

Metaphors of Genitive Prepositions in Idioms of the Bosnian Language

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the semantic role of prepositions in idiomatic constructions, with a particular emphasis on genitive prepositions in the Bosnian language. When embedded in idioms, prepositions activate their full metaphorical potential, often shaping or intensifying the figurative meaning. Genitive prepositions—especially *od* ('from'/'of')—are among the most semantically diverse in Bosnian, typically conceptualized as expressing *detachment from a source*. Despite their variety, these prepositions share a common conceptual base rooted in spatial separation. The study examines how idioms formed with genitive prepositions generate abstract meanings through conceptual metaphors. Examples include: *odvajati od usta* ('to separate from the mouth') as *ablocation* – 'to save'; *ne biti od jučer* ('to not be from yesterday') as *abtemporal* – 'to be experienced'; *topiti se od miline* ('to melt from delight') as *abcausative* – 'to feel joy'; and *od sveg srca* ('from the bottom of one's heart') as *abmodal* – 'wholeheartedly'. In each case, the genitive noun is defocused and functions as a reference point rather than a spatial anchor. These idioms are metaphorically structured via the conceptual metaphor ABSTRACT IS CONCRETE, allowing abstract experiences to be mapped onto spatial schemas, thereby reinforcing the figurative power of language.

Keywords: idioms; ablocation; abtemporal; abcausative; abmodal.

1. Introduction

Complex idiomatic units involve the integration of at least two predications. This integration does not result in a mere additive combination of individual meanings, but instead gives rise to a novel, composite semantic structure, cognitively encoded within a distinct conceptual profile. This emergent structure may be understood as a type of *trajectory*, as it is characterized by prominent features of conceptual dynamism and movement.

When a preposition participates as one of the elements contributing to the development of idiomatic meaning, it introduces an entire network of meanings—both invariant and contextually variant. In the case of the genitive case

and its associated prepositions, their frequency of usage appears to correlate with their semantic richness and complexity.

Nonetheless, the organization of language—and the genitive case within it—suggests a consistent pattern in which invariant meanings can be inferred from their variant realizations. Among genitive prepositions, the preposition *od* stands out as semantically central and particularly versatile. Its core conceptual schema is based on the notion of *separation*, allowing it to encode a range of spatial, temporal, and abstract meanings within idiomatic expressions.

2. The Genitive Case in Bosnian: Prepositional and Non-Prepositional Forms

The challenges associated with analyzing the meaning of the (prepositional) genitive stem from multiple factors. As Feleško (1995, 16) observes, “in various contextual variants, it can express an unusually wide array of meanings between which it is often difficult to establish a distinct boundary”. This semantic fluidity complicates attempts at consistent categorization.

Palić (2016, 17) argues that the core meaning of the genitive case should be sought in its non-prepositional usage. He emphasizes the necessity of conceptualizing both variant and invariant uses of the genitive in terms of its *ablative function*, which is unique to this case in the Bosnian language and constitutes one of its defining features.

Among the genitive prepositions, *od* (‘of’/‘from’) holds a central position. Its meaning closely corresponds to that of the genitive case itself (Palić, 2016, 20), as it encodes the notions of *movement away* and *separation* (see Figure 1). Notably, the conceptual *origin* signaled by this preposition does not necessarily represent a physical or spatial point; rather, its interpretation is metaphorically grounded. According to the conceptual metaphor ABSTRACT IS CONCRETE, such spatial schemas serve as the foundation for understanding abstract relations, enabling metaphorical extensions beyond the literal domain of space.



Fig. 1. Basic meaning of genitive-ablative in the Bosnian language

3. Genitive prepositions in idioms

Genitive prepositions occur with notable frequency and appear to be the most numerous among prepositional idioms in the Bosnian language. According to Palić (2016), the genitive case is associated with as many as five hundred prepositions, which supports the expectation that the genitive maintains a prominent position within idiomatic constructions as well.

