Verb Phrase Idioms in Valency Alternation: A Selection-based Approach

Tomokazu Takehisa

Proceedings of the 39th Pacific Asia Conference on
Language, Information and Computation (PACLIC 39)

Emmanuele Chersoni, Jong-Bok Kim (eds.)

2025

Verb Phrase Idioms in Valency Alternation: A Selection-based Approach

Tomokazu Takehisa
Saitama Prefectural University
820 Sannomiya, Koshigaya
Saitama, Japan
takehisa-tomokazu@spu.ac.jp

Abstract

This paper discusses Japanese verb phrase idioms based on verbs alternating in valency and makes the following claims. First, the ditransitive/transitive alternation involves augmentation of an internal argument, unlike the transitive/intransitive alternation, which involves augmentation of an external argument. Second, given the structure of transitive/intransitive verbs, the transitive version of an intransitive idiom should in principle be available in terms of structure, yet some intransitive idioms lack their transitive counterparts. In defense of the selection-based approach to idioms, a possible solution is suggested where the absence of the transitive version is related to the interpretive properties of the base intransitive idiom, which might have structural reflexes. The paper also discusses the status and distribution of *ni*-phrases in transitive idioms.

1 Introduction

Idioms have been intensively studied since the early days of generative grammar, as they pose important challenges to the form-meaning correspondence in general. Phrasal idioms can sometimes behave as an atomic unit like a word, while acting as a complex phrase to varying degrees. In the case of verb phrase idioms, some idioms act as a complex predicate, and, if a nominal element is an essential part of an idiom, that element, being part of a verbal predicate, behaves as such and cannot be referential.

Another topic that has been intensively studied is verbs that alternate in valency. Since the early to mid-1980s, research on lexical semantics and its relation to syntax has centered around valency alternations such as the causative alternation, the double object alternation, the resultative construction, and the like, and has contributed to the current conceptions of argument structure in the principles-and-parameters framework.

When we consider verbs alternating in valency and verb phrase idioms together, there are three patterns as to the relation between alternating verbs and idioms, depending on the minimum size of a particular idiom: (i) idioms with both the valency-reduced and the valency-augmented alternants, (ii) idioms only with the valency-reduced alternant, (iii) idioms only with the valency-augmented alternant.

In this paper, I will discuss the alternation patterns of verb phrase idioms based on two types of alternating verbs in Japanese and argue that these two types involve different alternation processes. Specifically, I will argue that ditransitive/transitive verbs involve augmentation of an indirect internal argument, while transitive/intransitive verbs involve augmentation of an external argument. I will also discuss transitive idioms that are predicted to exist but not detected under the present approach and suggest possible solutions to their absence. Moreover, as an implication of the present analysis, I will discuss the status and distribution of *ni*-phrases in transitive idioms.

Before proceeding, I would like to briefly review the basic assumptions in this paper. One is a realizational theory of the morphology of Japanese transitive/intransitive verbs. Japanese has a series of idiosyncratic transitive-intransitive morpheme pairs, which are allomorphs of the same syntactic heads, and their distribution is determined by the particular lexical roots they are associated with (e.g., Jacobsen, 1990).

Under the theory of Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz, 1993; Embick, 2015), their distribution is handled by Vocabulary Insertion (VI) rules (Nishiyama, 1997; Miyagawa, 1998). In this paper, the (templatic) VI rules in (1)a and (1)b are assumed for the transitive and intransitive morphemes, respectively. They are assumed to be applied in the structure in (1)c, which is derived post-syntactically via head movement or a formally

equivalent operation.[1]

(1) a. v $\leftrightarrow$ s/X__VOICE, where $X \in \{\sqrt{\text{A}}, \sqrt{\text{B}}, \textit{etc.}\}$
b. v $\leftrightarrow$ r/X__, where $X \in \{\sqrt{\text{A}}, \sqrt{\text{B}}, \textit{etc.}\}$
c. After syntax:

$$\begin{array}{c} \tau\psi \\ \tau\psi \text{ VOICE} \\ \sqrt{} \quad \text{v} \end{array}$$

More concrete examples of the VI rules would be as in (2), for the transitive-intransitive pair *tuk-e(-ru)* 'attach (tr.)' and *tuk-∅(-u)* 'attach (in.)'.

(2) a. v $\leftrightarrow$ e/X__VOICE, where $X \in \{\sqrt{\text{tuk}}, \textit{etc.}\}$
b. v $\leftrightarrow$ $\varnothing/X$__, where $X \in \{\sqrt{\text{tuk}}, \textit{etc.}\}$

Along with the realizational view of the verbal morphology, a relational theory of lexical causation is adopted, which assumes that the causative semantics of a lexical causative verb emerges from the combination of VOICE and its complement vP.[2] Specifically, the verbalizing functional head is interpreted as causative when combined with , as given in the semantic interpretation rule in (3), a simplified and slightly modified version of the one in Wood and Marantz (2017).

