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How bizarre!

A non-syntactic constraint on idiom syntax

Abstract: This paper demonstrates that syntax-external factors at the level of pragmatics are responsible for certain constraints on word order variation in phrasal idioms. I propose a new constraint in this context by referring to the fact that idioms can be distinguished by the criterion of having either a plausible or a 'bizarre' literal reading. Since this constraint on topicalization of subparts of idiomatic strings cannot be accounted for in syntactic terms, this paper contributes to an understanding of how to approach marked word order options from a pragmatic perspective in general.

Keywords: idioms; syntax-pragmatics interface; topicalization

1 Introduction

From a historical perspective, one of the main motivations for developing construction grammar models in theoretical linguistics was recognizing several problems with analyzing idioms within the 'syntactocentric' framework of generative linguistics. Since the meaning of idioms such as *kick the bucket* (meaning: 'die') cannot, in the eyes of many, be derived by compositional rules of semantic interpretation, numerous scholars point out "the clear inability of generative syntax to account for a phenomenon as pervasive in language as idiomaticity" (Chafe 1968: 127). Fillmore et al. (1988) argue that the pervasiveness of idiomaticity emphasized by Chafe strongly suggests that "[t]hose linguistic processes that are thought of as irregular cannot be accounted for by constructing lists of exceptions" (Fillmore et al. 1988: 534), as many linguists committed to generative grammar commonly do in order to explain these idiosyncratic phenomena that contradict compositionality. For Fillmore et al., the

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absurdity of excluding idiomatic expressions from the 'core' of the grammar by relegating them to the 'periphery' becomes clear in the case of idioms that are 'formal' to a greater or lesser degree instead of being 'substantive'.[1]

Nowadays, generative linguistics has developed different approaches to address phrasal idioms (for an overview, cf. Fellbaum 2015). What remains as a challenge, however, is to account for the syntactic flexibility of certain idioms (e.g., Horn 2003; Jackendoff 1997; Svenonius 2005). It is especially the topicalization of subparts of idioms that poses a theoretical problem. In this short paper, I will first point out mismatches between syntax and information structure in the context of topicalizing only subparts of idiomatic constructions. In section 3, I will then turn to the discontinuous occurrence of phrasal idioms in more detail and demonstrate a constraint on the flexibility of idiomatic constructions that has gone unnoticed so far. At a more abstract level, the discussion shows that the syntactic flexibility of idioms should be accounted for on syntax-external rather than on syntax-internal grounds. Section 4 summarizes and concludes the paper.

2 Topicalization of idiomatic constituents

In generative linguistics, information structural properties that are associated with word order variation in a sentence are encoded in the syntax as formal categories present and actively determining the syntactic derivation. This 'syntactocentric' approach aims at representing every conceivable interpretive aspect in terms of syntactic structures, or, to put it more metaphorically, it attempts "to draw maps as precise and detailed as possible of syntactic configurations" (Cinque and Rizzi 2010: 51). An illustrative case that challenges this approach and that has recently been confirmed experimentally (Trotzke et al. 2015) is the topicalization of verbal particles in idiomatic particle verb constructions.

Particle topicalization in general has been extensively discussed in the literature on present-day Germanic, including English (cf. Dehé 2015 for a short overview). As is the case for other Germanic languages, both semantic and structural factors have been claimed to constrain particle topicalization in German (e.g., Lüdeling 2001; Müller 2002; Stiebels and Wunderlich 1994; Zeller

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1 Cf. Goldberg (2013b) for an overview of research postulating formal idioms whose elements are all lexically open (such as the 'ditransitive construction').

2001). Most researchers agree that one major condition on particle topicalization consists in the possibility of attributing a contrastive interpretation to the particle. This explains why the sentence in (1) is judged as acceptable by the authors, whereas the one in (2) is not.

(1) *ZU   hat   er   die   Tür   gemacht (und nicht auf)!*
    PART(close) has   he   the   door made   and   not   PART(open)
    'He closed the door.'
    (Zeller 2001: 89)

(2) **AUF   hat   Peter   mit   dem   Trinken   gehört!*
    PART   has   Peter   with   the   drinking   heard
    'Peter stopped drinking.'
    (Zeller 2001: 90)

While the particle topicalized in (1) may enter a relation of paradigmatic opposition with the particle *auf* in *auf-machen* (lit. 'open-make', to open), the particle *auf* in *auf-hören* enters no such paradigmatic opposition (cf. #*zu-hören*, #*ab-hören,* etc.). However, contrastiveness of the particle does not hold for idiomatic cases like the following, a corpus example by Müller (2002).[2]

(3) *VOR   hat   er   das   jedenfalls.*
    PART   has   he   that   anyway.
    'He intends that in any case.'
    (Müller 2002: 276)

A natural account in terms of information structure would be to analyze such configurations as 'pars-pro-toto-constructions'. That is, elements that do not fulfill any discourse-semantic function in the left periphery alone can appear in the prefield 'pars-pro-toto', thereby highlighting the whole predicate. This is a very common strategy, given that the category that appears in the left periphery of the German clause may be smaller than the focus (4) or larger than the focus (4a), and sometimes it coincides with the focus (4b), cf. Jacobs (1991: 8).

