

Scrambling in Idioms: A Remark to Fanselow (2012)

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Abstract

This paper begins with a summary of Fanselow (2012), where idioms are employed to demonstrate that scrambling is not influenced by information structure. However, the study focused only on scrambling cases where the relative order of the non-verbal idiom parts is not altered. I will supplement the discussion on scrambling in idioms with the observation that scrambling cannot change the order of idiom parts, while topicalization can. I provide numerous corpus examples as evidence for this claim. If this observation is correct, it provides further evidence for the claim that scrambling is more constrained than topicalization.

1. Introduction

It has been well observed for German, English and many other languages (see e.g. Ackerman and Webelhuth 1993, Nunberg et al. 1994, Müller 2000, Horn 2003, Bargmann and Sailer 2018, Fellbaum 2019 among others) that idioms can be subject to syntactic transformations, such as passive (1-a), relativization (1-b), wh-movement (1-c), and topicalization (that is filling of the prefield in declarative clauses) (1-d).¹

Regarding the notation of idioms in this paper, (lexically) fixed parts of idioms are marked in bold, while free slots in idioms are underlined. I define free slots as structural positions necessary for the idiomatic interpretation but not being fixed lexically. The different non-verbal parts of an idiom are put in square brackets to distinguish them more easily.

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¹Unless cited otherwise, all examples below were found in the German Reference Corpus DeReKo-2023-I (Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache 2023) accessed via COSMAS II (<http://www.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2/web-app/>).

- (1) a. ... und [den Spitzen der deutschen Wirtschaft] damit [ein
and the top of the German economy as.a.result a
Korb] gegeben wurde
basket given was
'that the top of the German economy was turned down as a result'
(WEZ16/NOV.01265)
- b. Eine ganz gute Zeit für [**den Bock**], den die beiden da
a pretty good time for the buck that the both there
geschossen haben.
shot have
'A pretty good time for both of them to make a massive blunder.'
(SKU02/FEB.11330)
- c. [Welchen Bären] muss Rainer Wieland [seinen Parteilfreunden]
which bear must Rainer Wieland his party.friends
aufbinden, wenn Oettinger ...
attach, if Oettinger
'Which bull story does Rainer Wieland have to tell his fellow party
members if Oettinger ...'
(STZ07/OKT.04211)
- d. [**Den Kopf**] steckt Diane nicht [**in den Sand**].
the head buries Diane not in the sand
'Diane does not bury her head in the sand.'
(SBZ04/MAR.09418)

The focus of this paper, however, revolves around the interplay of scrambling and idioms. Fanselow (2012) reports a judgment study with native speakers and finds that, in German, idioms can be subject to clause-internal scrambling (A-scrambling) across an adverbial. He concludes from this that idioms and non-idioms behave alike with regard to scrambling and that scrambling is a formal movement which does not interact with information structure: Because parts of idioms cannot be topics/given and yet can be scrambled, topichood/givenness is no prerequisite for scrambling, even in the case of non-idioms.

However, the issue is not as simple as Fanselow (2012) concludes. Scrambling that changes the relative order of non-verbal idiom parts has been judged to be impossible (see Müller 2010: 610). Also in a broader study about the syntactic flexibility of German idioms, Wierzba et al. (2023: 33) conclude that the number and type of non-verbal idiom parts play a role for the possibility to alter the canonical order.

This paper first summarizes the argument from Fanselow (2012) explaining why scrambling must be formal movement (Section 2) and then continues to discuss reversing the order of parts of idioms (Section 3) based on corpus data. I will show that while the order of arguments can be reversed by topicalization, reversing it by scrambling is more restricted. I finally conclude in Section 4 that in order for using idioms as an argument regarding the nature of scrambling, a finer syntactic classification of idioms is necessary.

2. A Recap of Fanselow (2012)

The main question in Fanselow (2012) is whether scrambling is influenced by information structure. Fanselow's answer to this question is *No*, since there is no clear connection between the two. In this section, I will summarize relevant general points of the paper, but mainly stick to Fanselow's discussion of idioms.

Starting with scrambling, Fanselow (2012) distinguishes two kinds of scrambling in German: A-scrambling and \bar{A} -scrambling. A-scrambling is defined as clause-internal scrambling, meaning a change of the relative order with respect to adjuncts (2) or other arguments (3) within a clause. \bar{A} -scrambling is considered to be scrambling across a clause boundary (4).²

- (2) a. dass ich heute Bücher kaufe
that I today books.ACC buy
'that I buy books today'
- b. dass ich Bücher heute kaufe
- (3) a. dass ich Kindern Bücher gebe
that I children.DAT books.ACC give
'that I give books to children'
- b. dass ich Bücher Kindern gebe
- (4) *What did the brave knight demand after he had killed the dragon?*
 - a. Er hat verlangt dass er die Prinzessin heiraten darf.
he has demanded that he the princess marry may
'He demanded that he be allowed to marry the princess.'
 - b. Er hat die Prinzessin verlangt dass er heiraten darf.

