

## Lexically filled items and metaphor in idioms

Karen Sullivan  
ksull@berkeley.edu  
UC Berkeley

### 1. Goals of this talk

- To attribute the correlation between metaphor and idiomaticity to idioms' *lexical filledness*, in the sense of Fillmore et al. (1988).
- To explore three effects of lexical filledness: (1) that **some** idioms are always metaphoric ("inherently metaphoric"), (2) that **all** idioms are sometimes metaphoric, and (3) that over time, idioms can accumulate constructional meaning which mandates a metaphoric reading, even in the absence of lexical items which evoke the metaphoric target domain.

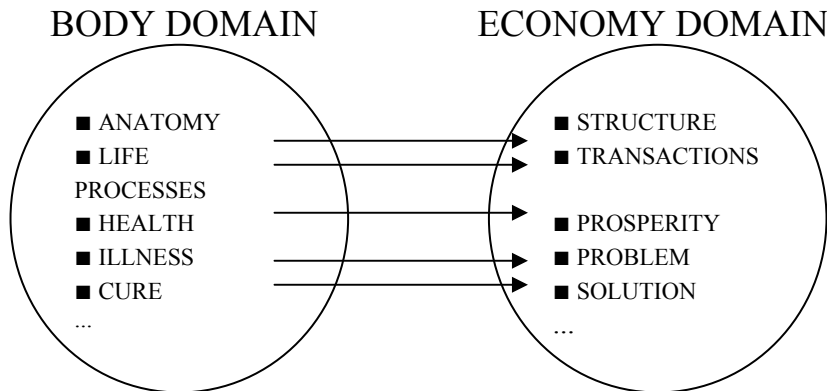
### 2. Lexical filledness in idioms

- Lexically filled/lexically specified constructions require one or more specific lexical items to evoke a particular constructional meaning. For example, the idiom *glutton for punishment* is filled by *glutton*, *for* and *punishment*.
- Lexically open constructions, like the English intransitive, draw from the complete set of English items of the appropriate grammatical classes. Any nonidiomatic intransitive construct, such as *the child somersaults* or *a steamboat crashed*, is compositionally derived from the semantics of its lexical items and the intransitive construction.

### 3. The metaphoric usage of lexical items

- Conceptual metaphor exists when structure from a source domain is mapped to a target domain (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Language is metaphorical when lexical items representing a source domain are used in a target domain context (Fass 1997, Croft 2003).

**Figure (1).** THE ECONOMY IS A BODY



- For example, the items *cure* and *ailments* refer literally to the BODY domain in (1) below; but these items refer metaphorically to the target domain ECONOMY when the surrounding items refer to the ECONOMY, as in (2) below (via THE ECONOMY IS A BODY, shown above – a special case of SOCIAL SYSTEMS ARE BODIES). Normally, lexical items can be used either literally or metaphorically.

(1) Antibiotics can **cure** a variety of **ailments**.

(2) Deregulation can **cure** a variety of economic **ailments**.  
(THE ECONOMY IS A BODY)

- Specific lexical items in a phrase usually resolve the indeterminate or ambiguous items, like *cure* and *ailments*; so for example, in (2) the subject *deregulation* and the domain adjective *economic* do not allow *cure* and *ailments* to be understood literally, but instead suggest a metaphorical illness in a metaphorical body.
- Nonidiomatic metaphoric sentences almost always involve target-domain items. In my survey of 1677 nonidiomatic metaphoric sentences in a minicorpus drawn from the British National Corpus, only 19 of these lacked explicit target domain items (see Table [1]). Almost half of these (727/1677)

sentences involved **multiple** target-domain items, as in the nonidiomatic sentence (2) (in which *deregulation* and *economic* are target-domain items).

