

# THE ABSENTIVE: TIME, PERSON, AND PLACE DEIXIS\*

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is part of a project to describe and analyze the syntax and semantics of the progressive construction in Swabian, an Alemannic dialect of High German. There are two similar constructions classified as progressives in Swabian and Standard German whose syntactic and semantic properties however are not sufficiently described. Both are formed with *sein* 'be' and an infinitive verb form. The infinitive is preceded by either AM (1a) or BEIM (1b). Initial evidence suggests that BEIM is in fact a fusion of the preposition *bei* 'at' with the neuter singular dative definite article 'dem' (Spreng 2016a, b). On the other hand, AM cannot be analyzed this way, counter to views for other dialects and Standard German in both descriptive and theoretical work (Krause 2002, Deslisle 1986, Ebert 2000, Donaldson 2007 Bhatt & Schmidt 1993). Thus, the constructions show significant syntactic differences in Swabian (Spreng, 2016a).

### (1) Swabian

- a. r'isch am schwemm-a  
he's **AM** swim-inf  
'he is swimming'
  
- b. r'isch **beim** schwemm-a  
he's **BEIM** swim-inf  
'he is off swimming'

As the translation indicates, the progressive with BEIM (1b) implies additionally that the event takes place away from the speaker in some sense while that does not seem to be part of the meaning of the AM progressive in (1a).

In a paper as part of the large-scale study on grammaticalisation processes in European languages, deGroot (2000) proposes a grammatical category *Absentive* that denotes events taking place in some distance away from the deictic centre. Formally, it is often expressed with some sort of non-finite verb form/progressive form. This paper presents the results of a study to determine whether there is such a grammatical category *Absentive* in Swabian and if yes, whether the BEIM progressive is the formal way to express its semantics as described in deGroot (2000).

This paper is sectioned as follows. Section 2 will discuss the description of the forms, meaning, and previous treatments of the grammatical category *Absentive* in Standard German. Section 3 discusses the main hypotheses of the paper with respect to the *Absentive* in Swabian and the data patterns with the BEIM construction. Section 4 concludes with an outlook for the next research steps.

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\* I would like to thank my consultants who have generously provided their time, insights, and often some interesting views on the work of a linguist. They prefer to remain anonymous at this time.

## 2. The Absentive

The grammatical category *Absentive* is described for a variety of related and unrelated European languages (deGroot 2000, Vogel 2007). They all have in common that there is a non-finite verb form involved.

### (2) Hungarian

A: Péterrel szeretnék beszélni  
 Peter:COM like:COND:1SG speak:INF  
 ‘I would like to speak to Peter.’

B: De hiszen úszni van  
 Well swim:INF is  
 ‘Well, he is off swimming.’

(de Groot 2000:695)

Standard German denotes the absentive reading similarly with *sein+Infinitive* (3a) by default but also allows the BEIM-progressive with that reading (3b).<sup>1</sup> Swabian has no such construction (3a) for any purpose. The assumption in the context of this paper is thus that the BEIM-progressive is the *only* form for absentive meaning in Swabian while in Standard German, *sein+Infinitive* is the *default* form for absentive meaning. Thiel (2007) shows that the BEIM-progressives have overlapping absentive semantics with the ‘regular’ absentive Standard German.

### (3) Standard German

a. er ist schwimm-en  
 he is swim-inf<sup>6</sup>  
 ‘he is off swimming’

b. er ist **beim** schwimm-en  
 he is **BEIM** swim-inf  
 ‘he is off swimming’

## 2.1 Absentive Semantics

The semantics of a grammaticalised Absentive is described as spatial absence of the event from the deictic centre. DeGroot (2000) argues that the deictic centre is not necessarily the place where the speaker is as illustrated in the examples in (4).

### (4) a. Dutch

Toen Peter de kamer binnenkwam was Marie lunchen  
 when Peter the room came\_in was Marie have\_lunch:INF  
 ‘When Peter entered the room, Mary was off having lunch’

<sup>1</sup> It seems that the BEIM construction has not actually been discussed with respect to the absentive reading for Standard German.

