
Variation in V+the+N idioms

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The modification of idioms expresses the spontaneity of language in use

Introduction

The term 'idiom' can refer to two types of fixed expressions. First, in a narrow sense, idioms are 'expressions whose idiomaticity is semantic; typical expressions are *kick the bucket*, *spill the beans* etc. Second, idiomaticity is a formal property of expressions and is more or less equated with the fixedness of form; for example, *by and large*' (Stathi, 2006: 27). It is more common, as Moon (1997: 46) says, for idioms to refer to 'multi-word items which are not the sum of their parts: they have holistic meanings which cannot be retrieved from the individual meanings of the component words.' Idioms are thought to be 'relatively frozen and to have severe grammatical restriction' (Moon, 1997: 47), and so it might be generally taken that they do not permit any lexical or syntactic modification, but they have greater possibilities of modification than might be expected. There are many idioms with different structures in the English language; I have chosen the idioms with the syntactic structure V + the + N. In this paper I will try to show the degrees of modification, the possible reasons for their modifications and the significance of the definite article by using the British National Corpus (BNC) and Webcorp, a web concordancer.

Methodology

In *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms*, there are 4400 idioms of British, American and Australian usage. I have accumulated seventy-one idioms that consist of the structure V + the + N. In this list twelve idioms are found where the noun phrase is in the plural. I have checked their canonical forms in BNC, a large corpus of British English, consisting of ninety million words of written texts and ten million

words of transcribed spoken English. I have also checked their non-canonical forms in Webcorp, a corpus which is the product of the Research and Development Unit for English Studies at the University of Central England in Birmingham. WebCorp allows us to view the entire Web as a body of text that includes newspapers, media websites and just about everything. BNC also occasionally provided a few modified versions of some of these idioms.

Among these seventy-one idioms, seven did not occur in BNC. These are *push the envelope*, *get the bump*, *count the beans*, *buy the farm*, *thumb the tube*, *spread the wildfire* and *get the axe*. So basically I have worked on sixty-four idioms. Some of these sixty-four idioms have identical meanings.

- *kick the bucket*, *bite the dust* and *buy the farm* all mean die,
- *stem the tide* and *stem the flow* mean to stop an undesirable event escalating into something bigger,
- *weather the storm* and *ride the storm* mean



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survive a difficult situation without being badly harmed,

- *bend the rules* and *stretch the rules* mean do something that is not allowed or break the rules
- *learn the ropes* and *know the ropes* mean know how to do a particular job,
- *stack the deck* and *stack the cards* mean arrange a situation,
- *test the water* and *test the waters* mean gauge the reaction to an idea before enacting,
- *grease the wheels* and *oil the wheels* mean help to make something run smoothly.

Though these idioms have identical meanings, I have checked all their occurrences to find out if the replacement of the synonymous words brought any changes in collocation. By modification I mean the alteration of the definite article by noun, adjective, determiner or indefinite article.

Discussion of idiom modification

The great art in writing is to find an effective method to catch the reader's eye. Idiom modifications are also authors' creative efforts to express information. In my database *spill the beans* is the only idiom among of all the sixty-four idioms that permits different degrees of internal and syntactic modification. Although there is no evidence in BNC of any modifica-

tion of this idiom, sixty-four such examples are known to appear on the Internet. A search by the WebCorp has provided different sorts of modification of this idiom. In these varieties instead of the definite article four types of premodifiers come before *beans*. A table of classified elements functioning as premodifiers is given below.

Spill the beans

See Table 1. As may be expected, determiners may come before *beans*: (a) possessive determiners, (b) quantifier determiners, (c) demonstrative determiners, and (d) *Wh*-determiners.

A Determiners:

(a) possessive determiners

- 1 *I asked a handful of our top-performing members – including Neil – if they'd be good enough to come along and **spill their beans**.*
<<http://www.vwdseminars.com>>

(b) quantifier determiners

- 2 *Time to **spill some beans***
<<http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/34823/>>
- 3 *Parasound didn't really **spill much beans** on this one, but they've got an 'audiophile grade' Zpre2 preamplifier coming soon that will feature the following:*
<<http://www.audioholics.com/search?SearchableText=parasound>>

Table 1. Patterns of internal modification (variation of premodifiers) for *spill the beans*

A determiners	B adjectives	C genitive phrases	D nouns
many (2), more (1) [any more]	fresh (2)	clients' (2)	UFO (2)
much (2)	mere (1)	Apple's (1)	password (1)
her (3), his (3), their (4), thy (1)	illegal (4)	Wright's (1)	Oilgate (1)
those (5)	recent (1)	Blizz's (1)	
any (3)	contradictory (1)	Abdullah's (1)	
some (8)	valuable (1)	Bloch's (1)	
enough (2)	retaliatory (1)		
few (2)	further (2)		
such (1)			
what (1) whatever (2)			

Parenthesized numbers indicate frequencies of occurrence.

