

The Absentive in German

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1 Introduction

The goal of this talk is to understand how the absentive construction in German syntactically encodes the entailment that the subject of the sentence is absent. German absentives consist of the verb *sein* (to be) and an infinitival verb.

- (1) Er war Milch holen.
he was milk fetch.INF
'He (was absent because he) was fetching milk.' /
'He was off fetching milk.'

(Haider 2010:276)

Properties of the absentive De Groot (2000)

- (2) a. the subject is absent
- b. the subject is involved in an activity
- c. it is predictable how long the subject will be absent
- d. the subject will return after a period of time

(De Groot 2000:693)

Absentives in other languages

- (3) János boxolni van. *Hungarian*
John box.INF is
- (4) Jan er og boksar. *Norwegian*
John is and box.PRS
'John is off boxing'

(De Groot 2000:696)

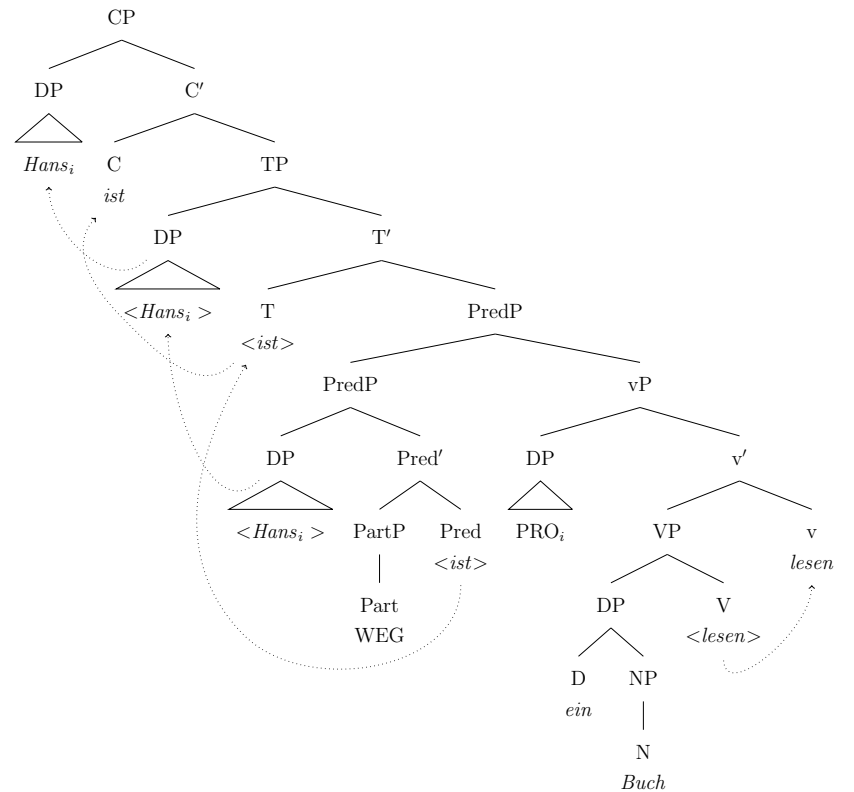
Additional properties of the German absentive

- (5) a. the absentive is a stative, not eventive construction
- b. the infinitive is verbal, not nominal

2 Proposal

The absentive construction involves a silent locative predicate such as WEG (*away*) and an infinitival secondary predicate.

- (6) Hans_i ist WEG [_{SC} PRO_i ein Buch lesen]
Hans is AWAY a book read.INF
'Hans is off reading a book.'



Other silent predicates

- HAVE as a component of *need* (Ross 1978, Maccawley 1979, Den Dikken, Larson, and Ludlow 1996, Harves and Kayne 2012, and others)
- FAILED in the English *have/be-yet-to* construction (Harves and Myler 2014)
- MEANT or SUPPOSED in the English *be-to* construction (Kayne 2012)
- GO in Germanic and Slavic (Van Riemsdijk 2002)
- FEEL-LIKE in various Slavic languages, in particular Slovenian (Marušič and Žaucer 2004)
- and others...

3 Overt locative expressions

In this theory, absentives are a subtype of what I'll call locative-infinitive constructions, as in (7)-(9). Specifically, they're locative-infinitives with the silent locative expression WEG.

- (7) Hans ist in der Bibliothek lesen.
Hans is in the library read.INF
'Hans is in the library, reading.'
- (8) Hans ist weg lesen.
Hans is away read.INF
'Hans is away reading.'
- (9) Hans ist WEG lesen.
Hans is away read.INF
'Hans is off reading.'

(See the appendix for a few examples of the evidence for parallel structures.)

A possible alternative: Could locative-infinitives just be absentives with a locative adjunct? (That is, could the subset relation be flipped?)

Two reasons to doubt this:

- (I) Some speakers who do not accept the absentive construction do accept locative-infinitives.
- (II) The locative expression in a locative-infinitive need not be compatible with the absentive construction's entailments:

- (10) Hans ist hier lesen.
Hans is here read.INF
'Hans is here reading.'

- (11) # Hans ist lesen. Er ist hier.
Hans is read.INF he is here
'Hans is off reading. He is here.'

4 Alternative theories

4.1 *Am*-progressives

We might consider the hypothesis that the absentive is a kind of progressive construction. In German, the preposition *am* can be used with an infinitive verb to convey progressive aspect.

- (12) Ich bin am Wasser trinken.
I am at-the water drink.INF
'I am drinking water.'