Idioms incorporating genitive prepositions exhibit the highest degree of semantic branching within the network of idiomatic meaning. The examples extracted from our corpus enumerate a variety of genitive prepositions alongside their corresponding meanings. These meanings are grounded in a localist-oriented theoretical framework, which posits that all so-called non-dimensional (i.e., abstract) meanings are derived from basic dimensional (i.e., spatial) ones.

It is also conceptually suggestive that the inherent structure of idioms parallels the semantic structure of the genitive case and its central meaning. Idioms are composed of lexical units that semantically diverge from their literal referents—mirroring the genitive’s core conceptual schema of *separation* or *movement away* from a source.

4. Corpus

Given the underdeveloped state of corpus linguistics within Bosnian linguistics (Bosnistics), and the limited availability of comprehensive corpora—such as the OSLO and bsWaC corpora, along with the SMS corpus of the Bosnian language—we were compelled to manually compile a custom corpus for the purposes of this study.

The following literary works were selected as representative sources for extracting idiomatic expressions containing genitive prepositions:

EUKB: Kukavica, Edin Urjan. *Beš*. Sarajevo: Autor, 2013.

ZKS: Ključanin, Zilhad. *Špas*. Sarajevo: Dobra knjiga, 2012.

IHS: Horozović, Irfan. *Sokolarov sonet*. Sarajevo: Stav, 2016.

Despite the relatively small size of the compiled corpus, we posit that the findings presented in this paper reflect broader patterns in the conceptual organization of genitive prepositional idioms in Bosnian—patterns that, due to limitations of scope, are not fully addressed in this study. The observed tendencies are assumed to be consistent with the use of genitive prepositions in other idiomatic expressions as well.

5. Discussion

Our analysis has identified eighteen prepositions that govern the genitive case in Bosnian idiomatic constructions. These prepositions include: *od, do, preko, van, iz, s(a), izza, poput, ispod, na kraj, oko, kod, pored, u, bez, umjesto, između,* and *za* (Eng. *from, to, over, out, from, with, behind, like, under, at the end of, around, at, beside, in, without, instead of, between, for*).¹

In this section, we focus on the preposition *od* (Eng. *of*) and examine a selection of its semantic realizations. The preposition *od* most frequently appears in its prototypical, spatially motivated sense—denoting the movement of a trajector away from a landmark. While its core meaning is grounded in spatial separation, this ablative function is conceptually extended to encompass a wide spectrum of metaphorical meanings.

Idiomatic expressions reveal the difficulty of delimiting the full semantic potential of the genitive preposition *od*. Certain idioms appear to diverge significantly from the original spatial schema—such as *od sveg srca* (lit. Eng. *with all one's heart*)—yet still conform to the broader conceptual framework of genitive-ablative semantics. These expressions continue to instantiate the underlying cognitive schema of *separation from a source*, albeit in abstract domains such as emotion or modality. Our corpus analysis has yielded multiple distinct semantic roles expressed by the preposition *od*, which will be systematically presented in the following section.²

5.1 Ablocation³

The idiom *odvojiti od usta* (EUKB, 74) [lit. Eng. *to separate from the mouth*], which conveys the meaning ‘to save up excessively, to put something aside with great effort’⁴ (Matešić, 1982, 725), exemplifies the conceptual category of *ablocation*, i.e., the act of separating something from a source. This construction represents a scenario of separation that is metaphorically framed as a physical displacement of an *unspoken trajectory*. The trajectory itself is not overtly expressed, but it is cognitively grounded in the genitive landmark *usta* (‘mouth’), which metonymically signifies sustenance and, by extension, existence.⁵

1 It should be noted that some of these prepositions do not govern the genitive case in other languages, highlighting language-specific patterns of case-preposition alignment.

2 The list of identified meanings remains far from exhaustive, indicating the need for further investigation into the semantic potential of genitive prepositions within idiomatic constructions.

3 The term *ablocation* constitutes a neological blend of the terms *ablative* and *location*, reflecting its conceptual grounding in spatial separation from a source.