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2 A corpus search via http://www.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2 confirms Müller's (2002) finding that cases such as (3) exist. Interestingly, in the case of *vor-haben* we found that 80% of all occurrences of left peripheral *vor* contained modal licensers such as *allerdings* (lit. 'indeed'), *eigentlich* (lit. 'actually'), and *schon* (lit. 'already', here used as the homonymous discourse particle); for further discussion of this aspect, cf. Trotzke et al. (2015).

(4) *Was hat er gemacht?*
'What has he done?'

Ein	*BUCH*	*hat*	*er*	*gelesen.*
a	book	has	he	read

(5) a. *Was hat er gelesen?*
'What did he read?'

Ein	*BUCH*	*gelesen*	*hat*	*er.*
a	book	read	has	he

   b. *Ein* *BUCH* *hat* *er* *gelesen.*

Ein	*BUCH*	*hat*	*er*	*gelesen.*
a	book	has	he	read

At the level of information structure, preposing only a subpart of the focus (4) is equivalent to topicalizing the whole focal constituent, as in (6):

(6) *Was hat er gemacht?*
'What has he done?'

Ein	*BUCH*	*gelesen*	*hat*	*er.*
a	book	read	has	he

Accordingly, following Fanselow (2003), we can analyze (7a) as a pars-pro-toto-construction that is equivalent to (7b) at the level of information structure.

(7) a.

VOR	*haben*	*wir*	*das*	*schon*	*gehabt.*
PART	have	we	that	well	had

   b.

VORgehabt	*haben*	*wir*	*das*	*schon.*
PART.had	have	we	that	well

'We had intended that.'
(Fanselow 2003: 35)

Given these initial observations concerning idiomatic particle verbs, notice that the topicalization of non-contrastable elements is a regular option in the syntax of German idioms. Specifically, it also shows up in phrasal idioms, like in (8a), which is equivalent to (8b).

(8)   *den Löffel abgeben* ('to die', lit. 'the spoon pass')

   a.

[Den	*LÖffel]*	*hat*	*er*	*abgegeben.*
the	spoon	has	he	passed.

'He died.'

b. *[Den LÖffel abgegeben] hat er.*
(Trotzke and Zwart 2014: 138)

As in the case of *vor* in (7a), the preposed part *den Löffel* of the idiom *den Löffel abgeben* is regarded as meaningless in isolation. Accordingly, topicalizing this element poses a problem concerning the assumption of a dedicated syntactic position in the left periphery associated with focal or contrastive interpretation of the element that occupies this position. Again, as was the case with (7b), *den Löffel* in (8a) is preposed to the left periphery 'pars-pro-toto', since the pragmatic interpretation involved (e.g., contrastive interpretation of the whole predicate) is equivalent to preposing the whole constituent, as shown in (9):

(9) *Den   LÖffel   abgegeben hat   er.*
    the   spoon   passed   has   he
    'He died (and did not survive).'

The topicalization in (8a), involving subextraction out of an idiomatic string, is problematic for any syntactocentric account of the syntactic mobility of idioms. In particular, an approach involving focus/contrast 'operators' triggering 'movement' does not provide a suitable model for the analysis of this phenomenon, since 'moving' only a part of the focus hardly suffices to check a corresponding syntactic focus/contrast feature. In other words, these phenomena provide evidence against generative accounts that encode information structural concepts in the syntactic representation. In what follows, I will turn to additional evidence against such an approach and demonstrate a syntax-external constraint on idiom syntax that has not been noticed previously.

3 How bizarre! Accounting for idiom syntax on pragmatic grounds

A prominent approach to idioms argues that we observe a systematic relation between semantic compositionality (i.e. transparency) of an idiom and its syntactic flexibility (e.g., Nunberg et al. 1994 and many others). According to this approach, two types of idioms can be distinguished: 'idiomatically combining expressions' (10a) and 'idiomatic phrases' (10b):

(10) a. *spill the beans*
   b. *kick the bucket*

In (10a), the meaning of the idiomatic expression is distributed among its parts, i.e. *spill the beans* is transparent in the sense that *beans* denotes the secrets and *spill* the event of revealing the secrets. In contrast, *kick the bucket* denotes an atomic meaning ('to die') that cannot be further decomposed. Nunberg et al. (1994: 510) claim that only relevantly transparent idioms (such as [10a]) are syntactically flexible, cf., e.g., the passivization patterns of the idioms given above:

(11) a. *The beans were spilled by Pat.*
   b. **The bucket was kicked.*

This claim has been widely adopted in the literature on idioms and seems to hold for most English examples discussed in this context (cf. Fellbaum 2015). However, there are two domains of evidence suggesting that this approach does not cover the syntactic behavior of all idiomatic cases. First, we observe non-transparent idioms such as *give up the ghost* ('to die'), which also show patterns of syntactic flexibility, cf. Kay and Sag (2012: 2):

(12) a. *give up the ghost*
   b. *The ghost was given up.*

Second, and turning again to German and to flexibility in terms of topicalization, we find several examples in authentic speech where idiom-specific lexemes (usually indicating a low degree of semantic transparency of the construction) are preposed to the left periphery of the clause:

(13) *Den Garaus wird es uns vielleicht nicht gleich machen.*
   the GARAUS will it us perhaps not immediately make.
   'It will not immediately kill us.'
   <http://chiliforum.hot-pain.de/thread-17580-post-334480.html>
   (accessed 15 September 2014)

(14) *Am Hungertuch hat in der Pharmaindustrie auch zuletzt*
   at.the HUNGERTUCH has in the drug.industry PART recently
   niemand genagt.
   nobody gnawed.

'In drug industry, nobody has been down on his uppers recently.'
<http://www.fr-online.de/wirtschaft/novartis-und-pfizer- pharmaindustrie-ordnet-sich-neu-,1472780,26910606.html> (accessed 15 September 2014)

This evidence, together with the English data given above, thus questions the claim that the flexibility of idioms only interacts with semantic transparency, as proposed, e.g., by Nunberg et al. (1994) and Goldberg (2013a). There is also psycholinguistic evidence from passivization against the hypothesis that compositional/transparent cases always display a greater extent of syntactic variation (Dörre 2012).

In the literature on the syntactic flexibility of idioms it is generally assumed that German (and also Dutch) phrasal idioms present an exception to the rule that only transparent idioms, in the sense of Nunberg et al. (1994), can be syntactically modified. In addition to rather special idioms such as (13) and (14), this is confirmed by examples such as *den Löffel abgeben* already given above. However, even in those cases we observe a restriction on syntactic flexibility. In particular, as Fanselow (2004) and many others claim, the order '*abgeben > den Löffel*' in, e.g., *Abgegeben hat er den Löffel!* destroys the idiomatic reading. We could explain this restricted flexibility in terms of an ordering constraint that becomes relevant for idiom interpretation in the semantic component (Trotzke and Zwart 2014). This is not the whole story, though. When we turn to the idiomatic cases in more detail, we notice that constraints at the level of pragmatics are at work. We observe the following tendency: when the literal reading is not accessible/plausible to the hearer (when it is 'bizarre'), the hearer infers, due to a relevance implicature, that the idiomatic reading should be chosen. This is why idioms such as *to give up the ghost* (with a bizarre literal reading) can show up in different syntactic constructions (12b), while idioms like *kick the bucket* (with a plausible literal reading) cannot (11b).

Let me be more specific about what I claim here. Idioms can have a literal and a metaphorical reading, and the literal reading can make more or less sense. In German, idioms such as *die Daumen drücken* ('to root for sb.') or *eine Hand leihen* ('to help sb.') in their literal readings would involve quite bizarre readings: *eine Hand leihen* would involve the transfer of a body part from one person to another and *die Daumen drücken* would refer to an event where someone squeezes both thumbs of another person. On the other hand, the literal reading of idioms such as *den Löffel abgeben* receives a perfectly reasonable interpretation. The literal denotation of the idiomatic expression in this case is an ordinary event when people partake of a meal.

A diagnostic test bringing out the 'accessibility' vs. 'bizarreness' feature is to use the idiomatic string in a directive imperative. If such an imperative can be used felicitously, and if it triggers an appropriate response (in the sense that the addressee knows what to do in order to behave consensually), the idiomatic string has an accessible counterpart. If acting upon the imperative would be impossible or create a weird situation, the literal reading of the idiomatic string is not accessible to the hearer. To test this, consider the following dialogues:

(15) A: *Du   musst   ihm   die   Daumen   drücken*!
     you   must   him   the   thumbs   squeeze
     'You must root for him!'
   B: *Okay! [takes C's thumbs and squeezes them]*

(16) A: *Du   musst   ihm   eine   Hand   leihen*!
     you   must   him   the   hand   lend
     'You must help him!'
   B: *Okay! [takes off his hand and gives it to C]*

If we judge the event in parentheses to be bizarre, the idioms belong to a class where the literal reading is not accessible to the hearer/not felicitous. In contrast, consider the dialogue in (17):

(17) A: *Sorge   dafür,   dass   er   den   Löffel   abgibt*!
     care   for.it   that   he   the   spoon   passes
     'Make sure that he dies!'
   B: *Okay! [tells C to pass the spoon]*

What is unexpected about the dialogue in (17) is the literal interpretation of the idiomatic string. But once we are in the domain of this literal interpretation (the event of enjoying a meal together), the event described in parentheses is not bizarre.

