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Tanulmány

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A Historical Perspective

Abstract

The paper takes as a starting point Hamblin and Gibbs ‘s (1999) claim that *kick* alone already had the sense ‘die’ before it was used in the idiom *kick the bucket*, and this may be the case with verbs in other nondecomposable expressions. The idioms provided by Hamblin and Gibbs (1999) are examined for attestations in *OED* and the dates are compared with the dates of matching meanings of the verbs to see whether the verb with the same sense emerged before the idiom. The verb is considered to have a matching sense if it is the same as the holistic sense of the expression (where this sense cannot be distributed over the components) or the sense of the verbal part of the idiom (where the idiom is decomposable). It has been found that the verbs of some idioms (typically decomposable expressions) emerged in a matching sense before the idiom appeared. *Kick the bucket* is exceptional, since the verbs of nondecomposable idioms do not have senses closely related to the idiomatic meaning.

Keywords: idioms, metaphors, nondecomposable, meaning development, historical semantics

1 Introduction

In their study, Hamblin and Gibbs (1999) examined native speakers’ preferences of idiom definitions as well as contexts. The definitions differed with respect to the manner in which the action of the idiom was performed. For example, one of the definitions of *get the picture* was “to quickly understand a situation”, while the other definition was “to slowly understand a situation” (Hamblin & Gibbs 1999: 29). Similarly, two contexts were provided in the form of stories that differed in the preferred interpretation of idioms. One story for *kick the bucket* illustrated the consistent condition of someone dying quickly or immediately, while the other story showed the inconsistent condition of someone dying slowly or gradually (Hamblin and Gibbs 1999: 31). Both the definitions and contexts were judged to be more appropriate when they were congruent with the manner implied by the literal meaning of the idiom’s verb (Hamblin & Gibbs 1999: 34).[1]

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[1] In addition to definitions and contexts, variant idiom forms with a substituted verb were also examined (Hamblin and Gibbs 1999: 31–33).

kick the bucket	give the ax
throw in the towel	hit the road
chew the fat	cook your goose
turn over a new leaf	get the picture
break the ice	face the music
shed some light	pull someone's leg
rock the boat	

Table1. Idioms examined by Hamblin and Gibbs (1999)

Table 1 shows Hamblin and Gibbs's (1999: 36) expressions. What is interesting about their finding is that the idioms investigated are claimed to be nondecomposable, which means that the idiomatic sense is carried by the expression as a whole, and therefore the words, including the verb, do not have senses of their own in the figurative reading. If an idiom is nondecomposable, no part of the idiomatic meaning can be attached to the individual words comprising the idiom.[2] It would not be plausible to assume that *kick* or *bucket* conveys the sense 'die', or the sense 'quickly'. However, even if the idiom component is not individually meaningful in the figurative reading, it can contribute semantic content to the overall idiomatic sense. More specifically, the verb in the idioms listed in Table 1 contributes part of the literal meaning that denotes the manner of action.

In exploring the issue further, Hamblin and Gibbs (1999: 34) ask whether the manner sense that is shared by the literal and figurative readings originates in the verb and is then carried over to the expression, or vice versa, is originally assigned to the idiom and is later attached to the verb. They argue that the former is the case:

> One question that still remains is whether people think that *kick the bucket* means "to die quickly" because they assume that to *kick* something means to do so quickly or because they first learn that *kick the bucket* means "to die quickly" and only then assume that the verb *kick* must mean to do so quickly. The data from our norming study address this issue and suggest the former explanation. In this study, the main verbs from idioms were consistently rated to be more likely performed in a certain was as opposed to another. (Hamblin & Gibbs 1999: 34)

Hamblin and Gibbs (1999: 34) continue with a confusing illustration:

> Furthermore, an informal analysis of our main stimuli using *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Murray, Bradley, Craigie, & Onions, 1989) showed that most of the verbs we studied were in use with these specific meanings before the idioms in which they appear were first cited (although the dates for some of our experimental verbs could not be found) For example, the verb *kick* first appeared in the language with the meaning of "to die" in 1858 while the entire idiom *kick the bucket* did not appear until 1890. This pattern also exists for *throw in the towel, turn over a new leaf, shed some light*, and *hit the road*. For each of these idioms, their verbs existed with the specific meaning conveyed in that idiom before the entire idiom first appeared in the language. (Hamblin & Gibbs 1999: 34)

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[2] The concept of decomposability is defined and interpreted in slightly different ways in the literature. My view is consistent with Nunberg's (1978: 125), Geeraerts's (1995: 61) and Langacker's (1987: 93) approaches. Some other researchers highlight the contribution of the literal meanings of the constituents to the idiomatic meaning (cf. Nordmann et al. 2014: 88), thus restricting the notion to the literal level and essentially equating decomposability with compositionality.

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Up until the end of the first quotation above, the “specific meanings” of the verbs that the authors refer to are to be interpreted by the reader as the literal meanings, more precisely, parts of the literal meanings such as ‘quickly’ or ‘slowly’. This would offer a natural explanation as to why parts of the literal senses are contributed to the figurative reading, since it makes sense to assume that idiom components are the same ordinary lexical items that can be found in the mental lexicon of speakers or dictionaries of the language, and an idiom is formed out of these lexical items. It is therefore not surprising that the lexical items contribute some part of their literal sense to the figurative meaning when source domain scenarios are mapped onto target domain scenarios. Yet, the second quote, which directly follows the first one above, illustrates the figurative sense of the verb, not the literal meaning. It claims that 1) *kick* has a figurative sense (‘to die’), and 2) the verb was already used in this figurative sense before the idiom arose. This explanation may support Hamblin and Gibbs’s (1999: 34) claim that the “meaning of the verb itself is somehow dominant or primary to the entire idiomatic expression”, but it is less appropriate as an illustration of the contribution of the literal meaning of the verb.

