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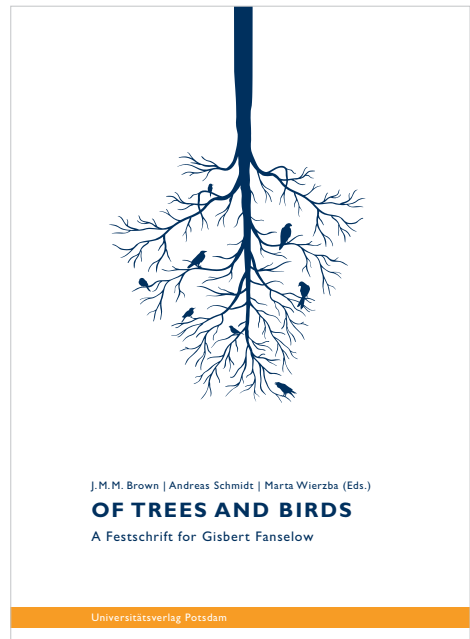
### **Of trees and birds**

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# Splits and Birds

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ὄρνις γενέσθαι βούλομαι λιγύφθογγος ἀηδών.  
'As for a bird, I wish to become a tuneful nightingale.'  
(Aristophanes, *Birds* 1380)

## 1 Abstract

Birds are a unique class of animals, splits are a special phenomenon in syntax. Birds and splits are certainly not a homogeneous pair, but two persons in the history of thought exploited the relations between them. The first one was an Ancient Greek poet, who wrote the famous Comedy *Birds*, performed at 414 BC during the City Dionysia in Athens. The second a contemporary writer, born 1959 in the City of Landshut, a historical town along the Isar in Bavaria. Aristophanes and Gisbert Fanselow, two persons who have hardly ever met, what do they share in common? After scrutinizing the various facets of the interplay between splits and birds, the present study concludes that this coincidence cannot be due to chance, it can only be traced back to properties that are hard-wired in Universal Grammar.

## 2 The puzzle

Split noun phrases are a syntactic phenomenon, birds a biological category. The reader may think that these two types of entity do not share anything in common – apart of the mere fact of inhabiting trees. A Greek poet of the 5 century BC, under the name of Aristophanes, wrote a comedy devoted to *Birds*, with the participation of *jays*, *crows*, *francolins*,

*alcyons, gallinules, kestrels, dabchicks, buntings, bearded vultures, woodpeckers, blackbirds.* This Comedy is 1964 verses long and contains 116 split noun phrases. Twenty-five centuries later, a German poet from Bavarian Landshut seeking for entities inhabiting trees, exploited the behavior of *buzzards* (Fanselow 1993: 61, 63; Fanselow & Ćavar 2002: 100), *owls* (Fanselow 1988: 92), *geese* (Fanselow 1988: 92), *curlews* (Fanselow 2016: 632), *eagles* (Fanselow 2016: 632), *nightingales* (Fanselow & Féry 2006: 10), *bee-eaters* (Fanselow 2016: 639), *chicken* (Fanselow & Lenerová 2011: 194), etc. There are not yet reliable statistics about the proportion of split noun phrases in the oeuvre of Gisbert Fanselow; yet some scholars believe that splits are even more frequent in Fanselow's articles than in Aristophanes' Comedies.

Since it is highly unlikely that a poet of 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens and a present-day German writer have ever met, this coincidence opens a promising puzzle. What do split noun phrases and birds have in common, such that they may link two quite different biographies across centuries, cultures, languages and literary traditions?

### 3 The facts

Birds play a major role in free topics. Examples such as (1) show that two semantically linked noun phrases may co-occur within the extended projection of the same verb, which offers a hint for the structural account of a part of the alleged discontinuous noun phrases. In a seminal study on split noun phrases, Fanselow & Féry (2006) report their insights from eliciting this example in the largest sample of world's languages that has been ever investigated in this respect.

(1) Korean

Say-nun ku-ka nightingale-man a-n-ta.  
bird-TOP he-NOM nightingale-only know-PRS-DECL

'As for birds, he only knows nightingales.'

(Fanselow & Féry 2006: 10)

A crucial observation is the left-right asymmetry in (2). It seems that the denotation of the referential phrase in the argument position must

be a subset of the topic phrase and not vice versa. This asymmetry was established by further birds in Fanselow (1993) and Fanselow and Ćavar (2002):

- (2) a. Raubvögel gekannt hat er nur Bussarde.  
 ‘As for birds of prey, he has only known buzzards.’  
 (Fanselow & Ćavar 2002: 10)
- b. \*Bussarde gesehen hatte er nur Raubvögel.  
 (intended) ‘As for buzzards, he has only known birds of prey.’  
 (Fanselow 1993: 61)

Although not at the same level of reflection, this discussion actually starts 2407 years earlier, in the year that Aristophanes manifested his vision of Cloudcuckootown, a wondrous town built on the clouds, inhabited by the Reign of Birds, which would rule the world of humans and gods. Interestingly, the poet confessed the well-formedness of free topics exactly with the same wording as Gisbert Fanselow; vgl. (1):

- (3) ὄρνις                      γενέσθαι      βούλομαι    λιγύφθογγος  
 bird:NOM.MASC.SG    become:INF    want:1SG    tuneful:NOM.FEM.SG  
 ἀηδῶν.  
 nightingale:NOM.FEM.SG  
 ‘Bird, I wish to become a tuneful nightingale.’  
 Aristophanes, *Birds* 1380

The left-right asymmetry in (2) is related to the asymmetry between simple splits and inverted splits that plays a central role in the reflection of Fanselow (1993), Fanselow & Ćavar (2002), Fanselow & Féry (2006). In German, it is possible to form splits with a nominal head in the prefield and a modifier in the middlefield, but not vice versa.

