Language as an Emergent Construction-Network: 
A Close-Up on Italian Idioms

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In the present contribution, I investigated the structure of Italian idioms from a perspective which combines insights from constructionist and dynamic-systems approaches to language. First of all, I empirically analyzed the occurrences of a sample of constructions downloaded from the itTenTen corpus, interrogated via the online corpus-query system Sketch Engine. On the basis of the tendencies observed in the analysis, I observed that the patterns of stability and variation of idioms in use can be satisfactorily accounted for in dynamic-systems terms. I then argue that the use of idiomatic constructions is governed by a principle of causal circularity, whereby the attractor state constrains the possible use of a construction, but at the same time the bulk of occurrences of an idiom shapes the attractor in an ongoing, non-linear process of self-organization. Looking beyond idioms, I propose that similar mechanisms may regulate the functioning of the linguistic system as a whole, consistent with the constructionist view of language as a network of interconnected units.

INTRODUCTION

In the present contribution, I will address language as a system which emerges as a result of intersubjective experience and evolves over time, in an ongoing process of self-organization. On this view, the nature of linguistic phenomena is context-sensitive and extremely complex. As a consequence, language structure, variation, and change can only be explained if one takes into account the multiplicity of context-bound interactions between intentional agents and their physical and socio-cultural environment at different time-scales. Likewise, the choice of specific linguistic constructions in a given communicative event is both inherently grounded in historically established socio-cultural practices and determined by (and embedded in) the immediate situated context (e.g. Madsen, 2014; Pedersen & Steffensen, 2014).

The present paper will analyze how Italian speakers make use of a set of idiomatic constructions in a sample of real-language occurrences, which will be accounted for by adopting an approach that combines the basic notions of two distinct theoretical traditions: Construction Grammar(s) and Dynamic Systems Theory. The choice of idioms as a target phenomenon is due to the fact that this kind of constructions represents a rather problematic topic in linguistic studies (e.g. Philip, 2007). Indeed, idioms are ubiquitous in language use, and yet they tend to escape definition and categorization. While many definitions of idioms have been provided throughout the last decades, I will define idiomatic constructions as “conventional linguistic units, usually including at least two words, characterized by a figurative meaning.” Consider for instance the constructions illustrated in below:

(1)

a. Rock the boat (i.e. “spoil a comfortable situation”).
b. Spill the beans (i.e. “reveal a secret”).
c. Grasp the nettle (i.e. “face a difficult problem”).
d. Swallow a bitter pill (i.e. “accept an unpleasant situation”).
The existence of such linguistic units posits challenges for language theorists, since they defy the long-standing computational view of language as a list of lexical items, which the application of a set of formal rules would combine into well-formed strings, whose meaning is entirely compositional. Traditional generative theories have usually eschewed the problem, dismissing idioms as non-decomposable items of non-literal language (sort of “long words”), a peripheral and uninteresting phenomenon, not worth investigating (e.g. Chomsky, 1980). Nevertheless, in the last decades a remarkable amount of psycholinguistic and corpus linguistic evidence has shown that idiomatic constructions are much more central than traditionally thought. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that they can often undergo structural modification and display different variation patterns (e.g. Glucksberg, 2001; Moon, 1998; Naciscione, 2010).

These findings call the supposed fixedness of idioms into question, suggesting instead that they may be an inherently intricate phenomenon, subject to change and environmental influences (e.g. Vulchanova et al., 2011). As a result, the adoption of a theoretical approach adequate to account for the nature of idiomatic constructions, taking into consideration the way they are actually used, is necessary. A specific issue to be addressed regards the way idiomatic constructions relate to the other linguistic constructions which are part of the inventory of units of a language. In the following section, I will briefly introduce two approaches to the study of language, namely Construction Grammar and Dynamic Systems Theory, and propose a way their integration can help to shed light on these issues.

BACKGROUND

Construction Grammar(s)

The label “Construction Grammar(s)” (CxG henceforth) covers a number of approaches to the study of language which are rooted in Cognitive Linguistics and share some basic tenets. These models represent a reaction against the generative view of language as a sort of inner code, made up of words and rules. Proponents of CxG conceive of language as an integrated branch of cognition, governed by the same general principles which govern other cognitive functions. Moreover, constructionists consider language as a network of conventional pairs of form and meaning (“constructions”), including the schematic templates which emerge as a result of regular use. Indeed, from a CxG perspective, language is learned by the abstraction of patterns from real occurrences (see e.g. Goldberg, 2006; Tomasello, 2003). Consider the following simple examples of an interrogative and a declarative sentence, respectively (from Torre, 2012):

(2) a. Is Penny dating someone?
    b. Penny is dating someone.

