

The Construction and Motivations for Immobile Verbs in German

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Abstract

German is a complex language with unique syntactic characteristics. In this paper, one of these unique features will be examined, namely, verbs that resist typical patterns of movement. These verbs, called immobile complex verbs, combine a prefix with a verb to communicate additional meaning. Although rules governing the German language require these verbs to move, they remain in their underlying position. This paper will provide a summary of current linguistic discussions surrounding immobile verb structure in German, exploring several key theorists who have attempted to discern what differentiates immobile complex verbs from separable and inseparable verbs within German. Ultimately, this paper will argue that Haider's theories for complex and comparative immobile verbs are not successful in capturing the nature of this phenomenon. Vikner's theory for complex immobile verbs, which argues for the existence of the IP, as well as Meinunger and Freitag's theory for comparative immobile verbs, which capture the cross-linguistic applications of this verb immobility, provide more comprehensive theories of this (non) verb movement.

1 Introduction

German grammar presents linguists with many opportunities to expand linguistic theory regarding phrasal construction and movement rules. For German syntacticians, the language is both a blessing for the material it provides for study and a curse for the complex methodology necessary to explain phrasal grammaticality. Furthermore, these phenomena are not simply restricted to German; other languages contain similar constraints that allow linguists to form conclusions with wider cross-linguistic implications. Examining German immobile verbs contributes significantly to broader theories about the grammar constraints of phrasal structures and verb mobility. In this paper, immobile complex verbs will be discussed as one of Haider's arguments against the appearance of an Inflectional Phrase (IP) in German. Without the use of IPs in German, the language is effectively disregarding one of the elements believed to be a necessity for Universal Grammar, the overarching goal of many linguists to define a set of rules all languages adhere to. Furthermore, immobile verbs following comparative phrases imply an

expansion of c-commanding and a reevaluation of S-structure realization. By studying German immobile verbs, linguists can then extrapolate these rules to other languages to mark patterns and possibly reconfigure previous assumptions about verb movement. Beyond their wider implications, immobile verbs (in both forms) pose an interesting dilemma as they operate outside the boundaries of normal verb movement. Furthermore, explanations for verb immobility typically entail the extension, or omission, of German grammar rules. For this reason, theories addressing immobile verbs must be careful to operate, as best they can, within the boundaries of German grammar rules.

This paper will summarize the various arguments posited by German linguists about the structures that prevent verbs from undergoing expected movement. The examination of immobile verbs will be divided into two categories; first, immobile complex verbs, which are constructed through affixation, and second, verbs restrained from movement in a comparative phrase. The focus will remain on immobile verbs as a parallel consequence of two different grammar processes, rather than as one single constraint applied across two different contexts.

Several concepts and terms will be referenced throughout this paper that should be defined. One such concept is the understanding of X' schema, where the building blocks of a sentence are assembled in ascending order from the most basic element to the most complex. The use of X denotes a placeholder where any word type, such as a noun or verb, can be substituted in to create a different type of phrase; this is known as the “head” of the phrase. There are three basic elements to each X' bar schema: The first denotes the most basic fundamental building block of a word or phrase, referred to as X₀. Next is X', which denotes the level(s) intruding between X₀ and XP, where additional information can be included by linking subordinate XPs. Finally, XP represents the entire phrasal unit and encompasses all the information that descends from that level. The same concept of building blocks explains this paper's references to N₀, which marks the base from which more complex words are built by appending suffixes.

