

Deep passive mimicry: Inherently reflexive particle verbs and prepositional prefix verbs in German

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A survey of patterns associated with German particle and prefix verbs in a 7 billion token extract from the German Reference Corpus (DeReKo) shows that inherently (lexically) reflexive particle verb constructions of the type *sich abVen mit etwas* are quite productive. The pattern determines reasonably many types in the corpus (*sich abquälen*, *-schinden*, *-strampeln*, *-stressen...* ('struggle')) as well as new types, modulo minor reshaping (*sich einen abbrechen*, *-asten*, *-frieren*, *-googeln*, *-zittern* ('torture oneself')).

We argue that the relative success of the inherently reflexive particle verb pattern rests on a peculiar type of grammatical mimicry: The particle verb construction outwardly imitates inward structural properties of the prefix verb structure. More specifically, overt inherent reflexivization in the particle verb construction mimics silent local binding of the SOURCE/GOAL role as built into the mechanism that relates adverbial prepositional structures and prefix verb structures (viz. locative alternation, applicativization), cf. (1).

- (1) (a) Sie baute Sandburgen um die Anlagen.
she built sandcastles around the facilities
(b) Sie umbaute die Anlagen (mit Sandburgen).
she around.built the facilities (with sandcastles)
'she surrounded the facilities (with sandcastles)'

In support of SOURCE/GOAL-binding in the prepositional prefix verb structure (1b), we note that independent expression of a SOURCE/GOAL role is impossible. Also, prepositional prefix verb constructions are themselves never overtly inherently reflexive. They couldn't be, as the SOURCE/GOAL of the adverbial structure gets to be realized as the direct object in the prefix verb structure. Not least, SOURCE/GOAL-binding provides an explanation for the oft-noted holistic interpretive effect associated with the prefix verb construction (1b).

The particle verb construction shares the diathetic, passive-like quality that characterizes the prefix verb structure (cf. 1a/b): There is a simpler transitive realization where the role expressed by means of the *mit*-PP is realized as the subject (*sie plagt sich mit mir ab – ich plage sie*). Indeed the inward binding operation in the prefix structure has the effect of a „deep passive“ in that it promotes the SOURCE/GOAL to direct object and allows for optional realization of the original THEME as a *mit*-PP. Intriguingly in this respect, the historically authentic target of reflexive binding in the particle verb structure is the SOURCE/GOAL in the fixed expression *Haut (von etwas/sich) abschinden* (with *Haut* disappearing and the reflexive taking the object position in the course of time, presumably). In the reshaped *sich einen ab-Ven* construction, the dative position of the reflexive outwardly restores the SOURCE/GOAL quality of the bound element and thus re-enhances the likeness to inward SOURCE/GOAL binding in the prefix verb structure.

In sum, the inherently reflexive particle verb construction copies and thereby uncovers structural properties of the prepositional prefix verb structure, to the advantage of acquiring attractive functional traits and type generating potential. These functional traits and generative capacity echo the merits of broadly and automatically applying but superficially invisible operations – viz. the mechanics of locative alternation or applicativization – that characterize the prefix verb model.