From a CxG point of view, the two sentences in (2) above instantiate two different schematic patterns previously stored as an effect of repeated use, each of which is associated with different semantic properties and pragmatic functions. These emergent patterns are illustrated in (3) below:

(3) a. Interrogative pattern: AUX SBJ V-ING OBJ
    b. Declarative pattern: SBJ AUX V-ING OBJ

In CxG, patterns emerged as a consequence of usage are labeled “schemas”. Generalizations are the outcome of recurring patterns of usage which allow the speaker to infer a higher-order schema. Consequently, both the schema and instances of that schema are listed in the grammar, and the schema represents an expression of the generalization which emerges from patterns of usage. Thus, from a

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1 As Johnson-Laird (1993: vii) pointed out, “If natural language had been designed by a logician, idioms would not exist.”
constructionist perspective both sentences in (2) are stored in the grammar, together with the schematic patterns in (3).

The two patterns illustrated above are instantiations of two different kinds of monotransitive construction. In the network, the monotransitive construction will be linked horizontally to other transitive patterns (ditransitive and complex transitive), and all of them will be linked vertically to a more general transitive construction. The latter will be horizontally linked to the intransitive construction and the copular construction, and all of them will be vertically linked to the more abstract interrogative and declarative patterns and the patterns they are horizontally linked to, i.e. the imperative and exclamative. All these patterns will be vertically linked to a more encompassing schema including all clauses. The latter will be horizontally linked with other nodes denoting lexical units, and all of them will be vertically linked to a more general schema encompassing all linguistic constructions.

Unlike generative linguists, constructionists consider both regular and irregular expressions as part of the speaker's inventory of symbolic units, and as such deserving to be accounted for. From a CxG perspective, idioms are therefore part and parcel of the network of linguistic units. In early CxG work, the two kinds of units were seen as differing on the fact that while the entrenchment of regular expressions is followed by the rise of a higher, more schematic pattern which will be productively used to create novel expressions, irregular expressions (e.g. idioms) are stored but do not give rise to any schematization. Nevertheless, several studies on the nature of idiomatic constructions and figures of speech call into question their supposed unproductivity. Indeed, there are several aspects of idiomatic language which show a certain degree of lexicogrammatical and semantic adaptability. These different levels of flexibility are considered the results of the level of analyzability of the specific idiomatic expression (e.g. Cacciari & Tabossi 1988; Gibbs 1994; Glucksberg 2001; Langlotz 2006; Moon 1998; Titone & Connine 1999). The degree of analyzability of an idiomatic construction corresponds to the extent to which its parts have a meaning that independently contributes to each idiom’s figurative reading. For instance, compare the examples in (4) and (5) below:

(4) Fall off the wagon (“resume drinking after having quit”).
(5) Pop the question (“propose marriage”).

Gibbs (2007: 706) reports that many English speakers consider the former as less analyzable than the latter because the meaning that the verb fall contributes to the expression is less salient than the meaning that the verb pop contributes to pop the question. In addition, experimental studies have shown that semantically decomposable idioms are usually more syntactically productive and lexically versatile. Consequently, it is possible to propose that the label “idiomatic construction” subsume a variety of constructions which differ in terms of their level of formal and semantic flexibility; in addition, there seems to be a connection between the degree of versatility in form and meaning.

Many aspects of idiomatic language can be characterized in terms of broader linguistic or conceptual patterns. It follows that different forms of an expression should be seen as variants of the same idiom rather than distinct idioms which share the same meaning and some lexis. Consider the examples below (from Gibbs 2007: 714):

(6) a. Shake in one's shoes.
b. Quake in one's shoes.
c. Shake in one's boots.
d. Quake in one's boots.
e. Quiver in one's boots.
f. Quake in one's Doc Martens.

The main verb in each expressions means “shake”, and it is associated with nouns related to “footware” to connote apprehension. Any verbs and nouns that convey similar meanings will result in equally appropriate expressions. Moon (1998: 163) suggests that these expressions are subsumed
under a single “idiom schema”, which “represent[s] concepts embedded in the culture and associated with particular lexicalizations.” In Gibbs’s (2007: 715) words, these idiom schemas “have some reference, a metaphor (or metonymy) or cognate words, in common, but without (necessarily) any fixed structure or specific words.” Therefore, idiomatic constructions have more in common with more “regular” aspects of language than traditionally thought.

**Dynamical Systems Theory**

Despite the fact that Dynamical Systems Theory (DST from now on) has only recently begun to make its way into linguistics (e.g. Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2009; Gibbs & Colston, 2012), its first applications to the study of language date back to the late 80s and early 90s (e.g. Van Geert, 1991). One of the most influential accounts of language in DST terms is Elman’s (1995) paper. Elman argues for the plausibility of conceiving language as a dynamical system characterized by fluidity, fuzziness, emergence, and context-dependence. Using a connectionist network, Elman introduces a perspective on language understanding based on the constant interaction of several syntactic, semantic, and contextual factors and on the sequential nature of language production. Since a linguistic event always takes place over time in a specific context, Elman argues that these factors should be taken into consideration when modeling language. Simulations carried out training the network to make predictions on each next word in a sentence resulted in the network learning to generalize over linguistic items on the basis of repeated experience in a way which is extremely similar to the performance of human subjects: the network was successful in the vast majority of tasks to perform on new data, and when it was not, it made mistakes at a very similar rate humans do.

