

*Particle Verbs in English: Syntax, information structure, and intonation*

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## **1. Introduction**

This book represents the most comprehensive investigation to date into the alternation in word order in the verb-particle construction in English: It defends the hypothesis that the choice between the two different orders (e.g. in *put out the fire* versus *put the fire out*) is determined by information structure.

The argument is amply supported and, to my mind, entirely convincing. Furthermore, the book makes an important contribution in that it documents in some detail the intonational patterns used by speakers for various kinds of verb-particle constructions. One interesting result of this is to bolster the position that idiomatic and compositional verb-particle constructions have the same structure.

On the other hand, the book also proposes a specific syntactic analysis of the construction and the alternation, essentially an updated version of Johnson 1991, which is problematic from the standpoint of syntactic theory and is, to my mind, entirely unconvincing. Part of the reasoning is based on what seems to me to be a flawed experiment in which subjects were asked to construct sentences on the basis of randomly arranged words appearing on a computer screen.

In this review I first detail the successful parts of the book and then move on to justify my criticism of the other parts.

## **2. The good news**

In chapter 2, Dehé provides a very clear and competent review of much of the extensive body of literature on the formal structure of the English verb-particle construction. She deftly leads the reader through the tangled web of sometimes convergent, sometimes incompatible analyses, pointing out for each theoretical assumption which authors hold it and which authors hold the opposite.

Though the chapter is 55 pages long, it never drags on; it is rich with detail, discussing the small clause accounts of Kayne, Hoekstra, Aarts, Guéron, den Dikken, and myself, and the non-small clause accounts of Johnson, Koizumi, Radford, Harley and Noyer, Nicol, Olsen and Dehé herself, among others; consult Dehé's highly readable chapter for full references.

In the course of reviewing them, Dehé criticizes the previous treatments, noting where a problem constitutes a challenge for a whole range of analyses. For example, the fact that a verb-particle can be coordinated with a simple verb (as in *I chopped up and fried the onions*) is a challenge for small clause analyses, but falls out naturally for complex head analyses.

The details of Dehé's own account (which diverges from the account she has advocated in previously published work) is postponed until chapter 4, and I postpone a discussion of it until section 3. However, it generally becomes clear from her critical discussion of the various previous accounts that she favors a complex head account for all

verb-particle constructions, remaining unconvinced by the arguments (for example in Aarts 1989) that there are two different types of verb-particle construction with two different syntactic structures. Though I agree with the latter finding, I am not convinced by the former, but I postpone that, too, until section 3.

In chapter 3, Dehé moves on to discuss the different orders; she uses the term CONTINUOUS for the order in which the verb and the particle are adjacent, and DISCONTINUOUS when they are separated by the DP object.

Here much of the same work reviewed in chapter 2 is revisited, but whereas in chapter 2 the focus was on the structure, here the focus is on the analysis of the alternation. Syntacticians have often felt at liberty to simply characterize the alternation in formal terms, without being overly concerned with the motivation for one choice or another. In fact, there is a long tradition of “optional” transformations, with the exercise of one option or another being a matter of “stylistic” or “pragmatic” factors, not considered to be the syntactician’s job to explicate. It was only in the early 90’s when mainstream syntactic theory began to make use of a notion of economy that optionality came to be seen as problematic.

Subsequently, syntacticians began to assume that movements could never be truly optional and began to try to state specific conditions for so-called stylistic rules. This commonly boils down to the optional inclusion of a feature, which is usually implicitly understood to have some discourse effect, for example when the features driving movement are called ‘+topic’ or ‘+focus.’ In many cases this may represent more of a change in attitude than in theory.

In any case Dehé is critical of most previous accounts, stressing the importance of information structure to constructing a satisfactory theory of the alternation between continuous and discontinuous orders. She argues at great length that the ‘basic’ or ‘neutral’ order is the continuous one, and I examine this argument in more detail in section 3.

Chapter 4 includes over forty pages of summary of important work on information structure (pp. 103–122) and intonation (pp. 133–160), before turning to particle constructions specifically (clearly presented but felt like a bit much). It is asserted that the neutral order is the continuous one, and some examples from literature are used to illustrate, though frankly they don’t always seem to achieve this. For example, two of the examples used to illustrate the different orders are given here (Dehé’s examples (35), p. 126, and (56), p. 129; all punctuation, ellipses, and italicizations are copied here from Dehé).