Nevertheless the idea that the verb of a nondecomposable idiom can have a figurative sense that matches the meaning of the idiom when used outside the idiomatic expression is worth examining. Can the verbs included in the idioms in Table 1 convey matching figurative senses on their own? Did these senses appear before the idiom emerged? To answer these questions, the *Oxford English Dictionary* was consulted. Instead of Hamblin and Gibbs’s (1999: 34) “informal analysis” and the second edition of *OED*, a systematic inspection was carried out using the third edition (available online).

Although Hamblin and Gibbs (1999: 28) say that all their idioms were rated as nondecomposable “in earlier published research”, some of the expressions in Table 1 can actually be seen as decomposable. Evidence comes from the conceptual mappings underlying them, from their meaning paraphrases and from the literature including Gibbs’s other publications.[3] Of the expressions in Table 1, *break the ice* is regarded as decomposable by both Gibbs and Nayak (1989: 133) and Gibbs et al. (1989b: 67), and *get the picture* is judged to be decomposable by Gibbs et al. (1989b: 67). Therefore, these idioms will be considered decomposable in this study. In the case of decomposable expressions, the meaning of the verb outside the idiom will be compared with the meaning of the verbal part of the idiom.

Interestingly, *cook your goose* is decomposable in Gibbs and Nayak (1989: 133) but nondecomposable in Gibbs et al. (1989b: 67). Reasons for the discrepancy between Gibbs and Nayak (1989) and Gibbs et al. (1989b) can probably be attributed to the different groups of participants and the complexity of decomposability judgments. Speakers’ disagreement is thought to be due to the low degree of accessibility of the type of linguistic knowledge required for decomposability classification (Titone & Connine 1994: 262, Cieślicka 2013: 497) or the subjectivity involved in decomposability ratings (Nordmann et al. 2014: 90, 93–95).

Furthermore, some of the idioms listed by Hamblin and Gibbs (1999) cannot be found in Gibbs’s other publications: *shed some light*, *rock the boat* (*miss the boat* is decomposable in Gibbs et al. 1989b: 67), *give the ax*, *hit the road*, *face the music* and *pull sb’s leg*. Based on their conceptual structures and meaning paraphrases, *rock the boat* and *face the music* are decomposable. The decomposability of *give the axe* and *hit the road* will be discussed below.

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[3] Hamblin and Gibbs (1999: 28) refer the reader to Gibbs et al. (1989a) for decomposability ratings, but Gibbs et al. (1989a: 579) claimed that they had taken the ratings from Gibbs and Nayak (1989) and Gibbs et al. (1989b). Ultimately, Hamblin and Gibbs (1999) used already existing categorizations, so that any disagreement of Hamblin and Gibbs (1999) with the decomposabilty judgments of Gibbs and Nayak (1989) and Gibbs et al. (1989b) defies explanation.

2 A survey of idioms

One challenge that had to be handled was determining "the specific meaning of the verb" Hamblin and Gibbs (1999) refer to. The example of *kick the bucket* seems to suggest that the verbal part of the idiomatic meaning is this sense. From the meaning of the whole ('to die quickly') we simply extract the verbal sense ('to die'). Based on the discussion above, however, it is more plausible to assume that *kick* contributes not only the sense 'die', but also 'quickly'. Since *kick the bucket* is often considered synonymous with the simple verb *die*, the meaning of the verb can be considered to be equivalent to the meaning of the idiom. This is consistent with the nondecomposability of the expression. It is usually challenging to isolate the figurative sense of the verbal part in nondecomposable idioms. In fact, no figurative meaning is assigned to the verbal constituent itself, and simply extracting the verb of the meaning paraphrase is misleading. Lexicographers are not primarily guided by underlying conceptual mechanisms when they provide meaning definitions. This is the reason why paraphrases from some idiom dictionaries will also be considered in addition to *OED*'s meaning definitions.

Another difficulty involved was determining whether two senses are the same or not. There are no objective criteria, and lexicographers often disagree about the identity of two senses. Some dictionaries lump two or more senses together that others split and list as separate. Theories that view meaning as arising out of context rather than inherent in a lexical item might view two senses as different if the context is different.

A further challenge was to decide whether the idiom should be viewed as decomposable or not, a binary categorization of what is essentially a scalar phenomenon, and to determine the meaning of the verbal component in decomposable idioms.

The idioms in Table 1 will be subjected to scrutiny below to address the question whether the verb outside the idiom can have a figurative meaning matching the expression (in nondecomposable idioms) or the verbal component (in decomposable idioms) and whether this meaning emerged before the idiom. *OED* gives the dates of the first and last recorded use (provided under "Date" in the tables below; for idioms only the first recorded use is shown in this study), but it is possible that future work might find an earlier use than the one currently shown. As any dictionary, *OED* has its limitations. The online 3rd edition actually contains a mixture of 2nd edition and 3rd edition entries, with some entries fully revised, others are partly updated or not at all (Allan 2012: 20). Any historical investigation has to face difficulties that make dating less than perfect, which raises the question of how big a temporal distance do we need between two meanings if we want to claim that one sense arose before another. Unfortunately, there is no clear answer.

