

Possessive alternations in German idioms

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German has at least four ways to express a possessor-possessum relation and, in many situations, these can be varied relatively freely. I will explore to which extend these possessive constructions occur with idioms such as "jm. das Herz brechen" (break s.o.'s heart).

1) Alex broke your heart.

- a. Alex hat dir das Herz gebrochen. (Dative + Definite)
- b. Alex hat dein Herz gebrochen. (Possessive)
- c. Alex hat dir dein Herz gebrochen. (Dative + Possessive)
- d. #Alex hat das Herz gebrochen. (Definite)

2) This got under my skin.

- a. Das ging mir unter die Haut. (Dative + Definite)
- b. #Das ging unter meine Haut. (Possessive)
- c. #Das ging mir unter meine Haut. (Dative + Possessive)
- d. Das ging unter die Haut. (Definite)

The presentation proceeds in the following steps: First, the possessive structures of German will be described independently of idioms. Second, I will introduce the framework of my analysis, both for the possessive constructions and for idioms in general. Third, the analysis of possessive idioms will be presented. I will derive three expectations from my analysis and check these against a collection of 150 German possessive idioms. The expectations will be confirmed by the vast majority of idioms. I will show how individual exceptions can be modeled in a way that clearly marks them as more exceptional than the other idioms. The chosen framework makes the prediction that there is no idiom allowing for the constellations in (1c) but not (1a). This predication is fully confirmed by the data.