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

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Linguists have discussed both syntactically flexible VP-idioms like *pull strings* (see, e.g., Wasow et al. 1983, Nunberg et al. 1994, or Horn 2003) and the highly productive N-*after*-N construction, as in *car after car* (see, e.g., Matsuyama 2004, Beck and von Stechow 2006, or Jackendoff 2008), but there is nothing in the linguistic literature about amalgamations of syntactically flexible VP-idioms and the N-*after*-N construction, meaning that the head noun of the NP that is canonically realized as the complement of the syntactically flexible VP idiom (*strings* in the case of *pull strings*) occurs in the N-*after*-N construction, filling the two noun slots surrounding the preposition *after* with the bare-singular version of itself (*string*) and, as a result, conveying a succession of events ("string-pulling" events in our example).

In fact, existing formal analyses of syntactically flexible VP-idioms (see, e.g., Riehemann 2001, Sailer 2003, or Soehn 2006) require, or would require, the plural form *strings* to be present for the idiom *pull strings* to be licensed. According to these analyses, the underlined part in (1) should not be interpretable in the idiomatic sense, which, however, is not only possible but more or less inevitable:

(1) The whole idea of the really talented/successful person in their 20s 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.[1]
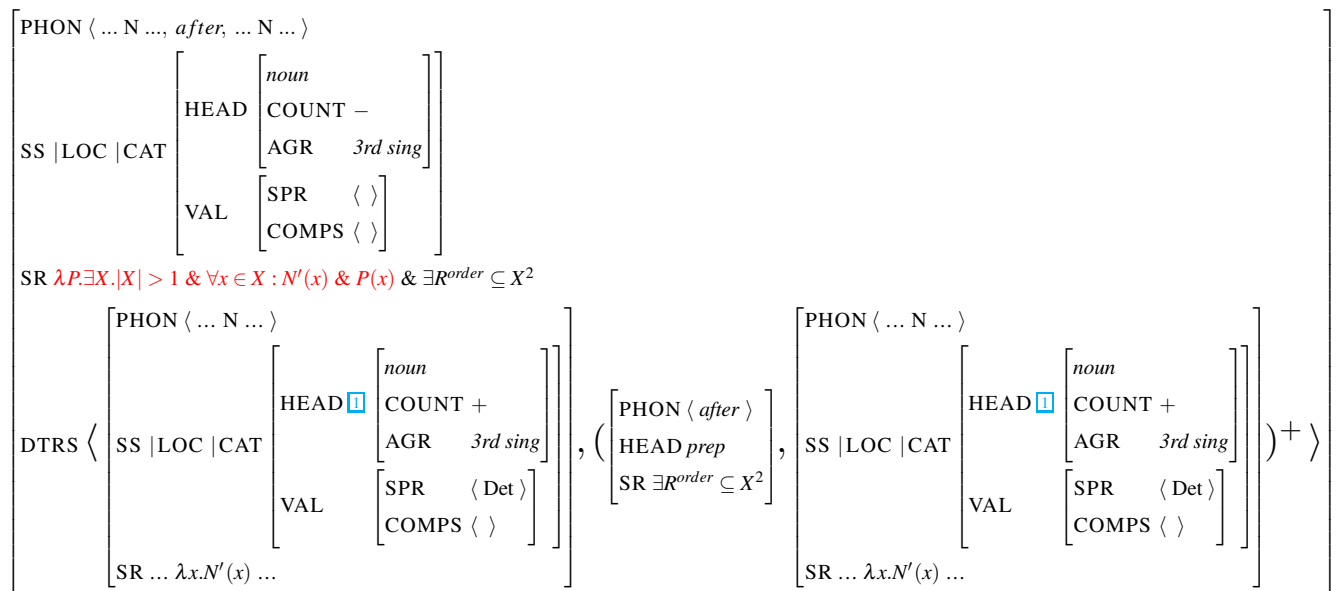
On my poster, I will give an explicit and formal account of how exactly such combinations of *pull strings* and N-*after*-N can be licensed. While *pull strings* is syntactically regular (*pull* and *strings* combine according to the standard rules of syntax) and semantically compositional (the meaning of *pull strings* is composed of the meanings of idiomatic *pull* and idiomatic *strings* and the way these are combined), N-*after*-N is an irregular fragment of morphosyntax with an idiosyncratic interpretation that shows a syntax-semantics mismatch: While N-*after*-N is syntactically singular, see (2), it semantically represents a plurality, see (3) and (4):[2]

(2) *Study after study* {reveals / *reveal} the dangers of lightly trafficked streets ...

(3) Words and images came tripping to my finger ends, and as I thought out *sentence after sentence*, I wrote {them / *it} on my braille slate.

