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Variability of *kick the bucket*

Abstract

This paper presents two different theoretical models of idioms and illustrates how the researcher's approach determines the treatment of figurative meaning, in particular the assignment of senses to idiom components. Corpus data are used to retrieve variant forms of *kick the bucket* to assess the degree of frozenness and relate the findings to the models presented.

Keywords: idioms, decomposition, flexibility

1 Introduction: the lexicon and grammar

Idioms pose a challenge for linguistic theories, because they defy a simple description based on the coupling of compositional form with compositional meaning, and yet show some degree of compositionality and flexibility. The researcher therefore finds it hard to place idioms into either the lexicon, the repository of irregularities, or grammar, the productive mechanism of language. Two solutions suggest themselves. The division between lexicon and grammar can be retained and various mechanisms could be devised that capture the properties of idioms, or the boundary between lexicon and grammar can be eliminated. The latter option is chosen by Construction Grammar, which replaces the lexicon-grammar dichotomy with the notion of Construction (Sailer & Markantonatou 2018: v). In constructionist frameworks, idioms, words and syntactic patterns instantiate constructions of various degrees of schematicity/specificity along a continuum with no separate lexicon and grammar components. For example, *blind spot* is a lexically filled construction, and the pattern Adj + N, of which *blind spot* is a specific instantiation, is a schematic construction, but both are essentially constructions (Buerki 2016: 16). Cognitive Grammar is also viewed as a constructionist model (Croft & Cruse (2004: 278). Other theories, such as Generative Grammar, Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG), Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG) maintain a division between the lexicon and grammar, though not a sharp one, where grammar is the locus of fully productive processes, but the lexicon is no longer viewed as a simple storehouse of unproductive mechanisms, rather it includes all kinds of (semi)productive processes as well. Some researchers, such as Kuiper (2018), still adhere to the traditional view of the lexicon.

Culicover et al.'s (2017) approach lies somewhere between constructionist and generative theories. It rejects the sharp contrast between stored items and generated structure but preserves a lexicon-grammar division (Culicover et al. 2017: 2). However, the rules are

conceptualized not as traditional, procedural rules but schemas or templates that can be used to generate novel structures and “to measure the extent to which stored items in the lexicon conform to the canonical patterns of the language” (Culicover et al. 2017: 13). Idioms resemble morphologically complex words: they are stored items but their internal structure is motivated by schemas “that relate them to larger patterns in the language” (Culicover et al. 2017: 14).

Below, a brief historical background to idiom decomposition (Section 2.1) will be followed by the presentation of two idiom representation models: Cognitive Grammar and an HPSG-based model. The idiom *kick the bucket* is used to illustrate how the models treat (a specific type of) idioms. These two models represent different views of the lexicon-grammar relationship, as mentioned above. In addition, they adopt different mechanisms of representing linguistic content. The former uses symbolic drawings, while the latter prefers formalized descriptions. Section 3 will provide a detailed scrutiny of the flexibility of *kick the bucket*, while Section 4 draws some conclusions.

2 Idiom representation models

2.1 Meaningful chunks in idioms

In early generative syntax, idioms were regarded as big words without internal structure. In an attempt to explain why some idioms undergo passivization while others do not, Newmeyer (1974: 329) drew attention to the role of both the literal and figurative readings. *Pull sb’s leg*, *bury the hatchet*, *spill the beans*, *pop the question* and *burn one’s fingers* are passivizable, because 1) their literal meanings allow the passive (one’s leg can be pulled) and 2) the figurative meanings contain “passive-governing predicates” (Newmeyer 1974: 329). To illustrate the latter point, he listed the following grammatical forms: ‘someone was teased’ (*someone’s leg was pulled*), ‘peace was made’ (*the hatchet was buried*), ‘something was divulged’ (*the beans were spilled*), ‘marriage was proposed’ (*the question was popped*), ‘a bad loss was suffered’ (*someone got his fingers burned*) (Newmeyer 1974: 329–330). As opposed to the above, the idioms *kick the bucket*, *sit on pins and needles*, *shoot the bull*, *make the scene* and *blow one’s top* block the passive, because, though the literal meanings of the verbs *kick*, *sit on*, *shoot*, *make* and *blow* license the passive, the figurative meanings are one-place predicates: ‘die’, ‘wait’, ‘talk’, ‘arrive’ and ‘explode’, respectively. Since idioms were regarded as noncompositional when Newmeyer (1974) expressed his view, the figurative meaning was carried by the multiword expression as a whole. Therefore, ‘die’ could be assigned only to *kick the bucket*, ‘wait’ only to *sit on pins and needles* and so on. In contrast, in the literal, compositional interpretation, the individual components were also meaningful.

The explanatory power of Newmeyer’s hypothesis (1974) was disputed by Nunberg (1978: 120), who highlighted the insufficiency of (the transitivity of) the figurative meaning alone as the predictor of passivizability. He argued that, on the one hand, idioms such as *give up the ghost*, *throw in the sponge* and *pop the question* are equivalent to intransitive verbs (‘die’, ‘resign’ and ‘propose’), yet they can be passivized (Nunberg 1978: 120). On the other hand, a transitive verbal synonym of an idiom cannot guarantee the acceptability of the passive, as in *have a shot at ‘try’* (Nunberg 1978: 120–121). Inherent in Nunberg’s (1978) proposal is the view that the internal semantic structure of many idioms is not monolithic, but decomposable into smaller meaningful chunks which can be assigned to the idiom components.

