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How creativity strains conventionality in the use of idiomatic expressions

The most recent book-length study of idiomatic creativity (Langlotz 2006) views this phenomenon as a form of intelligent human behaviour based on general cognitive principles which allows 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” (pp. 289-290). Based on Geerarts’ (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 “metaphorical standard of comparison in relation to which the idiomatic meaning is itself concretised” (p. 108). However Langlotz claims that in order for an idiom to be open to creative variation, the association between the literal and idiomatic scenes must be motivated and analyzable, so that the idiom is isomorphic and cognitively transparent to some degree. The goal of this paper will be to show that cognitive isomorphism and transparency are not necessary conditions for the variability of an idiomatic expression. The classic example of the non-transparent idiom, the expression *to kick the bucket*, will be demonstrated to manifest all of Langlotz’s basic forms of idiom variation, viz. constructional adaptation, literal-scene manipulation, topic indication and topic-related literal-scene manipulation, in addition to other creative variations introduced by ordinary speakers which derive from the poetic function of language. This suggests that as long as an idiom’s literal scene remains analyzable it represents a cognitive reality to which speakers can apply their intelligence and imagination in a creative fashion.

References

- Geerarts, Dirk. 1995. Specialization and reinterpretation in idioms. In M. Everaert, E. van der Linden, A. Schenk and R. Schreuder (eds.). *Idioms: structural and psychological perspectives*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 57-73.
- Langlotz, Andreas. 2006. *Idiomatic creativity*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.