

Extended idioms as metaphors

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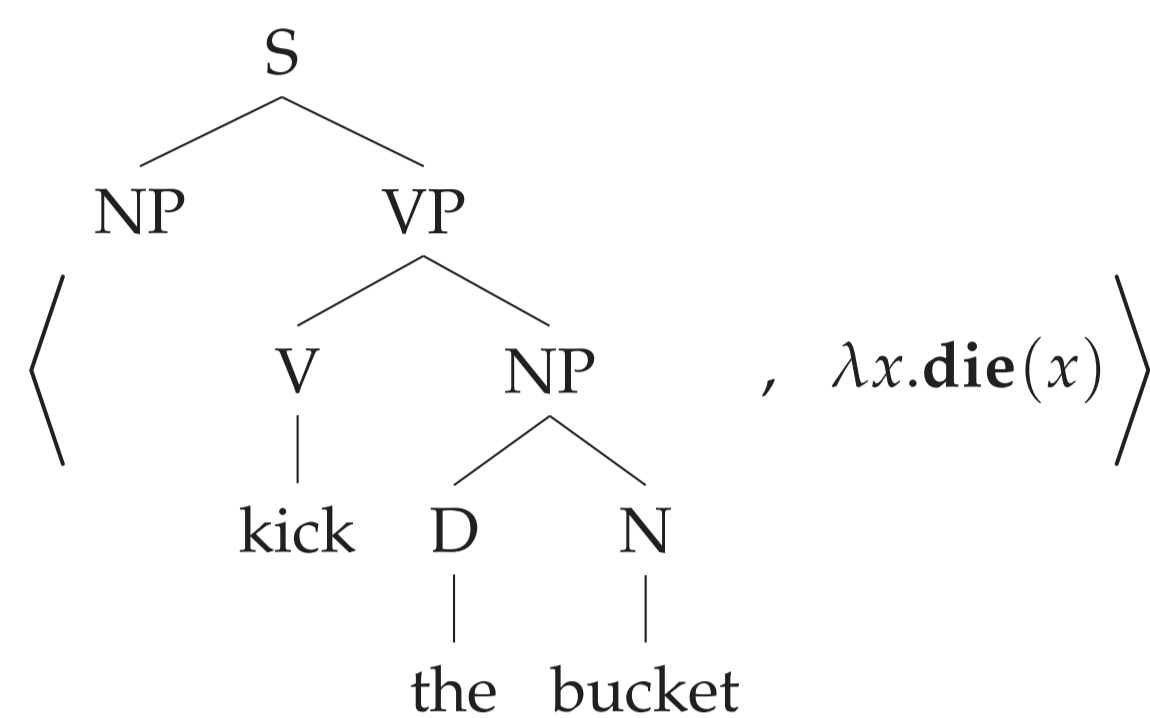
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Direct access theories

e.g. Kay et al. (2015), Bargmann & Sailer (2018), Findlay (2019)

Idiom meaning encoded directly in the lexicon (phrasally or lexically), e.g.:



Motivations

1. Psycholinguistic 'idiom advantage'

- ▶ Idioms processed faster than literal/compositional expressions (e.g. Swinney & Cutler 1979, Carrol & Conklin 2017).

2. Idiosyncrasies of form:

- ▶ Lexical idiosyncrasy ('cranberry words'):

- 1 a. They left me in the lurch.
b. I took umbrage at that.

- ▶ Syntactic idiosyncrasy:

- 2 a. We tripped the [_{??} light fantastic] all night long.
b. This was [_{??} by and large] a success.

Semantic mapping theories

e.g. Pulman (1993), Egan (2008)

Idioms seen as mappings from literal meanings to figurative meanings—i.e. as metaphors:

CONVENTION: when we talk about kicking a contextually salient bucket, we're actually talking about dying.