Counterargument: absentives, but not prepositional progressives, can take a full DP argument

- (13) *Ich bin am das Wasser trinken.
I am at-the the water drink.INF
'I am drinking water.'
- (14) Hans ist das Wasser trinken.
Hans is the water drink.INF
'Hans is off drinking water.'

4.2 Silent GO

Another possible hypothesis is that the absentive involves a silent motion verb such as GEHEN (*go*) (Abraham 2008).

- (15) Hans ist lesen GEGANGEN.
Hans is read.INF go.PAST
'Hans is off reading.'

Counterargument: The absentive is stative - it can be modified by *immer noch* (*still*); *gehen* cannot.

- (16) *Hans ist immer noch gegangen.
Hans is still go.PAST
'Hans is still gone.'

- (17) *Hans ist immer noch lesen gegangen.
 Hans is still read.INF go.PAST
 ‘Hans is still gone to read.’
- (18) Hans ist immer noch lesen.
 Hans is still read.INF
 ‘Hans is still off reading.’

5 Conclusion

Based on the data presented here, I argue that the silent WEG theory of the absentive is preferable to the alternative proposals. The extent to which this theory can be applied to Dutch and Hungarian is an interesting topic for further research. In addition, the possibility of silent WEG in other contexts in German is in need of exploration.

Appendix

Some parallels between locative-infinitives and absentives:

1. Passivization (absentives cannot be passivized, De Groot 2000)
2. Scope of indefinites (control)
3. Selectional restrictions (control, Davies and Dubinsky 2008)
4. Partial control (control, Haslinger 2007)
5. Habitual readings (stativity, Jóhannsdóttir 2011)
6. Sequence of tense (stativity, Jóhannsdóttir 2011)
7. Capitalization (nominalization)
8. Post-nominal genitives (nominalization, Burt 1979, Solstad 2010, Scheffler 2005)
9. Compounding (nominalization, Burt 1979, Solstad 2010, Scheffler 2005)
10. *Immer noch* (resultant state / target state, Kratzer 2000)
11. Coordination with perfect VPs

Post-nominal genitives (diagnostic for nominalization)

- (19) *Nominal*:
- a. ihr Kaufen des Stoffes
 her buy.NOUN [the cloth].GEN
- b. *ihr den Stoff Kaufen
 her [the cloth].ACC buy.NOUN
 ‘her buying of the cloth’

- (20) *Verbal*:
- a. *Sie muss kaufen des Stoffes.
 she must buy.INF [the cloth].GEN
- b. Sie muss den Stoff kaufen.
 she must [the cloth].ACC buy.INF
 ‘She must buy the cloth.’
- (21) *Absentive*:
- a. *Sie ist kaufen des Stoffes.
 she is buy.INF [the cloth].GEN
- b. Sie ist den Stoff kaufen.
 she is [the cloth].ACC buy.INF
 ‘She is off buying the cloth.’
- (22) *Locative-infinitive*:
- a. *Sie ist weg kaufen des Stoffes.
 she is away buy.INF [the cloth].GEN
- b. Sie ist weg den Stoff kaufen.
 she is away [the cloth].ACC buy.INF
 ‘She is away buying the cloth.’
- (23) *Locative-infinitive*:
- a. *Sie ist im Laden kaufen des Stoffes.
 she is in-the store buy.INF [the cloth].GEN
- b. Sie ist im Laden den Stoff kaufen.
 she is in-the store [the cloth].ACC buy.INF
 ‘She is at the store, buying the cloth.’
- Sequence of tense** (diagnostic for stativity)
- (24) *Eventive predicate*:
- a. *Hans sagte, dass Marie *Der Zauberberg* las.
 Hans said that Marie *Der Zauberberg* read.PAST
 ‘Hans said that Marie read *Der Zauberberg*.’
- (25) *Stative predicate*:
- a. Hans sagte, dass Marie müde war.
 Hans said that Marie tired was.PAST
 ‘Hans said that Marie was tired.’

- (26) *Absentive*:
- a. Hans sagte, dass Marie lesen war.
Hans said that Marie read.INF was.PAST
'Hans said that Marie was off reading.'
- (27) *Locative-infinitive*:
- a. Hans sagte, dass Marie weg lesen war.
Hans said that Marie away read.INF was.PAST
'Hans said that Marie was away reading.'
- (28) *Locative-infinitive*:
- a. Hans sagte, dass Marie in der Bibliothek lesen war.
Hans said that Marie in the library read.INF was.PAST
'Hans said that Marie was in the library, reading.'

Selectional restrictions (diagnostic for control)

- (29) *Baseline*:
- a. Das Gebäude stürzt ein.
the building collapses
'The building is collapsing.'
- (30) *Raising*:
- a. Das Gebäude scheint einzustürzen.
the building seems collapse.INF
'The building seems to be collapsing.'
- (31) *Control*:
- a. # Das Gebäude plant einzustürzen.
the building plans collapse.INF
'The building is planning to collapse.'
- (32) *Absentive*:
- a. # Das Gebäude ist einzustürzen.
the building is collapse.INF
'The building is off collapsing.'
- (33) *Locative-infinitive*:
- a. # Das Gebäude ist weg einzustürzen.
the building ist away collapse.INF
'The building is away collapsing.'

- (34) *Locative-infinitive*:
- a. # Das Gebäude ist in Berlin einzustürzen.
the building ist in Berlin collapse.INF
'The building is in Berlin, collapsing.'

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