

Definiteness Effects as Epiphenomena of Information Structure

Kordula De Kuthy and Detmar Meurers (Universität Tübingen)

Introduction Definiteness effects have been observed in connection with a number of word order phenomena in German. In this abstract, we take a closer look at definiteness effects occurring with partial constituents in German. Showcasing examples from two instances of partial constituents, NP-PP-split and partial verb phrase fronting, we investigate the formal pragmatic properties of these phenomena. We argue instead of stipulating it as a syntactic constraint, the definiteness effect can be explained in terms of the information structure requirements in such sentences. The apparent counter-examples to the syntactic definiteness constraint are predicted under such an information structure-based approach.

The Definiteness Effect in NP-PP Split The NP-PP split construction, in which a PP occurs separate from its nominal head and either the PP or the nominal head can be fronted, is exemplified in (1).

- (1) a. *Über Syntax* hat Max sich [ein Buch] ausgeliehen.
about syntax has Max self a book borrowed
'Max borrowed a book on syntax.'
- b. [Ein Buch] hat Max sich *über Syntax* ausgeliehen.
a book has Max self about syntax borrowed

The NP-PP split construction exhibits a definiteness effect, resulting in unacceptable examples when the NP is definite as shown in (2).

- (2) * *Über Syntax* hat Karl [das Buch] gelesen.
on syntax has Karl the book read
'Karl read the book on syntax.'

Müller (1996) proposed that the ungrammaticality of examples such as (2) should be explained in terms of the so-called specificity effect, a classical syntactic restriction on extraction.

Yet this leaves unexplained why fronting of the embedded PP is grammatical in certain cases (3), as was pointed out by Pafel (1993).

- (3) *Über Syntax* hat Karl nur **dieses**, aber nicht **jenes** Buch gelesen.
on syntax has Karl only this but not that book read
'Karl only read this book on syntax and not that one.'

In search for an alternative explanation of the ungrammaticality of (2), which also takes into account the grammatical counterexample (3), we investigated the formal pragmatic properties of such examples. As shown in De Kuthy (2002), the acceptability of the NP-PP-split construction can directly be related to its information structure: The construction is only grammatical in contexts where the PP and its nominal head do not belong to the same part of the information structure; e.g., the two parts cannot both be in the focus of an utterance.

As the second component of our explanation of the definiteness effect, we need to determine the discourse properties of definite NPs. One can distinguish two classes of definite NPs. In the first class definite NPs function anaphorically so that they are part of the background of a sentence. Since the entire NP is in the background, it cannot occur in an NP-PP-split where the NP and the PP are required to be in different parts of the information structure. The second class of definite NPs, on the other hand, are used deictically, endophorically or as a semantic definite. Definite NPs belonging to the second class can be used in a discourse where they do *not* refer to an entity already present in the discourse. In consequence, such definite NPs can be in the focus while the PP is in the background. The grammaticality of the example with the deictic NP in (3) thus follows directly from the information structure explanation, instead of being a counter-example to a syntactic definiteness constraint.

The Definiteness Effect in Partial Verb Phrase Fronting Turning to the second instance of a partial constituent phenomenon showing a definiteness effect, in German it is possible to realize a subject as part of a fronted non-finite verbal constituent as exemplified in (4).

- (4) a. [Ein Fehler unterlaufen] ist meinem Lehrer noch nie.
an_{nom} error crept in is my teacher still never
'So far my teacher has never made a mistake.'
- b. [Ein Außenseiter gewonnen] hat hier noch nie.
an_{nom} outsider won has hier still never
'An outsider has never won here yet.'

Kratzer (1984, p. 46), Grewendorf (1989, p. 24), Haider (1990, p. 96) and Wurmbrand (2001) mention a definiteness effect disallowing definite subjects from occurring in partial verb phrase fronting, as exemplified by (5).

- (5) * Der Außenseiter gewonnen hat hier noch nie.
the outsider won has here still never

There are, however, some clear counterexamples to this definiteness effect, which are illustrated in (6).

- (6) a. Das Herz geklopft und geschauert hat dem Kind. (Wegener, 1990, p. 98)
the heart beaten and shuddered has the child
'The child's heart beat and it shuddered.'
- b. Die Hände gezittert haben ihm diesmal nicht. (Höhle, 1997, p. 114)
the hands trembled have him this time not
'This time his hands didn't tremble.'

Parallel to the NP-PP-split discussed above, we want to argue that the definiteness effect is best viewed as reflecting the information structure requirements in such sentences, instead of stipulating it as a syntactic constraint. The argument is again reinforced by the syntactic counter-examples, which automatically follow from an information structure-based explanation.

As discussed in De Kuthy & Meurers (2003), one of the informational restrictions on partial verb fronting is that such fronted verbal constituents must be in the focus of the utterance, for which in such examples the focus must be able to project from the subject NP. This excludes definite NPs which are used anaphorically and thus are in the background of an utterance – explaining the ungrammaticality of examples such as (5).

Taking a closer look at the counter-examples in (6), where a definite subject is grammatical as part of the fronted VP, we see that the definite NPs in those sentences are instances of semantic definites. Thus, distinguishing the two classes of definite NPs in the way discussed for the NP-PP-split cases above, makes exactly the right predictions when combined with the generalization that a fronted verbal constituent has to be focused.

Summing up, in this abstract we sketched that the definiteness effect occurring with two distinct partial constituent phenomena in German can both be explained based on the information structural properties of these constructions – and that the apparent counter-examples for a syntactic definites constraint follow naturally from the information structure explanation.

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