

The Unit Condition in Idioms*

David Lebeaux

SUMMARY

I first introduce the Unit Condition, and its alternative that all idioms consist of a lexical category and its governing domain. I argue for the former, which says that all idioms consist of exactly a constituent. The Unit Condition creates a tension between it and UTAH, UTAH is argued against. Idioms turn out to be grammatical in several different ways: some reaching idiomhood through reconstruction to the base form, and some gathering together their parts throughout the derivation. Different idioms (VP vs. IP vs. CP) are penetrable by different types of adverbs (VP vs. IP); this is guaranteed by the Unit Condition. Finally, the Unit Condition itself is drawn back to the proposal that a single “word” is substituted for the idiom at LF.

RÉSUMÉ

Je présente d’abord la Condition d’unité puis l’autre possibilité que tout idiome se compose d’une catégorie lexicale et son domaine dirigeant. J’appuie cette première, qui dit que tout idiome ne consiste qu’en un seul constituant. La Condition d’unité produit une tension entre elle-même et UTAH; celui-ci est réfuté. Les idiomes s’avèrent grammaticaux de plusieurs façons : quelques-uns sont devenus idiome par le biais de la reconstruction de leur forme de base, alors que d’autres ramassent leurs composants dans la dérivation. Les idiomes différents (SV vs SI vs SC) sont pénétrables aux différents types d’adverbes (SV vs SI), comme le veut la Condition d’unité. Enfin, la Condition d’unité elle-même est ramenée à la proposition qu’un seul “mot” se substitue à l’idiome en FL.

1. INTRODUCTION

An idiom is a unit—a unit which contains all and only idiomatic pieces. That is the contention of this paper. It is a constituent.

(1) a. UNIT CONDITION ON IDIOMS (GENERAL)

Every idiom consists of (dominates) all and only idiomatic pieces (at some level of representation).

* Congratulations, Lisa, on a wonderful career.

b. UNIT CONDITION ON IDIOMS (C-COMMAND)

Each idiomatic piece c-commands only other idiomatic pieces.

The position that these conditions take is by no means obvious (Svenonius 2005). For example, Marantz (1984), in a rightly celebrated passage, shows that verbs and DP objects, excluding subjects, form an idiomatic constituent, while DP subjects and verbs, excluding objects, do not. He goes on to show that subtle changes in the meaning of a verb depend on the object, but not the subject, “kill an audience” (wow them) vs. “kill a bottle” (empty it). It is this extraordinarily convincing argument which gives credence to the division of the S into DP-VP (see also Kratzer 1996). Yet if the contention of this paper is correct, the conclusion that Marantz ultimately draws about idioms deserves more scrutiny. Marantz contends that a verb, or lexical head, plus its governing domain forms an idiom. This is problematic on several counts. First, an idiom may be larger than a verb, or lexical category, plus its governing domain. This is shown in (2).

- (2) What’s up?
 What gives?
 What’s cooking?
 When push comes to shove
 When the chips are down
 When all is said and done
 When it comes right down to it
 When pigs fly
 If you catch my drift
 Where’s Charley? (where’s the action?)
 Is the Pope Catholic? (isn’t it obvious?)
 Does the bear shit in the woods? (isn’t it obvious?)

These are too large to be complements of V. These are all complements, if anything, of +wh, plus a specifier, a functional category, and not a lexical category (the specification above is for a lexical category, and its governing domain).

In addition, the governing domain excludes too many elements, as idioms exist in relative clauses, and as VP adjuncts as well. (These are adjuncts outside the governing domain.)

- (3) an accent you can cut with a knife
 the powers that be
 the straw that broke the camel’s back
 fiddle while Rome burns
 eat like a bird
 eat like a horse
 hide one’s light under a bushel
 make out like a bandit

There are also examples of progressive idioms, perfective idioms, and modal idioms, which I will discuss below. In general, the list in (4) starts to show that idioms exist as constituents (the Unit Condition), in many different categories.

