"Der Schal war gestern sogar mit frühstücken": Form and meaning of the so-called absentive in informal written German

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The absentive is considered a "newly discovered" grammatical category, which is described as the grammatical expression of absence in a variety of European languages (de Groot 2000: 718). In this sense, an absentive expression such as "Er ist arbeiten" ([NP][seinFIN][INF]) is often used as an answer to the question "Where are you?", because it implies the ongoing absence of the subject person ("er"/"he") in combination with some distance from the speaker-deictic center, as opposed to the present tense form "Er arbeitet", which suggests no such deictic distance. The subject person is expected to return after finishing the concerned activity. Studies on the absentive in German, many of those from a generative grammar point of view, show that the description of the absentive structure turns out to be problematic (Abraham 2008). Some scholars try to propose unique syntactic features and properties of the verb sein in various ways (König 2009), while some argue a constructional understanding with the absentive semantics (Krause 2002). With the controversial discussion, there is still no plausible relation between form, meaning and usage of the so-called absentive.

Following usage-based constructionist approaches within the field of cognitive linguistics, e.g., frame semantics (Fillmore 2006; Ziem 2008) and construction grammar (Langacker 1987; Goldberg 2003), this current study presents an explorative analysis of the form and meaning of the so-called absentive by focusing on empirical data from the databases Mobile Communication Database (MoCoDa) 1 and 2, collected between 2012 and 2022. It will be shown that depending on contextual factors, such as interactional, sequential or functional parameters, the format [NP][seinFIN][INF] exhibits a broad spectrum of forms und meanings. Certain usages can be found in the data, which have not been observed so far in analyses or were considered grammatically incorrect in the literature. As usually postulated, there must be a subject person who is capable of acting and is absent because of the concerned activity. However, as the example in the title „Der Schal war gestern sogar mit frühstücken" (eventually in engl. "The scarf was even (there with us) at breakfast yesterday") shows, there is even no person referent in the subject. As such, this usage diversity will show that the term absentive is actually not plausible in many respects. Instead of taking "absent" as its root, the format [NP][seinFIN][INF] must be associated with a much more abstract basic meaning. It may therefore be seen as a grammatical construction, which is strongly tied to the frame-based language knowledge within individual speakers on the one hand and the contextual information in the language use on the other.

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