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L'idée nous est venue d'écrire ça pour Annibale...
Complex support verb constructions with *idée*

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Abstract

French expressions such as *l'idée nous est venue de* 'the idea popped into our heads to' also occur under other forms. We investigate how a set of such expressions and their variations can be represented in a lexical database. In particular, we attempt to use knowledge about frozen verbal idioms and support verb constructions for that.

Keywords: idiom, support verb, light verb, multiword expression.

INTRODUCTION

French expressions such as *l'idée nous est venue de* 'the idea popped into our heads to' also occur under other forms, for example *il m'est venu l'idée* 'it popped into my head the idea'. How can they and their variations be represented in a lexical database? How can we use knowledge about frozen verbal idioms and support verb constructions for that? This article is organized as follows. The next section is a survey of related work. Then, we introduce a small list of expressions and we analyse if they can be considered support verb constructions. The third section is devoted to the syntactic operations these expressions can undergo. In the conclusion, we draw consequences from our study on the architecture of lexical databases.¹

RELATED WORK

Some expressions, e.g. *casser sa pipe* 'kick the bucket', are almost completely fixed, made of unreplaceable units. But it is well-known that many others, even if categorized as 'frozen', also occur under other forms. Considerable research effort has been devoted to describing them and their syntactic behaviour, either informally, or in a lexical database.

The problem is usually dealt with differently in the case of verbal idioms (VI), like *break the ice*, and of support verb (or light verb) constructions (SVC), like *have an opportunity*.

In SVCs, one of the main sources of morphosyntactic diversity is variants of support verbs. These variants are called 'extensions' (Gross 1981: 33). Many have a semantic

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function. For example, in Italian, the following construction in *avere* ‘have’ has a terminative variant in *perdere* ‘lose’:

- (1) *Max ha l'angoscia* ‘Max feels anguish’
- (2) *Max ha perduto l'angoscia* ‘Max has got rid of anguish’ (D’Agostino *et al.* 2007: 40)

An extension of support verb may be either a simple substitution of verbs, or a more complex syntactic operation (Gross 1981: 36). Thus, with some extensions, the predicative noun or its arguments move to other syntactic positions, for example in the following French construction:

- (3) *Luc a fait un cri* ‘Luc did a scream’
- (4) *Un cri a échappé à Luc* ‘A scream escaped Luc’ (Samvelian *et al.* 2013: 211)

The predicative noun *cri* ‘scream’ shifts from the position of direct object in (3) to that of subject in (4); symmetrically, the argument shifts from the position of subject in (3) to that of dative complement in (4).

VIs also undergo formal changes, generally described as syntactic operations, e.g. pronominalization of a free complement, as in this French example:

- (5) *Luc casse les oreilles d'Anne* ‘Luc’s noise is a pain for Anne’
(lit. Luc breaks Anne’s ears)
- (6) *Luc lui casse les oreilles* ‘Luc’s noise is a pain for her’ (Gross 1982: 177)

A number of syntactic operations are known, and Frazer (1970: 34) noticed that an operation that applies to an idiom does not necessarily apply to another, even if the morphosyntactic conditions are met in both. In order to register which syntactic operations apply to them, Gross (1984: 277) proposed a table where each idiom appears in a row and each syntactic operation in a column. This ‘lexicon-grammar’ approach has been implemented in many languages.

Thus, the syntactic variation of both SVCs and VIs is described in terms of syntactic operations. But the operations are not the same. Therefore, an enterprise of actual description involves distinguishing SVCs from VIs. This task is considered difficult (this is probably why specialists of natural language processing classify them together in the larger class of multiword expressions or MWE). However, some criteria of recognition of SVCs have been validated by extensive lexical description of expressions in various languages (Langer 2005). Gross (1976: 109) proposes as a criterion a formal property of determiners and adjuncts, which is also observed in English. In (7), if possessive determiners, phrases with *of* and genitives are inserted around *joke*, they cannot refer to anything else than the subject:

- (7) *He made a joke*
- (8) *He made his joke*
- (9) **He made your joke*
- (10) **He made Ann's joke*

This behaviour is compatible with the analysis of *make a joke* as a SVC.

