



Partial VP-fronting structure in German complex predicate constructions

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Outline

1. Introduction
2. Approaches to partial VP fronting
3. Testing: Acceptability judgments of partial VP-fronting
4. HPSG analysis: partial VP-fronting in German complex predicates
5. Conclusion

The pre-field in German V2 clauses

- (1) a. Leo hat seinem Bruder gestern ein Buch gegeben.
Leo has his.DAT brother yesterday a.ACC book given
'Yesterday, Leo gave his brother a book.'
- b. Seinem Bruder hat Leo gestern ein Buch gegeben.
his.DAT brother has Leo yesterday a.ACC book given
- c. Ein Buch hat Leo seinem Bruder gestern gegeben.
a.ACC book has Leo his.DAT brother yesterday given
- d. Gestern hat Leo seinem Bruder ein Buch gegeben.
yesterday has Leo his.DAT brother a.ACC book given
- The pre-field is syntactically flexible and can host different types of constituents, including subjects, objects, and adverbials.¹

¹This assumption has been challenged by analyses allowing multiple elements in the pre-field (so-called *mehrfache Vorfeldbesetzung* (see Müller, 2003 for examples).

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 - The pre-field is syntactically flexible and can host different types of constituents, including subjects, objects, and adverbials.¹
 - The pre-field can also host verbal projections, including partial VPs.
- (2) Seinem Bruder gegeben hat Leo gestern ein Buch.
his.DAT brother given has Leo yesterday a.ACC book

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Partial VP in the pre-field

- (3) Seiner Tochter ein Märchen erzählen wird er.
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'He will tell his daughter a fairy tale.'

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- German allows **partial VP fronting** in the pre-field.

- (4) a. Ein Märchen erzählen wird er seiner Tochter.
 a.ACC fairy.tale tell will he his.DAT daughter
 'He will tell his daughter a fairy tale.'
- b. Erzählen wird er seiner Tochter ein Märchen.
 tell will he his.DAT daughter a.ACC fairy.tale

- (5) a. Ein Märchen erzählen wird er seiner Tochter müssen.
 a.ACC fairy.tale tell will he his.DAT daughter must
 'He will have to tell his daughter a fairy tale.'
- b. Erzählen müssen wird er seiner Tochter ein Märchen.
 tell must will er his.DAT daughter a.ACC fairy.tale

(from Hinrichs & Nakazawa, 1994, 2000: 17b–f)

- The fronted verbal constituent can be incomplete, that is partial.

- (6) Dem Kind geschenkt hat die Lehrerin das Buch.
the.DAT child gifted has the.NOM teacher the.ACC book
'The teacher gifted the book to the child.'
- (7) Dem Teilnehmer geben wird der Forscher das Formular.
the.DAT participant give will the.NOM researcher the.ACC form
'The researcher will give the form to the participant.'
- (8) Die Technik beibringen wird der Trainer dem Team.
the.ACC technique teach will the.NOM trainer the.DAT team
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Research Question:

- In what discourse contexts is partial VP fronting licensed?
- How do different discourse conditions affect its acceptability?

In this study:

- The acceptability of partial VP fronting is examined through an experiment under different discourse conditions (*wh*-QUD & *topic-shift*).
- Based on the results, an HPSG analysis is proposed that incorporates discourse constraints Pollard & Sag 1994; Müller et al. 2024; Müller 2026).

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- └ Approaches to partial VP fronting
 - └ Previous research 1



Speyer, 2008: Pre-field and discourse linking

- Pre-field constituents are not distributed freely.
- They are associated with discourse-linking functions: topic, contrast and scene-setting

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(9) Topic

Verteidigungsminister Peter Struck (SPD) hat gestern sein Sparprogramm
defense.minister Peter Struck (SPD) has yesterday his.ACC savings.program
bekannt gegeben. Er sieht darin auch einen Schritt zur Reform der
known given he sees therein also a.ACC step to.the.DAT reform the.GEN
Bundeswehr.
federal.army

‘Minister of defense Peter Struck (SPD) announced his savings program
yesterday. He also sees it as a step toward reform of the Federal Armed
Forces.’

