

ИДИОМЫ, КОНТРОЛЬ И ПОЗИЦИЯ АРГУМЕНТА В СВЕТЕ РУССКИХ ДАННЫХ*

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Аннотация: Интерпретация идиоматических выражений традиционно используется в синтаксической литературе для определения исходной позиции синтаксических выражений. В применении к материалу русского языка данный аргумент лежит в основе анализа клауз с предикатами косвеннообъектного контроля через исключительное падежное маркирование/ЕСМ [Burukina 2020]. В настоящей работе показывается, что идиоматические выражения совместимы также с предикатами субъектного контроля и прямообъектного контроля и поэтому не могут служить основанием для выделения предикатов косвеннообъектного контроля в отдельный класс с альтернативными синтаксической структурой и механизмом приписывания падежа.

Ключевые слова: субъектный контроль, объектный контроль, ЕСМ, идиомы, синтаксис, русский язык

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IDIOMS, NP POSITION, AND CONTROL: EVIDENCE FROM RUSSIAN*

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Abstract: This paper challenges the legitimacy of the idiom diagnostic, which has long been employed in syntactic argumentation to distinguish movement from base generation. In response to [Burukina 2020], who re-analyses several Russian control predicates in terms of ECM (exceptional case marking) based on the idiom test, we question the necessity of the alternative analysis. We provide data from Russian that the idiom test would make implausible predictions for, should Burukina’s [2020] logic be followed through, and argue that idiomatic readings can be obtained in control environments, in line with the Constraint on Idiom Chunks [Bruening 2015].

Keywords: subject control, object control, ECM, idioms, syntax, Russian

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Idioms have long been used as a syntactic test meant to differentiate between movement and base generation in the realm of both A and A'-dependencies [Adger, Ramchand 2005; Bhatt 2002; Chomsky 1965; Chomsky 1995; Kwon et al. 2006; Postal 1976; Salzmann 2006; Vergnaud 1974]. As the following examples from English featuring the idiom *the shit hit the fan* indicate, idioms are grammatical in cases of raising to subject, like example (1), but not control, like example (2).

(1) *They believe the shit t to have hit the fan yesterday.* (raising to object)

(2) **They convinced the shit [PRO to have hit the fan] yesterday.* (object control)

The idiom test is supposed to work like this: if, as frequently assumed, all constitutive parts of an idiom must be adjacent at some point in the syntactic derivation, the availability of the idiomatic reading indicates the adjacency of what on the surface looks like the matrix object with the remainder of the idiom in the infinitival clause.

The idiom part *the shit* in the raising example (1) is base-generated in the embedded infinitival clause and appears in a non-thematic position in the matrix clause, so the sentence is acceptable. In example (2), however, *the shit* is base-generated as a matrix object, separately from the rest of the idiom in the embedded infinitival clause, which renders the sentence unacceptable.

As indicated above, the assumption under which idioms have been used in syntactic argumentation is that all constituent parts of an idiom must be adjacent at some point in the derivation. Thus, movement of an idiom part is possible, because it can proceed out of an idiom that was base-generated as a whole. Control or pronominal anaphora, on most approaches, do not involve movement, leading to a part of an idiom being base-generated outside of it, which prevents the idiomatic reading.

However, several works have taken issue with this assumption. [Ruwet 1991] and [Nunberg et al. 1994] have shown that idioms actually can participate in control. Examples of pronominal anaphora and control with idioms in English abound on the Internet, as shown in [Bruening 2015]. Sentences (3) and (4) below illustrate this.

- (3) *I thought I would miss the boat, and miss it I did.* [Bruening 2015: 5]
- (4) *The plug is waiting to be pulled once all the 5600 stock is gone...*
[Bruening 2015: 2]

The examples above demonstrate that idiom parts such as *the boat* in (3) can be anaphorically referred to, and, like *the plug* in (4), control the embedded PRO with the idiomatic interpretation kept intact, contrary to what would be expected under the logic that the idiom test rests upon. We now turn from the broad range of cases that are problematic for the idiom diagnostic to one specific case — Russian control predicates.

Recent work on the syntax of Russian infinitival clauses has argued that a subset of structures traditionally analysed via object control are to be reanalysed in terms of either raising or exceptional case marking (ECM). The main evidence for this claim comes from the idiom test, namely, the availability of idiomatic readings when a subpart of an idiom inside an infinitival clause appears in the matrix clause as a main-clause object, as in (5) from [Burukina 2020].

- (5) *Ya ne velel [chernoi koshke probegat' mezhdu nimi].*
I not ordered black cat.DAT run.INF between them
'I did not order them to quarrel.' (lit.: 'I didn't order the black cat to run between them.')

This paper shows that, just like in English, idiom chunks in control environments in Russian can give rise to idiomatic interpretations. If Burukina's [2020] logic were followed through, one would be forced to postulate an additional ECM-like structural source for accusative object-control verbs as well as subject control with the putative controller inside the infinitival clause. This effectively amounts to restating the original question of why idiomatic readings are compatible with some verbs under some circumstances without actually answering it. It would also require an additional mechanism of accusative case assignment and nominative case assignment.

The paper is laid out as follows. Section 2 is devoted to control and Russian control predicates in particular: Section 2.1 provides some background on the definition of control, raising and exceptional case marking (ECM); Section 2.2 discusses how control can be distinguished syntactically; semantic restrictions on arguments of control predicates are described in Section 2.3. Section 3 presents the data that is problematic for the idiom test logic, our analysis, featuring the Constraint on Idiom Chunks, is provided in Section 4 and Section 5 concludes the paper.

1.2. Aims of the paper

We are going to demonstrate that the idiom test makes absurd predictions about Russian control predicates, if employed in the same way as in [Burukina 2020]. As the Russian data indicates, idiom chunks are acceptable in object and subject control environments. Since idioms must have all their constituent parts together at some point, it must be possible for a control predicate's argument to be inside the embedded clause. Hence, one would be forced to postulate an additional ECM-like structure and a mechanism for assignment of the accusative and nominative case. The argumentative force of the idiom test is therefore lost, because any type of control-like structure can be shown to be ambiguous with respect to the nominative/accusative/dative/etc. argument's position. The question of why idioms are often unacceptable in control environments remains unanswered.

We suggest that the fault with the idiom diagnostic is that the reason for the said unacceptability is semantic rather than syntactic. Control is a syntactic phenomenon, however, the felicity of idioms with control/raising/ECM predicates does not serve as a good predictor of the structure type. The next section investigates the notion of control in Russian and provides the data that corroborate our claim.

2. Russian idioms in control environments

2.1. Background

Control, raising and ECM are different syntactic configurations of subordinate clauses, typically non-finite, with an embedded argument that is mandatorily coreferent with a matrix argument (see [Polinsky 2013] for detailed discussion of raising and control). Raising is the phenomenon of there being no theta-role to fill in the matrix clause, like in example (6). That is why the matrix subject can be an expletive, as shown in example (7).

(6) *John seems [t to be upset].*

(7) *It seems (that) [John is upset].*

John in example (6) has a single theta-role — it is the only argument of the embedded predicate *to be upset*. The matrix verb *seem* does not assign any theta-roles other than the proposition, so *John* can be located in the matrix

clause, like in example (6), as well as in the embedded clause, like in example (7), since there is only one theta-role for it to obtain.

Control results from there being two thematic positions seemingly occupied by the same event participant: one in the matrix clause and one in the embedded clause. Since it is not possible for one argument to fill two theta-roles, according to the theta-criterion (see [Chomsky 1981] for details), a silent pronoun appears in the embedded clause, whose reference is determined by an argument in the matrix clause, like in example (8).

(8) *Kim_i wants [PRO_i to buy a house].*

Kim in example (8) receives the ‘wanter’ role from the matrix verb *wants* and the ‘buyer’ role from the embedded verb *buy*. One participant cannot have two theta-roles at once, and PRO appears in the embedded subject position.

Exceptional case marking (ECM) is different from both raising and control. The subject of the embedded clause receives its case from the matrix predicate (see [Chomsky 1981] for details). It occupies the embedded subject position rather than an argument position in the matrix clause, like in example (9) below.

(9) *Kim wants [me to buy a house].*

Me is the subject of the embedded clause in example (9). However, it receives accusative case from the matrix predicate *wants*. Note that one and the same verb (*wants*) can participate in two different structures: control, like in example (8), and ECM, like in example (9).

As mentioned in the introduction, [Burukina 2020] proposes an alternative analysis for Russian mandative verbs with dative arguments. She argues that such predicates as *velet* ‘order’, *razreshit* ‘allow’, *pomogat* ‘help’, *meshat* ‘hinder’, which appear to assign a thematic role in the matrix clause, and hence to exhibit control, are structurally ambiguous. The two possible structures are shown in example (10) and (11). In particular, the dative argument can either denote the Holder of the obligation and be coreferent with the embedded PRO (i.e. traditional object control) or be located in the embedded clause itself, similarly to the ECM structures of English and other languages.

(10) [*pomoch/pomeshat*’ DP.DAT_i [PRO_i infinitive]]

(11) [*pomoch/pomeshat*’ [DP.DAT infinitive]] [Burukina 2021: 5]

The first reading of example (12) results when *Voldemort* is the Holder (see the schema in example 10), and the second is derived when *Voldemort* is the embedded subject (see the schema in example 11).

- (12) *Direktor prikazal Voldemortu ubit' mal'chika.*
 director.NOM ordered Voldemort.DAT kill.INF boy.ACC
 'The director ordered Voldemort that he should kill the boy.'
 'The director ordered that Voldemort should kill the boy.'
 [Burukina 2020: 9]

One argument [Burukina 2020] provides in support of her analysis is based on the interpretation of idiom chunks. Her reasoning is as follows: sentences with a mandative verb and an idiom, such as example (13) below, can keep the idiomatic reading. Thus, the constituent parts of the idiom must have been base-generated together. Since this is by definition impossible in a control setting, an alternative ECM structure should be available.

- (13) *Ya ne velel chernoi koshke probegat' mezhdru nimi.*
 I not ordered black cat.DAT run.INF between them
 Literally: 'I did not order the black cat to run between them.'
 Idiomatic reading available: 'I did not order them to quarrel.'
 [Burukina 2020: 8]

[Burukina 2020] contrasts Russian mandative predicates with 'proper' object control predicates such as *zastavit'* 'force' that she claims do not create such an ambiguity and also disallow idiomatic readings.

2.2. Defining control

The definition of control via the notion of theta-roles, which we have given in the previous section, makes the nature of control dependent on one's understanding of theta-roles. They can be conceptualized as handled by the semantic module, which would imply that the Theta Criterion is replaced by a compositionality requirement (in the sense of formal semantics) and control becomes a semantically driven phenomenon [Bruening 2013; Kratzer, Heim 1998, amongst others]. Theta-roles can also be argued to belong in the syntax: asymmetries between arguments receiving different roles have been analysed using argument introducing heads [Kratzer 1996; Pylkkänen 2008]. Collins [2021] has suggested a Merge-based theory of theta-roles, which places them in the syntactic module as well.

We are going to adopt the middle ground: arguments are projected in the syntax, whereas the wide variety of theta-roles, which can be highly specific, is handled by semantics.

In order to show that proper control predicates allow for idiomatic readings when combined with idioms, we need a syntactic diagnostic that would distinguish control predicates from all the other types (restructuring, raising, ECM). Recall that the only property that sets control apart is that the predicate of the clause embedded under them has to have at least one argument (PRO), or else there would be nothing to control. Thus, the presence of an embedded PRO could be witnessed by the unacceptability of the matrix predicate with argumentless ‘weather predicates’ such as *smerkat’sya* ‘get dark’ etc., as shown in (14) below.

- (14) **reshilo/khotelo/gotovo/zastavilo smerkat’sya*
 decided/wanted/ready/forced get.dark.INF
 Int.: ‘It decided/wanted/is ready/forced to get dark.’

The verb *smerkat’sya* ‘get dark’ has zero arguments, so it is not possible to build a control structure with it. Not all ‘weather verbs’ are like that, and those that do project a nominal argument are acceptable under control predicates such as the ones listed above. We illustrate this with the figuratively used ‘weather predicate’ *poiti* ‘go’ that requires a nominal argument such as *dozhd* ‘rain’, *sneg* ‘snow’ or *grad* ‘hail’, as in (15) below.

- (15) *dozhd’ reshil / byl gotov poiti*
 rain decided was ready go.INF
 ‘It decided/was ready to rain.’

