

# Variation patterns and creativity in English non-compositional binomials

Ramon Marti Solano

► **To cite this version:**

| Ramon Marti Solano. Variation patterns and creativity in English non-compositional binomials .  
| Analizar datos > Describir variación / Analysing data > Describing variation, 2010. hal-01645054

**HAL Id: hal-01645054**

**<https://hal-unilim.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01645054>**

Submitted on 23 Nov 2017

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## VARIATION PATTERNS AND CREATIVITY IN ENGLISH NON-COMPOSITIONAL BINOMIALS

RAMÓN MARTÍ SOLANO  
*Université de Limoges*

### ABSTRACT

*Binomials, as all other types of phraseological units in English, are more or less fixed and therefore subject to a certain degree of variation. Non-compositional binomials are usually varied by replacing one of the constituent parts by another lexeme which changes the mental representation of the metaphor involved. Prosodic devices are responsible as well for the creation and variation of non-compositional binomials. However, we claim that the lexicalisation of certain binomials is the result of their functioning autonomously in discourse outside their traditional collocational frameworks. Well-established nominal or verbal binomials can thus attain a higher degree of non-compositionality thanks to their discursive instantiations as attributive adjectives. It should be noted that conceptual blending accounts mainly for the creation of nonce formations, purely for stylistic purposes.*

Key-words: binomials, non-compositionality, adjectivisation, collocational frameworks, hapax legomena, prosodic factors.

### RESUMÉ

*Comme avec tous les autres types d'unités phraséologiques en anglais, les groupes binaires sont plus ou moins figés et par conséquent susceptibles de subir un certain degré de variation. Les groupes binaires non-compositionnels sont généralement variés en remplaçant l'un de leurs éléments constituants par un autre lexème qui change la représentation mentale de la métaphore sous-jacente. Des facteurs prosodiques sont aussi responsables de la création et de la variation des groupes binaires non-compositionnels. Néanmoins, nous estimons que la lexicalisation de certains groupes binaires est le résultat de leur fonctionnement autonome en dehors*

*de leurs cadres collocationnels traditionnels. Des groupes binaires nominaux ou verbaux peuvent ainsi atteindre un plus haut niveau de non-compositionnalité grâce à leurs emplois discursifs en tant qu'adjectifs épithètes. Il s'avère important de souligner que le télescopage conceptuel donne lieu principalement à la création d'hapax legomena, purement pour des raisons stylistiques.*

Mots-clés: groupes binaires, non-compositionnalité, adjectivisation, cadres collocationnels, hapax legomena, facteurs prosodiques.

## 1. VARIATION AND INSTABILITY OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS: THE CASE OF BINOMIALS

Phraseological units (PhUs) encompass all polylexematic items of a language that are more or less lexically and morpho-syntactically fixed and that range from the totally transparent to the most opaque. Contrary to the traditional view of PhUs as fixed in form and lexis, recent research demonstrates that they are subject to wide-ranging variation and that instability and creativity are an intrinsic part of these multi-word units (Moon 1998; Langlotz 2006; Fellbaum 2007; Vega Moreno 2007).

Binomials, or irreversible binomials, are a subtype of PhUs rather frequent in English (Hudson 1998: 32) and traditionally defined as “two words pertaining to the same form class, placed on an identical level of syntactic hierarchy, and ordinarily connected by some kind of lexical link” (Malkiel 1959: 113). These are usually coordinated lexical items from all word classes, principally nouns, adjectives, and verbs, which are syntactically frozen, albeit to a certain degree, and whose meaning can be either compositional or non-compositional. *Strawberries and cream* and *father and son* are compositional nominal binomials whereas *fair and square* is a non-compositional adjectival binomial and *slash-and-burn*, a non-compositional verbal binomial generally functioning as an attributive adjective. By a process of semantic extension or metaphorisation many compositional binomials can become non-compositional as with *bread and butter* or *milk and water*. These conjoined pairs tend to belong to the same word class and are normally linked by the conjunction *and*. However, some scholars have included strings such as *head over heels* (Norrick 1988: 72; Gramley & Pätzold 2004: 58), *from cradle to grave* (Moon 1998: 154) or even *happy go lucky* (Makkai 1972: 314) in their own and rather extensive classifications.