(StZ 1,1–2)

Speyer, 2008: Pre-field and discourse linking

(10) Scene-setting

Zwar den weitesten Weg [...] doch den sichersten [...] nahm Simon
 though the.ACC farthest way but the.ACC most.secure took Simon
 Dach, dessen Einladungen diesen Aufwand ausgelöst hatten. Schon im
 Dach whose invitations this.ACC expense caused have already in.the.DAT
 Vorjahr [...] waren die vielen einladenden und den Treffpunkt
 pre.year were the.NOM many inviting and the.ACC meeting.point
 beschreibenden Briefe geschrieben [...] worden.
 describing letters written become

‘Simon Doch, whose invitations started this business, took the farthest, but
 the most secure way. Already in the preceding year, the huge amount of
 letters, inviting and describing the meeting point, had been written.’

(GrT 1, 21–22)

- The constituent ***schon im Vorjahr*** ‘already in the preceding year’ does not refer to a participant in the event.
- Instead, it provides a temporal frame within which the event is interpreted.
- It sets the background for the proposition.

Speyer, 2008: Pre-field and discourse linking

(11) Contrast

Bisherige sozialdemokratische Vorzeigeminister wollen sich aber nicht mehr über
former social democratic model minister want REFL but no longer over
sich verfügen lassen. Clement verabschiedet sich, Struck lehnt den
themselves dispose let Clement takes.leave REFL Struck declines the.ACC
Posten des Außenministers ab. Schröder selbst hat eine andere
post the.GEN foreign minister Schröder himself has a.ACC different
Lebensplanung. Manche werden gar nicht mehr genannt.
life.plan some become at.all no longer mentioned
'Former social democratic model ministers no longer want to let others
dispose of them. Clement is stepping down, Struck declines the post of
foreign minister. Schröder himself has a different life plan. Some are no
longer mentioned at all.'

(FAZ 1, 3–7)

²Speyer also notes that these discourse-linking functions are not always mutually exclusive: in corpus data, a pre-field constituent may exhibit more than one such property.

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(FAZ 1, 3–7)

- Marked pre-field configurations are dispreferred in neutral contexts.
- Acceptability improves when they can be linked to the preceding discourse.²

²Speyer also notes that these discourse-linking functions are not always mutually exclusive: in corpus data, a pre-field constituent may exhibit more than one such property.

- └ Approaches to partial VP fronting
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Frey, 2004: VP-fronting and information structure

- The pre-field is not exclusively reserved for topics.

Frey, 2004: VP-fronting and information structure

- The pre-field is not exclusively reserved for topics.
- VP fronting cannot be straightforwardly analyzed as topicalization:

- (12) a. * Diesen Roman jedenfalls gelesen hat Maria nicht.
this novel at.any.rate read has Maria not
- b. * Er_i ist ein bekannter Schauspieler. Den Otto_j sehen will
he is a.NOM famous actor the.ACC Otto see wants
daher jede Frau.
therefore every woman

- As in (12), topical material cannot be part of the fronted VP.

(Frey, 2004: 28)

Frey, 2004: Focus projection

- Focus projection depends on information structure.

(13) a. Was ist passiert?
what is happened?
'What happened?'

b. (Das Radio berichtet,) dass JOHNSon gestorben ist.
the.NOM radio reports that JOHNSon died is
'(The radio reports) that JOHNSon has died.'

c. (Das Radio berichtet,) dass Johnson geSTORben ist.
the.NOM radio reports that Johnson died is
'(The radio reports) that Johnson has DIED.'

- In (13b), focus interpretation extends to the whole clause.
 - In (13c), focus projection may originate from the predicate.
 - In (13b), the subject of athetic sentence is not interpreted as a topic,
 - If the subject is not interpreted as a topic, focus may project from the subject.
 - Consequently, the predicate becomes part of the focus domain.
- (Frey, 2004: 28–29)

Research question and experimental goal

- VP-fronting is grammatically possible, but its acceptability appears to be discourse-sensitive. (Speyer, 2008)
- It cannot be straightforwardly analyzed as topicalization. (Frey, 2004)
- Focus projection depends on information structure and may extend to the predicate/event domain. (Frey, 2004)
- **Research question:**
Under which discourse conditions is a partial VP-fronting structure acceptable?
More specifically, is it more acceptable in contexts that support a focus-related interpretation?
- **Experimental goal:**
To test whether discourse configuration systematically affects the acceptability of VP-fronting.