4 It is most commonly employed in contexts that involve expressions of empathy or emotional identification.

5 This conclusion is derived from the lexical semantics of the noun *mouth*, which, through metonymic projection, represents the act of eating—an activity that is conceptually associated with the maintenance of life and, by extension, existence.

The conceptual trajectory is tightly anchored to the landmark *mouth*, evoking the basic life function of eating as a prerequisite for survival. The act of refraining from eating—*removing from the mouth*—is thus reinterpreted as symbolic of financial restraint. Through this imagery, the idiom constructs a mental model in which saving emerges from self-denial and deprivation. The idiom thus activates both metaphorical and metonymic processes, forming a composite conceptual mechanism that Goossens (2003) terms *metaphonymy*—a blend of metaphor and metonymy operating simultaneously.

In the given example, the *schematic concept of separation* is clearly manifested, as it encompasses both the notion of spatial distancing from the genitive landmark (i.e., the noun in the genitive case) and the dynamic component introduced by the verb of motion *to separate*. The distancing is thus not only implied conceptually, but also explicitly reinforced lexically. In *Figure 2*, the genitive landmark is represented with dashed lines to illustrate the possibility that the act of separation may entail a transformation or alteration of the landmark itself.⁶

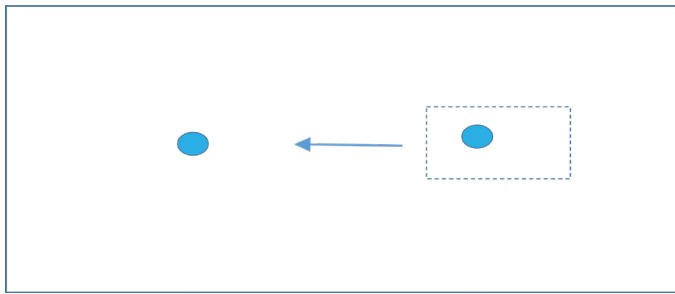


Fig. 2. Profile of the idiom *odvojiti od usta*

As the action of separation continues over time, the quantity of separated items increases. This accumulation is cognitively processed through the conceptual metaphor *TIME IS SPACE*, which is made possible by the prototypical and highly generalized character of the spatial domain as a source domain in conceptual structuring. Lexically, this interpretation is supported by the use of the progressive aspect of the verb *odvajati* ('to be separating'), which is visually represented by a black temporal trajectory arrow in *Figure 3*.

Within this conceptual framework, the spatial distribution of the separated items varies: some are positioned farther from the landmark, others remain closer to it, some maintain direct contact, while others are even conceptualized

⁶ The mental image of reduced food intake is readily accessible and conceptually salient, serving as a concrete basis for the abstraction of frugality and self-restraint.

as being located *within* the landmark itself. These variations illustrate the flexible spatial-semantic structuring enabled by the genitive-ablative construction.⁷

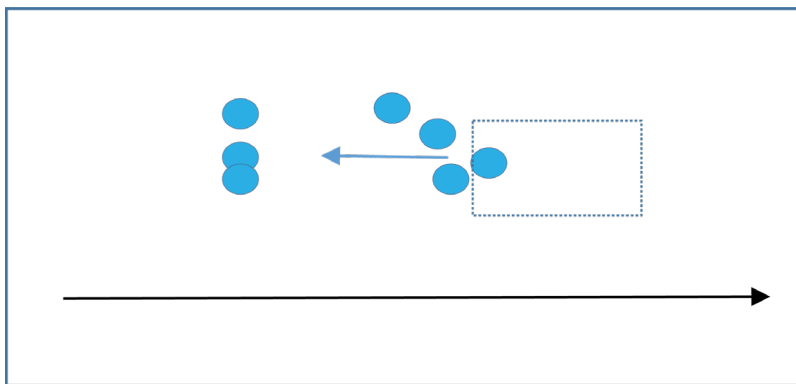


Fig. 3. Profile of the idiom *odvajati od usta*

It becomes evident that the only stable element within this idiomatic structure is the position and meaning of the preposition *od*. It consistently retains its core function, even outside idiomatic contexts, thereby representing the central and prototypical expression of the genitive-ablative relation in the Bosnian language.

