Naturally!

Linguistic studies in honour of Wolfgang Ulrich Dressler presented on the occasion of his 60th birthday

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From syntax to morphology

Separable complex verbs

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1. Introduction

Separable complex verbs (SCV's) have become a focus of interest in recent discussions on the demarcation between morphology and syntax, both within German and Dutch linguistics (German: Stiebels & Wunderlich 1994, Olsen 1998; Dutch: Booij 1990, Neeleman & Weerman 1993). In this article, I will discuss SCV's in Dutch, and argue that their behaviour can be understood in terms of grammaticalisation, in particular as the gradual transition of syntactic constructs into morphological ones.

Let me first give some examples from Dutch (the non-verbal part of a separable complex verb can be a preposition, an adjective, a noun, an adverb, and even a lexicalized phrase):

(1) Hans belde zijn moeder op
    Hans phoned his mother up
    'Hans called his mother'
    Jan maakte het huis schoon
    John made the house clean
    'John cleaned the house'
    Rebecca speelt piano
    Rebecca plays piano
    'Rebecca plays the piano'

The non-verbal part is called a 'particle' if it is also used as adposition; however, the notion 'particle' here has no theoretical status. In this paper I will focus on the class of particle verb combinations.

In Booij (1990) I argued that constructs such as op bellen 'to phone' are not words, but have phrasal status: semantically they function as units, but they can be split up by Verb Second, and hence they are not words. They are also split up in past participle formation (op-ge-beld) and in infinitive forms (op te bellen). On the other hand, the strong bond between the two parts is clear from Verb Raising which can raise either only the verb, or the combination:
(2) dat Suzanne haar moeder wilde op bellen /op wilde bellen
that Suzanne her mother wanted up call /up wanted call
'that Suzanne wanted to call her mother'

This contrasts with normal phrases like the VP romantisch maken ‘to make romantic’ where the two parts are always split:

(3) dat Hans de slaapkamer *wilde romantisch maken / romantisch wilde maken
that Hans the bedroom wanted romantic make / romantic wanted make
'that Hans wanted to make the bedroom romantic'

The fact that a particle verb like op bellen can be raised as a unit shows that it can form a syntactic unit before Verb Raising is applied.

Some of the particles involved also appear as real, i.e. inseparable prefixes. Below, I give some examples:

(4) prefix example
    aan- aanteken ‘to worship’
    achter- achterhalen ‘to recover’
    door- doorlopen ‘to pass through’
    mis- mislukken ‘to fail’
    om- omringen ‘to surround’
    onder- onderbreken ‘to interrupt’
    over- overdenken ‘to think over’
    voor- voorvoelen ‘to anticipate’

In the prefixed verbs, main stress is on the verbal stem, whereas the particle verbs have main stress on the particle.

2. The grammatical status of SCV’s

There are two different analyses of Dutch SCV’s, a syntactic and a morphological one. In the syntactic analysis the particle is seen as the head of a resultative ‘small clause’, an embedded clause without finite verb in which the particle functions as predicate (Bennis 1992). In the morphological analysis, SCV’s are interpreted as complex verbs with a special property, the separability of particle and verb (Neeleman & Weerman 1993). The two analyses can be illustrated as follows for the verb phrase het huiswerk afraken ‘to finish homework’:

(5) a. syntactic analysis
    \[
    \text{[[het huiswerk]_{NP} [af]_{VP} [maken]_{V}]}_{VP}
    \]

b. morphological analysis
    \[
    \text{[[het huiswerk]_{NP} [af]_{V} [maken]_{V}]}_{VP}
    \]

There are two arguments for the syntactic analysis: it explains the separability of SCV’s, and it correctly predicts that only those words can function as particles that also function as predicates. For instance, the preposition uit ‘out’ can function as predicate, as in Het boek is uit ‘The book has appeared’, and consequently it can also functions as the particle of an SCV. On the other hand,
the preposition *naar* 'to' cannot function as a predicate, and does not occur as particle either, as predicted by the syntactic analysis.