- b. Hungarian  
 Nem érdemes odamenni, mert Imre ilyenkor uszni van  
 not worth there-go, because Imre at.that.time swim:INF is  
 ‘It’s not worth going there because Imre will be off swimming then’  
 (deGroot 2000:698)

Deictic centre thus is not to be understood in the classic sense but more as what is described as ‘origo’ (Haslinger, 2007) based on work in Klein (1982) and Bühler (1934). Thus, in the unmarked case, the origo is speaker oriented, i.e. what we think of traditionally as the deictic centre. In the absentive, the origo is does not coincide with the speaker’s domain of visual perception and a subject of the absentive is dislocated with respect to its pragmatically default location (Haslinger 2007). Thus, Mary is not where Peter might expect her to be (4a) and Imre is not at the location the speaker normally expects him to be (4b). Absentive semantics should thus be possible with first person statements and they are with the appropriate context (5b). Without, they are ungrammatical (5a).

- (5) Standard German
- a. \*Ich bin/\*Wir sind arbeiten/schlafen/kochen ... \*1sg/pl  
 I am/we are work/sleep/cook....  
 ‘I am/we are off working/sleeping/cooking....’
- b. Du, ich bin jetzt (draußen) rauchen. ... 1sg  
 ‘Listen, I’ll be out smoking’<sup>2</sup>
- (Abraham 2007:5)

If absentive semantics are pragmatically determined, past tense should influence absentive readings since logically, the event is remote from the discourse in both space and time. Furthermore, absentive semantics also implies a remoteness component. Thus, the place where Imre is swimming is remote from the place where ‘there’ is (4b). This seem to include a component of invisibility (deGroot 2000). So, absentive would not be used for a situation where Peter can see Mary through a glass window in (4a).

It is also normally used for a habitual or institutionalised event and implies the assumption of a short duration with a short return to the *origo* (deGroot 2000). According to Vogel (2009), a grammaticalisation of these semantics it can be found in 26 languages of Europe.

## 2.2 Absentive Semantics in Standard German

Some treatments have argued that the semantics of the Absentive as described in deGroot (2000) are not necessary components of the *sein+infinitive* construction.

- (6) Etwas außergewöhnliches ist passiert: Theo ist den Müll entsorgen/einkaufen.  
 Something extraordinary has happened: Theo is off depositing the garbage/ shopping  
 (Fortmann and Wöllstein 2013:79)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I would translate as Listen, ‘I’m outside smoking now.’

<sup>3</sup> English translations of Fortmann and Wöllstein (2013) by the author.

The construction in (6) is entirely possible with the absentive readings despite the non-habitual context. One could argue that both taking out the garbage and shopping are institutionalised events in the general sense but it does seem that the absentive reading is not necessarily correlated to habituality for the subject *Theo*.

- (7) a. Theo ist Holz hacken, aber ich weiß nicht wie lange.  
 Theo is off chopping wood but I don't know how long.
- b. #Theo ist eine Stunde Holz hacken, aber ich weiß nicht wie lange.  
 Theo is off chopping wood for an hour but I don't know how long.  
 (Fortmann and Wöllstein 2013:79)<sup>4</sup>

(7a) should be equally problematic as (7b) if there is an implied assumption as to the shortness of the event associated with an absentive reading. Note that regardless of the additional dependent clause, (7b) is less acceptable to Standard German speakers.

### 2.3 Grammatical restrictions for the Absentive in Standard German

Fortmann and Wöllstein (2013) argue that almost any locative indicator may or may not imply absence from some origo or deictic centre depending on pragmatics and/or types of verbs. Therefore, there is no exclusively and well-defined absentive interpretation associated with the construction. In fact, they argue that the construction shows striking semantic and syntactic parallels when an overt locative PP is included. Overt or not, they do not allow for passives (8a), inchoative verbs (8b), or inanimate subjects (8c, d).

