

Gradience in constituency: Idiomaticity and apparent multiple frontings in German

Although German counts as a V-2 language, it has long been noted that sometimes more than one constituent may precede the finite verb in a main clause (e.g. Engel 1970; Lötscher 1985; Jacobs 1986; Eisenberg 1989):

- (1) [Dem Saft] [eine kräftigere Farbe] geben Blutorangen...
the juice a richer colour give blood-oranges
'Blood oranges give the juice a richer colour'
[IDS PUBLIC R99/JAN.01605]

Moreover, it has been observed (Müller 2005) that the frequency of idioms in this construction is disproportionately high:

- (2) [Öl] [ins Feuer] goss wieder einmal Erzbischof Johannes Dyba.
oil into-the fire poured again once archbishop Johannes Dyba
'Once again, archbishop Johannes Dyba added fuel to the flames'
[IDS PUBLIC M00/JUN.26272]

By contrast, the present study suggests that idiomatic examples like (2) in fact involve fronting of just one single (albeit 'defective', i.e. non-prototypical) constituent. Specifically, idioms like *Öl ins Feuer gießen* – 'to add fuel to the flames', i.e. 'to aggravate a problem' – are special in that the NP and PP constituents form a semantic unit – both *X ins Feuer gießen* and *Öl ins Y gießen* will only give the idiomatic reading if *X = Öl* and *Y = Feuer* (or a near-synonym such as *Flammen*, 'flames'). In other words, we suggest that fronting either element in isolation is dispreferred because neither of them is semantically autonomous. By contrast, syntactically isomorphic idioms with semantically more autonomous components are predicted to come with a higher proportion of isolated frontings:

- (3) [Die skandalöse Affäre] brachte der Lehrer des Kindes [ins Rollen].
the scandalous affair brought the teacher of.the child into-the rolling
'The child's teacher kicked off the scandalous affair'
[IDS PUBLIC O94/FEB.10728]

We evaluate this prediction with a corpus study of caused motion idioms (SUBJ V OBJ OBL) in a giga corpus of written German, taking increasing collocation strength between OBJ and OBL (up to the limiting case of mandatory co-occurrence) as an indication of decreasing semantic autonomy. The second part of the study addresses apparent counterexamples like (4):

- (4) [Zusätzliches Öl] gießt seit Wochen der Bericht des Rechnungshofes [ins Feuer]...
additional oil pours since weeks the report of.the audit-court into-the fire
'The audit court's report has been adding additional fuel to the flames for weeks'
[IDS PUBLIC M00/JUN.26272]

Cases in which strongly collocating idiom components are broken apart (as in (4)) typically involve specific additional modification of the fronted component. We suggest that the addition of such elements increases the semantic weight of the modified head and thus privileges isolated fronting – if in fact the idiom is sufficiently transparent (i.e. if the separated NP corresponds to a clearly individuated participant in the semantic structure of the figurative reading). In a second study, we evaluate this idea by using semantic transparency ratings from a questionnaire experiment to predict such otherwise unexpected isolated frontings. Finally, implications of the obtained results for the concept of gradience in syntax are discussed.

References

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