

## On the trail of idioms

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Though idiomatic phrases, characterized by their figurative meanings and cultural grounding, are no longer viewed monolithic blocks resistant to any kind of modification or alteration, they are still seen as rather fixed and inflexible, with the degree of flexibility depending on the semantic transparency of an idiom (e.g. Nunberg et al. 1994). For example, the idiomatic expression *spill the beans* (fig. 'reveal a secret') is according to Nunberg et al. (1994) decomposable (*spill* corresponds to *reveal* and *the beans* corresponds to the secret) and can be passivized, whereas *kick the bucket* (fig. 'die') is not decomposable and cannot be passivized without losing its idiomatic meaning (*The bucket was kicked* can be interpreted in the literal sense). In this talk, we will explore various cases where idioms deviate from their conventionalized form without compromising their idiomatic meaning. We will discuss psycholinguistic evidence and corpus data that target the role of semantic decomposability and type of modification and show an overall astonishing extent of variability. Taking up a proposal by Gisbert Fanselow, we will compare operations that have interpretive consequences and/or are semantically constrained with operations that are purely syntactic (cf. Fanselow 2018).

## References

- Fanselow, Gisbert (2018). Zur Flexibilität von Idiomen im Deutschen. *Colloquia Germanica Stetinensia* 27, 115–134. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18276/cgs.2018.27-07>.
- Nunberg, Geoffrey & Sag, Ivan A. & Wasow, Thomas (1994). Idioms. *Language* 70(3), 491–538. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/416483>.