(3) $[\![\text{v}]\!] \leftrightarrow \lambda\text{P}\lambda\text{e}\exists\text{e}'[\text{P}(\text{e}') \,\&\, \text{CAUSE}(\text{e}, \text{e}')]/$__VOICE

Note that, although I adopt the causative semantics of lexical causation as relational, the syntactic causative predicate in Japanese, *-(s)ase*, is a single syntactic head specially dedicated to causation. Thus, these two kinds of causation in Japanese are similar yet ultimately different.

Yet another assumption adopted in this paper concerns phrasal idioms. Phrasal idioms are linguistic expressions with meanings that are unpredictable from those of their component parts (Nunberg *et al.*, 1994). It is standardly assumed (e.g., O'Grady, 1998; Bruening, 2010; Everaert, 2010) that an idiomatic interpretation is possible when a set of particular lexical items are related in a particular configuration, which can be understood as a chain of selectional relations between the lexical items involved. For example, an idiom like *shoot* the *breeze* is assumed to involve the following set of selectional relations, as given in (4)c.[3][4]

(4) *shoot the breeze*
a. [$_{\text{vP}}$ v $\sqrt{}$shoot[$_{\text{nP}}$[$_{\text{Det}}$ the][$_{\text{n}}$ n $\sqrt{}$breeze]]]
b. 'have a casual conversation; talk nonsense'
c. Selectional relations
i. v $\rightarrow$ $\sqrt{}$shoot
ii. v $\rightarrow$ n
iii. n $\rightarrow$ $\sqrt{}$breeze
iv. n $\rightarrow$ Det

A structure where all the required relations hold for an idiom can receive the relevant idiomatic interpretation,[5] so disrupting any one of them leads to its loss. Thus, if the object nP in (4)a is replaced with the PP *in the breeze*, the idiomatic interpretation (4)b becomes unavailable because the required selectional relation in (4)c-ii is replaced by two other relations irrelevant to the idiomatic interpretation: v $\rightarrow$ P and P $\rightarrow$ n.

Furthermore, there are cases where the nature of the event described matters as to the possibility of valency alternation. As Levin and Rappaport

[1] I assume that VOICE comes in two varieties: the active one, which introduces an external argument (Kratzer, 1996), and the passive one, which introduces an implicit agent (i.e., $[\![\text{VOICE}_{\text{PASS}}]\!] = \lambda e\, \exists x\, [\text{Agent}(e, x)]$) (e.g., Landau, 2010). I identify the active VOICE head as the basic argument introducer i*, proposed by Wood and Marantz (2017), which is category-neutral and inherits the first category it merges with. For the purposes of this paper, it can be taken to be a verbal functional head, i.e., as a flavor of v in the sense of Folli and Harley (2007). However, I diverge from the original proposal in that the head is not endowed with the function of closing off its projection, which is notated by "*." Thus, I omit the notation in what follows and use i instead of i*.

[2] See Hale and Keyser (1993) for the view of CAUSE as a syntactic configurational relation and Pylkkänen (2008) for the view of CAUSE as a syntactic head denoting a relation.

[3] For example, the relevant principle and constraint formulated in Bruening (2010: 532) are as follows:

(i) The Principle of Idiomatic Interpretation
X and Y may be interpreted idiomatically only if X selects Y.

(ii) Constraint on Idiomatic Interpretation
If X selects a lexical category Y, and X and Y are interpreted idiomatically, all of the selected arguments of Y must be interpreted as part of the idiom that includes X and Y. (Lexical categories are V, N, A, Adv.)

I assume that lexical categories in (ii) can be formed by categorizing heads such as v, n, and a.

[4] The precise treatment of weak definite articles in idioms is outside the scope of this paper, as Japanese does not have articles. While I simply assume that they are not obstacles to idiom formation, I follow Bruening (2010) in that determiners in English are modifiers to nPs (NPs in his paper), as given in the text. Note that I use the labels DP and nP(NP) interchangeably throughout this paper. See Gehrke and McNally (2019) for an approach to idioms that aims to integrate two different domains of semantics that are computed separately: reference and descriptive content.

[5] I assume that the Encyclopedia, a post-syntactic component in Distributed Morphology responsible for extralinguistic knowledge, is also responsible for the assignment of idiomatic interpretation.

Hovav (1995) argue, when the event described by the verb requires the intervention of an agent, the valency reduction of a transitive/intransitive verb is impossible, as shown in (5) below. In contrast, the causing argument of an externally caused event can be left unexpressed if the nature of the causing event is completely unspecified.

(5) a. He broke his promise/the world record.
b. .*His promise/The world record broke.
(Levin and Rapapport Hovav, 1995: 105)

In general, if a verb phrase describes an event whose nature implies the involvement of an agent, the presence of a VOICE head is effectively required. The same consideration applies to events described by idioms: If an event described by an idiom implies the involvement of an agent, it is not necessary to specify a VOICE head as its essential part, though it is possible to do so and there are indeed such cases.[6]

Lastly, the form-meaning correspondence in idioms can be one-to-many, aside from the non-idiomatic, literal interpretation: There can be more than one idiomatic interpretation per structure. In this paper, examples of idioms are presented with at least one idiomatic interpretation to show that they are idioms, but it should be kept in mind that there may be other idiomatic interpretations that are ignored in the discussion.[7]

With these backgrounds, we will turn to idioms based on verbs alternating in valency and the alternation patterns they display.