(c) demonstrative determiners

4 *This is the part of the story with the most spoilers, though, so I won't spill those beans right now.* <<http://uk.movies.ign.com/articles/656/656167p1.html>>

(d) Wh-determiners

5 *As Bolton fell over himself with enthusiasm to spill whatever beans he could on the Syrian/North Korean/Iranian weapons proliferation cooperation.* <http://www.prospectsforpeace.com/2007/09/>>

B Adjectives:

6 *General manager spill fresh beans*

<<http://play.tm/story/14955>>

7 *Iglasias says Goodling 'Holds the keys to the kingdom', which doubtless means she doesn't spill mere beans; she spills the meat.* <<http://www.tpmuckraker.com/archives/003269.php>>

C Genitive phrases:

8 *Of course, that's no excuse for some thoughtless PR department to spill Apple's beans early. Shame on ATI!* <<http://www.macobserver.com/article/2000/07/25.7.shtml>>

9 *SEC may force lawyers to spill clients' beans.* <<http://www.dailymirror.lk/2003/01/14/ft/2.html>>

D Nouns:

10 *ANC funder to spill Oilgate beans?* <<http://iafrica.com/news/sa/833327.htm>>

It sounds natural that premodifiers of some kind should come before *beans*. The example of noun, the second example of genitive phrases, the first examples of adjectives and of quantifier determiners are headlines of articles in some newspapers. In all these titles *spill* occurs in either infinitive or non-inflected form. Thus I have found five examples of titles using the phrase *spill the beans*. It seems that this idiom plays an important role in titling news articles about disclosing secrets. But they are not used in the body of the article later. They are certainly exploited to attract the reader's attention. Such headlines imply that the news is very thrilling. In these articles the revealed secret is about what has been referred to by the premodifiers of *beans*. In 'spill Oilgate beans', *Oilgate* refers to the scandal in an oil company. Here *-gate* is a combining form meaning scandal, created from the scandal of 'Watergate'. The use of *-gate* and the modifica-

tion of *spill the beans* might suggest that the news is very sensational.

In *spill much beans* the determiner *much* is used for the grammatically expected *many*. A single instance is not enough evidence, but it would significantly suggest that the writer has analyzed the meaning of the idiom according to the decomposable components *spill* and *the beans*, which seem to be considered semantically equivalent to 'disclose' and 'secret (information)' respectively. There must be a semantic motive for the writer's use of *much* here. In the example, *spill mere beans* is contrasted to 'spill the meat'. Since *beans* are a less substantial food item than meat, 'spill the meat' is intended to mean 'to disclose the most important secret, not mere bits of the whole secret'. 'Meat' often has the idiomatic connotation of importance as in 'get to the meat'. This kind of modification may be called contrastive modification, so the writer is aware that the idiom may be decomposed as if it were a normal phrase.

Idioms modified by noun, genitive or determiner

Some idioms are modified by nouns, genitive or determiners (possessive, demonstrative or quantifier) or both. I have found twenty such idioms. They are *pass the baton*, *soften the blow*, *catch the eye*, *run the gauntlet*, *shoot the messenger*, *miss the boat*, *leave the nest*, *rule the roost*, *cross the Rubicon*, *stem the flow*, *ride the storm*, *bend the rules*, *stretch the rules*, *read the runes*, *test the waters*, *grease the wheels*, *oil the wheels*, and *foot the bill*.

