

The event structure and thematic properties of the German *bekommen*-construction*

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1 Introduction

- Is (1-a) a passive of (or otherwise derived from) (1-b)?
- (1)
- a. dass sie die Medaille überreicht **bekommt**
that she.NOM the medal.ACC presented **RECEIVES**
'that she is presented with a medal'
 - b. dass der König ihr die Medaille überreicht
that the king.NOM her.DAT the medal.ACC presents
'that the king presents the medal to her'
- that is: Is *bekommen* a passive auxiliary? Is the subject moved from the embedded participle's indirect object position? Is there an implicit agent in (1-a)? Is the participle a passive participle?

The subject of the *bekommen*-construction does not originate as an argument of the participle. Putative examples of the *bekommen*-passive instantiate transfer-of-possession-events, with the participle (and DO) specifying the event.

- the appeal of the passive analysis: the German *werden*-passive is a DO passive, so there is an IO passive functional gap
- recipients in ditransitives are dative-marked, as beneficiaries and other affected so-called free datives, and subjects in the *bekommen*-construction are subject to an affectedness restriction that makes them look like plausible promoted datives
- this debate is usually considered settled towards the passive analysis, but the *bekommen*-construction does not pass passive diagnostics, and instead behaves as closely related to the lexical verb *bekommen* ('receive')
- this simplifies the picture for the German dative, and promises insight into participle distribution

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Plan for this talk:

- §2: Core data, analysis of *bekommen*-construction as transfer-of-possession event
- §3: Arguments against the passive analysis
- §4: Implications for the German dative
- §5: Connections and conclusions

2 Transfer-of-possession events

- empirically well-established: *bekommen*-construction is canonically used with the embedded verb denoting an event of receiving (Leirbukt 1997, Bader 2012, Bader & Häussler 2013, Diedrichsen 2012)
 - a note on the data: the author and her informally polled informants hail from West Central Germany, the ‘core region’ of the *bekommen*-construction according to Lenz (2013), with the most permissive grammars and most frequent use
 - *bekommen* and *kriegen* (both: ‘receive’) are variably used in this construction, with variation conditioned at least by register (Eroms 2000) and region (Lenz 2013)
 - (*erhalten* (also ‘receive’) is sometimes mentioned as a third possible verb here but is rarely attested and ungrammatical with verbal complements for many speakers)
 - participles frequently and uncontroversially found in the construction denote transfer-of-possession events with a recipient, compatible with the transparent semantic contribution of the lexical verb “bekommen” (to receive)
- (2)
- a. dass Maria ein Pony geschenkt **bekommt**
that Maria.NOM a pony.ACC gifted **RECEIVES**
‘that Maria is gifted a pony’
 - b. dass der Vater ein Paket geschickt **bekommt**
that the father.NOM a package.ACC sent **RECEIVES**
‘that the father is sent a package’
 - c. dass meine Mitarbeiterin ihr Gehalt überwiesen **bekommt**
that my coworker.NOM her wages.ACC transferred **RECEIVES**
‘that my coworker has her wages transferred’

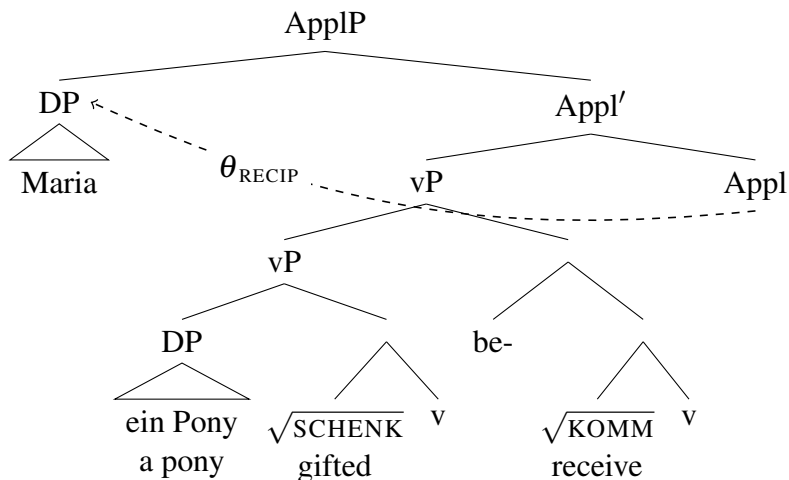
- the subjects: recipients, nominative
- the participles: specify mode of transfer, if left out, sentences are still grammatical, just slightly less specific:

- (3)
- a. dass Maria ein Pony **bekommt**
that Maria.NOM a pony.ACC **RECEIVES**
‘that Maria receives a pony’
 - b. dass der Vater ein Paket **bekommt**
that the father.NOM a package.ACC **RECEIVES**
‘that the father receives a package’

- c. dass meine Mitarbeiterin ihr Gehalt **bekommt**
 that my coworker.NOM her wages.ACC **RECEIVES**
 ‘that my coworker receives her wages’

- the basic facts suggest an analysis in which:
- the subject in the *bekommen*-construction is never projected as an argument of the embedded verb, but is instead introduced as an argument of *bekommen* itself
- *bekommen* takes a vP complement that includes the DO and the participle

(4)



- there are reasons to think that the subject is a thematic subject of *bekommen*, consider the possibility of an adverb that expresses an attitude of the subject, impossible in the *werden*-passive (Haider 1984)

- (5) a. Ich **bekomme** gern Blumen geschenkt.
 I.NOM **RECEIVE** with.pleasure flowers.ACC given
 ‘I enjoy being given flowers.’
- b. Mir werden gerne Blumen geschenkt.
 Me.DAT are with.pleasure flowers.ACC given
 ONLY ‘People enjoy giving me flowers’

- how exactly the thematic role of the subject should be characterized is surprisingly complicated - while in the examples we’ve seen so far, RECIPIENT is perfectly appropriate, that is going to appear a little narrow later on
- in the remainder of this talk, I nonetheless argue that this analysis holds with minor modifications even when we consider the full range of possible participles/complements

2.1 Monotransitives

- for some speakers, the *bekommen*-construction is grammatical with embedded participles that exceptionally have a single dative object in the active, such as *helfen* (‘to help’), *applaudieren* (‘to applaud’), *drohen* (‘to threaten’)

- however, this only holds when they too, on some level of abstraction, denote a transfer of possession:

- (6)
- dass wir geholfen **bekommen**
that we.NOM helped **RECEIVE**
'We are being helped.'
 - dass wir gedroht **bekommen**
that we.NOM threatened **RECEIVE**
'We are being threatened.'
 - *dass wir geglaubt **bekommen**
that we.NOM believed **RECEIVE**
intended: 'We are being believed.'
 - *dass wir begegnet **bekommen**
that we.NOM met **RECEIVE**
'We are being met.'

- this follows under the present analysis given that the restriction on compatibility with *bekommen* is evaluated at the level of vP
- the absence of an accusative object requires no changes to the proposed structure
- speakers that entirely disallow the construction with monotonatives then have a grammar that excludes the more abstract transfer-of-possession interpretation of the participle, not one that somehow requires accusatives (cf. the ACCUSATIVE CONSTRAINT in the experimental literature)