- (8) a. \*Theo ist (beim Barbier) rasiert werden.  
 'Theo is being shaved (at the barber)'
- b. \*Fritz ist (in der Dusche) aufwachen.  
 'Fritz is waking up (in the shower)'
- c. Theo ist (im Park) Tauben vergiften.  
 'Theo is poisoning pigeons (in the park)'
- d. \*die/eine Chlorgaswolke ist (im Park) Tauben vergiften.  
 'the chloric gas cloud is poisoning pigeons (in the park)'  
 Fortmann & Wöllstein (2013): 82-83

Abraham (2007) discusses a few grammatical restrictions for the Absentive form. He shows that by default, only 3<sup>rd</sup> person allows for the Absentive reading (9c, d) but this restriction can easily be overridden with the right context, thus providing more evidence that the absentive is not a grammatical phenomenon.

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<sup>4</sup> There is some ambiguity in the example concerning *wie lange* 'how long' in German. It could mean the speaker does not know how long Theo will be chopping wood or it could mean the speaker does not know how long ago Theo left.

- (9) a. Er ist arbeiten/schlafen/kochen ... 3sg  
 he is work/sleep/cook  
 ‘He is off working/sleeping/cooking...’
- b. Sie/Die Kameraden sind arbeiten/schlafen/kochen ... 3pl  
 they/the colleagues are work/sleep/cook...  
 ‘they/the colleagues are off working/sleeping/cooking’...
- c. \*Ich bin/\*Wir sind arbeiten/schlafen/kochen ... \*1sg/pl  
 I am/we are work/sleep/cook...  
 ‘I am/we are off working/sleeping/cooking...’
- d. \*Du bist/\*Ihr seid arbeiten/schlafen/kochen ... \*2sg/pl  
 you(sg) are/you(pl) are work/sleep/cook...  
 ‘you are off working/sleeping/cooking’  
 (Abraham 2007:5)

They can be salvaged to be acceptable under certain specific context conditions.

- (10) a. Ich bin dann, wenn man mich braucht, (weg) arbeiten. ... 1sg  
 ‘I will then, when you need me, be off working’
- b. Immer, wenn man Euch braucht, seid Ihr auf Tour. ... 2pl  
 ‘Always when you are needed you are off touring (lit. on tour)’<sup>5</sup>
- c. Du, ich bin jetzt (draußen) rauchen. ... 1sg  
 ‘Listen, I’ll be out smoking’<sup>6</sup>
- (Abraham 2007:5)

While it is entirely possible that the Absentive exists as a grammaticalisation in languages, it does not seem to be the case for Standard German.

## 2.4 Previous analyses

Previous approaches to the Absentive construction argue that the reading is due an optional (*weg*)*gegangen* ‘gone (away)’ (Vogel 2007, Krause 2002, Abraham 2007) in Germanic. It would thus be similar to English: *He’s gone/away/off swimming*. The slight ambiguity in English progressives thus might also be traced back to a possible absence of ‘gone’. Depending on pragmatic factors it seems that the absentive reading without ‘gone’ would be preferred in a construction like (11b) compared to (11a).

- (11) a. He is swimming.  
 b. He is strawberry-picking.

<sup>5</sup> There is no infinitive: better: *Immer, wenn man Euch braucht seid Ihr touren (touring)*.

<sup>6</sup> I would translate as ‘Listen, I’m outside smoking now.’

The influence that pragmatic factors have on the presence or absence of the absentive reading thus may be accounted for by an optional ‘gone’. If it is present, the reading is absentive, if not, we have a default progressive reading. However, König (2009) argues against such an analysis on the basis that constructions with overt *gehen* ‘go’ are ingressive and punctual while absentives without it are durative and they thus cannot be identical. Haslinger (2007) also argues that any ellipsis analysis that claims the readings are due to a dropped *gegangen* ‘gone’ or ‘weg’ ‘away’ are on the wrong track at least for Dutch.

Fortmann and Wöllstein (2013) argue that the semantics in these constructions are nothing but a composition of an arbitrary locative equivalent with *irgendwo* ‘somewhere’ with the place of the event that is pragmatically determined by the verb. The fact that even events fairly close to the origo can be salvaged with the appropriate context suggests that this might be on the right track. I will discuss some evidence for this in Swabian in section 3.2.