2.1 *kick the bucket*

Table 2 summarizes the *OED* data. The third column shows the dates for the given meaning. (Some dates are preceded by abbreviations in the dictionary. The letter "a" before a date stands for "ante", "c" stands for "circa", and a question mark shows an uncertain date, see "Key to symbols and other conventions"
https://public.oed.com/how-to-use-the-oed/key-to-symbols-and-other-conventions/.)

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The earliest uses involved *kick* in the idiom *kick up one's heels* and the phrasal verb *kick up*, with the meaning attached to the whole expression rather than *kick* alone, but later *kick it* and *kick* alone conveyed the same meaning. It would be plausible to hypothesize that *kick it* predates *kick*, and the latter intransitive use derived from the former longer transitive one, but the first quotation of *kick it* in the dictionary is from 1892, making this hypothesis unlikely. The dictionary supports Hamblin and Gibbs's (1999) claim that *kick* indeed was used in the sense 'die' before the idiom appeared in the language.

Word or expression	Meaning	Date
kick (it)	1.b. *slang*. To die. Also *to kick it*.	1725–1899
kick off	3. To die. *slang* (originally *U.S.*).	1921–1970
kick out	3. *intransitive*. To die. *slang*.	1898–1898
kick up	†2. *intransitive*. To die (cf. 1b). *Obsolete*.	a1658–1813
kick up one's heels	†(b) To die. *Obsolete*.	1604–1845
kick the bucket	(*slang*) to die	1785

Table 2. Kick

Does this mean that *kick* in *kick the bucket* has the sense 'die (quickly)'? Theories that assume the compositionality of language posit that *kick* carries the sense 'die', and the rest of the idiom (*the bucket*) is either semantically empty or contributes the same sense as the verb in a redundant fashion (Everaert 2010: 83–84, Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 14–15). In addition to this lexical sense, the idiom components include in their semantics operators and variables that eliminate the redundancy when the words combine (Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 14–15). Approaches that attach less importance to compositionality assign the sense 'die' to the whole expression. In Cognitive Grammar, the idiom's meaning is not simply 'die' or even 'die quickly' but a complex semantic structure denoting the process of dying linked to the less salient literal interpretation that forms the conceptual background (Langlotz 2006: 107). However, 'die' is assigned holistically to the whole expression. The sharp discrepancy between the literal interpretation of a transitive verbal sense combined with a definite nominal sense and the figurative interpretation of a process renders the idiom opaque, but perhaps not fully opaque. The occurrence of *kick* in other expressions (*kick up*, *kick up one's heels*, *kick it*) denoting death and the use of *kick* 'die' may reduce the opacity to some extent. This reduced opacity, nevertheless, is not sufficient to attach the meaning 'die' to *kick*.

2.2 throw in the towel

The idiom *throw in the towel* comes from boxing, originally it was metonymically motivated whereby the act of throwing in the towel signified the intention of the coach to admit defeat. *OED* defines the idiom as 'admit defeat', and the verbal part is simply 'admit', yet it is counterintuitive to claim that *throw in* conveys this meaning, and *the towel* means 'defeat'. The entire literal scenario of throwing in the towel is mapped onto the admission of defeat. There is no evidence of *throw* alone and *throw in* conveying the idiomatic sense 'admit defeat' or its synonyms ('give up', 'surrender'), when they are not part of the expressions.

Word or expression	Meaning	Date
throw	–	
throw in the towel	to admit defeat	1915

Table 3. Throw

Meanings related to ‘giving up’ and ‘surrendering’ can be expressed with multiword units with the component *throw*, as shown in Table 4, but the sense of ‘surrendering’ is carried by the whole unit, not by the verb itself.

Word or expression	Meaning	Date
throw in	10.a. *to throw in one’s hand* […] (b) *figurative. colloquial*. To give up a contest or struggle.	1916–2003
	10.b. *colloquial*. To give up, stop doing (something); *spec.* to quit, resign from (a job).	1951–2014
throw up	1.b. *to throw up one’s hands*. (a) To raise one’s hands in a gesture of submission to someone; to surrender. Chiefly in imperative. Also occasionally to throw up one’s arms.	1724–2008
	5. *transitive*. a. *Cards*. *to throw up the game (*also *one’s cards, one’s hand):* to retire from a game or hand; to fold. Also occasionally *figurative*: to give up a contest or struggle. Now *rare*.	1635–1964
	b. To relinquish, abandon, give up (a task, occupation, responsibility, etc.).	1645–2016
sponge	1.c. *to throw (*also *chuck) up the sponge*: to abandon a contest or struggle; to submit, give in. *colloquial*.	1860

Table 4. Throw in multiword units denoting ‘giving up’.

The phrases that include *up* were already in use before the idiom appeared, but the verb *throw* does not seem to have this sense.

2.3 chew the fat

OED gives several closely-related senses for the idiom, all centering around communicative activities: talking, discussing, arguing. Today, notions of complaining or arguing are absent, and the idiom refers to a leisurely or friendly chat (Ammer 1997: 75). Table 5 summarizes the data.

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Word or expression	Meaning	Date
chew	3.e. in reference to words: To take or retain in the mouth; to keep saying or mumbling over.	a1616–1834
chew	7. *figurative*. To exercise the mind, meditate, ruminate *upon*, *on*, occasionally *at*. Also with *over*; esp. to discuss, talk over (a matter).	1580–1960 chew over 1939
chew the fat	3.h. Slang phr. *to chew the rag or fat*: to discuss a matter, esp. complainingly; to reiterate an old grievance; to grumble; to argue; to talk or chat; to spin a yarn.	1885–1948

Table 5. Chew

The idiomatic sense of ‘talk’, ‘chat’ does appear under subsense 7 for *chew*, but it is used in combination with the preposition *over*, and the first attested example is from 1939, later than the idiom’s appearance. Sense 3e is different from the idiomatic meaning because it usually takes linguistic units as objects, not discussion topics or abstract ideas. On the whole, no confirmation is found that *chew* alone had a matching figurative sense before the idiom was formed.