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Experimental design

- The experiment examined under which discourse conditions VP-fronting in German is judged to be acceptable.
- Participants completed an acceptability judgment task on a 1–5 Likert scale.
- The study employed a 2×2 design with the factors:
 - Factor 1: DISCOURSE CONDITION: *wh*-QUD & *topic-shift*
 - Factor 2: NP DEFINITENESS: definite & indefinite

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 - Factor 1: DISCOURSE CONDITION: *wh*-QUD & *topic-shift*
 - Factor 2: NP DEFINITENESS: definite & indefinite
- In the *wh*-QUD condition, the contextual question introduced an alternative set for the questioned argument.
- In the *topic-shift* condition, the context established a referent as the aboutness topic of the following proposition.
- The second factor tested whether NP definiteness affects the acceptability of VP-fronting.

DISCOURSE CONDITION: *wh*-QUD

- Each item consisted of a short dialogue followed by a response containing a fronted VP.

(14) A: Der Forscher wird das Formular geben.
 the.NOM researcher will the.ACC form give

‘The researcher will give the form.’

B: Wem genau wird er denn das Formular geben?
 whom exactly will he PRT the.ACC form give

‘Who exactly will he give the form to?’

A: Dem Teilnehmer geben wird der Forscher das Formular.
 the.DAT participant give will the.NOM researcher the.ACC form

‘The researcher will give the form to the participant.’

- In the *wh*-QUD condition,
the question introduces possible alternatives for the questioned argument.

DISCOURSE CONDITION: *topic-shift*

(15) A: Die Sekretärin wird dem Kollegen die Datei schicken.
the.NOM secretary will the.DAT colleague the.ACC file send
'The secretary will send the file to the colleague.'

B: Und was ist denn eigentlich mit dem Kollegen?
and what is PRT actually with the.DAT colleague
'And what about the colleague, then?'

A: Dem Kollegen schicken wird die Sekretärin die Datei.
the.DAT colleague send will the.NOM secretary the.ACC file
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- In the *topic-shift* condition, the contextual prompt establishes a referent as the aboutness topic of the following proposition.

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- In the *topic-shift* condition, the contextual prompt establishes a referent as the aboutness topic of the following proposition.
- The contextual prompts were not intended to require VP-fronting directly.
- However, they were designed to provide a discourse context in which VP-fronting could be pragmatically licensed.

Indefinite NP condition

(16) *wh*-QUD condition

A: Der Techniker wird eine Nachricht senden.
the.NOM technician will a.ACC message send
'The technician will send a message.'

B: Wem genau wird er denn eine Nachricht senden?
whom exactly will he PRT a.ACC message send
'Who exactly will he send a message to?'

A: Einem Benutzer senden wird der Techniker eine Nachricht.
a.DAT user send will the.NOM technician a.ACC message
'The technician will send a message to a user.'

(17) *topic-shift* condition

A: Das Unternehmen hat einem Auftraggeber eine Alternative angeboten.
the.NOM company has a.DAT client a.ACC alternative offered
'The company has offered a client an alternative.'

B: Und was ist denn eigentlich mit einem Auftraggeber?
and what is PRT actually with a.DAT client
'And what about a client, then?'

A: Einem Auftraggeber angeboten hat das Unternehmen eine Alternative.
a.DAT client offered has the.NOM company a.ACC alternative
'The company has offered an alternative to a client.'

- Nineteen native German speakers (n=19) participated in the experiment.

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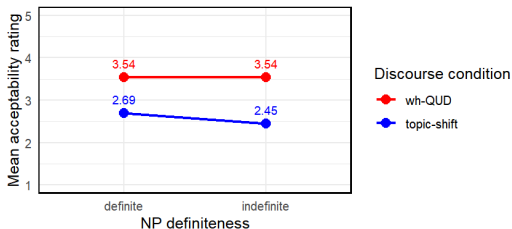


Figure 1: Acceptability of partial VP-Fronting across two factors

- NP definiteness did not show a noticeable effect.

- By contrast, discourse condition revealed a clearer difference.