(4) a. John ate {*apple after apple* / apples / #an apple} for an hour.

    b. John ate {**apple after apple* / #apples / an apple} in an hour.

My account of syntactically flexible VP-idioms, the N-*after*-N construction, and their interaction is formulated within Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG, Pollard and Sag 1994), a framework that allows the specification of intricate links between syntactic and semantic structure. The attribute-value matrix (AVM) on top of the next page is a sketch of my HPSG-representation of N-*after*-N.

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[1] source: http://doiwakeorsleep.tumblr.com/post/46393612094/25-things-i-learned-in-the-first-half-of-my-20s

[2] The data in (2) (3), and (4) have been adapted from Matsuyama 2004's (15b), (30), and (16), respectively.

$$
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{PHON } \langle \, ... \, N \, ..., \, \textit{after}, \, ... \, N \, ... \, \rangle \\[4pt]
\text{SS}\,|\,\text{LOC}\,|\,\text{CAT}
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{HEAD}
\begin{bmatrix}
\textit{noun} \\
\text{COUNT } - \\
\text{AGR} \quad \textit{3rd sing}
\end{bmatrix} \\[6pt]
\text{VAL}
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{SPR} \quad \langle \, \rangle \\
\text{COMPS } \langle \, \rangle
\end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix} \\[8pt]
\text{SR } \lambda P.\exists X.|X| > 1 \;\&\; \forall x \in X : N'(x) \;\&\; P(x) \;\&\; \exists R^{order} \subseteq X^2 \\[6pt]
\text{DTRS } \Big\langle
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{PHON } \langle \, ... \, N \, ... \, \rangle \\[4pt]
\text{SS}\,|\,\text{LOC}\,|\,\text{CAT}
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{HEAD}\,\boxed{1}
\begin{bmatrix}
\textit{noun} \\
\text{COUNT } + \\
\text{AGR} \quad \textit{3rd sing}
\end{bmatrix} \\[6pt]
\text{VAL}
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{SPR} \quad \langle \text{Det} \rangle \\
\text{COMPS } \langle \, \rangle
\end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix} \\[6pt]
\text{SR } ... \, \lambda x.N'(x) \, ...
\end{bmatrix}
, \Big(
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{PHON } \langle \textit{after} \rangle \\
\text{HEAD } \textit{prep} \\
\text{SR } \exists R^{order} \subseteq X^2
\end{bmatrix}
,
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{PHON } \langle \, ... \, N \, ... \, \rangle \\[4pt]
\text{SS}\,|\,\text{LOC}\,|\,\text{CAT}
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{HEAD}\,\boxed{1}
\begin{bmatrix}
\textit{noun} \\
\text{COUNT } + \\
\text{AGR} \quad \textit{3rd sing}
\end{bmatrix} \\[6pt]
\text{VAL}
\begin{bmatrix}
\text{SPR} \quad \langle \text{Det} \rangle \\
\text{COMPS } \langle \, \rangle
\end{bmatrix}
\end{bmatrix} \\[6pt]
\text{SR } ... \, \lambda x.N'(x) \, ...
\end{bmatrix}
\Big)^{+} \Big\rangle
\end{bmatrix}
$$

PHON = Phonology, SS = Syntax+Semantics, LOC = Local, CAT = Category, AGR = Agreement, VAL = Valence, SPR = Specifier, COMPS = Complements, SR = Semantic Representation (combinatorial, i.e. non-local)

In words: The N-*after*-N construction has two (or more) nominal daughters that are headed by identical third-person-singular count nouns. The fact that the number of nominal daughters has to be at least two is expressed by the round brackets around the second and third daughter and the Kleene-Plus attached to these brackets. The identity of the nominals' heads is specified by their identical HEAD values, pointed out by the tag [1]. Each of these nominals still requires a determiner to form a noun phrase. This is indicated by their positive COUNT and non-empty SPR values. The N-*after*-N construction, however, requires its nominal daughters to be bare and does not allow for any determiners itself either, which is indicated by the mother's negative COUNT and empty SPR value.

Semantically, the two (or more) nominal daughters contribute a predicate of the form $\lambda x.N'(x)$, while the preposition *after* contributes a relation that orders the entities denoted by this predicate. The condition that the quantity of these entities must exceed one ($\exists X.|X| > 1 \;\&\; \forall x \in X : N'(x)$) is contributed by the N-*after*-N construction as a whole.

Due to the spatial restrictions that this abstract is subject to, I unfortunately cannot include the lexical entries that compose the syntactically flexible VP-idiom *pull strings* or how these interact with N-*after*-N. This will have to be postponed to the poster presentation. All I can reveal here is that idiomatic *pull* does not require the morphosyntactic plural *strings*, but rather a plurality of strings on the semantic level, which is why it is perfectly happy with *string after string*.

References

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