11 *One has to leave one's nest and friends to pursue one's dreams and ambitions.. partly because of parents' wishes.* <<http://dawnlim272.blogspot.com/>>

12 *The new Republican creed is to shoot any messenger of bad news.* <<http://www.dvorak.org/blog/?p=11451>>

13 *Did you or will you cross US Rubicon with this crazy leader?* <<http://www.wakeupfromyourslumber.com/node/4639>>

14 *In the end, although Green was able to ride Tyson's storm of blows, he fiddled, slapped and smothered his way out of serious trouble without ever coming up with an effective response. Tyson won a unanimous decision.* <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/general/boxing-after-the-lights-went-out-551077.html>>

- 15 *Not that it's too important for a sprint distance, but I am learning lessons that will help me go **Olympic distance** in 2008!* <http://charlotteharris.wordpress.com/2007/09/26/general-smallwood-sprint-tri-race-report/>>
- 16 *The Pasa president is hopeful that someone from the private sector would step forward and **foot Molina's bill**.* <[http:// sports.inquirer.net/inquirersports/inquirersports/view_article.php?article_id=107403](http://sports.inquirer.net/inquirersports/inquirersports/view_article.php?article_id=107403)>

The intention behind these modifications is just to indicate the person, thing, concept or the recipient of the information involved. The idiomatic meaning is not distorted, and the implication is very clear. Any idioms can be modified in this way just for special effect in the mass media. These modifications are used for socio-psycholinguistic effect.

Idioms modified by adjectives

In my list of sixty-four idioms only five allow internal modification with adjectives. They are *foot the bill*, *ring the changes*, *cut the cord*, *get the picture*, and *tip the scales*.

- 17 *Knowsley Tax Payers to **foot massive bill!*** <<http://www.kirkbytimes.co.uk/newshome.html>>
- 18 *Springer indicated that the three immediate source markets Canada, United States and the UK have to be looked at along with the performance of other secondary markets to **get a clear picture** of how the industry did in 2007.* <<http://www.barbadosadvocate.com/NewViewNewsleft.cfm?Record=34649>>
- 19 *And it seems he's going to **ring familiar changes** on his favorite themes.* <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0CE1DE123BF934A35752C0A967958260>>
- 20 *Tokelauans tipped to **cut colonial cord** to Wellington* <<http://www.mvariety.com/calendar/October/10/pacific/pac04.htm>>
- 21 *Confidently negotiate and **tip difficult scales** in your favour* <<http://www.terrap-inntraining.com/Course.aspx?EID=2389>>

Examples 17, 20 and 21 are headlines. These modifications are usually made to exploit the idiomatic meaning to suit a particular situation. The adjectives are syntactically the pre-modifiers of the noun phrases and semantically

they also modify the meaning in terms of amount and quality; that is, they are used to specify more precisely the referent of the noun. As in example 17 the tax payers have to pay a huge bill; in example 18 the three countries have to get a clear understanding of industry; in example 19 he is going to make familiar changes; and in example 20 Tokelau, an island belonging to New Zealand, might seek independence from Wellington.

Idioms modified for use as news headlines

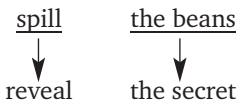
A number of idioms are modified to suit the titles of news articles basically for business, sports or advertisements. They are usually modified by nouns and sometimes by genitives and adjectives. When idioms are modified for news headlines, it gives a sophisticated effect to the title which can sometimes be humorous or serious but always attracts readers' attention. The creative use of language stimulates the readers' desire, and news articles that use eye-catching phrases, with their salient points emphasized, are more popular. Word play with idioms occasionally can convey something briefly but with emphatic connotation, that lingers in readers' minds for a long time. The idioms used in headlines are *make the grade*, *sweep the board*, *miss the boat*, *turn the table*, *stem the tide*, *stem the flow*, *rule the roost*, *foot the bill*, *tip the scales* and *soften the blow*.

- 22 *Will India's outsourcers **rule China's roost?*** <http://www.news.com/8301-10784_3-5564260-7.html?tag=bl>
- 23 *UNFPA charts new course to **stem population tide*** <<http://www.popline.org/docs/731655>>
- 24 *Vigilance week highlights need to **stem corruption tide*** <<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20071212/aplus1.htm>>
- 25 *A persistent pharmacist tries to **stem drug's flow*** <<http://www.markelliot.com/archive/july31.htm>>
- 26 *U.S. puts Iraqis on borders to **stem terrorist flow**; Top officer sees local forces as 'linkage' to population. (NATION)* <http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/summary_0199-3222841_ITM>
- 27 *Effect of acute hypoxia on respiration and brain **stem blood flow** in the piglet* <<http://jap.physiology.org/cgi/content/abstract/70/1/251>>