2 Idioms and Valency Alternation

2.1 Ditransitive/transitive verbs

There is a class of verbs in Japanese which alternate between ditransitive and transitive verbs. These verbs take nominative and accusative arguments in the dyadic use, and they can take an additional dative argument when they are turned into triadic by adding an argument-introducing morpheme *-se*, which I identify as APPL. [8]

We can find idioms based on verbs of this class: Some idioms are possible with both the transitive and the ditransitive alternants, as in (6), while other idioms are found only with one of the alternants, transitive (as in (7)), or ditransitive (as in (8)).[9][10]

(6) a. X-ga Y-o on-ni ki-∅-ru
X-NOM Y-ACC grace-DAT $\sqrt{}$put.on-V-NPST
'X is grateful/obliged for Y'
b. X-ni Y-o on-ni ki-∅-se-ru
X-DAT Y-ACC grace-DAT
ki-∅-se-ru
$\sqrt{}$put.on-V-APPL-NPST
'make X feel obliged for Y'

(7) a. X-ga baka-o mi-∅-ru
X-NOM nonsense-ACC $\sqrt{}$*textsee*-V-NPST
'X ends up losing out'
b. *X-ni baka-o mi-∅-se-ru
X-DAT nonsense-ACC $\sqrt{}$see-V-APPL-NPST
[No idiomatic interpretation] (see above)
c. X-ni baka-o mi-∅-sase-ru
X-DAT nonsense-ACC $\sqrt{}$see-V-CAUS-NPST
'make X end up losing out'

(8) a. *X-ga hiyamizu-o abi-∅-ru
X-NOM cold water-ACC $\sqrt{}$pour.on-V-NPST
[No idiomatic interpretation] (see below)
b. X-ni hiyamizu-o abi-∅-se-ru
X-DAT cold water-ACC
abi-∅-se-ru
$\sqrt{}$pour.on-V-APPL-NPST
'throw a wet blanket on X'
Lit.: 'pour cold water over X'

Since embedding an idiom should be fine as long as its prerequisite relations are kept intact, it is expected that (7)b should be possible, which is not the case. Given that embedding per se is not banned, as shown in (7)c, the unacceptability of (7)b suggests that something other than simple embedding is involved in the ditransitive/transitive alternation.

[6] See, for example, Schildmier Stone (2016) for English idioms that resist passivization (e.g., *kick the bucket*).

[7] When more than one idiomatic interpretation per structure is possible, the ambiguity is resolved contextually.

[8] It is more or less standard in the literature to treat this morpheme as a lexical causative (e.g., Matsuoka, 2003). The treatment in the text is justified by the success of the analysis presented therein.

[9] For space reasons, the nominative subject is omitted in most examples with the valency-augmented alternant.

[10] Abbreviations used in this paper are as follows: ACC(usative), APPL(locative), CAUS(ative), DAT(ive), DIM(unitive), DV = dummy verb, GEN(itive), HON(orific), IN = intransitive, INST(rumental), LOC(ative), N = nominalizer, NEG(ative), NOM(inative), NPST = nonpast, PASS(ive), PST = past, TOP(ic), TR = transitive, V = verbalizer, $\sqrt{}$noun = nominal root, $\sqrt{}$verb = verbal root.

To account for the difference in question, I argue that the transitive and the ditransitive alternants have the following structures, respectively, where *i* is assumed to introduce a thematically underspecified argument (Takehisa, 2018; cf. Wood and Marantz, 2017):[11]

(9) a. Transitive
$[_{vP2}\ DP_{NOM}\ [[_{vP1}\ DP_{ACC}\ [_{v}\ \sqrt{}verb\ v\ ]]\ i\ ]]$
b. Ditransitive
$[_{vP2}\ DP_{NOM}\ [[_{APPLP}\ DP_{DAT}\ [\ vP1\ APPL\ ]]\ i\ ]]$

As depicted in (9)b, it is assumed that APPL, a head introducing an internal argument, is responsible for deriving the ditransitive alternant, which is crucially different from previous analyses (e.g., Inoue, 1976), where *-se* is assumed to be a causative and introduce an external argument.

Under this applicativization view of ditransitives, an idiom displays the ditransitive/transitive alternation only when vP1 in (9) contains all the essential parts of that idiom; if an idiom requires material outside vP1 as essential, it does not alternate in ditransitivity and only the transitive or ditransitive version is available as an idiom.

Thus, while the examples in (6) involve an idiom whose essential parts are all contained in vP1, the idioms in (7) and (8) require material outside vP1. More specifically, the idiom involved in (7) requires at least the head of vP2 (i.e., *i*) as well as the material within its immediate complement vP1 (as in (9)a), which makes the ditransitive version in (7)b impossible as an idiom. Likewise, the idiom in (8)b requires at least the APPL head as well as the material within its immediate complement vP1 (as in (9)b), which makes the transitive version in (8)a impossible. Hence, the selection-based approach, combined with the applicativization view, can account for the alternation patterns of idioms based on ditransitive/transitive verbs.