The results of Elman's study suggest that lexical items would be better seen as regions in a phase space, large enough to include the different senses and connotations a lexical item can take in different discursive and situational contexts. At the same time, grammatical patterns are best seen as attractor states, which tend to drag lexical items in a certain syntactic constructions. Language use also give rise to restrictions on the extent to which words can fill a certain position in a given construction, due to the persistent interaction of different formal, semantic, contextual factors and the sequential nature of language production (cf. Rączaszek-Leonardi, 2013). For instance, a sentence like *Mary ate an apple* represents the integration of an unmarked declarative monotransitive construction (which in English takes a SBJ-V-Obj word order) denoting a completed process with the subject NP “Mary”, the simple past form of the verb “to eat”, and the object NP “an apple”. Inverting the positions of the NPs would lead to a construction (*an apple ate Mary*) which would sound weird, at best (excluding very particular contexts as may be, for instance, a cartoon).

CxG and DST seem therefore to complement each other in that while CxG describes the nature and structure of the inventory of linguistic units, as a result of language use, DST provides a description of the way the nature and structure of this repository influences people’s use of linguistic constructions in each usage event. Indeed, while the constructions in the network (at different levels of abstraction and generality) can be seen as attractor states, which will exert a certain attractive force on lexical items, they do not exhaust the possible units language users may decide to employ in their message, which of course include expressions which, at a given time, are not entrenched in the grammar of the language. In a sense, a DST approach provides a valuable model to make sense of everyday linguistic creativity: the constructions used in each specific communicative event will be influenced by the situated context of the interaction; therefore, they may not completely conform to the attractor state. Deviations of these kind are ubiquitous in language use, and normally do not have any consequence on the network. Nevertheless, sometimes they may make their way into the inventory of conventional units shared by the speakers of a language, and create a new attractor, which will compete with the previous one. These are the mechanisms which drive language change. For instance, this is what happened with the *going to* construction in English, which was initially used
to express motion only, and then developed an alternative meaning as a future auxiliary. Compare the two examples below (adapted from Campbell, 2004):

(7)  
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a. Sylvia is going to}\text{motion construction} & \text{ watch the match (e.g. by bus).} \\
\text{b. Sylvia is going to}\text{future auxiliary} & \text{ watch the match (e.g. next Saturday).}
\end{align*}
\]

Here, it is possible to observe a mechanism of language change linguists normally refer to as “reanalysis”, whereby the form of a construction remains identical, but there is a change in the inner structure or meaning. Adopting a DST perspective, it is possible to describe the phenomenon in the following terms. Initially, only the construction in (7a) was part of the language, i.e. this was the only attractor. Then, the expression began to be used to refer to future events rather than motion. Initially, this could be seen as a state outside the basin of attraction, but later the spread of the new meaning creates a new attractor, leaving the system at a bifurcation point. The system is then in a phase of multistability: it is possible to find the constructions used in both ways within the same linguistic community.

It is possible to tie in this view with the observations made in the previous subsection with regard to “idiom schemas”. The figurative meaning of a construction will be the attractor state, along with the cluster of formal patterns it occurs more often with. Therefore, the integration of a CxG approach with insights from DST can represent an ideal theoretical framework to explore the phenomenon of idiomatic constructions in use which can be observed in occurrences of natural language data. In the following section, I will present the analysis of some different kinds of occurrences of a specific Italian idiomatic construction, making the connection between the theory and the data more explicit.

**CASE-STUDY**

The study of idiomatic constructions is facilitated by the employment of a series of cognitive linguistic notions which, far from being mutually exclusive, often interact in the determination of the figurative meaning of an idiom. A very important step in this direction was taken by Andreas Langlotz, who carried out a detailed, book-length study of idiomatic constructions and their patterns of stability and variation in British English (Langlotz, 2006). For the purpose of the present study, it is relevant to focus on two of the notions Langlotz used to provide a characterization of each idiom: base-form (a formal notion) and conceptual backing (a semantic notion). With regard to the former concept, Langlotz (2006) describes the base-form as follows:

In accordance with the usage-based view of grammar as a complex inventory of digested performance, an idiom's base-form can thus be defined as an idiom's context-independent default structure that is distillated from various usage-events. This constructional standard is directly associated with the idiomatic meaning, which itself emerges as a meaning standard (a schematic meaning type) derived from concrete occurrence.

