

The Syntax and Pragmatics of German Inalienable Possession Constructions

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Given the use of certain verbs, German possession constructions with a PP-embedded body part as possessum come in three versions, occurring in what may seem like free variation: (1) with external possessor, (2) with internal possessor, and (3) with doubly-marked possession.

- (1) Das Kind hat ihm/ihn in die Hand gebissen.
the child has him.DAT/ACC in the hand bitten
- (2) Das Kind hat in seine Hand gebissen.
the child has in his hand bitten
- (3) Das Kind hat ihm/ihn in seine Hand gebissen.
the child has him.DAT/ACC in his hand bitten

While the DAT(ive)/ACC(usative) alternation in (1) has been described and analyzed in the literature (Wegener 1985, Draye 1996, Lamiroy & Delbecq 1998, Hole 2005, Lee-Schoenfeld 2012), a comparison of all three variants, from both a pragmatic and a syntactic perspective, has not been offered. The present contribution brings together Lehmann et al.'s (2004) typological findings concerning general tendencies of encoding possessors, the results of a corpus search, and an extension of Lee-Schoenfeld's (2012) formal syntactic analysis.

Based on Lehmann et al., we argue that in German the choice between (1) the prototypical strategy of DAT-marked external possession, (2) the dispreferred (though typologically less marked) strategy of GEN(itive)-marked internal possession, and (3) the marginal strategy of doubly-marked possession depends on whether the speaker wants to emphasize the possessor's core participant role of SYMPATHETICUS, his/her non-core interparticipant role of POSSESSOR, or both. Choice of DAT vs. ACC-marking of the possessor depends on whether or not possessor and body part are analogously affected. DAT expresses non-analogous affectedness, the possessor being involved as an affected participant independently of the possessum, while ACC expresses analogous affectedness, the possessor being identified with the affected body part.

The results of our corpus search thus far support this. Using the written corpus IDS Cosmas II, focusing on the verbs *beißen* 'bite', *treten* 'kick', *schlagen* 'hit', *hauen* 'hit', *boxen* 'box' and search strings like *in die Nase gebissen* 'in the nose bitten', we had a total of 98 hits (sentences containing the construction DAT/ACC pronoun + body part PP + V). Of these, 66 had DAT-marked and 32 had ACC-marked possessors, confirming that DAT external possession is the prototypical choice for expressing inalienable possession in German. Crucially, of the 32 ACC-marked possessors, 29 (90.6%) occurred in the context of a court/police report, i.e. an impersonal account of events, intended to be maximally neutral. This is precisely what we expect given that use of an ACC pronoun expresses analogous affectedness of possessor and body part and thereby de-emphasizes the possessor's role as independently affected participant (SYMPATHETICUS).

Strategy (3) poses an interesting challenge for Lee-Schoenfeld's (2012) possessor raising analysis of DAT external possession. We propose that, unless the inherently possessed body part nominal is coerced into an alienable possession construction (strategy (2)), it is headed by a defective D that cannot license an internal GEN possessor and therefore triggers possessor raising. Doubly-marked possession with both a DAT external possessor and an overt internal possessor, as shown in (3), can then only be the result of resumption, where not only the higher but also the lower copy of the possessor is pronounced (cf. Potsdam & Runner's (2001) discussion of resumptive pronouns in the domain of A-movement).

References

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