### 3. Swabian Progressives

Swabian is a dialect continuum spoken in Baden Württemberg and in parts of Bavaria in mostly Southwestern Germany. It is part of Alemannic, which includes Swiss German, Bavarian, and Austrian variants. Data was elicited from monolingual speakers of Upper Swabian (spoken around Ravensburg) between the ages of 70 and 80, who have rarely used any other variant of Swabian or German throughout their lives.

The initial hypothesis is that if Swabian has a grammatical category Absentive, only the BEIM construction can be used for it since the Standard German default *sein+infinitive* is not available in Swabian. There are also significant syntactic differences between the AM- and the BEIM-progressive in Swabian that align with semantic differences that might include the absentive meaning. Some evidence suggests that the BEIM-progressive is a PP construction with the infinitive a nominalization that is a complement to a preposition *bei* ‘at’ while the infinitive in AM progressives is verbal (Spreng 2016a, b). Therefore, it is more likely that the BEIM-progressive retains some kind of locative (some time/place else) reading in contrast to the AM-progressive.

(12) Syntactic differences between AM and BEIM constructions (Spreng, 2016a)

BEIM	AM
non-finite verb is nominal	non-finite verb is verbal
modified by adjectives	modified by adverbs
→ BEIM is preposition <i>bei</i> +dative article <i>dem</i>	→ AM is aspectual particle

Infinitives associated with locative or absentive readings are historically due to semantic bleaching of location indicators such as prepositions and case and a tendency of infinitives to become nominalized (Tamm, 2011). According to Bybee et al. (1994), this has led to the close association of progressives, non-finite verbs, and absentive/location semantics.

### 3.1 Absentive readings with BEIM constructions in Swabian: predictions

The fact that the Absentive reading includes distance, invisibility, and remoteness from the origo suggests that if the BEIM construction is the absentive construction in Swabian, it should be problematic for 1<sup>st</sup> person. It may be problematic in two different ways:

- not available at all with 1<sup>st</sup> person
- available but does not express absentive readings without context

The invisibility and remoteness aspect of the absentive semantics has also led me to the assumption that it might be a default reading of the BEIM construction if it is used with past tense. In that case, BEIM constructions should have absentive readings by default for past tense.

If the BEIM construction is in fact a grammatical category Absentive and has no other reading, then the construction should be ungrammatical in 1<sup>st</sup> person present sentences without context. If it is available based on pragmatically conditioned factors, we can conclude that it is connected to the construction, but not a grammatical category.

### 3.2 The BEIM-construction as grammatical absentive in Swabian

#### 3.2.1 First person

Absentive readings should not be available or BEIM should be ungrammatical with 1<sup>st</sup> person present. Only the former prediction is borne out. BEIM is available and generally preferred regardless of spatial distance. In (13), there is no spatial distance and both BEIM and AM are available. Removing the subject from its expected place makes no difference (14). There is no absentive reading for BEIM (13, 14). 1<sup>st</sup> person is available but the construction has no absentive reading. However, the absentive reading can be coerced (15).

(13) B is in the kitchen. A enters and asks B.

A: Was dusch?  
'What are you doing?'

B:

a. I be BEIM grombiera schäla 1st present  
'I am peeling potatoes'

b. I be AM grombiera schäla 1st present  
'I am peeling potatoes'

(14) A goes to the kitchen. B is not there. A yells.

A: Was dusch?  
'What are you doing!'

B:

a. I be (im Garta) BEIM Schnittlauch schneida! 1st present  
'I'm cutting chives (in the garden)!'

- b. I be (\*im Garta) AM Schnittlauch schneida!  
‘I am cutting chives!’ 1st present

Despite B being not at the expected location, both AM and BEIM are available (14). However, if the location is overt, AM is not available. This indicates that the AM construction does not allow any locative modification.

15) A announces a visit to B.

- B: I be aber BEIM bade.  
‘But, I’m gone swimming!’ 1st present

### 3.2.2 Past Tense

With past tense, the BEIM construction is preferred similarly to present tense (16).

