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### **A Comparison of the Syntactic and the Asyntactic Idioms in English**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This study is theoretically an attempt at identifying the syntax of idioms. It tries to investigate the internal and external syntax of syntactic (and hence SIs) and asyntactic (and hence AIs) idioms in English. This study aims at figuring out the similarities and differences between SIs and AIs in the light of their internal and external syntactic behavior. It is hypothesized that both SIs and AIs could have internal and external syntax. Another hypothesis is that syntax of AIs could be internally fixed, but externally variable. To achieve the aims of this study, the researcher collects many examples of SIs and AIs from many references of English to show their internal and external syntactic behaviour. This research concludes that syntax of SIs and AIs could be internally different, but externally somehow similar in the sense of undergoing external syntactic operations. It is also concluded that the syntactic deviance of AIs can be identified in terms of internal syntax and their internal organization can be to some extent syntactically recognizable.

## 1. Introduction

Idioms can be considered as a common and pervasive phenomenon in every language. It has also been noticed that English is very rich in idioms which are frequently used by native speaker and non-native learners of English.

English idioms can be categorized into SIs and AIs where the former can be formed according to the syntactic rules of English such as *kick the bucket*, *break the ice*. The latter can be identified in terms of violating or disrespecting rules of English syntax such as *by and large*, *trip the light fantastic*. Accordingly, Both SIs and AIs will be identified and analyzed in this study. Thus, the current study tries to find answers for the following research questions:

1. Do SIs and AIs have internal and external syntax?
2. What are syntactic processes that will be permitted for SIs and AIs in English?
3. Can the syntactic processes that are applicable for SIs and AIs be characterized or identified within internal or external syntax?
4. What are the similarities and differences between SIs and AIs in English in the light of their syntactic features or behaviour?
5. Can the syntactic behaviour of SIs and AIs be analyzed or determined through examination of their meaning?

This study aims at:

1. Identifying the syntactic behavior or structures of SIs and AIs through examination of their internal and external syntax.
2. Characterizing and analyzing the internal syntactic deviations of AIs since such deviations require a special analysis and identification.
3. Examining some syntactic processes that SIs and AIs can undergo.
4. Figuring out the major points of similarities and dissimilarities of SIs and AIs in English in terms of their syntactic or structural behaviour.

Accordingly, to achieves these aims, this study puts forward the following hypotheses:

1. SIs and AIs could have internal and external syntax (or syntactic structure) which could be to some extent similar to ordinary expressions.
2. Their internal and external structure could somehow interact with the regular syntactic rules and operations while still retaining their idiomatic interpretations.
3. There are restrictions on the syntactic operations that some SIs and AIs can undergo.

4. Internal syntactic ill-formedness of AIs couldn't block regular external syntactic operations.

The limits of this study include the followings:

1. This study is restricted to an analysis or identification of the syntactic behaviour or structures of SIs and AIs collected by the researcher through examination of their internal and external syntax.
2. The focus of this study is also limited only to make a comparison between SIs and AIs in English concerning their syntactic behaviour.

In terms of the procedures adopted for this study, this paper presents some definitions, theoretical considerations and terminology of SIs and AIs. This study is a qualitative one by collecting some examples of SIs and AIs from different references to analyze and identify their internal and external syntactic behaviour based on observation of these examples. Thus, most English data of this study come from Spear's (1998) *NTC's Thematic Dictionary of American Idioms* and *McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms* (2005) and Moon's (1998) *Fixed Expressions and Idioms in English A Corpus-Based Approach*. This study tries to characterize and analyze the internal syntactic deviations of AIs since they have received little attention. Thus, such syntactic deviations are driven from Moon (1998, p. 81-82) and Quirk et al. (1985, p. 159-839-843-844-1102-1168).

## 2. Literature Review

Idioms have been tackled by many linguists since they can be regarded as an important and essential part of any language. One of the conventional definitions has been introduced by Weinreich (1969, p.26), who defined idioms "as a complex expression whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of its elements". Seidl and McMordie (1978, p.13) state that "an idiom is a number of words which, taken together, mean something different from the individual words of the idiom when they stand alone". Thus, the idiom should have more than one word; thus, it can be called a multiword and the notion of non-compositionality could be regarded as a defining feature of idioms. In addition, Cruse (1987, p.37) states that there are two features which are required in order to identify or characterize idioms precisely: "first, that it be lexically complex - i.e. it should consist of more than one lexical constituent; second, that it should be a single minimal semantic constituent".

There could be many terms adopted for identifying idioms. Panou (2014, p. 12) states that some linguists like Alexander (1978, 1979) and Carter (1987) have adopted the very general term which would be *fixed expression* for describing idioms. On other hand, other linguists like Glässer (1986a), Cowie (2001) and Naciscione (2011) prefer to adopt the term *phraseological unit* (Panou, 2014, p.12). Moon (1998, p. 2) prefers to adopt the term *fixed expressions* and *idioms*, and the abbreviation for such a term that has been used throughout her book is *FEIs*.

### 2.1 Syntactic Idioms

The term of syntactic idioms comes from the common and traditional view of idioms which involve regular syntactic structures. According to Fillmore et al. (1988, p .505), idioms that have regular grammatical structures are called *grammatical idioms*. They (1988, p .505) mention that “the so-called grammatical idioms include *kick the bucket*, *spill the beans*, *blow one’s nose*, etc., where verbs and nouns phrases are found just where you expect them. Furthermore, they (1988, p .506) state that SIs can be included under the category “*familiar pieces familiarly arranged*” in the sense of having regular syntactic structures and ordinary lexical items.

### 2.1.1 Grammaticality or Syntactic Well-Formedness

The principle of grammaticality or syntactic well-formedness can be considered as a defining characteristic of SIs since the majority of idioms can be formed according to rules of grammar, for example, *hit the books*, *kick the bucket*. In this respect, furthermore, Bussmann (1996, p. 485) mentions that the concept of grammaticality can be defined as “a term coined by Chomsky (1965) to indicate the well-formedness of expressions of natural languages”; thus, the concept of grammaticality has been introduced in order to measure the phrases or sentences whether being grammatical or ungrammatical. Thus, Dąbrowska (2018, p. 151) states that “idioms are usually well-formed in terms of grammar by obeying the structure building mechanisms of the language”.