- 28 *Plants, splash of lemon, gently running water soften winter's blow* <<http://www.househunting.ca/outdoorliving/story.html?id=0da9c422-c111-4632-8ee1-feff1e3e943e>>
- 29 *Oil companies urged to soften import blow to Africa.* <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/69af5fd8-555f-11da-8a74-00000e25118c>, Authorised=false.html?_i_location=http%...>
- 30 *Banks not prepared to foot entire bill for Eden Park* <<http://www.scoop.co.nz/multimedia/tv/politics/2313.html>>
- 31 *Did the OK Prosperity Project tip legislative scales of power?* <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4182/is_20041104/ai_n10163742>
- 32 *It was then that I resolved to enjoy the rest of the year, accept that I simply did not have the talent to make the professional grade, and find a job.* (BNC)

Syntactic modification

Stathi (2006: 28) shows two types of idioms, following previous idiom studies, especially Gibbs et al. (1989). One of these types may be analyzed into its components to a certain degree. Stathi (2006: 28) explains that 'the components of the idiom are believed to correspond to parts of the meaning of the idiom.'



This decomposability allows a certain degree of modification to a decomposable type of idiom, the object component of which may be used as subject in a passive version. Note that the meaning 'reveal the secret' has the same syntactic structure as the V + the + N of the idiom. But the structure of the paraphrase alone is not sufficient for passivization. That is why other paraphrases with V + the + N structure cannot be passivized. Another vital matter for passivization is that the noun phrase in the structure of V + the + N of a decomposable idiom carries the important meaning rather than the meaning of the verb. I have come across an idiom *go the distance* meaning *reach the goal* which cannot be passivized, because *reach* carries the essence rather than goal.

I have found six idioms that permit syntactic modification, especially passivization. In these six idioms the meanings have the same syntac-

tic structure as the idiom and the NP carries important meaning:

- 33 *You get the loot when the beans are spilled in the Sabbath press. Little did I think that the one-time pretty young copy typist would end up bellowing in my ear.*
- 34 *There ... the beans are spilled! And here's another little surprise.*
- 35 *Goodling got the limited immunity based upon at minimum an outline of the beans she will spill (usually known as a 'proffer').* <<http://www.tpmuckraker.com/archives/003269.php>>

In instance 35, *the beans* is followed by a relative clause which contains the verb *spill*. Here the noun phrase *the beans* is taken out of the verbal idiom and used as a complement of the preposition 'of', as if it alone means 'the secret information'. This is an instance of syntactic modification, not merely of internal modification. The BNC provides two interesting examples of the idiom *beg the question*, where the collocation is pluralized and modified. The examples are:

- 36 *For they beg the questions they ask by simply assuming the truth of individualism.*
- 37 *It follows from this that any anthropologist who selects a particular category word from his own mother tongue, e.g. incest, marriage, family, myth, religion, and then embarks on some kind of cross-cultural study of institutions which he lumps together under such headings, is begging all the questions which are of serious interest!*

The first example is especially interesting because the word *question* is used with both verbs *beg* and *ask*. However, it is clear that I could not exchange the positions of the verbs: **they ask the questions they beg*. Undoubtedly the collocation *beg the question* is underlying here. I should note that the writer says 'they' ask more than one question, and that they beg the question in each case by taking individualism for granted. In the second example the pluralized 'the questions' has *all* as a premodifier and a relative clause as a postmodifier. In this alteration again both modification and pluralization are seen. As the passage talks about serious topics such as incest, marriage, family, myth, religion etc., I believe the author has deliberately modified the collocation to attract the reader's attention. Four more instances of

idiom passivization are found on the Internet: *prick the bubble* meaning hamper the success of something, *ring the changes* meaning vary permutations, *miss the boat* meaning miss the opportunity, and *pass the baton* meaning pass the responsibility:

- 38 *Sorry conspiracy theorists, prices of homes rose in response to blow off demand, and prices are now declining as the bubble was pricked.* <http://globaleconomicanalysis.blogspot.com/2006_02_13_globaleconomicanalysis_archive.html>
- 39 *When he turned from the gay and corrupt world in which he lived, where the changes were rung incessantly upon self-interest, falsehood, pride, and the various, more or less refined forms of sensuality,* <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/warner-susan/queechy/queechy.html>
- 40 *Does the report effectively target the mounting problems that Western Sydney currently faces, or has the boat been missed on some issues?* <http://www.polemica.info/archives/2005/04/the_future_of_g.html>
- 41 *In fact, so successfully has the baton been passed on to his daughter Ameeta that Usha-breds have been enjoying a banner year (2003–05), smashing all opposition in the country.* <<http://www.ushastud.com/genesis.htm>>
- 42 *This article aims to understand how the dynamics of the public debate about the European Constitution changed when the baton was passed from the Convention to the Intergovernmental Conference and to the different national arenas that were expected to ratify the Constitution.* <http://www.arena.uio.no/publications/working-papers2007/papers/wp07_16.xml>

