Conspiracy theories: the problem with lexical approaches to idioms

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According to a particular strand of research, idioms are not stored as units, but are rather conspiracies of single-word lexical items which combine in just the right way so as to give the correct idiomatic form and meaning. In this way, expressions which seem to represent a one-to-many relation between the lexicon and the grammar are, instead, reduced to the usual kind of one-to-one correspondence. In this paper, however, I argue that such a move is misguided, and that we should instead prefer a theory where idioms are represented as units, such as that of Abeillé (1995).

I present arguments of three main kinds against such a 'lexical ambiguity' approach: based on theoretical elegance, empirical coverage, and psycholinguistic plausibility. I contend that such a theory leads to undesirable consequences in all these areas. The challenge of correctly constraining the collocational patterns, for instance, leads an explosive proliferation of homophonous forms in the lexicon. It is also not obvious that the correct collocational restrictions can be stated in general terms in the first place. And psycholinguistic experiments (Swinney & Cutler 1979, i.a.) have found that idiomatic meanings are processed faster than literal ones, and are looked up rather than computed: this is not the prediction of a model where idioms are put together in the same way as any other phrase.

Idioms embody a tension between word-like and phrase-like properties. The lexical ambiguity approach ignores this tension by treating idioms as regular phrases made up of words in the usual way. But this fails to match our intuitions about idioms, and does not accord with the psycholinguistic findings either. Instead, we need an approach in which idioms are represented as units, but with internal structure that can be manipulated.

References: ● Abeillé, Anne (1995): The flexibility of French idioms: A representation with Lexicalized Tree Adjoining Grammar. In: Martin Everaert, Erik-Jan van der Linden, André Schenk & Rob Schreuder (eds.), *Idioms: Structural and psychological perspectives*. Lawrence Erlbaum. ● Swinney, David A. & Anne Cutler (1979): The access and processing of idiomatic expressions. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 18, 523–534.