Three classes of idioms were distinguished: 1) normally decomposable, 2) abnormally decomposable and 3) nondecomposable. In normally decomposable idioms, each constituent can be conventionally used with the given meaning in certain situations, as when *the question* refers to a marriage proposal in the context of *pop*, which refers to the act of uttering (Nunberg 1978: 128). In abnormally decomposable expressions, “we can identify the referents of their constituents” only by virtue of “our knowledge of conventional metaphors” (Nunberg 1978: 129). For example, *go to the happy hunting ground* or *go to heaven* invoke a conventional metaphor whereby we refer to the act of dying as a relation between people and the place they go to after death (Nunberg 1978: 128). It is due to this metaphorical relationship between death and a journey that we can identify the other world with the happy hunting ground or heaven, respectively. Finally, nondecomposable idioms do not have meaningful constituents. Nunberg (1978: 129) claims that only normally decomposable idioms can passivize, but while normal decomposability is a necessary condition for passivization, it is not a sufficient one. The passivizability of the verb in the idiom also depends on the passivizability of the same verb in an analogous sense outside the idiom (Nunberg 1978: 132–133). Thus, *hit the sack* contains a verb that is similar to the *hit* of *The paper I dropped hit the floor*, which is unacceptable in the passive, while the verb in *hit the jackpot* resembles the verb in *hit the answer*, *hit the lucky number* or *hit all the reasons for not going*, each of which can passivize.

Despite Nunberg’s (1978) proposal, the predominant view of idioms in the late 70s and early 80s was that the components are semantically non-autonomous, i.e. meaningless. For example, Bresnan (1982: 46–47, 83–84), working in the LFG framework, assigned the idiom *keep tabs on* to the idiomatic word *keep* in the lexicon, and also defined a semantically empty idiomatic *tabs*, which had the form *tabs* (in the technical parlance of LFG, (OBJ FORM) = _c TABS.). The stipulation of semantically empty components raises the question of how to prevent this meaningless component from occurring outside the idiom, and the solutions proposed so far are not without problems (Sailer & Markantonatou 2018: xvii).

Nunberg et al. (1994: 496–497) abandoned the threefold decomposability classification and distinguished only two types of expression: idiomatic combinations (decomposable expressions) and idiomatic phrases (nondecomposable). This might be due to the complexity of the notion of decomposability. Disagreement among native speakers is often reported in tasks of decomposability judgements (Titone & Connine 1994: 262, Libben & Titone 2008: 1116, Cserép 2012: 161, Nordmann et al. 2014: 90). The reasons proposed for this lack of agreement include the complexity and low degree of accessibility of the relevant linguistic knowledge required for decomposability classifications as well as subjectivity (Titone & Connine 1994: 262, Cieślícka 2013: 497, Nordmann et al. 2014: 90, 93–95).

2.2 Idioms in an HPSG model

Bargmann and Sailer (2018) adopt Nunberg et al.’s (1994) idea that many idiom components have semantic content and extend it to all idioms. Their motivation is partly theory-driven, partly data-driven. In terms of theory, by viewing idiom constituents as meaningful lexical entries, they aim to achieve a uniform treatment of idioms within and across languages (Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 1). Furthermore, an analysis along these lines highlights the similarity between idioms and non-idiom word strings. In both types of expressions, words combine according the standard rules of syntax and the individual words make semantic contributions to the larger expression in which they are included (Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 2). The syntactic behavior of idioms follows naturally from the meanings contributed by the

words involved and the specific constraints imposed by the syntactic construction (Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 12).

Linguistic data are also provided by the researchers to support the lexical encoding of idioms and argue against the semantic emptiness of idiom constituents. German idiom components can undergo manipulations, even when the given component is assumed to have no figurative reading. Examples (1)-(2) are taken from Bargmann & Sailer (2018: 4).

- (1) Den Löffel habe er noch nicht ab-geben wollen, ...
 the spoon has he still not on-pass want
 He didn't want to die yet, ...'
- (2) Hier wurde der Löffel ab-gegeben.
 here was the spoon on-passed
 'Someone died here.'

There seems to be no correlation between nondecomposability and syntactic frozenness in German. Bargmann and Sailer (2018: 5, 21), however, also claim that English nondecomposable expressions are not fully fixed either, though they emphasize that the variations illustrated here as (3)-(5) are admittedly rare:

- (3) When you are dead, you don't have to worry about death anymore. ... **The bucket will be kicked.**
- (4) I excitedly yet partially delusional turned to Alexandria to point out the sun as it set and all I see is eyelids and hear **logs being sawed**. Come on! I can't say too much because I wasn't far behind as I was catching flies [= sleeping] about a minute later
- (5) There was really no need for the police to have a cow, but **a cow was had**, resulting in kettling, CS gas and 182 arrests.

Working in the formalism of HPSG, Bargmann and Sailer (2018: 14) propose that the semantics of the idiomatic verb *kick* includes “a situation *s*, the predicate **die**_{id} and the formula that combines this predicate with its two arguments – one of them being the situation *s*” (see 6 below). The other components of the idiom *kick the bucket* contribute meanings that are also contributed by the verb *kick* alone: *the* denotes a variable and a quantification over this variable, while *bucket* contributes the predicate **die**_{id} and a referential variable (Bargmann and Sailer 2018: 14). The meanings of *the* and *bucket* are included in the meaning of *kick*, creating redundancy, which is ultimately eliminated (Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 15).

- (6) Redundancy-based semantic analysis of *kick the bucket* (adopted from Bargmann and Sailer 2018: 14):
- a. $kick_{id}: \langle s, \mathbf{die}_{id}; \mathbf{die}_{id}(s; \alpha); \exists s(\beta) \rangle$
 - b. $the_{id}: \langle s, \exists s(\beta) \rangle$
 - c. $bucket_{id}: \langle s, \mathbf{die}_{id}; \mathbf{die}_{id}(s; \alpha) \rangle$

The idiom variants in (3)-(5) are attested examples taken from the web, but in the absence of more detailed quantitative information, it is difficult to estimate the frequency of the given non-canonical form. Below we present corpus data that throw light on how common such

variation might be. This study is concerned only with English, other languages exemplified by Bargmann and Sailer (2018) are omitted.