**Table 1.** BNC mini-corpus totals.

Metaphoric sentences	Source-domain items	Target-domain items	Target/source ambiguous sentences
1677	1900	2404	19

#### 4. Inherently metaphoric idioms

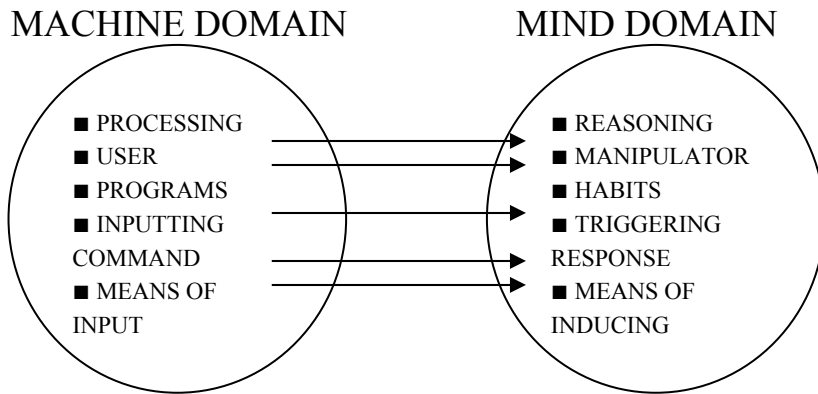
- Lexically filled items in some idioms have **only** a metaphoric interpretation. For example, *glutton* in *glutton for punishment* and *pop* in *pop the question* are always understood metaphorically, as in the (a) sentences below.

- (3) a. Marge is a **glutton for punishment**. (EXPERIENCING IS EATING)  
 b. Marge is a **glutton** at dinner parties.
- (4) a. James **popped the question** to Lily. (COMMUNICATION IS OBJECT TRANSFERAL; QUESTION FOR MARRIAGE PROPOSAL)  
 b. James **popped** the present out from under his jacket.

The literal senses of *glutton* and *popped* shown in the (b) sentences (representing the domains EATING and OBJECT TRANSFERAL), are blocked in the (a) sentences by the items *punishment* and *question* (representing EXPERIENCING and COMMUNICATION). The items *punishment* and *question* guarantee that *glutton* and *popped* will be understood metaphorically, because literally EATING *punishment* is impossible and marriage proposals are not literally OBJECTS. Idioms which combine lexically filled items from different domains will always be metaphoric.

- The idiom *push somebody's buttons* permits any genitive noun or pronoun denoting a sentient being, as in *that kind of thing always pushes **Mary's** buttons*. This idiom as a whole evokes the well-known metaphor THE MIND IS A MACHINE, shown below. Even though the genitive slot *X* in *push X's buttons* can be filled by an open set of lexical items, the idiom will always be metaphoric, like *glutton for punishment* or *pop the question*.

**Figure (2).** THE MIND IS A MACHINE



## 5. Metaphoric uses of “nonmetaphoric” idioms

■ Even “nonmetaphoric” idioms can be used in metaphor. For example, *kith and kin* (“friends and relatives”), *breathe one’s last* (“die”, via a metonymy), and *spin one’s wheels* (“be stuck”, via a metonymy) are not inherently metaphoric, as shown in the (a) sentences below. However, the contexts in the (b) sentences (referring to languages’ ORIGINS, the reform effort’s ENDING, and Office Depot’s failure to ACHIEVE A PURPOSE) nevertheless force a metaphoric interpretation.

- (5) a. He invited all his **kith and kin**.  
b. Finnish is **kith and kin** to Hungarian. (COMMON ORIGINS ARE ANCESTORS)
- (6) a. The old man **breathed his last**.  
b. The reform effort **breathed its last**. (ENDING IS DYING)
- (7) a. The truck was **spinning its wheels** in the greasy mud.  
b. Office Depot is **spinning its wheels** in a public relations battle.  
(Location Event-Structure Metaphor/ACHIEVING A PURPOSE IS REACHING A DESTINATION)

## 6. Constructional meaning and metaphor in idioms

- Some idioms can occur in sentences without explicit target-domain items:

(8) Judge, listen, I'm out on a pass. I go back inside, I'm back in for a long time.

