

Portuguese idioms: a brief functional analysis

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Abstract. Based on the functional analysis of English idioms (idiomatic expressions) proposed by Keizer (2016, 2018), the general objective of this work is to analyse Portuguese idioms applying motivation and compositionality as parameters proposed by the author. Here, we made a inclusion of new categories for types of modification, in order to understand and classify Portuguese idioms coming from the Reference Corpus of the Contemporary Portuguese, into the four types of idioms: (i) non-motivated (opaque) and semantically non-decomposable; (ii) motivated and semantically decomposable; (iii) motivated, non-decomposable, and (iv) new AD-HOC (specific purpose) ones. As a specific objective, we seek to analyse the expressions based on the analysis of levels and layers of Functional Discourse Grammar (Hengeveld; Mackenzie, 2008), in order to understand the one-to-one relationships between form and meaning among the Interpersonal, Representational and Morphosyntactic levels. These objectives aim to answer the following problems: what would the characterization of Portuguese idioms be like from the functional perspective proposed by Keizer (2016, 2018)? Under what pragmatic, semantic and morphosyntactic functions do they operate in the sentence? The methodology was organized on a qualitative analysis of the data, with an initial definition of the object of study and functional analysis of the idiomatic expressions. The partial results showed the applicability proposed by Keizer (2016, 2018) for Portuguese idiomatic expressions, with the emergence of new pragmatic conjunctures, based on transparent and opaque relationships among the FDG levels.

Keywords. Decomposability, Functional Discourse Grammar, Motivation, Portuguese idioms.

1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the partial results of the author's doctoral thesis in progress. Due to the brevity of this paper, we have abbreviated both the theoretical contribution and the results, which are in the development phase. The thesis, in general, focuses on investigating idiomatic expressions of the Portuguese language (found in real spoken language situations), such as *descascar o abacaxi* (to peel the pineapple, i.e. solving problems), *fazer tempestade em um copo de água* (to make a storm in a glass of water, i.e. exaggeration) and *engolir sapo* (to swallow a toad, i.e. accepting a situation or enduring an unpleasant experience without complaint), from the perspective of the Functional Discourse Grammar (Hengeveld and Mackenzie, 2008). In addition, we have as our main theoretical framework the papers of Keizer (2016, 2018) on the functioning of English idiomatic expressions, such as *to bring home the bacon* (providing for one's family), *to grasp the nettle* (confronting a difficult situation), *to hit the ceiling* (getting angry) and *to spill the beans* (divulging a secret).

The occurrences analyzed here were found in the

Reference Corpus of the Contemporary Portuguese (2016), organized by the Linguistics Center of the University of Lisbon, which is available via a publicly accessible digital platform. Idiomatic expressions are treated in the FDG as a set of semi-fixed expressions that can be represented at the four levels of the theory (Interpersonal, Representational, Morphosyntactic and Phonological) as unpredictable and invariable elements that are stored in the lexicon as a sealed combinatorial entry (partially instantiated) and associated with a conventional meaning.

Keizer (2016, 2018) analyzed English idioms with the aim of understanding under which functional parameters these expressions function, such as “*hit the ceiling*” (to be furious), which is presented in (1), with the formal representation at the Interpersonal, Representational and Morphosyntactic levels (respectively, IL, RL and ML), in which the idiom is part of the semantically motivated non-decomposable idiomatic expression type (there is a literal scene motivation for understanding the idiomatic scene, although there is no clear understanding of how the component parts of the idiom contribute to the overall meaning).

In this example, the author identified two lexical items - *hit* and *ceiling* designating a single property - one State-of-Affairs (e_1) in RL, which means an entity that are located in place and relative time, which may be real or not, in that case, a state of getting angry:

(1)	He hit the ceiling. IL: $[A_1: [(F_1: DECL (F_1) (P_1)_S (P_2)_A (C_1: [(T_1)_{FOC} (+id R_1)] (C_1))]$ Where: A (Discourse Act), F DECL (Declarative Illocution), P (Participants – Speaker and Addressee), C (Communicated Content), T (Ascriptive Subact), FOC (Focus function) and +id R (more identifiable Referential Subact). RL: $[p_1: (past ep_1: (e_1: (f_1: [(f_2: [(f_3: hit_v (f_3)) (1x_1: ceiling_N (x_1))_U] (f_2)) (1x_2)_U] (f_1)) (e_1)) (ep_1))(p_1)]$ Where: p (Propositional Content), ep (episode), f (Configurational Property), v (verb), x (Individual), U (Undergoer), N (noun) and e (State-of-Affairs). ML: $[Cl_1: [(Np_1: (Nw_1: he (Nw_1)) (Np_1)) (Vp_1: (Vw_1: hit_{past} (Vw_1)) (Vp_1)) (Np_2: [(Gw_1: the (Gw_1)) (Nw_2: ceiling (Nw_2)) (Np_2))]] (Cl_1)]$ (KEIZER, 2016, p. 1004) Where: Cl (Clause), Np (Noun Phrase), Nw (Nominal Word), Vp (Verb Phrase), Vw (Verbal Word) and Gw (Grammatical Word).
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In the general objective of this work, we seek to analyze Portuguese idioms, applying the motivation and compositionality parameters seen in her papers, in order to find occurrences in the types of classification proposed by the author: (i) non-motivated (opaque) and semantically non-decomposable idioms; (ii) motivated and semantically decomposable idioms; (iii) motivated, non-decomposable, and (iv) and new AD-HOC (specific purpose) idioms.

The eight modification tests proposed by Keizer (2016) to understand the cognitive-semantic behavior of idioms as functionally motivated were: substitution (*to spill the beans/to spill the **peas***), passivization (*to spill the beans/the beans **were spilled***), nominalization (*the **spilling** of beans*), definiteness (*to spill of **those** beans*), number (*spilling **ten** beans*), quantification (*to spill **many** beans*) and anaphoricity (*He spilled the **beans**. Big ones!*) were proposed to analyze the behavior of pragmatic aspects in the Subact layer of the Interpersonal Level (identifiability, specificity and pragmatic function); semantic aspects in the State-of-Affairs, Configurational Property and Individual

layers at the Representational Level; morphological representations, syntactic forms and ordering at the Morphosyntactic Level, and phonological aspects (segmental and suprasegmental representations) at the Phonological Level.

The latter will not be treated here because the results from the three higher levels are sufficient to understand the cognitive-semantic proprieties of the idioms. Here, we create a new nomenclature of categories for the types of modification – grammatical category (adjective, noun, adverb, article, numeral) and voice (active and passive one). Our specific objective is to analyze the expressions based on the analysis of levels and layers of Discursive-Functional Grammar (Hengeveld; Mackenzie, 2008), in order to understand the one-to-one relationships (form and meaning) among Interpersonal, Representational and Morphosyntactic levels, with the aim of investigating the transparency and opacity of idioms. The objectives aim to answer the following problems: what would the characterization of idiomatic expressions in the Portuguese language be like from the perspective of Keizer (2016, 2018)? Under what pragmatic, semantic and morphosyntactic functions do they operate in the sentence?

As hypotheses for these problems, we start from the assumptions that we can apply and find the four types of idiomatic expressions that Keizer classified, based on the FDG formulation and encoding processes, when analyzing idioms, with a new set of parameters for the tests of modification that the author also used in her analysis, but here within a new set of groups, given the new configurations found in the Portuguese language, a fact already expected and natural as they are languages with different linguistic materialities, resulting in the proof of the author's proposal on the different degrees of transparency and opacity of expressions, related to the literal and idiomatic scenes of expressions.

2. Materials and Methodology

This work was organized as follows: the first chapter briefly discusses the basic theory for this research: Functional Discourse Grammar. The second chapter addresses the definitions of idiomatic expressions from the perspective of the FDG. The dictionaries of Brazilian Portuguese idioms of Riva (2009) and European Portuguese idioms (Almeida, 2022) were selected to attest their formal and idiomatic meanings as an official register. The results of practical analysis are found in the third chapter, in addition to closing the work with final considerations and the bibliography used.

2.1 Development

For Hengeveld and Mackenzie (2008), Functional Discourse Grammar is defined as a Component

Grammatical of a verbal interaction model that is related to other components together: (i) Conceptual Component, referring to communicative intentions and extralinguistic conceptualizations; (ii) Contextual Component, i.e., description of the form and content of the discourse, based on the context of the speech event and the social relationship between the participants, and (iii) Output Component, responsible for acoustic or linguistic expressions based on current information. Let's see the Figure 1 about the FDG architecture:

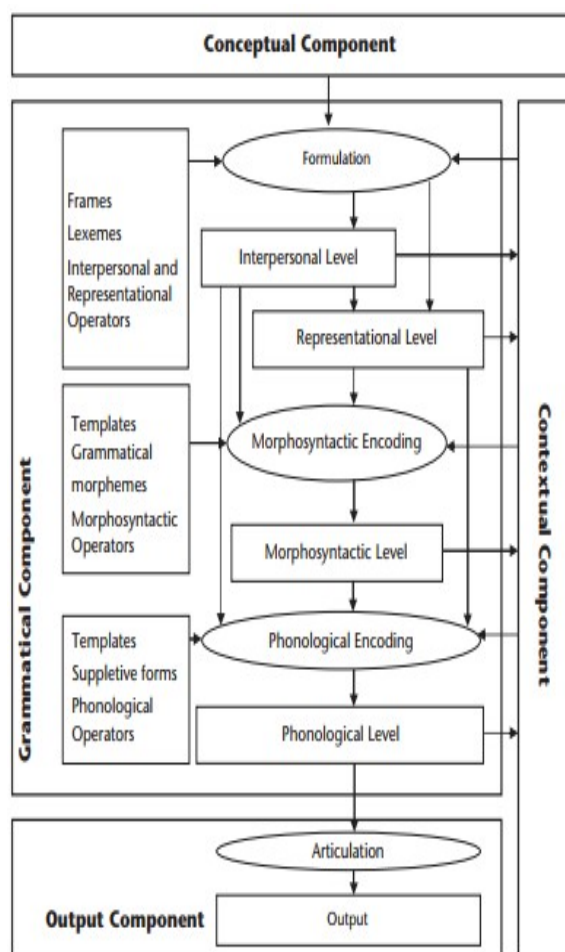


Fig. 1 – Architecture of FDG (Hengeveld; Mackenzie, 2008, p. 13)

Hengeveld and Mackenzie (2008) highlight two major processes of utterance construction in this top-down organization: **formulation** and **encoding**. Formulation is the rules that determine what constitutes valid underlying semantic and pragmatic representations in a language, based on the interaction between three processes: selecting appropriate templates at the Interpersonal and Representational levels, inserting appropriate lexemes into these templates, and applying operators that symbolize grammatical distinctions in the language.

Encoding is the rules that convert these semantic and pragmatic representations into morphosyntactic and phonological representations (Morphosyntactic and Phonological levels, respectively).

All four levels of representation in the FDG are hierarchically organized into layers, with their general structure organized as follows:

(π v1: [head (v1) Φ]: [σ (v1) Φ]) Φ

Where: v1 is a variable from the relevant layer; head is the nucleus, which takes the variable as its argument, and may be constrained by a modifier σ that takes the variable as its argument. The layer can be specified by an operator π , which applies to the unit itself, and carries a function Φ , which applies to the same or different units of the same layer. The nucleus and modifiers represent lexical strategies, and the operators and function represent grammatical strategies.

Due to the brevity of the paper, it will not be possible to address the levels and layers of theory here. For an in-depth study of this grammatical theory, see Hengeveld and Mackenzie (2008).

2.2 Idioms in the FDG Theory

Idiomatic expressions are lexical units that together lose their denotative meaning and acquire a new connotative and idiomatic meaning, such as *bater as botas* (to hit the boots) in Portuguese, and *to kick the bucket*, in English, which both means: to die. Keizer (2016) treats these expressions as units that have heterogeneous form and function, both in their composition (type of phrase or sentence, number and open positions), and in their syntactic and semantic behavior, understanding idioms as a block of thought, that is, a conventionalized unit that has meaning as a set, in a non-literal reading of its components.

With the purpose of understanding how the FDG can be responsible for storing these expressions in the lexicon and also explaining the phenomena of variation in form and behavior of idiomatic expressions, the author proposed a new primitive called **Combination of Partially Instantiated Frames**, as she understands that the lexical entry of an idiom should take the form of a meaning definition that is associated with a semi-fixed combination of interpersonal and representational frames and morphosyntactic templates that specify the functional and formal restrictions in expressions individually, while at the same time explaining the different degrees of syntactic flexibility (slots) exhibited by the three main types of idiomatic expressions.

The author's work brings a range of definitions from traditional and generative grammars from the 1960s and 1970s, in which idioms were treated as fixed, non-compositional expressions, where the meaning of the component parts does not

contribute to the understanding of the idiomatic meaning, as seen in Katz and Postal (1963), Fraser (1970), Chomsky (1980), and others, and at the same time, non-productive, which did not allow for passivization, topicalization or relativization (Wood, 1986).

