



The Absentive in the Slavic Languages

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The Quick Career of a New Concept

- the concept 'Absentive' was introduced by Casper de Groot in 1995, for examples of the following type:
 - › Dutch: *Jan is boksen*.
 - › Hungarian: *János boxolni van*.
 - › German: *Jan ist boxen*.
 - the discussion of this concept can be divided into several phases:
 - › the first papers of de Groot (1995a, 1995b)
 - › first expansion by de Groot (2000)
 - › second expansion by Vogel (2007)
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The Beginnings

- two papers of Casper de Groot
 - de Groot, Casper 1995a. De absentief in het Nederlands: een grammaticale categorie. *Forum der Letteren* 36, 1–18.
 - de Groot, Casper 1995b. The absentive in Hungarian. In: Kenesei, István (ed.), *Levels and structures: approaches to Hungarian* 5. Szeged, 45–61.
 - summary of de Groot (1995a)
 - This article argues that the construction of *zijn* ('be') + infinitive in Dutch is the grammatical expression of absence, as in *Jan is boksen* ('John is away boxing'). This grammatical form is given the name 'Absentive' (Dutch: Absentief). Investigation of a great number of properties of the construction itself and of the class of verbs which may be used as the infinitive, reveals that the Absentive is a stative, spatial and deictic construction, which differs from any other aspectual and directional forms in Dutch.
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The Main Features

- construction of ESSE + infinitive
 - grammatical expression of absence
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 - a stative, spatial and deictic construction
 - *Wo ist Marie? – Sie ist essen.* (stative)
 - *Als Peter ins Zimmer kam, war Marie essen.* (deictic centre)
 - *Hans sitzt neben mir. *Er ist essen.* (remotedness)
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First Expansion by de Groot (2000)

- one further paper by de Groot
 - de Groot, Casper 2000. The absentive. In: Dahl, Östen (ed.): *Tense and aspect in the languages of Europe*. Berlin, 693–719.
 - more constructions included
 - ESSE + preposition + infinitive
Italian: *Gianni è a mangiare*.
 - ESSE + conjunction + present tense
Norwegian: *Jan er og handlar*.
 - more languages
 - first group: Dutch, German, Hungarian
 - second group: Fering, Italian, Finnish
 - third group: Norwegian, Swedish
 - no Slavic languages!
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Second Expansion by Vogel (2007)

- Vogel, Petra M. 2007. Anna ist essen! Neue Überlegungen zum Absentiv. In: Geist, Ljudmila and Rothstein, Björn (eds.), *Kopulaverben und Kopulasätze. Intersprachliche und intrasprachliche Aspekte*, Tübingen, 253–284.
 - even more languages
 - analysis of 36 official languages (Amtssprachen) of Europe
 - 26 languages with an absentive
 - 10 languages without an absentive
 - even more subtypes
 - full absentive in all tenses (18 languages)
 - partial absentive only in the past tense (9 languages)
 - connection with constructions with the verb ‘to go’
 - *Jan geht boxen. – Jan ist boxen.*
 - *She went and bought some bread. – She has been and bought some bread.*
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The Absentive in Europe (Vogel 2007, 265)



Abbildung 1: Der Absentiv in den europäischen Amtssprachen
(inkl. Färöisch und Friesisch)²⁴



The Absentive in the Slavic Languages according to Vogel

- full absentive in
 - Czech, Slovak, Serbian, Bulgarian, Macedonian
 - partial absentive in
 - Polish, Slovene, Croat, Bosnian
 - no absentive in
 - Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian
 - unfortunately only very few constructed examples, most of which are dubious
 - Czech: *Anna je se koupat. Anna byla se koupat.*
 - Croat: *Anna se je bila kupati.*
 - Slovene: *Anna se je bila kopat.*
 - Bulgarian: *Anna je da kupuva hljab. Anna beše da kupuva hljab.*
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Other Literature on German

