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Idiom decomposability and variability: the case of eight Hungarian non-decomposable idioms

Abstract

This paper studies the Hungarian National Corpus in order to collect the variant forms of eight non-decomposable Hungarian idioms. The results show that the base forms of the selected expressions can be manipulated in various ways. In consistency with Langlotz's (2006) investigation, the most frequent alterations were wordplays, lexicalized idiom variants and idiom blends; however, the isomorphically constrained constructional adaptation, inconspicuous literal-scene manipulation and topic indication were also attested in our data. Nonetheless, the number of these variations was quite low, so they do not provide sufficient evidence against the hypothesis that only decomposable idioms can be subject of them (Langlotz 2006).

Keywords: idioms, decomposability, variations

1 Introduction

Idioms are traditionally referred to as fixed multi-word expressions, which label suggests severe restrictions on their formal realizations. In fact, many corpus studies (e.g., Moon 1998; Langlotz 2006; Wulff 2008; Duffley 2013) have proven that the forms of idioms can be manipulated in a wide range of ways. The degree of productivity, however, seems to be different for each expression, which phenomenon provides one of the main concerns for investigation. The possible reasons why certain idioms allow a higher number and more types of variations than others are still a subject of debate.

One approach holds that the variation-potential of an idiomatic expression mainly depends on whether it has an internal semantic structure, i.e. whether its constituent words contribute to the overall figurative meaning of the whole string. According to the extent of this contribution, Nunberg (1978) distinguishes three classes of idioms: normally and abnormally decomposable and non-decomposable idioms. The notion of decomposability here is different from what it defines in lexical semantics which assumes that the meaning of a word (e.g., *bachelor*) can decompose into certain primitives (e.g., SINGLE, ADULT, MALE): it rather refers to the mechanism that the meaning of an idiom can be broken down into constituent parts, each of which can correspond to an element in the idiom's denotation (Vega Moreno 2007). Normally decomposable idioms can be identified as having an open relation Rxb for which speakers can easily see how idiom constituents map to the elements in this relation. In the case of the expression *pop the question*, for example, the words *pop* and *question* are directly related in meaning to 'utter' and 'marriage proposal', thus, they make an individual contribu-

tion to the overall interpretation. Non-decomposable idioms are the opposite pole of the decomposability continuum as their constituents cannot be assigned independent idiomatic meanings (e.g., *kick the bucket*). Abnormally decomposable idioms are positioned somewhere between the normally decomposable and non-decomposable categories. As opposed to normally decomposable idioms, abnormally decomposable expressions “are not licensed by conventions whereby each of its constituents can be used to refer to the constituents of its referent; instead this relation is mediated by a conventional metaphor” (Vega Moreno 2007: 151). For instance, in the idiom *spill the beans* it is relatively easy to understand the link between the meaning and *spill* and the act of revealing, but only a much less direct, metaphorical relation can be detected between the meanings of *beans* and the idiomatic referent *secrets*.

In a series of experiments, Gibbs and his colleagues (Gibbs and Nayak 1989; Gibbs et al. 1989) examined the link between decomposability and variability, and found that decomposable idioms are more flexible for syntactic and lexical alterations than non-decomposable expressions. Langlotz (2006) arrived at a similar consequence and stated that an idiom must be cognitively motivated, transparent and isomorphic (i.e. decomposable) in order to allow particular variations.

This view, however, is challenged by Duffley’s (2013) survey which examines the usage of the two most-frequently discussed opaque and non-decomposable English idioms, *to kick the bucket* and *to shoot the breeze*, on the internet. Despite the fact that these two idioms are regarded in principle as unalterable, Duffley found a surprisingly high amount of variations for both of them: lexical variations (e.g., *my phone kicked the pail last week; shoot some air with some chums*), inserted concepts (e.g., *was ready to kick its digital bucket; shoot the cosmic breeze*), and even passives (e.g., *most of their buckets have been kicked; most of the breeze was being shot by one sloppy looking ‘veteran’ driver*) have been attested without the idioms losing their figurative meanings. This finding suggests that not only decomposable but non-decomposable idioms can also be prone to creative variations.