New views on variation in different degrees of idiomaticity emerged, mainly with Nunberg et al. (1994), who delimited six properties present in the processes of variation of idiomatic expressions:

- (i) **Conventionality** (the only mandatory property of idioms, according to the author): the meaning and use of an idiom is not entirely predicted or understood based on the conventional meaning of the components when analyzed in isolation;
- (ii) **Inflexibility**: idioms typically exhibit restricted syntactic behavior;
- (iii) **Figuration**: metaphors or hyperboles;
- (iv) **Proverbiality**: common and recurrent use in situations of interaction and social interest;
- (v) **Informality**: colloquial and informal character of usage;
- (vi) **Affectivity**: affective implication regarding what is denoted (expressive value of idiomatic expressions).

This idiomatic character of *idioms* led the author to highlight two main discursive-pragmatic parameters for analyzing and classifying these expressions: **transparency** and **compositionality**. Transparency is the ease with which the motivation for use can be recovered by the speaker, that is, it is the identification that the speaker makes of the expression and its respective use in its connotative character.

Compositionality is the extent to which specific aspects of the idiomatic meaning can be related to its component parts, that is, it is the significant connection of the parts of the *idiom* from the literal scene with the idiomatic scene (Keizer, 2016). For the analysis of idiomatic expressions to be possible in theory, it means that only if a systematic relationship can be found between the cognitive-semantic or pragmatic functions of an idiom and its formal behavior, will these functions be represented in the grammar.

Regarding representation in the FDG, the author understands that interpersonal and representational characteristics are reflected in the morphosyntactic and phonological behavior of the theory. In the Interpersonal Level, the analysis of pragmatic aspects is performed, such as the referentiality and identifiability of the component parts of the idiom (differences in number and types of Subacts).

On the other hand, the Representational Level is responsible for the analysis of semantic aspects, which provide information about the quantitative and qualitative valency of the designated State-of-Affairs (differences in the number of Individuals and Properties, tense, aspect, and modality).

In the encoding process, the Morphosyntactic Level

covers the analysis of the form and syntactic order of the components, and the Phonological Level analyzes the phonological aspects of the expressions (segmental and suprasegmental features).

We have summarized below about the four types of languages proposed by Keizer (2016, 2018) to use as a basis for our analysis.

The Type 1 (less productive) is non-motivated and semantically non-decomposable idioms, which means this type is opaque, does not allow manipulation (modification, lexical replacement, nominalization, passivity or anaphoric reference). Its meaning is conventionalized, and has more restricted syntactic behavior.

There is no relationship between the component parts of the literal scene and the idiomatic meaning, and it is difficult to understand the contribution of the separate parts to the idiomatic meaning, e.g. *to kick the bucket* (to die), *to bite the dust* (to die, to fail).

The Type 2 idioms are motivated and semantically decomposable. They allow manipulation, such as modification, nominalization, quantification, passivity, plurality and anaphoric reference. They also have conventionalized meaning. Then, they are less restricted syntactically. There is a clear contribution of the component parts of the idiom with the literal scene and the idiomatic meaning, for example, *to grasp the nettle*, where *to grasp* means to solve, and *the nettle* means the problem; and *to spill the beans*, where *to spill* means to divulge and *the beans* means the secret.

Idioms belonging to the Type 3 are motivated, non-decomposable; allow certain forms of manipulation (modification and substitution). There is certain contribution of the literal scene to the idiomatic meaning, which contribute to its conventionalized meaning in a language. However, the syntactic behaviour of this type is more restricted, e.g. *to open the floodgates* (granting exceptions), and *to throw the towel* (giving up).

The last type, **Type 4**, is known as AD-HOC *idioms*, motivated or unmotivated, and (non)decomposable idioms. They fit within a minimum degree of lexical variation of an existing language. There is no ambiguity or context dependency of the new elements, but there is an extra cognitive effort on the part of the interlocutor to reanalyze the new element. For example of a motivated idiom, we have: *to bite the bullet* (enduring a painful or difficult situation with courage) and *to gnaw the bullet* (AD-HOC one), which *to gnaw* means to cautiously address the unpleasant situation.

As a non-motivated one we have *to open the floodgates* (granting exceptions) in: *Once the floodgates open, they cannot be closed*, where we have a substitution of the verbs *to open* and *to*

close related to the specific situation of preventing things from happening (Keizer, 2018).

3. Partial results

We have found occurrences for the 04 types of classification proposed by Keizer (2016, 2018), which are still under development. For this paper, we only use the complete analysis of two occurrences, due to page limitations.