2.4 turn over a new leaf

In this idiom the verbal meaning seems to be carried by *turn over*, not *turn* alone. Candidate verbal senses include ‘adopt’ and synonymous items such as ‘start’. The whole idiom implies changing your behavior or lifestyle.

Word or expression	Meaning	Date
turn over	–	
turn over a new leaf	to adopt a different (now always a better) course of action, conduct, or behaviour	1535

Table 6. Turn (over)

Apart from *to turn a (new) page* ‘ to make a fresh start or new beginning, esp. after a difficult or troubled period’, where *turn* is part of a multiword unit, *turn* can imply a sense of adopting something new or starting something such as (1). These involve intransitive uses of *turn*, where *turn* is followed by the preposition *to*. However, these follow a different grammatical pattern.

(2) 24.b. To adopt a different religion (usually with implication of its truth or excellence), or a godly life; to be converted. (c1225)

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2.5 break the ice

Table 7 summarizes the *OED* data. The idiom has two meanings, both implying that a state or situation ceases to exist and a new situation begins. The verbal meaning can be paraphrased as 'break through', 'eliminate', and the ice refers to the lack of success or progress in sense a. and the tense social relationship and uneasiness in sense b. of the idiom.

Word or expression	Meaning	Date
break	29. To interrupt the continuance of (a state); to disturb: esp. a. *to break one's sleep* or *rest*.	1600–1853
	b. *to break silence*: see silence *n.* and *int.* Phrases 2. Also *to break stillness*.	a1393–2006
	c. *to break one's fast*: to put an end to fasting by eating; *esp.* to eat after the night's fast, take the first meal of the day; to breakfast.	c1460–1808
break the ice	a. To make a beginning in an undertaking or enterprise, esp. in the face of difficulty or resistance (cf. *to break ground* and ice-breaker *n.*); to prepare the way for others (cf. quot. 1590); (also in *literal* contexts) to break the frozen surface of a river, lake, etc., in order to make a passage for boats, etc. (also with vessel as subject).	?1553–77
break the ice	b. To break through cold reserve or stiffness, esp. facilitating conversation or social ease.	1795

Table 7. Break

Seven major senses of *break* are distinguished in the dictionary, further divided into 42 subsenses. Part of *OED*'s entry for *break* can be seen in (3) below. Subsense 29 is listed under major sense V, and it is judged to be the same meaning that *break* has in the idiom. When you break the ice you interrupt the continuance of the state of lack of progress or success in an enterprise, or the state of stiff, cold relationship, social uneasiness. A slight difference is that the nouns *sleep/rest* and *fast* are used with possessive pronouns that are co-referential with the subject (you break your own sleep, silence, fast), whereas *ice* takes the definite article.

(3) **V.** To make a rupture of union or continuity by breaking.
…
29. To interrupt the continuance of (a state); to disturb: esp.
a. ***to break one's sleep*** **or** ***rest***.
b. *to break silence*: see silence *n.* and *int.* Phrases 2. Also ***to break stillness***.
1600–1853
c. ***to break one's fast***: to put an end to fasting by eating; *esp.* to eat after the night's fast, take the first meal of the day; to breakfast.
c1460–1808

Subsense 29 occurs in various expressions, but as (3) shows, *OED* does not provide separate dates for *break one's sleep/rest* and *break silence* in the entry for *break*. Instead, only one date and one set of quotations are given for both expressions. The earliest uses of the nouns in the quotations are dated as follows: *sleep* (1600), *rest* (1706), *silence* (1768) and *stillness* (1853). This suggests that *break silence* was not attested earlier than 1768, but if this is true, 1600 may be misleading, as it marks the first attestation of *break one's sleep/rest* only, not of *break silence*. However, the date of 1768 may not be appropriate as the first attestation of *break silence*. In fact, the quotations illustrating *break the ice* include a sentence dated 1678, ninety years earlier, that contains the expression *break silence* (see (4) below).

(4) 1678 S. Butler *Hudibras: Third Pt.* iii. ii. 122 The Oratour..At last broke silence, and the Ice.

To clarify this issue, dates and examples have been checked in the entry for *silence*, to which the dictionary cross-refers the reader. The relevant section of the entry is given in (5).

(5) **P2.** ***to break (the) silence***.
†**a.** To speak instead of maintaining habitual silence or silence imposed by spiritual or religious practice. *Obsolete*.
?c1225–a1500
b. To begin to speak after refraining from speech for a considerable period of time, *spec.* to speak about or disclose something shocking, distressing, sensitive, or controversial for the first time after a period of refraining from discussing it. Often as ***to break one's silence***.
a1393–2006
c. To utter something or make noise after a period of complete quiet.
1558–2019

As (5) shows, *break silence* was established well before 1768 or even 1600, as the entry for *break* might lead us to conclude. This mismatch in dating may be due to the ongoing revision process. The dictionary informs us that the entry for *break* has been modified but not fully updated yet, whereas the entry for *silence* has been fully updated. While the first sense in (5) is specialized and no longer current, the other senses are still in use. Therefore, a1393 was put in Table 7 as the date of the first attestation. To summarize, *break* in the sense 'interrupt the continuation of a state, disturb' arose with a restricted number of noun collocates (*break silence, break one's fast*) before *beak the ice* was formed.