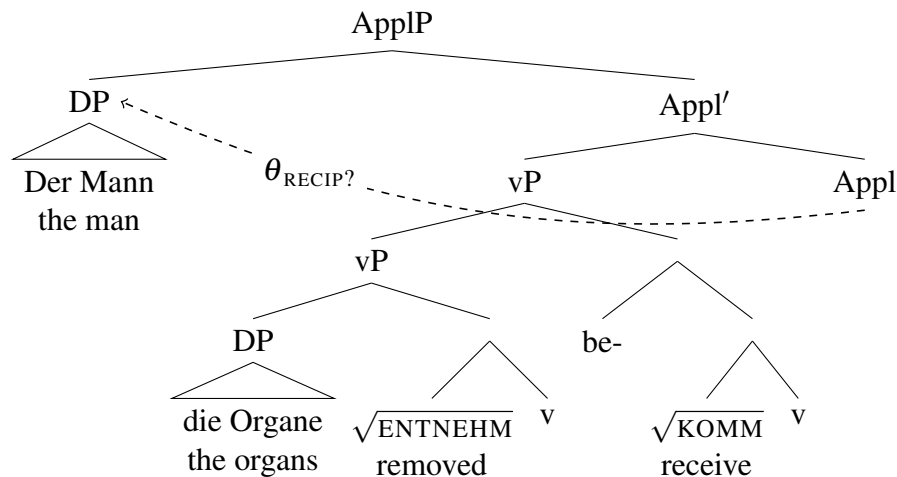
2.2 Transfer-of-possession - the other way

- also only available to a subset of speakers

- (7)
- dass der Mann die inneren Organe entnommen **bekam**
that the man.NOM the inner organs.ACC removed **RECEIVED**
'that the man had his inner organs removed'
 - dass Laura ihre Gitarre gestohlen **bekommt**
that Laura.NOM her guitar.ACC stolen **RECEIVES**
'that Laura had her guitar stolen'

- this data does complicate the previous picture a little, in that only part of the lexical meaning of *bekommen* is retained
- bekommen in this use allows negative in addition to positive transfer-of-possession, but does not act as 'auxiliary' in the relevant sense

(8)



- what is needed to accommodate these examples is a somewhat bleached interpretation of *bekommen* - one that still encodes transfer but not the direction

2.3 How to receive an event

- at this point, with the lexical meaning of *bekommen* only imperfectly preserved, we predict that other types of participles are allowed as long as the vP plausibly encodes an event that can be ‘received’, that is, experienced as a transfer-of-possession event

- (9)
- a. dass wir die Teller gewaschen **bekommen**
that we.NOM the plates.ACC washed **RECEIVE**
‘that the plates are washed for us’
 - b. dass Max Nudeln gekocht **bekommt**
that Max.NOM pasta.ACC cooked **RECEIVES**
‘that pasta is cooked for Max’
 - c. ??dass ich den Hund getötet **bekomme**
that I.NOM the dog.ACC killed **RECEIVE**
‘that the dog is killed on me’

- under the passive analysis, these examples feature dative beneficiaries raising to subject position, but it seems equally plausible to construe these subjects as ‘recipients’ in our slightly more abstract sense
- ‘maleficiaries’ are then predicted to be grammatical as subjects only where the event is still plausibly a transfer event

2.4 Subject restrictions

- it has long been noted that the subject in the *bekommen*-construction is almost always animate (cf. Cook 2006)

- (10)
- a. dass der Mann die inneren Organe entnommen **bekam**
that the man.NOM the inner organs.ACC removed **RECEIVED**
‘that the man had his inner organs removed’

- b. *dass das Buch ein Zitat entnommen **bekam**
 that the book.NOM a quote.ACC from.took **RECEIVED**
 ‘that the quote got taken from the book’
- c. dass er dem Buch ein Zitat entnahm
 that he.NOM the book.DAT a quote.ACC from.took
 ‘that he took a quote from the book’
- exceptionally, the subject can be inanimate if it is plausibly affected by the transfer-of-possession event:
- (11) a. Die Firma **bekommt** stets die besten Arbeitskräfte zugeführt.
 the company **RECEIVES** always the best workers.ACC supplied
 ‘The company always gets supplied with the best workers.’
- b. Das Substantiv **bekommt** eine Endung hinzugefügt
 the noun.NOM **RECEIVES** a suffix.ACC added
 ‘A suffix is added to the noun.’
- examples like this have sometimes been taken to show that there is no animacy restriction on the subject (the restriction being unexpected under the passive analysis), but are probably better understood as cases of atypical recipients