Given the correspondence between the transitive nominative subject and the ditransitive dative object of the alternating verb, as in (10) below, it might appear natural to assume that the alternation involves causativization, as widely assumed in the literature. However, these two arguments are crucially different in that the transitive subject is variable in interpretation and can be either agentive or non-agentive, as shown in (11) and (12) below, respectively, each of which is a continuation of (10)a: (11) involves the process of *soo suru* ('do so') replacement, which is only possible with volitional agents, ensuring that the subject in (10)a can only be agentive; on the other hand, the subject in (10)a is forced to be non-agentive by (12), where the agenthood of the subject is negated in the presence of an empathic reflexive.

(10) a. Taro-ga mizu-o abi-∅-ta
T.-NOM water-ACC $\sqrt{}$pour.on-V-PST
i. 'Taro poured water over himself.'
ii. 'Taro got water poured over himself.'
b. Ziro-ga Taro-ni mizu-o abi-∅-se-ta
Z.-NOM T.-DAT water-ACC $\sqrt{}$pour.on-v-APPL-PST
'Ziro poured water over Taro.'

(11) Ziro-mo {soo si-ta / abi-∅-ta}
Z.-also so do-PST/ $\sqrt{}$pour.on-V-PST
'Ziro did so, too./ Ziro poured it, too.'

(12) kedo zibun-de-wa abi-∅-nak-ar-ta (> -at-ta)
but self-INST-TOP $\sqrt{}$pour.on-V-NEG-DV-PST
'but he didn't pour it himself.'

In contrast, the ditransitive dative object, as in (10)b, is not variable in thematic interpretation and can only be non-agentive.

The difference in this respect is reflected in the argument introducers involved: *i* introduces a thematically underspecified argument, but APPL introduces a thematically specified, non-agentive argument. Note that *i* also introduces the ditransitive subject, but it can only be agentive. This is because the presence of the non-agentive dative object prevents the subject from being non-agentive, as required by thematic uniqueness.[12]

Given the above discussion, it is predicted that the ditransitive version is unavailable when the selection of *v* by *i* is among an idiom's required relations. The most transparent case is idioms with

[11] Building on the work by Wood and Marantz (2017), Takehisa (2018) assumes that i introduces a thematically underspecified argument: an argument which can be interpreted either as agentive or non-agentive. To borrow Newman's (2024) notation and extend it into covering a non-agentive role, the denotation of i can be represented as follows: $[\![i]\!] \leftrightarrow \lambda e \lambda x[\text{-ER}(e, x) \vee \text{-EE}(e, x)]$, where the theta role labels "-ER" and "-EE" correspond to an external theta role and an internal theta role, respectively (cf. Dowty, 1990). The argument introduced by i ends up with one of the two interpretations at the interface, as a result of processes resolving thematic underspecification. See also footnote one.

[12] See Landman (2000), a.o., for thematic uniqueness.

transitive subjects as agents, as in (13)a, but those with non-agentive subjects, as in (7)a above, also count as evidence, since the subject interpretation is not necessarily variable in the case of idioms: It may be specified either as agentive or non-agentive as part of an idiomatic interpretation.

(13) a. X-ga neko-o kabur-∅-u
X.-NOM cat-ACC √put.on-V-NPST
'X pretends to be quiet; X puts it on'
b. *X-ni neko-o kabur-Ø-se-ru (> kabu-se-)
X-DAT cat-ACC √put.on-V-APPL-NPST
[No idiomatic interpretation] (see above)

Conversely, idioms whose subject is variable in thematic interpretation are based solely on material within vP1 in (9), and thus can alternate in ditransitivity, as shown in (14). The interpretational variability of the subject in (14)a is illustrated by (15) and (16), each of which is a continuation of (14)a and serves to disambiguate the subject.

(14) a. Taro-ga doro-o kabur-∅-ta (> kabut-ta)
T.-NOM mud-ACC √put.on-V-PST
i. 'Taro played a thankless role.'
ii. 'Taro was blamed (for someone).'
Lit.: 'Taro got covered with mud.'
b. Ziro-ga Taro-ni doro-o kabur-∅-se-ta (> kabu-se-ta)
Z.-NOM T.-DAT mud-ACC √put.on-V-APPL-PST
i. 'Ziro made Taro play a thankless role.'
ii. 'Ziro blamed Taro for him.'

(15) Ziro-mo {soo si-ta / kabur-∅-ta (> kabut-)}
Z.-also so do-PST/ √put.on-V-PST
'Ziro did so, too./ Ziro played it, too.'
Lit.: 'Ziro did so, too./ Ziro got covered, too.'

(16) kedo zibun-de-wa kabur-∅-anak-ar-ta (> -at-)
but self-INST-TOP √put.on-V-NEG-DV-PST
'but he didn't blame himself.'
Lit.: 'but he didn't get himself covered.'

Therefore, we conclude from these alternation patterns that the ditransitive alternant does not contain its transitive counterpart.

2.2 Transitive/intransitive verbs

Given the selection-based approach to idioms and that the transitive/intransitive alternation involves complementation of an intransitive vP by *i*, it is predicted that, if an intransitive idiom is possible, then its transitive counterpart is always possible as long as the idiom's required relations are kept intact. This prediction can be immediately countered by examples where idioms based on the intransitive alternant of an alternating verb have no transitive counterparts. In defense of the selection-based approach, I turn to such examples and present possible solutions under the present approach.