The syntactic analysis does not express directly that a word sequence such as *af maken* can behave as a unit with respect to Verb Raising. It is therefore assumed that the particle can be incorporated into the verb by means of Chomsky-adjunction:

(6) \[ ([\text{het huiswerk}] \text{NP} \ [\text{af}] \text{PrtP} \ [\text{[af]} \text{PrtP} \ [\text{[maken]} \text{V}] \text{VP}) \]

The arguments for a morphological analysis pertain to the unitary nature of the SCV's: they often have an idiomatic meaning, and they function as input for word formation. Moreover, particles cannot be topicalized, unlike (other) predicates of small clauses; compare (bold indicates focus):

(7) \begin{align*}
\text{Groen} & \quad \text{verf ik die deur niet} \\
& \quad \text{Green paint I that door not} \\
& \quad \text{`I will not paint that door green'} \\
\text{Af} & \quad \text{maak ik dat huiswerk niet} \\
& \quad \text{Off make I that homework not} \\
& \quad \text{`I will not finish that homework'} \\
*\text{Op} & \quad \text{bel ik mijn moeder niet} \\
& \quad \text{On phone I my mother not} \\
& \quad \text{`I will not phone my mother'}
\end{align*}

It is lexicalised SCV's like *ophellen* 'to phone', in which *op* has no lexical meaning, and only expresses telic aspect, that do not allow for topicalization of the particle. In a syntactic analysis, such SCV's have the status of phrasal idioms that are listed in the lexicon.

The fact that SCV's are inputs for word formation does not prove that they are words rather than phrases: phrases can also feed word formation (Booij 1990). So this observation does not help us in deciding between the two analyses.

The main problem for the morphological analysis is the separability of particle and verb which has been illustrated above. The question arises how we can differentiate here between particles and (real) prefixes that cannot be separated, as in the minimal pair *vóorkomen* 'to occur' versus *voorókomen* 'to prevent'. Moreover, if we allow for prefixes to be separated from their verbal stems, we violate an important universal principle, the principle of Lexical Integrity.

Therefore, we have to distinguish formally between prefixed words and SCV's. Prefixed words are morphologically complex, but their internal structure is not accessible to syntax, and hence a prefix cannot be separated from its stem. SCV's, on the other hand, are basically syntactic constructs: they may arise through the syntactic operation of Chomsky-adjunction, and thus lead to a kind of structure that we may call 'syntactic compounding'. These constructs often lexicalize, and are therefore stored in the lexicon. Thus, SCV's are syntactic
constructs that are available via two routes: the syntactic route (Chomsky-adjunction of the predicates of resultative clauses) in the case of semantically transparant SCV's, and the lexical route in the case of idiomatic SCV's.

There is one problem that remains to be solved, given the analysis defended so far: how come that particles often behave semantically like prefixes in that they do not have a lexical, but a grammatical (e.g. aspectual) meaning, even in newly coined SCV's? In order to get more insight into this issue, we have to take a diachronic perspective.

3. Reinterpretation and grammaticalisation

A number of particles are prefix-like in that they have acquired an aspectual meaning. For instance, the particle door expresses continuative aspect. It can be added to all verbs that express a durative action, for instance

(8) dooreten 'to continue eating'
doorgaan 'lit. to continue going, to go on'
doortoveren 'to continue swimming'
doorgevaderen 'to continue having a meeting'

The productivity of this type of SCV cannot be explained by assuming that these SCV's are created by means of syntactic adjunction of the predicate of a small clause. For instance, in a sentence such as:

(9) De directeuren vergaderen vanavond door

'a resultative interpretation of door as expressing the effect of the action vergaderen is simply impossible. Door is a purely aspectual morpheme here. This suggests that what is involved here is grammaticalisation:

(10) [T]he process whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions, and, once grammaticalized, continue to develop new grammatical functions.

(Hopper & Traugott 1993: xv)

Grammaticalisation usually implies bleaching of the original lexical meaning into a more abstract meaning. For instance, the meaning of the particle af is now that of telic aspect. This also explains why particles cannot be topicalized: they do not have an independent lexical meaning that can be focused upon.

