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Janneke ter Beek – *University of Groningen*
Particle verbs trigger cluster formation

j.ter.beek@rug.nl

In the Germanic OV-languages, infinitival complementation may give rise to cluster formation, in which the verbs form an adjacent sequence in the right periphery. In Evers' (1975) seminal work, this is derived by Verb Raising (VR), which adjoins an embedded infinitive to the dominating verb:

(1)   dat   hij [Nederlands t_i]   begint   te $leren_i$
        that   he   Dutch   begins   to   learn
        '…that he begins to learn Dutch.'
        DUTCH (Van Riemsdijk 1998; 642)

According to Evers (1975), Dutch particle verbs do not trigger VR of the embedded infinitive:

(2)   * dat   hij [Nederlands t_i] **aan-**   vangt   te $leren_i$
        that   he   Dutch   on-   catches   to   learn
        '…that he begins to learn Dutch.'
        (Van Riemsdijk 1998; 642)

This contrast between simple verbs and particle verbs in triggering cluster formation has been observed many times since, and it is occasionally offered as support for the operation VR (Van Riemsdijk 1998; Wurmbrand 2001; Neeleman 1994, among others).

I show that this is not justified, as there is a counterexample to the generalization, and moreover, the scarcity of VR-triggering particle verbs (VR a descriptive term from here) could be explained differently.

The counterexample to the generalization that particle verbs cannot trigger cluster formation is *mee-helpen* 'help' (literally: with help). The *infinitivus pro participio* effect, by which the expected past participle surfaces as an infinitive, proves that (3) involves a verb cluster:

(3)   De   brandweer   heft   **mee-**   helpen   zoeken
        The   fire.department has   with-   help   search
        'The fire department has helped search.'

        (from: www.politie.nl/zuid-holland-zuid/nieuws/060605_hoeksche_waard.asp)

I believe there are two reasons for the near-absence of VR triggering particle

verbs, both of which argue against excluding them as VR triggers in principle.

First, the VR triggers roughly correspond to the restructuring verbs cross linguistically. Perhaps most particle verbs fail to trigger VR not because of the particle, but because meaningwise, they are unlikely restructuring predicates.

Once this factor is controlled for, only a handful of predicates remain. Besides *mee-helpen* 'help', only *aan-vangen* 'begin' (literally: on-catch), *op-houden* 'stop' (literally: up-hold) and *door-gaan* 'continue' (literally: through-go) might be expected to be restructuring verbs.

I suggest that the fact that the latter three do not create clusters, is accidental. The VR triggers form a natural class, but to some extent, it is arbitrary which verbs are actually in it, just like cross linguistically, the exact set of restructuring verbs is to some degree arbitrary. Thus, it seems just a coincidence that *beginnen* 'begin' is a VR-trigger, but its (near) synonym *starten* 'begin' is not. The fact that the particle verb *aan-vangen* 'begin' is not a VR-trigger could be a coincidence as well.

Similarly for *op-houden* and *door-gaan*: it is unclear whether it is the particle that explains that they are not VR triggers, because the (near) synonyms *stoppen* 'stop' and *continueren* 'continue' are not VR triggers either.

In conclusion, I challenged the claim that VR triggering particle verbs do not exist, and proposed that the near absence of such verbs could be explained partly by the low incidence of particle verbs with the relevant meaning, and partly by lexical accident. Consequently, it is questionable whether the near absence of VR triggering particle reveals anything about the derivation of verb clusters.

References

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