# Two German Impersonal Passives and Expletive *pro*

Patricia Cabredo Hofherr

Université de Paris 7, URA 1028
2, Place Jussieu. 75251 Paris Cedex 05. France
cabredo@ccr.jussieu.fr

**Abstract**

In the present article I argue that the null subject observed in German impersonal passives is neither a null expletive nor in canonical subject position (e.g. AgrSP). We will link the possibility of null subjects in German constructions involving the participle to the possibility of nominative assignment into the VP. The null subject is then analysed as a syntactically projected null cognate object that is assigned nominative case in situ.

**Key words:** null expletives, nominative-assignment, German impersonal passives.


**Resum.** *Dues passives impersonals de l'alemany i l'expletiu* pro

En aquest article argumento que el subjecte buit de les passives impersonals de l'alemany no és ni un expletiu buit ni a la posició canònica del subjecte (e.g. SconcS). Relaciono el fet que els subjectes buits siguin possibles a les construccions de participi de l'alemany amb la possibilitat d'assignació de cas nominatiu dins del SV. El subjecte buit s'analitza doncs com un objecte cognat buit projectat sintàcticament que rep cas nominatiu in situ.

**Paraules clau:** expletius buits, assignació de nominatiu, passives impersonals de l'alemany.

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## 1. Introduction

The German impersonal passive construction with *werden* poses a well-known puzzle of German syntax: even though German is not a *pro*-drop language (see (1)), the subject position of the impersonal *werden*-passive must remain empty (see (2)):

(1) Gestern      kam    *(er) zu   spät.
    yesterday   came   he     too  late
    'Yesterday he came too late.'

(2) Gestern      wurde        (*es) lange  diskutiert.
    yesterday   werden 3sg  expl  long   discussed
    'Yesterday it was discussed/ the discussion went on until late.'

When the expletive *es* is inserted  in subject position of a *werden*-passive it receives an argumental reading as the 3sg neuter pronoun where possible (see (3)), resulting in ungrammaticality when the argumental reading is impossible as in (4).

(3) Gestern      wurde        *es*  früh  gegessen.
    yesterday   werden 3sg  it    early eaten
    'Yesterday it (e.g. the food) was eaten early.'

(4) *Gestern     wurde        es    früh   geschlafen.
    yesterday   werden 3sg  it    early  slept
    'Yesterday it (=sth) was slept early.'

## 2. The Semi-pro-drop Analysis

The standard analysis for the empty subject position in German impersonal passives within the generative framework proposes that German is a *semi-pro-drop* language (e.g Sternefeld (1985), Safir (1985), Grewendorf (1989)). A full pro-drop language such as Spanish licenses null referential pronouns (see (5a)) while a restricted pro-drop language such as German is taken to allow only the equivalent of (b): a phonetically empty expletive pronoun *pro*$_{expl}$.

(5)  a. (Sp)   *pro*      hablo
                          speak 1sg
                          'I speak.'

     b.          pro$_{expl}$   es   evidente  que   quieren       invitarnos.
                          is    evident   that   (they) want  invite-us
                          'It is evident that they want to invite us.'

An empty expletive explains why the subject position of the impersonal passive **can** remain empty: it is filled by the pro$_{expl}$. The fact that it **must** be empty is then derived by the Avoid Pronoun Principle (see Safir (1985)).

(6) **Avoid Pronoun Principle** (APP) (Chomsky (1981)):
Wherever an overt pronoun can be avoided it must be avoided.


## 2.1. The Distribution of Expletives in German

The semi-pro-drop analysis assimilates the null subject in German impersonal passives to expletives. This raises a number of problems. In German the impersonal use of actives verbs (see (7)) and weather verbs (see (8)) do not allow expletive drop:

(7) Vorhin    hat    *(es)  am Fenster      geklopft.
    just now  has    expl   at the window   knocked
    'Just now there was a knock at the window.'

(8) Heute    schneit  *(es).
    today    snows    expl
    'Today it is snowing.'


Under the plausible assumption that weather-arguments are not expletives but rather quasi-arguments, it has been proposed that the German $pro_{expl}$ corresponds to the true expletive while *es* is a semi-argument.