Motivations

1. Lexically flexible idioms

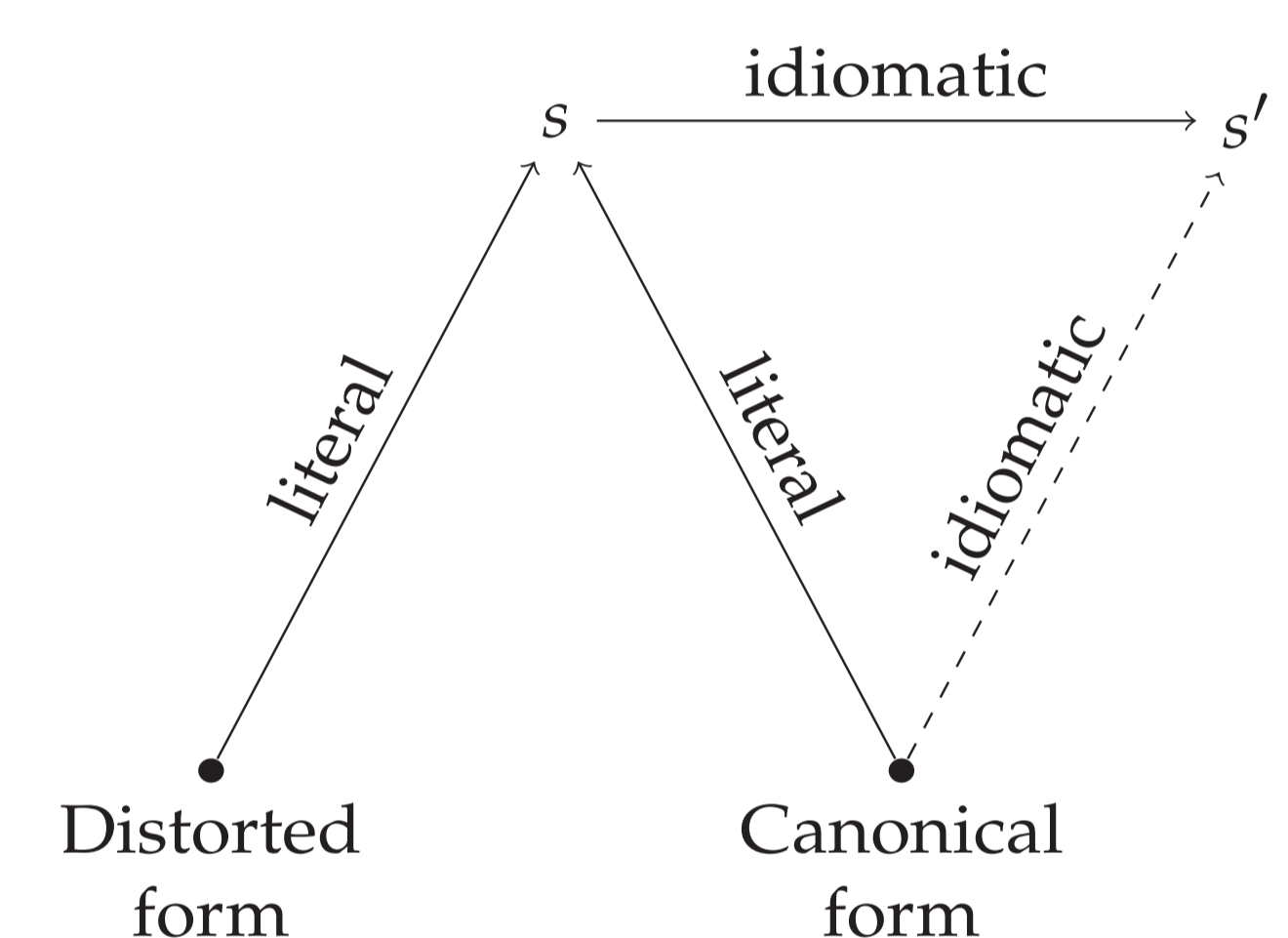
- 3 Kim gave me a kick up the backside/rear/arse/bum/booty/...

- ▶ Any word meaning backside is acceptable here—the constraint is on meaning, not form.

2. 'Inferred' idioms

- 4 a. Shit finally completes 29-month journey towards fan.
b. Good gawd it's another porcine flyer.

- ▶ What makes these interpretable as instances of the idioms in question? They describe the same situation as the *literal* meaning of the idiom.



3. 'Extended' idioms

- 5 a. Alex let the cat out of the bag, and we saw that it had sharp claws.
b. Livia didn't quite kick the bucket, but she took a good strong swing at it.

