Syntax
(part 8)

A-Movement

Neal Snape

Idioms

• An interesting piece of evidence in support of the VP-Internal Subject Hypothesis comes from the syntax of idioms.

(5)
(a) Let’s have a couple of drinks to break the ice (to introduce yourself)
(b) Be careful not to upset the applecart (to cause trouble)
(c) The president must bite the bullet (to force yourself to do something unpleasant or difficult)

• In (5) the form verb + complement is the idiom, but the subject isn’t part of the idiom.

• It is easy to change the subjects of the idioms in (5), as in (6):

(6)
(a) Let’s play a game to break the ice
(b) I hope I don’t upset the applecart
(c) I hate going to the dentist, but I’ll just have to bite the bullet
• In (5) and (6) the form \textit{verb + complement} is the idiom, but the subject isn’t part of the idiom.

• Compare idioms in (5) with (7):

(7)
(a) All hell broke loose (a situation suddenly becomes violent and noisy)
(b) The shit hit the fan (when things get uncontrollable)
(c) The cat got his tongue (when you are annoyed with someone and the person is quiet)

• In (7), not only is the choice of verb and complement fixed, but so too is the choice of subject.

• However, what is puzzling about idioms like (7) is that one or more auxiliaries can freely be positioned between the subject and verb

(8)
(a) All hell \textit{will} break loose
(b) All hell \textit{has} broken loose
(c) All hell \textit{could} break loose

(9)
(a) The shit \textit{might} hit the fan
(b) The shit \textit{has} hit the fan
(c) The shit \textit{must have} hit the fan
(9a) The shit might hit the fan

This is the idiom

(9b) The shit has hit the fan

This is the idiom

(9c) The shit must have hit the fan

This is the idiom

Exercises

1. He hit the nail on the head (do or say something exactly right) / He must have hit the nail on the head.
2. It takes two to tango (actions or communications need more than one person) / It must take two to tango.
3. He lost his head (angry and overcome by emotions) / He may have lost his head.
4. He hit the books (to study, especially for a test or exam) / He should hit the books.

(1) The cat is out of the bag = (the secret has been discovered)
(2) The cat must be out of the bag
(3) The cat will be out of the bag
(4) The chickens came home to roost = (the bad results of something someone has done are starting to happen)
(5) The chickens have come home to roost
(6) The chickens did not come home to roost