
The acceptability of German noun-verb compounds in V2 – an experimental approach

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Complex German verbs fall into two categories: prefix verbs which are always inseparable and particle verbs which are split when they occur in verb-second (V2) position. However, there is a group of verbs which has been described as resisting this classification: some complex verbs of the structure N + V – such as *bergsteigen* ‘mountaineer’ or *ehebrechen* ‘commit adultery’ – have been described as being neither separable nor inseparable and instead have therefore been termed as non-V2 verbs which are unable to appear in V2 altogether. Competing theoretical accounts include the attribution of this behaviour to morphological structure (Freywald & Simon 2007), degree of lexicalisation (Fortmann 2007) or usage-based factors such as frequency (Forche 2020). However, empirical support for those theories remains insufficient: previous studies have often tested only a small number of verbs with no use of control conditions or full statistical analyses. Disagreement between authors about which verbs should be classified as non-V2 in the first place further highlights the need for more data and suggests that there may be a high degree of individual variation in speakers’ judgements of verbs’ ability to appear in V2. To address these gaps, this study presents a large-scale acceptability judgment experiment that compares 30 potential non-V2 verbs which have been discussed in the theoretical literature with canonical particle and prefix verbs. Sentences were presented as audio recordings to avoid orthographic bias and participants rated both split and non-split versions in V2 contexts. Linear mixed models and cluster analyses were used to investigate variation at both item and participant levels. Findings reveal that the tested potential non-V2 verbs do not constitute a homogeneous class. Ratings show significant item- and speaker-level variation with many verbs receiving intermediate scores and some being judged similarly to canonical verbs. The results challenge a classification of the tested verbs as a distinct grammatical category and suggest that individual grammars and a complex interplay of item-level factors better capture the observed patterns. These findings have implications for the classification of complex German verbs, the use of acceptability judgment data for linguistic theory building and the treatment of complex verbs in orthographic conventions.

References: • Forche, C. R. (2020). *NonV2-Verben im Deutschen*. Springer. • Fortmann, C. (2015). Verbal pseudo-compounds in German. In P. O. Müller et al. (eds.), *Word formation*. De Gruyter, 594–610. • Freywald, U., & Simon, H. J. (2007). Wenn die Wortbildung die Syntax stört. In M. Kauffer & R. Métrich (eds.) *Verbale Wortbildung im Spannungsfeld zwischen Wortsemantik, Syntax und Rechtschreibung*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 181–194.