An analysis in terms of $pro_{expl}$ and the APP cannot be extended to another case of null subject positions that arises in German. In some cases of extraposition *es* can be left out (see (9a)); that this is not a property of extraposition in general as shown in (9b)):

(9) a.   …dass  (es)  klar war,   dass es so kommt.
         … that  it    clear was  that it so comes
         '…that it was clear that that would happen.'

    b.   …dass  *(es)  keinen Verdacht   erregte, dass…
         …that  it     no suspicion      roused, that…
         '… that it aroused no suspicion that …'


The APP would lead us to expect that where *es* can be dropped it is impossible to insert it. This expectation is not borne out: in extraposition constructions *es* is always possible in subject position. Furthermore, the $pro_{expl}$ postulated for the impersonal passive cannot be taken to fill the empty position in (9) since languages that have two overt expletives corresponding to a true expletive and a semi-argument only admit the argumental variant in extrapositions.

(10) (Dutch)   … dat  het/*er    mij irriteert   dat  …
     (Danish)  …at    det/*der   irriterer mig   at   …
               …that  it/*there  annoys me       that …

     (examples taken from Vikner (1995:235))

The element $pro_{expl}$ cannot appear in this configuration. This is equally the case for other impersonal constructions like the impersonal middle where the expletive *es* subject is obligatory:

(11)  Hier   lebt   *(es)   sich   gut.
        here   lives   expl   refl   well
        'Here it lives well / here people live well.'                    (impersonal middle)

Under a $pro_{expl}$-analysis of the impersonal passive the argumental status of the middle subject has to differ from that of impersonal passives. Except for the difference with respect to expletive surface subjects there is no evidence for such a difference of theta-roles.

## 2.2. Conclusion

The semi-pro-drop analysis for German raises a number of problems briefly reviewed above. We have seen that the distribution of expletives in German depends on the syntactic construction involved, and that the distribution of $pro_{expl}$ is limited to a particular construction, namely the impersonal passive. In what follows I will therefore concentrate on two construcions where the lexical expletive is systematically excluded: the *sein*- and the *werden*-passive. I will argue that the lack of an overt subject in the German impersonal passives is not to be found in a global property such as «semi-pro-drop» but rather in the properties of the past participle and its interactions with the syntactic environment it appears in. In particular I propose that the null subject in the passive corresponds to the null object that is present with active intransitive verbs.

## 3. Sein- and werden-passive

### 3.1. The Sein-passive

The German *sein*-passive is a stative passive formed with the auxiliary *sein*, 'to be', and the past participle. Like the *werden*-passive it allows a personal (12) and an impersonal (13) variant.

(12)  Der Garten   ist   gegossen.
        The garden   is   watered (=stative/resultative reading)

(13)  Er sah, dass   eingekauft   war.
        he saw that   shopped       was
        'He saw that the shopping had been done.'

Like the *werden*-passive the impersonal *sein*-passive cannot take an expletive subject (see e.g. Rapp (1997: 214)):

(14)  a.  Er sah,  dass  schon       serviert  war.
          he saw   that   already    served    was
          'He saw that the serving had already been done.'

     b.  Er sah,  dass  *es*  schon     serviert war.
         he saw   that   it   already   served   was
         'He saw that it (the food) had already been served.'

### 3.2. Interpretive Differences

The two passives have clearly different interpretive properties. The *werden*-passive shares the *aspectual properties* of the active verb while the *sein*-passive is always stative picking out the resultant state of the action described by the verb. The *werden*-passive can combine with all the *modifiers* that can modify the active verb (see (15)); the *sein*-passive only allows modification that affects the resultant state (see (16)).

(15)  Der Brief wird        langsam/mit roter Tinte    geschrieben.
      the letter werden3sg   slowly/with red ink            written
      'The letter is being written slowly/with red ink (process).'

(16)  Der Brief  is          *langsam/mit roter Tinte   geschrieben.
      the letter  sein3sg    *slowly/with red ink           written
      'The letter is written slowly/with red ink (result).'