First, consider (17), where a different kind of idiom is formed by transitivization, in contrast to those in (18), (22), and (25) below, where the transitive and the intransitive idioms are related.

(17) a. (X-ni) atama-ga sag-ar-u
X-LOC head-NOM √lower-IN-NPST
'appreciate X; take one's hats off to X'
Lit.: 'One's head lowers to X'
b. (X-ni) atama-o sag-e-ru
X-LOC head-ACC √lower-TR-NPST
'apologize to X; beg X (for something)'
Lit.: 'bow to X'

The fact that (17)a cannot be retained in (17)b can be straightforwardly accounted for under the selection-based approach if we add the following: When a chain of selectional relations between particular lexical items is interpreted idiomatically, maximize the number of the relations involved. Thus, in (17)b, the selection of *v* by *i* must be counted as one of the idiom's essential relations.

Next, there are cases where transitivization destroys intransitive idioms. First, observe that transitive/intransitive verbs can form idioms that alternate in transitivity, or ones with only one of the alternants, transitive or intransitive. Consider (18), (19), and (20) below.

(18) a. (X-no)ryuu.in-ga sag-ar-u
X-GEN gastric juices-NOM √lower-IN-NPST
'{become/ X becomes} relieved/satisfied'
b. (X-ga) ryuu.in-o sag-e-ru
X-NOM gastric juices-ACC √lower-TR-NPST
'{have/ X has} one's grudge satisfied'

(19) a. ude-ga tat-∅-u
arm-NOM $\sqrt{}$stand-IN-NPST
'be skilled/competent'

b. *ude-o tat-e-ru
arm-ACC $\sqrt{}$stand-TR-NPST
[No idiomatic interpretation] (see above)

(20) a. *(o-)tya-ga nigo-r-u
HON-tea-NOM $\sqrt{}$muddy-IN-NPST
[No idiomatic interpretation] (see below)
Lit.: 'the tea gets cloudy'

b. (o-)tya-o nigo-s-u
HON-tea-ACC $\sqrt{}$muddy-TR-NPST
'give an evasive answer'
Lit.: 'make the tea cloudy'

The verbs involved in these examples are the ones whose transitive alternant takes two DPs as arguments, and idioms based on these verbs involve at least a verb and an internal argument as their essential parts. In addition, there are other types of idioms to consider. Specifically, there are transitive/intransitive verbs that take a locative PP as an argument. Idioms based on verbs of this class also involve a verb and an internal argument as their essential parts, but the internal argument may be DP or PP,[13] as depicted in the following, with an (intransitive) idiom underlined:

(21) a. DP as part of an idiom
$[\ldots[_{vP}\ PP\ \underline{[\ DP\ [_{v}\ \sqrt{}\ \ v\ ]]}]\ldots]$

b. PP as part of an idiom
$[\ldots[_{vP}\ DP\ \underline{[\ PP\ [_{v}\ \sqrt{}\ \ v\ ]]}]\ldots]$

With this distinction in mind, consider the following examples: The idioms in (22)-(24) have an internal DP argument as their essential part, while those in (25)-(26) have a locative PP as their essential part.

(22) a. X-ni hakusya-ga kak-ar-u
X-LOC spur-NOM $\sqrt{}$hook-IN-PST
'X gains impetus'

b. X-ni hakusya-o kak-e-ru
X-LOC spur-ACC $\sqrt{}$hook-TR-NPST
'give impetus to X'

(23) a. X-ni (Y-no) me-ga todok-∅-u
X-LOC Y-GEN eye-NOM $\sqrt{}$reach-IN-NPST
'X is within (Y's) sight; One/Y can see X'

b. *X-ni (Y-no) me-o todok-e-ru
X-LOC Y-GEN eye-ACC $\sqrt{}$reach-TR-NPST
[No idiomatic interpretation] (see above)

(24) a. *X-ni in.nen-ga tuk-∅-u
X-LOC fate-NOM $\sqrt{}$attach-IN-PST
[No idiomatic interpretation] (see below)

b. X-ni in.nen-o tuk-e-ru
X-LOC fate-ACC $\sqrt{}$attach-TR-NPST
'make a false charge against X'

(25) a. X-ga (Y-no) ki-ni kak-ar-u
X-NOM Y-GEN mind-LOC $\sqrt{}$hook-IN-NPST
'{be/ Y is} concerned about X'

b. (Y-ga) X-o ki-ni kak-e-ru
Y-NOM X-ACC mind-LOC $\sqrt{}$hook-TR-NPST
'{be/ Y is} concerned about X; care about X/ Y cares about X'

(26) a. X-ga (Y-no) hana-ni tuk-∅-u
X-NOM Y-GEN nose-LOC $\sqrt{}$attach-IN-NPST
'X gets up {one's/ Y's} nose; {be/ Y is} fed up with X'
Lit.: 'X sticks to {one's/ Y's} nose'

b. *(Y-ga) X-o hana-ni tuk-e-ru
Y-NOM X-ACC nose-LOC $\sqrt{}$attach-TR-NPST
[No idiomatic interpretation] (see above)