3 Not a passive: the diagnostics

- the *passive* analysis of the *bekommen*-construction has reached wide-spread acceptance following Eroms 1978 and especially Reis 1985, who forcefully argues against Haider’s 1984 ‘predicative’ analysis, in which (12-b) is interpreted like (12-a):
- (12) a. Er **bekommt** den Lohn bar
 he **RECEIVES** the wages in.cash
 ‘He gets his wages in cash.’
- b. Er **bekommt** den Lohn überwiesen
 he **RECEIVES** the wages transferred
 ‘He has his wages transferred.’
- as Reis argues and Haider (1986) admits, the participle in the *bekommen*-construction firmly behaves as part of the verbal complex
 - from this point onward, the game has seem decided in favor of the passive analysis (cf. Zifonun et al. 1997)

3.1 von-phrases as Source PPs

- a cautionary tale of passive diagnostics:
- *von*-phrases are compatible with *bekommen*, but that does not make them agentive by-phrases

(13) Peter **bekam** das Paket von der Mutter geschickt
 Peter.NOM **RECEIVED** the package.ACC by/from the mother sent
 ‘Peter was sent the package by/from his mother’

- has been argued to show that the *bekommen*-construction is a passive (Alexiadou et al. 2014)
- that argument fails to take into account that the lexical verb *bekommen* ‘receive’ is independently compatible with a *von*-phrase, which is interpreted as specifying a source
- consider the minimal pair in (14), where the sentence in (14-a) has *bekommen* in its uncontroversially lexical use, whereas it appears in the *bekommen*-construction in (14-b) with the participial of *schenken* (‘to gift’)

(14) a. Zu Weihnachten **bekomme** ich ein Pony von meinen Eltern.
 for Christmas **RECEIVE** I.NOM a pony.ACC from my parents
 ‘For Christmas I’m getting a pony from my parents.’
 b. Zu Weihnachten **bekomme** ich ein Pony von meinen Eltern
 for Christmas **RECEIVE** I.NOM a pony.ACC from my parents
 geschenkt.
 gifted
 ‘For Christmas I’m being getting a pony from my parents as a gift.’

- from this perspective, *von*-phrases in the *bekommen*-construction appear to be SOURCE PPs, not agentive *by*-phrases
- in line with this, including a *von*-phrase is harder when the direction of transfer is reversed:

(15) ?dass Laura ihre Gitarre von Max gestohlen **bekommt**
 that Laura.NOM her guitar.ACC by/from Max stolen **RECEIVES**
 ‘that Laura had her guitar stolen by Max’

3.2 Overt subject interference

- Alexiadou et al. (2014) also report that there is evidence from control into purpose clauses for the projection of an implicit agent in the *bekommen*-construction

(16) a. Der Junge **bekommt** das Paket geschickt, um die Eltern zu
 the boy.NOM **RECEIVES** the package.ACC sent to the parents
 ärgern.
 annoy
 ‘The boy gets sent the package to annoy his parents.’
 b. Der Junge **bekommt** das Paket absichtlich geschickt.
 the boy.NOM **RECEIVES** the package.ACC purposefully sent
 ‘The boy gets sent the package on purpose.’

