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4

How Creativity Strains Conventionality in the Use of Idiomatic Expressions

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1 Introduction

The most recent full-length study of idiomatic creativity (Langlotz 2006) rightfully views this phenomenon as a form of 'intelligent human behaviour that is based on general cognitive principles and processes.' These allow speakers to 'manipulate an idiom as a cognitive micro-model – a mental network that can be evoked to organise and communicate the abstract conceptual relationships in a target conceptualisation figuratively' (289–290). Based on Geeraerts' (1995) prismatic model of idiomatic meaning, Langlotz shows how in many cases the scene evoked by the literal meaning of the idiom is 'not deactivated or absent,' but works as a 'metaphorical standard of comparison in relation to which the idiomatic meaning is itself concretised' (108). Thus for example the literal meaning of the idiom to *take the bull by the horns* gives rise to the implicatures that the problem tackled was difficult to face and required effort and determination. Such idioms are consequently not impenetrable semantic units, but rather have a motivated and analyzable semantic structure that makes them open to variation and creativity, which can play on the literal scene (as in *to walk a narrow tightrope*), on the idiomatic meaning (as in *to walk a financial tightrope*), or on the correlation between the two (as in the description of the plot

of an Italian mafia movie which uses the expression *to kill Bertoli before he can spill the pasta*, as demonstrated by Langlotz (2006: 206–215).

However, according to Langlotz (2006: 193–194), in order for an idiom to be open to creative variation, the association between the literal and idiomatic scenes must be motivated and analyzable on the basis of entrenched conceptual patterns. Some idioms are claimed to be opaque and to resist conscious manipulation, such as for example *to kick the bucket*, in which the two-place transitive scene evoked by the literal meaning is nonisomorphic with respect to the one-place intransitive idiomatic meaning 'to die', and in which there is consequently no referent in the idiomatic scene corresponding to the direct object *bucket*. Invariability has also been claimed for *to kick the bucket* by a considerable number of other authors, making this idiom a sort of *exemplum classicum* of the category of invariable idiom. Newmeyer (1972: 297), for instance, states that *pass* could not be substituted for *bucket* when this sequence is used in its idiomatic meaning. Similarly, Gibbs et al. (1989) claim that *punt the bucket* cannot convey the meaning 'to die' since speakers are unable to semantically decompose *kick the bucket*. Fernando (1996: 48) describes this idiom as 'unlikely to tolerate any additions, even innovative ones.' Glucksberg (2001: 81–82) holds that it is 'difficult to imagine a context in which someone would say *kick the pass* instead of *kick the bucket*, as one cannot discern any communicative intent that would prompt a speaker to make this substitution.' Evans (2009: 241–243) uses *kick the bucket* as an example of a lexical concept whose corresponding form is restricted to the terms *kick*, *the*, and *bucket*, the only variation possible being the subject and tense-aspect-modality of the verb *kick*.

The goal of this paper will be to show that cognitive isomorphism and transparency are not absolute conditions for the variability of idiomatic expressions and that speaker creativity is not hampered by the referential opacity of idiomatic expressions whose literal scene is analyzable. More specifically the 'opaque' idioms *kick the bucket* and *shoot the breeze* (cf. Langlotz 2006: 129, 236) will be demonstrated to manifest all of Langlotz's basic forms of idiom variation, viz. constructional adaptations, literal-scene manipulation, topic indication and topic-related literal-scene manipulation.¹ Additional creative variations will also be attested and their production linked to the poetic function of language identified by Jakobson (1960) and the language-user maxim of 'extravagance' proposed by Haspelmath (1999). The data for this study has been collected from the Internet, which Wierzbicka (2009: 102) sees as holding 'great potential for the study of the semantics of phraseology.'

¹ I have omitted Langlotz's fifth category of ambiguity and punning, as it can be conflated with the category of topic-related literal-scene manipulation in my opinion.