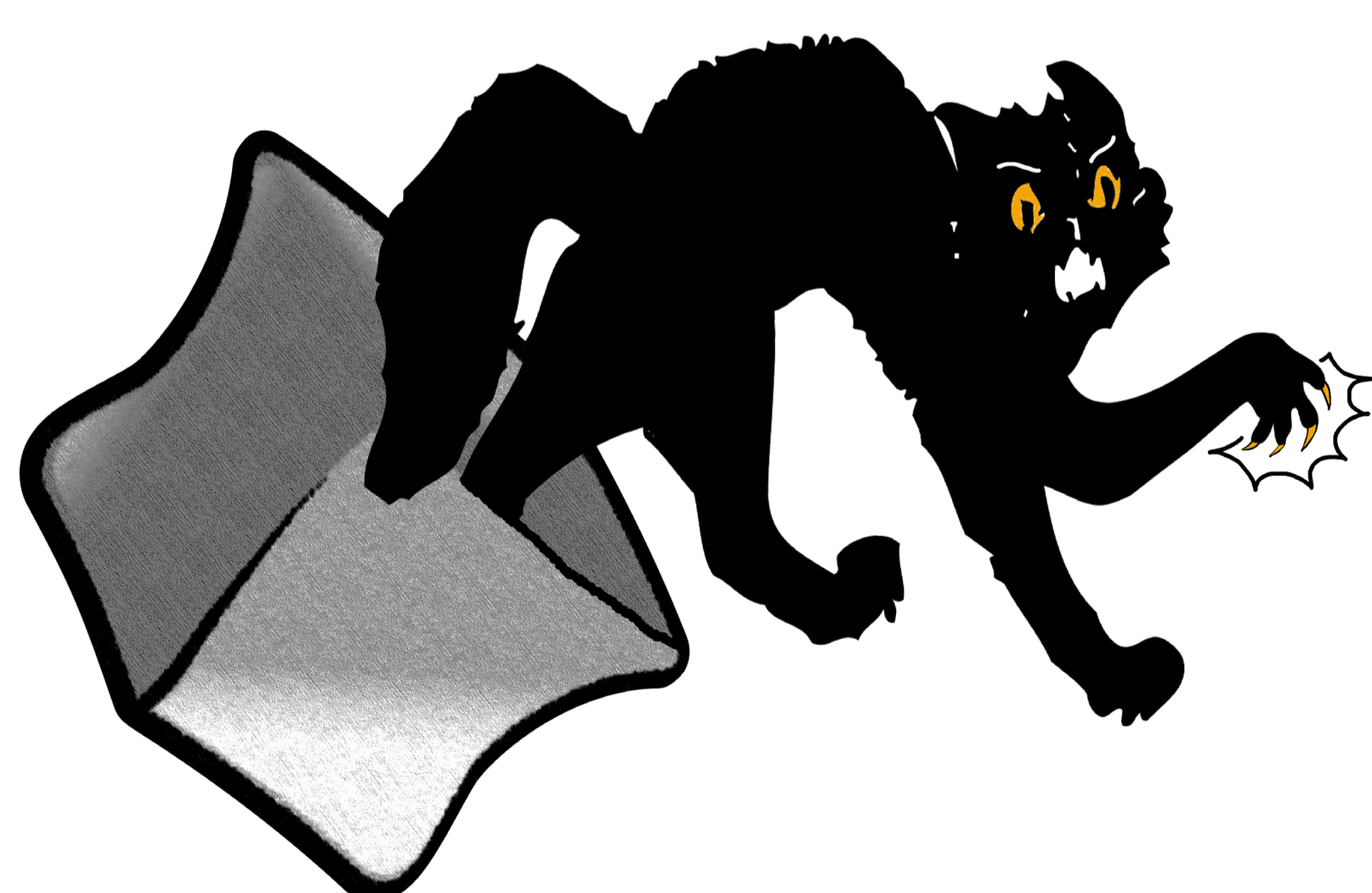
- ▶ If direct access theories are right, these should be nonsense: (5a) says that the secret had claws, and in (5b) there is no antecedent for *it*.
- ▶ Rather, we have to interpret the extension relative to the *literal* meaning, which is not available under a direct access approach.

Two modes of idiom interpretation

- ▶ We propose that both theories can be right: they correspond to two distinct ways of interpreting idioms.
- ▶ The direct access approach is the default; other cases (except for the lexically flexible ones) have an affected, playful, or literary feel—this is because they are interpreted via a different, less automatic, mechanism.
- ▶ Idiom extensions are interpreted as analogical (along the lines of Gentner 1983).

Alex let the cat out of the bag.

... and we saw that it had sharp claws.



cause(alex, x, be-revealed) \wedge secret(x)

sharp-claws(x) \wedge cat(x) \Rightarrow dangerous(x)

cause(alex, x, be-revealed) \wedge secret(x) \wedge ~~sharp-claws(x)~~ \wedge dangerous(x)

Livia kicked the bucket.



die(livia)

Livia didn't quite kick the bucket, but she took a good strong swing at it.



take-a-good-strong-swing-at(x, y) \wedge \neg kick(x, y) \Rightarrow nearly(kick(x, y))

nearly(die(livia))