- there is quite a lot of texts on the absentive in German, e.g.
 - Krause, Olaf 2002. *Progressiv im Deutschen: eine empirische Untersuchung im Kontrast mit Niederländisch und Englisch*. Tübingen.
 - Abraham, Werner 2007. *Absent arguments on the Absentive: An exercise in silent syntax. Grammatical category or just pragmatic inference?* *Groninger Arbeiten zur Germanistischen Linguistik* 45, 3–16.
 - Fortmann, Christian and Wöllstein, Angelika 2013. *Zum sogenannten Absentiv*. *Jahrbuch für Germanistische Sprachgeschichte* 4, 77–93.
 - Fortmann, Christian and Wöllstein, Angelika 2019. *On the so-called Absentive – in German*. *Studia Linguistica*, 1–46.
 - Fortmann/Wöllstein 2019:
 - “The predication expresses the localisation of the subject at the location of the event, denoted by the infinitival verb. The interpretation of absence, then, can be explained by an implicature.”
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Some General Points

- to my opinion, the term “absentive” should be reserved to the construction of ESSE + infinitive
 - there is no reason to assume that this construction has always the meaning of “absence”, but it can be implied in many contexts
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Dokulil (1949) on the “Absentive” in Czech

- Dokulil, Miloš 1949. *Byl jsem se koupat, naši byli vázat*. (Osobní vazby slovesa býti s infini-tivem). *Naše řeč* 33, 81–92.
 - Dokulil describes ESSE + infinitive in contrast to other similar constructions
 - *je vidět hory* – it is (possible) to see the mountains
 - *všem jest umřít* – for all people it is (necessary) to die
 - *Byl jsem si koupit klobouk*. – I was (somewhere) to buy a hat.
 - BÝT here is not an auxiliary, but a full verb
 - the construction is related to constructions with JÍT ‘to go’
 - the construction can be used in all tenses (past, present, and future)
 - *kluk je dneska zase někde tancovat* – the boy is today again somewhere to dance
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After Dokulil's Paper

- the construction has become a constant element in the description of the Czech syntax
 - it is mentioned in virtually all grammars and syntax books, though in most cases very briefly and mostly with the same examples
 - discussion on some issues
 - is the infinitiv a final infinitive or a local complement?
 - does the construction occur in the present tense?
 - can the construction be explained by ellipsis of the verb IRE?
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Two Papers from the Year 2009

- Karlík, Peter 2009. Syntaktická struktura *Petr byl boxovat*: české specifikum, nebo evropské univerzále? In: Hlaváčková, Dana et al. (eds.), *After Half a Century of Slavonic Natural Language Processing*, 2009, 113–123.
 - stative constructions with a local complement
 - “resultative” constructions
 - completely different from the absentive described by de Groot
 - Berger, Tilman 2009. Einige Bemerkungen zum tschechischen Absentiv. In Berger, Tilman et al. (eds.), *Von grammatischen Kategorien und sprachlichen Weltbildern – Die Slavia von der Sprachgeschichte bis zur Politsprache. Festschrift für Daniel Weiss zum 60. Geburtstag*. Munich 2009, 9–28.
 - corpus study
 - the construction is restricted to the past tense
 - the construction is mostly used with a small group of verbs, the most frequent of which is *podívat se* ‘to look’ (38,9%).
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The Absentive in Other West Slavic Languages

- the absentive is also mentioned in grammars of Slovak, but there is no special study on this issue
 - *Bol chytať ryby.* – He was (somewhere) to catch fish.
 - the absentive occurs in both Sorbian languages and all examples are accepted by native speakers, but the construction is not mentioned in grammars
 - Upper Sorbian: *W Bad Elsteru běštaj kupać byłoj, tež hodžinku čołnikowałoj, a wulět w horcym wjedrje bě jeju zmučnił.*

In Bad Elster the two of them were bathing, they also went boating, and the trip in hot weather had tired them.
 - Lower Sorbian: *No ja som był tam pólu na tu pšenicu glědat.*

Well, I was there at the field to look at the wheat
 - Lower Sorbian uses the supine instead of the infinitive!
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No Absentive in East Slavic