²Regarding (4), Fanselow uses such examples to note that \bar{A} -scrambling is influenced by information structure, but admits that speakers generally reject all long-distance scrambling in German independent of information structure. See Fanselow (2012: 293 fn.24).

In (2-b), *Bücher* (“books”) scrambles over the adverb *heute* (“today”), while in (3-b), it scrambles over the dative co-argument *Kindern* (“children”).

Now, a common claim is that A-scrambling has to do with givenness (see Fanselow 2012: 268f. and references cited there.). The idea is that given phrases can be scrambled in front of new ones. Fanselow (2012), however, aims to show that it is not about givenness but about definiteness, providing the following example.

(5) *Imagine how strangely John behaved yesterday!*

- a. Er hat sogar sein Lunchbrot einem Hund gegeben
 he has even his lunch.sandwich.ACC a dog.DAT given
- b. ?*Er hat sogar ein Lunchbrot einem Hund gegeben
 he has even a lunch.sandwich.ACC a dog.DAT given

Example (5) shows that scrambling of a definite argument across its co-argument (5-a) is possible, while an indefinite argument cannot be scrambled (5-b). Given the context of (5), neither the indefinite nor the definite direct object (*sein Lunchbrot* (“his/a lunch sandwich”)) is given. So, instead of givenness, it seems to be formal definiteness that interacts with scrambling, meaning that scrambling does not have to interact with information structure.

A further argument that is connected to this comes from scrambling in idioms. Many idioms contain definite noun phrases, but since the parts of idioms are meaningless, the definite noun phrases in them cannot count as given. Yet, scrambling is possible in idioms as shown in (6). In (6-b), the definite phrase *die Flinte* (“the gun”) is scrambled in front of the adverbial *zu früh* (“too early”).

- (6) a. Vielleicht hat er zu früh [**die Flinte**] [**ins Korn**] geworfen
 Perhaps has he too early the gun into.the grain thrown
- b. Vielleicht hat er [**die Flinte**] zu früh [**ins Korn**] geworfen

To look closer at these constructions and confirm that they are acceptable, Fanselow (2012) conducted a rating study with 26 first semester linguistics students who were asked to rate 88 sentences on a 1–7 Likert-Scale, with 7 being the best possible score. The test items have the form of the example in (7).

- (7) a. [wenn man [_{VP} Mut hat] und [_{VP} nicht zu früh [**die Flinte**]
if one courage has and not too early the gun
[**ins Korn**] wirft]], dann ...
into-the grain throws then
- b. [wenn man [_{VP} Mut hat] und [_{VP} nicht [**die Flinte**] zu früh [**ins Korn wirft**]]], dann ...

Test items contain a VP-coordination in a conditional clause with the idiom being one conjunct. The idiom consists of a direct object, a PP, and a verb. Additionally, an adverbial is added to the idiom which shows whether the direct object has been scrambled or not. The study has a 2x2-factorial design. The first factor regards the presence (7-b) or absence (7-a) of scrambling. The second factor concerns the definiteness, whether the targeted object is definite like in (7) or indefinite. The goal is to see whether there is any interaction between the two factors.

The study found that there is a significant drop in ratings for scrambling of indefinite idiom parts (5.9 w/o scrambling vs. 4.44 with scrambling). The effect could not be seen for scrambling of definite idiom parts (5.83 w/o scrambling vs. 5.39 with scrambling).

This led Fanselow to the conclusion that scrambling in idioms is allowed in principle, with definite direct objects being able to front. But since the parts of idioms are meaningless, definiteness cannot be semantic here. Instead, it must be the formal definiteness that is the trigger for scrambling. This provides an argument for the assumption that scrambling is not triggered by information structure.