\[\text{(p. 177)}\]

Langlotz adopts a convention-based approach to the base-form of an idiom, simply equating it with its entry-form found in dictionaries:

For purely practical reasons, I will equate a given base-form with the idiom’s citation-form in idiom dictionaries. I take it for granted that lexicographic practice attempts to record only highly familiar lexicalised constructions belonging to the langue of a given variety (i.e. those units that are entrenched in the mental lexicons of most speakers). Dictionary citation-forms therefore approximate the present view of a usage-based default construction.

\[\text{(p. 178, italics original)}\]
Looking at a concrete example, the base-form of the English idiom *spin one’s wheels* (i.e. waste one’s time and energy) will be the bare infinitive with a plural object NP featuring a generic possessive, as illustrated below:

(8) Spin one’s wheels.

*Conceptual backing* instead represents the cluster of conceptual patterns that support the recognition of a transparent idiom structure. Langlotz distinguishes between four different patterns of semantic extension which determine transparency:

- **Conceptual metaphor**: abstract objects and situations are conceptualized in terms of more concrete ones;
- **Conceptual metonymy**: an aspect or element in a conceptual domain is named to refer to another one which stands in a contiguity relation with it;
- **Conceptual blending**: the integration of different mental spaces which gives rise to an emergent conceptualization;
- **Emblems**: cultural symbols and stereotypes.

With reference to the idiomatic construction chosen as example in (8) above, the meaning of the idiom is motivated by the conceptual metaphors *PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY IS A CAR JOURNEY* and *SUCCESS IS MOVING FORWARD*. These metaphors describe a stagnating situation in terms of a stuck car: a car that is spinning its wheels does not move forward; consequently, it cannot reach its destination. Likewise, a person or organization who does not progress cannot attain any result and so their efforts are wasted. An attested example of this idiom in use is the following (Ayto 2009: p. 379):

(9) As long as our energy policy is demand-driven … we will continue to *spin our wheels*.

As anticipated in the introduction, idioms in use can undergo structural modification, and their level of variability depends on their formal and semantic structure. Below it is possible to observe an interesting variant of *spin one’s wheels* (Langlotz 2006, p. 234) detected in a specific language event:

(10) Thank you, but it was Rob’s idea. I merely *set a few wheels in motion*.

It is possible to observe a series of modifications in the structure of the idiom, with regard to both its form and meaning. The expression “set something in motion” denotes an action taken to put an idea into practice and, contrary to the idiom’s base-form, denotes success. The substitution of the indefinite quantifier “a few” for the possessive denotes the speaker’s downplaying of their own merit. The possessive use without any modifier, implies totality; in contrast, “a few” implies indefinite partiality. As Langlotz (2006, p. 235) emphasizes, this understatement that can be paraphrased as: “I am only partially responsible for the successful activity”. In the present study, Langlotz’s model will be taken as a starting point to investigate the ways Italian speakers use idiomatic constructions in a collection of real-language occurrences.

**Data and methodology**

I carried out an empirical analysis of a sample of real occurrences of 50 Italian idioms in use. The constructions were selected from Sorge’s (2010) dictionary, where entries are organized according to headwords, which represent the concept the editor saw as particularly salient in each specific idiomatic expression. For instance, all idioms whose salient concept is MOUTH are listed under the headword *bocca* (“mouth”), while all constructions whose salient concept is MOON are listed under the headword *luna* (“moon”). Consider the examples below:
For each idiom, I extracted a group of lemmas\(^2\), formed by the (lemma corresponding to the) headword plus (the lemmas corresponding to) one or more content words which feature in the entry form. I will refer to this group of lemmas as an idiom’s “lemma-group”. Then, I investigated the large web-based Italian corpus *iTenTen* with the aid of the online corpus-query system *Sketch Engine*, which allowed me to make a concordance between the lemmas included in the lemma-group and check their co-occurrence in the corpus in a 10-word span (-5, +5).\(^3\) Next, for each idiom I downloaded 100 examples of occurrences, after manually checking that each of them showed some level of idiomaticity (as defined in the previous subsection). For those expressions which returned less than 100 results showing some degree of idiomaticity, all the relevant occurrences were collected. This process enabled me to build a database including 4,809 attested occurrences of idiomatic constructions.

The first step in the investigation of the occurrences was the empirical identification of the attractor state of each idioms (see the “Data analysis” subsection below), which could be defined as “the bundle of (both lexical and syntactic) items which are usually associated with the key words of an idiom, together with the particular semantic, pragmatic, affective, and socio-cultural values related to their co-occurrence.” If the bundle includes several possible structures, these may differ in terms of their attractive force. This attractor state emerges as a result of the constant, nonlinear interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural factors in actual language usage events. The attractor state of each idiomatic construction is made up of two poles: a *formal* pole (roughly corresponding to Langlotz’s notion of *base-form*), which includes the verb forms and phrase orders which can most often be observed in the occurrences of the idiomatic construction, and a *meaning* pole, which includes the combination of the motivation patterns whose interaction defines the relationship between the literal and the figurative meaning of the idiom.

