In (7), the pronoun *it* should activate the previously-mentioned *the cat*, and thus an idiomatic reading should be available, contrary to fact.

- (7) After talking to the employee who had been scratched by the cat, the detective concluded that #it was out of the bag. (no idiomatic reading of *the cat is out of the bag*)

Identity condition on ellipsis. In an influential proposal, Merchant (2001) suggests that a constituent XP can be elided if it is e-GIVEN, i.e. if XP and its antecedent mutually entail each other, after replacing focused-marked elements in XP and the antecedent with existentially-bound variables (i.e. F-closure). e-GIVENness requires computing the denotations of XP and its antecedent. This is difficult (if not impossible) for clausal idioms whose constituents lack denotations of their own, like *the shit hit the fan*, since they do not clearly refer to entities or events in a discourse. If so, for example, the VP *hit the fan* cannot be said to be e-GIVEN, even when an antecedent is available. We would then incorrectly rule out VPE.

To resolve this problem, we propose weakening the e-GIVENness condition (8), adapting Gengel’s proposal (2007, p. 229). (8) states that the mutual entailment essential for e-GIVENness can be computed for a constituent containing the elided constituent. In clausal idioms, this “containing” constituent is presumably the idiom itself, which has a coherent denotation. A schematic for the dialog in (2) is presented in (9).

- (8) Proposed e-GIVENness condition: XP is e-GIVEN iff XP is (reflexively) dominated by a constituent YP_E , such that YP_E has a salient antecedent YP_A , and modulo existential type-shifting, YP_E entails F-closure(YP_A) and YP_A entails F-closure(YP_E).

- (9) a. $\overbrace{[[\text{the shit}] [\text{VP hit the fan}]]}^{YP_A}$ b. $[\text{NEG} \overbrace{[[\text{the shit}] [\text{VP hit the fan}]]}]^{YP_E}$ (strikethrough = elided) (=2b)

We further argue that constituents that lack denotations of their own cannot mutually entail; this would incorrectly predict that we can elide parts of any clausal idiom as long there is another salient clausal idiom whose constituents also lack denotations of their own, regardless of whether the two idioms are identical.

More broadly, we take this to mean that identity between an elided constituent and its antecedent is necessary but not sufficient for licensing ellipsis, e.g. as independently argued by Fox & Lasnik (2003).

Deriving the empirical generalization. All else being equal, we predict subject pronominalization and VPE should occur freely without affecting idiomatic interpretation, contrary to fact. We argue for a pragmatic explanation for why they must co-occur in (2b). A speaker who repeats the VP while pronominalizing the subject (2c), or repeats the subject while eliding the VP (2d), leads a hearer to infer that the speaker intends to contrast the repeated element with another entity or predicate. For instance, *it didn’t hit the fan* suggests that *the shit* did something else instead. However, since *the shit* does not refer, and nor does *hit the fan*, there are no plausible alternative propositions for the hearer to consider.

Selected references. Bruening. 2015. Idioms, anaphora, and movement diagnostics. Ms. · Elbourne. 2001. E-type anaphora as NP deletion. *NLS*. · Gengel. 2007. Focus and Ellipsis. PhD diss. U. Stuttgart. · Merchant. 2001. *The syntax of silence*. OUP. · Nunberg, Sag, & Wasow. 1994. “Idioms.” *Language*. · Postal. 1969. “On so-called ‘pronouns’ in English.” In *Modern studies in English*.