2.6 shed some light

No attestation is found for *shed* in related senses, such as 'clarify', 'help understand' or similar meanings. As *OED* explains in the entry for *shed*, "9. *transitive*. To send forth as an emanation. a. To throw (light) *upon* something. *literal* and *figurative*. In the figurative use of the phrase *shed* is in our quots. not found before the 19th cent.; earlier *throw* or *cast* was used".

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Word or expression	Meaning	Date
shed	–	
to throw (also cast, shed) light on (also upon)	to help to explain (something) by providing further information.	(1731–2013) *shed* 1860

Table 8. Shed

2.7 rock the boat

This is a decomposable expression. *Rock* means ‘disturb’, ‘upset’, and *the boat* refers to the equilibrium, a stable situation or balance. A very similar meaning, presented in Table 9 as sense 5b, is attached to the verb *rock* outside the idiom.

Word or expression	Meaning	Date
rock	5.b. *transitive*. *figurative*. To cause to be emotionally or psychologically shaken; to render bewildered or distressed; to shock; to perturb; to dumbfound. Cf. *to rock a person’s world* at Phrases 3. Frequently with a place, institution, etc., as object.	1881–2001
rock the boat	to disturb the equilibrium of a situation; to stir up trouble	1903

Table 9. Rock

OED notes that in this meaning, *rock* often co-occurs with direct objects referring to places, institutions, etc. In *OED*’s quotations, the verb is found in the context of *nation*, *industry*, *village*, *medical research company*, in addition to words with human references. The places and institutions can be viewed as metonymically standing for the people living or working in those places. In the idiom, the *boat* refers to a more abstract concept, a situation, but that situation also includes the people involved, and if the situation is disturbed, the people will also be shaken. These senses are viewed here as the same. *Rock* in the given meaning predates the idiom, but the time gap of 22 years between the two is very short by historical standards.

2.8 give the ax

This idiom cannot be found in *OED*, but the dictionary provides examples of figurative *axe* with the meaning “1.b. *the axe* (*figurative*): the cutting down of expenditure in the public services; the body appointed to do this. Also in other extended uses, esp. the dismissal of an employee”.

(3) 1922 *Glasgow Herald* 5 Oct. 7 Another class of military officers for some of whom assistance..may be needed are those who are the unhappy victims of the Geddes economy ‘axe’.

(4) 1923 *Times* 16 Mar. 12/1 Army and the ‘axe’. Limit of safety reached... No fewer than 1,500 officers had fallen before the Geddes axe.

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(5) 1926 *Encycl. Brit.* New Suppl. II. 160/2 Sir Eric [Geddes] himself was appointed in Aug. 1921 chairman of a small committee, later known as the 'Geddes Axe', to recommend public economies to the Government.
(6) 1926 *Times Lit. Suppl.* 21 Jan. The Inchcape Axe has not deprived students of the Memoirs issued by the Archæological Survey.
(7) 1958 *Economist* 1 Nov. 390/1 Capital formation should never again become the first candidate for the axe when times for restraint recur.

As can be seen from (3)–(7), *axe* occurs in relatively free word combinations. Multiword idiomatic forms are missing from the quotations; therefore, an advanced search was performed to retrieve co-occurrences of *give* within five words of *ax(e)* in the dictionary examples, but none were found. This prevented me from ascertaining the idiom's date of first occurrence. A further search of *get* in combination with the noun captured two more examples:

(8) 1987 *USA Today* 21 Dec. b3 That group packed the second-floor Hutton auditorium last Monday to hear director of research Thomas Stiles announce that everyone present was on 'The C List'–a group of Huttonites getting the axe.
(9) 1986 *Los Angeles Times* (Nexis) 5 Dec. vi 26/1 The low-rated freshman series 'Heart of the City' got the ax Thursday from ABC.

Both are recent attestations coming from the 1980s. Even though *OED* is of little help in determining the emergence of the idiom, a study of *give* leads to the conclusion that the verb does not have meanings expressed by the whole phrase, such as 'dismiss', 'reduce' or 'end'.

While our primary concern is the verb, the examples in (3)–(7) show that the noun *axe* has a figurative sense denoting the termination of a situation. Therefore, further research was conducted with the focus on the noun. Two questions were addressed. Did *axe* have a figurative meaning before the idiom arose? If *axe* is meaningful, is the idiom decomposable?

Since *OED* offers insufficient evidence concerning the emergence of *get/give the axe*, additional sources were checked. *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (*AHDI*) lists *get the ax* together with other variations such as *get the boot*, *get the bounce*, etc. and claims that most of these expressions date from the 1870s and 1880s (Ammer 1997: 159). Ammer (1997: v) provides the main sources used to compile the *AHDI*, and most of these sources were explored via the website *Internet Archive* (https://archive.org/). The earliest figurative use of *axe*, dated 1883, was found in the entry "Americanisms" in Stoddart's *Encyclopaedia Americana. A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and General Literature and Companion to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Ninth Edition) and to All Other Encyclopaedias Illustrated. Volume I* and is shown in (10).

(10) The *axe*, or rather the *guillotine*, is made to represent the dismissal of Government officials upon the coming in of a new President or in case of some grave complication, and the victims are said to be beheaded.

