
How to modify idioms

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(based on joint work with Berit Gehrke, CNRS-LLF / Paris Diderot)

The analysis of adjectival syntactic modification of nominal complements in idiomatic expressions by Ernst (1981) distinguishes between *internal*, *external*, and *conjunctive* modification. In internal modification (1), the meaning of the adjective applies to the meaning of the nominal complement. In external modification (2), the meaning of the adjective applies to the meaning of the idiom as a whole, and, according to Ernst (1981), the modifier functions like a domain adverb. In conjunctive modification (3), the meaning of the adjective applies to the literal meaning of the nominal complement, so that the idiomatic and the literal meaning of the nominal complement must be accessible at the same time.

- (1) [...] many people were eager to jump on the **horse-drawn** Reagan bandwagon.
- (2) Carter does not have an **economic** leg to stand on.
- (3) [...] there is that little stab of shame we feel [...] for having had so much fun pulling his **cross-gartered** leg for so long.

The goal of our paper is to relate the types of modification illustrated in (1)–(3) to more general modification strategies outside the realm of idioms, and to derive restrictions on modification in idioms from general restrictions on modification in other domains. We propose that the internal modification in (1) can be treated on a par with modification of weak definites. Following a proposal by Gehrke & McNally (2014), we conjecture that the kind of modifying strategy in (2) involves independently attested (semantic) noun incorporation, with an effect of the adjective on the V-N combination. In (3), we observe non-intersective modification that adds secondary content (at the CI tier) to the main content of the sentence.

References: • Ernst, T. (1981): Grist for the linguistic mill: Idioms and “extra” adjectives. In: *Journal of Linguistic Research*, vol. 1(3), 51–68 • Gehrke, B., & L. McNally (2014): Event individuation by objects: Evidence from frequency adjectives. *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung 18*, 146–163.