(16) A called B this morning and got no answer. A calls B again and asks.

- A: I ho heit morga agruafe. Was hosch do?  
‘I called you this morning. What were you doing?’

B:

- a. I war BEIM onkraut rupfa 1st past  
‘I was pulling weeds’

- b. I war #AM onkraut rupfa 1st past  
‘I was pulling weeds’

Thus, there is a difference to the present tense examples (13). This indicates that past tense coerces an absentive reading.

However, what we find is that AM is available if a concurrent event of calling is explicitly stated in the answer (17c). BEIM becomes obligatory unless another event is mentioned. The fact that fishing happens in a different location by default however does not require BEIM. Thus, the association of BEIM and an absentive reading is at best, tenuous. However, once a location is overtly mentioned, AM becomes completely unavailable (18b, c).

(17) A called B last week and got no answer. A calls B today and asks.

- A: I ho letsch Woch agruafe. Was hosch gmacht?  
‘I called last week. What were you doing?’

B:

- a. I war BEIM fischa 1st past  
‘I was gone fishing’

- b. #I war AM fischa 1st past  
‘I was fishing’



- c. I war AM fischa wo do agruafa hosch 1st past  
 ‘I was fishing when you called’

(18) A called B last week and got no answer. A calls B today and asks.

A: I ho letsch Woch agruafe. Was hosch gmacht?  
 ‘I called last week. What were you doing?’

B:

a. I war am See BEIM fischa 1st past  
 ‘I was gone fishing at the lake’

b. \*I war am See AM fischa 1st past  
 ‘I was fishing at the lake’

c. #I war AM See AM fischa wo do agruafa hosch 1st past  
 ‘I was fishing at the lake when you called’

### 3.2.3 Third person

The sense that an absentive requires invisibility of the event for the origo can also not be found for the BEIM construction. BEIM is available while the event is completely visible and close to the speaker (19). Again, AM becomes very problematic when a location is introduced, while BEIM becomes problematic when a concurrent event is introduced (20).

(19) A calls B and asks about C, B’s husband. B can see C from the balcony.

A: Was dud’r?  
 ‘What is he doing?’

B:

a. r’isch (im Garta) BEIM onkraut rupfa 3rd present  
 ‘He is pulling weeds (in the garden)’

b. r’isch #AM onkraut rupfa 3rd present  
 ‘He is pulling weeds’

(20) A calls B and asks about C, B’s husband. B can see C from the balcony.

A wants to talk to C.

A: Kasch m’s telefon gea?  
 ‘Could you give him the phone?’

B:

a. noi, I will’n it stera, r’isch AM/#BEIM onkraut rupfa 3rd present  
 ‘No, I don’t want to interrupt him. He is pulling weeds’

b. r’isch #AM onkraut rupfa 3rd present  
 ‘He is pulling weeds’

Speakers prefer BEIM regardless of visibility or actual distance. This shows that the BEIM construction does not require invisibility of the event/place.

A similar example is shown in (21). The question of interruption seems to force the eventive reading of AM instead of the locative/absentive reading of BEIM. In (21a), only BEIM is available while (21b) only allows for AM.

- (21) a. B and C are out on the lake. B is on the beach, C is in the boat. A calls B.  
Only B has a phone.  
A: Was dond'r grad?  
'What are you(pl) doing?'
- B: C isch (im Boot) BEIM/#AM fisha ond I lieg in dr' Sonn. 3rd present  
'C is fishing (in the boat) and I am lying in the sun'
- b. A: kann I mit'm C reda?  
'can I talk to C?'
- B: noi, r'isch BEIM/AM fischa ond I schwemm do it na 3rd present  
'no, he is fishing and I'm not going to swimm there'

In (22), the deictic centre is closer and somewhat involved in the event. Now, BEIM and AM are equally possible. Again, the threat of interruption forces AM with the eventive reading, making BEIM unacceptable.