The *werden*-passive implies *disjoint reference* between the surface subject and the implied agent, the *sein*-passive allows both reflexive and disjoint interpretation (see(17)).

(17)  Hans    ist   gewaschen.
      'Hans   is    washed. ' (resultative)
      ok: Hans/somebody else washed Hans.
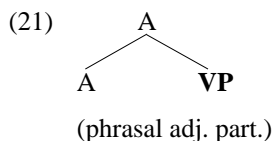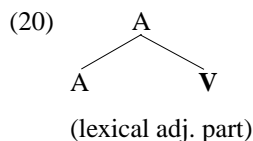
## 4. The Analysis

### 4.1. The Sein-passive

Levin & Rappaport (1986) propose that the English adjectival passive involves a lexical category changing operation on the past participle:

(18)  V[Part] $\rightarrow$ [V [Part]]A        Levin & Rappaport (1986: 646)

For German this analysis is too restricted. Kratzer (1996) shows that the German adjectivised past participle can be phrasal, in that it can retain the dative argument of  the underlying verb.

(19)  Das Land   war   ihm             abgeschmeichelt.
      the land   was   him (dative)    off-flattered
      'The land was obtained from him by flattery' (Kratzer's example)

Following Kratzer I will therefore assume that the adjectival past participle in German is derived by affixation of an adjectival affix. This affixation may be lexical (20) or phrasal (21):

(20)        A                              (21)        A
        ╱    ╲                                     ╱    ╲
      A        V                                  A        VP
    (lexical adj. part)                         (phrasal adj. part.)

This analysis presupposes that the external argument of the verb is introduced outside the maximal projection minimally containing the object. I will assume with Kratzer that the external argument is the argument of a specialised VOICE head that may also introduce accusative case. Under these assumptions the fact that the (acc-assigning) present participle cannot be adjectivised (see (21)) shows that the adjectival affix cannot take a VoiceP complement.

(21)  *Der Mann  ist   seine Kinder   liebend.
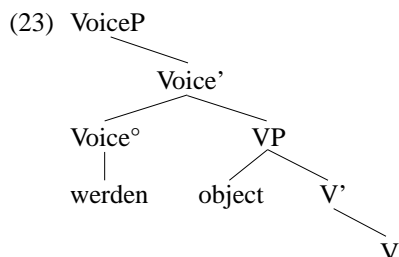       the man    is    his children   loving

Adjectivisation of the participle therefore necessarily prevents the projection of the VoiceP. Since the VoiceP is absent in adjectival participles, the external argument is syntactically absent — see Kratzer (1996) (cf. reflexive interpretation of the implicit argument).

The overall structure of the syntactic as well as the lexical variant of the German *sein*-passive is a copula construction parallel to the combination of *sein* plus an underived adjective as in (22b) (see e.g. Höhle (1978)).

(22)  a.  Das Haus    ist   gestrichen.
          The house   is    painted.      (*sein*-passive)

      b.  Das Haus    ist   blau.
          The house   is    blue.        (copula *sein* + adjective)

### 4.2. The Werden-passive

For the *werden*-passive as for the *sein*-passive the participle first projects its internal argument. I propose to analyse *werden* as a voice-auxiliary: it fills the Voice head, allowing the projection of the VoiceP:

(23)  VoiceP
       ╱    ╲
            Voice'
          ╱    ╲
     Voice°       VP
        │        ╱    ╲
     werden   object    V'
                      ╱    ╲
                          V

As the verb *werden* cannot assign accusative (see (24)), only one argument can be realised.

(24)  Er            wird          der neue Gesundheitsminister.
      He (nom)   becomes     the new health secretary (nom)

The internal argument is realised since it is immediately merged within the VP; it is therefore already present when the second, external, argument has to be legitimised.

As the impersonal variants of the *sein-* and *werden*-passives rely on the same auxiliaries combined with the past participle as their personal counterparts, I will assume that personal and impersonal passives have the same syntactic structure. This forces us to assume that unergative intransitive verbs in German have a syntactically realised null cognate object. Adapting an analysis by Dobrovie-Sorin (1994) for Romanian passives I will assume that the empty object has to stay in situ since movement out of the VP is incompatible with its semantic content (cf. the difference in interpretation between VP-internal and VP-external bare plurals in German, Diesing (1992)). If the null cognate object cannot move out of the VP, how is it licensed? In what follows I will argue that it is licensed in situ through the assignment of [nom] case. The possibility of having an impersonal passive without an overt subject in German is then linked to the possibility of assigning [nom] to the object position in the *werden*-passive.

That in German [nom] can be assigned into the VP is supported by the fact that the passive of double-object constructions has the subject of the sentence in the same position as the [acc] object in the active (see e.g. den Besten (1985), Broekhuis (1992)).

(25)  a.  dass Hans  einem Jungen     dieses Buch     gegeben  hat.
          that Hans   to a boy (dative)   this book(acc)  given       has
          'that Hans gave this book to a boy.'

      b.  dass  einem Jungen     dieses Buch     gegeben  wurde.
          that   to a boy (dative)   this book(nom)  given       was
          'that this book was given to a boy.'

In Dutch, another Germanic OV-language, there is also some evidence that the Dutch cognate of the German *werden*-passive does not involve NP-movement. In active double object constructions in Dutch the indirect object can be realised by a bare NP or by a PP introduced by *aan*. If the indirect object is realised as an NP it has to precede the direct object:
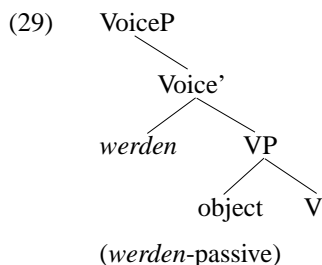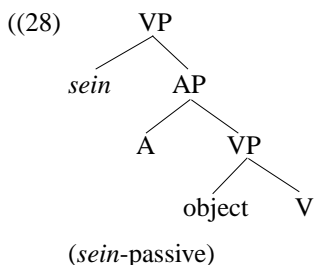
(26)  a.  dat   de jongen  (*aan*) het meisje  het cadeau    gaf.
          that   the boy      (to) the girl        the present    gave

      b.  dat   de jongen   het cadeau    *(*aan*) het meisje  gaf.
          that   the boy       the present    (to) the girl        gave
          'that the boy gave the present to the girl.'

Now consider the distribution of *aan* in the double object passive. The data in (27) suggest that (27b) is not derived from (26a) by NP-movement but related to the acc-dative order in (26b).

(27) a. dat (*aan*) het meisje het cadeau werd gegeven.
　　　 that (to) the girl　　　the present was　given

　　 b. dat het cadeau *(*aan*) het meisje werd gegeven.
　　　 that the present (to) the girl　　　was　given
　　　 'that a present was given to the girl.'

### 4.3. No Expletive Subject

In both the phrasal *sein*-passive and the *werden*-passive the underlying object initially occupies the object position (spec VP).

((28)　　　 VP　　　　　　　　　　　　(29)　　 VoiceP

*sein*　　 AP　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　 Voice'

　　 A　　 VP　　　　　　　　　　 *werden*　　 VP

　　　 object　 V　　　　　　　　　　　 object　　 V

　　 (*sein*-passive)　　　　　　　　　　 (*werden*-passive)

In the impersonal variants the null object has to be licensed in situ by transmission of [nom] case. Since the null object needs case the lexical expletive in subject position is excluded for case reasons. This analysis implies that the *es* in preverbal position in presentative V2 configurations is not inserted in subject position but directly in spec CP (as suggested for *thad*, the Icelandic equivalent of *es* in Platzack & Holmberg (1995)):

(30) [CP Es　 [C' wurde　[IP [VP null object [V'　getanzt.]]]]
　　 expl　　 werden 3sg　　　　　　　　　　 danced
　　 'It was danced/ There was dancing.'

The similarity between impersonal *phrasal sein*-passives and *werden*-passives is obscured by the fact that *lexical sein*-passives admit the impersonal use like underived adjectives: this use always takes an *es* subject.