### 2.1.2 Realizations of SIs

English SIs can be formed according to various grammatical patterns or forms in the sense that they can be realized by phrasal, clausal and sentential patterns. According to Herbst (2010, p. 134), idioms, like SIs, which can be realized by different grammatical forms are outlined in the following Table:

**Table (2.1)**

*Forms or Patterns of SIs According to Herbst*

No.	Form	Examples of AIs
1.	Noun phrases	<i>the wind of change, bad blood, a nervous wreck</i>
2.	Predicates	<i>have a frog in one’s throat, have second thoughts</i>
3.	Sentences	<i>the early bird catches the worm, don’t cry over spilt milk</i>
4.	Phrasal verbs	<i>look up, come up with.</i>

### 2.1.3. Characteristics of SIs

#### 2.1.3.1 Metaphoricity

Metaphoricity could be considered as an essential and common feature of SIs. In this respect, Lakoff and Johnsen (1980, p. 46) mention that “the English expressions are of two sorts: simple literal expressions and idioms, like SIs, that fit the metaphor and are part of the normal everyday way of talking about the subject.” According to Cruse (2006, p. 106), the concept of metaphor can be defined as “a variety of figurative (i.e. non-literal) use of language”. Also, it has been noticed that “what distinguishes a metaphorical use of an expression is the relationship between its figurative meaning and its literal meaning (Cruse, 2006, p. 106).

According to Horn (2003, p. 245), SIs could be described as “metaphor” in the sense of having the feature of “transparency of interpretation”. Thus, the set transparent expressions such as ***pull strings***, ***draw the line*** and ***jump on the bandwagon*** can be described as “metaphors”. Thus, their metaphorical meanings can be explained by Horn (2003, p. 256) who noticed that “in these expressions, ‘*strings*’ are abstract means of manipulation, ‘*the line*’ is an abstract boundary and ‘*the bandwagon*’ is a cause/crusade”.

Thus, according to Dąbrowska (2018, p.20), it seems that the majority of studies concerning idioms have acknowledged that metaphoricity can be considered as the main and basic characteristic of SIs.

#### 2.3.4.2 Compositionality /Non-Compositionality

According to O'Grady and Dobrovolsky (1997, p. 260), the principle of compositionality can be explained by saying that “the meaning of a sentence is determined by the meaning of its component parts and the manner in which they are arranged in syntactic structure”. Thus, according to Spear (1998, pp. 43-44), there are some of SIs could involve a compositional meaning since their idiomatic meaning can be inferred from their individual constituents:

1. ***given to understand*** (*made to believe*)
2. ***do someone good*** (*to benefit someone*)

On the other hand, the notion of non-compositionality has been early regarded as the major or defining feature of idioms, like SIs, by Sweet (1889, p.140), where he states that “the meaning of each idiom is an isolated fact which cannot be inferred from the meaning of the words of which the idiom is made up”. Thus, some of SIs would be as non-compositional strings such as ***kick the bucket*** (to die), ***shoot the breeze*** (to spend time chatting) where the meaning of their parts could not contribute to their idiomatic meanings.

### 2.3 Asyntactic Idioms

Smith can be regarded as one of the earlier scholars who made important contributions to identify English idioms; thus, he (1925, p.167) defines idioms as follows: “idiom, like AI, is sometimes used, in English as in French, to describe the form of speech peculiar to a people or nation”. Furthermore, he (1925, p.168) adopts the narrower meaning of idioms by regarding them as “the idiosyncrasies of our language, and, above all, those phrases which are verbal anomalies, which transgress, that is to say, either the laws of grammar or the laws of logic”.

According to Weinreich (1969, p. 46), English idioms which have irregular structures from the view point of syntax such as *by and large*, or *to blow somebody to kingdom come* can be called “**isolated oddities**” which can be found in any language.

According to Fillmore et al. (1988, p. 505), idioms that cannot be formed according to rules of syntax have been called *extragrammatical idioms*. These can be considered idiomatic expressions since they deviate from the normal structure of English syntax. In this respect, Taylor (2012, p. 84) states that “for many expressions, like AIs, however, their idiomaticity does reside in their syntax” such as *all of a sudden* and *by and large* where the adjectives (*sudden*) and (*large*) can be used as if they were nouns. In addition, according to Fillmore et al. (1988, p. 508), AIs can be characterized as *familiar pieces unfamiliarly arranged* where they have familiar lexical items, but they have irregular syntactic structures such as *sight unseen, so far so good*.

According to Moon (1998, pp. 20-21), idioms which violate the syntactic rules of English are called “*ill formed collocations*” that can be included under the term “*anomalous collocations*” such as *by and large*. Furthermore, she (1998, p. 80) states that expressions which “cannot be parsed according to normal syntactic rules are non-compositional” and can be called *Ill-Formed FEIs*.

### 2.3.1 Ungrammaticality or Syntactic Ill-formedness

Syntactic ill-formedness can be regarded as a major or core feature for identifying AIs since Cacciari and Tabossi (1993, p. 135) state that “(syntactic) ill-formedness itself might serve as a signal that the incoming string is an idiom”. Furthermore, according to Baker (1900, p.48), grammatical or syntactic irregularity can be considered as a defining feature for idioms since she (1900, p.48) states that “an idiom is a deviation from the grammar of the language, but not from its literary usage”. Moreover, Cermák (as cited in Dąbrowska 2018, pp. 11-12) states that “the more anomalies a phraseme displays, the more idiomatic it is and vice versa”.

### 2.3.2 Realizations of AIs

AIs can have different forms or realizations. Even though their structures deviate from the conventional norms of grammar, but such structures might be grammatically identifiable. In this respect, Fillmore et al. (1988, p. 505) state that “such expressions, like AIs, have grammatical structure, to be sure, but the structure they have are not made intelligible by knowledge of familiar rules of grammar”. Thus, AIs which could be realized by the following forms or patterns are outlined in Table below:

**Table (2.2)**

#### *Forms or Patterns of AIs*

No.	Form	Examples of AIs
1.	Noun phrases	<i>all of a sudden, bag and baggage</i>

2.	Prepositional Phrases	<i>by and large, at large, of late, at all</i>
3.	Phrasal Verbs	<i>stay put, go for broke, trip the light fantastic</i>
4.	Clauses	<i>come what may, come to think of it</i>
5.	Sentence	<i>far be it from me to do something, So help me God</i>

### 2.3.3 Characteristics of AIs

#### 2.3.3.1 Non-Metaphoricity

AIs could be regarded as non-compositional strings since the meanings of their individual parts would not totally be linked to their idiomatic meaning (e.g. *by and large* “generally speaking,” or *trip the light fantastic* “to dance”. Accordingly, such AIs can be semantically opaque in the sense that their literal meaning could be absolutely irrelevant to their idiomatic meaning (Dąbrowska, 2018, pp. 35-36).

