

Name of Student: **Magdaléna Jirků**

Thesis title: **(Non)compositionality of Idioms Through the Lens of Passivization**

Supervisor: **Jeffrey Keith Parrott, PhD.**

Reviewer: **Jeffrey Keith Parrott, PhD.**

Scoring: 0 = unacceptable, 1 = poor, 2 = acceptable, 3 = average, 4 = good, 5 = excellent

Body

1. Originality of the paper and its contribution. Quality of the topic.

This excellent thesis takes on the notoriously difficult issue of idiomatic expressions, which are crucial to syntactic theory because of their implications for the fundamental linguistic property of compositionality. Idioms are currently a fruitful empirical domain for state-of-the-art theoretical approaches such as Distributed Morphology (DM), the framework adopted by the author. For an undergraduate thesis to take on such a deep topic is remarkable, as is the author's ability to focus on the specific question of idiom passivization and not get lost in generalities.

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2. The review of previous literature on the topic. Extent and quality of the review, critical appraisal.

The author provides a sharp critique of a prominent article on idioms (Nunberg et al. 1994) and does a great job interpreting contemporary DM literature on idioms and passivation (Folli & Harley 2007, Stone 2013, Harley 2014) and applying DM theory to data to provide evidence for the arguments presented in the thesis. It would have been good, however, to include more citations of the view that idioms are non-compositional and therefore must be treated as lexical item. The author's arguments against such views would furthermore be strengthened by a discussion of Marantz's 1997 observation, confirmed by Harley & Stone 2013, that Agents cannot have context dependent idiomatic interpretations because of their syntactic non-locality. Nonetheless, these mild shortcomings are more than compensated by the clear discussion of selected literature and a steady focus on a limited research question in the thesis.

4

3. Research goals and questions. Formulation of hypotheses.

The research questions addressed in the thesis are explicitly formulated in the abstract and reiterated throughout the text. Indeed, the research questions are nicely encapsulated in the thesis title. Perhaps the arguments could be stated more sharply, but that is a question of style and does not undermine the coherence of the reasoning on display throughout the thesis.

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4. Methodology. Its description and adequacy for addressing the research questions.

The thesis employs a standard linguistic methodology, analyzing examples from the literature and evaluating contrasting theoretical models by applying them to novel data. Although additional empirical data would enhance the thesis, both in Chapter 5 and in distinguishing idioms from other expressions in Chapter 3 (see questions below), the research questions are well addressed.

4

5. Analysis of data, description of results, and their interpretation.

The author contrasts both the Nunberg et al. approach and the DM framework to three V-DO idioms that have not been previously discussed in the literature. She very capably shows that Nunberg et al's claims about the

connection between ‘matching structures’, passivizability, and compositionality of idioms do not hold up (see in particular the discussion of ‘lose one’s shit’ in 5.2) but that all these (non)passivizable idioms can be accounted for under the DM analysis. Again, an important point about the locality of idiomatic interpretation in the context of little vP could have been emphasized by examining the ‘no agent idioms’ hypothesis. Also, the other expressions from 3.2 might have been better tied together with V-DO idioms during the final discussion.

4

6. Discussion of how the results relate to the research questions.

Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of this thesis is way that the author makes such cogent arguments and supports them with many examples, leading up to the detailed analysis of (non)passivizable V-DO idioms in Chapter 5. She shows persuasively that these idiomatic expressions can and therefore must be treated as compositional, many claims to the contrary notwithstanding.

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7. Formal aspects. Quality of language (grammatical, lexical, and stylistic adequacy), formatting, referencing, and length of the paper.

The author writes with near-native fluency and appropriate academic style, with formatting and references all in order.

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For the supervisor:

Evaluation of the collaboration between student and supervisor:

The student consulted closely with me at every stage of the work and was able to effectively incorporate my feedback into the drafts.

5

Supervisor’s statement about plagiarism:

Neither the analysis of this thesis by the online system Theses.cz nor any other kind of examination of the text revealed a degree of correspondence with other works that would give rise to the suspicion of plagiarism or violation of copyright.

Supervisor: Jeffrey Keith Parrott, PhD.

Overall evaluation of the paper:

This is one of the best BA theses in linguistics that I have seen in my time here. It’s gratifying to see a student critically engage with theoretical ideas at such a high level, and it is especially impressive that throughout the entire thesis, the author is able to clearly formulate and convincingly evaluate her argument that idioms are not, despite the claims of most authorities in the literature and indeed among her teachers, non-compositional “frozen” lexical items. She addresses this potentially overwhelming issue with clarity and specificity by keeping to the narrow scope of passivization in V-DO idioms. Indeed, my only real complaint about the thesis is that I want more of it! But other research avenues related to idioms can be pursued in future work if the student so wishes. I have no doubt that she will be a high achiever in whatever domain she chooses. I certainly recommend an A—this thesis deserves the highest evaluation.

Note: The overall evaluation **CANNOT be computed simply as the average** of the scores awarded on the basis of the individual criteria above.

5

Other comments:

Not all compounds are idiomatic, but some are. Again, this topic would be worth looking into as it reinforces the point that all idiomatic expressions are compositional because semantic interpretation is determined in (morpho)syntactic context.

Questions for the author to be discussed at the defense:

Naturally I would have many questions on this topic, but in the interest of fairness and brevity I will restrict myself to two and a half of them:

1. *Chapter 3 presents a useful demarcation of different expressions that are lumped together as idioms. Notably, 'idioms' are distinguished from 'collocations' and 'proverbs'. In the DM theoretical framework adopted in the thesis, this means that collocations and proverbs do not involve syntactic context dependent semantics; their lexical specificity and other surface similarities to idioms are accounted for by pragmatics (i.e. usage). Can you please briefly discuss some observational or experimental methods that might be used to empirically distinguish idioms from collocations or proverbs, inter alia, independently of theory-internal classification.*
2. *This is the half-question: can you please speculate on whether or how collocations or proverbs, inter alia, might develop into idioms diachronically?*
3. *In the analysis of 'lose one's shit', 'shit' is interpreted as 'mind, temper' in the context of 'lose', but 'lose' receives its 'literal', i.e. default, interpretation of 'cease to have, misplace'. Please discuss, giving reasons, whether you think 'lose' is or is not idiomatically interpreted in the context of 'shit/mind/temper/etc.'.*

Final evaluation

I recommend the thesis for the defense

Proposed grade: A

Date: 14/01/2021

Signature: Jeffrey Keith Parrott