- (4) a. Bücher gelesen hat er noch keine.  
 ‘As for books, he has read noone.’                      (Fanselow 1993: 59)
- b. \*keine gelesen hat er Bücher.  
 (intended) ‘As for noone, he has read books.’  
 (Fanselow 1993: 59)

However, Aristophanes speaks a different language. In his variety of the UG, it seems less costly to generate structures of the (4b) type, as illustrated in *Birds*. Birds were namely ‘born before the humans and the gods, and they were ruling and reigning humans during the Ancient Age’. This statement is followed by the sentence in (5):

- (5) πολλὰ ἐστὶ τεκμήρια τούτων.  
 many:NOM.NEUT.PL be:3SG proof:NOM.NEUT.PL that:GEN.FEM.PL  
 ‘There are many proofs of that.’ Aristophanes, *Birds* 481f.

The same structure also appears with numerals. There are various arguments why the birds should again reign in the New Age of the Cloud-cuckootown. They will help farmers: owls and kestrels will protect the vine-blossoms from locusts, thrushes will protect the figs from gnats and gallbugs. Second, they will help people to avoid several dangers in land and sea by predicting the future. Finally, they will offer age to humans from their own; birds like the cawing crow live five times as long as the humans. The precise amount of years that is promised to humans is given by the following passage:

- (6) τριακόσι' αὐτοῖς ἔτι προσθήσουσ'  
 three\_hundred:ACC.NEUT.PL 3:DAT.PL yet add:FUT:3PL  
 ὄρνιθες ἔτη.  
 bird:NOM.MASC.PL year:ACC.NEUT.PL  
 ‘Yet the birds will add to them three hundred years.’  
 Aristophanes, *Birds* 481f.

The simple splits in (5) and (6) illustrate the dominant pattern in Aristophanes’ *Birds*, as shown in Figure 1. Five out of total twenty eight quantified noun phrases are discontinuous (the remaining twenty three are continuous). All five discontinuous noun phrases are simple splits. In the continuous structures, the order is very flexible, but the quantifier precedes the noun most of the time (in thirteen out of total twenty three continuous noun phrases).

Hence, Aristophanes prefers exactly the opposite pattern than Gisbert Fanselow, which opens an array of possible accounts to test. Is



Figure 23.1: Linearization of quantified noun phrases in Aristophanes' Birds

*Key:*

N=nominal projection (without determiner),

Q = quantifier (existential quantifiers such as *πολύς* 'much', *ὀλίγος* 'few' and numerals such as *εἷς* 'one', *δύο* 'two', *μύριοι* 'ten thousand', etc.; not including universal quantifiers); numbers of tokens in parenthesis; *p*: conditional probability, calculated by dividing the number of tokens by the total in the mother node.

this difference a reflex of a difference in configurationality? This is certainly too simplistic, since flexibility in the Greek nominal projections is a meaningful choice, involving clear interpretable contrasts, such as the predicative interpretation of modifiers, as also shown for Warlpiri by Fanselow (1988: 107f.). Is it rather related to the fact that Attic Greek nominal structures do not have determiners and the emergent definite article does not yet lay down a fully articulated D-layer, which would constrain left branch extraction? Or does the preverbal position for narrow focus attracts quantifiers to the effect that the nominal head is stranded in the background domain following the verb? Or are both

types of split just universally available, and their acceptability in particular grammars is a sociolinguistic matter, i.e., it results from the evolution of constructions in a speech community, as argued by Fanselow (2017)? Finally, Aristophanes evidently accepts inverted splits, as documented elsewhere (cf. Aristophanes, *Acharnenses* 136) and Fanselow may accept simple splits in German at the end of a day reflecting on syntax, which would confirm his view about the manifold sources of variability.

But we should now turn to the research question of the present squib, which was not the difference between German and Greek. What do splits and birds share in common?

#### 4 Towards an account

Aristophanes acknowledges the importance of trees as settlements of birds. They are the future temples in the Age of the Cloudcuckootown.

- (7) τοῖς                    δ'    αἶ    σεμνοῖς                    τῶν  
 the:DAT.MASC.PL    but    again    brave:DAT.MASC.PL    the:GEN.MASC.PL  
 ὀρνίθων                    δένδρον                    ἐλάας  
 bird:GEN.MASC.PL    tree:ACC.NEUT.SG    olive:GEN.FEM.SG  
 ὁ                            νεῶς                            ἔσται:  
 the:NOM.MASC.SG    temple:NOM.MASC.SG    be:FUT:3SG

‘The temple of the brave birds will be the olive tree.’

Aristophanes, *Birds* 615-617

Trees are not only the temples of the Cloudcuckootown Age, but also the ultimate answer to the puzzle at issue. It becomes now clear what syntactic heads share in common with *buzzards*, *owls*, *geese*, *curlews*, *eagles*, *nightingales*, *bee-eaters* and *chicken* (see references in Section 1). In the words of the poet of Landshut:

- (8) Zwei Verben wohnen, ach in meinem Baum.

(Fanselow 1993: 57)



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