The present paper aims to further explore this question by investigating the occurrence of eight Hungarian idioms that have previously been judged by Hungarian native speakers as non-transparent and non-decomposable expressions. Similar to Duffley (2013), the variations found in the corpus are classified on the basis of Langlotz’s (2006) variation strategies which will be briefly overviewed in the next section.

2 Langlotz’s (2006) variation principles

Langlotz’s (2006: 175) cognitive linguistic approach posits that “idioms are complex linguistic routines which are mentally represented as idiomatic activation-sets.” Idiom variation and variability is defined as a form of linguistic creativity in which the idiomatic activation-set is manipulated in order to encode a contextually relevant and communicatively motivated target conceptualization that the base form of the idiom cannot sufficiently express (p. 188).

According to Langlotz (2006), creative idiomatic variation is underlied by five variation principles (i.e. strategies). Constructional adaptation refers to the inflectional and syntactic modifications (such as article variation, number variation, passivisation and fronting/topicalisation) of the base form.

- (1) *That tightrope was walked every weekend when Charles and Diana took the train with their nanny from Norfolk to Liverpool Street station in London where their mother met them.*¹

Constructional adaptations seem to be conditioned by the idiom's internal semantic structure. Since the expression *to walk a tightrope* is isomorphic, i.e. the constituents *walk* and *tightrope* correspond to 'deal with' and 'very difficult situation', respectively, its passive form in the above example can easily be understood simply by replacing the original constituents with their figurative equivalents.

Depending on which scene is manipulated within the activation-set, Langlotz (2006) distinguishes three additional variation strategies: literal-scene manipulation, topic indication, and topic-related literal-scene manipulation. Literal-scene manipulation involves the modification of the literal layer of the expression which evokes a richer image than the base form does. In (2a), for instance, the qualifying adjective *narrow* is absolutely consistent with the literal meaning of *tightrope*, but it also effects the figurative interpretation of the idiom in a way that it emphasises the extent of difficulty the Chancellor has to face. This example illustrates a very inconspicuous example of literal-scene manipulation, however, Langlotz (2006) points out that many instances of this type of variation can rather be regarded as wordplay. The use of the verb *totter* instead of *walk* and the insertion of the premodifier *fraying* in (2b), for example, result in an alteration that shows a high degree of deviation from the typical construal of the base form. Thus, it can be considered as an intentional pun variant created through semantic exploitation. According to Langlotz's (2006) claim, inconspicuous literal-scene manipulation is specific for motivated idioms and is restricted for opaque expressions that are rather open for wordplay.

- (2) a. *The Chancellor had a narrow tightrope to walk and he managed to please a variety of people.*
 b. *Only the utter ruthlessness of one ravaged, machine-sustained tyrant and the overstretched forces of his fierce yet fragile Imperium kept the human race tottering along its fraying tightrope.*

As opposed to literal-scene manipulation, topic indication affects only the figurative layer of an idiom activation-set. Taking into account the literal scene, the premodifier *financial* in (3) is semantically inconsistent with the noun *tightrope*, whereas no problem emerges when assigning a meaning to the noun phrase at the figurative level. *Financial* in this case can be seen as a grammatical modifier of the figurative correspondent 'difficult situation' of the constituent *tightrope*, so the whole idiom can be understood as 'go through a difficult financial situation'. This type of modification is clearly context-specific, and it requires the idiom to be potentially isomorphic.

- (3) *That sum may seem like a lot of lei (the Romanian currency that purchases next to nothing abroad) but it still left the Romanians treading a financial tightrope.*

Topic-related literal-scene manipulation is basically the combination of the previous two variation strategies. Although it involves modification at both the literal and figurative levels,

¹ Examples (1)-(5) are taken from Langlotz (2006).

the alteration can be interpreted only literally. The main mechanism behind this type of variation is to find a constituent of the string that is associated with both the usage-context and the conventional literal scene. Conjunction modification (discussed in Ernst 1981) is also governed by this principle. In (4), for instance, the constituent *teeth* is modified by the quantifier *three rows of*. This modifier, in fact, has no contribution to the idiomatic meaning; it only describes one of the shark's most scary features in the literal scene. This variation, therefore, should be interpreted normally, according to its standard figurative meaning 'become deeply involved in'.