The first Portuguese excerpt (translated to English below) from CLUL (2016) analysed here is the idiom *descascar o abacaxi* (to peel the pineapple), which means *solving problems*.

(2) E ainda: "Surpresa entre os associados azul-grenat, pela patada de Mourinho a Ronaldo". - Como se verifica, **um abacaxi para Robson descascar**. (Portugal 1996 jornal J83417)

English: - And also: "Surprise among the blue-garnet fans, by Mourinho's jab at Ronaldo." - As it turns out, **a pineapple for Robson to peel**.

Representation at the FDG levels and layers:

IL: (M₁: (A₁: [(F₁: DECL (F₁) (P₁)_S (P₂)_A (C₁: [{(T₁) (R₁: abacaxi)_{FOC} (R₂: Robson) (- idR₁, +idR₂)] (C₁))(A₁))] (M₁))

Where: M (Movement) and - idR (less identifiable Referential Subact)

RL: (p₁: (INF ep₁: (e₁: (f₁: [(f₁: descascar (f₁)) (p₁: abacaxi_N (x₁))_U (1x₁)_A] (f₁)) (e₁)) (ep₁)) (p₁))

Where: INF (Infinitive verb) and _A (Actor)

ML: (Np_i: [(Nw_i: abacaxi (Nw_i)) (Adp_i: [(Gw_i: para (Gw_i)) (Cl_i: [(Np_i: (Nw_j: Robson (Nw_j)) (Np_i))_{Subj} (Vp_i: (Vw_i: descascar (Vw_i) (Vp_i))] (Cl_i))] (Adp_i))] (Np_i))

Where: Subj (Subject) and Adp (Adpositional phrase)

Here, we see that there's motivation to facilitate the use of the expression's elements for idiomatic reading (*descascar* as to solve and *abacaxi* as problem), and it also is decomposable, because it's possible to see the contribution of the component parts to its idiomatic meaning. We made some tests of grammatical category of elements in variation:

Robson descascar (insertion of Actor- personal name)

*Descascar o **abacate** (to peel the **avocado** - substitution)

***Descascamento/descasque** do abacaxi (**peeling** of pineapple- nominalization)

Abacaxi **carioca/um dos maiores abacaxis** da política nacional (carioca (from Rio de Janeiro) pineapple/**one of the biggest pineapples**- adjective and plural modifications found in the

CLUL)

Um abacaxi/o abacaxi (a/the - indefinite and definite articles found in the CLUL)

Descascar muitos abacaxis (many pineapples - quantification)

Descascar dois abacaxis (two pineapples - number)

Making a voice test, we found:

Robson descascar (**Robson** peel - Active voice - found in the CLUL)

O abacaxi **foi descascado** pelo Robson (The pineapple **was peeled** by Robson - passive voice)

Its syntactic behavior is less restricted, allows the insertion of grammatical categories in nominal and verbal agreement with the subject, new order - Undergoer - pineapple, Robson - Actor and peel/Verb. Anaphoricity is possible as well.

We found one kind of insertion of a Locative:

Tasso e Ciro descascaram **no Ceará** um dos maiores abacaxis da política nacional nos últimos tempos (Tasso and Ciro peeled **in Ceará** one of the biggest pineapples in national politics in recent times - found in the CLUL).

We have found cases of anaphoricity: Como se verifica, *um abacaxi para Robson descascar*. **Esse** será um dos maiores da temporada. (As it turns out, a **pineapple** for Robson to peel. **This** will be one of the biggest of the season).

Then, we have classified this idiom as a Type 3 (more productive, motivated, + transparent and decomposable idioms. We also have defined its relationship among levels:

NI - NR: transparent (1 T, 2 R) (1 p, 1x, 1 e)

NI - NM: transparent (1 T, 2 R) (2 Nw, 1 Vw)

NR - NM: transparent (1p, 1x, 1e) (2 Nw, 1 Vw)

The second Portuguese excerpt analysed is the idiom *tirar o cavalo da chuva* (to take the horse out of the rain), which means *giving up*.

(3)- Sr. Deputado Nogueira de Brito, no seu tempo, faça favor de continuar, se assim o entender, a sua exposição.

- Eu **"tiro o cavalo da chuva"**.

- Do tempo de que disponho, gostaria de registrar que o termo que empreguei há pouco foi "calamidade" e não **"cavalidade"**, como parece ter sido entendido. (Portugal NIL Política A137983)

English: - Mr. Deputy Nogueira de Brito, please continue in your own time, if you wish, your exposition."

