On pronounization and ellipsis in clausal idioms

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1 Introduction

Pieces of idioms can participate in anaphoric relations: pronounization and ellipsis. Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994; Bruening 2015; etc.

We discuss a novel paradigm involving anaphoric relations in clausal idioms.

<table>
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<th>Claims</th>
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<td>i. (Some) pronouns are derived from DPs. Lees &amp; Klima 1963; Postal 1969, Elbourne 2001</td>
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<td>ii. The identity condition on ellipsis can refer to a constituent containing the ellipsis site. Rooth 1992; Gengel 2007, pace Merchant 2001</td>
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<td>iii. Pronominalization and VPE interact, giving rise to pragmatic inferences (focus or simply emphasis) that can disrupt the idiomatic interpretation.</td>
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2 Paradigm

Clausal idioms: pronoun subjects and VP ellipsis (VPE) seem to need to co-occur.

(1) Alex: When the news got out, the shit hit the fan.
Ben: No, ...
  a. ... the shit didn’t hit the fan. [-Pron., -VPE]  
  b. ... it didn’t. [+]Pron., +VPE]  
  c. ... it didn’t hit the fan. [+]Pron., -VPE]  
  d. ... #the shit didn’t. [-Pron., +VPE]  

Non-idioms: Pronoun subjects and VPE can freely occur.

(2) Alex: The red balloon hit the ceiling.
Ben: No, ...
  a. ... the red balloon didn’t hit the ceiling. [-Pron., -VPE]  
  b. ... it didn’t. [+]Pron., +VPE]  
  c. ... it didn’t hit the ceiling. [+]Pron., -VPE]  
  d. ... The red balloon didn’t. [-Pron., +VPE]  

3 Pronouns can be derived from full DPs

- For concreteness: Idioms are complex lexical items. Katz and Postal 1963; Fraser 1970
- Idiomatic reading is available because both pronominalization and VP ellipsis involves unpronounced syntactic structure. Lees and Klima 1963; Postal 1969, Elbourne 2001; Ross 1969; Lasnik 1999; Merchant 2001, etc.

3.1 The pronoun is not base-generated / referential

The idiom subject doesn’t introduce a discourse referent that could be easily picked up by a pronoun.
- If the subject pronoun is referential, the idiom subject should introduce a discourse referent.
- Generally, a pronoun can pick out such a referent.
- Suppose the shit means “a (serious) problem” or “chaos.”

(3) The shit hit the fan. We suspect that [the shit] did something else.

(4) Alex: The chickens have come home to roost.
Ben: Yes, I’m afraid [it has/they have].

3.2 The pronoun is not an expletive it

Incorrect prediction: Expletive it should be available with clausal idioms with plural subjects.

(4) Alex: The chickens have come home to roost.
Ben: Yes, I’m afraid [it has/they have].

4 Implications for the identity condition

Merchant (2001): a constituent XP can be elided if it is e-GIVEN; essentially, XP and its antecedent mutually entail.

Puzzle: If clausal idioms are not compositional and their subparts lack denotations, the elided shit and its antecedent cannot mutually entail (same goes for hit the fan).

Solution: Partially disentangle ellipsis site from identity calculation. Rooth 1992; Fiengo & May 1992; Gengel 2007, etc.

(5) Revised e-GIVENNESS condition: XP is e-GIVEN iff XP is (reflexively) dominated by a YP, s.t. YP has an antecedent YP, and modulo existential type-shifting, YP entails F-closure(YP) and YP entails F-closure(YP).

(6) a. [[the shit] [VP hit the fan]] = The shit hit the fan.
   b. NEG [[the shit] [VP hit the fan]] = It didn’t. (1b)

5 Deriving the empirical generalization

If the speaker decides to pronounce something that could be elided, the hearer assumes that the repeated piece is contrastive.
- #It didn’t hit the fan (1c) → the shit did something else.
- #The shit didn’t (1d) → something else hit the fan.
- No plausible predicates to consider, if the shit and hit the fan both lack denotations.

Conclusions and future directions

i. Clausal idioms help adjudicate between competing theories of pronouns and ellipsis.
ii. Interaction between anaphoric relations can affect the availability of idiomatic interpretation.
iii. Future work: what about clausal idioms in null subject languages?

Acknowledgements: