

# Possessive (Non-)Alternations in Idioms

Manfred Sailer  
Universität Frankfurt a.M.

Recently there has been a growing interest in the study of idioms that contain a possessive, such as in English *keep one's cool* which is discussed in Kay & Sag (ms.).

Richter & Sailer (2009) point out that German has a variety of possessive expressions that can be considered truth-conditionally equivalent. In particular there are the following four ways to express the idea of me putting powder on my nose:

- (1) a. Ich habe die Nase gepudert. (Def N)  
I have the nose powdered 'I powdered my nose.'
- b. Ich habe mir die Nase gepudert. (Dat Def N)  
I have myself the nose powdered
- c. Ich habe meine Nase gepudert. (Poss N)  
I have my nose powdered
- d. Ich habe mir meine Nase gepudert. (Dat Poss N)  
I have myself my nose powdered

While there are idioms with any of these four possessive patterns, the possible alternations are heavily restricted. Two of these alternation patterns are illustrated below, where # signals the unavailability of the intended idiomatic interpretation:

- (2) a. Er hält den Mund. (Def N)  
he holds the mouth 'He keeps his mouth shut.'
  - b. Er hält seinen Mund. (Poss N)
  - c. #Er hält sich den Mund. (Dat Def N)
  - d. #Er hält sich seinen Mund. (Dat Poss N)
- (3) a. Da läuft mir das Wasser im Mund zusammen. (Dat Def N)  
there runs me the water in.the mouth together 'My mouth is watering'
  - b. #Da läuft das Wasser im Mund zusammen. (Def N)
  - c. Da läuft das Wasser in meinem Mund zusammen. (Poss N)
  - d. #Mir läuft das Wasser in meinem Mund zusammen. (Dat Poss N)

Nunberg et al. (1994) and, more recently, Kay & Sag (ms.) argue that whether an idiom may occur in a particular syntactic construction depends on the idiom's semantics and also on the semantic and pragmatic conditions of the construction. The examples in (1) suggest that the four possessive constructions are freely interchangeable. The patterns found with idioms in (2) and (3), consequently, pose an important challenge.

I will show that there are in fact semantic differences between the four possessive constructions in (1) and that these can be used to account for the alternation patterns available (and non-available) for idioms.

I will compare the German patterns with what has been reported on English. This will corroborate the point made in Mateu & Espinal (2007) that the grammar of idioms strongly reflects the grammar of non-idiomatic combinations in a language.

## References

- Kay, Paul & Ivan A. Sag. ms. A lexical theory of phrasal idioms. Available at: [www1.icsi.berkeley.edu/~kay/idioms-submitted.pdf](http://www1.icsi.berkeley.edu/~kay/idioms-submitted.pdf).
- Mateu, Jaume & Teresa Espinal. 2007. Argument structure and compositionality in idiomatic constructions. *The Linguistic Review* 24. 33–59.
- Nunberg, Geoffrey, Ivan A. Sag & Thomas Wasow. 1994. Idioms. *Language* 70. 491–538.
- Richter, Frank & Manfred Sailer. 2009. Phraseological clauses in constructional HPSG. In Stefan Müller (ed.), *Proceedings of the 16th international conference on head-driven phrase structure grammar, göttingen 2009*, 297–317. Stanford: CSLI Publications. [cslipublications.stanford.edu/HPSG/2009/richter-sailer.pdf](http://cslipublications.stanford.edu/HPSG/2009/richter-sailer.pdf).