The *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (Lighter 1994: 53) notes that figurative *ax* occurs especially in the phrase *get/give the ax*, and the first citation of the phrase (in the form *give the ax*) is from 1897, chronologically subsequent to the 1883 citation in (10). The phrase is used as part of a football cheer: "Gibem the ax, the ax, the ax". The variant with

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get is first quoted from a 1928 *New York Times* article, resulting in the following chronology: *ax* (1883) – *give sb the ax* (1897) – *get the ax* (1928).

The time gap between the first attestation of *axe* (1883) and that of *give sb the axe* (1897) is merely 14 years. Assuming that the dating in the above sources reflects the temporal order of the emergence of various forms with the given meaning, it seems that figurative *axe* first appeared in relatively free word combinations, but soon after speakers began to use it in the multiword units *give sb the axe* and *get the axe*. Given the incompleteness of evidence that historical semantic research has to deal with, as well as the imperfection of human detective work, it has to be admitted that this claim is not particularly strong.

Does the meaningfulness of *axe* make the idiom *give the axe* decomposable? *Give sb the axe* conceptualizes an action (dismissal, rejection, putting an end to something) as an object transferred to a recipient. The ACTIONS ARE OBJECTS metaphor also underlies examples such as *give sb a call* or *He caught the kiss she threw to him* (Kövecses 2010: 39, Goldberg 1995: 149). This metaphor suggests a correspondence between the action of dismissing/reducing/ending and the object referred to as *axe* (dismissal/reduction/end). Thus, the noun *axe* could be seen as meaningful, conveying most of lexical meaning of the whole idiom, just as the nouns in light verb constructions such as *take a shower*, *have a bite*, *make a decision* are said to express most of the meaning of the whole expression, and the verbal part has little lexical meaning, its function is merely to turn the noun into a (complex) verb, which is why it is also called “support verb”.[4]

One argument against decomposability is the meaning paraphrase. The whole idiomatic expression can be paraphrased with a single verb (*give the axe* ‘dismiss’, ‘reduce’, ‘end’, ‘cancel’), which implies a holistic, indivisible meaning. This argument is, nevertheless, weak, as meaning paraphrases can take various forms, and thus they are not always reliable.[5] Instead of the single verbs above, sense descriptions such as ‘make a reduction’, ‘cause (sb) to lose their job’ or ‘cause (sth) to stop’ could also be posited for *give (sb) the axe*. The conceptual correspondences between source and target domain comprise a more reliable criterion (Langlotz 2006: 116, Dobrovol’skij 2011: 52–53). Viewed from this perspective, the source domain scenario of an agent giving an object to a recipient is mapped onto the target domain scenario of an agent dismissing somebody or an agent ending/reducing something. The act of giving does not seem to correspond to any identifiable part of the target domain scenario. *Give the axe* in the source corresponds to the act of dismissing/reducing/ending in the target, but *give* alone or *axe* alone has no target domain counterpart.

Although the meaning of *axe* in contexts such as (3)–(7) could be synonymous with ‘reduction’, ‘curtailment’, ‘dismissal’, etc., *axe* is a noun and thus construes the act of dismissing, reducing, etc. as a thing, i.e. a region in some domain, while the target domain meaning of *give the axe* describes a process (Langacker 1987: 189, 247). To the extent that this difference in construal (*dismiss* as opposed to *dismissal*, or *reduce* versus *reduction*) is viewed as insignificant, speakers may assign the sense ‘dismissal’, ‘reduction’, etc. to *axe* in the idiom and consequently regard the phrase as somewhat decomposable with *axe* being meaningful but *give* having no or very little meaning. In this study, nevertheless, construal is considered an important facet of meaning, and the idiom is taken to be nondecomposable.

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[4] Some linguits treat the verb in this constructions as semantically empty, while others (cf. Allan 1998) attribute some semantic content to the verbal part. It is interesting to compare two editions of a book written by the same authors. While in the first edition Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen (2005: 48) say that “support verbs are semantically transformed, in the sense that their semantic structures are strongly reduced *so that it is possible to consider them as being semantically empty*” [emphasis mine], the italicized part has been omitted from the second edition (Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen 2022: 64).

[5] For a similar reasoning, see Nunberg (1978: 126) and Dobrovol’skij (2011: 52–53).

2.9 *hit the road*

As Table 10 shows, *hit* in sense 11a is first attested before 1075, and the earliest quotations in *OED* contain direct objects such as *lands*, *the right way* and *entrance*. *Hit* also combines with *road* and its synonyms, whose first quotations are dated as follows: *way* 1621, *trail* 1873, *road* 1893, *pike* 1904. The *OED* evidence seems to point in the same direction as with *kick*, i.e. the verb *hit* had been in use for some time with the same meaning when *hit the road* appeared. However, while the meaning of *kick* we are concerned with is synonymous with the meaning of the whole idiomatic expression *kick the bucket*, *OED*'s sense 11a does not express the meaning of the whole expression *hit the road*. If *hit the road* is nondecomposable, we are interested in whether *hit* could possess the same meaning as the whole idiom ('go on the way, go away' or synonyms such as 'depart', 'leave'). The answer is clearly negative. But is this idiom nondecomposable?