2 Constructional Adaptation

Langlotz's first category of variation, constructional adaptation, includes things like aspectual variation, passivization and pluralization, which are associated with fitting the idiom to the literal scene to which it refers. As regards *kick the bucket*, Langlotz (2006: 221) agrees with Glucksberg (1993: 20) that this idiom does not appear in the progressive. This is claimed to be due to the semantic discrepancy between the transitional nature of dying and the momentary nature of kicking, with which the progressive can only be used if one wishes to describe a repetition of this punctual action. A google search for *is kicking the bucket* retrieved over 300 occurrences of this sequence, however, most of which referred to particular singular processes of dying. The first occurrence, given in (1) below, refers to the death throes of a pet fish. A good number of progressives were also found that referred to electronic devices which had begun to show signs of malfunction, as in (2).

- (1) My Male Betta is Kicking the Bucket
(<http://www.aquariumadvice.com>)
- (2) My Xbox is Kicking the Bucket
(<http://www.tribalboyz.net>)

Passivization is another constructional manipulation that is claimed to be excluded for *kick the bucket* by a number of authors (cf. Newmeyer 1974; Moon 1998: 208; Glucksberg 2001: 84; Langlotz 2006: 251; Wulff 2008: 2; Makkai 2011: 221). Langlotz attributes this to the intransitivity of the idiomatic scene and its consequent nonisomorphism with respect to the transitive action of kicking the bucket. Glucksberg puts the absence of the passive form down to pragmatic considerations, claiming that it makes no sense to place focus on the bucket, which, because it lacks a referent in the idiomatic scene, does not lend itself to topicalization. Glucksberg neglects to take into account however the depersonalizing function of the passive, which is attested in uses such as (3) and (4) below:

- (3) LOL, Ian Shuttleworth wrote a joint biography of her [Emma Thompson] and Kenneth Branagh in 1995! I.e. when (he was under the impression that) they were still married. So it was really the last minute for that particular biography even if no buckets were kicked.
(<http://www.forums.emma-thompson.org>)
- (4) no buckets were kicked, no coffins were nicked, no trolls expired, no babies were sired.
(<http://community.tasteofhome.com>)

Here the negative determiner *no* combines with the agentless passive to convey the absence of any deaths in the scenarios evoked by these sentences. The passive is also attested in another function which shows the influence of the transitivity of the idiom on the construal of the idiomatic meaning itself. In (5) and (6) below the meaning conveyed is that of the transitive 'kill' rather than the intransitive 'die':

- (5) The Chaotic Combo is no more. Most of their buckets have been kicked. The City Council runs the town now, and they're too busy to care about Chris. (http://doesi.deviantart.com)
- (6) He [Christ] was so full of the Truth, that when His bucket was kicked, Truth is what came out. (http://metroworshipcenter.blogspot.com)

This corresponds to the active construction with a possessive determiner illustrated in (7):

- (7) He [Bin Laden] is better off dead and it's a shame we couldn't put him through the torture he caused all his victims before we kicked his bucket for him. (http://www.rubbins-racin.com)

One sees here how the conceptual scaffolding provided by the literal meaning of the idiom allows possibilities that the paraphrase of the most commonly found idiomatic meaning does not. This provides interesting confirmation of Geeraerts' prismatic theory of idioms, as it constitutes evidence that the literal meaning of the idiom configures the view of the targeted scenario, with death being construed through a transitive image in the case of *kick the bucket*.

Passive forms are also attested with the idiom *shoot the breeze*:

- (8) We jump back to the PTParty, where everyone seems to be having a great time. Drinks flow, the breeze is shot, the fat is chewed, and a rug is being well and truly cut by several of the folks in attendance, but we're not too interested in them right now. What we are interested in is a quiet secluded corner, where Twiggie sits on a beanbag looking out at the party. (http://www.talkwrestlingonline.com)

In the above use the passive fulfils a depersonalizing function as it does in (3) and (4), the import of the passage being to provide a generic description of a stereotypical party, and so it is not consonant with the effect sought by the writer to identify who is shooting the breeze.