2.3 Idioms in Cognitive Grammar

In Langlotz's (2006a) model, idiom components are assigned meanings based on metaphorical mappings between the literal and figurative scenarios. An idiom such as *rock the boat* evokes the figurative scenario of upsetting a stable situation (Langlotz 2006a: 117, 2006b). The literal meaning of rocking the boat is not absent; rather, it serves as a metaphorical background that links the sense 'rock' to 'upset', and 'boat' to 'stable situation' (Langlotz 2006a: 117). The literal and figurative scenarios have similar ontological structures. Both involve a force-dynamic situation whereby an agent applies force to cause a change of state in an entity (Langlotz 2006a: 117).

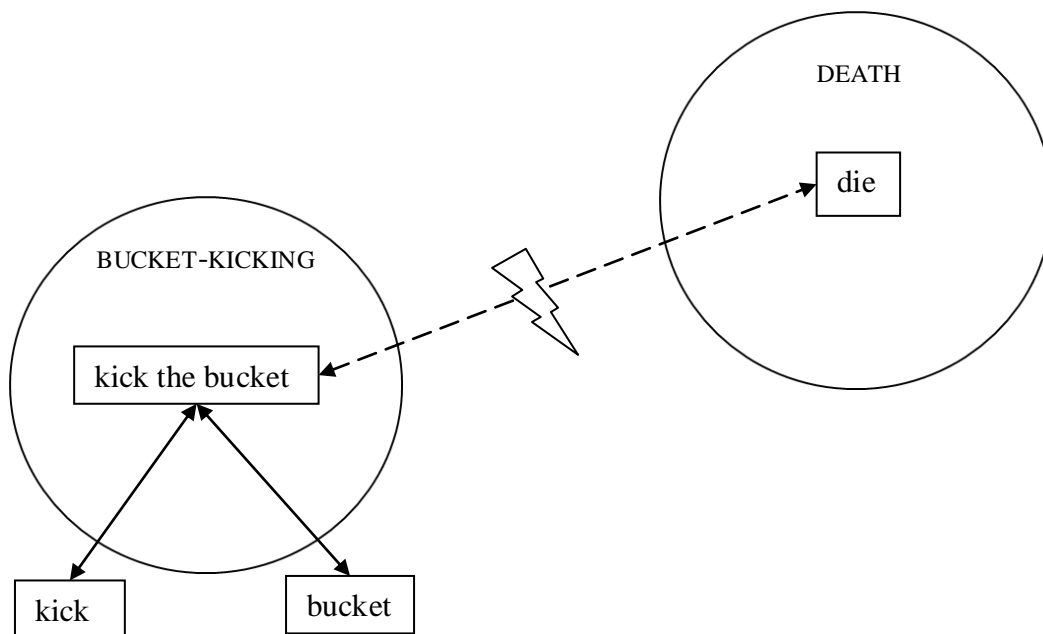


Figure 1. The semantic structure of kick the bucket (based on Langlotz 2006b)

In an opaque idiom such as *kick the bucket*, the meanings of the literal components *kick* and *bucket* cannot be mapped onto elements of the figurative sense of dying (see Figure 1). The force-dynamic construal of the literal scenario is similar to that of *rock the boat*, an agent causing a change of state (movement) in a concrete object (bucket), but the figurative scenario is construed as the “experiencer’s non-volitional, inherent change of state” (Langlotz 2006a: 117). In Figure 1, based on Langlotz (2006b), the dashed arrow shows the metaphorical mapping between the literal and figurative senses, and the lightning bolt image stands for the lack of transparency of this mapping. The double-headed arrows linking *kick the bucket* with *kick* and *bucket* show compositionality. Boxes include (semantic) units.

2.4 Variability predictions

Bargmann and Sailer's (2018) study is mainly concerned with topicalization and passivization. They regard three types of variation as challenging for an analysis that assumes semantically empty *bucket*: verbal inflection, modification of the noun and passivization, but they also note that the modifier in their example *Alex kicked the political/proverbial/goddamn/golden bucket* does not apply to the meaning of *bucket* (Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 5). Verbal inflection is not explored in their study, but topicalization and passivization are discussed in detail. Bargmann and Sailer (2018: 2) explain the behaviour of idioms as a result of the interaction of two factors: the meanings contributed by the idiom components and the semantic/pragmatic constraints imposed by the larger syntactic construction in which the idiom is embedded. Since topicalized constituents (in English) have to convey discourse-old information and make an independent semantic contribution to the clause, this manipulation is unacceptable because the meaning of *the bucket* is included in the clause (Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 10–11, 20). This follows naturally from (6) above, which shows that the semantics of *the bucket* is included in the idiom as well. Passivization is less restricted in that it requires the passive subject to be discourse-old (i.e. not the discourse-newest element) (Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 11–12, 20–21). This can account for (3) above, where the notion of death and dying is introduced in the preceding discourse. Passive subjects do not need to be referential entities, as semantically empty expletives can be found in the passive (*There was believed to be another worker at the site besides the neighbors who witnessed the incident*) (Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 11).