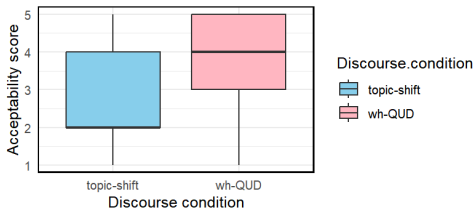


Figure 2: Frequency distribution of acceptability ratings by discourse condition

- VP-fronting received higher ratings in the *wh*-QUD condition ($M=3.54$) than in the *topic-shift* condition ($M=2.58$).³⁴

³Welch's t-tests revealed a significant difference between the discourse conditions ($p < .001$).

⁴The data were additionally analyzed using linear mixed-effects models, and the effect remained significant after accounting for variation across participants and items.

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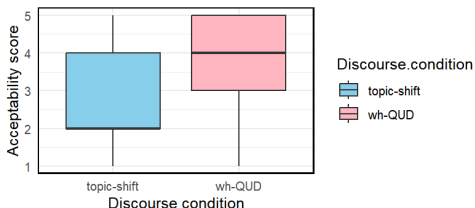


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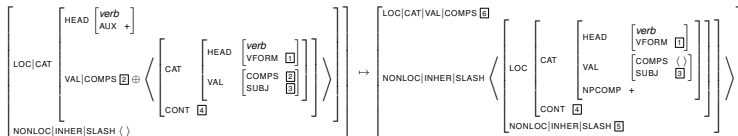
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'The teacher has given the book to the child.'
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the.DAT participant give will the.NOM researcher the.ACC form
'The researcher will give the form to the participant.'
- c. Die Technik beibringen wird der Trainer dem Team.
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- The results suggest that VP-fronting is more acceptable in contexts that support a focus-related interpretation.

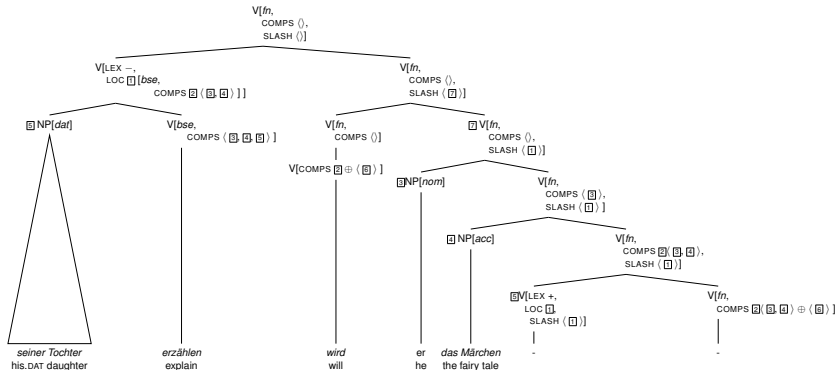
Lexical rule for PVP-Topicalization

- Hinrichs & Nakazawa (2000) analyze partial VP fronting by means of a specialized lexical rule.
- Missing arguments in the fronted VP are linked to the auxiliary's COMPS list and realized in the middle field.

(19) Lexical rule for PVP-Topicalization (from Hinrichs & Nakazawa, 2000: 285)

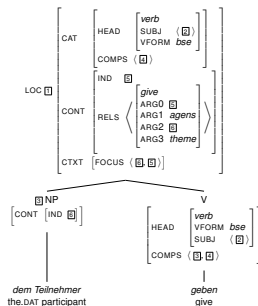


Müller's analysis of partial VP fronting (see Müller, 2026: Chapter 14.2)

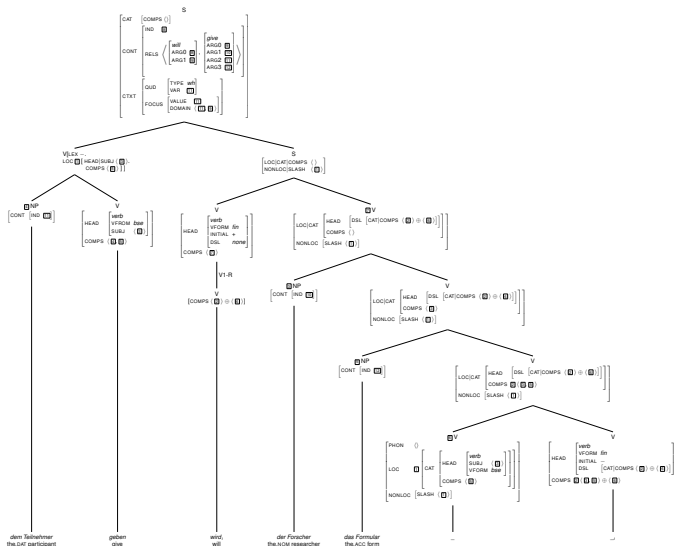


- Fronting is licensed by the ordinary filler-gap dependency.
- No specialized lexical rule is required.