Although binomials are less likely to vary if compared to predicate idioms or other idiomatic verbal phrases, the results of our research show that “language use combines creativity and convention” (Vega Moreno 2007: 217) and that the discursal behaviour of binomials is far more different, complex and unusual than what

dictionaries generally register as canonical forms or lexicalised variants.

## 2. DEGREES OF NON-COMPOSITIONALITY

It is generally assumed that there is a cline or continuum of idiomaticity or non-compositionality in multi-word units that would go “from least to most idiomatic based on semantic consideration” (Grant & Bauer 2004: 42). The classical example of non-compositionality amongst idioms in English is represented by the binomial *by and large* (Glucksberg 2003: 72) which could be placed at the top of the cline. *Rough and ready*, *good and proper*, *seek-and-hide*, *huff and puff*, *trial and error* or *airs and graces* are but a few examples of binomials showing different degrees of transparency/opacity and non-compositionality.

## 3. VARIATION PATTERNS

The daily press appears to be the ideal environment for the creation and variation of phraseological units in general and for binomials in particular. Even though these fixed coordinated lexemes are generally used in their canonical form, examples of discursal instantiations are not infrequent and although some of them may be considered as nonce formations, others are recurrent and may eventually become lexicalised.

### 3.1. *Word-for-word substitution*

As with idioms in general, the most widely extended pattern of variation is the substitution of one of the constituents of the string by another word of the same class, more often than not a synonym. Other types of lexical relations are also possible as illustrated by the following examples:

*get your **wires** crossed* > *get your **lines** crossed* (paronymy)  
***wrap** yourself in the flag* > ***drape** yourself in the flag* (hyponymy)  
*from head to **foot*** > *from head to **toe*** (meronymy)

The examples above are lexicalised variants, extensively institutionalised and registered as such by general dictionaries and dictionaries of idioms. As far as binomials are concerned, the commonest variation pattern consists in the substitution of the second core element of the string as in (1) in which the non-compositional dyad *body and soul* (with its literary variant *heart and soul*) becomes *body and mind* with exactly the same holistic meaning:

(1) *The more sushi you taste the more sushi you know and the more you become curious about sushi and your knowledge and enjoyment grows [sic], and you become obsessed in **body and mind** about sushi.* (The Guardian, 30 January 2005)

Other substitution patterns can generate paradigms of non-compositional binomials lexically, syntactically, and semantically related: the binomial template *blood + and + N* has given rise to strings such as *blood and guts* (violence and bloodshed, especially in fiction), *blood and thunder* (unrestrained and violent action or behaviour, especially in sport or fiction) and *blood and iron* (military force rather than diplomacy). This binary phraseological template (templates such as *heart + and + N* or *body + and + N* in which the first noun is invariable and the second changes paradigmatically) is thus productive and can, by a process of lexical analogy, bring about new formations such as *blood and treasure*:

(2) *They work for us and, when they chose to make war on Iraq, it was our **blood and treasure** they were risking. Of course we have a right to know why they did it.* (The Guardian, 3 March 2004)

The indivisible character of the string in example (2) is confirmed by its syntactic behaviour: the binomial functions as the direct object of the verb *risk* with which it collocates, which is not generally the case for either nominal component taken separately. The non-compositional status of this binomial is also determined by a lexical constraint which does not allow other nouns to replace either of the constituent parts for the holistic meaning to be retained.

### 3.2. Intensification

An important number of lexicalised binomials in English are what has been described as *composés synonymiques coordonnées* (Tournier 1991: 90) or “coordinated word-pairs with semantic repetition” (Kopaczyk 2009: 91) as, for example, *aims and objectives*, *rules and regulations*, *decline and decay* or *guts and determination*. This type of expressive lexical combination constitutes a pattern of semantic relation used not for the sake of precision, as in legal terminology, but as a stylistic device for the sake of emphasis or intensification:

(3) *Alastair, whose grandmother is mortally ill in Liverpool, has no words for his grief at the trespass behind him, but possesses **the heart and marrow** to feel it.* (The Guardian, 26 February 2005)

In (3) the second nominal constituent has been added in order to intensify the meaning expressed by the canonical form (*not*) *have the heart to do something*. Exactly the same meaning could have been construed by simply using the first nominal component.