THE UNIT CONDITION IN IDIOMS

(4) IDIOMS AS STRUCTURAL UNIT

- a. VP or V' idioms: *kick the bucket, hit the nail on the head, make the grade, hit bottle, keep body and soul together*
- b. IP idioms: *the shit hit the fan, the axe fell, the cat has got X's tongue, the sky is the limit, the early bird gets the worm, the worm has turned, here goes nothing*
- c. CP idioms: *what's up, what gives, what's cooking, where's Charlie, is the Pope Catholic, does the bear shit in the woods, what do you know*
- d. CP idioms (adverbial): *when push comes to shove, when the chips are down, when all is said and done, when it comes right down to it, when pigs fly, if you catch my drift*
- e. Predicative idioms PP: *in the bag, off the wall, in the pink, in the know, in the soup*
- f. PP idioms, adverbial: *by word of mouth, by the seat of one's pants, in plain English, in the money*
- g. VP idioms containing an adverbial: *fiddle while Rome burns, eat like a bird, eat like a horse, hide one's light under a bushel, make out like a bandit*
- h. DP predicative (no complement) : *an open book, the real McCoy, one's main squeeze*
- i. Complex DP (including complement): *a horse of another color, a fish out of water, a dose of one's own medicine, the man of the hour, a pain in the neck*
- j. DP CP: *an accent you can cut with a knife, the powers that be, the straw that broke the camel's back*
- k. Conjunction: *over and above, kiss and make up, kith and kin, tall, dark, and handsome*
- l. Headed by infinitival *to*: *to put it mildly, to say the least, to say nothing of X, to make a long story short*
- m. Headed by negation: *not hold a candle to, not bat an eyelid, not believe one's eyes, not see the forest for the trees*
- n. Headed by progressive *-ing*: *cooking with gas, hitting/firing on all cylinders, dying for an X*
- o. Headed by perfective *have*: *have had it, has gone to the dogs, have seen better days, have had enough*
- p. Headed by modal + negation: *couldn't care less, can't stand the sight of, can't make heads or tails of, can't cut it*

Another kind of idiom supports the Unit Condition, rather than the condition that says that idioms are composed of a lexical category and its governing domain. These consist of a closed class functional category on their left periphery. They are quite surprising. First, consider perfective idioms.

- (5) a. I have had it. (I am fed up)
- b. *I have it. (ungrammatical as an idiom)

The idiom is “I have had it”, meaning I am fed up (another idiom!). The idiom is completely ungrammatical as an idiom without the perfective *have*: *I have it.

A second perfective idiom:

- (6) a. I have had enough. (I am fed up)
- b. *I have enough. (ungrammatical as an idiom)

THE UNIT CONDITION IN IDIOMS

Also:

- (7) a. John has seen better days.
b. ??John saw better days. (ungrammatical as an idiom)

Progressive *-ing* acts similarly: it is part of the idiom, and thus is not removeable without detriment to the idiom. Note that it forms a unit—a constituent—an Aux', with the rest of the idiom. However, it does not form a lexical category and its governing domain because it is a functional category.

Idioms with Progressive:

- (8) a. John is dying for a drink. (craves a drink)
*John died for a drink. (ungrammatical as an idiom)
b. Now we are cooking with gas. (we are progressing)
*We cooked with gas. (ungrammatical as an idiom)
c. We are firing on all cylinders. (we are progressing)
*We fired on all cylinders. (ungrammatical as an idiom)

“John is dying for a drink” means he craves a drink; take away the progressive, and it has only the literal meaning. Similarly with “now we are cooking with gas”. With the progressive, it means the idiomatic, “now we are progressing”. Without the progressive it becomes only literal.

Finally, infinitival “to”, as part of the idiom.

- (9) a. to say the least
b. *saying the least
c. *can say the least

A closed class functional category plays a key role in all these idioms, different than the specification that an open class category and its governing domain would. In general we may say that the Unit Condition, repeated below, holds.

- (10) **UNIT CONDITION**
Every idiom consists of (dominates) all and only idiomatic pieces. (see also Svenonius, 2005).

This holds for relative clauses and V' adjuncts.

- (11) a. relative clauses: (DP (DP an accent)(CP you can cut with a knife) (4j)
b. V' adjuncts: (V' (V' fiddle)(CP while Rome burns))(4g)
c. Questions: (CP What's (IP (VP up)) (4c)
d. Progressive: (PROG be (VP dying for a X))(4n)
e. CP idioms (adverbial): (CP when (IP push comes to shove))(4d)
f. Predicative idioms (PP): (PP off the wall)(4e)

Marantz's claim that sentential idioms are unaccusative looks largely correct, but not the claim that idioms are generally a V or lexical head and its governing domain. This is because, while a number of the idioms are unaccusative, they have in addition material in the C layer (such as “what's up?” and “what

gives”), and also higher than the CP, as in relative clauses (“an accent you can cut with a knife”), adjuncts (“when push comes to shove”, “when pigs fly”), and V’ modifying adjuncts (“fiddle while Rome burns” and “eat like a horse”). This all gives an argument for the Unit Condition.

