

(Re-)constructing German verb particle meanings for familiar and novel verbs

German particle verbs (PVs) are still controversial regarding their compositionality. On the one hand we find transparent cases such as *eine Stadt anfahren* ('to drive towards a city'), where the particle *an* contributes the direction of the driving event that takes place from the subject and the city; similarly, *den Hund anketten* ('to chain the dog'), where *an* contributes a contact relation between the dog and a background. The fact that all verb particles are highly ambiguous and productive leads to many variation possibilities, which depend on the meaning of the verb the particles are combined with, and also on the context. Lechler und Roßdeutscher (2009), Springorum (2011) and Haselbach (2011), among others, showed that such compositions are in many cases regular. On the other hand, there are also cases where the composition is not obvious or hidden behind meaning shifts, as in *jemandem eine Aufgabe aufbrummen* ('to forcefully assign someone a task'), where the verb *brummen* ('to hum') has, at first sight, nothing in common with the semantics of *aufbrummen*. Springorum et al. (2013) however demonstrated that this composition can be seen as analogical to *aufzwingen* ('force someone to do something'), where the base verbs *zwingen* and *brummen* share the concept of pressure (physical pressure and heavy sound), which, lead in combination with *auf* to a similar PV meaning of forcefully assigning a task.

In this talk, I will present a psycholinguistic experiment in which the participants were confronted with existing and also with systematically composed particle verbs. They were asked to generate a sentence which describes a possible meaning of the target particle verb. Our hypothesis is that – if PVs are compositional and productive – the novel PVs should in most cases have at least one obvious meaning, and if the novel PVs were given an interpretation it should be rule-based and not idiosyncratic.

From this ongoing experiment, I will present a selection of PV sentences and discuss the underlying construction constraints of the PV composition, focusing on already known patterns, new patterns and also cases where particle meaning and verb meaning lead to semantic contradictions. In the latter cases, there are several strategies to obtain a coherent compound, such as adjusting the context, or sense accommodation in terms of a meaning shift regarding the verb, particle or verb particle semantics.

References

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