Can't you **pull some strings**.

([www.fortunecity.com/lavender/poitier/1005/id18.htm](http://www.fortunecity.com/lavender/poitier/1005/id18.htm))

In this example, there's nothing within the *pull strings* sentence itself that tells us that the speaker does not refer to literal string-pulling.

- The idiom *pull strings* first occurred in constructions in which items evoked the target domain directly, as in (9)-(11):

(9) A king who **pulled the strings** of government so exclusively himself.

(1860-70 William Stubbs, *Seventeen lectures on the study of mediaeval and modern history*. I. i.)

(10) Persons...who **pull the strings** of the Catholic world in the city of Rome.

(1868 James Franck Bright, *Sp. Irel.* 1 Apr. I.)

(11) Some men...who **pulled the strings** that influenced the mob.

(c1880 *Our Own Country* II.)

- The idioms continue to occur predominantly in constructions with target-domain items, as in (12)-(13):

(12) The President **pulled strings** to get into the Texas Air National Guard.

([www.essentialliberties.com/archives/000828.php](http://www.essentialliberties.com/archives/000828.php))

(13) She admits on the show that Navi Rawat is her friend and that she had to **pull strings** to get her into the film.

([boards.bravotv.com/bb/showflat.php?Cat=&Number=46070&page=&view=&sb=5&o=&fpart=40](http://boards.bravotv.com/bb/showflat.php?Cat=&Number=46070&page=&view=&sb=5&o=&fpart=40))

- In the absence of explicitly target-domain items, these idioms typically occurred and continue to occur in contexts where the referent situation is either explicitly mentioned in parallel to the idiomatic expression, as in (14):

(14) I don't control the president and I don't control Donald Rumsfeld. In the end, you don't **pull strings** here. You don't have favors done.

(news.minnesota.priprod.publicradio.org/features/200205/09\_zdechlikm\_crusader/)

## **7. Conclusion**

- Idiomaticity encourages metaphor through (1) inherently metaphorical idioms, (2) metaphorical uses of other idioms; and (3) idiomatic meaning that evokes the metaphoric target domain. All of these effects are made possible by idioms' lexical filledness.

## References

- Croft, William 2003. "The role of domains in the interpretation of metaphors and metonymies". In: René Dirven and Ralf Pörings, eds., *Metaphor and Metonymy in Comparison and Contrast*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 161-206.
- Fass, Dan 1997. *Processing Metonymy and Metaphor*. Greenwich: Ablex Publishing Co.
- Fillmore, Charles, Paul Kay and Mary Catherine O'Connor 1988. "Regularity and Idiomaticity in Grammatical Constructions: The Case of *Let Alone*". *Language* 64:501-538.
- Geeraerts, Dick 2003. "The interaction of metaphor and metonymy in composite expressions". In: René Dirven and Ralf Pörings, eds., *Metaphor and Metonymy in Comparison and Contrast*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 435-468.
- Gibbs, Raymond W. 1990. "Psycholinguistic studies on the conceptual basis of idiomaticity". *Cognitive Linguistics* 1:4, 417-451.
- Gibbs, Raymond W., Josephine M. Bogdanovich, Jeffrey R. Sykes, and Dale J. Barr 1997. "Metaphor in Idiom Comprehension". *Journal of Memory and Language* 37, 141-154.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, George 1980. "Getting the whole picture: The role of mental images in semantics and pragmatics". *Proceedings of the 6th Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, Berkeley, CA: BLS: 191-195.
- Lakoff, George 1987. *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Makkai, Adam, Maxine T. Boatner and John E. Gates 2004. *Dictionary of Commonly Used American Idioms*. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc.
- Nunberg, Geoffrey, Ivan A. Sag and Thomas Wasow 1994. "Idioms". *Language* 70:3, 491-538.