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Constructional idioms and periphrasis: the progressive construction in Dutch

The Dutch progressive construction has the form *aan het* + *infinitive*, as in *Jan is aan het fiets-en* ‘John is cycling’. Similar constructions are found in other Germanic languages. This construction appears with a number of verbs such as *zijn* ‘to be’, modal verbs, inchoative verbs, and *aci*-verbs. When combined with *zijn*, the *aan het infinitive* construction as a whole inherits the syntactic valency of the verb, as in

- (1) a. De kinderen zijn de boeken aan het lezen ‘The children are reading the books’
b. *De kinderen zijn aan het de boeken lezen

Although objects cannot appear after *aan het* (see 1b), particle verbs and similar phrasal verbs and constructions with generic nouns do occur in that position:

- (2) De jongens zijn aan het afwassen ‘The boys are doing the dishes’
(3) Mijn ouder zijn aan het brieven schrijven ‘My parents are letter-writing’

Thus we can use the progressive construction as a test for the lexical status of multi-word units.

The progressive construction is a clear case of a constructional idiom: it is a piece of syntax with non-compositional properties that must be specified in the lexicon.

This construction competes with the synthetic, morphological expression of the notion ‘progressive’. The use of present participles for that purpose is only possible in attributive position. In predicative position, this is impossible, and instead the *aan het infinitive* construction must be used:

- (4) De fietsende jongen ‘the cycling boy’
(5) De jongen is *fietsend / aan het fietsen ‘The boy is cycling’

This competition between morphological and syntactic expression suggests that the progressive construction should be interpreted as a form of periphrasis. Another conclusion is that there is no sharp boundary between lexicon and syntax, as also argued in recent work by Jackendoff.