Parmentier and Waszczuk (2019, p.42) state that “Idioms which are not figurative do not have a comprehensible literal meaning, and as such are necessarily opaque”. Thus, AIs might be regarded as non-figurative expressions since, according to Fraser (1970: 30) some AIs cannot have literal counterparts or interpretations.

On the other hand, according to Spear (2005, pp. 108-299), a limited number of AIs could be considered as figurative phrases or sentences such as *come a cropper* (to have a misfortune or to fail) and *heaven help us* (Good grief).

#### 2.3.3.1 Compositionality/Non-Compositionality

According to Wood (2020: 32), the notion of non-compositionality would be regarded as a key or defining feature for some idioms, including AIs such as *go bananas* (to go crazy) and *go for broke* (to risk everything). Thus, these AIs would be non-computational since their idiomatic meaning can be completely irrelevant to the meaning of their individual elements.

Accordingly, the notion of non-compositionality may be linked with the syntactic deviation in the sense that such a deviation might make such AIs to be non-compositional. In this respect, Taylor (2012, p.72) states that “it is their syntactic regularity which makes a literal, compositional interpretation possible”.

AIs could be commonly viewed as expressions involving a non-compositional meaning. On the other hand, based on Spear (1998, pp. 67-265-313), some of AIs could be regarded as compositional strings because their idiomatic meaning can be predicted from the meaning of their constituents. Consider the following examples.

1. *in short* (stated briefly)

2. *of late* (*lately*)
3. *all of a sudden* (*suddenly*)

### 3. Internal and External Syntax in SIs and AIs

In discussing the syntax of idioms, it is very important and useful to take two aspects of syntax into consideration: internal and external syntax. In this respect, Makkai and Melby (1985, p. 467) state that “it is clear that idioms have both internal and external syntax”.

Fillmore (1988, p. 36) characterizes the notion of internal and external syntax as follows:

On the level of syntax, we distinguish for any construction in a language its external and its internal properties. In speaking of the external syntax of a construction we refer to the properties of the construction as a whole, that is to say, anything speakers know about the construction that is relevant to the larger syntactic contexts in which it is welcome. By the internal syntax of a construction we have in mind a description of the construction’s make-up.

Katamba (1993, p. 326) states that “idioms are syntactic constituents subject to syntactic rules, just like any other syntactic units”. Thus, the same syntactic principles which are responsible for producing ordinary phrases might be used to generate the majority of idioms. Thus, idioms could have both internal and external syntax that is visible to or could interact with the syntactic rules or transformations. Moreover, the internal and external syntactic structure of idioms can determine the syntactic behaviour of idioms and shed light on the syntactic variability of these expressions.

Syntactic operations which could be applicable to some idioms can be classified into internal and external transformations. The former operations could be identified in terms of the internal syntax of idioms. The latter can be concerned with the capability of idioms for undergoing the syntactic transformations in the light of their external syntactic behavior.

#### 3.2 Internal Syntax of SIs

According to Katamba (1993, p. 298), idioms, including SIs, are expressions that “have the internal structure of normal syntactic units, and they behave just like other syntactic units of the same type in the syntax”. Furthermore, according to Pulman (1993, p. 250), SIs could have an internal structure that could follow or interact with the syntactic rules or operations. Thus, the internal structure of SIs could determine the syntactic behaviour of SIs and shed light on the syntactic operations that such SIs could undergo.

Some syntactic operations which could be permitted for some SIs would restructure or interrupt the internal syntactic organization of these expressions such as passivisation, topicalization, nominalization, pronominalization and wh-question. According to Langlotz (2006, p. 180), such operations could involve “changes in the constructional organisation of the base-form” of the internal syntactic structure of such SIs. In addition, Moreno (2007, p. 146) states that these syntactic processes can be called “internal transformations” in the sense that



“they are not external and so affect the string as a unit, but internal and so affect only a constituent of the idiomatic phrase, which can be focused, modified or even omitted”.

### 3.2.1 Passivization

Passivization can be regarded as one of the syntactic transformations that can be applicable to some SIs in the light of their internal structure. Thus, such a transformation may be called internal syntactic operation in the sense of reordering or distributing the internal parts of some SIs in a larger syntactic context.

Horn (2003, pp. 245-246) states that according to Jackendoff (1997), some idioms, like SIs, can be described as “mobile idioms” in the sense of involving a feature which may be called “a sort of metaphorical semantic composition”. Thus, SIs having such a property can be passivized in the sense of distributing their parts in a larger syntactic construction such as *let the cat out of the bag*. On the other hand, SIs lacking such a property would not be permitted to undergo the passive operation such as *shoot the ball*. Thus, he (2003, p. 247) states that the application of passivization for such idioms would make them be as asyntactic in terms of idiomatic readings:

1. *The cat was let out of the bag.*
2. *#The bull was shot all evening during the party.*

### 3.2.2 Topicalization

Topicalization could be one of the internal syntactic variations permitted for some SIs. Thus, such an operation would involve reordering or distributing the parts of some SIs. That’s why, it can be called internal syntactic operation. According to Nurnberg et al. (1994, p. 503), topicalization can be one of the syntactic operations identified for some SIs in a restricted way. Adding to that, Nurnberg et al. (1994, p. 503) notice that such an operation can show that the individual parts of such SIs can have recognizable meanings:

1. *Pull strings* • *Those*  
*strings, he wouldn't pull for you.*

(Nurnberg et al., 1994, p. 503)

On the other hand, according to Schenk (1995, p. 259), topicalization can be one of the syntactic operations licensed for only expressions having meaning. Thus, such a transformation cannot be applied to some SIs (e.g., *spill the beans*) in the sense that their parts might not carry meaning in the sense of contributing to their idiomatic meaning. Consider the following examples.