2 Immobile Complex Verbs

Complex verbs are constructed by the addition of prefixes onto a ‘root’ verb to communicate additional meaning. These complex verbs are differentiated by the types of prefixes they include; they are separable, inseparable, or immobile. Separable prefixes are a classification of prefixes that are separated from the ‘root’ verb when it undergoes movement, including prefixes such as ‘*auf-*’ (meaning ‘on’). These prefixes will appear where the verb was positioned in a sentence before it moved. Inseparable prefixes are the opposite of separable prefixes; they must remain attached to the verb as it undergoes movement and they will never appear in the base position after the verb has moved to the left. Prefixes such as ‘*ur-*’ (meaning ‘earlier, older or more primitive’) that combine to the N₀ are considered inseparable. The final type of complex verb is a combination of separable and inseparable prefixes. These

verbs are typically referred to as “immobile” verbs due to their inability to undergo movement despite no visible obstructing factors. An example of an immobile verb would be ‘*üraufführen*,’ meaning to ‘put on (a play) for the very first time,’ which combines both aforementioned prefixes to a verb base (Vikner, 2005).

German is similar to French in that it allows movement of all verbs between head positions, as opposed to English, which only allows the movement of auxiliary verbs to empty head positions. The theory of head movement states that when possible, head movement will occur within the constraints of a language (Murphy, 2021). Since German allows movement of all verbs, not just auxiliary verbs, the formation of complex sentences the verb would be expected to ‘stop off’ in the head of the IP (Inflectional Phrase) and leave a trace as it continues to the head of the Complementizer Phrase, henceforth referred to as the C head. This understanding of head movement is the motivation behind Haider’s argument against the inclusion of an Inflectional Phrase in German X’ theory, which will be discussed below.

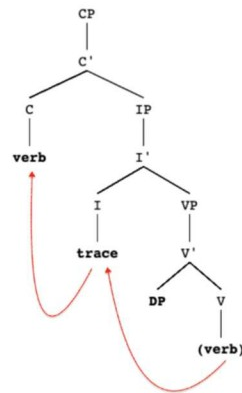


Figure 1: Demonstration of basic verb movement based on Haider’s argument against the inclusion of an Inflectional Phrase (IP). In this tree, movement leaves behind a ‘trace’ to occupy the I head in its movement upwards.

Immobile verbs are an interesting phenomenon that appear not only in German but in several other Germanic languages including Dutch and Swiss German (Vikner, 2005). These verbs, also called complex verbs, pose an interesting dilemma as they are an exception to the constraints established for verbs and their movement. Assuming that immobile verbs function differently, a way to categorize and understand them must be found as to understand why they are an exception to the otherwise universal rule in German that all verbs must undergo movement to a V2 position unless the C head is otherwise occupied (Murphy, 2021). Without this assumption, the entire structure established for German must be scrutinized, and grammatical constraints must be started from scratch. For some linguists, such as Haider,

the solution to this paradox is to introduce a new constraint that blocks the immobile verb's movement into C without affecting other types of verbs.

Haider (2010) argues that immobile verbs are the product of a verb conjoined with multiple prefixes that contradict each other. Returning to our previous example, 'uraufführen' contains both 'ur-' which is inseparable and 'auf-' which is separable. When a separable prefix occurs closer to the root than the inseparable prefix, it causes a paradox in which the verb must leave behind an embedded prefix while keeping the other (inseparable) prefix attached to the verb. Rather than violate the constraint on prefixes, the grammar instead chooses to violate the less important constraint that obligates verbs to move when they are presented with the opportunity (Haider, 2010). This understanding of German X' structure relies on a certain interpretation of immobile verbs as a combination of contrasting prefixes that figuratively 'weigh' the word down so as to prevent it from moving into C.

The ramifications of this theory are widespread. In Haider's construction of a Germanic X' structure, he controversially argues against the Inflectional Phrase (IP), based on the claim that the immobility of certain complex verbs negates its existence. This is due to the fact that if the IP were present in German, immobile verbs would be able to move, either in part or as a whole, to the I head in cases where it is previously empty. The immobile verb would then leave behind the separable prefix in the I position while carrying on to the C position with the inseparable prefix.

