Absentive constructions in German and Italian.
Person or place deixis?

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The absentive (de Groot 2000) has been referred to in the existing studies as a grammatical category of the verb expressing a temporary absence or non-availability for interaction of an agentive subject who distances themselves physically from a place to perform an activity for a limited period of time. In the language systems in which this construction is found, the absentive interpretation results from a specific syntactic configuration minimally involving the combination of a copula *be* and a (finite or non-finite) lexical verb conveying the action taking place. De Groot (2000) and Abraham (2007) propose a cross-linguistic three-class taxonomy of absentives based on their syntactic realization:

(1) Type A: *be* + V(infin) (e.g. German)
     Type B: *be* + local preposition + V(non-fin) (e.g. Italian)
     Type C: *be* + paratactic conjunction *and* + V(fin) (e.g. Swedish)

One of the definitional features characterizing absentive constructions is that they must receive the relevant interpretation without the insertion of any additional lexical (generally, adverbial) element disambiguating the non-presence of the subject, which is why e.g. English is standardly assumed not to possess this structure (cf. Vogel 2007, Fortmann & Wöllstein 2013). In (2), the omission of off reduces the activity addressed in the clause to a (progressive) aspectual reading excluding the absentive component:

(2) Mary is (off) doing the shopping.

As for the interpretative derivation of this construct, it has been established that absentivity is basically a person-deictic phenomenon, i.e. that it comes about as a result of the clause subject's departure from the speaker's deixis.
In this presentation I propose, relying on data from German and Italian, two not directly cognate languages belonging to different 'types' (cf. (1), as well as (3) below), that this assumption should be revised in light of the fact that in both languages the specific absentive interpretation does not imply any person deixis, but is exclusively interpreted w.r.t. the local deixis of a place in which the subject of the clause is supposed to be at the time of speaking, which is, in turn, contextually reconstructed on the basis of the hearer's world knowledge. Arguments speaking for an overestimation of the speaker's deixis w.r.t. the reading of such constructs come, for example, from the fact that both in Italian and in German the subject of an absentive may, but need not be, a third person.

(3) a. Maria ist   einkaufen.
       Mary   be.3SG.IND.PRS   do-the-shopping
    b. Maria è   a   fare   la   spesa.
       Mary   be.3SG.IND.PRS   at   do   the   shopping

In this case, the relevant deixis which permits the interpretation of (3)) is not overtly lexicalized in the form of a segmental item (e.g. of a pronoun or a demonstrative), but represents an abstract conceptualization of the subject's spatial coordinates to be traced back on the basis of contextual information. A contrastive approach to this phenomenon corroborates, on the one hand, the hypotheses investigated for one of the two systems and

opens up, on the other hand, a discussion as to the (relative) 'universalizability' of the conclusions drawn from this analysis, thereby extending the issue to other languages.

References

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