2. *#The beans John spilled.*

(Schenk, 1995, p. 259)

### 3.2.3 Nominalization

Nominalization can be regarded as one of syntactic transformations allowable for some SIs. Such a transformation might be one of the internal syntactic operations in the sense of reordering the internal structure or parts of SIs, for example, *lay down the law* into *laying down of the law*.

Frazer (1970, p.23) states that one of the major problems of idioms is their syntactic behaviour within a transformational grammar since many idioms cannot undergo certain syntactic operations. Accordingly, some idioms, like SIs, cannot undergo the action nominalization such as *make up one's mind* (Frazer, 1970, p.23). On the other hand, the SI *lay down the law* can be nominalized:

1. a. #*Your making up of your mind on that issue surprised us*  
       b. *His laying down of the law didn't impress anyone.*

(Frazer, 1970, p. 23)

### 3.2.4 Pronominalization

Pronominalization can be regarded as one of syntactic operations applicable for some SIs in the light of their internal structure. Thus, such an operation might be one of the internal syntactic operations in the sense of restructuring or replacing the structure of SIs into a new one. Abeillé (1995, p.18) states that “pronominalization of an idiomatic part can also occur when no coreference is involved”. For example.

1. *My goose is cooked* but *yours* isn't.

(Schenck, 1995, p. 19)

According to Pullman (1993, p. 253), the syntactic process of pronominalization can be acceptable for SIs whose components can be modified in the sense that they have independent meanings. Consider the following examples of SIs.

2. He *turned the tables on me* and then I *turned them on him*.

(Pullman, 1993, p. 253)

On the other hand, some SIs which cannot be modified cannot be permitted to undergo pronominalization such as *keep an eye* in the sense that their constituents may not have individual meanings (Pullman 1993, p. 253). Consider the following examples.

3. #*I'll keep an eye on him* and *one on her too*.

(Pullman, 1993, p. 253)

### 3.2.5 Wh-Question Formation

The formation of wh-question could be regarded as one of the syntactic transformations that are applicable to some of SIs in terms of their internal syntactic behaviour. Such a process could

affect or alter the internal structure of some SIs since it would involve reordering or distributing their parts in the larger syntactic structure. Abeillé (1995, p.19) states that the possibility of SIs to undergo the operation of wh-question can be related to the fact that whether SIs such as *spill the beans* involve a free determiner or not.

1. *Which beans did he spill?*

According to Shim (2021, p. 20), SIs could be classified into three groups: “(i) one that is syntactically fully flexible; (ii) one that is syntactically less flexible; and (iii) one that is syntactically inflexible or frozen”. The first group such as *take care of* are permitted to undergo wh-question without losing their idiomatic. Some of SIs which belong to the second and third group such as *spill the beans*, *kick the bucket* could be syntactically restricted or invariable in the sense of not tolerating some syntactic transformations such as wh-question formation. Consider the following examples.

2. *How much care did they take of the infants?*

3. *#Which beans did Bibi spill?*

4. *#Which bucket did Bibi kick?*

(Shim, 2021, p. 20)

### 3.3 External Syntax of SIs

SIs can have external syntax in the sense that they could be put in a larger pattern. Thus, they could interact with normal syntactic rules or operations due to their syntactic regularity. In this respect, Schafroth (2020, p. 134) states that the external syntax of SIs represents a “larger structure into which the idiom can be embedded”.

Accordingly, syntactic operations which are applicable to some SIs might be called external transformations such as tense shifting, negation, wh-question formation, modification and subject-verb agreement. Thus, such processes can be identified in the sense of embedding SIs in a larger context. Thus, such operations wouldn’t involve restructuring or interrupting the internal organization of such SIs. On the other hand, as noticed by Stock et al. (1993, p. 235), internal transformations such as passivisation and topicalization which can alter the internal syntactic structure of idioms and “would involve a restructuring of the word string”.

#### 3.3.1 Shift in Tenses

Tense shifting is one of the syntactic alterations licensed for SIs. Such a transformation is identified when SIs are organized in a larger construction or pattern. In this respect, Cacciari and Glucksberg (1991, p. 218) state that tense alteration is one of the syntactic modifications permitted for some SIs in the sense of behaving like ordinary expressions concerning their external syntactic behavior. For example, the verb *kick* in the expression *kick the bucket* can be syntactically altered by accepting various tenses.

1. *One will **kick the bucket** tomorrow.*
2. *One may have **kicked the bucket** last week.*

(Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991, p. 218)

According to Barkema (1996, p. 143), tense alterations could be involved within the type of variation which is called “Term selection” that “implies that an element from a closed system is replaced with an element from the same system”. Observe the following example.

3. *The straw that breaks the camel's back vs. the straw that broke the camel's back.*

(Barkema, 1996, p. 143)

Wulff (2012, p. 291) states that some of SIs can be syntactically immutable since syntactic invariability can be recognized as a predominant syntactic property for some of SIs. Thus, the SI such as *It takes one to know one* which is syntactically inflexible could not be permitted to undergo tense shifting.

4. a. *It takes one to know one.*
- b. *#It took one to know one.*

(Wulff, 2012, p. 291)

### 3.3.2 Negation

Negation is another syntactic operation licensed for SIs concerning their external syntactic structure. According to Fellbaum (2011, p. 444), some of SIs such as (*not lift a finger, not give a hoot*) are regarded as “negative polarity items”. Thus, such negative components can be regarded as obligatory items in the sense that such expressions could only occur in a negative structure since omitting such items will make them lose their idiomatic interpretations. Observe the following examples.

1. *They wouldn't **lift a finger** to help us.*
2. *She doesn't **give a hoot** about me. Why should I care?*

(Spears, 1998, p. 179)

(Spears, 2005, p. 455)

Accordingly, some of SIs (e.g. *lay an egg*) could be permitted to undergo the syntactic process of negation in the light of their external syntactic behavior:

3. *I hope I don't **lay an egg** when it's my turn to sing.*

(Spears 1998, p. 150)

On other hand, Baker & Hengeveld (2012 :274) state that some of idiom, like SIs, (e.g. *I'm a Dutchman* and *pigs will fly*) are not permitted to undergo negation since they might be ungrammatical:

4. a. \*If Shaw wrote Othello, *I'm not a Dutchman*.

b. \*And *pigs will not fly*.