Gross (1979: 865–866, footnote 6) proposes an additional criterion of recognition of SVCs that contributes to making more definite the distinction between SVCs and VIs. Take the expression *make an appeal*:

- (11) *The police made an appeal to their conscience*

A syntactic operation applied to (12) produces a paraphrase (13) where *make* is absent:

- (12) *The appeal to their conscience made by the police (is not the only path)*
- (13) *The appeal to their conscience by the police (is not the only path)*

This positive response to the test is consistent with the analysis of *make an appeal* as a SVC. In contrast, a negative response to the same criterion will indicate that *have the back of*, meaning ‘back, support’, is not a SVC, because it has no variant in which *have* would be absent. Take the following sentence:

- (14) *The president has the back of our children* ‘The president supports our children’

A banal syntactic operation on (14) would produce the subject of the following sentence:

- (15) **The president's back of our children (is manifested by real actions)*

But (15) is not in use. In consequence, we have to analyse *have the back of* as a VI.

The use of this very reliable criterion is complicated by the fact that an extension of SVC, such as (2), will not necessarily give a positive response, especially when the extension has a semantic function (Vivès 1984: 20). For example, *l'angoscia di Max* ‘Max's anguish’ means *l'angoscia che Max ha* ‘the anguish that Max has’, not *l'angoscia che Max ha perduta* ‘the anguish that Max has got rid of’. As a matter of fact, identifying an extension of SVC involves relating it with a ‘basic’ SVC that satisfies the criteria.

Applying these methodological tools, Gross (1988: 17) analyses the French expression *une joie intense brille dans les yeux de* ‘intense joy shines in the eyes of’ as a SVC where *joie* is the predicative noun, and *briller dans les yeux* an extension of the basic support verb *avoir*. The basic SVC occurs in (16):

- (16) *Luc a une joie intense* ‘Luc has an intense joy’

Since the extension of support verb *briller dans les yeux* is itself a multiword verb, the same criteria can be applied, in turn, to classify it. This time, the criteria point to a VI, which is not a contradiction, since the second expression is only a part of the first. A wide diversity of expressions can be analysed in the same way as *une joie intense brille dans les yeux de* (Gross 1988: 15–20), and Giry-Schneider (2004: 230–231) cites as one of them *l'idée de (...) a germé dans l'esprit de* 'the idea of (...) sprang up in the mind of', which is akin to the expression that motivated this paper.² As to the question of describing this kind of expressions in a lexical database, Gross (1995: 79–84) constructs examples of local grammars to register the most productive ones, but without registering formally the relation of the expressions with the respective basic SVC. In the meantime, the expressions cited by Gross (1988: 15–20) appear in the unpublished final version of his tables of verbal idioms,³ without a formal relation with the basic SVCs either.

A SET OF EXPRESSIONS WITH *IDÉE* AS SUBJECT

Here are 10 entries in Gross' C0 class of French idioms (the class of idioms with frozen subject) that seem to be extensions of SVCs with the predicative noun *idée*, with approximately matching English constructions:⁴

- (18) *Det idée bourgeonner dans la tête de Nhum*
Det idea bud in Nhum's mind
- (19) *Det idée germer dans LE (cerveau + cervelle + esprit + tête) de Nhum*
Det idea sprout in Nhum's (brain + mind + head)
- (20) *Det idée jaillir Loc (Nhum + N-hum)*
Det idea spring up (in Nhum's mind + from N-hum)
- (21) *Det idée passer dans LE (esprit + crâne + tête) de Nhum*
Det idea come into Nhum's (mind + brain + head)
- (22) *Det idée passer par la tête de Nhum*
Det idea go through Nhum's mind
- (23) *Det idée prendre (Nhum + à Nhum)*
Det idea occur to Nhum
- (24) *Det idée traverser LE (esprit + tête) de Nhum*
Det idea cross Nhum's (mind + head)
- (25) *Det idée trotter dans la tête de Nhum*
Det idea run in Nhum's head
- (26) *Det idée vagabonder dans LE (crâne + esprit + tête) de Nhum*
Det idea wander in Nhum's mind

² However, she does not identify the basic SVC precisely.

