

Idiomatcity and multiple fronting in German

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

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

Müller (2005) lists VP-idioms like (2) as particularly common in the pattern:

- (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]

The present study focuses on such idiomatic instances of the construction and proposes a semantic explanation of the observed fronting preferences. Specifically, it is suggested that idioms like *Öl ins Feuer gießen* – 'to add fuel to the flames', i.e. 'to aggravate a problem' – are peculiar 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'). I suggest that fronting either element in isolation is dispreferred because neither of them is semantically autonomous. By contrast, syntactically isomorphic idioms like *X ins Rollen bringen* 'to get X rolling' with semantically more autonomous object NPs are predicted to come with a higher proportion of single frontings:

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

Using the type frequency of the head of the object NP in 'caused motion' VP-idioms (NP_{SUBJ} V NP_{OBJ} PP_{OBL}) in a giga corpus of written German as an indicator of its semantic autonomy, it is shown that degree of autonomy is a significant predictor of fronting behaviour. The deeper reason for this is identified in a strong tendency to interpret the fronted material contrastively, and non-autonomous idiom components fail to evoke a relevant contrast set within the idiomatic reading if fronted in isolation. Finally, the proposed explanation is contrasted with an alternative approach based on collocational strength, and the existence of (few but unambiguous) counterexamples to the semantic account in the idiom data is acknowledged as evidence for the ultimately more complex multifactorial nature of the phenomenon at large.

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