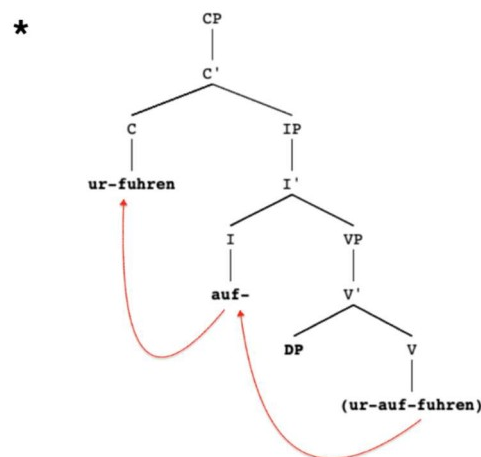


Figure 2: Demonstration of complex verb movement based on the inclusion of the Inflectional Phrase, where the separable prefix would be left behind in the I head. The star demonstrates this sentence is ungrammatical, arguing against this construction in German.

Haider provides several examples in his paper which categorically prove that this theory of movement is impossible. In sentences where the separable prefix has been left in the presumed location of I, even if there are no other violated constraints in German, the sentence will still be considered ungrammatical by a native German speaker (Haider, 2010). Under this interpretation of complex verbs, the IP cannot exist, as it would present an alternative solution to the paradox of verb prefixes that do not necessitate a restriction on verb mobility. This is Haider's argument as to the exclusion of an IP when constructing an X' structure for German, but considering alternative theories about immobile verbs, this entire argument is questionable. Haider only addresses certain examples of complex immobile verbs in his writing and leaves behind many other verbs which do not include the contrasting prefixes he deems necessary in explaining their immobility (Murphy, 2021). Without this theory of restrictions placed upon 'immobile' verbs, Haider lacks a clear piece of evidence used in his argument against IPs, meaning that the possibility of Inflectional Phrases must again be considered in German.

Alternative theories of the functionality and categorization of immobile verbs have been posited in an attempt to resolve the gaps in Haider's theory, or dismiss it entirely. Vikner (2002) criticizes Haider's theory as insufficient to address the breadth and variety of immobile verbs. Vikner lists many examples which lack the paradoxical prefixes that Haider associates with immobility and still are unable to undergo movement. This includes immobile verbs such as '*teilzahlen*', meaning 'to pay in installments' and '*ehebrechen*', meaning 'to break up a marriage or commit adultery' (Vikner, 2005). In both of these examples, the contradictory prefixes that Haider argues prevent these complex immobile verbs from movement are not present, yet they remain in their base position. Instead, Vikner proposes a new categorization of complex verbs which simultaneously expands the X' theory of German and other languages in which immobility occurs like Swiss German and Dutch. He differentiates between V0 and V*, which are similar to Haider's categorization of inseparable prefixes and separable prefixes, respectively. Just as X' theory designates different levels of constituent power, a V* is equivalent to a new constituent that is more powerful than V, but less powerful than V'. This permits a differentiation between inseparable verbs and separable verbs. Only V0 can undergo movement, meaning that within a V* only the V0 portion displays movement. This is demonstrated below:

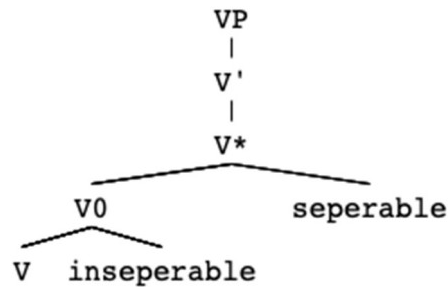


Figure 3: Internal structure of a verb phrase based on Vikner's assertion of a V^* between the V' and V , allowing the movement of the verb and inseparable suffixes while leaving behind separable prefixes.

According to Vikner (2005), immobile verbs differ from these two categorizations because they “are in the intersection” of complex $V0$ and complex V^* verbs (Vikner, 2005, p. 101). Therefore, immobile verbs are unable to undergo movement to the C head, not directly due to the paradox of prefixes. He claims that since immobile verbs are typically composed of separable and inseparable prefixes, which usually indicate whether a complex verb is $V0$ or V^* , it cannot undergo movement in any form. This alternative theory calls Haider's argument for the exclusion of inflectional phrases in German into question. Assuming this lack of movement is not due to an inability to separate the inseparable prefix from the root, verbs could reasonably move through the I to arrive in C without leaving behind a verbal trace.