3. Reversing the Order of Idiom Parts

The study in Fanselow (2012) did not investigate the reversal of the order of parts of idioms (so the scrambling construction in (3)). The background of this remark is the question whether scrambling in front of an adverb is the same as the rearrangement of co-arguments. This section provides some corpus data that exhibit such rearrangement in idioms. I show that the rearrangement of fixed idiom parts is in principle possible, even though infrequent. However, if the fixed non-verbal parts change their relative order, it can only happen via movement to the left periphery like topicalization, and not via scrambling in the middle field as in (3). This can be contrasted with data where fixed

(9) *Reversal by topicalization*

- a. [**In den Sand**] kann man [**den Kopf**] **stecken**, wenn es zu spät
 in the sand can one the head put when it too late
 ist.
 is
 ‘One can bury his head in the sand when it is too late.’
 (STN13/MAI.04159)
- b. Sprichwörtlich [**ohne den Wirt**] hatten zwei Linzer
 literally without the innkeeper had two from.Linz
 Einbrecher [**die Rechnung**] **gemacht**, als sie die Beute
 burglars the bill made when they the loot
 im Hotelzimmer lagerten.
 in.the hotel.room stored
 ‘Two burglars from Linz counted their proverbial chickens be-
 fore they hatch, when they stored the loot in the hotel room’
 (O02/NOV.06127)
- c. Thematisch [**auf den Kopf**] **treffen** beide Titel [**den Nagel**]
 thematically on the head hit both titles the nail
 nicht.
 not
 ‘Both titles are not dead on with respect to the topic.’
 (SKU14/AUG.08166)

Additionally, remnant VP topicalization can lead to a reverse order of the non-verbal parts, see (10).⁵

(i)	idiom	non-reversing topicalization	non-reversing scrambling
	[die Kastanien] [aus dem Feuer] holen ‘to pull someone’s chestnuts out of the fire’	23	178
	[die Katze] [aus dem Sack] lassen ‘to let the cat out of the bag’	39	30
	[das Kind] [mit dem Bade] ausschütten ‘to throw the baby out with the bath water’	14	62

⁵These data provide evidence against the judgments in Lasnik and Saito (1992: 141-142), Ackerman and Webelhuth (1993), Nunberg et al. (1994: 511-512), Heck and Assmann (2014: 538 (17b), 539 (20)). In (10), the direct object has been moved out of the VP before the

(10) *Reversal by remnant VP-topicalization*

- a. [_{VP} t_i [**Vom Eis**] **gebracht**] wurde [**die Kuh**]_i durch eine von
 off.the ice brought was the cow by a by
 SPD-Fraktionschef Hans-Jürgen Grasmann
 SPD-parliamentary.group.leader Hans-Jürgen Grasmann
 beantragte Sitzungsunterbrechung ...
 requested meeting.adjournment
 ‘The problem was solved by the adjournment of the meeting
 that SPD-parliamentary group leader Hans-Jürgen Grasmann
 requested ...’ (BMO13/APR.00459)
- b. [_{VP} t_i Ganz [**aus dem Sack**] **lassen**] wollten und
 completely out.of the bag let wanted and
 konnten die Beteiligten [**die Katze**]_i noch nicht.
 could the people.involved the cat yet not
 ‘The people involved didn’t want to and weren’t able to let the cat
 out the bag.’ (SKU16/OKT.09766)

While order reversals due to topicalization can be found occasionally and therefore seems to be in principle possible for speakers, reversals in the middlefield (due to scrambling) cannot be found. The closest and only case of such scrambling that I could find is given in (11).

- (11) und spätestens im Berufsleben **trennt** [**vom Weizen**] sich
 and latest in.the work.life separates from.the wheat REFL
 [**die Spreu**]
 the chaff
 ‘and at the latest in your professional life, the chaff is separated from
 the wheat’ (O14/FEB.02922)

The context for this example is missing. It might be that we deal with a lyrical text form, similar to the example in (12-b), where the idiom verb *haben* (‘to have’) is dropped. This would further strengthen the point that scrambling cannot lead to a reversed order since lyrical texts are highly prone to grammatical deviance (see Steube 1966).⁶

VP is topicalized. This violates *Barss’ (1986) Generalization*: The direct object cannot be reconstructed into the VP anymore, because it doesn’t c-command its trace inside the VP.

⁶Reversing the order in lyrical texts can, of course, also be due to topicalization, as (i) shows:

- (12) a. Context:
Petra Bock shone as a “psychologist”. The teacher, in a white coat and with disheveled hair, unerringly found her victims among the visitors:
- b. Wer **[im Schrank] nicht [alle Tassen]**, der kann sich
 whoever in.the cupboard not all cups he can REFL
 bei mir beraten lassen.
 at me advise let
 ‘Whoever is not all there, can get advice from me.’
 (MAZ05/FEB.02195)

3.2. Rearranging Free Slots and Fixed Idiom Parts

Idioms with free slots can also undergo order reversal, as shown in Haider (2020: 376) with idioms of the form SUBJECT X_{OBJECT} VERB given in (13) (an instance of scrambling), and as shown in Wierzba et al. (2023: 6) in (14) (an instance of topicalization).⁷ In the data below, the underlined constituent (the free slot) and the first bold-faced constituent (a fixed part) are reversed in order, while the fixed non-verbal parts (in bold) keep their canonical relative order.