Once the attractor state of a construction was identified, each occurrence was analyzed and classified according to its level of conformity or divergence to the properties of the attractor state. More specifically, according to their characteristics, the occurrences were allocated to one of the following patterns of occurrence:

- **No variation (NOV)**: nearly complete convergence with the properties of the attractor state.
- **Systematic variant (SV)**: a variant which only denotes modifications in the morphosyntactic, syntactic, and lexical structure.
- **Context-bound grammatical variant (CBGV)**: a variant which denotes modification in the morphosyntactic, syntactic, and lexical structure, and whose meaning is affected by contextual integration.
- **Striking creation of a variant (SCV)**: a variant which is very likely to cause certain perlocutionary effects in the interlocutor playing on the relationship between the literal and the figurative meaning of an idiom.

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\(^2\) A “lemma” is the citation form which is chosen by convention to represent a “headword” or “lexeme” (i.e. the a unit of lexical meaning that exists regardless of the number of inflectional endings it may have or the number of words it may contain). For instance, in Italian (and other Romance languages), the infinite form is the lemma conventionally adopted to represent all the forms of a verb, while the singular is the form chosen to represent all the forms of a noun, and the masculine singular the form adopted to represent all the forms of an adjective.

\(^3\) A “10-word span (-5, +5)” includes the five words immediately preceding and following the headword. A “concordance” is an alphabetical index of a search pattern in a corpus, showing every contextual occurrence of the search pattern. For an overview of the corpus linguistic terminology and methodology, the reader is referred to McEnery, Xiao, & Tono (2006).
In the following subsection, I will address the way occurrences of idiomatic constructions in use differ with regard to distinct aspects of their form and/or meaning, showing that idiomatic variants range from plain lexicogrammatical adaptations to more striking instances of wordplay, and thus can be seen as distributed along a cline of conventionality and conspicuousness.

Data analysis

All the four occurrence patterns listed above can be found in virtually all the idioms included in my data sample, although to different extent. Indeed, the most regular patterns, No Variation and Systematic Variant are also the most frequent, whereas the most striking ones are the rarest. From a DST perspective, it is possible to say that instances of Striking Creation of a Variant represent the strongest perturbations to the system, which result in the meaning of the idiom falling somewhat farther away from the attractor state. For the sake of both space and exposition, in the present subsection I will single out a specific Italian idiom, which is representative of the tendencies observed throughout the whole sample of data. I will first illustrate its attractor state; then, I will address an example of each of its four patterns of occurrence described at the end of the previous subsection. The choice of the specific instances of use are due to their clarity, which makes them accessible to readers with little or no experience with the analysis of linguistic data (many more examples can be found in Torre, submitted). Consider the following expression, which first appeared in the Gospel (Matthew 23, verse 27) and is used to refer to “something beautiful on the outside, unclean within”:

\[(13)\] Essere un sepolcro imbiancato.
Be:INF a.MSG sepulcher.SG whitewashed.SG
“to be a whitewashed sepulcher”

The formal pole of the attractor state was identified by including the verb forms and the syntactic patterns which occur most frequently with the idiom. Rather than adopting a dictionary-based approach, which would equate the formal pole with the entry-form found in the dictionary (the strategy used by Langlotz), I opted for a more empirical approach, directly observing the occurrences of the idiom and including all the forms which scored a frequency of at least 5% of the data in the formal pole\(^4\). The verb forms and phrases orders included in the formal pole of the attractor state of the idiom *essere un sepolcro imbiancato* are illustrated in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VERB FORM</th>
<th>PHRASE ORDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple Present 3Plural (27%)</td>
<td>NP(Subject) Verb NP(Subject Complement) (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Present 3Singular (25%)</td>
<td>Verb NP(Subject Complement) (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Present 2Plural (8%)</td>
<td>NP(Subject) (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Present 2Singular (7%)</td>
<td>NP(Subject) Verb AdjP(Subject Complement) (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infinitive (5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The formal pole of the attractor state of the idiom *essere un sepolcro imbiancato*.