(Baker & Hengeveld, 2012, p. 274)

### 3.3.3 Wh-Question Formation

According to shim (2020, p. 21), wh-question formation could be one of the syntactic transformations permitted for some of SIs. Such an operation could be identified in terms of the external syntactic behaviour of some SIs since there is no involvement of distribution or reconstruction as far as their parts are concerned. Thus, Some of SIs could be subject to such syntactic formation, for example, *rule the roost*, *slow someone or something down*:

1. Who *rules the roost* at your house?

(Spear, 1998, p. 106)

2. Did I *slow myself down* enough?

(Spear, 1998, p. 108)

### 3.3.4 Modification

Modification is another syntactic operation licensed for some SIs due to their regular syntactic properties which could interact with some syntactic transformations. According to Barkema (1996, p. 143), modification is one of the syntactic variations which could be discussed within the type of variation called "Addition". Adding to that, such an operation might be called external syntactic variations in the sense that when the internal syntax of these SIs is concerned their parts are not involved in restructuring or distributing (Barkema, 1996, p. 143).

Accordingly, there are many SIs such as *speak one's mind*, *a flash in the pan* that can tolerate the internal modification by insertion of adjectives or adverbs before a noun or noun phrase. Consider the following examples.

1. When drugs are involved, it's time to *speak your parental mind*."

2. Did he finally *speak his mind*?"

(Glucksberg, 1993, p. 16)

3. A *flash in the economic pan*.

(Barkema, 1996, p. 143)

### 3.3.5 Subject-verb Agreement

Subject-verb Agreement is one of the syntactic characteristics or requirements of sentences observed or recognized in the light of external syntactic behaviour of SIs. In this respect, Abeillé (1995, p. 19) states that due to the fact that SIs conform or follow regular syntactic rules or principles; thus, they can show “regular agreement patterns” when inserting them in a larger construction.

Idioms, like SIs, can be classified into phrasal and sentence idioms: the first group could be “structurally described as fixed combinations like “verb + noun”, “verb + noun + preposition”, “preposition + noun”, “adjective + preposition + noun”, and so on”. Thus, phrasal idioms would not show the grammatical requirement or feature of sentences (Yong and Peng 2007, p. 177). Hence, some SIs which are phrasal expressions are lacking subject-verb agreement since such a grammatical feature could only be identified when such SIs are embedded in a larger context:

1. *Too many soldiers **kick the bucket** in unnecessary wars.*

(Langlotz, 2006, p. 221)

2. *Business usually **hits the skids** in the summer.*

(Spears, 1998, p. 150)

### 3.4 Internal Syntax of AIs

Some scholars such as Jackendoff (2011, p.24), Taylor (2012, p.70) and Heredia and Cieśllicka (2015, p.210) notice that some of AIs could have internal structures. Though the internal organization of AIs deviate from rules of English syntax, for example, there is no English syntactic rule for generating the expression **by and large** by coordinating a preposition and an adjective, however, their structure could be somehow grammatically identifiable. Accordingly, AIs can show syntactic peculiarity or recalcitrance in the light of their internal organization, moreover, idioms, including AIs, may “present a considerable stumbling block to the generative paradigm” due to their syntactic ill-formedness (Langlotz, 2006, p .2).

In addition, Read (2020, p. 534) notices that though some of AIs could be syntactically frozen in terms of their internal behaviour or makeup, but they still “- possess internal structure and undergo - at least to some extent - regular decompositional analyses”. Thus, the unavailability of AIs for undergoing syntactic transformations concerning their internal structure can be explained in terms of the fact that Glucksberg (2001, p. 72) confirms that “syntactic flexibility in such cases is virtually nil: there is no plausible way to transform the idiom into any other syntactic or sequential form”.

Accordingly, syntactic transformations which might be called internal transformations such as passivisation, topicalization, nominalization pronominalization and wh-question formation would not be allowable for AIs. Thus, such operations would involve reordering or interrupting the internal organization of these expressions.

### 3.4.1 Internal Organization (or Structural Behaviour) of AIs

It is useful to investigate the internal structural organization of AIs which can be characterized as ill-formed. The internal syntactic irregularity or peculiarity of AIs can be identified or discussed within the notion of syntactic behaviour since AIs have structure, but it deviates from the conventional rules of syntax.

In addition, the structure of some AIs can be to some extent built by similar grammatical rules that are responsible for generating non-idiomatic expressions. In this respect, Cruse (1987, p.37) states that some internal structures of AIs could be grammatically recognizable. For example, Barkema (1996, p. 149) states that “an expression like *by and large* can still be regarded as a form of coordination, be it an idiosyncratic one”.

Based on Moon (1998, pp. 81-82) and Quirk et al. (1985, pp. 159-839-843-844-1102-1168), one can recognize some reasons for the internal syntactic ill-formedness of some AIs. Thus, some of these reasons will be explained in the following subsections.

#### 3.4.1.1 Odd (or Irregular) Phrase Structures

Irregular phrase structure can be regarded as a major reason of syntactic deviations for some AIs. Thus, most syntactic ill-formedness might be characterized as irregular syntactic structure or syntactically phrasal irregularity.

Accordingly, Fellbaum (2015, p. 783) states that AIs can be described as constructions having irregular phrase structures since they could not “be assigned to a phrasal category”. Also, Moon (1998, p. 81) states that some syntactic deviations for AIs could be noticed due to the irregular or strange phrase structures that AIs could have. For example, the expression *battle royal* has an irregular phrase structure in the sense that the noun *royal* could only be used as a premodifier not a postmodifier. Thus, it should proceed the word *battle* to form a regular noun phrase.

#### 3.4.1.2 Ellipsis

Other syntactic irregularity of some AIs, mentioned by Moon (1998, p. 81), could arise from ellipsis. Accordingly, Ellipses of some element can be regarded as one of the reasons for the syntactic deviation of the internal structure of AIs. Thus, some constitutes or items of such expressions can be ellipped. Examine the following example.

1. *through thick and thin (wood)*

2. *(a matter) of course*

(Moon, 1998, p. 40)

3. *trip the light fantastic (toe)*

(Fellbaum, 2015, p. 783)

### 3.4.1.3 Archaic Mood

According to Moon (1998, p. 81), “archaic mood” can be regarded as one of the causes or reasons for the internal syntactic anomaly of some AIs. Aarts et al. (1994, p. 33) state that the concept “archaic” can be used to describe “a word or grammatical structure: no longer in ordinary use, though retained for special purposes”.