Hopper & Traugott (1993: 33) also point out that the mechanisms through which grammaticalisation arises are always "reanalysis primarily, and analogy secondarily". In the case of the particle door this word has first been reanalysed as part of a syntactically complex verbal expression, which subsequently got the function of aspectual marker. In other words, the sequence of resultative predicate and verb that occurs in surface structure as the result of a syntactic operation of adjunction has become a construction of its own, a pattern [Particle V]v, in which a number of words can be inserted into the particle position, and then express a particular aspect.
In other words, as has also been stressed in recent work by Jackendoff (e.g. Jackendoff 1997), surface constructions cannot be considered as epiphenomena, as in rule-based classical generative grammar, but have a psychological reality of their own. In Jackendoff's view, phrase structure rules may be reanalyzed as constructions, and thus as lexical entries with open positions. This makes, as Jackendoff argues, the distinction between lexicon and syntax blurry. SCV's are a category of expressions that form a perfect illustration of this point since they have both syntactic and lexical properties. For instance, the construction [door V] can be seen as a lexical item with the meaning 'to go on Ving' in which the V-position is an open one that can be filled by each action verb.

This view of particles as the results of grammaticalisation is supported by the diachronic data of Dutch: many predicates not only became particles, but also developed even further into prefixes. This further grammaticalisation also has the effect of semantic bleaching. The following Dutch words can be used as separate words, as particles, and as prefixes:

(11) aan, achter, door, mis, om, onder, vol, voor, weer

Consequently, there is a number of minimal pairs, for instance in the case of door, onder and over:

(12) SCV      Prefixed verb

doorlopen 'to walk on'      doorlopen 'to pass'
doorbreken 'to break through'  doorbreken 'to break'
ondergaan 'to go down'      ondergaan 'to undergo'
overkomen 'to come over'       overkomen 'to happen to someone'

As Overdiep (1937: 245) already pointed out, the change from particle to prefix implies a loss of lexical meaning: the prefixes only have an aspectual meaning. The particles have a more concrete, spatial meaning than their prefixal counterparts. In sum, the following historical development can be reconstructed for Dutch:

(13) word > word/particle > word/particle/prefix > prefix

The following morphemes illustrate the different categories:

(14) word:       green 'green' (as in groen verven 'to paint green')
    word/particle:     op
    word/particle/prefix:  achter, door, mis, om, vol
    prefix:           be-, ver-, ont-, ge-

The prefixes be- and ver- derive historically from the words bij (modern Dutch bij 'at') and voor 'for' respectively. Note that both bij and voor are also used as particles.

This diachronic pattern is also in conformity with the hypothesis of 'unidirectionality': grammaticalisation develops into one direction, that of increasing grammaticalisation (Hopper & Traugott 1993: 94). This hypothesis is supported by the available data concerning the relation between separable and inseparable complex verbs in Dutch, as Van Loey (1976) has shown: many
verbs which are inseparable in modern Dutch, were separable verbs in Middle Dutch, but the inverse situation does not occur. Some of the examples from Middle Dutch given in Van Loey (1976) are the following, which are inseparable verbs in modern Dutch:

(15) achtervolgen 'to run after'
omringen 'to surround'
omsingelen 'to surround'
overbruggen 'to bridge'
overvallen 'to attack suddenly'

In the Middle Dutch sources, the infinitive particle te and the participle prefix ge- occur after the particle, just like the negative particle en, which shows that these verbs are separable. Note also that these verbs still have a locative, concrete interpretation, whereas they often have a more abstract meaning in modern Dutch.

4. Conclusions
Separable complex verbs cannot be interpreted as morphological constructs: they are syntactic constructs. This type of syntactic construct arose from resultative small clauses, but it got a life of its own: the particles became aspectual markers that can be used productively. The development of these SCV’s is a case of grammaticalisation. It also shows that syntactic surface constructs are not just epiphenomena, the effects of syntactic rules, but can start a life of their own, and result in the rise of syntactic constructs that are lexical idioms with open places.

Bibliography