Furthermore, Haider's theory does not acknowledge the group of complex verbs commonly referred to as pseudo-compounds. Pseudo-compounds are complex verbs created through the back-formation of a compound noun with prefixes. These verbs are similar in appearance to other complex verbs, but their resistance to movement makes their categorization controversial; if they were a single lexical unit they would be expected to move as one unit, and if they were multiple units conjoined together, the prefixes would be separable from the root. In comparison, Vikner's theory addresses these pseudo-compounds since their ambiguity is resolved by assuming these verbs have qualities of both $V0$ and V^* (Vikner, 2005).

Vikner's theory is further affirmed in a study conducted by Chenchen Julio Song attempting to compare and contrast multiple languages. This study provides evidence in German for the expansion of the X' theory to accommodate these ‘in-between’ categories. Song (2016) remarks that inseparable prefixes function as $X0$ but that separable prefixes must exist above $X0$ but below X' in order to accommodate $V2$ movement, prefix topicalization, and inflection. He also describes inseparable prefixes as “more abstract than separable ones in a way similar to Type II [bound prefix + free base] and Type III

[free prefix + free base] prefixes in English” (Song, 2016, p. 4). An example of Type II in English would be ‘disconnect’ and an example of Type III would be ‘overrun.’ He further proposes that there are constraints on the number and forms of prefix attachment, which prevent mobility in instances where the complex verbs create a unit too large to move into the C0 position. Here, Song argues for the existence of a constituent higher than X, while acknowledging that verbs can be ‘weighed down,’ similar to Haider’s contentions about the cause of immobility.

Yet another argument for understanding complex verbs is that particle verbs should be examined based on their morphological makeup rather than as a syntactically complex constituent. Previously, these complex verbs were thought to be restricted from movement, modification, or separation from the base verb, however, Müller (2002) argues that there are certain examples where these circumstances can occur and the sentence will remain grammatical. His argument is not that syntactic constraints are applied exceptionally to immobile verbs, but rather that there are other factors that are falsely attributed to a single grammatical rule. Two examples that Müller gives of these so-called ‘other factors’ are information structuring and contrast establishment. Information structuring dictates the ways in which a sentence must be structured so as to communicate the intended semantic meaning, occasionally at the expense of less important grammatical rules. Contrast establishment dictates a particle’s ability to be modified based on semantic factors. If it were in fact a semantic concern, communicated through the morphological makeup of these complex verbs, then it would circumvent some syntactic constraints to ensure the sentence’s grammaticality (Müller, 2002).

3 Comparative Phrase Immobile Verbs

Immobile verbs can also be created by German comparative phrases. In sentences where a comparative phrase modifies and exists before a verb in the sentence’s base order, that verb will not complete the expected V to C movement that creates the V2 order. Meinunger (2006) gives a number of examples of these phrases, including “*mehr als*” (meaning ‘more than’), “*so gut wie*” (meaning ‘as good as’) and others (55). In sentences with these phrases, the verb cannot move to C as usual, meaning sentences such as (1) “**Der Wert verdoppelte sich nun soviel wie*” are unacceptable (Meinunger, 2006, p. 55). At first glance, this appears nonsensical. In almost any other situation, the same verbs can move to the C position. This indicates that some property of the comparative phrase restricts movement, rather than some condition of the verb itself. Meinunger (2006), Haider (1997), and Freitag (2021) each present different explanations for this phenomenon.