Langlotz (2006: 236) also claims that because of its opacity *shoot the breeze* does not allow any variation in the determiner introducing the noun, as it is unclear 'relative to which discursive referent, domain of knowledge or situational context this definiteness could be motivated.' The attestation of sequences such as *to kick the proverbial bucket* and *to shoot the proverbial breeze* shows however that the notion of definiteness does seem to characterize the nouns in these constructions. Moreover, both passive and active contexts show considerable variation in determiner usage. For the passive construction, the following were attested:

- (9) Like most online groups, rides are posted, advice is given, breeze is shot, piss is taken and a bit of fun is had. (http://www.kiwibiker.co.nz)
- (10) Later, schlepping loads up to a gear cache, Daren, Matt and myself are sprawled out at el mirador, lounging and breaking under the damp overcast skies. Jake and Eva wander up the trail on their way to Campo Bridwell to cache gear. More breeze is shot. Later we meet up for a leisurely and friendly mate session at Campo Bridwell. (http://patagonia.jaredspaulding.com)
- (11) Most of the breeze was being shot by one sloppy looking 'veteran' driver who claimed to be not just 'supertrucker,' but 'superduper trucker'. (http://www.layover.com)

In active constructions, other kinds of variation were discovered:

- (12) We came back a couple of times to rent boards, pick up shirts, and just shoot a little breeze. Very cool place. (http://www.yelp.ca)
- (13) I'm just a little site in a big internet, and the fact you're taking the time to shoot some breeze with me says a lot. So again, thank you. (http://kdm-racing.com)
- (14) Having been told to dress in white, some took a stab at the possible theme by going in clockwork orangesque get up, others banked on the halloween proximity and dolled up nice and ghoulfish, but everyone must have passed by the window on the way in where a ripley look a like and her crew were shooting their despondent breeze. (http://www.metafilter.com)

Sentence (9) shows that the noun phrase is felt by some speakers to be sensitive to generic reference, while (10) and (11) exhibit the possibility of quantifying the noun *breeze*. Examples (12) and (13) involve yet other

forms of quantification; (14) illustrates the possibility of introducing the noun by a possessive determiner.

The utterances attested with *kick the bucket* in (3) and (4) above also invalidate another of Langlotz's claims, namely that 'the compatibility constraint prevents this idiom from modifying or pluralizing the NP' (2006: 221). In fact, in the two contexts just cited only the plural seems possible, due to the need to negate the occurrence of whatever possible number of deaths might have taken place in the situations referred to. The plural form is also found outside of passive contexts; a search for the sequence *kicked their respective buckets* got over sixty hits, of which a typical example is given in (15):

- (15) Dave Thomas and Frank Perdue have also kicked their respective buckets.
(<http://boards.straightdope.com>)

The plural corresponds here to a reference to a specific number of deaths.

3 Literal-Scene Manipulation

The second type of idiom variability identified by Langlotz is literal-scene manipulation. Here a modification of the idiom's literal meaning is used to imply some added information about the actual referent, as in *to walk a narrow tightrope* where the adjective expresses a greater degree of precariousness than the bare noun in the unmodified idiom. Although implied to be impossible in the literature, this type of variability is also found with both *kick the bucket* and *shoot the breeze*. In (16) and (17) below, a quality is attributed to the bucket in the literal scene in order to imply something about the person whose demise is envisaged in the idiomatic target scenario:

- (16) When I was married to Prince, who stands to inherit a gazillion dollars when his parents kick their gold-plated bucket, I felt soothed by the cocoon of comfort that mega-wealth brings, yet also anaesthetized and dumbed-down by it.
(<http://open.salon.com>)
- (17) Being naturally reluctant to kick his brimming bucket of life while still a lusty juvenile, Mr Bhosh was occupied in lamenting the injudiciousness of Providence.
(<http://www.gutenberg.org>)