(27) a. *X-ga ko-mimi-ni hasam-ar-u
X-NOM DIM-ear-LOC $\sqrt{}$put.in-IN-NPST
[No idiomatic interpretation] (see below)

b. X-o ko-mimi-ni hasam-∅-u
X-ACC DIM-ear-LOC $\sqrt{}$put.in-TR-NPST
'overhear X; happen to hear X'

The idioms in (18), (22), and (25) alternate in transitivity, behaving as predicted by the present approach. Those in (20), (24), and (27) do not have the intransitive version to begin with and are thus irrelevant to the prediction in question. However, the fact that the transitive versions cannot be formed out of the intransitive idioms, as in (19), (23), and (26), may present a serious challenge to the present approach and needs to be taken care of.

I do not have a fully worked-out analysis of idioms based on transitive/intransitive verbs that only have the intransitive version at present. Yet what is crucially relevant in blocking the transitive idioms in question is that the base intransitive idioms have stative, non-episodic interpretations.[14] Specifically, (19)a is an individual-level predicate

[13] When a PP is an essential part of an idiom, it is lower than an accusative argument. This is what Kishimoto (2008) calls (internal) APPLP, distinct from the one higher than vP. For Kishimoto, it is APPLP rather than PP because *-ni* cannot be replaced by a postposition like *-e*. However, since *-ni* may be fixed as such due to being part of an idiom, I remain agnostic about the nature of *-ni* that comprises an idiom, though I agree that this use of *-ni* is special.

[14] For the following solution to go through, the aspectual/aktionsart properties of idioms in general and alternating idioms in particular need further investigation, which I leave for future research. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing up this point.

denoting the property of being skilled in something;[15] (23)a describes a state in which something is within sight or ascribes an ability to see something to someone; and (26)a ascribes a disposition to someone/something. Moreover, the idioms in (28) below, which involve result state interpretations, could be added to the above data set.

(28) a. X-ga doo-ni ir-$\varnothing - u$
X-NOM temple-LOC $\sqrt{}$go.in-IN-NPST
'X reaches a masterly level'

b. too-ga tat-$\varnothing - u$
flower stalk-NOM $\sqrt{}$stand-IN-NPST
'have passed one's prime'
Lit.: 'a flower stalk lengthens/comes out'

These observations suggest that some element contributing to their stative meaning (e.g., a generic or aspectual operator, or other TAM-related elements) must be structurally related to the intransitive vP for the relevant idioms to be formed. If this is the case, it would immediately explain why their transitive counterparts are not available as idioms: Embedding an idiom in these cases is not possible without disrupting a required relation for an intransitive idiom (e.g, $H_{T/A/M} \rightarrow$ v, where $H_{T/A/M}$ is a TAM-related head).

However, the solution I am suggesting needs more elaboration and refinement, and more careful inquiry is no doubt needed about the data set under discussion before making any substantial claims. I leave the matter for future research.

3 Discussion: the status of *-ni*

Discussing two-place unaccusative verbs entering into the transitivity alternation (ones with DP and PP as internal arguments), Takano (2011) argues that a *ni*-phrase in unaccusatives is a PP headed by the postposition *-ni*, while that in (non-idiomatic) ditransitives (some of which are transitives in our analysis) may be marked by the dative case marker.

Given the discussion of the present study, it trivially follows that, if a *ni*-phrase is an integral part of an alternating intransitive idiom, which is of the form [PP V], it is a PP in the transitive version as well. The idioms in (25) are such examples.

Thus, the *ni*-phrase may be a dative DP only in the case of transitive idioms that require a nominal element as essential (i.e., are of the form [DP V]). This is also congenial to the assumption that, in ditransitive contexts, a *ni*-marked animate(-like) argument higher than an accusative argument may be a dative argument (Miyagawa and Tsujioka, 2004).[16] Examples of this class of idioms are given below, with (24)b repeated as (29)a.

(29) a. X-ni in.nen-o tuk-e-ru (= (24)b)
X-LOC fate-ACC $\sqrt{}$attach-TR-NPST
'make a false charge against X'

b. X-ni indoo-o wata-s-u
X-LOC last words-ACC $\sqrt{}$pass-TR-NPST
'give X one's last word (on something)'
Lit.: 'address the last words to X
(X: a newly deceased person)'

c. X-ni yak-i-o ir-e-ru
X-LOC $\sqrt{}$burn-N-ACC $\sqrt{}$go.in-TR-NPST
'teach X a lesson; discipline X; torture X'
Lit.: 'temper X (X: swords, *etc.*)'

d. X-ni kugi-o sas-$\varnothing$-u
X-LOC nail-ACC $\sqrt{\text{sting}}$-TR-NPST
'give X a warning'
Lit.: 'drive a nail into X'

For these idioms to be interpreted as such, the following selectional relations should be minimally satisfied, where $\sqrt{\text{noun}}$ and $\sqrt{\text{verb}}$ represent the relevant nominal and verbal roots, respectively:

(30) Selectional relations for the idioms in (29)

a. v $\rightarrow \sqrt{}$verb
b. v $\rightarrow$ n
c. n $\rightarrow \sqrt{}$noun

Note that, though they are all obligatorily transitive, the selection of v by *i* need not be specified (though it may be), since it is effectively required by the fact that the events described are externally caused through the intervention of an agent (cf. (17)b).

