German "VP"-fronting: A matter of syntax?

This talk explores the connections among word order, subjecthood, information structure, and processing constraints with respect to fronted verbal constituents. As seen in (1)-(3), this kind of fronting appears to be sensitive to the differences between those verbal projections which host a 'subject' and those which do not.

(1) *[Ein Idiot Mamas Auto zu Schrott gefahren] hat damals.
(2) [Ein Außenseiter gewonnen] hat {?*im zweiten Rennen / ✓hier noch nie}.[1]
(3) [Das Auto zu Schrott gefahren] wurde der Frau.

Fronting of verbal constituents hosting a transitive subject (1) is degraded in almost any context, and inclusion of an unergative (proto-agent) subject (2) is more severely constrained than inclusion of a passive or unaccusative (derived, proto-patient) subject (3). Subjects of verbs that are typically used unergatively, like *gewinnen*, are only acceptable as part of a fronted verbal constituent if this constituent is focused as a single unit (Webelhuth 1990, De Kuthy & Meurers 2003). Using different terminology, the fronted constituent needs to be embedded in a context which allows for a 'thetic', as opposed to 'categorical', interpretation (Kuroda 1972, Ladusaw 1994). Under a thetic interpretation, the subject is not understood as separate from the predicate but is integrated into the interpretation of the predicate, resulting in a single, non-compositional unit. Theticity then makes predictions about specificity and conventionality. In order to require only a single interpretation act, the subject must be non-specific, and a thetic interpretation is more likely, the more conventional the described situation is. The post-fronting context needed for a thetic interpretation is provided by *hier noch nie* in (2).

Assuming that proto-patient subjects originate as part of the lexical VP and are thus integrated into the predicate, while proto-agent subjects are introduced by little *v*, outside the VP and are thus separate from the predicate, it could be argued that VPs (see (3)) may front, but agentive little *v*Ps (see (1)) may not. The verb phrase in (2) then needs to be coerced into a passive/unaccusative VP-structure (Hankamer & Lee-Schoenfeld 2005).

Although this purely syntactic analysis, which encodes the thetic/categorical distinction structurally, covers a lot of ground, it rules out examples like (4), which are acceptable. The transitive Accusativus cum Infinitivo (AcI) complement, consisting of an agentive *v*P, in this example is hardly coerceable into a passive/unaccusative VP.

(4) [Katzen Mäuse jagen] sieht man hier oft.

The new hypothesis to be tested is that constituents describing conventional situations with generic (non-specific) participants, like the AcI in (4), trigger a thetic interpretation. If this is indeed the case, it is the thetic/categorical distinction rather than syntactic complexity that determines the possibility of fronting. Examples like (4) will be contrasted with minimally different examples, where the subject is changed to *Hühner* (4') and *unsere Katzen* (4"), respectively. To investigate the independent contributions of conventionality and specificity on the one hand and plausibility on the other hand, the results of separate surveys will be presented. The first asks native speakers to judge non-fronted verbal constituents with respect to (i) plausibility of the described situation, (ii) conventionality of the described situation, and (iii) specificity of the subject. The second asks for acceptability of the some of the same verbal constituents in fronted position. If my predictions are borne out, speakers will judge (4) to be better than both (4'), which is less conventional but still plausible, and (4"), which has a specific fronted subject.

This suggests that German "VP"-fronting is a matter of not only syntax but also processing constraints: It is acceptable to front structurally complex constituents, including transitive *v*Ps, if they can be interpreted thetically, as a single unit, and are therefore light semantically. This is in line with recent work in psycholinguistics. The heavier the fronted constituent, that is, the more processing memory is required to interpret it, the harder it gets to properly integrate the displaced constituent back into the site from which it was extracted (Grodner & Gibson 2005).

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[1] The grammatical version of this sentence was first discussed by Grewendorf (1988) and Haider (1990). Note that another requirement for the acceptability of the fronted constituent in this example is a LHL ('Brückenkontur') intonation pattern.