The result is a fully consistent image on the literal level that is considerably richer than the standard image and consequently conveys a richer meaning on the idiomatic level. This type of variability was also found with *shoot the breeze* in cases such as (18)–(20):

- (18) It had been a decent, barely decadent dinner. Held at the Monkey Bar in New York two weeks ago, GQ Tasty, a couple of forever-thirsty contributors, and one terrifyingly Machiavellian, high-powered Hollywood publicist sat down to shoot the warm April breeze over burgers, one lukewarm lobster thermidor and, for me, a perfectly cooked line-caught piece of striped bass.
(<http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk>)
- (19) Friends can come too since Suzhou is equipped with private nooks where a group of 4–6 can just shoot the afternoon breeze.
(<http://shootmeagainir.wordpress.com>)
- (20) taking you to visit with and photograph the monks of ancient Angkor Wat we then shoot the sunset breeze at our favourite lake side rest spot.
(<http://greentourscambodia.com>)

Here the modifier of the noun characterizes the setting in which the chat takes place. It would not appear to be the case therefore that literal-scene manipulation is 'highly restricted for opaque idioms' (Langlotz 2006: 210).

4 Topic Indication

Langlotz's third category of idiom variability is 'topic indication,' in which the element added to the idiom operates exclusively on the level of the idiomatic meaning, as in *to walk a financial tightrope*. This type is also attested with *kick the bucket*:

- (21) Gadget was acting weird & looked like it was ready to kick its digital bucket.
(<http://drfeelgoed.multiply.com>)

Here *digital* operates on the figurative level to specify the type of demise as being that of an electronic device. Contrary to Langlotz's (2006: 211) claim that 'for topic indication to work, the idiomatic configuration must be potentially isomorphic,' there is no referent here that corresponds isomorphically to *bucket* in the idiomatic scene. Rather, the adjective *digital* characterizes something corresponding to the overall sense of the expression, namely the type of death referred to. Another case was found in which the adjective modifying *bucket* characterized the person who might die:

- (22) Officials in Florida need to know who to contact if you are seriously hurt or kick your British bucket in an accident.
(<http://www.britishflorida.com>)

This would seem to exhaust the possibilities offered by the idiomatic scene for this expression, which involves both an act of dying and a being who dies.

Topic-indicating variations were also found with *shoot the breeze*. These generally referred to the subject of the small-talk, as in (23)–(24) below, or to the speaker's evaluation of it, as in (14) above with the adjective *despondent* and (25) below with *silly*:

(23) For my book *Brain Trust*, I chatted with Ian Stewart, mathematician, prolific puzzle author and very fun person to shoot the mathematical breeze with, who explains the following best card trick I've ever seen, invented by mathematician Art Benjamin of Harvey Mudd College.
(<http://www.britishtoronto.com>)

(24) So here we are, an expression of spiritual meaning, not a search for it. Sweet, huh? Let's meet on this Web site. Shoot the cosmic breeze. Compare notes.
(<http://www.mightycompanions.org>)

(25) so it came to pass that on my final Sunday I found myself at last at Henry's adobe hut deep down in the Tumbaco valley east of Quito, guzzling gutrot rum, shooting the silly breeze, and petting his mule Rocinante, the same hut where he blew his brains out with a pistol after falling in rash and unrequitable love ("woo the wench I shall") with a girl-woman almost young enough to be his granddaughter.
(<http://spikejapan.wordpress.com>)

5 Topic-Related Literal-Scene Manipulation

Lastly, Langlotz's fourth category of topic-related literal-scene manipulation is also attested with *kick the bucket*:

(26) All we know with certainty is that Titian died in 1576. (...) He may have been over, or under, 90 years old when he kicked the paint can.
(<http://www.ft.com>)

Here the literal scene of *kick the bucket* is adapted to the context of the death of a painter, with the substitution of *paint can* for *bucket* relating the literal meaning to the actual context of the target conceptualization. This topic-related literal-scene manipulation does not alter the idiomatic meaning, nor does it undo the structure of the literal scene; its effect is to tailor the literal scene to the topic, evoking not a generic death but rather one of a

painter, and further implying that death put an end to Titian's painting career.