For a syntactic explanation, Meinunger argues that immobility is due to the last word in the phrase. For example, ‘*als*’ in “*mehr als*.” According to his explanation, the blocking elements occur within C, and are therefore functional categories. He then explains how functional words are different from lexical words. Functional words, as they are not independently considered phonological words, need to become part of an actual phonological word, by having a phonological word come afterwards. Meinunger (2006) argues that the last word in the blocking phrase becomes a part of the phonological word that contains the verb, meaning that these two cannot be split up— putting the words in any other order creates a badly formed sentence. For example, in the sentence (2) “*Der Wert hat sich nun soviel wie verdoppelt*” , ‘*soviel wie*’ (meaning ‘as much as’) would be considered a lexical or semantic word, while ‘*wie verdoppelt*’ (meaning ‘as doubled’) is considered a phonological word (Meinunger, 2006, p. 55). Because these three words are divided in this way, ‘*wie*’ cannot be split from ‘*verdoppelt*’ nor ‘*soviel*.’ Furthermore, because these word boundaries are all assigned in base order, the verb cannot move and leave ‘*soviel wie*’ behind. Therefore, Meinunger argues that this is more than just a problem of syntax.

Haider (1997), however, disagrees . He argues that the unacceptability of sentences like example 1 (“**Der Wert verdoppelte sich nun soviel wie*”) are due to a c-command constraint. In an acceptable sentence, such as “*Der Wert hat sich nun soviel wie verdoppelt*,” the adverbial comparative phrase, ‘*soviel wie*’ is an adjunct to the VP containing ‘*verdoppelt*’, and c-commands it (Haider, 1997, p. 23). He argues that the comparative word, such as ‘*mehr*,’ in “*mehr als*”, or ‘*soviel*,’ in “*soviel wie*” is the one that creates the constraint, which is the exact opposite of what Meinunger says. A sentence such as “**Der Wert verdoppelte sich nun soviel wie*” breaks this constraint by having ‘*soviel*’ before the verb. Using Haider’s rules, ‘*soviel wie*’ must c-command ‘*verdoppelte*’ at the surface structure. Surface structure, or S-structure, is the sentence’s final form, the way it is spoken, which can be different from the deep structure, or D-structure, where a sentence is originally generated. Words or phrases often move and change order between the D-structure and the S-structure. Moving the verb to the C position puts it before the comparative phrase, breaking the c-command constraint. Meinunger (2006), however, disagrees with this claim. He argues that in most other cases, there are no S-structure constraints on verb movement, a pillar of Haider’s proposal. If Haider’s theory were correct, previous conclusions drawn about constraints on movement derived from the S-structure in all other contexts would have to be reevaluated. Usually, the D-structure is used to determine whether movement can be allowed, so accepting this theory would mean considering that the S-structure might have a greater impact on movement than previously thought. Also, Meinunger (2006) argues that there are other sentences with different constructions that this rule does not account for. For example, in other constructions, ‘*mehr*’ is permitted to go before the verb, which Haider’s proposal would classify as ungrammatical. Also, there are other constructions that do not allow for verb

movement, which Haider's proposal does not acknowledge. While Haider's proposal is certainly more simple to explain and understand, it is a narrow explanation that does not include data from other sentence constructions. For this reason, Meinunger's theory seems advantageous, as it fits a wider variety of sentences.

Freitag (2021) provides a fresh perspective on this type of immobile verbs. He argues that this restriction on V2 movement is specific only to this type of comparison structure, which, just like Meinunger's theory, contradicts Haider (1997). Freitag demonstrates how the same type of sentences in different languages, including English and Italian, also restrict movement, showing that this is a problem that is not specific to German or to V2 movement (Freitag, 2021). In fact, he states that this pattern is not specific to verbs either, using the example "*Dann war Christopher mehr als betrunken*" (Freitag, 2021, p. 13). This sentence uses the comparative phrase '*mehr als*' with an adjective, '*betrunken*' (meaning 'drunk'). Freitag then shows that "**Betrunken war Christopher mehr als*" is unacceptable, similar to previously discussed examples (Freitag, 2021, p.13). The widespread nature of this problem means that according to Freitag's analysis, explanations for these sentences' unacceptability cannot simply be due to a German-specific syntax constraint. Like Meinunger, Freitag views this as a problem beyond the scope of syntax. He states that movement blocking is due to the requirement of focus marking (Freitag, 2021). Freitag's contention is that the entire verb (or other constituents) must come after the comparative phrase in order for the focus and accent to be applied correctly, and for the semantic meaning to remain intact. Therefore, syntactic operations, such as V2 movement, would make sentences containing these comparative phrases unacceptable. Even verbs with particles, such as '*anschreien*,' (particle '*an*-' meaning 'at' and verb '*schreien*' meaning 'to scream') which leave their particles behind after movement, cannot undergo V2 movement in a sentence with a comparative phrase, as the focus is then only on the particle, rather than the whole verb, which generates an incorrect semantic interpretation (Freitag, 2021, p. 15). This emphasizes the fact that any kind of movement that splits up or changes the order of the comparative phrase and the constituent it modifies (in this case, a verb) will create an unacceptable sentence. This does, however, permit the movement of the entire phrase that contains both the comparative phrase and the phrase it modifies.