These assumptions would indeed give some room for the possibility of APPL selecting v in the idioms in (29) (with a necessary revision of or addition to the VI rule in (1)a above in order to accommodate cases where APPL selects v) because no required selectional relations in (30) would be disrupted. (Recall the discussion in section 2.)

However, it is notoriously hard to pin down the dative *-ni* as opposed to the postpositional *-ni* in the

[15] Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995: 96) note that, unlike stage-level properties, individual-level properties, which describe permanent properties, typically cannot be externally caused.

[16] Lexical meanings of verbs also matter in the selection between the dative case marker or the postposition. In general, change-of-possession verbs take dative arguments, while change-of-location verbs take locative PPs. See Kishimoto (2001, 2008, 2010) and Kimura and Morita (2021) for proposals regarding the classification of Japanese ditransitive verbs.

cases under consideration. This is because these idioms allow no more than one *ni*-phrase, unlike "two-goal" constructions, discussed by Miyagawa and Tsujioka (2004), where the high goal and the low goal tend to be animate (i.e., recipient/goal) and inanimate (i.e., goal location), respectively.

However, though an animacy restriction holds for arguments of APPL, P can also take animate arguments, affected or not. That is, P can take as its complement whatever APPL can, making it even harder to pin down which use of *-ni* is involved in the context where only one *ni*-phrase is possible.

Thus, to argue for the possible presence of APPL in the idioms in (29), one should demonstrate that a *ni*-phrase cannot be PP, using a diagnostic like numeral quantifier float, which is possible with DP, but not with PP (Miyagawa, 1989). However, though it needs to be more thoroughly investigated and is left for future research, such examples are hard to construct, as things stand.

Given these considerations, I conclude that, although APPL showing up in place of P with idioms as in (29) is indeed a possibility, it has yet to be seen whether this possibility is instantiated.

Proponents for the dative analysis of *ni*-phrase might object to this conclusion by citing the example pair as in (31) below as evidence that the *ni*-phrase in the active is dative, provided that the *ni*-phrase in (31)a cannot be the passive subject, as in (31)b, if it is a PP.

(31) a. Yakuza-ga tensyu-ni
yakuza-NOM shop owner-LOC
in.nen-o tuk-e-ta
fate-ACC $\sqrt{}$attach-TR-PST
'A yakuza made a false charge against the shop owner.'

b. Tensyu-ga yakuza-kara
shop owner-NOM yakuza-from
in.nen-o tuk-e-rare-ta
fate-ACC $\sqrt{}$attach-TR-PASS-PST
'The shop owner had a false charge made against by a yakuza.'

An alternative analysis without APPL is possible, however. Specifically, it is possible to analyze the *ni*-phrase in the active as a PP argument of vP1, as depicted in (32)a, and the nominative subject in the passive as an argument introduced by *i*, which extends vP1, as in (32)b. This analysis, without APPL, can account for the idiomatic interpretation being kept intact in the passive and the fact that the goal argument can become a passive subject, as (31)b shows. Moreover, as depicted in (32)b, the passive nominative subject introduced by *i* is interpreted as non-agentive (goal or affected goal, in this case) in the presence of the passive VOICE head, as required by thematic uniqueness.[17] Note that, as shown in (32)c, no stacking of more than one argument introducer of the same kind is allowed, which is also due to thematic uniqueness, so no "extra" dative *ni*-phrase is allowed, and thus the *ni*-phrase in the active is unambiguously PP. Therefore, we can explain the dative-like behavior of the PP argument without invoking APPL.

(32) a. Active
$[\text{vP3 DP}_{\text{NOM}}\ [\text{vP1 PP}\ \underline{[\text{vP1 DP}_{\text{ACC}}[\text{v}\ \sqrt{}\ \text{v}\ ]]]}\ \underset{\text{-ER/-EE}}{i}\ ]$

b. Passive
$[\text{PASSP (PP}_{\text{-ER}})\ [\text{vP2 DP}_{\text{NOM}}\ \underline{[\text{vP1}\ ]}\ \underset{\text{-ER/-EE}}{i}\ ]\ \underset{\text{-ER}}{\text{VOICE}_{\text{PASS}}}]$

c. Active (thematic uniqueness violation)
$*[\text{vP3 DP}_{\text{NOM}}\ [\text{vP2 DP}_{\text{DAT}}\ \underline{[\text{vP1}\ ]}\ \underset{\text{-ER/-EE}}{i}\ ]\ \underset{\text{-ER/-EE}}{i}\ ]$

4 Summary

In light of the selection-based approach to idioms, we have argued for an applicativization analysis of the ditransitive/transitive alternation in Japanese and the relevance of stative interpretations to some non-alternating intransitive idioms, which may be amenable to a structural analysis under the present approach. We have also presented an analysis of the status and distribution of *ni*-phrases in transitive idioms, where *i*, instead of APPL, is utilized.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their feedback. The usual disclaimers apply.