Identifying the meaning pole of the attractor state is a rather more intricate affair, since meaning is much more complex and multifaceted than form. The empirical observation of the occurrences of the idiom shows that the construction is used with a meaning which basically overlap with Sorge’s (2010) dictionary definition (see the translation of (13) above). Then, I proceeded to the detection of the motivation patterns whose interaction determines the relationship between the literal and the

\(^4\) While intuitively 5% may seem a very low threshold, since one would expect just one or two forms to take the lion’s share, the empirical observation of the data suggested that the adoption of a lower cut-off point rather than a higher one would be better: indeed, a high variety of forms could be observed in the occurrences.
The figurative meaning of the idiom. These patterns, which constitute the meaning pole of the idiom, are illustrated in Table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMBINATION OF MOTIVATION PATTERNS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual metaphor: PEOPLE AS CONTAINERS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implying: PERSONAL QUALITIES AS CONTENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration: VERY BAD QUALITIES AS DISGUSTING CONTENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual metonymy: OBJECT FOR EMOTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration: ROTTEN FLESH FOR DISGUST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implying: TOMB AS A CONTAINER FOR DISGUSTING CONTENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual metonymy: WHITENING FOR EMBELLISHMENT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2: The meaning pole of the attractor state of the idiom essere un sepolcro imbiancato.

Now, I will focus on the four main patterns of occurrence (mentioned above) displayed by the observed instances of this idiom. I will address each of them in turn, with the aid of an example. The allocation of each example to a specific pattern of occurrence will be explicitly motivated. I will begin with the “No variation” pattern, which basically conforms to the attractor state of the idiom. An example of this pattern can be observed in (14) below.

(14) Mi vergogno di essere parmigiano. Siamo sepolcri imbiancati, bellì di fuori, con le fioriere, le rotonde e le feste ininterrotte, ma dentro siamo pieni di putredine, scheletri, affari loschi e presunzione.

“I feel ashamed of being a Parmesan. We are whitewashed sepulchers, beautiful from the outside, with plant racks, roundabouts, and continuous celebrations, but inside we are filled with putrescence, skeletons, dirty business, and presumption.”

It is possible to observe that in the chunk above, the form of the idiom conforms to the formal properties of the attractor state. Indeed, the verb is conjugated in the second person plural of the simple present, and from the syntactic point of view, we can see the verb followed by the subject complement. With regard to the semantic/pragmatic content of the expression, the meaning of the idiom in context does not diverge from the standard exemplified in (13) above. As a result, the occurrence was allocated to the “no variation” pattern.

The second pattern to be observed is “systematic variant,” which displays a certain degree of deviation from the standard depicted in the attractor state. An example is represented by the excerpt in (15) below.

(15) Non facciamo i sepolcri imbiancati, bitte. Sono il primo a solidarizzare con chi è colpito dalle gravissime sindromi come Down o Phocomelia ma allora anche dare del cretino, dell’idiota, dell’imbecille come fate voi sinistri è la stessa identica cosa.

“Let’s not do the whitewashed sepulchers, bitte. I am the first who is sympathetic to those who suffer from very serious syndromes like Down or Phocomelia but then also calling others “dumb”, “idiot”, “imbeciles” as you sinisters/leftwingers do is exactly the same thing.”

In this occurrence, it is possible to observe a morphosyntactic and lexical adaptation: the author uses a first-person plural negative imperative, employing the verb fare (“to do”) rather than essere (“to be”). With reference to meaning, it is possible to see a perspectivization, whereby the scene is to be construed from a common vantage point between the author and the addressee. This occurrence shows

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5 The distinct patterns of occurrence are also not equivalent with regard to their frequency. Some patterns are indeed remarkably more recurrent than others. This issue is beyond the scope of the present study, though (see Torre, submitted for details).

6 Since Italian is a pro-drop language, the subject is often omitted.

7 Bitte is the German word for “please.” In this case, the use of a German word is only a mannerism.

8 This is an instance of wordplay: sinistra is the Italian word for “left,” and leftwing people are labeled di sinistra. On the other hand, sinistro means “sinister,” and rightwing people often exploit this wordplay to belittle leftwing people.
the author’s invitation for the addressee to abandon what they see as a biased point of view and to adopt a more consistent one. The use of the first-person plural rather than the second-person singular negative imperative can be seen as reducing the distance between the interlocutors, pointing in a sense to a more “cooperative” conversation between people with different opinions, rather than a watertight opposition between two blocks. This kind of variant is systematic, since it follows general rules of formal variation and is not particularly driven by the need for contextual integration.

The next pattern is the one labeled “context-bound grammatical variant”, which includes cases where the deviation from the attractor state is more dependent on the context of use. The properties of this pattern are exemplified by the instance illustrated below.

(16) Cionondimeno, la Dow Plastic, settore plastico della Dow Chemical, ha ricevuto riconoscimenti internazionali per il suo supporto al piano VNAH, Assistenza agli Handicappati Vietnamiti. Qualcuno si era probabilmente dimenticato che quegli handicap erano stati provocati da alcune delle invenzioni belliche della stessa multinazionale, che ora andava fiera di tanto generoso aiuto... vampirizzazioni...! E questo può bastare per capire quanto infame ed ipocrita sepolcro imbiancato sia stato il guerrafondaio presidente USA Bush, che cercava in altri paesi armi di distruzione di massa, quando le teneva ben conservate nei suoi magazzini chimici e nei suoi arsenali!