In the cognitive model, the unavailability of separate figurative senses of *kick* and *bucket* is supposed to constrain the syntactic flexibility of the idiom. Operations depending on meaningful components such as article variation, pluralization of the noun, modification of the noun in the idiom and passive are not expected to occur (Langlotz 2006a: 227). In fact, the semantic content of the idiom constituent is only one facet of the complex semantic structure of idioms. Lack of decomposability is not the only factor blocking variation. Flexibility is also restricted by the degree of motivation and various constraints related to recognisability and well-formedness (Langlotz 2006a: 215–223). One of these factors is compatibility, the requirement that any manipulation of the form of an idiom should be in accordance with the idiomatic meaning (Langlotz 2006a: 221). This accounts for the unacceptability of *is kicking the bucket*, since it can only have an iterative reading, and repetitive dying does not make sense (Langlotz 2006a: 221). Similarly, Langlotz (2006a: 221, 302) argues that the simple present often denotes habitual events, a use that is not likely to occur when the idiom has a singular subject, except for *when*-clauses. Glucksberg (2001: 84) also notes that the idiom requires a durative interpretation, but *kick the bucket* is a discrete process; therefore, *he lay kicking the bucket for a week* cannot be interpreted figuratively. The passive defocuses the agent participant and reverses the figure-ground alignment of the prototypical active transitive clause (Langacker 1987: 351–352, 1991: 336–337). It highlights the less energetic participant (patient) (Langlotz 2006a: 250). Langlotz (2006a: 251) considers semantic autonomy of the noun as a necessary prerequisite to passivization. Glucksberg (2001: 84) also finds the passive unlikely, as it does not serve any communicative purpose.

3 Kick the bucket

3.1 Introductory remarks

Variants of *kick the bucket* were searched in the *News on the Web (NOW)* corpus, consisting of 7.3 billion words at the time of data collection. The corpus contains texts from web-based newspapers and magazines from the period between 2010 and the present. The texts cover a range of English varieties from 20 countries. All examples of *kick* in various inflectional forms were retrieved within a span of 5 words to the left or right of *bucket/buckets*. Some instances proved to be metalinguistic or denoted literal bucket-kicking, these were omitted. Occasionally, the phrase is found within a string of synonyms of *die* as an allusion to, or excerpt from, Monty Python's well-known parrot sketch, in which a customer is complaining about the untimely end of a parrot he has recently bought from a pet shop. Instances such as (7) are not regarded as metalinguistic uses. They are part and parcel of cultural knowledge that is often required to interpret figurative utterances.

- (7) Is metabolic processes are now' istory!' E's off the twig!' E's **kicked the bucket!**' E's shuffled off' is mortal coil, run down the curtain, and joined the bleedin' choir invisible! (14-09-13 GB, The Guardian)

Eight occurrences show semantic variation in that the meaning conveyed is not the intransitive dictionary sense of 'die' or 'cease', but a transitive sense paraphrasable as 'kill/destroy/put an end to'. They evoke the image of kicking over a bucket (an image that is different from the one evoked by the idiom) or the metaphor of death by hanging (8-10).

- (8) Whilst it made the anti death penalty lobby stand up and roar in unison their vehement opposition to President Sirisena's new change of heart and new fangled creed to **kick the bucket** kept under the feet of those sentenced to swing and make them dangle on the rope with their necks throttled in its noose, the President's declaration received a response of support from a most unexpected quarter. (18-08-18 LK, The Sunday Times Sri Lanka)
- (9) We don't know if they'll tell us to take the vines out," she said. "We've invested thousands of dollars into this, and we're just about to retire." # "They just want to **kick the bucket** out from under us," Dave Gomez said.¹ (14-08-25 US, Los Angeles Times)
- (10) We are happy occasionally. Most of the time we are either preparing or pretending to be happy. The art of dying is to prepare ourselves in this lifetime to **kick the bucket** of the ego. God plus ego is man. Man minus ego is god. (16-07-06 IN, The New Indian Express)

Examples (8) and (10) contain postmodifiers of the noun, while (9) shows a particle added to the verb *kick*. The literal scenario in (8) is that of a person about to be hanged, and the bucket is the object that prevents death. This metaphor implies a correspondence between bucket and whatever preserves a desirable situation and prevents its end; more specifically, the absence of the death penalty from the criminal code. The context is about a president who announces his intention to restore the death penalty, the expression therefore contributes to the cohesive

¹ The double cross in the corpus text stands for the beginning of a new paragraph in the original.

ties in the discourse and introduces some degree of punning. The metaphor is extended in the postmodifying *-ing* clause and the next clause, further reinforcing cohesion. (9) also evokes the image of hanging, and the bucket is mapped onto circumstances that enable people like Dave Gomez to pursue vine growing and prosper. Kicking the bucket is mapped onto removing the favorable circumstances.

The expression in (10) denotes a bucket-kicking scenario in the literal reading, while the idiomatic interpretation is that of destroying the ego in us. The context suggests that this destruction is both abstract and physical. The PP *of the ego* functions as an appositive, specifying the interpretation of *bucket*, i.e. *kick the bucket of the ego* can be interpreted as ‘kill/destroy the ego’. Such appositive uses of *of*-PPs are not uncommon, and they are typically found with decomposable idioms (Langlotz 2006: 263-264).

The contexts in (8)-(9) clarify that bucket-kicking is part of a hanging scenario, but the literal reading of (10) is less clear. Although the origin of *kick the bucket* is not known, the most likely explanation relates it to the slaughtering of pigs. *Bucket* referred to the beam from which pigs were suspended by their heels (Ammer 1997: 234). Another widespread explanation mentions suicide, where the person about to kill themselves stands on a bucket. (Ruhl 1975: 3) The latter is probably more widely used by speakers to find an underlying metaphor and could motivate (10). Note that conceptualizing putting an end to something in terms of kicking the bucket under a person hanging implies some degree of similarity between the two conceptualizations. In the literal reading, a participant performs an action (kicking) that affects the bucket and indirectly also affects (causes the death of) another participant. In the figurative reading of (8), the president’s restoration of the death penalty affects the legal situation and also indirectly causes death. In (9), action on the part of the authorities directly affects vine growing and indirectly causes the financial ruin of vine growers. Since the meaning in (8-10) carries a causative idea, whereby an agent causes the end of a theme participant, these examples are excluded from the statistics in Table 1, which presents *kick the bucket* in the idiomatic sense ‘die/cease to function’.

