

Adverbial and attributive modification of German light verb constructions

Jens Fleischhauer & Thomas Gamerschlag

Heinrich-Heine Universität Düsseldorf
Abteilung für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft & SFB 991

Light verb constructions (LVCs) are complex predicates formed of a semantically light verbal head and an additional predicative element. In German, this additional element is usually either an NP or as PP as in (1a) and (b), respectively. Characteristically, the meaning of LVCs is distributed unevenly over its parts: While the main predicational content is provided by the non-light element, the semantic contribution of the light verb is highly reduced compared to its literal use. For example, in the LVC in (1a) *geben* ‘give’ does not refer to a transfer of possession as the corresponding heavy verb does. Likewise, *stehen* ‘stand’ in (1b) does not express the fact that someone is located somewhere in an upright position. By contrast, the major part of the LVC meaning is carried by the nouns *Anweisung* ‘instruction’ and *Explosion* ‘explosion’.

- (1) a. *eine Anweisung geben*
‘give an instruction’
b. *vor der Explosion stehen*
‘be close to explosion’ (lit. ‘in front of the explosion stand’)

LVCs exhibit a certain degree of syntactic flexibility. For instance, they frequently license attributive modification of the nominal element as in (2) where the adjective *geheim* ‘secret’ is placed inside the PP and shows agreement with the noun *Anweisung* ‘instruction’.

- (2) *Im Jahr 1975 gab der Innenminister eine geheime Anweisung an die Generäle der Grenztruppen.*
‘In 1975, the Minister of the Interior gave a secret instruction to the generals of the border troops.’

With respect to the interpretation of modification constructions such as (2), it is widely assumed that attributive adjectives function as adverbial modifiers (e.g. Everaert & Hollebrandse 1995, Nicolas 1995). This results in a mismatch between syntax (realization as an attributive modifier of the noun) and semantics (having scope over the complex predicate). It is usually gone unnoticed, however, that one and the same adjective is sometimes licensed as an attributive as well as an adverbial modifier (cf. (2) and (3)).

- (3) *Im Jahr 1975 gab der Innenminister geheim eine Anweisung an die Generäle der Grenztruppen.*
‘In 1975, the Minister of the Interior secretly gave an instruction to the generals of the border troops.’

We would expect the same interpretation for (2) and (3) if the adjective is interpreted adverbially, irrespective of its syntactic realization. Yet, (2) and (3) exhibit different interpretations: In (2), the adjective modifies the noun and it is the content of the instruction, which is secret. This does not mean that the instruction was also given secretly. For example, the meaning of (2) is compatible with a scenario in which the minister could have handed over a letter containing the secret instruction in front of an audience. In (3), on the other hand, the adjective modifies the manner of giving the instruction, which can be paraphrased as ‘the instruction was given secretly’. As a further contrast to (2), the content of the instruction need not be secret. The interpretation of the modifiers is thus in line with their syntactic realization.

Likewise, frequency-related modifiers such as *erneut* ‘again, renewed’ can yield different readings in dependence of their positions. For example, the sentence in (4a) refers to a situation in which the company is again in a condition close to bankruptcy while it is not entailed that the company has run into bankruptcy before. By contrast, the attributive realization of *erneut* entails that the company has been ruined before and that it is close to becoming ruined again.

- (4) a. *Die Firma steht erneut vor dem Ruin.*
 ‘The company again faces bankruptcy.’ (lit.: ‘The company stands again in front of bankruptcy.’)
 b. *Die Firma steht vor dem erneuten Ruin.*
 ‘The company faces another bankruptcy.’ (lit.: ‘The company stands in front of another bankruptcy.’)

As a contrast to the examples in (3) and (4), there are also instances of modification such as (5) in which the attributive vs. adverbial realization of a modifier does not result in a different interpretation: Both (5a) and (b) express that the subject referent is under surveillance again.

- (5) a. *Er steht erneut unter Beobachtung.*
 ‘He is (lit.: stands) under surveillance again.’
 b. *Er steht unter erneuter Beobachtung.*
 ‘He is (lit.: stands) under renewed surveillance.’

Another type of modifiers such as the German degree modifier *sehr* ‘very (much)’ can combine with adjectives (*sehr groß* ‘very tall’) and verbs (*sehr lieben* ‘love very much’) but is excluded as a noun modifier. The use of *sehr* with LVCs exhibits some kind of syntax-semantics mismatch since *sehr* is syntactically licensed by the LV whereas it operates on a scale that comes with the noun. In (6a) the nouns *Einfluss* ‘influence’ and *Kontrolle* ‘control’ introduce an intensity scale (like the corresponding verbs *beeinflussen* and *kontrollieren*) which is targeted by the degree modifier. By contrast, in the awkward example (6b) *Beobachtung* ‘observation’ does not provide a scale and *sehr*-gradation is consequently ruled out.

- (6) a. *Er steht sehr unter dem Einfluss/der Kontrolle seiner Mutter.*
 ‘He is (lit.: stands) very much under the influence/the control of his mother.’
 b. *#Er steht sehr unter Anklage.*
 lit.: ‘He stands very much on trial.’

In the talk, we will present a compositional analysis of LVCs that accounts for the contrasts in modification illustrated above. We will argue that the readings that arise with modifiers in different position depend on the way the meaning of the modifier, the LV, the preposition and the event noun interact. For example, in (2) the preposition *vor* ‘in front of, before’ introduces a prephase of the event denoted by the noun. As a consequence, it is the state of being in this prephase which can be targeted by *erneut* in addition to the event referred to by the noun. By contrast, in (5) the preposition *unter* ‘under, below’ expresses that the subject referent is the undergoer of the action referred to by the noun *Beobachtung* ‘surveillance’ but unlike *vor* it does not add a new phase which can be targeted by a modifier if realized as an adverb. Moreover, instances of *sehr*-gradation are analyzed based on the scale introduced by the event noun following Fleischhauer’s (2016, 2018) approach to verb gradation.

Formally, our account builds on the frame analysis of German LVCs outlined in Fleischhauer et al. (2019) and Fleischhauer & Gamerschlag (ms.) We will show that starting from a frame representation of the literal meaning of the components the meaning of the LVC can be derived compositionally by means of structure persevering operations on the frame representations of the literal meaning of the LVC components.

References

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