2. DIFFERENT TYPES OF IDIOMS (UTAH VS. THE UNIT CONDITION)

Idioms come in different sizes and shapes, and they fulfill the Unit Condition at different stages in the derivation. For example, take “put on a pedestal”. At Spell Out, it does not satisfy the Unit Condition, because “Mary” or some DP intercedes between “put” and “on a pedestal”: “put Mary on a pedestal”. It does fulfill the Unit Condition at Merge Initial Structure, since “put on a pedestal” is a constituent then (assuming a derivation where “put” and “on a pedestal: form a constituent at Merge). It also fulfills the Unit Condition at Reconstruction/LF, since “put” may reconstruct to its merged position. This is shown in (12):

- (12) Merge: Mary (put on a pedestal)
 Spell Out: put (Mary <put> on a pedestal)
 LF/Recon.: e (Mary (put on a pedestal))

Are there other idioms like it, which obey the Unit Condition at Merge and at LF/Reconstruction Structure, but not in between? Yes, indeed. There are a number of idioms with this property.

- (13) Double Object
 Merge: Bill (give a hard time)
 Spell Out: give (Bill <give> a hard time)
 LF/Recon.: e Bill (give a hard time)

At LF/Reconstruction the idiom is restored.

- (14) VP internal subject (Sportiche)
 Merge: has (all Hell broken loose)
 Spell Out: all Hell has <all Hell> broken loose.
 LF/Recon.: e has all Hell broken loose.

These are all like “put on a pedestal” because the structure forms a unitary idiom at Merge, and at LF/Reconstruction, but not in between. I don’t choose between a representation like (15a) or (15b) for the LF form of “All Hell has broken loose”.

- (15) LF/Reconstruction form
 a. All Hell has <all Hell> broken loose.
 b. e has all Hell broken loose.

For (15a), we may say the following:

- (16) Either the head of a chain, or its copies (or both) may be active.

Thus in (15a) the copy will be active.

Let us examine another group of idioms, which differ from the “put on a pedestal” class, at least apparently. They are in (17) vs. (18), (19) vs. (23), within (20), and (21) vs. (22).

THE UNIT CONDITION IN IDIOMS

- (17) put the blame on
put the bite on
put the arm on
put the heat on
put the finger on
put the kibbosh on
put the screws on
put the squeeze on
- (18) put X on a pedestal
put X on the spot
put X on hold
put X on ice
put X on paper
put X on the back burner
- (19) take a dig at
take a crack at
take a gander at
take a look at
- (20) take a backseat to
take a fancy to
take a liking to
take a shine to
turn a blind eye to
turn a deaf ear to
turn one's back to
turn X to good account
turn X to good advantage
- (21) take a raincheck on
take pity on
- (22) take X on the chin
take X on faith
take X in
take X into one's confidence
take X in stride
- (23) take X at face value
take X at his word

The difference between the idioms in (17) vs. (18) is one in which the first vs. the second internal argument is realized, with the verb and the preposition held constant. The same holds for (19) vs. (23); within (20); and for (21) vs. (22). The structure of the idioms in (18) is obvious; but what is the structure of the idioms in (17)? This is a very difficult question. Similarly for the idioms in (19), (20) (first half), and (21). The examples above show different bracketings, at least if we assume that fully specified arguments take place inside partially specified arguments. The examples in (17) show a bracketing in (24a), while the examples in (18) show a bracketing in (24b), again assuming that fully specified arguments take place inside partially specified arguments.

THE UNIT CONDITION IN IDIOMS

- (24) a. ((put the blame) (on e))
 b. (Mary (put on a pedestal)) “put Mary on a pedestal”

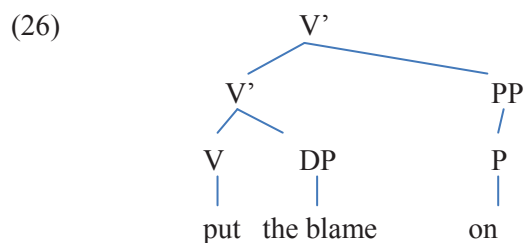
Assume preposition incorporation in (24a). The representation for (24a) is then also chosen with the Unit Condition on Idioms (C-command), repeated below:

(25) UNIT CONDITION ON IDIOMS (C-COMMAND)

Each idiomatic piece c-commands only other idiomatic pieces.