Form	Frequency	Frequency (%)
<i>kick the ADJ bucket</i>	16	2.28
<i>kick DET bucket</i>	6	0.85
<i>kick the N bucket</i>	4	0.57
<i>kick the bucket of NP</i>	3	0.43
<i>kicking the bucket N</i>	2	0.28
<i>kick DET buckets</i>	2	0.28
<i>kick the bucket N</i>	1	0.14
<i>kick the buckets</i>	1	0.14
<i>the ADJ bucket he’s kicking</i>	1	0.14
<i>DET bucket is kicked</i>	1	0.14
<i>with DET bucket kicked</i>	1	0.14
<i>The only “it” they should have kicked was “the bucket”</i>	1	0.14
Pronominalization	1	0.14
Total variation	40	5.69
Total instances	703	100

Table 1. Variant occurrences of *kick the bucket* in the NOW Corpus

3.2 *Premodifiers*

The most common type of variation is the insertion of an adjective before the idiomatic noun. Attributive adjectives, however, can modify the whole expression, rather than semantically modifying the head noun (Ernst 1980, Stathi 2007, McClure 2011). They are licensed even when the noun has no figurative sense. Most adjectives in the corpus are not genuine modifiers of the noun *bucket*: domain delimiters (*In dying as author the writer kicks the financial bucket as well...*) are interpreted semantically as adverbials, whereas expressives (*...just waiting to kick the fucking bucket*) intensify the whole expression. Metalinguistic adjectives (*...a list of things you want to do before you kick the proverbial bucket*) signal the specialized interpretation of the given expression. The other premodified items are listed below:

- (11) If having a passionate affair is something you want to tick off your bucket list before you kick **the same bucket**, you should first read the cautionary tale of Dido and Aeneas in Book 4 of Virgil's Aeneid. (18-12-27 AU, The Australian Financial Review)
- (12) I still don't know why this guy isn't dead already. Because he's got a cool flaming sword? I think we're all waiting for the day when Beric **kicks the final bucket**, and this season is going to be it. (18-11-16 US, Gizmodo)
- (13) Why all of the arguments in favour of vegetarianism, arguments with which I had long agreed, suddenly coalesced and inspired me to **kick the carnivorous bucket** – but, there we are, they did. (10-06-29 GB, Independent)
- (14) Here's an outfit, set up in 1986, which – assailed by animal-rights protests down the years and ensnared by health-and-safety strictures – should probably have **kicked the glitter-packed bucket** ages ago. (11-03-30 GB, Telegraph.co.uk)
- (15) Cryogenicists at The University Hospital at Newark, N.J., preserved Mr. Hake's body in low temperature, and will attempt to resuscitate him in July, just ahead of the movie's release. # “Yeah, I mean, there's no guarantee,” said Dr. Sanjuanita Perkins, head of cryonics and cryopreservation research at The University Hospital at Newark. “In fact, he'll probably **kick the ole bucket**. This stuff is just theory and experiments right now.” (11-12-20 US, Huffington Post (satire))
- (16) Because even the mighty crowd-surfing, knee-sliding, curfew-busting Bruce Springsteen (born 1949) is statistically likely to **kick the sweaty, all-American bucket** eventually. (18-05-16 AU, The Australian Financial Review)
- (17) If you need a refresher on who's **kicked the Westerosi bucket**,... (17-05-29 AU, Gizmodo Australia)
- (18) I used to say I'll be dead by 40, and then when I got to 49 and three-quarters, I thought, maybe not, maybe I'll be dead by 50,” he says. “They're gonna have to shoot me to put me out.” Even if the word “memoirs” alludes to something nearing its end, this batshit-crazy man is very much alive. **The only bucket** he's kicking is the one flying toward your head. (14-11-19 US, Consequence of Sound)

Same in (11) metalinguistically refers back to the *bucket* of *bucket list*. The adjective in (11) is interpreted adverbially ('finally dies'). The character called Beric having been reanimated, this interpretation makes sense. *Westerosi* in (17) is a domain delimiter referring to location. *Carnivorous* in (13) is what McClure (2011: 4) calls "hypallage" or "epithet transfer": the modifier applies to another (pro)noun (*I/me*), not the one that it is syntactically attached to (*bucket*). Such transferred epithets can be found in (14) and (16). The context for (14) is the circus, and the adjective *glitter-packed* seems to describe a property of this form of entertainment. *Sweaty* and *all-American* in (16) apply to Bruce Springsteen. (18) is a pun, a creative manipulation of the idiom. Creative variants admit operations that are normally illicit. The focusing adjective *only* does modify *bucket*, but the expression is deliberately ambiguous. The context "primes" the meaning 'die', but the literal reading is also foregrounded. It may be an allusion to Ozzy Osbourne's regular act of throwing buckets of water onto the crowd.² In addition to the adjective, a relative clause is attached to the noun *bucket*, which is unusual with nondecomposable idioms, and the subsequent context shows pronominalization of *bucket*, though the antecedent of the pronoun is the literal *bucket*. Finally, the use of *ole* in (15) is not likely to be a transferred epithet of Mr Hake, as the broader context claims that he is 24 years old. Interestingly, Nunberg (1978: 129) gives *ol'* and *proverbial* as possible modifiers of *bucket*. According to the online *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, *old* (or the alternative spelling *ol'*) can be used as an intensifier (*Come back any old time. Don't give me any ol' excuse.*) or can express affection or familiarity (*good ol' Sam*). It functions in (15) as an expressive, conveying the writer's emotional state.

Some instances with nominal premodification have also been found.