- I **"take my horse out of the rain"**

- Regarding the time I have, I would like to note that the term I used earlier was "calamity" and not **"cavalidade"**, as it seems to have been understood.

Representation at the FDG levels and layers:

IL: (D₁: [(M₁: [(A₁: [(F₁: DECL (F₁) (P₁)_S (P₂)_A (C₁: [(T₁ tirar o cavalo da chuva (T₁))_{FOC} (+id R₁)] (C₁))]

(A₁)](M₁)

RL: (p_i: (PRES ep_i: (e_i: (f_i: [(f_i: **tirar o cavalo da chuva**_v (f_i)) (1x_i)_v] (f_i)) (e_i)) (ep_i)) (p_i))

Where: PRES (Present)

ML: (Cl_i: [(Np_i: (Nw_i: eu (Nw_i))_{Subj} (Np_i)) (Vp_i: (Vw_i: **tirar** (Vw_i)) (Vp_i)) (Np_j: [(Gw_i: **o** (Gw_i)) (Nw_i: **cavalo** (Nw_i)) (Nw_k: **chuva** (Nw_k)) (Np_j))] (Np_i))] (Cl_i))

The conventionality of this idiom seems to have no connection with the metaphorical interpretation of the literal scene, but rather with its established use as an idiom in the speaking community.

Then, there is no motivation that facilitates the use of the elements of the expression for idiomatic interpretation. This idiom is non-decomposable, and then it is not possible to see the contribution of the parts of the idiom to idiomatic meaning. Let us see the formal tests:

Tirar o **cavalinho** da chuva (to take the **little horse** out of the rain- substitution – size found in the CRPC)

Tirar **seu/meu** cavalo da chuva (to take **your/my** horse out of the rain – possessive pronouns – found in the CRPC)

Tirar **rapidamente/imediatamente/agora** o cavalo da chuva (to take **quickly/immediately/now** the horse out of the rain – adverbial modifications)

*Tirar o **ponei** da chuva/storm (to take the **pony** out of the rain/storm – substitution - type)

*Tirar **dois** cavalos da chuva (to take **two** horses out of the rain - number)

*Tirar **um/uns** cavalo(s) da chuva (to take **a/some** horse(s) out of the rain - indefinite articles)

*Tirar **algum/nenhum/muitos** cavalo(s) da chuva (to take **any/no/many** horse(s) out of the rain - quantification)

*Tirar o **grande/pequeno/novo/velho** cavalo da chuva (to take the **big/small/new/old** horse out of the rain – adjective modification)

***Retirada** do cavalo da chuva (**Removal** of the horse of the rain –nominalization)

Voice Test: **tirar** o cavalo da chuva (**to take** the horse out of the rain - Non-finite construction – found in the CRPC)

Tire o cavalo da chuva (**Take** the horse out of the rain - Imperative construction – found in the CRPC)

*O cavalo **foi tirado** da chuva (The horse **was taken** out of the rain – passive voice)

Its syntactic behavior is more restricted, but allows the insertion of possessive pronouns, adverbial modification and the diminutive term “cavalinho” (small horse). Cataphoric and anaphoric references seem possible, but not so common:

Tire o seu cavalo da chuva. Isso vai ter ajudar. (**Take your horse out of the rain. It** will help you – anaphoric reference)

Você deve fazer **isso: tirar o cavalo da chuva**. (I must do **it: to take the horse out of the rain** – cataphoric reference)

We classified it as **Type 1 (less productive)**: non-motivated (opaque) and semantically non-decomposable idioms. The alignment among levels is as follows:

IL – RL: transparent (1 T) (1 e)

IL – ML: opaque (1 T) (2 Nw, 1 Vw)

RL – ML: opaque (1e) (2 Nw, 1 Vw)

3.1 Final considerations

The work is in progress, and here we attest, very briefly, the application of Keizer's proposal (2016, 2018) in idiomatic expressions of the Portuguese language, in which we saw that, even in just two practical examples, there is the possibility of classification of the four types of idioms, with a new set of groups or formal testing (grammatical category and voice), in this case, with the same alignment between NR and NM, a point that attests to its degree of transparency, since we see a contribution from the literal scene to the value of the idiomatic scene in (2) and the opacity among levels in (3).

The doctoral thesis in progress will be concluded with more excerpts of analysis, new set of results, and possibly, a new type of idiom. An important part of this doctoral studies has been developing at the University of Vienna with the support of Keizer, head of Department of English and American Studies and leader of the Fun*Cog Research Group in Vienna.

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