WG1: Syntactically Flexible VP-Idioms and the N-*after*-N Construction

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PARSEME 5th General Meeting, Iasi, 23-24 September 2015

Introduction

Already discussed in the linguistic literature:
- syntactically flexible VP-idioms, like *pull strings* ('use connections')
- the N-*after*-N construction, as in *car after car*

Not yet discussed:
- the combination of syntactically flexible VP-idioms and the N-*after*-N construction, as in *Kim pulled strings after strings to get Alex into a good college.*

Challenge:
- Existing analyses of *pull strings* usually require the morphosyntactic plural form *strings* to be present for the idiom to be licensed.

Syntactically Flexible VP-Idioms in English

... are called *syntactically flexible* because their parts can be separated and dislocated:

(1)
- a. *Strings* seem to have been *pulled* to get Alex the job. (raising + passive)
- b. Some *strings*, Kim has already *pulled* to get Alex the job. (topicalization)
- c. The *strings* (that) Kim *pulled* helped Alex get the job. (relative clause)
- d. What *strings* did Kim *pull*, though? (wh-interrogative)
- e. Kim feared *strings* would be *pulled*, but they weren't. (pronom. + V-ellipsis)
- f. Kim's *pulling* of *strings* was the only way to get the job. (nominal gerund)
- g. Kim *pulled* a lot of important *strings* for you. (det variation + adj modification)

The N-*after*-N Construction

Some Properties of N-*after*-N (see Matsuyama 2004 and Jackendoff 2008):

1. NP-Status: N-*after*-N is (distributed like) an NP.

2. Partial Lexical Fixedness: *after* cannot be replaced by any other word:
   *Alex asked me question { after / *following / *succeeding } question.*

3. Partial Lexical Flexibility: The choice of Ns is free, except for:
- (a) **N-Identity:** Ns must be identical: * *bus after car* ($N_1 \neq N_2$)
- (b) **N-Countability:** Ns must be count nouns: * *water after water* (Ns = mass nouns)
- (c) **N-Singularity:** Ns must be in the singular: * *books after books* (Ns = plurals)
- (d) **N-Bareness:** Ns must be bare: * *a day after a day* (Ns have determiners)

4. Syntactic Fixedness: N-*after*-N cannot be split by syntactic operations:
   Man after man passed by. (N-*after*-N)
   * *Man passed by after man.* (N-*after*-N split by the extraposition of *after man*)

5. Syntax-Semantics Mismatch:
- (a) Syntactically, N-*after*-N is singular:
   *Study after study { reveals / *reveal } the dangers of lightly trafficked streets.*
- (b) Semantically, N-*after*-N is plural:
   *John ate { apple after apple / apples / *an apple } for an hour.*
   *John ate { *apple after apple / *apples / an apple } in an hour.*

6. Semantic Sequentiality: N-*after*-N conveys a temporal or spatial sequence:
   The meaning of *Man after man passed by.* is something like:
   First one man passed by, then another(, then another(, then another(, then ...))).
   NB: It is NOT the case that every N refers to one individual.

7. Adjective Insertion:
- (a) N_1 can only be preceded by an adjective if N_2 is preceded by the same adjective:
   bad day after bad day (N_1 and N_2 are preceded by the same adjective.)
   * *bad day after awful day* (N_1 and N_2 are preceded by different adjectives.)
   * *bad day after day* (Only N_1 is preceded by an adjective.)
   day after bad day (Only N_2 is preceded by an adjective.)
- (b) If only N_2 shows an adjective, it semantically still applies to all the referents:
   The meaning of *day after bad day* equals the meaning of *bad day after bad day*.

8. *after*-N Iteration: *after*-N can be iterated to emphasize the multitude of the referents:
   Day after day after day went by, but I never found the courage to talk to her.

