

The syntax and semantics of the adverbial present participle construction in German

1. Introduction

This article is concerned with the essential syntactic and semantic aspects of adverbial participle constructions with the present participle (PPC) in modern German. These constructions are headed by a verbal present participle and, in addition, contain 1–3 phrases functioning as arguments or adjuncts of the verbal participle, as the following examples show:

- (1) So erzählt ein Junge Lolli lutsch-end und auf dem Bodensitz-end von seiner
so tells a boy lollipop suck-PRS.PTCP and on the floor sit-PRS.PTCP of his
Kindergruppe: „Ich mag alle.“
children’s.group I like everyone
(Nürnberger Zeitung, 27.10.2008, S. 3; Experimentiertheater an der Uni Erlangen - Ein bisschen Grausamkeit)
‘Sucking on a lollipop and sitting on the floor, a boy tells us the following about his children’s group: I like everyone.’
- (2) Spiel-end und sprech-end in der Art des Raperzählen die . . .
play-PRS.PTCP and talk-PRS.PTCP in the manner the.GENrap tell the
Instrumentalisten wilde Geschichten.
instrumentalists wild stories
(St.Galler Tagblatt, 15.6.1999, Ressort: TT-NEU (Abk.); Fliegende Keulen, Tiere und Musik)
‘Playing and talking in a rap-like manner, the instrumentalists tell wild stories.’

These constructions are clause-like in that they denote a predication between an implicit subject and the participial predicate of the PPC. In contrast to finite sentential modifiers, however, they are semantically and syntactically underspecified. This means that the syntactic function and (adverbial) interpretation of a PPC is highly dependent on the context in which it appears.

The 1970s and ’80s saw the publication of several notable works on participle constructions in German. Among them are the corpus-based studies of Rath (1971), Bungarten (1976) and Filipović (1977), which focus on the interpretations and syntax of German participle constructions headed by the present and past participles. In the 1980s, several studies comparing PPC to similar clause-like constructions in German and other languages were published, such as Helbig (1983), Jäger/Koenitz (1983), Kvam (1984), Schatte (1986, 1989) and Kortmann (1988). In the last 30 years, however, the syntax and semantics of German participle constructions with the present participle have received little attention.

Relying on a corpus-based study of 400 PPC first presented in Brodahl (2016), this article attempts to shed new light on the adverbial interpretations, distribution and implicit subject of these constructions. I will argue that German PPC can have a wide variety of both event-related and sentence or speech-act adverbial readings, that there is a correlation

between the interpretation and position of a PPC, and that the interpretation of the implicit subject is not limited to co-reference with the subject of the matrix clause.

2. Main findings of the corpus study

The empirical foundation for the following conclusions consists of 400 complex, adverbial PPC headed by a verbal (not adjectival or prepositional) present participle. The samples are taken from several morpho-syntactically tagged subcorpora of the two digital corpora “Das deutsche Referenzkorpus” (DEREKO) and “The Oslo Multilingual Corpus” (OMC), which contain both fictional and non-fictional German texts from the period 1963–2009.

2.1 Adverbial interpretations of German PPC

With regard to the possible adverbial interpretations of German PPC, previous research has focused on six main adverbial readings, which modify different aspects of the matrix event: temporal, causal (in the narrow sense), concessive, conditional, manner and consecutive adverbial relations are attested. Additionally, Jäger/Koenitz (1983), Helbig (1983) and Helbig/Buscha (2001) describe a predicative use of these constructions, whereby the PPC denotes an event that merely takes place at the same time as the matrix event, but does not modify it in the same way as the above-mentioned adverbial readings.

The PPC in my material occur with all the above-mentioned, and some other event-related readings, which can all be subsumed under temporal, causal and manner modification in a wider sense. Relying on a semantic distinction described by König (1995) and Fabricius-Hansen/Haug (eds.) (2012), among others, these adverbial readings can be divided into two classes. On the one hand, we have *event-expanding* PPC, which introduce a new event to the matrix clause (cf. Fabricius-Hansen/Haug (eds.) 2012). On the other hand, we have *event-specifying* PPC, which do not denote a separate event, but describe some aspect of the matrix event in more detail (ibid.). PPC with different temporal, causal and accessory readings belong to the former group, whereas the latter group consists mainly of PPC with instrumental or manner readings.

However, German PPC are not limited to event-related readings such as those mentioned above. My corpus contains several examples of PPC with sentence-adverbial and speech-act adverbial interpretations, which have either not previously been attested or have been analysed as subgroups of the conditional interpretation (cf. Rath 1971, p. 142ff; Bungarten 1976, p. 201f.; Filipović 1977, p. 62ff.). These PPC do not modify the matrix event itself, but rather express the speaker’s attitude toward the content of the matrix sentence or comment on the utterance being made. Four different sentence-adverbial interpretations are attested in 15 PPC, and in two instances, the PPC expresses an illocutionary comment.

Interestingly, there appears to be a correlation between the interpretation of a PPC and its adjunction site within the so-called middle field of German sentences. Like Frey/Pittner (1998, 1999) and Pittner (1999), I assume that German adverbials have different base positions in the middle field, which correlate with their semantic scope. According to this theory, adverbials modifying the speech act or proposition (i.e. speech-act, frame and sentence adverbials) are base generated in the left section of the middle field, to the left of event-related (causal, temporal etc.) adverbials, while event-internal and process-related (instrumental and manner) adverbials have their base positions in the right end of the middle field. German PPC seem to adhere to this distributional pattern, as 73.6% of

the middle-field PPC in my material appear in the base position of the adverbial class they belong to. Importantly, because of these syntactic base positions, a PPC can have different interpretations depending on where it occurs.

