Movement and C-Command in German Complex Prefields: The Case Against Structure Removal

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Recent publications have argued that the set of core syntactic mechanisms includes a structure removal operation \textit{Remove} in addition to the structure building operation \textit{Merge}. In particular, Müller (2017) argues that a close look at German complex prefields (the element in the pre-verbal position in a V2 clause, i.e., in Spec,CP by standard assumptions) reveals the existence of \textit{conflicting representations} — for one battery of tests, complex prefields pattern like a single constituent, and for another, like multiple constituents. With respect to the former, complex prefields pattern like a single constituent — namely with VP-topicalization. For example, they are subject to a clause-mate condition (i.e., all elements in the prefield must originate in the same clause), and exhibit the same ordering restrictions as unmoved VPs. Unlike VP-topicalization, however, they disallow R-Pronoun scrambling (1), and license NPIs, as exemplified by \textit{auch nur irgendein} (2):

(1) a. (Da) seinen Sprintern einen Tip (da) für gegeben \[ c' \text{ hat der Rabobank-Leiter}. \]
    there his sprinters\textsubscript{dat} a hint\textsubscript{acc} there for give.\textsubscript{rcp} has the Rabobank-manager

b. (*Da) seinen Sprintern einen Tip (da) für [c' hat der Rabobank-Leiter gegeben]
    there his sprinters\textsubscript{dat} a hint\textsubscript{acc} there for has the Rabobank-manager give.\textsubscript{rcp}.

    ‘The director of team Rabobank gave his sprinters a hint for it.’adapted from Müller (2017: 231)

(2) a. ??Keinen Berg im Sitzen bewältigt [c' hat auch nur irgendein Fahrer].
    no hill seated managed has also only some rider

b. Keinen Berg im Sitzen [c' hat auch nur irgendein Fahrer bewältigt].
    no hill seated has also only some rider managed

    ‘No hill was conquered by a rider without getting out of the saddle.’

Müller’s solution is to derive these conflicting results, according to which complex prefields in (1b, 2b) sometimes appear to be a single VP, and sometimes two independent constituents, by arguing that they hold at different stages of the derivation: Initially, a single constituent is moved to Spec,CP, but later on in the derivation, the head of said constituent is removed from the syntactic structure. This triggers a process of \textit{reassociation}, by which both specifier and complement of a removed head reassociate as specifiers of the head that triggered the deletion – in this case, C. As a result, the initial representation is indeed only a single constituent, but the representation resulting from structure removal involves multiple constituents, and the conflicting representations are accounted for as different stages of a cyclic derivation.

I argue that we can make due without adding a mechanism for structure removal. Instead, I will argue that the differences between the “complex prefields” and the so-called VP-topicalization can be accounted for by refining the Fanselow (1993) approach to complex prefields, under which the complex prefields involve fronting a VP structure that the verb has been moved out of (e.g., via V→v head movement). Under such an approach, the complex prefields involve fronting a \textit{smaller} structure than “VP-topicalization” does, i.e., (1b, 2b) correspond to fronting the VP, with a stranded v+V head that is spelled out as the participle. In contrast, the so-called “VP-topicalization” involves movement of a phrase at least as big as VP. The reason that complex prefields do not allow R-Pronoun scrambling is then simply that the lowest possible landing site for scrambling is above v, and therefore movement of the landing site necessarily implies movement of the participle. In contrast, only complex prefields — and crucially, only the leftmost element of a complex prefield — can license NPIs. From the advocated position, this can be linked to the fact that the leftmost element is in the
highest specifier of the moved constituent. If we adopt Kayne’s (1994) definition of c-command,¹ the specifier of VP is expected to c-command out of the moved VP. For the vP movement, however, the leftmost argument is still in Spec, VP, and is thus not expected to c-command out of the vP.

Independent evidence for such an analysis of the fronted constituent comes from the behavior of depictive secondary predicates. Pykkänen (2008) argues that object depictives are merged VP-externally, while subject depictives are merged above the v position, as in (3).

(3) \[ vP \{ vP \{ VP \{ DO \{ (DEP-DO) \} \} \} \} \{ (DEP-SU) \} \]

Depictives may be moved or stranded with either VP or vP movement, but they each show markedly different behavior. If the participle moves along (vP movement, in (4)), the fronted depictive remains ambiguous between a subject depictive and an object one (4a), but a stranded one can only be read as a subject depictive (4b).

(4) a. \( \text{Die } \) \( \text{Tomate} \) \( \text{dem } \) \( \text{Gärtner} \) \( \text{nass} \) \( \text{hat } \) \( \text{John} \).

    the.\text{ACC} tomato the.\text{DAT} gardener wet have.\text{PTCP} have.3.sg John

    b. \( \text{Die } \) \( \text{Tomate} \) \( \text{dem } \) \( \text{Gärtner} \) \( \text{gab } \) \( \text{hat } \) \( \text{John} \).

    the.\text{ACC} tomato the.\text{DAT} gardener give.\text{PTCP} give.3.sg John wet

    ‘John gave the gardener the tomato wet.’

In crucial contrast, the VP-fronting contexts show an even more restricted interpretation: If the the depictive is in the preverbal constituent, it predicates over the direct object (5a), and if it follows the verb, it predicates over the subject (5b), i.e. the ambiguity disappears.

(5) a. \( \text{Die } \) \( \text{Tomate} \) \( \text{dem } \) \( \text{Gärtner} \) \( \text{nass} \) \( \text{hat } \) \( \text{John} \).

    the.\text{ACC} tomato the.\text{DAT} gardener wet have.\text{3.sg} John give.\text{PTCP}

    b. \( \text{Die } \) \( \text{Tomate} \) \( \text{dem } \) \( \text{Gärtner} \) \( \text{hat } \) \( \text{John} \).

    the.\text{ACC} tomato the.\text{DAT} gardener have.\text{3.sg} John wet give.\text{PTCP}

    ‘John gave the gardener the tomato wet.’

The VP-internal object depictive cannot be stranded if either the vP or the VP is fronted, given that is generated as part of that constituent, i.e. there never is any vP or VP that would form a constituent to the exclusion of the object depictive. This derives the absence of the corresponding reading in (4b) and (5b): A stranded depictive has to be generated above vP, i.e. predicate over the subject.

The analysis in terms of size also derives the contrast between (4a) and (5a). Movement of a vP (4a) remains structurally ambiguous in a way that parallels the ambiguity in the unmarked case. In contrast, movement of the VP in (5a) unambiguously contains an object depictive. The VP can never contain the subject depictive without also containing v, i.e. any movement of a verb phrase that contains the subject depictive necessarily movement of a vP and therefore must contain the participle. The behavior of secondary depictive predicates thus provides us with an independently motivated difference in the size of the verbal projection that moves to the pre-verbal position. In sum, there is an independently motivated difference in the size of the fronted constituent, the Müller effects can be derived from this difference in size, and the shared behavior follows from the fact that both of the relevant cases involve fronting of a verbal structure.

¹Or some similar mechanism that accounts for Kayne’s contrast between Nobody’s articles ever get published fast enough and *Articles by nobody ever get published fast enough.