Variation in Idiom Part Movement: A Gradient Harmonic Grammar Approach

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The goal of this talk is to show that Gradient Harmonic Grammar (Smolensky & Goldrick 2016) offers a new perspective on the restrictions on movement of DPs that are part of VP idioms, and on the substantial but highly principled variation that can be found in this empirical domain in German. The central claim is that object DPs in VP idioms are subject to exactly the same constraints as other object DPs; however, idiom part DPs are associated with less strength than regular object DPs. They are therefore more likely to be kept from undergoing movement by intervening heads of the clausal spine; and they also need more help from the featural trigger of the movement operation. 2. Idioms resist movement operations that split them up to various degrees (Fraser 1970, Nunberg et al. 1994, Jackendoff 1997, O' Grady 1998 for English; Burger 1973, Fleischer 1997, Müller 2000, Wierzba 2016, Bargmann & Sailer 2018 for German). Nunberg et al. (1994) assume that there are only two types of VP idioms – those that are compositional and can be split up, and those that are not compositional and cannot be split up. However, as noted in Müller (2000) and Bargmann & Sailer (2018), this view is untenable for German. In contrast, a more fine-grained opacity scale with four discrete areas can be postulated, according to which compositional interpretation becomes successively easier: (i) opaque, (ii) semi-opaque, (iii) semi-transparent, (iv) fully transparent idioms. Movement types differ as to whether they can affect parts of VP idioms. For instance, topicalization can affect all kinds of idiom part DPs, even, under ideal information-structural conditions (Fanselow & Lenertova 2011), fully opaque ones. In contrast, wh-movement cannot easily affect DPs of opaque or semi-opaque idioms. Scrambling is most restricted: It can only apply to DPs in transparent VP idioms. 3. In Gradient Harmonic Grammar, both constraints and symbols in linguistic expressions are assigned weights (between 0 and 1, as in Squishy Grammar (Ross 1973)). This way, the concept of varying strength of syntactic categories (Chomsky 2015) can be implemented in the grammar. I adopt a minimalist setting; more specifically, I assume that movement must take place in extremely local small steps, via the specifiers of intermediate heads. Finally, I assume that optimization proceeds serially (McCarthy 2008, Heck & Müller 2012): Outputs are generated by applying at most one operation to the input; the optimal output is used as the next input; and so on. 4. The analysis relies on two violable constraints: The Merge Condition triggers movement to specifier; the Anti-Locality Condition blocks this. Depending on the strength of (i) the constraints, (ii) the features that trigger movement, and (iii) the head crossed by movement (V or C), one and the same item may or may not move. Crucially, object DPs in VP idioms have less strength than regular object DPs, and this accounts for their immobility. 5. There is variation, which will be addressed by minor differences in weight assignments, and by incorporating a stochastic component (Boersma & Pater 2016).

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