2.2 The interpretation of the implicit PPC subject

Finally, German PPC turn out to be semantically open constructions even when it comes to the interpretation of their implicit subject. Previous work on German PPC focuses on the fact that the implicit subject of a PPC is usually co-referent with the subject of the matrix clause. Bungarten (1976, p. 268) even formulates this as a rule, and PPC with other antecedents are sometimes described as stylistically poor (cf. Duden 2016, p. 865).

Although most of the PPC in my corpus do in fact have an implicit subject with matrix subject reference, an important minority of 45 PPC have a variety of other antecedents. The implicit subject can be co-referent with other syntactic entities within the matrix clause, such as the matrix object or the matrix proposition itself, but it can also have different nominal entities outside the matrix clause or the implicit agent of a passive matrix clause as its antecedent.

Final remarks

The findings summarized above show that PPC in modern German are even more diverse than previous research indicates in terms of the possible adverbial readings of these constructions and the interpretations of their implicit subject. In addition, the analysis of PPC within a framework that assumes base positions for adverbials makes it clear how syntax and semantics interact to generate meaning for these types of underspecified adjuncts. Hopefully, these findings can contribute to future research on syntactic and semantic aspects of these and similar constructions that have not yet been described extensively in the literature.

References

- Brodahl, Kristin Klubbo (2016): Zu deutschen Partizipialkonstruktionen mit dem Partizip 1 als Kern: eine syntaktisch-semantische Untersuchung. Master's thesis. Trondheim: NTNU.
- Bungarten, Theo (1976): Präsensische Partizipialkonstruktionen in der deutschen Gegenwartssprache. Düsseldorf: Pädagogischer Verlag Schwann. (= Schriften des Instituts für deutsche Sprache 38).
- Duden (2016): Die Grammatik: Unentbehrlich für richtiges Deutsch. 9th edition. Berlin: Dudenverlag. (= Duden Volume 4).
- Fabricius-Hansen, Cathrine/Haug, Dag T. T. (eds.) (2012): Big Events, Small Clauses. The Grammar of Elaboration. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.
- Filipović, Nada (1977): Die Partizipialkonstruktionen in der deutschen dichterischen Prosa von heute. Tübingen: Narr. (= Forschungsberichte des Instituts für Deutsche Sprache 32).
- Frey, Werner/Pittner, Karin (1998): Zur Positionierung der Adjunkte im deutschen Mittelfeld. In: Linguistische Berichte 176. Pp. 489–534.
- Frey, Werner/Pittner, Karin (1999): Adverbialpositionen im deutsch-englischen Vergleich. In: Doherty, Monika (ed.): Sprachspezifische Aspekte der Informationsverteilung. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag. Pp. 14–40. (= studia grammatica XXXVII).
- Helbig, Gerhard (1983): Zur Verwendung der Infinitiv- und Partizipialkonstruktionen in der deutschen Gegenwartssprache. In: Helbig, Gerhard (ed.): Studien zur deutschen Syntax. Vol. I. Leipzig: Verlag Enzyklopädie. Pp. 188–214.

- Helbig, Gerhard/Buscha, Joachim (2001): Ein Handbuch für den Ausländerunterricht. Berlin i.a.: Langenscheidt.
- Jäger, Gert/Koenitz, Bernd (1983): Zur Semantik der polnischen Gerundien I und der deutschen inkongruenten Partizipien I in adverbialer und nebenprädikativischer Funktion. In: Jäger, Gert/Helbig, Gerhard (eds.): Studien zum deutsch-polnischen Sprachvergleich. Leipzig: Verlag Enzyklopädie. Pp. 89–136.
- Kortmann, Bernd (1988): Freie Adjunkte und absolute Konstruktionen im Englischen und Deutschen. In: Papiere zur Linguistik 38. Pp. 61–89.
- König, Ekkehard (1995): The meaning of converb constructions. In: Haspelmath, Martin/König, Ekkehard (eds.): Converbs in cross-linguistic perspective. Berlin: De Gruyter. Pp. 57–95. (= Empirical Approach to Language Typology 13).
- Kvam, Sigmund (1984): Zur Syntax der Partizipialkonstruktionen im Deutschen. Ein Vergleich mit den Infinitivkonstruktionen. In: Krenn, Herwig/Niemeyer, Jürgen/Eberhardt, Ulrich (eds.): Akten des 18. Linguistischen Kolloquiums Linz 1983. Vol. 1: Sprache und Text. Tübingen: Niemeyer. Pp. 65–76.
- Pittner, Karin (1999): Adverbiale im Deutschen: Untersuchungen zu ihrer Stellung und Interpretation. Tübingen: Stauffenburg. (= Studien zur deutschen Grammatik 60).
- Rath, Rainer (1971): Die Partizipialgruppe in der deutschen Gegenwartssprache. Düsseldorf: Schwann. (= Schriften des Instituts für deutsche Sprache 12).
- Schatte, Czesława (1986). Partizipialkonstruktionen im Deutschen und Polnischen. Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski. (= Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach 828).
- Schatte, Czesława (1989). Phraseologisierte Partizipialkonstruktionen im Deutschen und Polnischen. In: Studia Germanica Posnaniensia 16. Pp. 209–221.