

Idioms and the syntax/semantics interface of descriptive content vs. reference (joint work with Berit Gehrke)

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The syntactic literature on idioms contains some proposals that are surprising from a compositional perspective. For example, Sportiche (2005) and Cecchetto & Donati (2015) propose that, in the case of verb-object idioms, the verb combines directly with the noun inside its DP complement, and the determiner is introduced higher up in the syntactic structure, or is late-adjoined. This seems to violate compositionality insofar as it is generally assumed that the semantic role of the determiner is to convert a noun to the appropriate semantic type to serve as the argument to the function denoted by the verb. In this paper, we establish a connection between this line of analysis and lines of work in semantics that have developed outside of the domain of idioms, particularly work on incorporation and a mixed formal and distributional semantic model developed in McNally (2017), McNally & Boleda (2017). This semantic work separates the composition of descriptive content from that of discourse referent introducing material; our proposal shows that this separation offers a particularly promising way to handle the compositional difficulties posed by idioms.