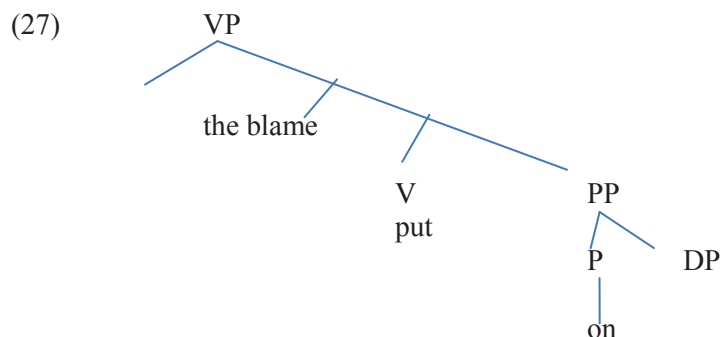
The examples in (17) show a bracketing where “put” and “the blame” cluster together, and the examples in (18) show an already familiar “put on a pedestal” bracketing. Similarly for (19) and (23), and the rest. As is evident, the first internal argument is bracketed with “put” in the “put the blame on” construction, while the second internal argument is bracketed with “put” in the “put on a pedestal” construction. The verb and the preposition are held constant. This suggests a violation of UTAH, since syntactically identical constructions have differing bracketings.

Two structures might underlie the “put the blame on” class (or “keep an eye on”, or “put the kibbosh on”). One is what appears to be on the surface, (26).



This is a radically different structure from those idioms in the “put on a pedestal” class, in that the first argument forms the closest argument with the verb. Note also that it comes very close to satisfying the Unit Condition already at Merge Initial Structure (needing only preposition incorporation to satisfy it completely).

The second possibility is that “put the blame on” has exactly the same structure as the “put on a pedestal” class, but with different lexicalizations.



Here in the derivation, “on” incorporates into “put”, and “put-on” moves to a high position above “the blame”, which eventually incorporates into “put-on”. Here, “put” is generated with a complement PP, headed by “on” (the same as “put on a pedestal”); “put” is c-commanded by “the blame” at Merge Initial Structure (the same as “Mary put on a pedestal”), and flips over “the blame” to take its surface form. This

gives rise to a structure where the Spell-Out structure is radically different from the Merge Initial Structure.

3. UTAH vs. THE UNIT CONDITION

The structure in (27), then, easily satisfies UTAH. Two possible structures, in (26) and (27), however reveal a tension between the Unit Condition and UTAH. If (26) is correct (i.e. it is the underlying structure), then idioms of the “put the blame on” class have an opposite underlying structure from those of the “put on a pedestal” class, with the same verb and preposition, and thus contradict UTAH. If (27) is correct, then UTAH is vindicated, but the Unit Condition is contradicted. The Unit Condition may be put as an economy condition, as well as a condition holding at LF. The economy principle would then be a principle which measures, in terms of movements, how far the original structure is from the Unit Condition. That is, how many movements it will take for an original structure to satisfy the Unit Condition. The left branching structure in (26) is close to perfect.

Is there any reason for the Unit Condition? Suppose that at LF, an idiom is replaced by a single LF constituent or “word”. This would mean that all the idiom pieces would have to be gathered into one “word” so that they would be substituted for. The substitution would then take place at LF, and the idiom—composed of idiomatic pieces, possibly originally scattered, would be substituted for. I put “word” in scare quotes, because it can be bigger than a morphological word—as in “put on a pedestal”.

4. SOME ADDITIONAL PHRASE STRUCTURAL EVIDENCE FOR THE UNIT CONDITION

I have said above that an idiom is a unit by an economy principle throughout the derivation, and strictly at LF. Let us add a little more meat to the Unit Condition. Suppose an idiom is modified. It must allow modification from outside it, and resist modification internally. VP idioms allow the modifying adverb to vary freely.

- (28) kick the bucket quietly
 hit the nail on the head frequently
 make the grade easily
 shoot the shit freely
 barely keep body and soul together

At the other extreme, consider now CP idioms, with adverb and tense changes. CP idioms are specified at least up to +wh, so cannot have tense permuted and intercession of an adverb.

- (29) *What gave yesterday? (What gives?)
 *What was cooking last night? (What’s cooking?)
 *What was up frequently? (What’s up?)
 *Did the bear shit in the woods? (Does the bear shit in the woods?)

(29) shows precisely this pattern. Consider now the IP. According to the Unit Condition, adverbs modifying the entire IP (S-adverbs) should be allowed, while VP adverbs should be disallowed, since they penetrate the IP. This seems to be true.

- (30) a. The shit hit the fan.
 The shit probably hit the fan. (S-adverb)
 *The shit hit the fan quickly. (VP adverb)
 b. The cat has got X’s tongue.
 The cat certainly has got X’s tongue. (S-adverb)
 *The cat has quickly got X’s tongue. (VP adverb)

THE UNIT CONDITION IN IDIOMS

- c. The early bird gets the worm.
The early bird certainly gets the worm. (S-adverb)
*The early bird gets the worm quickly. (VP adverb)

(30a), (b), and (c) all have the expected result, that the S-adverb is permissible but the VP adverb is not. This is because the S-adverb is exterior to the idiom given the DP-internal subject analysis, but the VP idiom is not.

