Discontinuous NPs in German

A Case Study of the Interaction of Syntax, Semantics and Pragmatics

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

1 Introduction 1

2 Basic Properties 5

2.1 Syntax 5

2.1.1 Fronted Positions 5

2.1.2 Reordering in the *Mittelfeld* 8

2.1.3 Extraposition 9

2.1.4 NP-PP Split Across Intervening Heads 11

2.1.5 Split PPs: Complements or Adjuncts? 14

2.2 Semantics and Pragmatics 15

2.2.1 Split PPs: Arguments or Modifiers? 15

2.2.2 Lexical Semantics 24

2.2.3 Context Effects 25

3 Other Partial NP Phenomena 27

3.1 Phenomena Involving Split PP Dependents 27

3.1.1 Secondary Predication 27

3.1.2 Support Verb Constructions 31

3.2 Other NP Split Phenomena 33

3.2.1 *Was-für* Split 34

3.2.2 *W-alles* Split and Quantifier Floating 35

3.2.3 NP Split 36

3.2.4 Partitive Split 37

4 Syntactic Aspects 41
4.1 Introduction 41
4.2 Reanalysis contra Extraction 41
4.2.1 The Noun Phrase Constraint (Horn, 1975) 42
4.2.2 A Reanalysis Rule for German 46
4.2.3 A Refinement of the Reanalysis Approach 47
4.2.4 Criticism of the Reanalysis Approach 49
4.2.5 Arguments for Extraction? 60
4.2.6 Predictions of a Reanalysis Theory 67
4.3 An HPSG Analysis 71
4.3.1 Dependent Raising 71
4.3.2 A Revised Analysis for Raising of PP Adjuncts 79
4.3.3 Further Principles 80
4.4 Example Analyses 83
4.4.1 Fronting the PP 83
4.4.2 Fronting the NP 85
4.4.3 Partial NPs and VP Topicalization 85
4.4.4 Scrambling in the *Mittelfeld* 88
4.4.5 Dependent Raising and Traceless Extraction 89

5 Semantic Aspects 93
5.1 Introduction 93
5.2 Thematic Hierarchy (Pafel, 1993) 94
5.3 Lexical Restrictions 97
5.4 Combining Lexical Semantics and Dependent Raising 99
5.4.1 Further Remarks on the Qualia Structure 101
5.5 Problems of the Lexical-Semantics Approach 103
5.5.1 How Can the Contextual Dependence Be Explained? 103
5.5.2 Limitations of the Qualia Structure 104

6 Pragmatic Aspects 107
6.1 Introduction 107
6.2 A Functional-Syntax Approach (Kuno, 1987) 108
6.3 Background Assumptions 110
6.3.1 Some Terminology 110
6.3.2 Focus, Topic and Intonation 112
6.4 The Role of Topic and Focus 117

6.4.1 Focus Projection in NPs 117
6.4.2 Focus Projection in PPs 119
6.4.3 The Focus-Background Structure of NP-PP Split 120
6.4.4 Summing up 149
6.5 Explaining the Specificity Effect 149
6.6 An HPSG Proposal 158
6.6.1 Introduction 158
6.6.2 The Architecture of Information Structure 158
6.6.3 Information Structure Principles 165
6.6.4 The Information Structure of NP-PP Split Constructions 170
6.6.5 The Role of Lexical Semantics Revisited 176

7 Summary 179

References 183

Subject Index 191

Name Index 195

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1

Introduction

Word order phenomena have played an important empirical role for the development of generative linguistic theories of natural language. Word order data constitute the prime evidence for the notion of constituency and thereby constituent structure as the central recursive linguistic data structure. In the generative tradition, the attention has focused on the syntactic properties of the various local and non-local word order phenomena with the intention of identifying the *syntactic restrictions* explaining which word orders are grammatical and which are not. On the other hand, it has long been observed that word order phenomena are subject to *lexical restrictions* such as, for example, the fact that fronting out of finite sentences is only possible in the presence of so-called bridge verbs. Furthermore, word order phenomena are highly dependent on being integrated in an *appropriate context*. In fact, in non-generative linguistics, word order phenomena are primarily discussed in terms of the particular communicative function associated with a particular word order, such as fronting of constituents as a way of emphasizing. The question which arises with respect to these three levels of analysis concerns the division of labor: Which of the factors constraining a word order phenomenon are of a syntactic nature, which derive from lexical restrictions, and which are more appropriately analyzed as relating to discourse properties?