- (4) *Bruce, a shark, found it a part he could really **sink his three rows of teeth** into.* [as a comment to the making of the movie *Jaws*]

Langlotz's (2006: 214) fifth variation strategy constitutes ambiguation and punning which "involve the creative evocation of multiple referentiality". It exploits the semantic structure of the idiom by co-activating both its literal and idiomatic meanings. This happens in the below example, where the expression *to have a good nose for something* is used in an ambiguous way. The wine expert must be good at discovering high quality wines (consistent with the figurative meaning of the idiom), but his/her job highly depends on his/her nose (consistent with the literal meaning of the idiom).

- (5) *If you like wine, **have a good nose**.*

3 Data analysis

3.1 The idioms

This study has been preceded by a test in which Hungarian native speakers had to make judgements on 6-point scales about the degree of the familiarity, transparency and decomposability of a relatively large number of Hungarian V+NP idioms. This judgement test was conducted as the first stage of a series of experiments which aims to examine the representation, comprehension and variability of different types of idioms. Since its details and results are planned to be published in a separate article, only a brief description is given in this paper.

For the three-part test, 160 Hungarian expressions were selected from various idiom dictionaries and collections (Bárdosi 2003, 2012; Hadrovics 1995; O. Nagy 1985). In the familiarity section, the participants were provided with the idioms, and they had to rate on a 6-point scale how familiar each idiom was to them. In the second, transparency phase, the same subjects received the list of the same 160 idioms, but, this time, the dictionary meanings were also given. The participants were required to decide how close the relationship was between the literal and idiomatic meanings of the expressions. Based on the familiarity and transparency ratings, 68 of the 160 idioms were submitted to a third, decomposability-rating test in which each expression was embedded in a figuratively biased context. The tasks of the participating native speakers (other than those who participated in the first two phases) were

(i) to read each short text carefully; (ii) to explain the meaning of the idiom in it; (iii) to rate the degree of decomposability of the idiom on a 6-point scale.²

For the purposes of the present investigation on the variability of non-decomposable idioms, eight expressions rated as non-transparent and non-decomposable have been selected from the above-mentioned tests. The list of the eight idioms and their transparency and decomposability ratings can be found in Table 1.

Idiom ³	Transparency	Decomposability
<i>felkapja a vizet</i> (‘to hit the ceiling’)	2.84	1.60
<i>összeakasztja a bajszát valakivel</i> (‘to fall out with someone’)	2.64	2.13
<i>megüti a bokáját</i> (‘to get one’s fingers burnt’)	2.87	1.43
<i>ráhúzza valakire a vizes lepedőt</i> (‘to blow the whistle on someone’)	2.62	2.26
<i>húzza a lóbórt</i> (‘to saw logs’)	2.79	1.93
<i>lándzsát tör valaki/valami mellett</i> (‘to make a stand for someone/something’)	2.69	2.30
<i>pálcát tör valaki/valami felett</i> (‘to judge someone/something’)	2.69	2.26
<i>elhúzza valaki nótáját</i> (‘to beat someone up / to give someone hell’)	2.53	2.17

Table 1. The list of V+NP idioms and their transparency and decomposability ratings

At this point it is worth mentioning that although present-day native speakers may not be able to find motivating links between an idiom’s literal and figurative meanings, the relationship between the two was originally not arbitrary. Dunkling (1998) and Parkinson (2000) found that most idioms were used literally at first, but, over time, they underwent a metaphorization process, as a result of which the phrase became institutionalized in the language with its idiomatic meaning. If we take a closer look at the origins of the idioms examined in our study, we can easily see that the genuine meanings of most expressions are related to old customs that are not employed nowadays.

Megüti a bokáját ‘lit.: to hit one’s ankle; fig.: to get one’s fingers burnt’ is claimed to root from the curse *A szél verje össze az akasztófán a bokádat!* ‘I wish the wind would blow your ankles together on the gibbet!’ (O. Nagy 1957). In earlier times, it was not uncommon that the convict hanged publicly was left on the gibbet for several days before being buried, so the image of a person hanging and being swung by the wind that made his ankles hit each other used to be quite familiar to everyday people. Following from this, if someone was warned that he will hit his ankle, that person was thought to be hanged (i.e., to have problems) in the future for something he committed previously.