5.2 Abtempora¹⁸

In the idiom *ne biti od jučer* (ZKS, 133) [lit. Eng. *to not be from yesterday*], which conveys the meaning ‘to be experienced’ (Matešić, 1982, 24), *time* as a conceptual domain is prototypically construed through spatial mapping. The *trajectory*—metaphorically representing the subject’s experiential development—is separated from the *landmark yesterday*, which functions as a temporal anchor associated with naïveté or inexperience. This separation reflects the metaphor UNDESIRABLE IS LESS, wherein the notion of *yesterday* is culturally encoded with negative connotations.

A *linear conceptualization of time* plays a crucial role in enabling the metaphor TIME IS AN OBJECT THAT MOVES. Through conceptual integration with the metaphor DESIRABLE IS MORE (TIME), the idiom expresses the idea of accumulated experience: the trajectory moves away from a fixed, conventional

7 This conceptualization is closely linked to strategies of financial management, wherein the act of withholding or saving is framed as a deliberate, structured process of resource allocation over time.

8 The term *abtemporal* is a neological blend of the elements *ablative* and *temporal*, denoting a conceptual category grounded in the metaphorical separation from a specific temporal reference point.

temporal reference point—*yesterday*—which is metaphorically reinterpreted as a site of cognitive immaturity or lack of insight.

This interpretation is further reinforced by the use of the negated copulative verb *ne biti* (‘not to be’), which syntactically distances the subject from the referent. Although the lexeme *yesterday* denotes a conventional time point on the timeline, its metaphorical function in the idiom is decoupled from the *deictic center*⁹ (i.e., speaker-oriented reference) and instead aligned with a *cultural center*,¹⁰ where *yesterday* symbolically encodes outdatedness or inferiority in knowledge.

In Figure 4, the idiomatic meaning is visually rendered through the interaction of conceptual elements: the *landmark yesterday* is shown as a fixed point on the timeline (solid line),¹¹ while the preposition *od* (‘from’) functions as a metaphor of *separation* or *departure* from that temporal anchor. The trajectory itself—representing the subject’s experience—is positioned beyond this point, outside the idiom’s literal profile, and is supported by the syntactic presence of the copulative verb,¹² symbolized as a bidirectional arrow with strong lines, indicating its structural and interpretative significance.

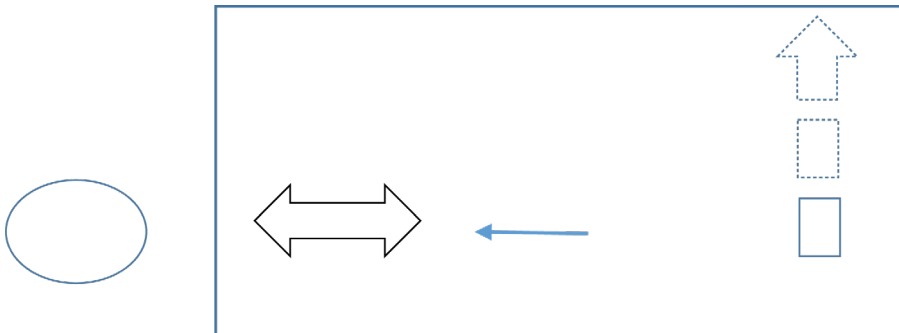


Fig. 4. Profile of the idiom *ne biti od jučer*

9 If interpreted literally, it would yield a referential meaning equivalent to “the day before today.”

10 This is not unexpected, as idioms often function as *axiological markers* within a given culture. They reflect and reinforce cultural self-perceptions—particularly the tendency of societies to view themselves as historically continuous, venerable, and rooted in antiquity.

11 Other temporal reference points remain in the background as *potential anchors*, conceptually available but not activated within the idiomatic construction.