References

Bruening, Benjamin. 2010. Ditransitive asymmetries and a theory of idiom formation. Linguistic Inquiry, 41(4):519–562.

Dowty, David. 1991. Thematic proto-roles and argument selection. Language 67(3):547–619.

Embick, David. 2015. The Morpheme: A Theoretical Introduction. De Gruyter Mouton, Boston and Berlin.

Everaert, Martin. 2010. The lexical encoding of idioms. In Malka Rapapport Hovav, Edit

[17] See footnotes one and eleven above. Interpretations that do not survive through inference driven by the constraint on thematic uniqueness are represented by a ~~double strikethrough~~.

Doron, and Ivy Sichel, eds., Lexical Semantics, Syntax, and Event Structure, pp.76–98. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Folli, Raffaela and Heidi Harley. 2007. Causation, obligation, and argument structure: on the nature of little v. Linguistic Inquiry, 38(2):197–238.

Gehrke, Berit and Louise McNally. 2019. Idioms and the syntax/semantics interface of descriptive content vs. reference. Linguistics, 57(4):769–814.

Hale, Kenneth and Samuel J. Keyser. 1993. On argument structure and the lexical expression of syntactic relations. In Ken Hale and Samuel J. Keyser, eds., The View from Building 20, pp.53–109. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Halle, Morris and Alec Marantz. 1993. Distributed morphology and the pieces of inflection. In Ken Hale and Samuel J. Keyser, eds., The View from Building 20, pp.111–176. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Inoue, Kazuko. 1976. Henkei-Bunpoo-to Nihongo [Transformational Grammar and Japanese], volume 2. Taishuukan, Tokyo.

Jacobsen, Wesley M. 1992. The Transitive Structure of Events in Japanese. Kurosio Publishers, Tokyo.

Kimura, Hiroko and Chigusa Morita. 2021. Lexical meanings of ditransitive verbs in Japanese. In Proceedings of the 35th Pacific Asia Conference on Language, Information and Computation, pp.99–107, Shanghai, China. Association for Computational Linguistics.

Kishimoto, Hideki. 2001. The role of lexical meanings in argument encoding: double object verbs in Japanese. Gengo Kenkyu, 120:35–65.

Kishimoto, Hideki. 2008. Ditransitive idioms and argument structure. Journal of East Asian Linguistics, 17(2):141–179.

Kishimoto, Hideki. 2010. The semantic basis of dative case marking in Japanese. Kobe Papers in Linguistics, 7:19–39.

Kratzer, Angelika. 1996. Severing the external argument from its verb. In Johan Rooryck and Lorie Zaring, eds., Phrase Structure and the Lexicon, pp.109–137. Kluwer, Dordrecht.

Landau, Idan. 2010. Saturated adjectives, reified properties. In Malka Rapapport Hovav, Edit Doron, and Ivy Sichel, eds., Lexical Semantics, Syntax, and Event Structure, pp.204–225. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Landman, Fred. 2000. Events and Plurality: The Jerusalem Lectures. Kluwer, Dordrecht.

Levin, Beth and Malka Rappaport Hovav. 1995. Unaccusativity: At the Syntax-Lexical Semantics Interface. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Matsuoka, Mikinari. 2003. Two types of ditransitive constructions in Japanese. Journal of East Asian Linguistics, 12(2), 171–203.

Miyagawa, Shigeru. 1989. Structure and Case Marking in Japanese. Academic Press, San Diego, CA.

Miyagawa, Shigeru. 1998. (S)ase as an elsewhere causative and the syntactic nature of words. Journal of Japanese Linguistics, 16(1):67–110.

Miyagawa, Shigeru and Takae Tsujioka. 2004. Argument structure and ditransitive verbs in Japanese. Journal of East Asian Linguistics, 13(1):1–38.

Newman, Elise. 2024. When Arguments Merge. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Nishiyama, Kunio. 1998. The morphosyntax and morphophonology of Japanese predicates. Ph.D. Thesis. Cornell University.

Nunberg, Geoffrey, Ivan A. Sag, and Thomas Wasow. 1994. Idioms. Language, 70(3):491–538.

O'Grady, William. 1998. The syntax of idioms. Natural Language and Linguistic Theory, 16(2):279–312.

Pylkkänen, Liina. 2008. Introducing Arguments. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Schildmier Stone, Megan. 2016. The difference between bucket-kicking and kicking the bucket: understanding idiom flexibility. Ph.D. Thesis. University of Arizona.

Takano, Yuji. 2011. Double complement unaccusatives in Japanese: puzzles and implications. Journal of East Asian Linguistics, 20(3):229–254.

Takehisa, Tomokazu. 2018. On thematically underspecified arguments. McGill Working Papers in Linguistics, 25(1):404–413.

Wood, Jim and Alec Marantz. 2017. The interpretation of external arguments. In Roberta D'Alessandro, Irene Franco, and Ángel J. Gallego, eds., The Verbal Domain, pp.255–278, Oxford University Press, Oxford.