“Nevertheless, Dow Plastic, the plastic branch of Dow Chemicals, received international acknowledgements for its help to the VNAH plan, Vietnam Assistance for the Handicapped. Somebody had probably forgotten that those handicaps were caused by some of the military inventions of the same corporation, which was now so proud of such generous help... vampirizations...! And this can be enough to understand how infamous and hypocrite whitewashed sepulcher has been the warmonger US president Bush, who was searching for weapons of mass destruction in other countries, while he was keeping them in his warehouses and arsenals!”

In this example, some formal modifications were made. First of all, the idiom figures in the context of an embedded dependent clause, which assumes the role of direct object of another dependent clause. As a consequence, other formal modifications follow: first of all, it is possible to observe the use of the past subjunctive form of the verb (sia stato, “has been”). Second, there is a change in the word order, since the subject complement comes first, followed by the auxiliary and the lexical verb, and the subject is at the end. Finally, the idiom is preceded by the quantifier quanto, and intensified by the adjectives infame (“infamous”) and ipocrita (“hypocrite,” the latter one is actually redundant, as it expresses the literal meaning of sepolcro imbiancato). In this occurrence, it is also possible to notice a topic indication, provided by the discourse context, which is centered on a harsh criticism of the US foreign policy, and strengthened by the use of the term guerrafondaio (“warmonger”) immediately before mentioning President Bush. This variant is thus an effect of contextual integration.

The final pattern of occurrence is “striking creation of a variant,” which includes the most remarkable type of deviation from the attractor state. An example of this pattern can be observed in (17) below. In this excerpt, the language user is bitterly criticizing the Pope. Such an attack follows harsh comments on an influential American statesman. This is the reason why in the last sentence (where the idiom variant can be observed) the user makes reference to two people, thus using the plural.

(17) Il Papa ha la colpa di essere un sovrano assoluto teocratico sedicente vicario di Cristo, ricco come un Creso che esalta la povertà degli altri, mentre i suoi sudditi in gonnella fanno e disfano le porcherie finanziarie più indecenti al riparo della extraterritorialità dello IOR. Un ‘semidio’ mantenuto nel lusso sibaritico da un sistema di finanziamento statale truffaldino ed iniquo. Un ‘semidio’ corresponsabile di aver coperto preti pedofili per decenni mentre scriveva libelli contro chiunque non rientri nei suoi precetti di “moral”. Due sepolcri imbiancati che dovrebbero essere sepolti dalle loro bugie e ipocrisie.

“The pope is guilty of being a theocratic absolute monarch, self-styled Christ's vicar, as rich as a Croesus who praises other people's poverty, while his subjects in petticoat tie and disfano the porcherie finanziarie più indecenti al riparo della extraterritorialità dello IOR. A 'demigod' maintained in the sybaritic luxury by a fraudulent and unfair system of state support. A 'demigod', complicit of protecting pedophilic priests over decades while writing libels against whoever does not fall within his precepts of “moral”. Two whitewashed sepulchers who should only be buried under their lies and hypocrisies.”
The example above is characterized by a modification along all the three formal dimensions: morphosyntactic, with the pluralization of the noun phrase; syntactic, with the occurrence of the lemma-group at the beginning of the sentence, functioning as antecedent for the relative pronoun which is the subject of the sentence, which features the periphrasis constituted by the semiauxiliary verb *dovere* (“must”), which takes a finite form, and the infinitive of the auxiliary *essere* (“to be”); and lexical, with the insertion of the numeral *due* (“two”). With regard to meaning, it is necessary to take multiple aspects into consideration, in order to fully appreciate the interplay between the literal and the figurative meaning of the idiomatic construction. First of all, it is important to consider the previous lines about the Pope, in order to understand the accusations the user is charging him with. Second, it is relevant to underline the fact that this idiom is rooted in the Catholic tradition: therefore, the accusation of the Pope represents a first link between the figurative and the literal meaning of the construction. In addition, there are another couple of points which make the interaction between the literal and figurative meaning of the idiom in this occurrence particularly complex. First, the scenario of sepulchers as being buried is rather controversial: indeed, sepulchers are not buried; rather, dead people are buried into sepulchers. Second, the burial of alive people “under lies and hypocrisy” is not experientially realistic, given that lies and hypocrisies are not material objects. The meaning of this variant involves different levels and emerges as a simultaneous burst of blending different scenarios, not completely consistent with each other. It would be perhaps quite trivial to say that this kind of occurrence patterns is remarkable in that it shows the level of complexity of the human mind and the ability of idiomatic expressions (and figurative language in general) to enrich communication; what is instead to be stressed, in the present view, is that the expressive potential of figurative language is exponentially enhanced by the creative process of playing with the semantic potential of idioms, which involves a constant shifting from the literal to the figurative level and the other way round.