³ This version is freely available with LGPL licence on the web site of LIGM.

⁴ Abbreviations follow usual lexicon-grammar conventions: *Det* means 'determiner', *Nhum* 'human noun', *N-hum* 'non-human noun', *LE* 'le, la or les', *Loc* 'locative preposition' (here *chez*, *en* and *parmi*), and the '+' symbol means an alternative between several forms.

- (27) *Det idée venir à l'esprit de Nhum*
Det idea pop into Nhum's head

In order to examine further Giry-Schneider's (2004: 230–231) analysis of some of these expressions as extensions of SVCs with the predicative noun *idée*, we need to relate them with basic SVCs with *idée*.

IDÉE 'IDEA' IN SUPPORT VERB CONSTRUCTIONS WITH *AVOIR* 'HAVE'

The noun *idée* with the support verb *avoir* takes various senses. Distinguishing them is key to constructing a lexical database, as distinct senses will usually show differences in syntactic behaviour. The most common of the senses is probably the one that denotes a plan of action and is exemplified by (30):

- (30) *Luc a eu l'idée de faire une fête* 'Luc had the idea of having a party'
(Giry-Schneider 2004: 230)

The sense in (31), which denotes a thought, is less frequent:

- (31) *Luc a une idée fausse sur l'économie* 'Luc has a wrong conception about economics' (Giry-Schneider 2004: 229)

As to criteria of distinction, we will rely as much as possible on formal properties correlated with the semantic difference between (30) and (31). A complement in *sur* 'about' occurs in (31), but we can't use its presence to distinguish the two entries reliably, because it is optional, and has some features of a verbal adjunct that could also occur in (30). But we can use several other properties.

(i) If (30) is reformulated with a completive, the completive is obligatorily in the subjunctive, whereas (31) may be reformulated with a completive in the indicative:

- (32) *Luc a eu l'idée qu'on (fasse + *fait) une fête* 'Luc had the idea of having a party'
(33) *Luc a l'idée que l'économie (*soit + est) seulement une question d'argent* 'Luc has the idea that economics is just about money'

(ii) With *idée* meaning a plan as in (30), the completive or infinitive is obligatorily interpreted with an agentive, voluntary internal predicate:

(34) ?**Luc a eu l'idée d'être un enfant adopté* 'Luc had the idea of being an adopted child'

We can interpret (34) only as something like *Luc a eu l'idée qu'on écrive le scénario de sorte qu'il soit un enfant adopté* 'Luc had the idea to have the script written so that he would be an adopted child', with an agentive predicate. In contrast, non-agentive predicates are readily accepted in the completive of *idée* meaning a thought as in (31):

(35) *Luc a l'idée qu'il ressemble à son fils* 'Luc has the idea he looks like his son'

(iii) With the 'plan' sense, the completive can be reduced to an infinitive, with the meaning of the sentence unchanged, whereas this reduction is not in use with the 'thought' sense:

(36) **Luc a l'idée de ressembler à son fils* 'Luc has the idea of looking like his son'

(iv) When the 'plan' predicate is negated, it entails the falsity of the infinitival clause, as *have the opportunity* does (Karttunen 1973: 71):

(37) *Luc n'a pas eu l'idée de regarder sous le lit* 'Luc didn't have the idea of looking under the bed' (implies Luc didn't look under the bed)

In contrast, the 'thought' predicate never entails the truth or falsity of the embedded clause:

(38) *Luc a l'idée que l'économie est seulement une question d'argent* 'Luc has the idea that economics is just about money' (does not imply it is or it isn't)

(39) *Luc n'a pas l'idée que l'économie soit seulement une question d'argent* 'Luc doesn't have the idea that economics is just about money' (does not imply it is or it isn't)

In addition to these two SVCs with *avoir* and *idée*, at least two others are in use, with other meanings and syntactic behaviours, which is a reason for distinct entries in a lexical database. They are exemplified by the following sentences:

(40) *Luc a une idée vague de l'âge d'Anne* 'Luc has a vague idea of how old Anne is'

(41) *Luc a une idée élitiste de la musique classique* 'Luc has an elitist approach to classical music'

In (40), *idée* denotes knowledge of an answer to a question. In (41), it denotes an attitude to a complex matter. These constructions can be distinguished from (30) and (31) by the fact that they don't accept infinitives or completives. They can be discriminated from each other by the different distribution of the prepositional

complement, and by the fact that (40) admits a negation by *aucun* ‘no’ and no nominal adjuncts, whereas (41) does not:

(42) *Luc n’a aucune idée de l’âge d’Anne* ‘Luc has no idea of how old Anne is’

(43) **Luc n’a aucune idée de la musique classique* ‘Luc has no approach to classical music’

RELATING THE EXPRESSIONS WITH THE LEXICAL ENTRIES OF *IDÉE* ‘IDEA’

With these criteria delimiting 4 lexical entries of *idée* used with the support verb *avoir*, we can determine if the expressions (18)-(27) can be related to the constructions (30), (31), (40) and (41), by checking if they satisfy the criteria. It turns out that all accept a completive and an infinitive with the same distribution and properties as in (30), repeated here for convenience:

(30) *Luc a eu l’idée de faire une fête* ‘Luc had the idea of having a party’

For example, here are the results of the tests on (19):

(19) *Det idée germer dans la tête de Nhum* (Det idea sprout in Nhum’s head)

(44) *L’idée (de faire + qu’on fasse) une fête a germé dans la tête de Luc* [(i) and (iii)]

(45) **L’idée de ressembler à son fils a germé dans la tête de Luc* [(ii)]

(46) *L’idée de regarder sous le lit n’a pas encore germé dans la tête de Luc* [(iv), implies he has not looked under the bed]

Now, all expressions except (23) accept a completive with the same distribution and properties as in (31):

(31) *Luc a une idée fausse sur l’économie* ‘Luc has a wrong conception about economics’

Here are the results of the tests on (19) and (23):

(19) *Det idée germer dans la tête de Nhum* (Det idea sprout in Nhum’s head)

(47) *L’idée qu’il soit amusant germe dans la tête de Luc* [(i) and (ii)]

(48) **L’idée d’être amusant germe dans la tête de Luc* [(iii)]

(49) *L’idée qu’il soit amusant ne germe pas encore dans la tête de Luc* [(iv), does not imply he is not fun]

(23) *Det idée prendre (Nhum + à Nhum)* (Det idea occur to Nhum)

(50) **L’idée (le + lui) prend qu’il soit amusant* [(i) and (ii)]

(51) *L’idée (le + lui) prend de faire une fête* [(iii)]

(52) *L’idée ne (le + lui) prend pas de faire une fête* [(iv), implies he does not have a party]

As to the senses in (40) and (41), none of the expressions are compatible with them or with the corresponding distribution of the *de* complement, as show the following sequences in the case of (19):

(53) **Une idée vague de l'âge d'Anne germe dans la tête de Luc* (lit. A vague idea of how old Anne is sprouts in Luc's head)

(54) ?**Une idée élitiste de la musique classique germe dans la tête de Luc* (lit. An elitist approach to classical music sprouts in Luc's head)

Thus, it is possible to consider sentences (55) and (56), particular realizations of scheme (19), as variants of (30) and (35) respectively:

(55) *L'idée de faire une fête a germé dans l'esprit de Luc* 'The idea of having a party sprouted in Luc's mind'