(1) “Our landlady stuck her head in at the door. There’s is [sic] a gentleman downstairs. Says he must see Monsieur Poirot, or you, Captain. Seeing as he was in a great to-do – and with all that quite the gentleman – I *brought up his card.*” (Agatha Christie, *Poirot Investigates: The Mystery of Hunter’s Lodge*: 65)

(2) Doubtless many fragments had been whittled away from the pillars of the the Philistine, before Sampson *pulled the temple down.* (D. H. Lawrence, *The Virgin and the Gypsy*: 75)

Of sentence (1), Dehé writes, “In [(1)], the DP in question contains a possessive pronoun that refers to a preceding proper noun, but still, the head of the DP belongs to the focused constituent, which is why the DP follows the PV” (p. 126; PV = Particle Verb). Of (2), she writes “the *temple* has been establishe[d] by the DP *the pillars of the Philistine*, which is why the DP *the temple* precedes the particle” (p. 130). This may be true, but it is not entirely clear that these examples could not have gone the other way around, and therefore it is strange that they are used to illustrate the argument.

Dehé does have better examples, such as the one in (3) (her (59), p. 130).

(3) Michael laboriously *puts down the bags*, pushes wide the door, *picks the bags up again* and enters, [...] (Stephen Fry, *Making History*: 350)

Here it is clear that *the bags* is already familiar in the second sentence while *picks up* is news, and the alternation forms a sort of minimal pair. However, even examples like this fail to establish that the continuous order is ‘neutral.’ Notice, too the marked order in this passage of *pushes wide the door*, suggesting that the author is not beyond using marked structures for stylistic effect.

The most interesting part of the chapter is the presentation of the results of some acoustic tests conducted by Dehé. Subjects were presented with short texts, some of which contained verb-particle constructions in different settings and with different orders. Each text was constructed to provide context favoring a particular information structure which Dehé had concluded went along with either the continuous or discontinuous order.

The results demonstrate that the accent in particle verb constructions falls on the noun in the discontinuous construction, and on the particle in the continuous construction (confirming observations made in previous studies). Furthermore, they demonstrate that the effect is measurably present even when other material (adverbs or prepositional phrases) follows the particle and noun phrase (this is as far as I know an original contribution of this experiment).

Judging from the example sentences displayed (e.g. on pp. 179–182), the examples were presented to the test subjects with contexts favoring the order exemplified, in each case. The two dialogues in (3) (her (130), p. 180) are typical.

(3) a. “Andrew, one of my students said you handed something out during your lecture today. What was it?”

“I *handed out the papers during the lecture*. I don’t know why the students were so excited about that.”

b. “Sue, what happened to the pile of papers I saw in your office yesterday?”

“I *handed the papers out*. I want the students to read them.”

The context was presumably included in order to encourage informants to read the examples in a natural intonation, but it means that two variables covaried systematically in the experiment: the continuous examples also had informative noun phrases and the discontinuous examples had backgrounded noun phrases. Thus it is not clear whether the experiment demonstrated the interaction of word order and accent or of information structure and accent (if the two can be separated).

### 3. The bad news

In chapter 3, Dehé presents the results of an experiment in which informants were presented with a verb, a particle, and a noun phrase arranged on a computer screen in one of the six possible orders, for example *carried in the tray*, *the tray carried in*, *in the tray carried*, etc. (they were arranged in a vertical column so that there was no left to right ordering, only a top to bottom one). Each time a new set of words was presented, the subject was asked to pronounce a sentence based on these words.

She shows that there is a strong tendency, in this situation, to place the particle before the noun phrase. Though the stimulus like *carry – the tray – in* was more likely to lead to a sentence like *She carried the tray in* than *She carried in the tray*, all other arrangements tended to elicit the continuous order.

Dehé takes the results as evidence that the continuous order is ‘neutral.’ It is not completely clear what this means. For example, the context of the experiment might lead to the noun phrase being taken as new information; in that case, the experiment shows that the continuous order is least marked when the noun phrase represents new information; but that is not a new result (see various references in Dehé’s chapter 4).