Word or expression	Meaning	Date
hit	11. *transitive*. To come upon, light upon, meet with, get at, reach, find, esp. something aimed at. a. with material object. Frequently in modern (esp. U.S.) colloquial use, to arrive at; also, to go to (a place), go upon (a course). *to hit the trail (*less commonly *the grit, pike, road, etc.)*: to take the road, to get on the way, to go away.	a1075–1973
hit the road	to take the road, to get on the way, to go away	1893

Table 10. Hit

The meaning definition of *hit* includes 'go upon (a course)', which seems to be an accurate description of the meaning. As discussed above, meaning paraphrases provide unreliable guidance, but this does not mean that they can never be helpful. *Hit the road* is considered here as the result of a chain of metaphorical and metonymic extensions. First, metaphorical *hit* in the sense 'go (up)on', 'take' combines with *road*, which keeps its literal meaning, and the whole combination of metaphorical *hit* and literal *road* metonymically stands for departing or going away. This results in a conceptual structure where a metaphor is included within metonymy. The final metonymic conceptualization reduces decomposability, because the metonymization process affects the whole idiom and pushes the metaphor in the background.

The binary opposition between decomposable and nondecomposable is a simplification, because this property of idioms is generally considered to be scalar. The image-schematic parallelism between the literal and figurative readings, the motivatedness of the whole idiom as well as that of each individual component all contribute to speakers' intuitive decomposability judgment. Motivatedness is relatively subjective, and this can partly explain why researchers report a high level of individual variation (cf. Titone & Connine 1994: 262, Libben and Titone 2008: 1116 and Nordmann et al. 2014: 90). *Hit the road* is treated here as largely but not

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completely nondecomposable, because the embedded metaphorical *hit* can be reinterpreted as conveying a sense of starting (a journey), rather than simply conveying the notion of 'go on', and *road* can be reinterpreted as a metonymy standing for the journey itself. This reinterpretation is facilitated by the close metonymic relation between road and journey. The expression can be seen as largely nondecomposable, in which case the question whether *hit* has the sense 'go away', 'get on the way 'can be answered negatively. To the extent that the meaning 'start' can be assigned to *hit*, the answer is also negative: the verb does not occur in this sense outside the idiom.

2.10 cook your goose

As explained in Section 1, participants in Gibbs and Nayak's (1989: 133) experiments disagreed with Gibbs et al.'s (1989b: 67) subjects on the decomposability of this expression. *OED* describes the sense of *cook your goose* as shown in Table 11. The *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (2002: 158) says that "if you cook your goose, you do something which gets you into trouble or spoils your chances of success". *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (Ammer 1997: 88) paraphrases the expression as "[r]uin someone, upset someone's plans". *Cook* can therefore convey the sense 'ruin', and *goose* corresponds to a person's plan or chance of success (and metonymically the affected person). What reduces the likelihood of this analysis is the lack of a motivated, transparent relation between the literal and figurative readings. While some degree of motivation is necessary for decomposability, the transparency of each component is not a prerequisite (Langlotz 2006: 119). Langacker (1987: 94) notes that the motivatedness of idiom constituents can differ: while there is a motivated link between 'bag' and 'concealment', there seems to be no natural explanation why 'cat' in the literal reading means 'information' in *let the cat out of the bag*. Speakers, however, can differ in how much transparency they see, and how much opacity they tolerate.

The source domain scenario of *cook one's goose* does not evoke a rich literal scene. The goose is not normally ruined, unless you are a terrible cook, and cooking is not typically viewed as harmful to the ingredients. If your plan is to eat a goose, then cooking actually helps you (achieve success); therefore, the level of transparency of the whole idiom and the constituents taken separately is low.

Word or expression	Meaning	Date
cook	7. *transitive*. *slang*. To inflict great and irretrievable damage on (a person or thing); to ruin. Cf. *to cook one's goose* at *goose* n. 1d.	1708–2013
cook one's goose	1.d. In phrases and proverbial sayings….*to cook (*rarely *do) one's goose*: (*slang*) to 'do for' a person or thing; to ruin or kill.	1835

Table 11. Cook

Interestingly, *cook* had a matching figurative meaning before the idiom arose (Table 11). *OED*'s sense 7 was established a long time before the expression emerged. This might increase the transparency of *cook* in the idiom to some extent, especially if this meaning was relatively common, and support assigning the meaning to the verb. Sense 7 can be found in combination with human and non-human

2.11 get the picture

As explained in Section 1, Hamblin and Gibbs (1999) include this idiom in the set of nondecomposable expressions, even though it is assigned to the decomposable class by Gibbs et al. (1989b: 67). The idiom is motivated by the UNDERSTANDING/KNOWING IS SEEING metaphor, whereby the picture corresponds to the situation that you want to understand, and seeing it is mapped onto understanding it. Getting the picture is a precondition of seeing it, the first event (the condition of getting) metonymically stands for the subsequent event (the consequence of seeing), and while the two events are different, the relation between getting and seeing the picture is so close that *get* can be assigned the sense ‘understand’, resulting in the analysis *get* ‘understand’ + *picture* ‘situation’. *OED* informs us that *picture* can denote ‘situation’ even outside the idiom, a meaning, labeled 8.a., that is first attested in 1616, long before *get* was used as part of the idiom.

(11) 8.a. The circumstances as they are; a state of affairs, situation. 1661–1996

As Table 12 shows, *get* emerged with the sense ‘understand’ (*OED* 15. d.) about 80 years before *get the picture* was attested. In the quotations illustrating this sense, the verb often takes personal pronouns as direct objects, and this is different in the idiom, where the verb takes an abstract object. However, *get* also combines with abstract objects such as *point*, the pronoun *it* and the clause *what I mean*.