Each of these three perspectives provides a different explanation for the unacceptability of V2 verb movement in sentences with comparative phrases. Haider's explanation is the most simple, concerned only with syntax. Having a constraint that requires the comparative word to c-command the VP that it modifies solves the problem in a direct and easily digestible manner. However, this theory was amended by Freitag, and directly refuted by Meinunger. While it may apply to isolated cases, it is hard to accept a constraint that cannot be generalized to the entire German language when more data is collected.

Therefore, both Freitag and Meinunger's theories seem to be more likely, despite their intricacies. Freitag's claim can be generalized not only in German, but cross-linguistically. His analysis that the focus marker must come after the comparative phrase and include the whole verb has remnants of Haider's theory, in that it requires the phrase being modified to come after the comparative phrase (and essentially be c-commanded by the comparative phrase). However, because he is concerned with comparative phrases, rather than comparative words like '*mehr*,' Freitag's theory accounts for Meinunger's examples where the comparative word, when not a member of a comparative phrase, occurs after the phrase it modifies. As it does not only involve syntax, this contention also satisfies Meinunger's criticism of Haider's theory, that S-structure does not affect verb movement in other cases. Since this is a case where the focus assignment affects the acceptable syntax, rather than the other way around, the acceptability is therefore not determined by syntactic structures. Meinunger's analysis bears similarities to Freitag's analysis. Although a different mechanism, both are examples of syntax interacting with other aspects of the sentence, in this case, phonology. Meinunger successfully satisfies his own criticisms of Haider's theory, while creating a theory that accounts for specific cases of the immobile verbs following comparative phrases. He does so without creating a theory that has unwanted, incorrect implications for other sentence constructions.

4 Conclusion

Despite possessing similar surface level attributes, the two types of verbs discussed in this paper have very different causes for their inability to perform the V to C movement. Neither has a firm, agreed-upon theory as to why they behave in this way, but each suggested theory can provide a little bit of insight into the German language.

In the first section, several theories were proposed for complex immobile verbs. Haider's theory, that verbs with multiple prefixes are immobile due to the lack of an IP in German would require many to rethink their understanding of German syntax. However, Haider's theory lacks thoroughness. In contrast, Vikner's theory, which would allow for the existence of the IP, emerges as the more likely theory.

In comparative phrase immobile verbs, Haider proposed a c-command restraint that would have a major implication on the way comparative words such as '*mehr*' could be used in a sentence. However, once again, he failed to consider other examples outside of those that worked for his theory, which allowed Meinunger and Freitag to propose their own theories, which directly refute Haider's contentions. Both of their theories allow for application not only in specific examples covered, but also throughout other German constructions, and in the case of Freitag's argument, even throughout other languages.

In order to know the cause of these immobile verbs, more research must be conducted with an expanded data set. However, in the meantime, the theories that have been proposed allow for the exploration of this topic and other related topics in the structure of German. Each theory helps to give a possible answer to a complicated problem and creates an area for future research to pursue, leading to a greater understanding of the German language.

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