- both the purpose clause and the adverbial are indeed possible, but (predictably) oriented towards the overt subject

3.3 Idioms

- as has been previously noted (Reis 1985, Haider 1986), idioms with fixed datives are hard to come by in German
- (17) is a candidate, but *geben* ('give') is independently not very good in the *bekommen*-construction

- (17) a. dem Affen Zucker geben
the monkey.DAT sugar.ACC give
'to do what you want', lit. 'to give the monkey sugar'
- b. ?dass der Affe Zucker gegeben **bekommt**
that the monkey.NOM sugar.ACC given **RECEIVES**
'that the monkey is given sugar'

- Note: that 'give' is degraded in the *bekommen*-construction plausibly follows under the present analysis if 'giving' is too underspecified for mode of transfer to add anything to *bekommen*
- (18) is another candidate, but this one depends on whether this is judged as an idiom or completely invariant proverb

- (18) a. Einem geschenkten Gaul schaut man nicht ins Maul.
a gifted horse.DAT looks one.NOM not in.the mouth
'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.'
- b. ?Der geschenkte Gaul **bekam** nicht ins Maul geschaut.
the gifted horse.NOM **RECEIVED** not in.the mouth looked
'The gift horse was not looked in the mouth' definitely not idiomatic

- in summary, the evidence *for* the passive analysis is less than solid

4 Implications for the German dative

- under the present analysis, there is no movement relationship between dative indirect objects and nominative subjects, and thus no DAT-NOM alternation in German
- a simple consequence is that the picture of the German is simplified: an account in terms of inherent case (cf. McFadden 2006, McIntyre 2006 a.o.) is not challenged by the *bekommen* construction
- the link between datives and *bekommen*-subjects emerges as indirect on this view: datives in German just independently denote recipients, possessors, beneficiaries etc., roles that are necessarily subject to similar restrictions
- the link is not perfect, see double accusatives (though cf. Lee-Schoenfeld 2018 for essentially the opposite argument)

- (19) a. dass der Meister ihm das Klavierspiel lehrt
 that the master.NOM him.ACC the piano-playing.ACC teaches
 ‘that the master teaches him piano’
- b. dass er das Klavierspiel gelehrt **bekommt**
 that he.NOM the piano-playing.ACC taught **RECEIVES**
 ‘that he is taught piano’

- under the present approach, this follows from the fact that the *bekommen*-construction is not a dative passive
- it’s also worth thinking about how a dative passive would be expected to work in German:

- (20) a. Er hilft uns.
 he.NOM helps us.DAT
 ‘He helps us.’
- b. Uns wird geholfen.
 Us.DAT are helped
 ‘We are being helped.’
- c. Wir **bekommen** geholfen.
 We.NOM **RECEIVE** helped
 ‘We are being helped.’

- direct-object-dative is retained in the *werden*-passive, but subjects in the *bekommen*-construction always receive nominative
- casts further doubt on the argument often made the other way around: that the *bekommen*-passive is evidence of DAT-to-NOM conversion in German
- finally, consider dative classes that seem cross-cut by their availability to appear in the construction, such as pertinence datives:

- (21) a. dass Laura ihm die Haare schneidet
 that Laura.NOM him.DAT the hair.ACC cuts
 ‘that Laura cuts his hair’
- b. dass er die Haare geschnitten **bekommt**
 that he.NOM the hair.ACC cut **RECEIVES**
 ‘that he has his hair cut’
- c. dass Laura ihm in die Arme rennt
 that Laura.NOM him.DAT in the arms runs
 ‘that Laura runs into his arms’
- d. *dass er in die Arme gerannt **bekommt**
 that he.NOM in the arms run **RECEIVES**
 ‘that his arms are run into’

- this can’t follow from lack of an accusative object in (21-d) (which we have seen is not a plausible constraint), but from the fact that ‘running’ can’t be received in the way that a haircut can

5 Connections and conclusions

- returning to the initial questions about the passive-status of the construction, we have seen that there is no evidence that the subject originates low, that there is no implicit agent, and that *bekommen* is not a real auxiliary, but we have maintained that the embedded participle is morphologically passive and part of the verbal complex
- this shows the importance of investigating properties of putative passives separately
- the analysis raises questions about flexibly relating events and their participants that mirror Biggs & Embick's (2022) investigation of the *get*-passive, though with different results
- different grammars within German are proposed to follow from different degrees of flexibility that speakers have in interpreting *bekommen+vP*

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