(56) *L'idée qu'il ressemble à son fils a germé dans l'esprit de Luc* 'The idea he looks like his son sprouted in Luc's mind'

In order to check if (30) and (35) are basic SVCs, we apply the tests mentioned in the first part of the paper:

(57) *L'idée que Luc a eue de faire une fête (m'a plu)* '(I liked) the idea Luc had of having a party'

(58) = *L'idée de Luc de faire une fête (m'a plu)* '(I liked) Luc's idea of having a party'

(59) **Luc a eu l'idée d'Anne de faire une fête* (lit. Luc had Anne's idea of having a party)

(60) ?(*Cela va renforcer*) *l'idée que Luc a qu'il ressemble à son fils* 'This will reinforce the idea Luc has that he looks like his son'

(61) = (*Cela va renforcer*) *l'idée de Luc qu'il ressemble à son fils* 'This will reinforce Luc's idea that he looks like his son'

(62) **Luc a l'idée d'Anne qu'il ressemble à son fils* (lit. Luc has Anne's idea that he looks like his son)

The results converge to the conclusion that (30) and (35) are actually basic SVCs. Thus, as suggested by Gross (1988) and Giry-Schneider (2004), sentences such as (55) and (56) are extensions of these SVCs. They add connotations or aspectual meaning to the SVCs: for example, (21) connotes a low opinion about the idea; (19) is inchoative and suggests a slow process. In this regard, the expressions are all variants of one another, and the SVCs are neutral variants.

In a lexical database, where can be stored sequences (18)-(27)? Considering their analysis as extensions of *avoir*, they are not to be viewed as separate entries of verbal idioms, but as syntactic operations applicable to some predicative nouns. Therefore, they are naturally represented as properties of the lexical entries of these nouns. In a

lexicon-grammar table where each predicative noun appears in a row, each extension of support verb appears in a column (Vivès 1984: 47-57).

As compared to extensions of support verbs described in literature, (18)-(27) are compatible with few entries of predicative nouns: *idée* ‘idea’, *souvenir* ‘memory’ (Giry-Schneider 2004: 230-231), *doute* ‘doubt’, *envie* ‘desire’, *pensée* ‘thought’...

Another difference is that some of these expressions show a richer variability, which we will examine in the next section.

SYNTACTIC OPERATIONS EVOCATIVE OF IDIOMS OR FREE VERBAL CONSTRUCTIONS

In expressions (18)-(27), the support verb is a MWE, except for (20) and (23) where it is a simple verb, respectively *jaillir* ‘spring up’ and *prendre* ‘seize’. All respond to several syntactic operations. For example, it is possible to extrapose the subject:

(63) *L'idée de siffler est passée par la tête de Luc* ‘The idea to whistle went through Luc’s mind’

(64) *Il est passé par la tête de Luc l'idée de siffler* ‘It went through Luc’s mind to whistle’

Nhum may be pronominalized into the dative clitic *lui* ‘to him/her’ or *leur* ‘to them’:

(65) *L'idée de siffler lui est passée par la tête* ‘The idea to whistle went through his mind’

Both operations can be applied together:

(66) *Il lui est passé par la tête l'idée de siffler* ‘It went through his mind to whistle’

The same variations are observed on sentences unrelated with *idée*, where *passer* is a locative predicate:

(67) *Plusieurs oies sont passées au-dessus de la tête de Luc* ‘Several geese passed over Luc’s head’

(68) *Il est passé au-dessus de la tête de Luc plusieurs oies* (lit. It passed over Luc’s head several geese)

(69) *Plusieurs oies lui sont passées au-dessus de la tête* ‘Several geese passed over his head’

(70) *Il lui est passé au-dessus de la tête plusieurs oies* (lit. It passed over his head several geese)

This similarity suggests that it may not be necessary to describe the variations of (18)-(27) as such, and that a relevant description might be somehow inherited or reused from other parts of a lexical database instead. This is certainly true for a large proportion of

these variations, but the implementation of such inheritance would face several problems.