12 The copulative verb *to be* functions as an equative verb, establishing a semantic correspondence between the subject and the trajectory. In its negated form, as in the idiom *ne biti od jučer*, it plays a crucial role in constructing the idiomatic meaning by explicitly denying the identification of the subject with the temporal landmark *yesterday*, thereby reinforcing the notion of experiential distance.

5.3 Abcausative¹³

The idiom *topiti se od miline* (EUKB, 297) [lit. Eng. *to melt out of pleasure*], meaning ‘to feel great joy’ (Matešić, 1982, 338), exemplifies the *abcausative* construction—where the trajectory is metaphorically construed as moving away from the landmark *milina* (‘pleasure’), thereby signaling the initiation of a process. This construction corresponds to a cause-and-effect schema, in which the *starting point is equated with the cause from which the consequence arises*, just as physical movement and its result originate from a spatial source (Palić, 2016, 65).¹⁴

In this sense, the *causal origin* (i.e., *pleasure*) is conceptually compatible with the original ablative schema of separation. The nature of causation here is grounded in a *linear model of event progression*, where the passage of time is understood metaphorically as movement through space—a projection enabled by the conceptual metaphor TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT.

In Figure 5, the abcausative structure is visually represented by several symbolic elements: the leftward-pointing arrow denotes the abcausative function; the landmark is shown as filled with the causal force (*milina*); and an upward-pointing thick black arrow illustrates the *intensity scale*, indicating that the landmark possesses sufficient affective force to generate a result. This result is lexically expressed by the verb *to melt*,¹⁵ which, in the figure, is represented by the conventional black rightward-pointing arrow denoting *temporal predication*.

The *trajectory*, as the experiencer of the process, is conceptually affected by the landmark—*pleasure*—which is understood not merely as a state but as an active, potent source of transformation. Through the conceptual metaphor ABSTRACT IS CONCRETE, the abstract emotional state (*milina*) is reified and assigned *metonymic force*, functioning as the proximate cause of a psychosomatic reaction. Thus, the idiom fuses metaphorical and metonymic mechanisms to encode experiential and affective nuance.

13 The term *abcausative* is a neological blend of the terms *ablative* and *causative*, denoting a conceptual configuration in which the source functions simultaneously as the point of origin and the cause of a resulting process or state.

14 “[P]ri čemu se polazište izjednačuje s uzrokom iz kojeg proizlazi posljedica kao što iz polazišta proizlazi kretanje i njegov rezultat” (Palić, 2016: 65).

15 “The target concept can then be structured according to the structure of the source concept, so that the source can influence the lexicalized meaning” (Dobrovolskij and Piirainen, 2010, 74). The action of *melting* is inherently vivid and image-rich, providing a highly salient visual metaphor for affective dissolution or emotional intensity.

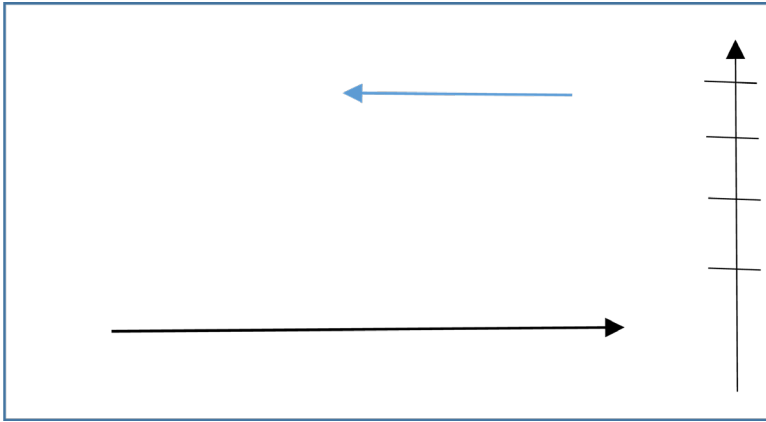


Fig. 5. Profile of the idiom *topiti se od miline*

5.4 Abmodal¹⁶

The idiom *od [sveg] srca* (IHS, 65) [lit. Eng. *from the bottom of the heart*], meaning ‘gladly’ or ‘wholeheartedly’ (Matešić, 1982, 632), exemplifies the *abmodal* construction—where the *mode* of performing an action is metaphorically grounded in spatial structure. This “metaphor of way” (Palić, 2007) implies that the action is executed in a single, unambiguous manner, thereby excluding alternative modes of realization. It establishes a direct link between *manner* and *spatial configuration*, reflecting how perception and modality are often conceptualized through spatial categories.