Coming back to the argumentless ‘weather predicate’ *smerkat’sya* ‘get dark’, we can show that unlike control predicates, other infinitive-embedding, raising-style, predicates such as *nachat* ‘begin’, easily combine with them, as in (16) below. We argue that this is precisely because raising-type verbs do not project a syntactic argument.

- (16) *nachalo smerkat’sya*
 began get.dart.INF
 ‘It started to get dark.’

Having established that such predicates as *reshit* ‘decide’, *khotet* ‘want’, *zastavit* ‘make/force’ and the adjectival *gotov* ‘ready’ pattern with control predicates rather than raising predicates, we can show that they are also distinct from restructuring ones. Embedded clausal negation is acceptable under the predicates in question, as in (17) and (18), which is considered in the literature to be an argument against restructuring [Cable 2004; Wurmbrand 1998].

(17) *Ya reshil [ne exat' k vam].*
 I decided not come to you
 ‘I have decided to not come to you.’

(18) *Ya gotov [ne exat' k vam].*
 I ready not come to you
 ‘I am ready to not come to you.’

Another phenomenon that can be utilized to distinguish control from movement and restructuring in Russian is negative concord [Letuchiy, Viklova 2020]. The negative concord item (NCI) *nikto* ‘nobody’ can be the subject of a raising predicate but not a control predicate, with the negation being in the embedded clause.

(19) *Nikomu možno [t ne prixodit'].*
 nobody.DAT may not come
 ‘It is OK if nobody comes.’ [*may > not*]

(20) **Nikto xochet [PRO ne prixodit'].*
 nobody.NOM wants not come
 Int.: ‘Nobody wants to come.’

Nikto ‘nobody’ in (19) is raised from the embedded clause, according to some analyses of modal predicates, so at least part of the movement chain is local with respect to sentential negation, and the negative concord reading is accessible. However, with the control structure in (20) it is not possible to license negative concord, since the NCI is non-local with respect to negation. The inability of NCIs as control predicates’ arguments to be licensed by the embedded negation is reproduced for other control predicates that have been discussed so far; example (21) illustrates this for subject control and example (22) for object control.

(21) **Nikto xochet/reshil/gotov ne prixodit'*.
 nobody wants/decided/ready not come
 Int.: 'Nobody wants/decided/is ready to come.'

(22) **My zastavlyali nikogo ne prixodit'*.
 we forced nobody not come
 Int.: 'We did not force anybody to come.'

There are other diagnostics such as the substitution of the embedded clause with the demonstrative pronoun *eto* 'this' or the scope of indefinites that are used for Russian by [Letuchiy, Viklova 2020]. For the purposes of the present paper, we restrict our argumentation to the evidence above.

In the light of this evidence, we are going to treat control as a syntactic phenomenon, whose defining feature is that control predicates necessarily introduce a nominal argument. We have also shown that *khotet* 'want', *zastavit* 'force', *reshit* 'decide', and *gotov* 'ready' are genuine control predicates in this sense.

2.3. Semantic restrictions on arguments of control predicates

Our proposal states that the constraints that rule out idiomatic readings in control environments are semantic, so the semantic restrictions on arguments of control predicates beg to be investigated.

Some of the predicates discussed in the previous section impose no animacy/sentience requirements on their arguments, despite being genuine control predicates. As evidenced by the examples below, their arguments can be inanimate, non-sentient and non-agentive. Examples (23), (24) and (25) below all feature the inanimate NP *dver'* 'the door'.

(23) *Dver' vdrug reshila otkryt'sya.*
 door suddenly decided open
 'The door opened all of a sudden.'

(24) *Dver' ne khotela otkryvat'sya.*
 door not wanted open
 'The door wouldn't open.'

While requiring the presence of a nominal argument, all of *reshit* 'decide', *zastavit* 'force' and *gotov* 'ready' impose no animacy requirement on it, whereas *khotet* 'want' allows inanimate arguments in downward-entailing environments such as under sentential negation, as in (24), or in antecedents of conditionals, as in (25), just like *velet* 'order' from [Burukina 2020].

- (25) *Esli dver' vse zhe reshita otkryt'sya ...*
 if door nevertheless decides open
 'Should the door decide to open, ...'

On the other hand, there are control verbs that do appear to require their arguments to possess some degree of sentience. For instance, *ubedit'* 'to convince' is marginally acceptable with non-sentient participants, as shown in (26). This sentence can be perceived as a joke or a metaphor, meaning that the door took some time or effort to open.