Given this aspect of idiomatic constructions, an interesting observation is that in cases like (15), where a non-idiomatic reading is not (easily) accessible to the hearer, the ordering constraint claimed for idioms such as *den Löffel abgeben* can also be violated in German, as in (18c), without destroying the idiomatic reading:

(18) a. *Sie   haben   ihm   die   Daumen   gedrückt*.
     they   have   him   the   thumbs   squeezed

    b.   *Die Daumen haben sie ihm gedrückt.*

    c.   *Gedrückt   haben   sie   ihm   die   Daumen   und   Aumas*
       squeezed   have   they   him   the   thumbs   and   Auma's
       Bürgermeister [...] ließ es dann auch nicht an Dramatik mangeln.
       mayor   let   it   then PART not   at   dramatics   lack
       'They rooted for him, and then Auma's mayor indeed behaved in a dramatic way.'
       (http://ssv-gera.de/home/1048) (accessed 15 September 2014)

Since the literal reading ('to squeeze sb.'s thumbs') is not as salient as in idioms such as *den Löffel abgeben*, the hearer infers, based on a relevance implicature, that the idiomatic reading is intended by the speaker. This shows that extra-linguistic (non-conventional) pragmatic factors may overwrite ordering constraints and play a more crucial role in accounting for idiom flexibility than assumed by the syntactic approaches above. The same is true of more complex idioms and their syntactic flexibility. Fanselow and Lenertová (2011: 179) claim that the ordering in idioms such as (19) cannot be changed due to reasons of the syntax-phonology of these constructions:

(19) a.   *Er   hat   die FLINte   ins   KORN   geworfen.*
       he   has   the gun   into.the grain   thrown
       'He has given up.'

    b.   *Die FLINte hat er ins KORN geworfen.*

    c.   **Ins KORN hat er die FLINte geworfen.*
       (intended: same as (19a))

However, when we turn to other cases that involve a similar stress pattern, but are different regarding their pragmatics (i.e. concerning the felicity of their literal reading), we arrive at a different conclusion. Consider the following idiom:

(20) *Er   hat   zwei   Fliegen   mit   einer   Klappe   geschlagen.*
    he   has   two   flies   with   one   swat   hit
    'He has killed two birds with one stone.'

Our test regarding the felicity of the literal interpretation shows that only in the case of (19) both interpretations (the idiomatic and the literal one) are available:

(21) A: *Hör   zu!   Du   musst die   Flinte ins   Korn werfen*!
     listen   up   you   must   the   gun   into.the grain throw
  B: *Okay! [takes his gun and throws it into a pile of grain]*

(22) A: *Hör   zu!   Du   musst   zwei   Fliegen mit   einer   Klappe schlagen!*
     listen up   you must   two   flies   with one   swat   hit
  B: *Okay! [gets a swat and hits two flies]*

In (22), the literal reading denotes an event that is highly implausible. In particular, *zwei Fliegen mit einer Klappe schlagen* literally means 'to hit two flies with one swat', rather than 'to beat two flies to death' (note that 'to beat sb. to death' would correspond to the German verb **er**schlagen). Crucially now, the ordering '*mit einer Klappe > zwei Fliegen*' can easily be found on the web and seems to be quite frequent:

(23) *Sie   schlagen   damit   mit   einer Klappe   zwei   Fliegen [...]*
   you   hit   thereby with   one   swat   two   flies
  (http://www.laufen-in-koeln.de/lik4.php?aid=A-1673)
  (accessed 15 September 2014)

In sum, our discussion of pragmatic restrictions on the syntactic flexibility of idiomatic expressions suggests that the mobility of certain phrasal idioms should be accounted for on syntax-external (pragmatic) rather than on syntax-internal grounds.

4 Conclusion

In this contribution, I demonstrated cases where syntax-external pragmatic inferences are responsible for constraints on word order variation in the domain of idiom syntax. In particular, having pointed out mismatches between syntax and information structure in the context of topicalizing only subparts of idiomatic constructions, I turned to the discontinuous occurrence of phrasal idioms in more detail and proposed a new constraint on the flexibility of idiomatic constructions. Since this constraint on topicalization of subparts of idiomatic strings cannot be accounted for in syntactic terms, this short paper may contribute to an understanding of how to approach marked word order options from a pragmatic perspective in general (Trotzke 2015). I provided some new evidence that the generative approach of encoding every conceivable aspect of

information structural meaning in the syntactic representation is, at least for the cases discussed in this paper, on the wrong track.

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