**CONCLUSION**

Though necessarily brief, the illustration provided above should be helpful to understand the differences between the distinct variation classes which can be found in the occurrences of real language use of idiomatic constructions, and to provide a flavor of the level of variation which can be found in the actual use of idiomatic constructions. The close-up on the Italian idiom *essere un sepolcro imbiancato* is representative of the tendencies observed in the sample of selected constructions, showing clearly that the use of idiomatic language is characterized by a persistent tension brought about by the simultaneous realization of the opposing tendencies towards stability and variation. This kind of evidence, observed (though to different extents) in all the idiomatic constructions included in the sample, strongly argues against the generative view of idioms as “long words” or fixed items of non-literal language. Instead, it shows two important features of this kind of linguistic units: on the one hand, it is actually possible to observe a cluster of forms and a general meaning which constitute a sort of “standard properties” of each idiomatic construction; on the other hand, it is also unavoidable to observe that the actual occurrences of each idiom displays a remarkable plurality of formal and/or meaning variants.

Adopting the terminology proper of DST (e.g. Beer, 2000; Thelen & Smith, 1994), it seems possible to propose that an idiomatic construction represents a dynamical system, while each actual occurrence of the idiom in use can be seen as a state. The set of all possible uses of the expression can be conceived as the phase space, while the collection of all observed uses of the construction can be considered as its trajectory. Finally, the motivation patterns whose combination constitute the meaning pole of the attractor state can be seen as the basin of attraction. The dynamical system embodied by each idiomatic construction can then be seen as regulated by a principle of causal circularity (cf. Deacon, 2003; Kelso, 1995), whereby on the one hand, the occurrences of an idiom tend to converge to the attractor state but, on the other hand, the amount of occurrences of the
construction in context constantly contribute to the re-definition of the attractor state, in a self-organizing fashion. This persistent tension lies at the roots of linguistic variation and drags the system into a condition of metastability (cf. Kello et al. 2008), where linguistic events can be conceived as networks of attractor states. In this landscape, the utterances tend to converge to the attractor states over time, but they remain sensitive to the real-time dynamics of the ongoing interaction. From this perspective, the linguistic system simultaneously shows a certain degree of stability and plasticity. Admittedly, at present this interpretation of the observed tendencies is still mainly speculative. As a consequence, the approach I applied to the study of idiomatic constructions in use is currently not fully-fledged, but it still on the way to operationalization. Therefore, it is better conceived of as a convenient metaphorical model to explore the data. Nevertheless, it provides a coherent and relatively novel way to explore the data, whose assumptions are consistent with those adopted in the constructionist tradition (e.g. Croft, 2001; Tomasello, 2003), and thus it is worth pursuing it as an attempt, scouting for explanatory frameworks.

Broadening the horizon, from a constructionist point of view it is possible to conceive of idiomatic constructions as nodes in the network of linguistic units, connected with a series of other grammatical and lexical items of different levels of abstraction and complexity. On the basis of usage-events, over time the links between constructions can be strengthened or weakened, obsolete unites can die out and new ones can arise. The case of idiomatic constructions only represents an example of the viability of the integration between DST and CxG approaches to the study of language. Elman’s (1995) characterization of grammatical constructions as attractor states which exert an attractive force on determined lexical items can be seen as a DST interpretation of the construction-network. Indeed, a certain grammatical construction will be linked with a series of possible lexical units which can fill (one or more of) its syntactic roles, which can be seen as collectively representing its basin of attraction. For instance, a caused-motion construction9 will tend to attract verbs of force-exertion, i.e. those verbs denoting actions like pushing, pulling, throwing, tossing, etc. (Torre, 2012).

From the perspective adopted in the present study, language can be characterized as a dynamical network of interconnected constructions. The structure of the network is not fixed and static, but rather it emerges and constantly evolves as a result of language use. Since usage events are always influenced by the context, language would be better considered in its relationship of constant interaction and mutual influence with other aspects of human life, adopting a distributed, ecological viewpoint. Since the possibility of providing encompassing characterizations of linguistic phenomena in studies carried out within a single academic field is fairly limited, in the future it would be beneficial to see an intensification of the collaboration and interaction between scholars, both within the same field and from different backgrounds and methodological traditions, in order to compare and complement each other’s findings, in prospect of establishing a more coherent and robust framework, able to account for linguistic interaction as an integral part of human interactivity (e.g. Steffensen & Pedersen, 2014).

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9 A caused-motion construction is a sentence-level construction which expresses an action whereby an entity causes another entity’s movement through space by means of an act of force-transmission (e.g. Broccias, 2003; Goldberg, 1995).
REFERENCES