- (26) *?Nikita ubedil dver' otkryt'sya.*
 Nikita convinced door open
 'Nikita forced the door to open.'

On the basis of examples like (26), an anonymous reviewer suggests that the limits to which the standards of acceptability can be stretched to include such interpretations as metaphors and irony are hard to define. This only goes to show that control predicates are not to be probed by tests that rely on interpretations, since it is possible to imbue a sentence with a non-standard interpretation if necessary, and this is indeed possible with idiomatic readings.

The same reviewer also observes that the absence of the sentience requirement imposed on the nominal argument upon which this paper relies might lead to circular reasoning. According to the reviewer, the lack of the sentience requirement is buttressed by the felicity of (24) involving a 'non-standard and non-experiencer meaning of *khotet'*.' We disagree. Firstly, the null hypothesis is that there is only one *khotet'*, and any deviations from that hypothesis to the effect of postulating a 'non-standard and non-experiencer meaning' require additional argumentation. Now, that argumentation, from where we are standing, effectively reduces to the observation that the two purported meanings only differ with respect to their interaction with idioms, since there are no other substantial differences between the two meanings with respect to the control diagnostics, for example. It is therefore the reviewer's objection which leads to circular reasoning. Secondly, as we have just shown above, *khotet'* is not the only control predicate compatible with idioms, and, as far as we can judge, the remaining ones are immune to the reviewer's objection.

3. Idioms in control environments

We show in this section that the four predicates previously shown to exhibit control and impose no animacy or sentience requirements on their arguments are compatible with idioms, with the idiomatic reading preserved. Example (27) illustrates the availability of the idiomatic reading under *khotet'* 'want' (in a downward-entailing environment, as before), whereas examples (28), (29) and (30) do so for *reshit* 'decide', *zastavit'* 'force' and the adjectival *gotov* 'ready', respectively.

- (27) *Delo ne khotelo* [PRO *dvigat'sya s mertvoi tochki*].
 business not wanted move from dead point
 'Things wouldn't get moving.' (lit.: 'didn't want to move from the dead point')

- (28) *Vchera u menya na dushe vnezapno koshki reshili*
 yesterday at me on soul suddenly cats decided

[PRO *zaskresti*].
 scratch.INF

'Yesterday, I suddenly started feeling really sad.'

- (29) *Napryazhennoe molchanie zastavlyalo atmosferu*
 tense silence was making atmosphere

[PRO *sgushchat'sya vse sil'nee*].
 solidify all stronger

'The heavy silence was making people in the room feel more and more uneasy.'

- (30) *Ot kazhdogo shoroxa serdce bylo gotovo uiti v pyatki*.
 from every rustle heart was ready go in heels

'Every rustle was making one's heart drop.' (lit.: 'making one's heart go into one's heels.')

In all four examples above, one part of an idiom occurs inside a PRO-containing infinitival clause, whereas the idiom's 'real' subject is base-generated as an argument in the matrix clause. The acceptability of idioms with these subject and object control predicates does not distinguish them from the verbs *pomogat'* 'help' and *meshat'* 'hinder' from [Burukina 2021]. These were the cases that [Burukina 2021] uses to argue in favour of an additional ECM structure alongside the object-control one. We illustrate the compatibility of idiom chunks with the dative mandative verbs *meshat'* 'hinder' in (31) and *pomogat'* 'help' in (32).

- (31) *Nikakie utsheniya ne meshali slezam*
 no comforting not hinder tears.DAT

[PRO *lit'sya v tri ruch'ya*].
 pour in three streams

'No comforting could prevent (somebody) from crying...'

- (32) *'Izvineniya pomogli gnevu smenit'sya na milost'*.
 apologies helped anger change to mercy

'Apologies helped her stop being angry.' (lit.: 'helped anger be superseded by mercy')

There are, however, control verbs that do not preserve idiomatic readings, as can be seen in (33).

- (33) **Menedzher ubedil delo [PRO sdvinut'sya s mertvoi tochki]*.
 manager convinced business move from dead point

Int.: 'The manager convinced things to get moving.'

We conclude that the idiom test does not reliably identify the type of structure that a certain verb requires. We suggest that there is, however, another rule at play when determining whether the idiomatic reading is available.

