

# Pushing the Boundaries: Idioms and Phases in Dutch dialects and English

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**1. Summary** This paper starts out from Svenonius' (2005) claim that idioms are constrained by phases. We focus on how such idioms can be used as a diagnostic for phasehood, and how such data demonstrate that the size of the clause-internal phase varies cross-linguistically. We demonstrate that, when comparing data from Dutch and its dialects to English, there is cross-linguistic variation with respect to the size of idioms, and therefore, by extension, the size of the clause-internal phase. This provides support for the claim that phases are *dynamic*, variable, and flexible across languages.

**2. Background** An idiom is an expression with a non-compositional interpretation: its meaning is not simply predictable from the literal meaning of its parts. A canonical example is *kick the bucket* ('to die'), the meaning of which has nothing to do with either kicking or buckets. Crucially, if any of the parts are altered, the figurative interpretation is lost: neither *kick the can* nor *knock the bucket* means 'to die'.

It has long been noted (cf. e.g. Chomsky, 1980; Marantz, 1984) that verbal idioms are typically comprised of the verbal predicate and its arguments: *bite the dust* (DP-theme), *come to the point* (PP-goal), *all hell breaks loose* (DP-theme subject). Svenonius (2005) observes that although verbal idioms can co-occur with other syntactic material, such as aspect, modality, tense, or voice, the idiomatic interpretation is never dependent on the presence of these items. Thus, with regard to the size of a verbal idiom, there seems to be a strict separation between the vP and TP domain: a verb does not form an idiom with material generated outside of the vP domain. This has led Svenonius (2005) to claim that the size/boundary of idioms is constrained by phases (postulated for independent reasons in Chomsky 2000, 2001): an idiom can be smaller than the phasal domain, but can never be larger than it.

**3. Data** However, in recent literature, it has been noted that certain idioms *are* reliant on additional syntactic material. A number of fixed expressions depend on passive voice (cf. Bowers, 2010):

- (1) a. He was bowled over by her response. = He was surprised by her response.  
b. # Her response bowled him over. ≠ Her response surprised him.

Moreover, we show that many idioms exist in English that are dependent on progressive aspect:

- (2) a. Bob is shitting bricks. = Bob is extremely scared.  
b. # Bob shat bricks. ≠ Bob was extremely scared.

Despite extensive research, however, there appear to be no real idioms in English that are dependent on perfect aspect, modality or tense (cf. Harwood 2014 for discussion of (only) apparent counterexamples). Thus, in English, it seems that the progressive aspect layer constitutes the "upper boundary" of verbal idioms.

It should not be surprising that in Dutch and its dialects quite a number of verbal idioms reliant on passive voice and progressive aspect are attested:

- (3) a. *van 'n éizel op kèiremis beschéite wèrre* [Dendermonde Dutch]  
of the donkey on fair shat become  
'become pregnant' (lit. 'be shat on by a donkey at the fair')  
b. # *'n éizel beschéit éir op kèiremis* ≠ 'she became pregnant'  
the donkey shat her on fair

- (4) a. *Hij zit en deuntje te make.* [Groesbeek Dutch]  
he sits a tune to make  
'He's crying.' (lit. 'he's sitting making a tune')  
b. *Hij maakt en deuntje.*  
he makes a tune  
'He's cheating.' (lit. 'he makes a tune')

Note that, interestingly, the non-progressive counterpart of (4a) in (4b) also has an idiomatic interpretation, but the meaning is completely different.

(Dialectal) Dutch idiomatic expressions differ from English idioms, however, in that they can also be dependent on perfect aspect and modality. When perfect aspect is absent, the sentence in (5) loses its figurative interpretation, as does the sentence in (6) when the modal *kunnen* ‘can’ is absent.

- (5) a. *Z'heit teigen den hoek van een ronne taufel geloeipen.* [Aalst Dutch]  
 she-has against the corner of a round table run  
 ‘She’s pregnant and she doesn’t know who the father is.’  
 (lit. ‘she has run against the corner of a round table’)
- b. # *Ze liep teigen den hoek van een ronne taufel.* ≠ ‘she was/is pregnant’  
 she ran against the corner of a round table
- (6) a. *Hij kan geen veer van de mond blazen.* [Standard Dutch]  
 he can no feather of the mouth blow  
 ‘he is very poor’ (lit. ‘he cannot blow a feather from his mouth’)
- b. # *Hij blaast geen veer van de mond.* ≠ ‘he is very poor’  
 he blows no feather from the mouth

Despite extensive research, there appear to be no idioms in Dutch that are dependent on particular tense forms. Thus it can be concluded that, in Dutch and its dialects, the modal layer constitutes the “upper boundary” of verbal idioms.

**4. Analysis** If verbal idioms are indeed constrained by the size of the clause-internal phase, then the data above implies that the clause-internal phase in English extends as far as the progressive layer, and as far as the modal layer in Dutch and its dialects. This subsequently means that phases are not rigid and absolute, as Chomsky (2001) claims, but rather are flexible across languages and perhaps context sensitive, as proposed in the dynamic phase approach (cf. Bobaljik & Wurmbrand 2005; Boskovic 2014; Harwood 2014).

In order to formally explain the variation we claim, as per Harwood (2014), that phases are determined by their sub-numerations, but that the phase does not project until the last item from the sub-numeration is merged, *irrespective of what that item is*. This denies vP of its exclusivity as the clause-internal phase, and allows other layers to project the phase when present. The difference between English and Dutch then arises from parametric variation with regards to what can be included in each of the sub-numerations of the clause: in English, progressive aspect constitutes part of the first sub-numeration of the clause, and so projects the phase when it is merged. Perfect aspect and modality, however, constitute part of the second sub-numeration and so are not included within the clause-internal phase. In Dutch, on the other hand, modality and perfect aspect *are* included in the first sub-numeration of the clause. Therefore these syntactic items are subsequently included within the clause-internal phase when they are merged onto the clausal spine.

**5. Supporting evidence** Our claims can be backed up by using evidence from VP ellipsis, VP fronting and existential constructions. It has been claimed that these phenomena privilege the clause-internal phase (Gengel 2007; Holmberg 2001; Chomsky 2001, 2005). We will demonstrate for English that said phenomena target as much as the progressive aspectual layer, and as much as the modal layer in Dutch, implying, once again, that the clause-internal phase in English extends as far as progressive aspect, and as far as modality in Dutch.

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