- (13) dass [den Mann] **[der Schlag]** getroffen hat
 that the man.ACC the stroke.NOM hit has
 ‘that the man was thunderstruck’

-
- (i) Wir woll’n auch keine Hochstromtrassen. **[Im Schrank] sind nicht mehr [alle Tassen] bei** denen, die da demonstrieren ...
 we want also no high-current.lines in.the cupboard are not anymore all
 Tassen] bei denen, die da demonstrieren ...
 cups with those who there demonstrate
 ‘We also don’t want any high-current lines. Those who demonstrate there are not all there ...’
 (PNP19/APR.01528)

⁷As for (14), Wierzba et al. (2023: 6) note that there are different judgments in the literature when it comes to these constructions. For their rating study, they group the idiom in (14) as well as *x die Leviten lesen* (lit. ‘to read the LEVITEN to x’ meaning ‘to scold x’) and *x den Laufpass geben* (lit. ‘to give x the LAUFPASS’ meaning ‘to break up with x’) together with simpler DP-V idioms that do not have an obligatory ‘free slot’, such as *das Handtuch werfen* (lit. ‘to throw the towel’ meaning ‘to give up’) or *den Löffel abgeben* (lit. ‘to give away the spoon’ meaning ‘to die’). It is important to note that the idiom in (14) *x den Garaus machen* (‘to kill x’) can only have an idiomatic reading with the free slot for a dative object. In this paper, I would therefore like to explicitly distinguish between the two types.

- (14) [**Den Garaus**] hat Hans [dem Kollegen] **gemacht**.
 the GARAUS.ACC has Hans to.the colleague.DAT done
 ‘Hans killed the colleague.’

In contrast to the idioms in Section 3.1, such idioms allow rearrangement by both topicalization and scrambling, with respect to the relative position of the free slot, see (15)–(16).

(15) *Reversal by topicalization*

- a. [**Den Wind**] wollen wir [den Sportfreunden] [**aus den**
 the wind.ACC want we the sport.friends.DAT out.of the
Segeln] **nehmen**
 sails take
 ‘We want to take the wind out of the sails of the friends of sport’
 (RPO05/FEB.32415)
- b. [**Ins Bockshorn**] ließen [sich] die Kleinen nicht
 in.the buck’s.horn let REFL.ACC the little.ones.NOM not
jagen.
 chase
 ‘The little ones did not let themselves get intimidated.’
 (MZE06/OKT.01300)
- c. [**Goldene Brücken**] haben sie [ihm] dort **gebaut**, ...
 golden bridges.ACC have they him.DAT there built
 ‘They created great opportunities for him there ...’ (R02/SEP.02504)

(16) *Reversal by scrambling*

- a. Natürlich hatten wir nicht nur [**auf Liebers**] [**ein Auge**]
 of.course had we not only on Liebers an eye.ACC
geworfen, ...
 thrown
 ‘Of course, we didn’t only watch Liebers closely, ...’
 (LVZ00/FEB.08311)
- b. Bis vor einem Vierteljahr hätten dreieinhalbtausend
 until ago a quarter.year had three.and.a.half.thousand
 Feuerwehrleute [**die Hand**] [**für sie**] [**ins Feuer**] gelegt.
 firefighters the hand.ACC for her in.the fire put
 ‘Until three month ago, three and a half thousand firefighters would
 have vouched for her.’ (MAG11/OKT.01924)

- c. Trotz des ärgerlichen Ausgleichs kann ich nur **[den Hut]**
 despite the upsetting equalizer can I only the hat.ACC
[vor der Leistung] ziehen.
 before the performance draw
 ‘Despite the upsetting equalizer, I can only respect the performance.’
 (LVZ00/JAN.03473)

4. Conclusion

The data presented here indicate that scrambling is more constrained than topicalization, as also observed in G. Müller’s work (e.g., Müller 2019). Fixed idiom parts appear rearrangeable through topicalization but not scrambling, resulting in a three-out-of-four pattern, as depicted in (17).

(17)

	maintain relative order	change relative order
topicalization	idiomatic	idiomatic
scrambling	idiomatic	non-idiomatic

The specific property of scrambling preventing the reconstruction of an idiomatic reading upon order reversal requires further research. This brief paper claims that Fanselow’s conclusions on scrambling in idioms were partially misled by (i) inadequate differentiation between scrambling of arguments in front of adjuncts and scrambling in front of co-arguments and (ii) a conflation of structurally distinct idioms. Despite this, Gisbert’s research on German idioms offers valuable insights into the nature of syntactic movement and should continue to inspire more empirical as well as theoretical work on the syntactic modification of idioms.

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