Spatialization and poly-constructionalization in German: The emergence of 'Come to mind' and Light verb constructions

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This paper investigates multi-word expressions which are formed following the pattern of the VP *in* 'in' N *kommen* 'come'. This structure is encountered in German in at least three different ways with respect to its semantics and its degree of idiomaticity. The diachronically primary construction (1) is almost completely schematic in the sense that it denotes any change of location of a subject: $[P_{loc} \, N_{loc} \, V_{movement}]$. 'Come to mind' constructions as in (2) are semi-specified and more restricted with respect to the verbal and the prepositional slot. They lack a concrete local reading and denote abstract entities like mental content: $[in \, N_{mind} \, kommen]$. Light verb constructions as in (3) are usually considered almost fully specified, as the meaning of the whole structure is non-compositional (see e.g. Fillmore 1987, 1997; Fleischhauer/Neisani 2020): $[in \, N_{event} \, kommen]$.

(1)   *in das Hotel kommen* 'enter the hotel', lit. 'come into the hotel'
(2)   *in den Sinn kommen* 'come to mind', lit. 'come into the mind'
(3)   *in Bewegung kommen* 'come into motion'

Both 'Come to mind' constructions (2) and Light verb constructions (3) result from ontological metaphors in that they create spatialized target domain entities: MINDS / STATES ARE CONTAINERS (see Lakoff & Johnson 2003). They nevertheless differ strongly with respect to their diachronic development: Light verb constructions consisting of the verb *kommen* are not attested until Early New High German and still continue to find high productivity (see Fleischhauer & Hartmann 2021). In contrast, 'Come to mind' constructions are already attested extensively in Old High German. Using data from six periods of German (Deutsch Diachron Digital: Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch, c. 750–1050; Referenzkorpus Mittelhoch-deutsch, c. 1050–1350; Referenzkorpus Frühneuhochdeutsch, c. 1350–1650; and data from Deutsches Textarchiv, c. 1701–1800, 1801–1900;), the study attempts to answer what semantic, formal, and structural reasons can be found for the different behavior of the two constructions in their emergence and persistence.

It will be argued that a more complex meta construction can be defined that serves as a primary productive source for the poly-constructionalization of the pattern. Thereby, a specific subject position must be added, which is connected to the element in the noun position via a semantic link: $[Subj_{sem1/2} \, V_{movement} \, P_{loc} \, N_{sem2/2}]$. While agentive subjects are combined only with concrete nouns, non-agentive subjects first occur only with abstract/eventive nouns. The data shows that only a few instances are not constrained by these restrictions and represent a marginal phenomenon in the early history of German. The diachronically different behavior of the individual constructions can be explained on the basis of available lexical and morphological items at different points in time. While the number of mental content nouns reaches its peak in Old High German, German Light verb constructions do not appear until new kinds of deverbal word formation were established from Middle High German onwards. This constructional approach allows to develop a unified explanation for all of the above mentioned phenomena without having to consider various desemanticization and grammaticalization processes otherwise assumed (see e.g. Fleischhauer/Hartmann 2021).

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