Word or expression	Meaning	Date
get	15.d. (a) *transitive*. *colloquial*. To understand (a person, the meaning of something). See also *get it?* at Phrases 2d(d). Frequently (originally *U.S.*) with a pronoun as object.	1857–2003
get	18.b. transitive. To come to have (a notion, impression, etc.).	a1658–2003
get the picture	P1. *colloquial*. *in the picture*: involved in or fully aware of a particular situation or activity; in harmony with one’s surroundings; present; *out of the picture*, out of place, at odds with one’s surroundings; uninvolved, inactive; (*figurative*) dead. *to get the picture*: to grasp or become aware of certain circumstances or facts; *to put (*a person*) in the picture*: to inform (a person) of particular circumstances or facts.	1900–1998; get the picture 1938

Table 12. Get

OED’s paraphrase of the idiom as ‘to grasp or become aware of certain circumstances or facts’ suggests a parallelism between getting (coming into possession of) an object and becoming aware of a situation. *Get* also had the already established sense ‘come to have’ *OED*’s sense 18b), and can be assigned the same sense in the idiom, but *picture* is then best defined as ‘an understanding of the situation’ rather than simply ‘situation’. This analysis requires re-construing the verbal process (of understanding) as a thing and attaching this meaning to the noun of the idiom, similarly to *give the ax*. This type of meaning assignment is less likely from a cognitive perspective, as the underlying conceptual mapping does not support a correspondence between picture in the source domain and (the act of) understanding/knowledge in the target domain. No matter how *get the picture* is decomposed, *get* already had a matching sense before the idiom arose.

2.12 *face the music*

This idiom is fully decomposable, even though the motivatedness of the noun is low. *Face*, however, is highly transparent, and it emerged in the matching sense of ‘accept’, ‘confront’ before the idiom appeared.

Word or expression	Meaning	Date
face	5. *transitive*. To look seriously and steadily at, not shrink from (an issue, idea, unpleasant fact, etc.); to come to terms with, to deal with or accept (a difficult situation). See also to *face (the) facts*, *let us (also let’s) face it* at Phrases 1h, *to face up to* at Phrases 1i.	1795–1999
face the music	to accept or confront the inevitable, or the unpleasant consequences of one’s actions	1834

Table 13. Face

2.13 *pull sb’s leg*

OED’s sense 7a of *pull* is similar to the meaning of the idiom at first sight, but there are also differences. The idiomatic sense includes the affected entity (person), while *pull* outside the idiom denotes the action without referring to the affected entity.

Word or expression	Meaning	Date
pull	7.a. transitive. colloquial (originally U.S.). To say or do (something) with intent to deceive, or (in later use) for effect, to impress or shock, etc.; to tell (a joke); to play (a trick). Also with *on.to pull a fast one*: see *fast one* at fast *adj*. Phrases 3.	1894–2004
pull sb’s leg	to deceive a person humorously or playfully; to tease a person	1852

Table 14. Pull

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In addition, *pull* in this meaning co-occurs with nouns such as *story, dope, stunt, trick* in the quotations, with the affected entity being nonhuman and consequently the verb denotes performing an action (in order to deceive, etc.). The date show that this sense of *pull* developed after the idiom emerged, not before it.

3 Conclusion

Table 15 summarizes the results. The idioms are divided into decomposable and non-decomposable, but we must bear in mind that this is a continuum, and some of the nondecomposable expressions (*give the ax*, *cook one's goose* and especially *hit the road*) can be viewed as having some degree of decomposability by speakers. Differences in decomposability judgments are attributed to the subjectivity and the low degree of accessibility of decomposition.

Idiom	**Did the V have a matching sense before?**
nondecomposable	
kick the bucket	yes
throw in the towel	no
chew the fat	no
turn over a new leaf	no
give the ax	no
shed some light	no
hit the road	no
cook your goose	yes
pull someone's leg	no
decomposable	
break the ice	yes
rock the boat	yes
get the picture	yes
face the music	yes

Table 15. Summary of the findings

Kick the bucket is the only fully nondecomposable expression the verb of which was used in the idiomatic sense before the idiom arose. The verb of *cook one's goose* also had a matching figurative sense before. Note, however, that its decomposability degree seems to differ from speaker to speaker, as evidenced by the contradiction between Gibbs and Nayak (1989: 133) and Gibbs et al. (1989b: 67). As argued in 2.1, the emergence of a matching sense in the verb before the idiom does not necessarily mean that the idiom was formed compositionally or that the verb in the idiom can automatically be assigned that sense. Much depends on how salient the given sense was and how similar the conceptual structures of the literal and figurative reading are.

All the fully decomposable idioms emerged later than the related sense of their verb. *Break*, *rock*, *get*, and *face* all developed the meanings that they convey in their idioms before the idiom appeared in the language. This does not mean that the idiom was formed compositionally by combining a figurative verb with a figurative noun. *OED* does not show evidence that *ice* 'cold reserve', 'social unease' or *boat* '(equilibrium of a) situation' or *music* 'unpleasant consequences' existed before the idiom. The results demonstrate the historical precedence of the figurative sense of some verbs used outside an idiom over the same sense of the same verb as part of the idiom or the holistic sense of the idiom (*kick the bucket*). The claim that this precedence is common in nondecomposable idioms is not supported by this study.

Limitations of this research include the challenges involved in historical semantic investigations. Lack of accessible texts from the past and limited dating evidence means that some senses of some words may be unattested, even though they were used (Allan 2012: 24–25). Semantics is a field where offering precise meaning definitions and making sense distinctions often encounter difficulties. Idioms have complex conceptual structures where the figurative scenario is construed against the background of a literal scenario. Finally, the conclusions of this study cannot be generalized, because only a handful of idioms taken from a single publication are examined.

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