² The term *decomposability* was explained and illustrated with examples in the introductory part of the test so the participants became familiar with it.

³ For morpheme-by-morpheme transcriptions of the idioms see the appendix.

The meaning of *elhúzza valaki nótáját* ‘lit.: to play someone’s song; fig.: to beat someone up/to give someone hell’ can be explained in two ways (O. Nagy 1957). The first explanation is based on the idea that when someone is beaten, he is hopping and moving his legs very fast as if he was dancing. Since dance and music are two closely related concepts, the image of a dancing person when his favourite song is being played automatically evokes in human mind. Another potential explanation is related to a certain type of corporal punishment, caning, which refers to the action of hitting someone’s back or buttocks with a cane. The movement of the cane when beating someone is similar to the movement of a fiddle bow when playing the violin; and this resemblance may be the underlying motivation for the expression.

The idiom *lándzsát tör valaki/valami mellett* ‘lit.: to break a lance next to someone/something; fig.: to make a stand for someone/something’ is borrowed from the German language, and its original form is *für jemanden eine Lanze brechen*. This expression goes back to the Middle Ages, when knights jousted for the hearts of their beloved women (O. Nagy 1957). Jousting was performed by two horsemen wielding lances with blunted tips, and the primary aim of this fight was to ride towards the opponent at a high speed, to strike him and to break the lance on his shield.

Pálcát tör valaki/valami felett ‘lit.: to break a wand above someone/something; fig.: to judge someone/something’ originates from a German custom employed in court: when the judge proclaimed the death sentence, he broke a wand into three pieces and threw them in front of the convict. This act symbolized that the judgement was definitive and irrevocable (O. Nagy 1957).

According to Csefkó (1930), *ráhúzza valakire a vizes lepedőt* ‘lit.: to lay the bed-sheet on someone; fig.: to blow the whistle on someone’ refers to a medical procedure used for attenuating fever. Laying a wet bed-sheet on someone with a very high body temperature helps the person gain back his consciousness and feel better, but this is a really unpleasant experience at the same time.

Unfortunately, no etymologies for *húzza a lóbőrt* ‘lit.: to pull the horse skin; fig.: to saw logs’, *felkapja a vizet* ‘lit.: to snatch up the water; fig.: to hit the ceiling’, and *összeakasztja valakivel a bajszát* ‘lit.: to hang one’s moustache with someone; fig.: to fall out with someone’ were provided in any of the sources available for me; I only found some relevant information on various websites. As this data, however, can be regarded as non-academic and unreliable, I decided not to include it in this paper. Nevertheless, in the case of the other five idioms, it is obvious that they reflect old traditions which have disappeared and become forgotten over time. The fact that most people are not familiar with these customs nowadays may explain why these idioms have been positioned closer to the opaque pole of the transparency scale.⁴

3.2 *The corpus*

The usage of the unvaried and the altered forms of the eight idioms were studied in the Hungarian National Corpus (HNC) (Oravecz et al. 2014). With its more than 1 billion words, it is the largest freely-available Hungarian corpus which contains five genres: official, press,

⁴ It should be noted that the knowledge of an idiom’s origin is sometimes not necessary for the hearer to find links between the literal and figurative interpretations. Depending on their encyclopaedic knowledge and creativity, comprehenders may be able to remotivate expressions and have various assumptions (which are different from the etymological explanations) about why an idiom means what it does (Langlotz 2006: 114-115).

spoken, personal and academic texts. The queries were made in a way that the nominal lemma of the idiom should have been within the span of 10 words to the left or to the right of the verbal constituent. In separate searches, the nominal collocations of the verbal elements and the verbal collocations of the nominal elements to both the left and the right directions within 5 words were also examined in order to collect the lexical variations of the selected expressions. Sentences that occurred multiple times in the corpus have been filtered out.

3.3 Results and discussion

The total number of tokens and the number of the variations for the idioms are summarised in Table 2. As can be seen, the predominant majority of the occurrences were the invariant forms for each idiom, but each of Langlotz's (2006) five basic idiom variation types was also manifested in the corpus.