Exclamatives, such as “Get a life!” or “Go for it!”, must have an exclamative feature in C. This is to regulate the occurrence of exclamatives in such structures as (Grimshaw 1979), “It is amazing how tall he is!”. This means that if the exclamative is an idiom, everything within the c-command domain of +excl, must be part of the idiom, as shown in (31).

(31) (C' +excl (IP))

Examples of exclamatives, with tense substitution are given below.

- (32) a. Get a life!
(*Got a life!)
- b. Perish the thought!
(*Perished the thought!)
- c. Go for it!
(*Went for it!)
- d. Here goes nothing!
(*Here went nothing!)

As can be seen, these idiom-exclamatives, and many others besides, do not undergo substitution of tense. This is because an exclamative is built up to the C'/CP level, so resists intercession of TNS.

5. AUXILIARY INTERVENTION CONSTRAINT

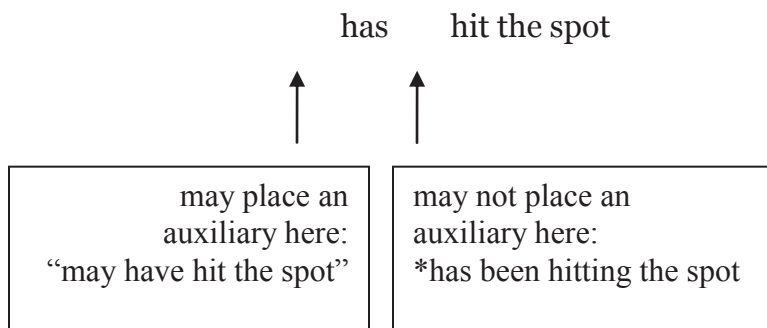
Let us close with the Auxiliary Intervention Constraint. I said earlier that some idioms have a closed class functional element on their periphery, such as an auxiliary. Some examples are given below.

- (33) Auxiliary part of idiom
 - a. to make a long story short
to say the least
to put it mildly
to say nothing of
 - b. can't make heads or tails of
can't cut it
couldn't care less
can't stand the sight of
 - c. has hit the spot
have had it
has seen better days
has gone to the dogs
 - d. is hitting on all cylinders
is cooking with gas
is dying for an X

THE UNIT CONDITION IN IDIOMS

These auxiliaries show a structural asymmetry, where another auxiliary, a free auxiliary, may be interposed. An auxiliary may not be interposed in the c-command domain of the specified auxiliary (to the right of it), while an auxiliary may be interposed which c-commands the specified auxiliary (it is to the left of it). This is shown in (34).

(34)



Many examples can be found for each position, to the right or to the left of the specified auxiliary. It is ungrammatical to insert to the right, while it is free to insert to the left.

(35) Insert to the right (some examples):

to make a long story short	*to have made a long story short
to say the least	*to have said the least
has hit the spot	*has been hitting the spot
can't cut it	*can't have cut it

(36) Insert to the left (some examples):

have hit the spot	may have hit the spot
have had it	may have had it
is hitting on all cylinders	has been hitting on all cylinders
is dying for a drink	has been dying for a drink
	might be dying for a drink

While this is just a small subset of the total, we can see that insertion to the left is possible, while insertion to the right is not. The full table of this is given below.

Table 1: Performance on the Auxiliary Intervention Constraint

	Insert Aux to Left	Insert Aux to Right
Grammatical	7	1
Ungrammatical	0	9

The Auxiliary Intervention Constraint is given below:

(38) **AUXILIARY INTERVENTION CONSTRAINT**

In an idiom which contains a specified auxiliary as part of it, additional auxiliaries are (1) grammatical to the left of the specified auxiliary, and (2) ungrammatical to the right of the specified auxiliary.

6. CONCLUSION

I have tried above to give some of the consequences of the Unit Condition in idioms.

REFERENCES

- Grimshaw, J. (1979). Complement Selection and the Lexicon, *Linguistic Inquiry* 10.2: 270-326.
- Kratzer, A. (1996). Severing the External Argument from the Verb. In *Phrase Structure and the Lexicon*, eds. J. Rooryck and L. Zaring, 109-137, Kluwer Reidel.
- Marantz, A. (1984). *On the Nature of Grammatical Relations*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Radford, A. (1997). *Syntactic Theory and the Structure of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Svenonius, P. (2005). Extending the Extension Condition in Discontinuous Idioms. *Linguistic Variation Yearbook* 5: 227-263.