- (19) Nonetheless, fans are still expecting Iron Man to **kick the iron bucket** at some stage in the near future. (18-11-10 GB, The Independent)
- (20) Just about every second person I know, of late, seems to have been through a long, drawn-out cat death. The vets have ummed and ahed over the moggy and kept it going and going at great harrowing expense and pain, when really it **should have kicked** the kitty litter **bucket** weeks ago. (18-07-01 NZ, Stuff.co.nz)
- (21) The 3000+ member group aimed to protect Salom?, whose ship would be (in part) piloted by sci-fi author Drew Wagar, writer of *Elite: Dangerous* tie-in novel *Reclamation*. Whether Salom? lived or died, Wagar's next book would reflect that, immortalising the player who did the deed, if she **kicked the space bucket**. (17-05-01 AU, Kotaku Australia)
- (22) Hallucinating, Balboa discerns a vision of his gnarly, weather-beaten trainer, although Mickey **kicked the spit bucket** two whole movies ago. (15-12-31 AU, Sydney Morning Herald)

These nominal premodifiers, as the adjectives above, serve to link the idiom to the discourse context. As Moon (1998: 284) claims, metaphorical expressions are lexically incongruent, but they may be made more coherent. *Space* in (21) is a domain delimiter, equivalent to "if she kicked the bucket in space". *Iron* in (19) is a transferred epithet that applies to Iron Man. The

² <https://www.factinate.com/people/42-wild-facts-oszy-osbourne/>

modifier *kitty litter* ties the idiom to the topic of the discourse through referring to, if not a property of cats, an object closely associated with cats: a kitty litter bucket. It is a playful variant which requires the simultaneous literal reading of *kitty litter bucket* and the figurative interpretation of *kick the bucket*. Finally, (22) is a reference to one of the *Rocky* movies. *Spit* has the same function as *kitty litter* in (20): it is interpreted literally in reference to an object typically used in boxing, the spit bucket, while Mickey's death is expressed with the idiom. Both *kitty litter bucket* and *spit bucket* are metonymically related to the respective topics.

Except for (15), none of the examples discussed requires the assumption that *bucket* has an independent meaning at the figurative level. Some examples have a decidedly playful flavor, with the premodifier ensuring cohesion in the text.

3.3 Determiners

The definite article in the idiom is occasionally replaced by other determiners.

- (23) Assisted suicide is a compassionate way out. You can have the last four weeks of your life in a morphine-induced-haze if you want, I wouldn't dare take that right away from you. # I, however, think I'll spare my loved ones the horror, **kick** my own **bucket** coherently, and let my family get on with celebrating my life and remembering the man I was. (17-01-18 CA, The Sarnia Journal)
- (24) North America specialists, American Holidays, has come up with a top ten list of things you really should see before it's time to **kick** your **bucket**. (17-03-04 IE, Dublin People)
- (25) ...which contained his memorable contributions to their irresistible covers of "Guns Of Navarone" and "Longshot **Kick De Bucket**". (15-09-07 GB, The Independent)
- (26) It will be the last time to see them together before they pass on, before they cease to be. Before they **kick** their **buckets**, shuffle off their mortal coils, run down their curtains and join their bleeding choirs invisible (metaphorically that is, not literally). (14-04-24 GB, The Guardian)
- (27) ...after he posted a message on Sunday that read: "#WhiteGenocide Would rape every 13yr old white girl after Mandela finally **kick** that **bucket**. Just for control". (13-07-11 ZA, Independent Online)
- (28) I understand your pain. You spent months praying and believing he is dead. All of a sudden he shows up. A beg take am easy o before you sef **kick bucket**. He is alive and getting well, sorry. (17-07-24 NG, THISDAY Newspapers)
- (29) With competition in full force and consumers moving the stick hard, broadcasters surely did not want to **kick** their **buckets** soon. (10-01-14 IN, Indiantelelevision.com)
- (30) 300 Hundred **Kick Bucket** in Mass Protest. (15-12-08 US, Huffington Post)
- (31) Rivers died in September, aged 81. And with her **bucket kicked**, the world became that bit dimmer. (15-01-02 GB, Spiked)

- (32) Constantine is a weary, dapper, neo-noir demon-hunting chainsmoker who carries the unfortunate burden of knowing that, when his **bucket's kicked**, he's going down, not up. (12-05-02 GB, Den Of Geek)

The canonical definite article is dropped in (28) and (30). The former is taken from a reader's comment made on an online article. The specific variety is Nigerian English, which may explain the oddness of the sentence. (30) is an invented example imitating the style of newspaper headlines. Article omission in headlines is very common with all types of idioms, even when the noun is semantically empty. The alternant in (25) is a song title by a Jamaican band, and *de* reflects the Jamaican English pronunciation of the article.

The other examples defy an elegant explanation. Six items contain a possessive pronoun (23, 24, 26, 29, 31, 32), and one example has *that* (27). In the Cognitive Grammatical framework briefly sketched in 2.3, articles are used with meaningful idiomatic nouns in essentially the same way as outside idioms (Langlotz 2006: 229–245). However, *bucket* does not have a figurative reading. Notice that the semantic structure of the intransitive use of the idiom is different from the transitive use, discussed in 3.1. Since the kicking-the-bucket literal scenario now corresponds to the event of dying, the agent and theme participants coalesce into an experiencer participant in the figurative reading. Isomorphism is lost. For many speakers, the idiom is opaque. Some degree of transparency may be achieved through remotivating the expression by conceptualizing a hanging scenario, a kind of suicide, since the kicker of the bucket is the same person as the one standing on it. To what extent this may be sufficient for some speakers to assign a figurative sense to *bucket*, something like 'life', and interpret *kick* as 'get rid of' needs testing. The variants do not have characteristics of wordplay, there seems to be nothing humorous about (24) or (29), so that article replacement cannot be attributed to the idiosyncratic behavior of creative puns.