Idiom	Total	Construc- tional adaptation	Literal- scene mani- pulation	Topic indica- tion	Topic- related literal- scene manipula- tion	Ambigu- ation and punning	Other
		# (%)	# (%)	# (%)	# (%)	# (%)	# (%)
<i>felkapja a vizet</i>	307	0	0	0	0	1 (0.33)	13 (4.23)
<i>összeakasztja a bajszát valakivel</i>	120	0	0	0	3 (2.5)	3 (2.5)	2 (1.67)
<i>megüti a bokáját</i>	166	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>ráhúzza valakire a vizes lepedőt</i>	164	1 (0.61)	0	3 (1.83)	2 (1.22)	0	10 (6.1)
<i>húzza a lóbőrt</i>	95	0	0	0	0	1 (1.05)	2 (2.1)
<i>lándzsát tör valaki/valami mellett</i>	101	0	0	0	0	0	4 (3.96)
<i>pálcát tör valaki/valami felett</i>	42	0	0	0	0	0	4 (9.52)
<i>elhúzza valaki nótáját</i>	86	1 (1.16)	2 (2.32)	0	0	4 (4.65)	0
Total:	1081	2 (0.18)	2 (0.18)	3 (0.28)	5 (0.46)	9 (0.83)	35 (3.24)

Table 2. The total number of occurrences and the number of variations in HNC

It has been pointed out earlier that constructional adaptation, literal-scene manipulation and topic indication potentially occur with cognitively motivated, isomorphic idioms, but are restricted for opaque, non-decomposable expressions. Following from this, the eight idioms investigated in this study should not show any of these variations. A few instances, however, were attested for each strategy.

Constructional adaptation was represented by the passive-like predicative adverbial participle construction and topicalization. The Hungarian predicative adverbial participle structure can occur with (i) the present and past copula *van/volt* ‘be/was/were’ or with (ii) the future copula and its past form *lesz/lett* ‘become/became’. Although, in terms of their formal traits, both type (i) and type (ii) are similar to the English passive construction, only (ii) functions in the same way (Laczkó 1995). The structure containing *van/volt* ‘be/was/were’ indicates the resulting state of a preceding process that is not denoted by the construction itself, so this type can be seen as adjectival rather than participial. As opposed to this, the future tense copula *lesz* ‘become’ and its past tense form *lett* ‘became’ is more dynamic and, thereby, more acceptable as a process-denoting construction. The form *el lett húzva a nótája* in (6) belongs to this second, passive-like category.

The other example, sentence (7), is a clear instance of topicalization where the object NP *vizes lepedő* is placed into the main clause while the remaining parts of the idiom form a relative clause. This example is surprising if we take into account Nunberg’s (1994) statement that this kind of alteration can occur only if the topicalized constituent has its own idiomatic referent, which condition is not fulfilled by non-decomposable expressions.

- (6) *pár-nak már el is lett húz-va a nótá-ja*
 couple-for already away also became pull-VA the song-POSS.3SG
 ‘the song of some of them has already been played’ [literal]
 ‘some of them has already been beaten up’ [figurative]
 (doc#1559)

- (7) *a vizes lepedő, ami-t néhány rejtélyes albán-ra*
 the wet bed-sheet, what-ACC some mysterious Albanian-onto
próbál rá-húz-ni a KBI
 try onto-pull-INF the KBI
 ‘the wet bed-sheet that the KBI tries to pull onto some mysterious Albanian’ [literal]
 ‘the whistle that the KBI tries to blow on some mysterious Albanian’ [figurative]
 (doc#1057)

Literal-scene manipulation was attested twice in our data, but both occurrences were alterations of the same idiom *elhúzza valaki nótáját* ‘to beat someone up’. The adjectives *magyar* ‘Hungarian’ and *keserves* ‘grievous’ in (8) as well as *utolsó* ‘last’ in (9) are grammatically and semantically consistent with the literal meaning of the head noun *nóta* ‘song’; nevertheless, they also add some extra meanings to the figurative interpretation. Example (8) was taken from a text which discusses what will happen if the government does not pay more attention to what other countries think about us. Both *magyar* and *keserves* refer to the unfortunate past of the Hungarian nation. The author of the text predicts that the recklessness of the government will lead to an unpleasant situation that the Hungarians had to experience so many times in the past. Similarly, *utolsó* in (10) has the same function: it denotes the last trouncing that causes the person’s death.