### 3.3. *Autonomy from collocational frameworks and syntactic constraints*

Some binomials are considered restricted collocations in the sense that they can only be used with a specific verb. This is the case of *life and limb*, normally used as the argument of the verb *risk* in the lexicalised idiomatic phrase *risk life and limb*. This binomial can exceptionally collocate with other synonymous or antonymous verbs such as, respectively, *jeopardise* or *save*. The verb form may even be substituted by a synonymous noun phrase forming a collocational framework (Renouf & Sinclair 1991: 128-129) as in *a + N + to + binomial*, where *N* is usually instantiated by the noun *threat*. Searches in the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) show that this binomial is

not used independently or otherwise stated free from its collocational constraints. The same can be applied to other collocational frameworks of the type *preposition + binomial*, as, for instance, *from far and wide*. The question remains whether these binomials actually have a discursive behaviour independent from the constraints of their collocational frameworks. Corpus research shows that their lexicographical description does not always reveal the actual realisations of the phrases in discourse: only 17, out of a total of 97 occurrences of *far and wide* in the BNC are in fact preceded by the preposition *from*.

A further step towards a higher degree of non-compositionality is represented by the attributive use of some binomial pairs which have both collocational and syntactic constraints. The binomial in (4), which is normally realised as part of the larger frame *to be head and shoulders above somebody or something*, functions independently as an attributive adjective with the distinct unitary meaning of “unsurpassed”:

(4) *The **head and shoulders** winner at this year's awards was the Royal Court theatre – it dominated the shortlists with 11 nominations and ...* (The Guardian, 23 November 2009)

Examples (5) and (6) show combinations which may have a lesser degree of non-compositionality in other discursive and syntactic contexts but that increase their non-compositionality by the fact of being used attributively:

(5) *But there remains a much greater probability of **blood-and-thunder contests** in the lunchtime derby in Hull, and later at the Jungle where Castleford meet Wakefield tomorrow night.* (The Guardian, 9 April 2009)

(6) *Now, how do we get round it? Swell party funds direct and we've got a declaration problem. Push a £1.5m loan note across the table, though, and we're in **nodding and winking business**.* (The Guardian, 13 March 2006)



### 3.4. Prosodic devices

The creation of new binomials or the variation on the well-established and lexicalised ones is usually the consequence of prosodic devices coming into play. Alliteration, intrinsic to the English language, is at the origin of non-compositional sequences as illustrated in the examples below:

(7) *The **hip-and-happening** Observer has hung its panel from a Christmas tree: highly desirable, perhaps, but naff all the same.* (The Guardian, 30 November 2004)

(8) *Up it inexorably goes, carrying the happy hamsters, far above the **grunts and grinds** of the town.* (The Guardian, 28 February 2005)

In (8) the transparent binomial *grunts and groans* is lexically and conceptually associated with the non-compositional dyad *grunts and grinds* which stands here for the hustle and bustle of city life. In (9) the use of the string *gun and gang* is based on paronymy and on the metonymical relation between the nominal constituents.

(9) *His intervention comes as figures close to Gordon Brown criticised Downing Street for not responding more quickly or coherently to David Cameron's promises of tax breaks for married couples or to his argument that absent fathers are to blame for **gun and gang** culture.* (The Observer, 25 February 2007)

This string, which tends to collocate with the nouns *culture*, *crime*, and *violence*, has no occurrences in the BNC and only one in the COCA. There are 28 results in the archives of *The Guardian*: 22 of them from the years 2007 and 2008. *The Telegraph* lists a total of 13 article results, the first registered example dating from 2004, which demonstrates the recent use of this binomial.

### 3.5. Blending

Some idiom variants have been analysed as the result of speakers having “blended two different standardised metaphorical uses” (Vega Moreno 2007: 210-211) and consequently creating a new variant form sharing the meaning of two distinct but semantically related multi-word units.