In this respect, Quirk et al. (1985, p. 852) state that “most formulae, like AIs, used for stereotyped communication situations are grammatically irregular”:

1. *Thank you*
2. *Nothing doing*

(Quirk et al., 1985, p. 852)

3. *At all*
4. *So long*

(Moon, 1998, p. 81)

### 3.4.1.4 Misuse of Word Classes

Moon (1998, p. 81) states that the internal structure of some AIs “contain strange uses of word classes: in particular, a non-nominal word or sense may be used as a noun, or an adjective as an adverb”. Thus, such odd uses of the word classes can be considered as one of the reasons for syntactic ill-formedness of the internal organization of some AIs. For example, some adjectives such as *large*, *sudden* can be used as if they were a noun or a noun phrase.

1. *by and large*
2. *all of a sudden*

(Moon, 1998, p. 81)

Other irregular use of word classes could arise when some verbs such as *know*, *make*, *swim*, *take* can be used as if they were nouns or noun phrases:

3. *in the know*
4. *on the make*

(Moon, 1998, p. 82)



5. *in the swim of things*

6. *on the take*

(Spear, 1998, pp. 96-196)

### 3.4.1.5 Zero Article

According to Moon (1998, p. 82), syntactic aberrations of some AIs can be identified in terms of the fact that some countable or singular nouns can be used in a construction with zero article or without determiners such as *accident*, *advantage*, *bag*, *baggage*.

1. *by accident*

(Fraser, 1970, p. 22)

2. *bag and baggage*

(Moon, 1998, p. 82)

### 3.4.1.6 Aberrant Transitivity Patterns

Linda and Flavell (1992, p. 7) state that the anomalous syntactic structure of some AIs could come from the fact that intransitive verbs can be followed by a direct object. In addition, Moon (1998, p. 82) states that other syntactic ill-formedness can be recognized for some AIs since some intransitive verbs can appear in “aberrant transitivity patterns”:

1. *go great guns*

2. *to come a cropper*

(Linda & Flavell, 1992, p. 7)

3. *rain cats and dogs*

(Moon, 1998, p. 82)

### 3.4.1.7 Aphoristic Sentences

Some AIs can take the form of aphoristic sentences which have anomalous syntactic structure. According to Everaert (2010, p. 77), idioms, SIs and AIs, could involve “all formulaic expressions including sayings, proverbs, collocations”. In this respect, Quirk et al. (1985, p. 843) state that “the aphoristic sentence structure is found in many proverbs (as AIs). The common structural feature is the balancing of two equivalent constructions against each other”. Consider the following examples.

1. *Waste not, want not.*

2. *So far, so good.*

(Quirk et al., 1985, p. 843)

### 3.4.1.8 Verb-Verb Combinations

Other reasons for internal syntactic ill-formedness of some AIs could arise from combining two main verbs which can be regarded as figurative constructions. In this respect, Quirk et al. (1985, p. 1168) state that “in these idiomatic constructions, the second verb is nonfinite, and may be either an infinitive or a participle, with or without a following preposition”. Consider the following example.

1. *Make do*
2. *Put paid*

(Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1168)

3. *Stay put*

(Moon, 1998, p. 82)

### 3.4.1.9 (Formulaic) Subjunctive

Some set expressions of AIs can be used in the form of a (formulaic) subjunctive. In this respect, Quirk et al. (1985, p. 159) states that “the FORMULAIC SUBJUNCTIVE, including AIs, consists of the base form of the verb. It is used in certain set expressions chiefly in independent clauses”:

1. *Come what may* ['Whatever may happen.].
2. *Be that as it may* ['However that may be.].

(Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1102)

Some AIs could be optative subjunctive by involving the subject-main or auxiliary verb inversion:

3. *Far be it from me* to spoil the fun.
4. *So help me God.*
5. *May the best man win.*

(Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1102)

Other AIs in the form of optative subjunctive can be identified by using verbs in the base form without involving subject-verb inversion:

6. *God save the Queen!*

7. *Devil take the hindmost.*

8. *God forbid.*

(Quirk et al., 1985, p. 839)

### 3.4.1.10 Verbless Clauses or Patterns

Another reason for the syntactic deviation of some AIs such as *the more fool you* could be recognized in the sense of using clauses without involving verbs. In this respect, Quirk et al. (1985, p. 844) state that “A single verbless comparative clause, like the AI *the more fool you*, introduced by *the* may occur as a response” and “it may be further reduced by the omission of *the*”, for example, *more fool you*.

In addition, other clauses which are AIs could be abnormal in terms of the regular syntactic structure that usual clauses or sentences could have. Thus, such clauses or patterns could be called verbless command. In this respect, Quirk et al. (1985, p. 843) state that “One kind of verbless command is constructed with an adverbial followed by a with-phrase”. Consider the following AIs.

1. *Off with his head!* ['Cut off his head!']
2. *Out with it!* [set expression: 'Tell me about it.']

(Quirk et al., 1985, p. 843)

### 3.4.1.11 Irregular Wh-Questions

Some of AIs can be used in the form of wh-questions such as *How come, how about, what about*. In this respect, Quirk et al. (1985, p. 839) states that there could be many of syntactically abnormal wh-questions used in spoken language. Accordingly, such wh-questions as *what about, how about* as idiomatic constructions could be followed by a noun, noun phrases, and ing-clauses.

1. *What about a picnic?*
2. *What about going on a picnic?*
3. *How about a lift?*

(Spears, 2005, p. 312-746)

Furthermore, there can be other AIs used in the form of abnormal wh-question. Thus, a question could be constructed by using verbs in the base form with no subject or auxiliary: “why (+ not) + predication” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 840). Consider the following examples.

4. *Why keep a dog and bark yourself?*
5. *Why buy a cow when milk is so cheap?*

(Spears, 2005, p. 757)

### 3.4.1.12 Coordination of a Noun Phrase and a Sentence

Another reason for syntactic deviance of AIs can be recognized by joining of a noun phrase and a sentence. Accordingly, Taylor (2018, p. 71) states that idiomaticity of some AIs such as *one more beer and I'm leaving* can result from their syntactic deviance since such a larger sentence can be constructed by combining a noun phrase and a sentence. Thus, such a combination would be asyntactic since there is no English syntactic rule for coordinating a noun phrase and a sentence.