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- (8) *Az húz-za el megint a nótá-nk-at. Magyar nótá-t.*
 That pull-3SG away again the song-POSS.1PL-ACC. Hungarian song-ACC.
A keserves-t.
 The grievous-ACC.
 ‘That will play our song again. The Hungarian song. The grievous one.’ [literal]
 ‘That will give us hell again. In the grievous, Hungarian way.’ [figurative]
 (doc#1070)
- (9) *el-húz-zák az utolsó nótá-já-t*
 away-pull-3PL the last song-POSS.3SG-ACC
 ‘they play his last song’ [literal]
 ‘they hit him to death’ [figurative]
 (doc#2793)
- The third variation strategy which is in principle conditioned by idiomatic isomorphism was present only with the expression *ráhúzza valakire a vizes lepedőt* ‘blow the whistle on someone’. In all of the three cases, the NP *vizes lepedő* ‘wet bed-sheet’ is involved in a possessive construction where the possessors are abstract nouns: *karrierizmus* ‘careerism’, *retorika* ‘rhetoric’, and *rossz lelkiismeret* ‘guilty conscience’. At the literal level, there is a clear semantic clash between these nouns and the modified NP *vizes lepedő*, but interpreting them figuratively causes no problem.
- (10) *azok-ra is rá-húz-za a karrierizmus vizes lepedő-jé-t...*
 those-onto also onto-pull-3SG the careerism wet bed-sheet-POSS.3SG-ACC
 ‘it also pulls the wet bed-sheet of careerism onto those...’ [literal]
 ‘it also blows the whistle of careerism on those...’ [figurative]
 (doc#1112)
- (11) *a retorika vizes lepedő-jé-t jog-gal reánk húz-zák*
 the rhetoric wet bed-sheet-POSS.3G-ACC right-with onto us pull-3PL
 ‘they deservedly pull the wet bed-sheet of rhetoric onto us’ [literal]
 ‘they deservedly blow the whistle on us for rhetoric issues’ [figurative]
 (doc#673)
- (12) *rossz lelkiismeretük vizes lepedő-jé-t húz-zák mindannyiunk-ra*
 bad conscience wet bad-sheet-POSS.3SG-ACC pull-3PL all of us-onto
 ‘they pull the wet bad-sheet of their guilty conscience onto all of us’ [literal]
 ‘they blow the whistle on all of us because of their guilty conscience’ [figurative]
 (doc#669)

As can be seen in the above examples, constructional adaptation, literal-scene manipulation and topic indication were attested only with two of the eight idioms, *elhúzza valaki nótáját* and *ráhúzza valakire a vizes lepedőt*. These occurrences, however, do not provide sufficient evidence against Langlotz’s (2006) hypothesis that only decomposable idioms are open to these kinds of alterations. On the one hand, the number of occurrences in our data is too low to draw such conclusions. On the other hand, the non-decomposable nature of the expression *ráhúzza valakire a vizes lepedőt* should be treated with a little caution. Although in the

judgement test it has been rated as opaque and non-decomposable by Hungarian native speakers, my intuition is that at least a certain extent of transparency and decomposability can be assigned to it. The verb *ráhúz* ‘to pull onto’ figuratively corresponds to the verb *rábizonyít* ‘convict’. The relationship between the two correspondents may be supported by the fact that *ráhúz* has a lexicalized meaning denoting the action of applying a theory. The contribution of the constituent *vizes lepedő* ‘wet bed-sheet’ is less clear, but some kind of motivation can be found behind it as well. The unpleasant feeling caused by the wet bed-sheet touching the body may cognitively be extended to the unpleasantness of a situation in which someone’s guilt is revealed. If the expression is understood by this analogy, a certain degree of decomposability can be detected in it. This may be one explanation why constructional adaptation and topic indication are applicable to this idiom.