One reason for the alternation in (26) might be the repeated occurrence of the V + possessive pronoun + plural noun structure in the context. The phrases *shuffle off their mortal coils*, *run down their curtains* and *join their bleeding choirs invisible* all conform to the same pattern, which may have created a desire in the writer to maintain parallelism. This is only possible if the idiom is creatively adapted by replacing the canonical determiner and putting *bucket* in the plural form.

3.4 Plural

The plural *buckets* occurs three times. Two of the instances have been given above in (26) and (29). The third instance is (33). There is no motivation for the plural form.

- (33) With life expectancy of 80 for males and 85 for females, this will translate to a deficient withdrawal of \$12,984 for each male and \$8,176 for each female when they depart for their happy hunting grounds. More if they **kick the buckets** earlier than 80 and 85 respectively. (16-08-05 SG, The Independent)

3.5 Attributive use

The idiom is used as a premodifier of a noun in three examples.

- (34) He even organised a gathering with his loved ones in July, which he proudly called his '**kicking the bucket** party'. (18-10-09 GB, Oxford Mail)

- (35) In 2012, she established the first **Kicking the Bucket** Festival, in Oxford, with a host of events... (17-09-19 GB, Swindon Advertiser)
- (36) **Kick the bucket** list # January 12, 2017 - 5:00am # KAMLOOPS -- Bucket lists have a grim quality about them. (17-01-11 CA, CFJC Today Kamloops)

This use does not require the meaningfulness of *bucket*. The party in (34) and the festival in (35) centre around death.

3.6 *Postmodification*

The only example that contains a relative clause is the creative alternant in (18). Three instances have *of*-PPs, which typically function as complements or postmodifiers. In (37)-(39), however, they do not form a syntactic unit with the noun.

- (37) As indicated by reports, two kids who were going with their mom to a marriage **kicked the bucket** of thirst and the mother discovered oblivious a kilometer far from the kid's dead bodies. (16-05-03 IN, FitnHit.com)
- (38) Specialists a year ago said they effectively performed a comparative system on a man in Barcelona with lymphoma, however he **kicked the bucket** of the growth not long after and they were not able to confirm whether the vanishing of the infection was long haul. (15-10-26 SG, The Indian Talks)
- (39) West Bengal kept on reeling under serious heatwave as a taxicab driver **kicked the bucket** of a suspected heatstroke on Saturday taking the toll to four since Friday. (15-05-23 SG, The Indian Talks)

The *of*-PP expresses the cause of death, just as with the verb *die*. These examples can be taken as evidence in favor of the unanalyzable, holistic nature of the idiom. *Kicked the bucket* is replaceable by *died* in each context and takes an *of*-complement. The idiom is used in its canonical form.

3.7 *Passive*

The passive is assumed to be acceptable only with decomposable idioms (Langlotz 2006: 252-253, Nunberg 1978: 129). The passive in (32), repeated here as (40), is therefore unexpected.

- (40) Constantine is a weary, dapper, neo-noir demon-hunting chainsmoker who carries the unfortunate burden of knowing that, when **his bucket's kicked**, he's going down, not up. (12-05-02 GB, Den Of Geek)

Passivization and topicalization are two operations explored by Bargmann and Sailer (2018). Topicalized forms have not been attested in the corpus. Bargmann and Sailer (2018: 11, 20–21) argue that passive subjects must refer to old information in the discourse, something that has been mentioned earlier in the text. In Cognitive Grammar, the passive presupposes semantic content of the idiom's noun, since it only makes sense to foreground the theme if it

is referential (Langlotz 2006: 250–253). Foregrounding the theme and backgrounding the agent are also involved in (31), repeated here as (41).

- (41) Sadly, Rivers died in September, aged 81. And with **her bucket kicked**, the world became that bit dimmer. (15-01-02 GB, Spiked)

The past participle *kicked* evokes the same change in focus as (39). However, since *bucket* cannot be assigned a figurative sense, the noncanonical form is odd. Passivization is less constrained in German, where semantically empty nouns seem to be able to take part in the process (Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 17–20).

3.8 *The only “it” they should have kicked was “the bucket”*

The variant in (41) is taken from an article with the title *The 123 Worst Musicians of All Time*.

- (41) A TRIBE CALLED QUEST # Every Tribe song sounds like the hardest quest involved was how to get from one end of a hopscotch game to the other. The only “it” they **should have kicked** was “**the bucket**.” (14-11-19 US, Consequence of Sound)

The particular form of the idiom makes an allusion to one of the band’s songs *Can I kick it?* It is an ambiguous example that requires simultaneous literal and figurative interpretation, just as (18), (20) or (22). The literal scenario specifies the object that *it* can refer to, a bucket, and the figurative reading expresses the author’s evaluation of the band: they should have abandoned their career as singers.

3.9 *Pronominalization*

Since the search syntax included both components of the idiom within a short distance of each other, pronominal forms could not be systematically captured. A single instance was found in the broader context of the expression in (42).

- (42) I suspect her son has been waiting for a long time now he has grown impatient as he realise that he is not getting any young and the old lady is not prepared to **kick the bucket**, he decided to help her so he can chuw something before he too **kick it**, 65 yrs and still living with mommy... (12-11-06 ZA, Sowetan)

This is especially interesting, as the replacement of an idiomatic noun by a pronoun is considered to be a sign of the meaningfulness of the noun. Nunberg et al. (1994: 501–502) argue that pronoun substitution is possible, if the noun has an interpretation of its own. They disagree with Bresnan (1982) on the analysis of *keep tabs on* (see Section 2.1), claiming that *tabs* is not semantically empty and providing examples where *tabs* is replaced by *they/them*.

