Possessive alternations in German idioms — WG1

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Recently there has been a growing interest in the study of idioms that contain a possessive, such as *keep one's cool*. They play a central role in Kay & Sag (ms.) and they had also been a major topic in Dan Flickinger's course on parsing MWEs at the Parseme Training School 2015. In English we typically find just one possible realization of such idioms: the possessor (here *one's*) is overtly encoded inside the possessum NP (*one's cool*). This reflects the general encoding strategy of possession in English, as illustrated in (1).

(1)   (I have already put on my make-up), but I still need to powder my nose.

Contrary to that, German has a variety of possessive constructions that can be used to express the idea of me putting powder on my nose. Example (2) illustrates the following four: The possessum is a plain definite (Def); the possessum NP contains a possessive expression (Poss); the possessor occurs as an additional dative NP, combined with a definite possessum NP (DatDef); and a dative possessor occurs together with a possessively marked possessum (DatPoss).

(2)   Ich hab mich schon geschminkt, aber ...
        (I have already put on my make-up, but ...)
   a.   ich muss noch die Nase pudern. (Def)
        I   must still   the nose powder 'I still need to powder my nose.'
   b.   Ich noch meine Nase pudern. (Poss)
        I   must still   my   nose   powder
   c.   Ich muss mir   noch die Nase pudern. (DatDef)
        I   must myself still   the nose powder
   d.   Ich muss mir   noch meine Nase pudern. (DatPoss)
        I   must myself still   my   nose poweder

There are German idioms with any of these four possessive patterns. However, hardly any idiom can occur in all four of them. One of these alternation patterns is illustrated in (3), where "#" signals the unavailability of the idiomatic interpretation.

(3) a.   Er hält den Mund. (Def N)
          he holds the mouth 'He keeps his mouth shut.'
     b.   Er hält seinen Mund. (Poss N)
     c.   #Er hält sich den Mund. (Dat Def N)
     d.   #Er hält sich seinen Mund. (Dat Poss N)

I collected a sample of 145 German possessive idioms (possessive idioms mentioned under the letter "A" of Duden 11 and some randomly collected expressions). I looked for natural occurrence of the idioms in the four possessive constructions on the internet. The result is displayed in Table 1, where "ok" indicates that there had been at least some uses with the idiomatic meaning on a website that looked like a natural, non-word play use by a competent speaker.[1] The data are, of course, neither representative nor solidly verified empirically. Nonetheless they reveal which patterns of alternation occur and which patterns are more common than others.

We can read of some tendencies from this table: (i) Of the possible 15 alternation patterns only 5 seem to play a considerable role (DatDef; DatDef–DatPoss; Def–Poss; Poss–DatDef–DatPoss; Poss–DatDef). (ii) A great number of idioms require the presence of a dative. (iii) Only very few allow for both a dative (DatDef or DatPoss) and a plain definite (Def). (iv) Whenever

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[1]No gloss or translation is given in the table as the example column is not directly relevant for the table.

# (N=145)	Def	Poss	DatDef	DatPoss	example idiom
2	ok	ok	ok	ok	(sich) etwas an den Fingern abzählen (können)
2	ok	ok	ok	*	sich etwas aus dem Ärmel ziehen
0	ok	ok	*	ok	—
29	ok	ok	*	*	für jm. die Hand ins Feuer legen
0	ok	*	ok	ok	—
2	ok	*	ok	*	(sich) die Ärmel hochkrempeln
0	ok	*	*	ok	—
5	ok	*	*	*	die Nase voll haben
17	*	ok	ok	ok	jm. das Herz brechen
14	*	ok	ok	*	jm. aus den Augen gehen
0	*	ok	*	ok	—
1	*	ok	*	*	in jms. Fußstapfen treten
36	*	*	ok	ok	sich die Hacken ablaufen
36	*	*	ok	*	jm. im Weg stehen
1	*	*	*	ok	sich seine Gedanken machen

Table 1: Alternation patterns for German possessive idioms

DatPoss is possible, so is DatDef (with one exception). (v) However, some idioms forbid a redundant marking of the possessor, for example the DatDef-only or the Def-only idioms.

I will relate the presented alternation patterns to an HPSG analysis of the possessive constructions in German. I will motivate an *External Possessor Rule* that allows an argument of a verb to be interpreted as the possessor of another argument (needed for Def). I will adapt the analysis in Hole (2005) of the dative external possessor by an *Affectee Rule* that adds a dative complement with an Affectee role to the verb. The output of this rule can then act as input to the *External Possessor Rule*. Thus, though relatively close in meaning, the possessive patterns with a dative have an Affectee in their semantic representation, which is missing from the dative-less constructions. I will assume a semantic combinatorics that allows for redundant marking of semantic operators (Lexical Resource Semantics, LRS). This accounts for the free alternation between definite possessum NPs and possessum NPs with a redundant possessive marking as in the DatPoss construction.

This general syntactic and semantic analysis of German possessive constructions can then be used to account for the possessive alternation patterns in idioms. I will present example encodings for the main alternation patterns and show why some patterns are absent or rare (observation (i)). The semantic difference between the constructions with and without dative can be used to account for the attested split in the alternation patterns (observation (iii)). The observation that DatPoss practically always alternates with DatDef, but not the other way around ((iv) and (v) above), follows straightforwardly from using LRS: We can exclude redundant marking in LRS but not enforce it.

Haspelmath (1999) shows that the existence of the dative external possessor construction (DatDef) is an areal feature of the European languages, independent of their genetic relationship. English is among the few exceptions to this. The poster demonstrates that dative possessors play an important role in the inventory of German idioms (observation (ii)) and we expect to find the same for other languages represented in Parseme (Almog (2012) shows this for Modern Hebrew). Consequently, a Parseme meeting is the ideal place to discuss which possessive constructions and alternations are present in the inventories of idioms and MWEs in general in the Parseme languages.

References

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