(10) *Meanwhile, I must ready my homecoming banquet, **put out the bunting and red carpet**. The coach is pulling up.* (The Times, 18 October 2008)

The binomial in (10) is the product of the blending of the non idiomatic collocation *to put up the bunting* and the idiomatic expression *to roll out the red carpet*. Both strings are semantically related as they belong to the same conceptual domain: OFFERING A SPECIAL TREATMENT. The resulting blend is not simply the combination of the nominal constituents but also of the two phrasal verbs *to roll out* and *to put up*.

(11) *A Rake’s Progress, a Harlot’s Progress, Marriage à la Mode... you can see Steve Bell **taking up pen and cudgel** in exactly the same causes now.* (The Guardian, 5 March 2007)

The example in (11) is the result of the blending of the non-idiomatic verbal phrase *to take up pen* and the idiomatic expression *to take up the cudgel(s) for something or somebody*.

(12) *... are all moving towards the same ends, which is the virtual end of the small independent shops that are **the glue and lifeblood** of our communities and ...* (The Guardian, 31 January 2007)

From the expression *to be the lifeblood of something* and the figurative use of the word *glue* as something that binds people or a society together, the formation in (12) shows the high degree of transparency achieved by the combination of two lexical items for the creation of a new binomial.

(13) *This unflappable demeanour surprises me. I had expected something altogether more **hellfire-and-brimstone**, given that she comes from the Ramsay school of expletive-laden kitchen machismo, where a light branding with a red-hot grill pan is par for the course.* (The Observer, 16 December 2007)

The canonical form which corresponds to the string in (13) is the binomial *fire and brimstone*. This variant form is the result of a conceptual blending with another multi-word unit *hellfire and damnation* which shares the same meaning with the afore-mentioned idiomatic expression.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Although irreversible binomials tend not to vary as much as other idiomatic phrases do, they show, nevertheless, a certain degree of variation which follows several regular patterns. They can be varied by replacing one of their constituent parts, generally the second core element, by another lexeme. A higher degree of non-compositionality is achieved by the fact of well-established binomials functioning syntactically as another word class, usually as attributive adjectives. This further step towards non-compositionality underlines the close and fundamental relation between syntax and semantic compositionality.

## REFERENCES

- Fellbaum, C. (ed.) 2007. *Idioms and Collocations. Corpus-based Linguistic and Lexicographic Studies*. London: Continuum.
- Glucksberg, S. 2003. *Understanding Figurative Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gramley, S. & Pätzold, K. M. 2004. *A Survey of Modern English*. London: Routledge.
- Grant, L. & Bauer, L. 2004. "Criteria for Re-defining Idioms: Are We Barking Up the Wrong Tree?". *Applied Linguistics* 25 (1): 38-61.

- Hudson, J. 1998. *Perspectives on Fixedness: Applied and Theoretical*. Lund: Lund University Press.
- Kopaczyk, J. 2009. "Multi-word Units of Meaning in 16th-century Legal Scots". *Selected Proceedings of the 2008 Symposium on New Approaches in English Historical Lexis (HEL-LEX 2)*. Eds. R. W. McConchie, A. Honkapohja & J. Tyrkkö. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. 88-95.
- Langlotz, A. 2006. *Idiomatic Creativity: A Cognitive-linguistic Model of Idiom-representation and Idiom-variation in English*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Makkai, A. 1972. *Idiom Structure in English*. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Malkiel, Y. 1959. "Studies in Irreversible Binomials". *Lingua* 8: 113-160.
- Moon, R. 1998. *Fixed Expressions and Idioms in English: A Corpus-Based Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Norrick, N. R. 1988. "Binomial Meaning in Texts". *Journal of English Linguistics* 21 (1): 72-87.
- Renouf, A. & Sincliar, J. M. "Collocational Frameworks in English". *English Corpus Linguistics*. Eds. K. Aijmer & B. Altenberg. New York: Longman. 128-143.
- Tournier, J. 1991. *Structures lexicales de l'anglais*. Poitiers: Nathan.
- Vega Moreno, R. E. 2007. *Creativity and Convention. The Pragmatics of Everyday Figurative Speech*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.