3.10 *Summary*

It is important to emphasize the quantitative aspect at this point. A total of 703 occurrences of *kick the bucket* have been extracted from the corpus, of which 40 instances, a mere 5.69 per cent, exhibit the noncanonical form. The idiom therefore has a high degree of fixedness. Many of the variants can be accounted for without the need to presuppose the meaningfulness

of *bucket* in the idiomatic reading. Most premodifiers and attributive uses are perfectly acceptable. Some alternation is the result of specific register requirements, such as the dropping of the article in (30), others occur in ambiguous uses, creative manipulations that are best considered humorous wordplay. Variants that are unexpected in the cognitive framework and run counter to the assumptions of the model are (23), (24), (26), (27), (28), (29), (31/41), (32/40), (33) and (42); altogether 10 instances, which is 1.4% of all occurrences.

Section 2.4 presented some predictions concerning the flexibility of *kick the bucket*. Corpus data confirm the infrequency of topicalization and passivization. The simple present does occur with singular subjects, especially in subordinate clauses of time or condition (43), as well as after *hope* (44), where the simple present replaces the future, or in plot summaries, narratives (45) and news headlines (46), where it stands for the past.

- (43) We will part only when one of us **kicks** the **bucket**. (19-01-20 PH, GineersNo)
- (44) God help the people of his country and we hope he **kicks** the **bucket** soon and maybe only then change may come. (17-02-20 NG, Bella Naija)
- (45) She falls in love with Ted, but later **kicks** the **bucket**. (19-01-08 KE, Tuko.co.ke)
- (46) Bawumia's press secretary **kicks** the **bucket** # Mr Kwabena Boadu, in his mid 30s was found dead in the bathroom at Jam Guest House at about 0630 hours. (16-11-25 ZA, IGN Africa)

However, some corpus examples do not have a habitual interpretation:

- (47) Every Canadian paddler should have the Hayes River on his bucket list, arguably the most significant fur-trade water route in Canadian history. But paddling the Hayes River to York Factory doesn't need to be the place where you **kick** the **bucket**. (17-08-31 CA, CBC.ca)
- (48) How does a giant corporation like Pontiac, or even a small industry newbie like Fisker, just up and **kick** the **bucket**? (16-08-25 ZA, Independent Online)
- (49) Here, customised sofas, office chairs and shopping-trolleys are deployed as pretend-vehicles while hand-held picture-frames conjure a TV-addicted world in which fame is all that counts and snack-guzzling viewers get to decide who **kicks** the **bucket** on Death Row. (11-02-08 GB, Telegraph.co.uk)

The progressive is rare. It is found in (50)-(52). The plural subject in (50) implies repetitiveness, whereas in (51) and (52) the progressive refers to some imminent future event, rather than a durative process in the present.

- (50) ...for example, advising you how rapidly your group's healers are **kicking** the **bucket** in battles and foreseeing when adversaries' definitive capacities might be prepared. (18-09-21 PK, RS-Tec)

- (51) Obasanjo's bombshell and the shaky Buhari presidency # It is hard to believe that President Muhammadu Buhari's presidency may just be **kicking the bucket** sooner than expected. (18-01-24 NG, Ripples Nigeria)
- (52) According to BGR, sources reveal something brewing from within the Cupertino company's end. A potential discontinuation of the iPad Mini is plausible with the tablet failing to live up to the hype. However, only the iPad Mini namesake could be **kicking the bucket**. (17-05-20 AU, International Business Times AU)

4 Conclusion

Corpus data show that *kick the bucket* is predominantly used in its canonical form. The non-occurrence of topicalization and the extremely low frequency of the passive and pronominalization reduce the strength of Bargmann and Sailer's (2018) argument. It has to be admitted that variation is not impossible, but the quantitative perspective suggests that *bucket* can be treated as a semantically "empty" noun.

Nunberg's (1978) and Nunberg et al.'s (1994) hypothesis of attributing meaning to idiom components is based on metaphorical correspondences. Research into conceptual metaphors has revealed a large number of metaphorical mappings that link literal and figurative scenarios, called "source domain" and "target domain", respectively. The literal reading is usually related to a concrete, physical domain that can often be perceived with the senses, while the figurative sense is more abstract, less easily perceptible (Kövecses 2010: 17–29). Emotions such as happiness or sadness, for example, are usually conceptualized in terms of substances or objects (Csillag 2016, Csillag 2017). This metaphor-driven meaning assignment typical of cognitive approaches to idioms is replaced by a formalized view using operators and variables by Bargmann and Sailer (2018). This paper has shown how the researcher's theoretical persuasion can determine meaning assignment to idiom chunks. Attaching the sense *die*_{id} to both *kick* and *bucket* is possible in the HPSG framework, but this step seems to be unsubstantiated in cognitive theories, as far as the English language is concerned.

An additional factor that could have contributed to Bargmann and Sailer's (2018) model is the interdependence of decomposition (meaning assignment) and compositionality. Researchers often use the two terms synonymously, since the availability of idiom components with independent senses entails a combination of the same words during production. Meaning assignment, however, is based on the ability of speakers to recognize the contribution of components to the whole (a process associated with comprehension), while compositionality pertains to the regularity of compositional relationships, i.e. "the degree to which the value of the whole is predictable from the values of its parts" Langacker (1987: 448).

The various linguistic models can differ not only in the specific mechanisms assumed to work but also in how the researcher approaches the data. As Sailer and Markantonatou (2018: xxii) remind us, formalized frameworks, such as HPSG, are concerned with what is possible, rather than with what is normal and usual. Although Bargmann and Sailer (2018) rely on attested corpus examples, the ratio between canonical and noncanonical forms is not explored in detail. It might sound a little unfair that criticism comes from a researcher with priorities and assumptions about language that are different from those of Bargmann and Sailer (2018). Cognitive Grammar views meaning as conceptualization and is usage based in attaching importance to the frequency of (naturally occurring) examples. Nevertheless, assigning semantic content redundantly, as Bargmann and Sailer (2018) do, by attaching the sense 'die'

to *bucket* runs counter to the spirit of Nunberg's (1978) original proposal of meaning assignment.

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