## 3.5 External Syntax of AIs

It is useful to identify the external syntax of AIs in the sense of embedding them in a larger construction. Thus, some of AIs could interact with the ordinary syntactic rules or transformations regardless of their internal syntactic ill-formedness.

Moon (1998, p. 80) states that according to Fraser (1970, p. 31), AIs can be characterized as “cranberries”, since “they never or only rarely undergo any transformations at all”. Accordingly, the syntactic behaviour of some AIs can somehow show some regularity by undergoing certain syntactic transformations concerning their external syntactic behavior. Moreover, Fillmore et al. (1988, p. 505) notice that some AIs might have grammatical constructions even when they are not generated by rules of syntax.

Some of AIs can be permitted to undergo what might be called external syntactic operations such as tense shifting, negation, wh-question formation, (internal) modification and concord (or subject-verb agreement). Thus, such operations couldn't involve restructuring of idiomatic elements of these AIs from their canonical form. In other words, these operations wouldn't involve interrupting or restructuring the internal organization of the idiomatic components of AIs. Accordingly, some of AIs may not show any syntactic irregularity concerning their external syntactic behavior.

### 3.5.1 Shift in Tenses

According to Mäntylä (2004, p. 33), variations in tense are one of the syntactic alterations which can be applied to the majority of idioms, including AIs, for example, *He goes bananas* vs. *He went bananas*. In addition, Fellbaum (2015, p. 788) states that according to Fillmore, Kay, and O'Connor (1988), the majority of idioms, including AIs, could tolerate alterations or variations in tense. Moreover, Stock et al. (1993, p. 235) state that “variations in tense are allowable because tense can be regarded as a global feature of the word string and in this sense is external to it”.

Accordingly, some AIs are permitted to appear in different tenses according to the context in which they occur. Consider the following examples.

### 1. *go bananas.*

*Whenever I see Sally, I just go bananas! She's fantastic.  
was a horrible day! I almost went bananas.*

• This

(Spears, 1998, p. 87)

### 2. *take advantage of someone*

*must be alert when you shop to make sure that someone doesn't take advantage of you.  
• The store owner took advantage of me, and I'm angry.*

• You

(Spears, 2005, p. 97)

## 3.5.2 Negation

Negation is another syntactic operation applied for some AIs in terms of their external syntax. According to Moon (1998, p. 106), negation is one of syntactic transformations licensed for some idioms, including AIs, and such transformation is mentioned under the title **Polarity**. Accordingly, some of AIs (e.g. *wait-and-see attitude, go whole hog*) can somehow show some regularity in their external syntactic behaviour in the sense of tolerating the syntactic process of negation:

### 1. *His wait-and-see attitude didn't influence me at all.*

(Spears, 1998, p. 191)

### 2. *Don't go whole hog all the time.*

(Spears, 1998, p. 148)

Some AIs could be negative polarity items such as *no can do, believe it or not, not at all, long time no see, waste not want not*. Accordingly, these negative items could be regarded as essential parts of such AIs in the sense of omitting such negative items from these expressions will make them lose their idiomatic readings.

## 3.5.3 Wh-Question Formation

The operation of wh-movement can be one of the syntactic processes applied to some AIs. Such a process can be recognized in terms of embedding such AIs in a larger structure. Nurnberg et al. (1994, p. 503) state that the applicability of some syntactic operations such as wh-question formation for some idioms, including AI, can lead to the view that the individual parts of such expressions can have identifiable meanings:

### 1. *To go it alone.*

*Do you need help, or will you go it alone?*

•

(Spears, 1998, p. 29)

2. ***To hold true.***

*Does this rule **hold true** all the time?*

(Spears, 1998, p. 332)

### 3.5.4 Modification

Modification is another syntactic operation allowed for some AIs in the light of their external syntactic behavior. Thus, such an operation could not involve reordering or reconstructing (or breaking) the internal organization of such expressions. In this respect, Barkema (1996, p. 143) states that there will be no involvement of breaking the structure or canonical form of idioms, including AIs, in terms of modifying their parts.

Accordingly, some of AIs (e.g. ***take advantage***, ***come a cropper***) can tolerate the syntactic modification by insertion of adjectives or adverbs:

1. ***take unfair advantage.***

(Nicolas, 1995, p. 239)

2. ***He came a nasty cropper yesterday.***

(Langlotz, 2006, p. 32)

### 3.5.5 Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement is one of the syntactic feature or behaviour observed or applied to some of AIs due to the regularity of their external syntactic behaviour. According to Fillmore et al. (1988, p. 510), the external syntactic behavior of some AIs could somehow follow or interact with the regular syntactic rules or operations. Accordingly, some of AIs that consist of verbs (e.g. ***stay put***, ***want in(to)***) could show agreement between subject and verb in terms of person and number:

1. ***If the children just stay put, their parents will come for them soon.***

(Spears, 1998, p. 278)

2. ***It's cold out here! I want into the house. The dog wants in.***

(Spears, 2005, p. 783)

## 4. A Comparison between SIs and AIs in English

### 4.1 Introduction

One of the aims of this study is to examine the internal and external syntax of both SIs and AIs. It also aims to investigate or determine their syntactic flexibility and invariability in the light of their syntactic or structural behavior. Accordingly, the present subsection is an attempt to show

a comparison between these SIs and AIs in English on the accounts of the similarities and differences that they could involve.

## 4.2 The Similarities

The

following similarities can be drawn from the comparison of SIs and AIs in English:

1. Both SIs and AIs can have internal and external syntax.
2. The external syntactic behaviour of both SIs and AIs could somehow interact with the normal syntactic rules or operations. Thus, the external syntactic structure of SIs and AIs could show some regularity in terms of undergoing some external syntactic operations. The similarities between SIs and AIs in terms of undergoing external syntactic transformations are outlined in Table (4.1) below:

**Table (4.1)**

*External Syntactic Operations for SIs and AIs.*

NO.	External Syntactic Operations	Examples of SIs	Examples of AIs
1.	Tense shifting	<i>The straw that breaks the camel's back.</i> <i>The straw that broke the camel's back</i>	<i>I just go bananas.</i> <i>I almost went bananas.</i>
2.	Negation	<i>Don't rock the boat.</i>	<i>Don't go the whole hog.</i>
3.	Wh-Question	<i>Did I slow myself down enough?</i>	<i>Will you go it alone?</i>
4.	Adjectival Modification	<i>A flash in the economic pan.</i>	<i>He came a nasty cropper yesterday.</i>
5.	Adverbial Modification	<i>Did he finally speak his mind?</i>	<i>Make absolutely certain.</i>
6.	Subject-Verb Agreement	<i>Too many soldiers kick the bucket in unnecessary wars.</i>	<i>It holds true no matter what.</i>

3. Both SIs and AIs could share the property of figurativeness or metaphoricity which can be considered as an essential and commonly identified characteristic for them. According to Spear (2005, pp. 75-90-170-310), some of SIs would have figurative meanings such as *bury the hatch*, the *cat is out of the bag* and *draw the line*. Furthermore, Spear (2005, pp.