This book investigates a particular word order phenomenon in German – the occurrence of discontinuous NPs which we will refer to as the NP-PP split construction – in order to research the division of labor between the syntactic analysis and the lexical as well as the discourse constraints on this construction. We will argue that many of the factors which previous literature has tried to explain in terms of syntactic restrictions on movement are in fact derivable from discourse factors.

The NP-PP split construction, which is the empirical subject of this book, is exemplified in (1).

(1) *Über Syntax* hat Sarah sich [ein Buch] ausgeliehen.
about syntax has Sarah herself a book borrowed
'Sarah borrowed a book about syntax.'

The construction has often been referred to as *extraction of PPs from NPs*, as one of the possible syntactic explanations for the fronting of the PP *über Syntax* in (1) is that the PP has been extracted from the NP *ein Buch*, of which the PP is a dependent specifying the topic of the book.

Fronting of the PP, however, is not the only possible word order in which a PP occurs separate from its nominal head. As illustrated by the example in (2), the reverse case in which the NP is fronted, leaving the PP behind, is equally possible.

(2) [Ein Buch] hat Sarah sich *über Syntax* ausgeliehen.
a book has Sarah herself about syntax borrowed
'Sarah borrowed a book about syntax.'

It has been argued that sentences like the one in (2) are problematic for an extraction theory, since the NP as the extraction site, and not the extracted element *über Syntax*, has been fronted. Partly in response to this problem, other analyses were proposed in which the NP and its PP dependent can alternatively be analyzed as independent sister constituents with the help of special processes like *reanalysis* (e.g., Fanselow, 1987). They can then occur at different positions in the sentence separate from each other. One of the main goals of this book will be to show that the empirical arguments that have been presented in favor of an extraction analysis are not convincing and to provide empirical evidence supporting a reanalysis-like approach.

The lexical constraints on the NP-PP split construction become apparent in (3). Grammatical examples of NP-PP split such as the ones we saw in (1) and (2) become ungrammatical when the embedding verb is replaced by a verb which has the same syntactic properties but a different semantics.

(3) a. * *Über Syntax* hat Sarah [ein Buch] geklaut.
about syntax has Sarah a book stolen
'Sarah stole a book about syntax.'

b. * [Ein Buch] hat Sarah *über Syntax* geklaut.
a book has Sarah about syntax stolen
'Sarah stole a book about syntax.'

The only difference between the sentences in (1) and (2) and those shown in (3) is that the verb *ausleihen* 'to borrow' is replaced by the

verb *klauen* 'to steal'.

In (4), we see that given an appropriate context a sentence like (3a) becomes much more acceptable.

(4) Gestern wurde in der Bibliothek eine Anzahl von Linguistikbüchern geklaut. Vor allem Semantikbücher verschwanden dabei.

'Yesterday, a number of linguistics books were stolen from the library. Mostly books on semantics disappeared.'

a. *Über Syntax* wurde jedoch [nur ein einziges Buch] geklaut.
about syntax was however only one single book stolen
'There was, however, only one book about syntax stolen.'

Building on these empirical characteristics of the NP-PP split construction, this book investigates two main questions, one concerned with the proper syntactic analysis of the construction, the other with the integration of such a syntactic analysis with an approach to the lexical and contextual factors involved. The structure of this book is as follows. In the first part of this book, we provide an overview of the empirical characteristics of NP-PP split: chapter 2 illustrates the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties of the construction and chapter 3 compares the NP-PP split construction to other phenomena involving discontinuous NPs. In the second part of the book, theoretical interpretations for the central aspects of NP-PP split are provided. In chapter 4, we reevaluate the empirical basis of the choice between the two syntactic analysis ideas proposed in the literature, extraction and reanalysis, and provide an explicit theory licensing reanalysis-like structures for NP-PP split within the framework of Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG). In chapter 5, the lexical-semantic effects observable for the NP-PP split construction are investigated, and we show how an account based on the generative lexicon can be integrated into our syntactic HPSG analysis. Finally, in order to find an explanation for the context effects that show up with the construction, in chapter 6 we explore the possible focus-background structures of NP-PP split constructions. The empirical insights from this investigation of discourse requirements are then integrated into our account of NP-PP split by developing an information-structure component for our HPSG fragment of German. Since this information structure component accounts for some of the restrictions traditionally viewed as part of syntax, this book can be understood as arguing for a more equal division of labor between syntactic theory and a theory of discourse, which have been unevenly balanced as a result of the significant advances in syntactic theorizing in the generative enterprise.