Composing the meaning of light verb constructions – a frame account

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Complex predicates formed of a semantically “light” verbal head and a noun or verb which contributes the major part of the meaning are frequently referred to as ‘light verb constructions’ (LVCs). Sequences of this type have been attested for various and typologically unrelated languages such as Japanese, Persian, Italian, English, Dutch and Hindi/Urdu. Based on the definition above, the so-called German ‘support-verb construction’ (‘Funktionsverbgefüge’; von Polenz 1963, Winhart 2005 among others) can also be characterized as a light verb construction. In this construction, illustrated in (1), a variety of frequent verbs functions as light verbs which are combined with NPs/PPs carrying the major part of the meaning.

(1) die Erlaubnis geben ‘give permission’, zur Verzweiflung bringen ‘drive to despair’, Beachtung finden ‘be taken notice of’, eine Bemerkung machen ‘make a remark’, aus dem Umlauf ziehen ‘withdraw from circulation’

Although the meaning of an LVC is often conventionalized and idiomatic, a large number of light verb constructions is semantically compositional (Nunberg et al. 1994). One piece of evidence supporting such a compositional view is that LVCs form “families” (Nunberg et al. 1994, Sag et al. 2002). Thus, in instances of LVCs formed with a specific verb regular interpretational patterns can be identified as illustrated below for LVCs with the posture verb stehen ‘stand’:

(2) unter Beobachtung stehen ‘to be under surveillance’, vor dem Ruin stehen ‘to face ruin’, in Blüte stehen ‘to be in blossom’, außer Zweifel stehen ‘to be beyond doubt’

In line with the heavy use of stehen, LVCs formed with this verb express stative predications (‘being in a certain state’). Moreover, parallel to heavy stehen the LV selects a PP with a spatial preposition specifying a particular relation between the meaning of the PP-internal noun and the subject. For instance, unter N stehen ‘under N stand’ means ‘being undergoer of a process denoted by N’ so that unter Beobachtung stehen can be paraphrased by the passive ‘being observed.’ By contrast, vor N stehen ‘in front of the N stand’ has the interpretation that someone is almost in the state denoted by N. In the third example, in indicates that the state expressed by the noun holds of the subject referent whereas in the fourth example außer is used to express that the state predication does not hold of the subject referent.

The different uses of posture verbs are well-described from a cognitive as well as a formal/representational point of view (Gibbs et. al 1994, Kaufmann 1995, Lemmens 2005, Gamerschlag et al. 2013 among others). In the talk, we will present a case study of LVCs with the posture verb stehen ‘stand’ which builds on the insights of these works. Starting from the frame analysis of the literal uses of posture verbs proposed by Gamerschlag et al. (2013), we will show how the meaning components of the literal uses are systematically exploited in the different interpretational patterns – meaning families –
of *stehen*-LVCs. In particular, we will discuss the effect of the choice of the preposition and how it interacts with the meaning of the LV and the noun.

Since the variant of frame semantics adopted in our analysis allows for a uniform representation of nouns, verbs and prepositions (Barsalou 1992, Petersen 2007), we can make explicit reference to all the relevant meaning components of LVCs in a single format.

**References**