108-299-543-735) notices that some of AIs could be regarded as figurative expressions, for example, *come a cropper*, *heaven help us* and *wait-and-see attitude*.

**Table (4.2)**

***SIs and AIs Expressing Figurative Meaning***

No.	Examples of SIs	Figurative Meaning	Figurative Meaning	Examples of AIs
1.	<i>bury the hatchet</i>	<i>to make peace</i>	<i>come a cropper</i>	<i>to have a misfortune</i>
2.	<i>the cat is out of the bag</i>	<i>the secret has been made known</i>	<i>heaven help us</i>	<i>Good grief</i>
3.	<i>draw the line</i>	<i>to separate two things</i>	<i>wait-and-see attitude</i>	<i>a skeptical attitude</i>

4. SIs and AIs could share the principles of compositionality and non-compositionality. Thus, being compositional means that the idiomatic meaning of both can be predictable from the meaning of their individual parts. On the other hand, the notion of non-compositionality can be identifiable for both SIs and AIs in the sense that their meaning cannot be inferred from the meaning of the individual components that make them up. The following examples are driven from Spear (1998, pp. 70-93-87-169-266-278-304).

**Table (4.3)**

***SIs and AIs Expressing Compositional Meaning***

No.	Examples of SIs	Compositional Meaning	Examples of AIs	Compositional Meaning
1.	<i>given to understand</i>	<i>made to believe</i>	<i>in short</i>	<i>stated briefly</i>
2.	<i>eat and run</i>	<i>to eat a meal and then leave</i>	<i>of late</i>	<i>lately</i>
3.	<i>Play with fire</i>	<i>to take a big risk</i>	<i>all of a sudden</i>	<i>Suddenly</i>

**Table (4.4)**

***SIs and AIs Expressing Non-compositional Meaning***

No.	Examples of SIs	Non- compositional Meaning	Examples of AIs	Non-compositional Meaning
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1.	<b><i>Shoot the breeze</i></b>	<i>to spend time chatting</i>	<b><i>Go bananas</i></b>	<i>to go crazy</i>
2.	<b><i>Kick the bucket</i></b>	<i>to die</i>	<b><i>By and large</i></b>	<i>generally</i>
3.	<b><i>bury the hatchet</i></b>	<i>to stop fighting or arguing</i>	<b><i>go for broke</i></b>	<i>to risk everything</i>

### 4.3 The Differences

The following differences can be derived from the comparison between SIs and AIs:

1. SIs can be different from AIs in terms of the internal organization. Thus, the internal structure of SIs could be highly similar to the structure of ordinary expressions. On the other hand, the internal organization of AIs can be characterized as ill-formed.
2. SIs can be subject to internal syntactic operations such as passivization, topicalization, nominalization, pronominalization and wh-question in the light of their internal syntactic structure. On the other, the internal organization of AIs might be syntactically invariable by not tolerating such internal syntactic transformations. Internal Syntactic Processes licensed for SIs are presented in Table (4.5) below.

**Table (4.5)**

#### *Applying Internal Syntactic Processes for SIs*

No.	Internal Syntactic Processes	SIs	Examples
1.	Passivization	<b><i>Spill the beans</i></b>	<b><i>The beans were spilled.</i></b>
2.	Topicalization	<b><i>Pull strings</i></b>	<i>Those strings, he wouldn't pull for you.</i>
3.	Nominalization	<b><i>lay down the law</i></b>	<i>His laying down of the law didn't impress anyone.</i>
4.	Pronominalization	<b><i>turn the tables</i></b>	<i>He turned the tables on me and then I turned them on him.</i>

3. The grammatical principle of subject-verb agreement can be identified for SIs in the sense of embedding them in a larger context.

1. *Business* usually ***hits the skids*** in the summer.

(Spears, 1998, p. 150)

2. *You* ***hit the nail on the head***.

On the other hand, some AIs can violate or lack such a grammatical feature since such AIs can be formed with the verb in the base form.

3. *God save the Queen!*

4. *Heaven help us.*

(Quirk et al., 1985, p. 839)

## 5. Conclusions

This paper is a qualitative study which involves collecting and analyzing some examples of SIs and AIs from different references. Thus, it tries to hopefully obtain a good understanding of the internal and external syntax of both SIs and AIs. Drawing on the results of the comparison study between SIs and AIs in English, the findings of this study are presented in the following similarities and differences:

1. This study supports the claim that SIs and AIs could have internal and external syntax.
2. The internal structure of some SIs could be flexible in the sense of undergoing internal syntactic operations. On the other hand, the internal structure of AIs would be highly inflexible the reason behind that they never or only rarely undergo such syntactic operations.
3. The external syntax of SIs and AIs could somehow show regularity in the light of undergoing external syntactic processes such as tense shifting, negation, wh-question, adjectival and adverbial modification and subject-verb agreement.
4. The property of figurativeness or metaphoricity could be identifiable for both SIs and AIs since metaphors can be typically involved in them.
5. This study supports the claim that internal syntactic deviations of AIs couldn't block their external syntactic variations.
6. Compositionality and non-compositionality as a semantic feature could be identified for both SIs and AIs.
7. The normal grammatical rule of subject-verb agreement can be recognizable for all SIs and some AIs. On the other hand, such a grammatical rule can be violated by some AIs used as subjunctives which involve verbs with the base form.
8. The syntactic flexibility of some SIs and AIs can be to some extent linked to or determined by their meaning. For example, According to Gazdar et al. (1985, p. 244), the SI (e.g. *kick the bucket*) and the AI (e.g. *trip the light fantastic*) cannot be subject to passivization since they could be semantically uninterpretable.

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