The use of the definite article in V + the + N idioms

Davis refers to Lyons' book *Definiteness* (1999), where he says that in Standard English, the definite article is used for four possible reasons: familiarity, identifiability, uniqueness and inclusiveness. But the definite article used in the V + the + N idioms is not related to these four. Idiom phrases are metaphorically used, for example, *kick the bucket* does not mean the act of kicking an identifiable bucket rather it metaphorically refers to *dying* from the picture of pigs kicking the bucket when

they die. Moreover, in analyzing *beg the question* I have found that this expression is said to be a translation of the Latin expression *petitio principii*, but it is not a verbatim translation, as it might be rendered literally and morphologically as 'asking [the] principle'. In the Latin expression, 'petitio' is a noun, and 'principii' is in the genitive singular. There was no article in the Latin term. So, linguistically speaking, 'beg the question' is a modification made in early Modern English, and not a direct calque of the original Latin. I believe that this definite article contributes to the idiomatic meaning and refers to the 'semantic definiteness', a term used by Lyons (1999).

Replacement of the definite article with an indefinite article

I have found two idioms in which an indefinite article is used instead of the definite article. They are *prick the bubble* and *take the mickey*:

- 43 *Those jokes have always been in pantomime, it's always been a place where you could take a mickey out of certain people and situations.* http://www.bbc.co.uk/south-yorkshire/stage/panto_2003/>
- 44 *He said monetary tightening is a highly inefficient tool to prick a bubble, and cites several instances where this has failed.* <http://www.eurointelligence.com/Article3.1018+M53a17dd01e5.0.html>

In these cases, it seems that the authors have deliberately changed the definite article into an indefinite article, because they are not referring to any specific situation. In example 43, the author is saying that *pantomime* is a place where generally people can tease others, and in example 44 the author is talking about cases where the act of monetary tightening does not prick the bubble. Thus it seems the author understands well that the definite article refers to the semantic definiteness and as he is speaking generally he used indefinite article to refer to semantic indefiniteness.

Conclusion

Idiom modification is a rich field in which social critics and authors alike will find much to enjoy its treatment. The modified examples are certainly innovative and interesting, indicating various intentions and purposes behind their creation. Idioms modified by nouns,

genitives or determiners are used to specifically indicate the person or company referred to by the idiom, and adjectives are used to describe the noun phrase. They are basically exploited for special effect or for stylistic writing. For this reason most idioms are modified by nouns or determiners. Another noteworthy reason for idiom modification is news headlines. When idioms are exploited for headlines it gives a tantalizing hint of the content of the news. Sometimes idiom modifications are deliberate ploys of the author. This study suggests that idioms like *kick the bucket* or *bite the bullet* are not altered because such modification does not contribute anything to the idiomatic meaning. In my list, twenty idioms are found without any modifications. All the other aforementioned idioms are modified to manipulate their idiomatic meaning. Thus modification does not mean they are no longer idioms. Rather this study reveals that every modification evolves out of a conscious manipulation of language and a deliberate selection of sign. An understanding of the idiom modification offers an important socio-psychological window on the English language that provides a knowledgeable observer with key insight.

I am well aware of the risk of using data from the Internet, as they may not be normal. Idioms may be used there on an ad hoc basis, say, for facetious or particular effect. There are dubious cases and obvious misspellings, which should be ignored. Yet, there are also many trustworthy examples of modification of idiom found on the Internet. A tremendous economy with words appeals to readers' psychologies and reflects the current usage of modified

idiom forms. Now it is known that among these idioms of the type V + the + N structure, some idioms permit a variety of modification probably because of the lexico-semantic and syntactic flexibility that it has even if it is usually quite fixed. Thus non-modified idioms should be regarded as completely frozen idioms (until now) and it would be better to call the flexible ones least frozen idioms. ■

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