In this idiom, the *heart* functions as a *prototypical source of benevolence*, cognitively construed as a space filled with positive content. Its metaphorical status as a *container of emotional energy* allows for the interpretation of that energy as radiating outward—akin to a wave—toward the trajector, thus affecting the action itself.

The idiomatic meaning is therefore shaped by the *positive axiological connotation* of the heart as a cultural symbol of sincerity and goodwill. Through the conceptual metaphor ABSTRACT IS CONCRETE, emotional intent is spatially represented and projected as an active force, capable of influencing the modality of the event structure. The heart, as the landmark, is not merely symbolic but spatially and causally functional within the idiom’s semantic architecture.

16 The term *abmodal* is a neological blend of the elements *ablative* and *modal*, denoting a conceptual structure in which the manner of an action is metaphorically construed as emerging from a source. For further discussion of the concept of *ablocation*, cf. Belaj and Tanacković Faletar (2014); Pranjković (2001).

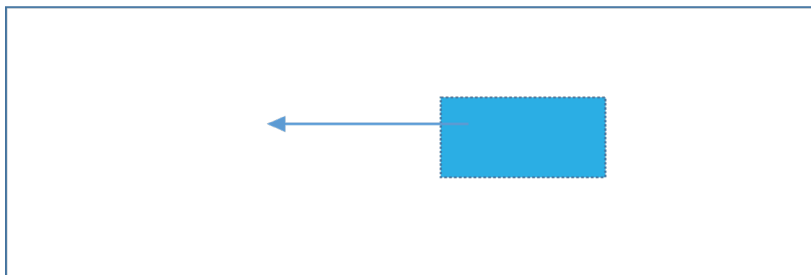


Fig.6. Profile of the idiom *od [svet] srva*

6. Concluding Remarks

The connection between members of the same semantic category is organized through a *chain of meaning*, a conceptual mechanism that links various realizations of a central schema. The idiomatic data analyzed in this study demonstrate that *space functions as the underlying conceptual domain* behind all genitive-ablative meanings in the examined idioms of the Bosnian language. This is made possible by the status of *space* as a *supracategory*—not only in these idioms but across broader semantic systems—that systematically enables the metaphorical projection of movement from a source.

The findings underscore that a preposition always operates as part of a construction endowed with its own predicational structure. In many cases, the preposition—particularly those governing the genitive case—activates a rich network of spatially motivated meanings, which in turn facilitate the emergence of *conceptual mechanisms*, such as metaphor and metonymy.

Idioms formed with *prepositional genitive constructions* express a wide range of metaphorical meanings, including but not limited to *ablocation*, *abtemporal*, *abcausative*, and *abmodal*. *These meanings are conceptually grounded in space as a primary cognitive category*. The noun in the genitive case is consistently defocused, functioning as a *reference point* (Palić, 2016, 21)—sometimes even as a *cultural reference point*—rather than as a concrete spatial entity. This abstraction is licensed by the conceptual metaphor ABSTRACT IS CONCRETE, which allows for the reification of non-material domains.

Moreover, many of these idioms simultaneously activate the metaphor TIME IS SPACE, further demonstrating the depth of spatial structuring in idiomatic conceptualization. The interaction of *conceptual metaphor* and *metonymy* within these idioms confirms their status as complex constructions, ideally suited to reveal the dynamic interplay of cognitive, cultural, and linguistic processes. As such, they

exemplify the capacity of language to function not merely as a communicative tool but as a continuum of meaning shaped by cognition and culture.

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