

‘*Il n’y a pas trente-six façons of building an NP structure*’

A. Starting from Chomsky (1970), a very influential research line maintains that there is a tight structural parallelism between the verbal and the nominal domain. This builds on the assumption that the internal core of the NP is formed by the noun plus its modifier(s), while the determiner would be peripheral to this core nucleus (*mutatis mutandis*, this assumption is retained in the DP hypothesis). The NP structure is similar to that of the VP, where the core part is the verb plus its complement (and its adjuncts) with the external argument being peripheral to this nucleus and sitting in Spec,VP (or Spec,vP in more recent implementations). In this abstract, we discuss some idioms in Italian and French that pose a challenge to this parallelism between VP and NP (or DP) and discuss some necessary revisions to the NP/DP structure.

B. In the verbal domain, there is a well-known asymmetry concerning idioms: there are idioms where verb and complement are fixed and the subject is variable, as in *kick the bucket* or *bite the dust*. However, there are no idioms where subject and verb are fixed and the complement is variable. This is naturally explained by assuming that an idiomatic expression must correspond to a constituent in clause structure. In the clausal domain, standard constituency tests indicate that the verb and the direct object form a minimal constituent. For example, in (1a) ‘did that’ replaces the complex constituent ‘bought a house’. However, (1b) is not even interpretable, although it should be OK if ‘did that’ could replace the group of words ‘John bought’ excluding the internal argument ‘a house’, under the reading ‘John bought a house but he bought no car’. The strong deviance of (1b) is explained by the fact that the unit formed by subject+verb *excluding the internal argument* can never be a constituent.

- (1) a. John bought a house and Mary did that too.
b. *John bought a house but did that no car

Observations of this kind are at the heart of generative approaches and motivate a condition called Verb-Object Constraint by Baker (2009). This condition is one of the best candidates for a language universal, as discussed by Baker. An idiom where subject and verb are fixed but the complement is variable would be a violation of the Verb-Object Constraint, much like (1b). So, it is only expected that no such idiom can exist.

C. Under the hypothesis that there is a tight parallelism between the nominal domain and the verbal domain, the determiner is external to the nucleus of the NP much like the external argument is external to the nucleus of the VP, which is formed by the V and its modifier. Therefore, we expect that no idiom should exist where the determiner and noun are fixed and the modifier of the noun is variable. However, we identified idioms in French and Italian that have this unexpected form. In Italian, in addition to idioms where the noun and its modifier are fixed and the determiner is variable (cf. 2), there are idioms where the determiner and noun are fixed and the modifier of the noun is variable (cf. 3 and 4)

- (2) Lui è una/la testa di cazzo
He is a/the head of dick
‘He is a dickhead’
- (3) (Facciamo) quattro passi in città/al parco/al fresco/al centro commerciale/in montagna
Let-us-make four steps in city/in-the park/at fresh-air/ to-the center commercial / in mountain
‘(Let us take) a walk in the city/ in the park/ outdoor/ in the mall/ in the mountains’
- (4) (Cuciniamoci) due fili al ragù/al pesto/ai funghi/al dente
Let-us-cook two strings bolognese/with-the pesto/ with mushrooms/ al dente
(Let us cook) some bolognese spaghetti/ spaghetti with pesto / spaghetti with mushrooms/ al dente

Crucially, in (3) if the determiner *quattro* (four) is replaced by *cinque* (five), or by any other numeral, only the compositional meaning is preserved ('let us make (exactly) five steps'). However, any locative PP can modify the D+N unit without affecting the idiomatic meaning, as shown by the possible continuations in (3).

Similarly in (4): if the determiner *due* (two) is replaced by *tre* ('three') only the compositional meaning is preserved ('let's cook (exactly) three spaghetti').

Similar examples are attested in French:

(5) Trois pas
three steps
'A stroll'

(6) (Il n'y a pas) trente-six façons de le dire/de le faire/ de...
(there aren't) thirty six ways of saying it/doing it/of...
'There is only one way to do/say...'

D. Simple and trivial as these observations may seem, they pose a clear challenge to the parallelism hypothesis between NP and VP. In fact, if idioms correspond to constituents, cases like (3) to (6) suggest that D+N make a constituent which excludes the modifier of the noun: this is incompatible with the classical view about NP structure. In the second part of the talk, we will discuss two recent approaches that, based on independent motivations, reject the view on NP structure stemming from Chomsky (1970) to see whether they can handle examples (3) to (6). Adger (2013) assumes that PP modifiers of the noun (including PPs that are traditionally considered complements of the noun) are peripheral to the NP nucleus, which is formed by the noun plus an adjective (if present). This may seem to go in the right direction to explain the data in (3) to (6), since the noun and the PP complement would not form a unit in (3) to (6). However, Adger proposes (this time in line with the classical view) that the determiner is even more external than the PP modifier of the noun. Therefore the existence of idioms like (3) to (6) is not really expected under his approach. Another approach is Cecchetto and Donati's (2015), who, in agreement with Adger, claim that PP modifiers of the noun can never be considered complements of the noun. As they are adjunct-like categories, Cecchetto and Donati claim that PP modifiers of the noun can be late merged after the noun has merged with the external determiner. This, among other things, can explain why the proform *that* can replace the unit formed by determiner and noun, crucially excluding the alleged complement of the noun, in sentences like (7).

(7) I have already seen **the picture** of John, but I haven't yet seen **that** of Mary.

Notice that (7) sharply contrasts with (1a); a nominal proform can replace D + N excluding the alleged complement of the noun in (7), while a verbal proform cannot replace the external argument + V excluding the internal argument in (1b). So, the facts about proform substitution and facts about idiom formation match in an interesting way and both argue against the tight parallelism between verbal and nominal structure.

Cecchetto and Donati's (2015) approach can account for the data in (3) to (6) under the assumption that the idiom in these structures corresponds to the D + N constituent which is replaced by the proform in (7). This is the constituent that precedes the late insertion of the PP modifier of the noun. An interesting twist of this analysis is that the processes of idiom formation are sensitive to fine-grained aspects of the syntactic derivation, up to the timing of insertion of lexical material.

References

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