- no construction of this type in the East Slavic languages Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian
 - according to Daneš and Hlavsa (1984) Russian uses non-determined motion verbs to mark an annulled result:
 - cf. the following examples
 - Russian: *On včera pošel kupat'sja.* – *On včera xodil kupat'sja.*
 - Czech: *Šel se včera koupat.* – *Byl se včera koupat.*
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Excursus: How to Look for Examples in Corpora

- it is rather complicated to find examples in electronic corpora, because the verb ESSE usually fulfils quite a lot of functions
 - some examples what happens if you look for forms of BITI and the infinitive in Croatian:
 - search expression: [lemma="biti"] [tag="V.n.*"]
 - *Cilj knjige je približiti kliničke pokazatelje i ozljede karakteristične za biološke, kemijske i radiološke napade.*
 - *Potrebno je proširiti ove pogodnosti za sve zaposlene, u ostalim industrijama i sektorima, te u drugim dijelovima svijeta.*
 - *Najbolje bi bilo sjediti u uspravnom stolcu za vrijeme dojenja.*
 - possible strategies
 - limitation to 1st or 2nd person
 - limitation to certain verbs
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Polish and Serbo-Croat

- in both languages examples of the construction can occasionally be found in corpora, but most native speakers reject them
 - Polish:
 - *Byłem wymienić prawo jazdy w wydziale komunikacji starostwa – opowiada pan Stanisław z Pabianic, który zadzwonił do naszej redakcji podczas wtorkowego dyżuru.*
I went to exchange my driver's license in the traffic department of the district administration, tells Mr Stanisław from Pabianice, who rang up to our editorial staff during their duty hours on Tuesday.
 - Croat:
 - [**...*] *i ja sam bila gledati film Sretna Nova godina**. (hrWaC 2.2)
 - Čakavski govor: Kao oznaka kretanja u širem smislu može se shvatiti svaka priložna oznaka koja obično dolazi uz glagole kretanja i u dotičnom kontekstu ukazuje na kretanje, pa i infinitiv kao oznaka cilja (*bili smo okūpâti se*), ali i oznake načina/oruđa kretanja kao *po nogâmi, bròdun, âutun, autôbusun*. (p.c. Benić)
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Slovene

- so far I found only one example from a web corpus
search expression: [lemma="biti"] [tag="G..m.*"]

7.3. 2009 ob 14:34

bil je ful lep!!!!!!

dosti sm jokala...

če ga še niste gledali ga pejte!!!

ne boste razočarani

— nikka

13.3. 2009 ob 15:53

sem bila gledat film Toseta in kar mi je ostalo zares v srcu je intervju skupaj z menedzerko Liljano...kjer se pokazeta Tose in Liljana v vsej iskrenosti, preprostosti in resnicnih custvih...Premalo kar se tice Toseta kot cloveka. Upam da bo nekdo ki ga je poznal, en dan napravil res en film o njegovem zivljenju. To bi bilo zares eno darilo, zanj in za nas vseh.Te sakamo, Tose.

— cristina -italija

<https://www.kolosej.si/filmi/film/tose-the-hardest-thing/>



Further Examples

- Žiw, isti avto sem bil gledat 2 tedna nazaj, pa je bil tko zaparkiran da not nisi lahko stopil.
- včeraj sem bil gledat tole

p.c. Mladen Uhlik



German Influence?

- German and Dutch seem to be the centre of the “absentive area” in the strict sense
 - therefore the absentive is often considered to be a loan construction from German
 - to my opinion, the occasional occurrence of absentive-like constructions in Polish, Serbo-Croat, and Slovenian should *not* be explained in this way, bearing in mind, that these constructions are very rare and seem to emerge spontaneously nowadays, a long time after intensive contact with German
 - therefore, I prefer to understand these constructions as spontaneous use of the infinitive as a local complement – which has no big chance to be grammaticalized since the Slavic infinitive cannot be combined with prepositions
 - on the other, German influence may have stabilized similar tendencies in Czech, Slovak and both Sorbian languages
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Thank you!

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