

Simplex-LVC pairs with experiencer objects in German: How causativity can ‘transfer us into excitement’

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German light verb constructions (LVCs) are said to have corresponding simplex verbs (SVs), e.g. *zur Aufführung bringen*, lit. ‘bring to performance’ vs. *aufführen* ‘perform’ (e.g. Polenz, 2008). However, it is under discussion whether LVCs and their corresponding simplex verbs are synonyms (e.g. Glatz, 2006; Polenz, 2008), which leads to the question: Why should German have two different syntactic types of predicates that denote the very same event?

We address this question in an intensively discussed lexical domain: Object-experiencer predicates such as *frighten* or *worry* are known to show several peculiarities at the syntax-semantics interface since the study of Belletti & Rizzi (1988). It is under debate to what extent object-experiencer verbs can be classified as agentive or causative; it seems that some of them frequently occur with human, and thus potentially agentive, subjects, while others strongly prefer situations as subjects, and that there are no clear-cut causativity distinctions.

German features several patterns of object-experiencer LVCs, of which the pattern *in N versetzen* (lit. ‘transfer into N’) is particularly productive. It works with numerous nouns denoting emotions, many of which are derived from object-experiencer SVs. We argue that there is a systematic difference in usage and meaning between object-experiencer SVs and corresponding LVCs. It can be accounted for by assuming that the LVC constitutes causative marking, which alternates with the SV as unmarked counterparts.

Our argumentation is based on a corpus study, in which ten pairs of *in N versetzen* object-experiencer LVCs and corresponding SVs were investigated in the corpus DeReKo (Leibniz-IDS, 2021). The database consists of 100 randomly collected and manually analyzed sentences for each SV and LVC. We annotated the syntactic and semantic type of the arguments of the predicates, presence and type of modification, coordination, aspectual properties, and the voice construction. Out of ten annotation parameters, the semantic type of the non-experiencer argument (values: animate; concrete; abstract; event; state; 0) turned out to be the most influential.

The quantitative analysis of our annotation results shows that differences between the LVC and SV patterns are visible in both subject and object type frequencies. We present a logistic mixed-effects model, predicting the choice of SV vs. LVC by the semantic annotation parameters, influenced by the random effects of lexical stem and syntactic types of the arguments. The model explains the observations that collective object NPs favour LVCs (1), while generic object NPs favour SVs (2), and that animate subjects strongly prefer LVCs (1), while eventualities prefer SVs.

- (1) *Der österreichische Saxophonist [...] versetzt das Publikum in Begeisterung.*
the austrian saxophonist transfers the audience in enthusiasm
‘The Austrian saxophonist fills the audience with enthusiasm.’
(A07/OKT.08550)
- (2) *Andere Fahrzeuge [...] begeistern [...] sportliche Lenker mit dem, was sie [...] zu bieten haben.*
other vehicles thrill racy drivers with that what they to offer
have
‘Other vehicles delight racy drivers with the features they offer.’
(A97/JUN.07770)

Based on the quantitative analysis and semantic tests on qualitative data, we classify the choice of the LVC over the corresponding SV as marking of causative semantics. We show why the LVC should be considered the marked alternation counterpart, and that it entails culminating causation of an emotion regardless of properties of its arguments, while non-causative readings and non-culminating causation readings are available for SVs.

Our study addresses the much-disputed question about the nature of German LVC-SV pairs, connects an empirical, quantitative study with a question of theoretical value, and contributes to the debate about the semantics of object-experiencer predicates.

References

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