

An experimental view on the syntactic flexibility of German idioms

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We present an experiment on German in which we investigate whether a part of an idiom can be syntactically dislocated. Nunberg et al. (1994) claim that this depends on (i) the semantic compositionality of the idiom (i.e., whether each part of the idiom maps to a part of the figurative meaning), and (ii) whether the respective syntactic construction requires that the dislocated part carries an individual meaning (e.g., because it imposes a topical or contrastive interpretation).

In our acceptability rating study, we tested how native speakers rate sentences in which the object of non-compositional/compositional idiomatic VPs and non-idiomatic VPs is fronted to the prefield, left-dislocated or scrambled in comparison to a canonical baseline. We also manipulated the type of context in which the sentence was presented.

The results show that dislocating parts of non-compositional idioms is indeed perceived as less acceptable than dislocating parts of compositional idioms or non-idiomatic constituents. However, even dislocating a part of non-compositional idiom can be relatively acceptable, especially in a context which facilitates a contrastive topic interpretation of the idiom. This type of context generally raises the acceptability of partial idiom movement significantly, irrespective of compositionality.

A possible interpretation of these findings is that having an individual meaning is not a necessary condition for undergoing movement to the prefield, left dislocation, and scrambling in German. This points into the direction that the respective syntactic positions are not linked directly to a specified interpretation of the dislocated constituent on its own.