First, there are in fact some differences between the variations of (18)-(27) and those of the corresponding locative predicates. For example, the extraposition of the subject is accepted with (24) but not with *traverser* as a locative predicate :

- (71) *L'idée de siffler a traversé l'esprit de Luc* 'The idea to whistle crossed Luc's mind'
- (72) *Il a traversé l'esprit de Luc l'idée de siffler* 'It crossed Luc's mind to whistle'
- (73) *Plusieurs camions ont traversé la route* 'Several trucks crossed the road'
- (74) *?*Il a traversé la route plusieurs camions* (lit. It crossed the road several trucks)

In addition, the syntactic variation of schemes (23) with *prendre* 'seize' and (27) with *venir à* 'come to' does not match that of any specific sense of these two frequent verbs, which have many senses and accordingly many syntactic behaviours.

Finally, expressions (18)-(27) accept a syntactic operation which consists in displacing the infinitival complement to the right:

- (75) *L'idée de tout recommencer a traversé l'esprit de Luc* 'The idea to start all over again crossed Luc's mind'
- (76) *L'idée a traversé l'esprit de Luc de tout recommencer* 'The idea crossed Luc's mind to start all over again'

This permutation can be considered a case of 'double analysis': the word order in (75) suggests the infinitival clause belongs to the subject noun phrase, whereas in (76) it suggests the same infinitival clause is a complement of the verb. This operation is typical of SVCs (Gross 1981: 22; Giry-Schneider 1987: 45), and nothing similar is observed in the corresponding locative predicates:

- (77) *Une file de gros camions a traversé la route* 'A line of big trucks crossed the road'
- (78) **Une file a traversé la route de gros camions* (lit. A line crossed the road of big trucks)

Thus, the specific behaviour of schemes (18)-(27) as extensions of SVCs must be described. The question is worth studying because a large number of expressions of the same kind are involved. Balibar-Mrabeti (1995: 90) and Giry-Schneider (2004: 230) describe such phenomena informally. Local grammars by Gross (1995: 79–84) are a further step towards formalization: they can register, together with an extension of SVC like (24), a set of its variants such as (72) and (76). Such local grammars can be integrated into a lexical database, as properties of the lexical entries of the relevant predicative nouns. In this way, the constructions represented by a local grammar become together a single property in the database. This solution contributes to registering the diversity of expressions in a parsimonious number of properties.

Sequences which differ from one another by the body-part noun can even be grouped within the same local grammar, as in (19), repeated here for convenience:

(19) *Det idée germer dans LE (cerveau + cervelle + esprit + tête) de Nhum*

Grouping several extensions makes sense only if they combine with the same entries of predicative nouns: (23) cannot be grouped with the rest of our corpus of expressions, since it does not apply to the ‘thought’ entry of *idée*, as is shown by the fact that (50) is not in use.

CONCLUSION

French expressions such as *l'idée nous est venue à l'esprit de* ‘the idea popped into our heads to’ belong to a type of expressions identified in literature as ‘extensions’ (i.e. variants) of support verb constructions: here, the application of precise criteria shows that *idée* can be analysed as a predicative noun and *venir à l'esprit de* as a multiword extension of the support verb *avoir* ‘have’. This method is a rigorous way to go beyond the initial impression that these expressions are intermediate between support verb constructions and verbal idioms. Among extensions of support verbs, systematic investigation has been essentially dedicated to simple verbs with the predicative noun in a complement position, like *caresser* ‘stroke’ in *Luc caresse une idée* ‘Luc caresses an idea’, whereas *venir à l'esprit de* is multiword and the predicative noun is in the subject position. In lexical databases, the best strategy seems to register such expressions as properties of predicative nouns, and to describe their formal variations in local grammars. The number and complexity of such properties are to be taken into account in the conception of the databases.

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