6 Poetic or 'Extravagant' Alteration

Above and beyond Langlotz's four categories of idiom variation, the expression *kick the bucket* was also attested in usage which corresponded to the poetic function of language identified by Roman Jakobson (1960) and the maxim of 'extravagance' ('talk in such a way as to be noticed') proposed by Haspelmath (1999). In effect, certain variants of this idiom seem to have to do with the esthetic quality and originality of the way the speaker expresses himself. This has been observed both on the level of form and of meaning. On the level of meaning, the fixed character of the idiom encourages some speakers to introduce variation for the sake of variety itself. Thus attestations were found of *pail* being substituted for *bucket*, and of *punt* and *flip* for *kick*:

(27) Hey everyone my phone kicked the pail last week and I lost everyone's everything.
(<http://www.facebook.com>)

(28) When Walter Cronkite punted the bucket recently, the title of 'Most Trusted Man in America' fell to -- believe it or not -- Jon Stewart.
(<http://www.dallasobserver.com>)

(29) Hermione Granger was dead. She had died, flipped the bucket, gone to the other side, seen the light, anything you want to call dying.
(<http://www.fanfiction.net>)

With *shoot the breeze*, three other nouns besides *breeze* and two other verbs besides *shoot* were attested:

(30) I'll be vlogging, blogging and logging all the happenings during the forum so feel free to tweet me @ThatGirl_Chloe and let's shoot the wind.
(<http://techfluff.tv>)

(31) How draining is it when you're generally quite chirpy, you think 'hey, I'll pop down to the pub, shoot some air with some chums, down some brews.'
(<http://benignumour.blogspot.com>)

(32) Every woman likes to take care of her nails, especially when preparing for a special event or occasion, so why not take your bridesmaids out to the nail salon for some potential time together?

Your girls will be thanking you for being so thoughtful. You can even throw a spa party and shoot the zephyr to get rid of the wedding day stress. A girls' convention is all the time needed to heal stress, and what great way to de-stress than with a minute pampering?

(<http://bestcarryonbagss.blogspot.ca>)

(33) but I had a very good time, meeting up with a lot of you guys, exchanging ideas and just blowing the breeze with you all!

(<http://www.wargamer.au.com>)

(34) Today was a total body push it – bleh. I upped all times on the machines to seven minutes (max allowed for this workout, too bad, so sad) and started getting through it. (...) And then... The Dreaded. One! You know what? I did it! mmhmm. I think the IV helped. I did seven minutes on the stair climber at level five, which is something like 12,478 floors climbed or one lap on the stairs at a Friday Fun Run.

I stagger off that insult to all that is virtuous and wheeze the breeze with a trainer. He's checking on me, which I appreciate to no end. His biggest concern is burn out, he wants my suffering to last for decades not a few namby pamby months – that's for wimps!

(<http://exerciseinfutility1.blogspot.ca>)

Besides literal-scene manipulation, (34) above also shows the introduction of the poetic device of rhyme. Another form of sound-play was also found in which a word rhyming with *breeze* was substituted in order to produce a humorous effect based on the semantic relation between it and the adjective *icy* used in the previous context:

(35) Where do you go on icy adventures? Shoot the freeze on Talk!

(<http://www.yelp.com>)

On the level of form, three variants of *kick the bucket* were found in which the choice of lexical items was motivated not only by synonymy with the components of the standard expression but mainly by the desire to create alliteration, the first of which also contained a third semantic variant of *kick* not yet mentioned:

(36) Big Busted Bimbo Boots the Bucket

[blog post about the death of Anna Nicole Smith, American model, actress and TV personality who first gained popularity in Playboy Magazine]

(<http://www.randompaul.blogspot.com>)

(37) My 5-year-old Dell kicked the can a few weeks ago.

