

An experimental view on the syntactic flexibility of idioms

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We present an experimental study 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 of German 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. The categorization of the idioms as (non-)compositional was assessed by a control condition checking whether a part of the idiom can serve as an antecedent for an anaphor, which we take to indicate individual referentiality and, indirectly, compositionality. We also manipulated the type of context in which the sentence was presented: it was preceded either by a why-question, inducing broad focus including the idiom, or by a polar question, inducing polarity focus and allowing to interpret the idiom as a whole as a (contrastive) topic.

A linear mixed effects model analysis of the results shows 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 a 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 (Fig. 1).

A possible interpretation of these findings is that having an individual meaning facilitates movement to the prefield, left dislocation, and scrambling in German, but it is not a necessary condition. This points into the direction that a specific information-structural interpretation of the dislocated constituent is not inherently linked to the investigated syntactic operations/positions—at least not in a 1:1 way. The results are compatible with the view that there is a less direct relation between syntax and interpretation (such that the operations can affect just a part of the required information-structural category, e.g., only the object when the whole idiomatic VP is a contrastive topic), or that the operations are triggered by prosodic rather than interpretative requirements.

This research is part of a cross-linguistic collaboration on German, Hungarian, and Serbo-Croatian. A comparison of the results will show whether the languages differ in how close the relation is between left-peripheral syntactic positions and information-structural categories and to what extent an individual interpretation of syntactically dislocated constituents is required.

References: Nunberg, G., I. Sag, and T. Wasow. 1994. Idioms. *Language* 70(3), 491–538.

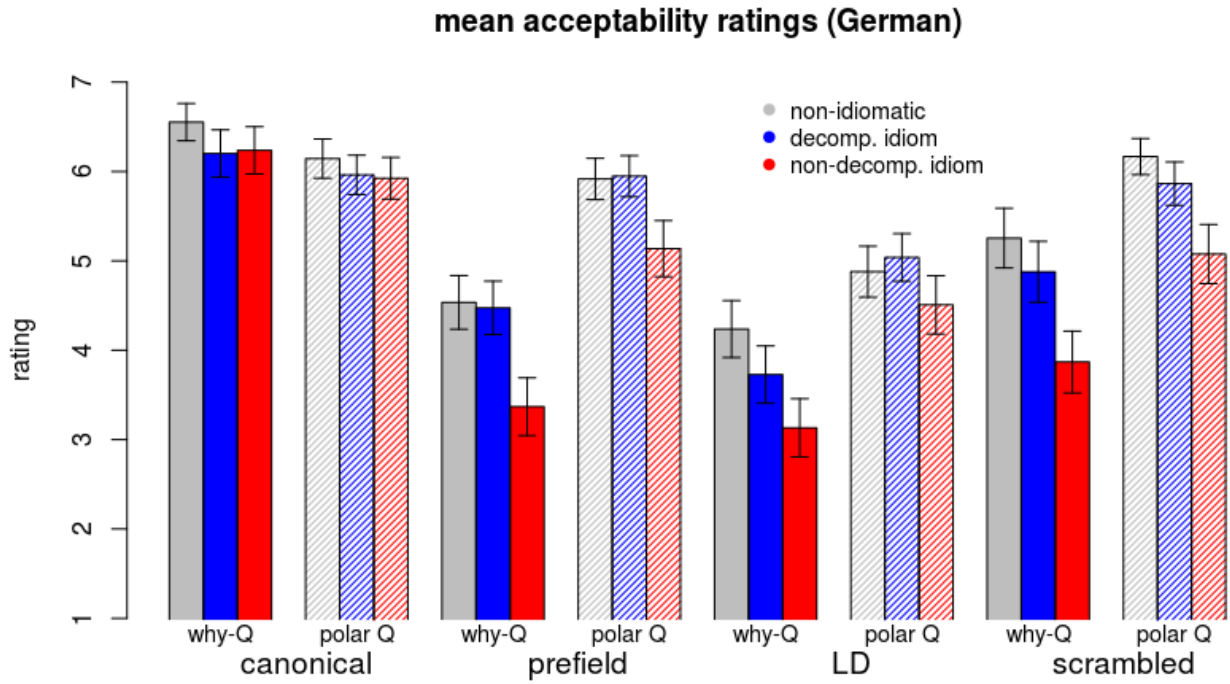


Fig. 1: results of the acceptability rating study on German idioms