(31) a. Bei dir　　　 ist　(es)　 immer　 so aufgeräumt.
　　　 at your place is　 expl　always　 so tidied up
　　　 'At your place it is always so tidy.'　　　 (lexical *sein*-passive)

　　 b. Bei dir　　　 ist　*(es)　 immer　 so ordentlich.
　　　 at your place is　 expl　always　 so tidy
　　　 'At your place it is always so tidy.'　　　 (underived adjective)

   In contrast with underived adjectives, however, *sein*-passives also allow the expletive-less (i.e. phrasal) construction.


### 4.4. The Interaction of Werden with the Perfect

The analysis of *werden* as a Voice auxiliary is supported by other evidence showing that the link between passive *werden* and the lexical verb is tighter than that between a verb and its perfect auxiliaries.

   Several languages show an interaction of perfect and argument structure (see van den Wyngaerd (1996) citing Postma (1994)). One example is provided by German modals: present tense modals have a root and an epistemic reading while perfect modals only have the root reading:

(32)  Er  hat  lachen   müssen.
      he  has  laugh    must (infinitive)
      ok: 'He had to laugh.'                              (root)
      *: 'It is/was probable that he laugh/laughed.'   (epistemic)


   In German the argument changing effect of the perfect interacts with the argument-reducing passive *werden*: in the perfect the participle of *werden* appears without the *ge*-prefix typical of the past participle:

(33)  *Heute   ist   lange   gearbeitet   *ge*worden.
      Heute    ist   lange   gearbeitet   worden.
      today    is    long    worked       werden past part
      'Today it was worked for a long time.'


   The past participles of the *sein*-passive, *gewesen* (see (34))*,* and of the perfect auxiliary *haben*, 'to have', keep their *ge*-prefix in the periphrastic perfect:

(34)  a.  Das Haus    ist          angestrichen.
          The house   is(copula)   painted.

      b.  Das Haus    ist          angestrichen   *ge*wesen.
          The house   is(copula)   painted         been

(35)  a.  Er   hat   angerufen.
          he   has   rung

      b.  Er   hat   angerufen   *ge*habt.
          he   has   rung        had


   This difference between passive *werden* and the other functional verbs follows from the analysis proposed above if we assume the structure for the past participle suggested in van den Wyngaerd (1996). He proposes that the *ge*-prefix of a participle is generated in a separate position below the verb, attaching to the verb root by head movement:

(36)

```
        FP
       /  \
     -t    V'
          /  \
         V    geP
               |
              ge'
              /
           ge-
```
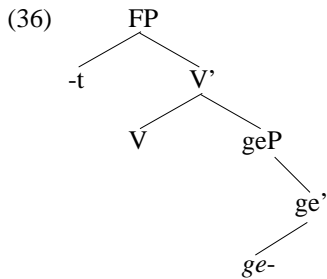
The above analysis then suggests an explanation why the participle of passive *werden* does not take the prefix in its past participle form: the insertion of a projection for *ge-* beneath VoiceP would split the thematic domain of the lexical verb. Another way of expressing the same intuition would be to say that Voice must take a complement that is an extended projection of VP which therefore cannot be dominated by a *ge*-P.

In German this conflict can be solved by the *ge*-less participle *worden*, that in its passive use has resisted the diachronic change generalising the originally telic *ge*-prefix. In Standard Dutch, where no *ge*-less participle of *werden* has survived, the periphrasic perfect of the *werden*-passive is impossible. My informants refused the examples (37a,b) that parallel the German examples in (33), they suggested a shift from the passive auxiliary to *zijn*, 'to be', be it in the synthetic past (37c) or in the periphrastic perfect (37d).

(37)  a. (Du)  *er    is        gedanst              worden

      b.          *er    is        gedanst              geworden.

      c.          er     was       gedanst.

      d.          er     is        gedanst (geweest).

            there   is/was   danced                (been)

            'There had been dancing going on.'

## 5. Conclusion

In the present paper we have presented an analysis of German impersonal passives that avoids the stipulation of an empty expletive in German by interpreting the empty subject position as the result of the combination of an empty cognate object and assignment of [nom] into the VP. We have further shown that the analysis of *werden* as a voice-auxiliary can be supported by evidence drawn from interaction of the *werden*-passive with the periphrastic perfect.

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