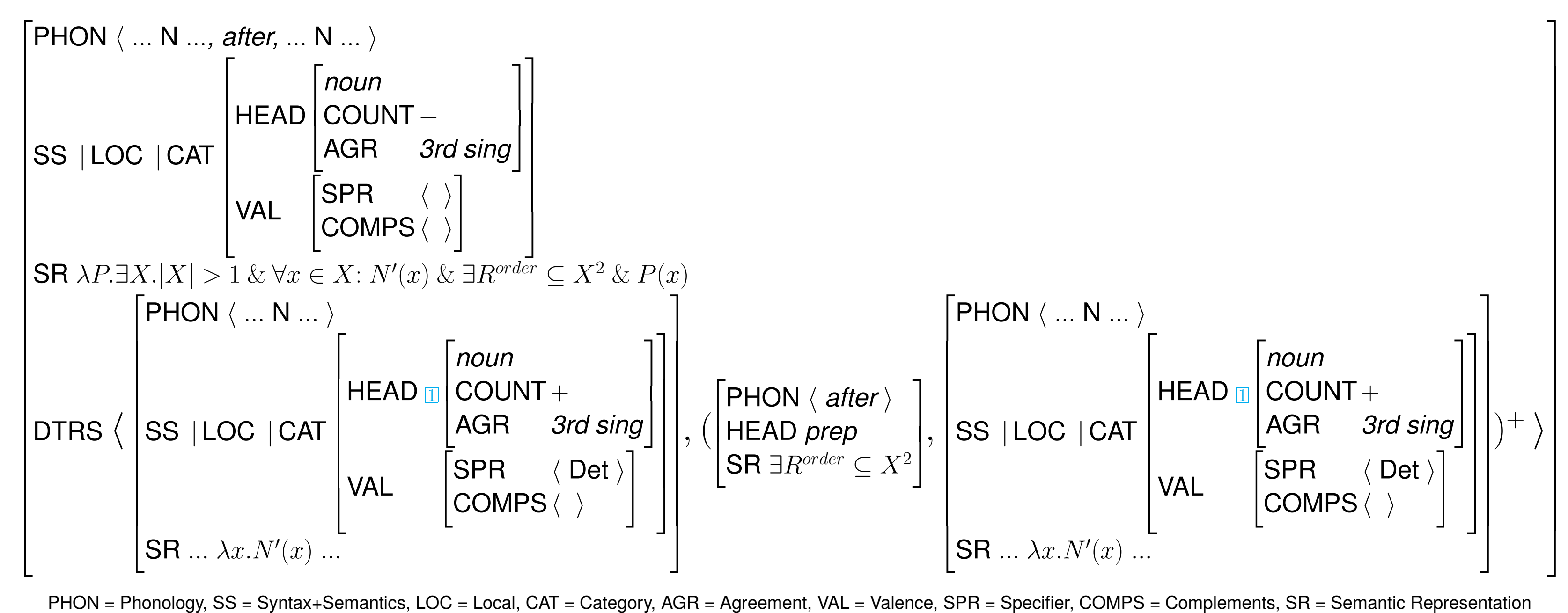## Natural Occurrences of *pull strings* + N-*after*-N

(2)
- a. The whole idea of the really talented/successful person in their 20's isn't a real thing. Or at the very least, it isn't an actual attainable thing. All those people have people behind them *pulling string* after *string* for them.
   http://doiwakeorsleep.tumblr.com/post/46393612094/25-things-i-learned-in-the-first-half-of-my-20s
- b. I had mentally accepted the fact that I wasn't going, but my friends are amazing and continued *pulling string* after *string* until I ended up in Manchester with a VIP wristband, parking pass, and air-conditioned living quarters, all at zero cost to me.
   http://mmmellifluous.wordpress.com/2010/06/21/the-bonnaroo-that-almost-wasnt