- (22) B and C are out fishing in a boat. A calls B. Only B has a phone.
- a. A: Was dond'r grad?  
'What are you(pl) doing?'
- B: mr'send BEIM/AM fisha 1st present  
'we are fishing'
- b. A: kann I mit'm C reda?  
'can I talk to C?'
- B: noi r'isch AM/\*BEIM fischa ond do derf ma it reda 3rd present  
'no, he is fishing and you're not allowed to talk there'

### 3.2.4 Second person

For second person, both AM and BEIM are available for past and present tense with locative/absentive readings for both tenses for BEIM. The patterns are the same as for 1st and 3rd person (23).

- (23) a. Bisch BEIM/AM mittagessa? 2nd present  
'Are you out lunching/having lunch?' (ambiguous)

- |    |   |             |
|----|---|-------------|
| b. | Bisch AM mittagessa<br>'Are you eating lunch?'(at home or out)                              | 2nd present |
| c. | Waret'r BEIM/#AM skifahra?<br>'Were you(pl) skiing?' (away)                                 | 2nd past    |
| d. | Waret'r in the Pyrenäa BEIM/*AM skifahra?<br>'Were you(pl) gone skiing in Pyrenees?' (away) | 2nd past    |
| e. | #Waret'r AM skifahra?<br>'Were you(pl) skiing?'   | 2nd past    |
| f. | #Waret'r AM/*BEIM skifahra wo I agruafa ho?<br>'Were you(pl) skiing when I called?'         | 2nd past    |

Again, when a location is overtly mentioned, AM becomes unavailable (23 d, f). Person overall does not have an impact in absentive readings.

The results show clearly that there is no obligatory absentive reading for BEIM. While BEIM has no obligatory absentive reading, AM is not compatible with any kind of location. Instead, AM seems to force a solely eventive reading. The contrast between AM and BEIM progressives is thus not related to absentive meaning. However, there is evidence of an optional/non-overt location modifier.

### 3.3 Asking for a location

All of the above situations are triggered by questions as to what the person is/was doing to avoid any kind of priming towards a location interpretation. If BEIM includes a locative component to its meaning, it only should be used in answer to the question: where are you/they/he and AM should be rejected. This is clearly borne out. Regardless of tense or person, AM is never available (24, 25).

- (24) a. A calls B.  
A: Wo isch C?  
'Where is C?'
- B: Der isch BEIM/\*AM rasa mäha.  
'He is mowing the lawn' 3rd present
- b. A calls B:  
A: Wo send'r?  
'Where are you(pl)?'
- B: mir send BEIM/\*AM essa  
'We are out eating' 1st present
- (25) a. A calls B.  
A: I hoa letsch Woch agruafa. Wo waret'r?  
'I called last week. Where were you(pl)?'

B: Mir waret BEIM danza 1st past  
 \*Mir waret AM danza  
 ‘We were out dancing’

b. A calls B.

A: I hoa letsch Woch C it erroicht. Wo war’r?  
 ‘I couldn’t reach C last week. Where was he?’

B: Der war BEIM/\*AM radla 3rd past  
 ‘He was gone cycling’

### 3.4 Summary

These examples show that the BEIM construction clearly has a location component reading which the AM-construction does not. Following the idea put forth in Fortmann and Wöllstein (2013), I suggest that the meaning of the BEIM construction may be compositional combining location and event in contrast to AM progressives, which have no such location component.

Neither person nor tense create a clear contrast between absentive and non-absentive readings or a clear choice between BEIM or AM. If there is an absentive reading, it is associated with the BEIM construction, although it is not a necessary component of its meaning.

### 4. Conclusion

There is no convincing evidence that the BEIM-construction is a grammatical form to exclusively encode absentive readings in Swabian. While there is no clear contrast between AM and BEIM construction with respect to Absentive readings as described in deGroot (2000), there is a locative component in the meaning of the BEIM construction that does not exist in the AM construction (Fortmann and Wöllstein 2013).

Whether this location component is represented by a PP as the syntactic properties of the BEIM construction suggest (Spreng 2016a) will be left to further research. Overall, there is no reason to support a grammatical category Absentive for Swabian.

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