Analysis of the partially VP-fronted structure in a complex predicate

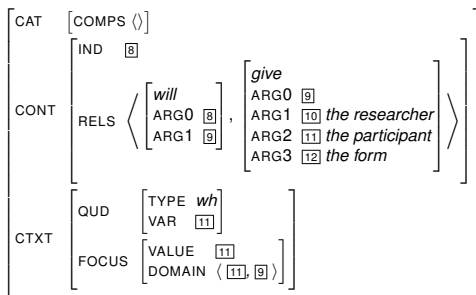


- Partial VP-fronting is analyzed as a focus-related construction.
- The fronted NP functions as a focus value.
- The predicate also belongs to the broader focus domain.
- The analysis captures the discourse sensitivity observed in the experiment.



Sentence-Level representation

- (20) Dem Teilnehmer geben wird der Forscher das Formular.
 the.DAT participant give will the.NOM researcher the.ACC form
 'The researcher will give the form to the participant.'



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To sum up,

- This study investigated under which discourse conditions partial VP-fronting in German is acceptable.
- An acceptability judgment task was conducted to test the effects of discourse condition and NP definiteness.

Regarding the experimental results:

- NP definiteness did not have a noticeable effect on acceptability.
- By contrast, discourse condition revealed a clear effect: partial VP-fronting was judged to be more acceptable in *wh*-QUD contexts supporting focus-related interpretations.

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- By contrast, discourse condition revealed a clear effect: partial VP-fronting was judged to be more acceptable in *wh*-QUD contexts supporting focus-related interpretations.
- The results therefore support a discourse-sensitive account of partial VP-fronting.

To sum up,

In HPSG:

- The proposed HPSG analysis builds on Müller's syntactic account of partial VP-fronting as an ordinary filler-gap dependency.
- The analysis extends this account by incorporating focus-related information-structural representations.
- The fronted NP functions as the primary focus value.
- Focus projection extends from the fronted NP onto the predicate-related event domain.

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Corpus evidence: PVP with a clause-final embedded predicate

- (21) Die Strohfüruren abbauen wird der nun verheiratete Landwirt nämlich
 the.ACC straw.figures dismantle will the.NOM now married farmer namely
 selber müssen.⁵
 himself must
 'The now-married farmer will have to dismantle the straw figures himself.'
- (22) Die Erfolgsaussichten erhöhen werden die S04-Fans kaum können.⁶
 the.ACC chances.of.success increase will the.NOM S04-fans hardly can
 'The S04 fans will hardly be able to improve their chances of success.'
- (23) Die Aggressivität beseitigen werden sie aber kaum können.⁷
 the.ACC aggressiveness eliminate will they.NOM however hardly can
 'However, they will hardly be able to eliminate the aggressiveness.'
- (24) Die Schließung abwenden wird sie kaum können.⁸
 the.ACC closure avert will she.NOM hardly can
 'She will hardly be able to avert the closure.'

⁵Luzerner Zeitung – nlz

⁶Kieler Nachrichten – kn

⁷Allgemeine Zeitung (Mainz) – Regionalteil –maz_regional

⁸Saarbrücker Zeitung – Regionalteil –saar_regional

Corpus evidence: PVP with a definite NP

- (25) Dem Staat schenken wollte er die Bahnlinie freilich nicht.⁹
 the.DAT state give wanted he.NOM the.ACC railway.line admittedly not
 'Admittedly, he did not want to give the railway line to the state.'
- (26) Der Öffentlichkeit vorstellen durfte es der Generalvikar.¹⁰
 the.DAT public present was.allowed it.ACC the.NOM vicar.general
 'The vicar general was allowed to present it to the public.'
- (27) Den Sieg schenken werden sie euch wahrscheinlich nicht.¹¹
 the.ACC victory give will they.NOM you.DAT probably not
 'They will probably not hand you the victory.'
- (28) Den Job retten wird ihm die Mitschuld anderer nicht.¹²
 the.ACC job save will him.DAT the.NOM complicity others.GEN not
 'The complicity of others will not save his job.'