Dehé maintains furthermore that the experiment indicates that the continuous order is ‘underlying.’ But this conclusion is certainly unwarranted. The unmarked order in English is Subject-Aux-Verb, but if the usual versions of the VP-internal subject hypothesis are on the right track, the underlying order is Aux-Subject-Verb.

Consider the case of subject positions in the Mittelfeld in Germanic languages. The order subject-adverb generally correlates with topical, presupposed, or wide-scope subjects, while the order adverb-subject generally correlates with focused and narrow-scope subjects (cf. Svenonius 2002 and references there, also Frey 2004). This is illustrated in (4) with Norwegian, using small capitals to suggest focus.

- (4) a. Derfor kommer Øystein alltid sent.  
          therefore comes Øystein always late  
      b. Derfor kommer alltid ØYSTEIN sent.  
          therefore comes always Øystein late

Assume that the subject in (4a) is in a higher specifier, e.g. SpecAgrP, having moved through a lower specifier, e.g. SpecTP, which the subject overtly occupies in (4b). If the origin of the subject is SpecvP, then the ‘underlying’ order is adverb-subject, but this has no impact on frequency of surface orders. If subjects are usually topical, then (4a) might be taken as the ‘neutral’ order, although it is derived from the ‘underlying’ order. So to equate neutral with underlying seems mistaken.

In fact, Dehé assumes obligatory movements in the derivation of the English verb phrase. In chapter 5, she adopts a complex head analysis of the construction similar to that of Johnson (1991): basically, the verb moves across the direct object (in SpecVP), either carrying the particle along for the continuous order or stranding it, for the discontinuous order. She adopts a three-way distinction among morphological structure, which is invisible to syntax, syntactic structure, which cannot interact with morphological structure, and something in between, which is where the particles are (she cites earlier work by Ishikawa). The fact that the particle can tag along with the verb under head movement makes it somewhat like morphology, while the fact that it can be stranded

makes it somewhat like syntax. She suggests (p. 240) that “the PV is a complex head and [...] therefore verb movement is movement of the complex PV whenever possible.” This ensures that the continuous order is ‘neutral,’ since it stipulates that the verb carries the particle with it across the direct object unless something prevents this from happening (however, it contradicts Chomsky’s 1995 economy condition, cited by Dehé on p. 213, that an attracted element carries along “just enough material for convergence”).

Dehé then attempts to ensure that the particle will be stranded in case the object is backgrounded. She does this by brute force (p. 248, her (69)).

(6) “*Condition on Focus Domains (final version)*:

Within a focus domain, a [+F] focus feature must be bound by some kind of verbal affix if there is a mismatch with regard to focus features.”

The “mismatch” referred to in (6) arises if the backgrounded DP is [–F] and the verbal complex is [+F]. If the verbal complex moves to its usual place outside VP, then the [+F] feature is unbound, according to Dehé. So the particle stays behind to bind it, satisfying (6). As for verbs without particles that have backgrounded objects, Dehé postulates a null particle.

The analysis solves nothing whatsoever, because it essentially restates the problem. The specific notion of binding, the significance of the feature mismatch, and the special property of verbal affixes are all unmotivated. Furthermore, the special pseudo-syntactic status of the particle and the postulated null particle, though Dehé argues for them, are undermotivated.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Though I am unimpressed with the specifics of the syntactic analysis, the book has many positive qualities and makes a real contribution to our understanding of the verb-particle construction. Dehé has carefully shown, for example, that the intonational patterns associated with the different orders are not simple right-edge effects, but exist independently of the presence of material to the right. Her investigation also strongly supports what has been suggested on the basis of less rigorous studies, namely that the alternation is not free but is sensitive to information structure, especially the discourse-newness of the DP (cf. Svenonius 1996). Finally, she provides new evidence regarding the purported difference between idiomatic and compositional verb-particle constructions; in her elicitation task, there was a significantly higher likelihood for compositional verb-particle constructions to appear in the discontinuous order (e.g. *carry the tray in*), compared with idiomatic ones (e.g. *show her car off*) (Dehé attributes this to the availability in the compositional cases of an alternative analysis involving an adverbial, cf. her p. 99, complicating the discussion of the discontinuous order in Chapter 5).

Finally, I note that, though there are a few typos, the finish and copyediting live up to Benjamins’ usual high standards for this series.

#### **References**

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