As opposed to the three principles discussed so far, topic-related literal-scene manipulation as well as ambiguity and punning are not exclusive for isomorphic idioms, but are also open to non-decomposable expressions. In (13) and (14), the adjective *vizes* ‘wet’ is replaced with *kokainos* ‘cocaine’ and *olajos* ‘oily’, respectively. Both are possible premodifiers of the literal meaning of *lepedő* but they are also associated with the usage-context.

(15) and (16) are typical examples of conjunction modification in which *képzeletbeli* ‘imaginary’ and *nemlétező* ‘non-existent’ do not make any contribution to the figurative meaning, but can only be interpreted at the literal level, denoting a feature of the subjects’ moustache.

- (13) *rá-húz-ni a kokain-os lepedő-t képviselő-társ-unk-ra*
 onto-pull-INF the cocaine-OS bed-sheet-ACC representative-mate-POSS.1PL-onto
 ‘to pull the cocaine bed-sheet onto our honorable friends’ [literal]
 ‘to blow the whistle on our honorable friends for cocaine issues’ [figurative]
 (doc#2805)

- (14) *rá-húz-t-ák a vizes-t... majd’ az-t mond-t-am olajos*
 onto-pull-PAST-3PL the wet-acc... almost that-acc say-past-1sg oily
lepedő-t egy olajcég-re
 bed-sheet-acc a oil company-onto
 ‘they pulled the wet... I almost said oily bed-sheet onto an oil company’ [literal]
 ‘they blew the whistle on an oil company’ [figurative]
 (doc#2607)

- (15) *össze-akaszt-ja képzeletbeli bajsz-á-t*
 together-hang-3SG imaginary moustache-POSS.3SG-ACC
 ‘he hangs his imaginary moustache with’ [literal]
 ‘he falls out with’ [figurative]
 (doc#2245)

- (16) *elmeháborodott gazfickó-val akaszt-juk össze nemlétező*
 insane knave-with hang-1PL together non-existent
bajsz-unk-at
 moustache-POSS.3SG-ACC
 ‘we hang our non-existent moustache with an insane knave’ [literal]
 ‘we fall out with an insane knave’ [figurative]
 (doc#2245)

The mechanism behind all of the attested occurrences of ambiguation and punning in the collected data involves the placement of the idiom into a literally biased context. Since the expression is mostly used figuratively, not only its literal but idiomatic meaning is activated at the same time what creates a humorous semantic effect. In (17), for example, this humorous effect is caused by the opposing nature of the two actions denoted by the literal and the figurative interpretations. The former expresses a joyful, heart-warming situation in which little children sing a song to Santa Claus, while the latter refers to an event where little children beat up Santa. Because of the clash between the two possible interpretations, the reader finds this sentence original and funny.

- (17) *A gyerekek öröm-mel húz-t-ák el a Mikulás*
 The children joy-with pull-PAST-3PL away the Santa
nótá-já-t.
 song-POSS.3SG-ACC.
 ‘The children gladly played Santa’s song.’
- (doc#2911)

Although this study was mainly interested in the occasional, non-lexicalized modifications, the last column of Table 2, labelled *Other*, also includes the number of alterations that fall outside this category. Lexicalized variants and formal idiom blends belong here, and, as can be seen, these alterations occurred the most frequently with the eight idioms in the corpus.

Formal idiom blends usually integrate two expressions that are nearly synonymous or have homophonous constituents. In (18), for example, the idioms *húzza a lóbőrt* ‘to snore loudly’ and *eldobja a rókabőrt* ‘to throw away the fox skin // to vomit’ are likely to be mixed. The basis of this combination may be the fact that both expressions contain a word that literally denotes the skin of an animal (i.e. horse and fox).

- (18) *a fi-á-ra néz, aki a vendégsezlon-on húz-za a*
 the son-POSS.3SG-onto see, who the chaise longue-on pull-3SG the
rókabőr-t
 fox skin-ACC
 ‘he looks at his son who is pulling the fox skin on the chaise longue’ [literal]
 ‘he looks at his son who is snoring on the chaise longue’ [figurative]
- (doc#583)

Lexicalized variant forms were also found for *felkapja a vizet* (*felkapja a cukrot* ‘to snatch up the sugar’ and *felszívja a vizet* ‘soak up the water’), *ráhúzza valakire a vizes lepedőt* (*ráborítja valakire a vizes lepedőt* ‘to lay the wet bed-sheet on someone’) and *összeakasztja a bajszát valakivel* (*összeköti a bajszát valakivel* ‘to tie one’s moustache with someone’). Since the conventionalized variations of idioms are beyond the scope of the present investigation, they and the issues related to them are not discussed in this paper.