4. Analysis: The constraint on idiom chunks

To capture the data above showing full compatibility of some control verbs with idiom chunks we adopt Bruening's [2015] Constraint on Idiom Chunks, according to which an idiom chunk appearing in position 1 and anaphorically related to position 2 must not receive an interpretation either in position 1 or position 2 that is inconsistent with its interpretation in the idiom:

[T]he only requirement on idioms is that a chunk of an idiom not receive an interpretation that is inconsistent with its idiomatic interpretation. Once this constraint is satisfied, idiom chunks can participate in pronominal anaphora and control in addition to movement [Bruening 2015: 2, ex. (5)].

The subjects of the idiomatic expressions in the examples above are all non-sentient NPs *delo* 'business', *atmosfera* 'atmosphere' and *slezy* 'tears'. They are all nonsentient both in position 1 in the matrix clause, because the control predicates *reshit* 'decide', *zastavit* 'force', *gotov* 'ready', and *khotet* 'want' (in a subset of contexts) do not impose a sentience requirement on their nominal argument, and in the corresponding idioms. Position 2 is occupied by PRO in

the infinitival clause corresponding to the rest of the idiom. The constraint on idiom chunks is not violated, and the idiomatic interpretations obtain. The same constraint rules out idiomatic interpretations with other control verbs such as *ubedit* ‘convince’ in (33), which do impose a particular interpretation on their nominal argument: *ubedit* ‘convince’ requires an NP (position 1) capable of being persuaded by arguments. Because that interpretation is inconsistent with the interpretation of the inanimate nonsentient *delo* ‘business’ in the idiom, the idiomatic reading is unavailable in (34), repeated from above.

- (34) **Menedzher ubedil delo* [PRO *sdvinut'sya s mertvoi tochki*].
 manager convinced business move from dead point
 Int.: ‘The manager convinced things to get moving.’

As regards the difference between *khotet* ‘want’, *zastavit* ‘force’, *reshit* ‘decide’ and *gotov* ‘ready’ on the one hand and *ubedit* ‘convince’ and its ilk on the other, we propose that, even though they are syntactically identical control predicates, the observed differences come from their lexical semantics/encyclopaedic knowledge. What sets control predicates apart from raising and ECM ones, then, is the requirement that they syntactically introduce a nominal argument in the sense of [Kratzer 1996] and [Pylkkänen 2008], while the particular and sometimes highly specific theta-roles are handled by the meaning component, *contra* [Collins 2021]. In syntactic terms, we implement this intuition by endowing the control predicates with a selectional feature, Sel:N, which must be satisfied by a nominal argument carrying a nominal categorial feature.¹ We locate this feature, as is standard, on the functional heads such as v/Voice responsible for introducing arguments. Raising verbs, on the other hand, do not have a v/Voice head endowed with such a feature.

The reasoning that leads [Burukina 2020] to postulating control/ECM ambiguity can thus be carried over to the absurd. Suppose the idiom test is compelling evidence for the matrix predicate’s argument residing in the embedded clause. As we have seen in previous sections, such an argument can be made for predicates with nominative and accusative arguments as well as dative. This would necessitate a structure that would exceptionally assign nominative or accusative case. Also, since the idiom test can potentially deem every control predicate to be ambiguous between control and ECM, there remains an open question of what this diagnostic actually shows.

¹ While we do not assume the DP-hypothesis, the observation in question readily lends itself to an implementation in terms of that approach.

We therefore reject the premise that the availability of idiomatic interpretations in control contexts necessitates the postulation of an additional structural source such as placing the controller NP in the embedded subject position. Control can handle the idiom facts and the animacy/sentience facts from [Burukina 2020] all by itself.

5. Conclusion

We have demonstrated that the idiom diagnostic is not reliable in identifying structural differences, because there are other factors at play, namely, the consistency of the combined interpretation of separated idiom chunks with the idiomatic interpretation. Control predicates differ as to how rigorously they restrict their arguments in terms of animacy, sentience, etc. Therefore, some of them are compatible with idioms and some are not, while their syntactic properties such as the mandatorily introduced argument are constant. We therefore doubt whether reanalysing of control structures based on the idiom diagnostic is reasonable.

Abbreviations

ACC — accusative; DAT — dative; INF — infinitive; NOM — nominative.

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