⁹Der Spiegel (ab 2013) –spie

¹⁰Zeitung:Enger-Spenge

¹¹toyota-dbbi.de

¹²Südostschweiz Bündner Zeitung –sog

Corpus evidence: PVP with an indefinite NP

- (29) Einer Fraktion anschließen können Sie sich leider nicht.¹³
 a.DAT faction join can you.NOM REFL unfortunately not
 'Unfortunately, you cannot join a faction.'
- (30) Einer Doktrin verschreiben sollte er sich aber nie.¹⁴
 a.DAT doctrine commit should he.NOM REFL however never
 'However, he should never commit himself to a doctrine.'
- (31) Einen grossen Dank aussprechen möchte ich den Ärzteteams und
 a.ACC great.ACC thanks express would.like I.NOM the.DAT medical.teams and
 dem Reha-Fachpersonal.¹⁵
 the.DAT rehabilitation.staff
 'I would like to express my sincere thanks to the medical teams and the
 rehabilitation staff.'

¹³ichspiele.cc

¹⁴Neue Zürcher Zeitung – nzz

¹⁵Basler Zeitung – Regionalteil – baz_regional

(32) Original *topic-shift* condition

- A: Die Sekretärin wird dem Kollegen die Datei schicken.
 the.NOM secretary will the.DAT colleague the.ACC file send
 'The secretary will send the file to the colleague.'
- B: Und was ist denn eigentlich mit dem Kollegen?
 and what is PRT actually with the.DAT colleague
 'And what about the colleague, then?'

(33) Reviewer's suggestion

- A: Die Datei muss jedem geschickt werden.
 the.NOM file must everyone.DAT sent become
 'The file has to be sent to everyone.'
- B: Und wer soll sie dem Kollegen schicken?
 and who should it.ACC the.DAT colleague send
 'And who should send it to the colleague?'
- A: Dem Kollegen schicken wird die Sekretarin die Datei.
 the.DAT colleague send will the.NOM secretary the.ACC file
 'The secretary will send the file to the colleague.'

- The reviewer suggested the discourse in (33).
- Although this discourse may provide a more felicitous context for partial VP fronting, it does not preserve the same topic-shift manipulation as the original condition.

(34) Definite NP condition

A: Der Forscher wird das Formular geben.
the.NOM researcher will the.ACC form give

‘The researcher will give the form.’

B: Wem genau wird er denn das Formular geben?
whom exactly will he PRT the.ACC form give

‘Who exactly will he give the form to?’

A: Dem Teilnehmer geben wird der Forscher das Formular.
the.DAT participant give will the.NOM researcher the.ACC form

‘The researcher will give the form to the participant.’

(35) Indefinite NP condition

A: Der Techniker wird eine Nachricht senden.
the.NOM technician will a.ACC message send

‘The technician will send a message.’

B: Wem genau wird er denn eine Nachricht senden?
whom exactly will he PRT a.ACC message send

‘Who exactly will he send a message to?’

A: inem Benutzer senden wird der Techniker eine Nachricht.
a.DAT user send will the.NOM technician a.ACC message

‘The technician will send a message to a user.’

(36) Definite NP condition

- A: Die Sekretärin wird dem Kollegen die Datei schicken.
 the.NOM secretary will the.DAT colleague the.ACC file send
 'The secretary will send the file to the colleague.'
- B: Und was ist denn eigentlich mit dem Kollegen?
 and what is PRT actually with the.DAT colleague
 'And what about the colleague, then?'
- A: Dem Kollegen schicken wird die Sekretärin die Datei.
 the.DAT colleague send will the.NOM secretary the.ACC file
 'The secretary will send the file to the colleague.'

(37) Indefinite NP condition

- A: Das Unternehmen hat einem Auftraggeber eine Alternative angeboten.
 the.NOM company has a.DAT client a.ACC alternative offered
 'The company has offered a client an alternative.'
- B: Und was ist denn eigentlich mit einem Auftraggeber?
 and what is PRT actually with a.DAT client
 'And what about a client, then?'
- A: Einem Auftraggeber angeboten hat das Unternehmen eine Alternative.
 a.DAT client offered has the.NOM company a.ACC alternative
 'The company has offered an alternative to a client.'