- (19) *Tegnap fel-kap-t-am a cukr-ot*
 Yesterday up-get-PAST-1SG the sugar-ACC
 ‘Yesterday I snatched up the sugar’ [literal]
 ‘Yesterday I hit the ceiling’ [figurative]
- (doc#987)

- (20) *Minden-en fel-szív-juk a viz-et.*
 Everything-on up-soak-1PL the water-ACC
 ‘We soak up the water because of everything.’ [literal]
 ‘We hit the ceiling because of everything.’ [figurative]
 (doc#1149)
- (21) *De most rá-borít-om a vizes lepedő-t*
 But now onto-lay-1SG the wet bed-sheet-ACC
 ‘But this time I will lay the wet bed-sheet on him’ [literal]
 ‘But this time I will blow the whistle on him’ [figurative]
 (doc#2007)
- (22) *most Gyurcsán-nyal jól össze-köt-ik a bajsz-uk-at!*
 now Gyurcsány-with well together-tie-3PL the moustache-POSS.3PL-ACC
 ‘now they will tie their moustache with Gyurcsány!’ [literal]
 ‘now they will fall out with Gyurcsány!’ [figurative]
 (doc#2871)

4 Conclusion

The natural language examples attested in this corpus study suggest that non-decomposable idioms can be used with a variety of alterations that are different from their canonical base forms. All types of Langlotz’s (2006) variation principles were found to occur, including constructional adaptation, inconspicuous literal-scene manipulation and topic indication which are claimed to be constrained by the lack of an isomorphic relationship between the literal and idiomatic referents of an idiom’s constituents. The number of such instances, however, was very low; therefore, they do not provide sufficient evidence against Langlotz’s (2006) hypothesis that only transparent, decomposable idioms are able to develop these variants. Future investigations should be carried out with a larger sample of idioms in order to explore this problem more deeply.

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Appendix

A morpheme-by-morpheme transcription of the eight idioms.

- 1) *fel-kap-ja* *a* *viz-et*
 up-snatch-3SG the water-ACC
 ‘to snatch up the water’ [literal]
 ‘to hit the ceiling’ [figurative]

- 2) *össze-akaszt-ja* *a* *bajsz-á-t* *valaki-vel*
 together-hang-3Sg the moustache-POSS.3SG-ACC someone-with
 ‘to hang one’s moustache with someone’ [literal]
 ‘to fall out with someone’ [figurative]

- 3) *meg-üt-i* *a* *boká-já-t*
 PERF-hit-3SG the ankle-POSS.3SG-ACC
 ‘to hit one’s ankle’ [literal]
 ‘to get one’s fingers burnt’ [figurative]

- 4) *rá-húz-za* *valaki-re* *a* *vizes* *lepedő-t*
 onto-pull-3SG someone-onto the wet bed-sheet-ACC
 ‘to pull the wet bed-sheet onto someone’ [literal]
 ‘to blow the whistle on someone’ [figurative]

- 5) *húz-za* *a* *lóbőr-t*
 pull-3SG the horse skin-ACC
 ‘to pull the horse skin’ [literal]
 ‘to saw logs’ [figurative]

- 6) *lándzsá-t* *tör* *valaki/valami mellett*
 spear-ACC break someone/something next to
 ‘to break a spear next to someone/something’ [literal]
 ‘to make a stand for someone/something’ [figurative]

- 7) *pálcá-t* *tör* *valaki/valami felett*
 wand-ACC break someone/something above
 ‘to break a wand above someone/something’ [literal]
 ‘to judge someone/something’ [figurative]

- 8) *el-húz-za* *valaki* *nótá-já-t*
 away-pull-3SG someone song-POSS.3SG-ACC
 ‘to play someone’s song’ [literal]
 ‘to beat someone up / to give someone hell’ [figurative]