(<http://www.copperykeenclaws.com>)

(38) Thanks for the info. I didn't know Dolly [the cloned sheep] had punted the pail. I remember hearing a couple of years ago that she was showing signs of premature aging (...)

(<http://forums.randi.org>)

Example (38) also undermines the claim made by Gibbs et al. (1989) quoted above that *punt the pail* cannot convey the meaning 'to die.' Alliteration would also seem to be at work in the common, more vulgar variant of *shoot the breeze* employing the noun *shit*, which in its turn has spawned semantically-based variants with the nouns *crap* and *bull*.

7 Conclusions

As Fernando (1996: 2) has observed, 'idioms attract wordplay.' The very fact of having a more or less canonical form invites speakers to play around with the conventional phraseology in order to introduce effects of novelty and personal style. Another element that plays a role is the fact that an idiom is supposed to be more expressive than the literal expression to which it corresponds ('emotionally-charged' in the words of Brinton and Brinton 2010: 111); consequently, when the idiom starts to lose its novelty and expressive power, some speakers rejuvenate it by introducing creative variants of their own. As Haspelmath (1999: 1057) has noted, there is a tension in language users' behaviour between 'conformity' (talking like everyone else talks) and 'extravagance' (talking in such a way as to be noticed), and speakers sometimes 'want their utterance to be imaginative and vivid – they want to be little 'extravagant poets' in order to be noticed, at least occasionally.'

The uses that obey the maxim of extravagance represent the most striking example of the way in which creativity strains conventionality in the use of idioms. As in the field of art, speakers can take a conventional form and personalize it so as to create something new and striking out of what would otherwise be old and stale. Outside of the usage illustrated in (34) and (36)–(38), which exemplifies what Gibbs (1994: 265) has called 'the poetry of everyday speech,' we have also seen that an idiom which is thought to be opaque and nonisomorphic with respect to its target scene is amenable to the same types of variation as idioms which are transparent and isomorphic. This suggests that as long as an idiom's literal scene is analyzable it has a cognitive reality to which speakers can apply their imagination. Only idioms that are both nonanalyzable and nontransparent such as *by and large* (cf. Glucksberg 2001: 75) do not lend themselves very easily to creative

variation.² Examination of more data would probably uncover further forms of creativity that the study of the two idioms considered in this paper has not brought to light. There are indeed more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philology.

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2 Even here, one must agree however with Glucksberg (2001: 84) that an opaque noncompositional idiom can be varied productively 'if there are discernible relations between a modification and an idiom's original meaning and referents.' Two variants of *by and large* were indeed found on the Internet:

- (a) It could have been broad and brash and an over-the-top cartoon. Instead, by and (not so) large, it feels like a kinder, gentler, warm and fuzzy *How to Succeed* which succeeds without giving in to temptations to schtick it up. (<http://www.talkinbroadway.com>)
- (b) For India's sarkari health care by and large, or should that be by and small? is arguably one of the worst in the world. (<http://blogs.timesofindia.com>)
- The whole sequence tends however to manifest the behaviour of a single word, as it can be suffixed by *-ly* (c), used as a pre-adjectival adverb (d), and written in hyphenated form (e):
- (c) There is only one split among atheists that really matters, and because by and largely atheists are not formally organized, and atheism is largely a very loose mass phenomenon and not an organization, that essential split is often concealed by all sorts of things. (<http://www.one-episcopalian-on-faith.com>)
- (d) Public pressure from a by and large thriving citizen sector continues, and there will be subsequent rounds of negotiation ... (<http://www.impacteconomy.com>)
- (e) With one noticeable patchy spot, a by-and-large fun (and funny) collection of Can Con shorts. (<http://torontoist.com>)

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