A Semantic Representation (SR) Account of *pull strings*

- Due to its morphosyntactic flexibility, I take the idiom *pull strings* to be composed of two separate word-level lexical entries: idiomatic *pull* and idiomatic *string*, each with idiomatic semantics but regular morphosyntax.
- These two lexical entries are subject to specific co-occurrence constraints at the level of Semantic Representation (SR), where each lexical entry has a unique SR-value, on the basis of which it can be clearly identified.
- Idiomatic *pull* is licensed if and only if the variable in the second argument position of its SR-value $pull_{id}'$ is predicated over by the SR-value of *string*: $string_{id}'$, and idiomatic *string* is licensed if and only if it occurs with a non-specific plural quantifier and its SR-value $string_{id}'$ predicates over the variable in the second argument position of the SR-value of *pull*: $pull_{id}'$.
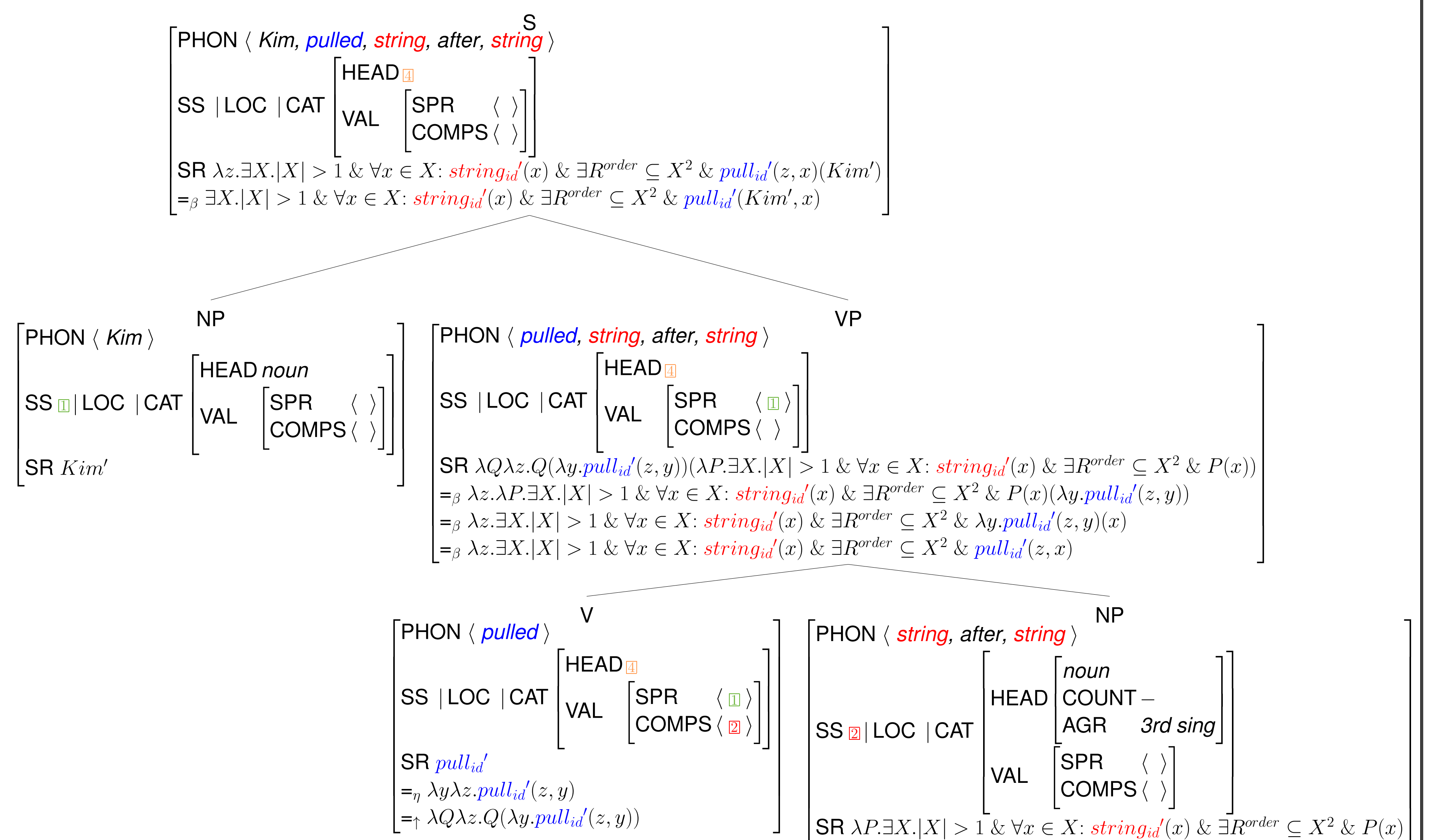
An SR-Account of N-*after*-N

On the basis of the properties already mentioned, I will analyze N-*after*-N as follows:

PHON = Phonology, SS = Syntax+Semantics, LOC = Local, CAT = Category, AGR = Agreement, VAL = Valence, SPR = Specifier, COMPS = Complements, SR = Semantic Representation

Morphosyntax: N-*after*-N is a single phrase-level lexical entry composed of a 3rd-person-singular non-count nominal mother and, at least in the non-iterated case, three daughters: two nominal daughters headed by identical 3rd-person-singular count nouns that the construction forces to stay determinerless and one prepositional daughter: *after*.

Semantics: The nominal daughters contribute a predicate of the form $\lambda x.N'(x)$, and *after* a relation that orders the entities denoted by that predicate: $\exists R^{order} \subseteq X^2$. The mother adds that the quantity of these entities must exceed one: $\exists X.|X| > 1$.

The Combination of *pull strings* and N-*after*-N in the SR-Account

In a verbal nutshell:
When idiomatic *string* occurs in the N-*after*-N construction, it fills the head positions of the nominal daughters, and, therewith, its requirement to occur with a non-specific plural quantifier is overwritten by the requirement of the construction that the nouns stay determinerless. Having idiomatic *string* as their respective head, the nominal daughters contribute an SR-predicate of the form $\lambda x.string_{id}'(x)$ to the overall Semantic Representation of the construction. When *string after string* then occurs as the complement of *pull*, the above-described co-occurrence constraints of idiomatic *pull* and *string* are fulfilled: The variable in the second argument position of $pull_{id}'$, here x, is predicated over by $string_{id}'$.

Conclusion

The Semantic Representation approach is not only capable of accounting for the morphosyntactic flexibility of VP-idioms like *pull strings* and the numerous idiosyncrasies of the N-*after*-N construction, it can also explain the empirically undeniably existing combination of these two linguistic rebels, which, at least in some respects, actually seem to be far less anarchistic when it comes to grammar than one might think.