

The size of non-inflectional constructions in German

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1. In modern German, there exist non-inflectional constructions (NIC), consisting of a bare verbal stem and internal arguments and/or adjuncts. NICs are found primarily in comic books and online communication (chats and emails). Importantly, NICs can be structurally complex and may include overt arguments, adverbial modification (1), and even purpose clauses (2).

(1) •dich gleich mal für verrückt erklär•

you.ACC immediately PART PREP insane declare.[STEM]
(Bücking & Rau 2013, p.72, ex. 7b)

(2) •hier mal die fenster aufmach [um den kippenqualm rauszulassen]•

here PART the.ACC windows open.[STEM] in.order.to the.ACC cigarette.odor out.part.let.INF
'open the windows here to let the cigarette smoke out' (Bücking & Rau 2013, p.72, ex.9)

Bücking & Rau (2013) identify three formal properties of non-inflective constructions (NIC): (i) no inflectional morphology, (ii) verb final VP-construction, (iii) lack of (overt) subjects.

The present study is concerned with the internal syntax of complex NICs and aims to refine the existing analysis proposed by Bücking & Rau (2013).

2. Existing analysis: Bücking & Rau (2013) argue that NICs are truncated. Following adverbial hierarchy (Cinque 1999, Frey 2003 for German), they show that NICs allow modification with low adverbials (manner, temporal, locative), as in (3), but not with higher adverbials such as evaluatives and epistemic modifiers (4), nor by frame setting adverbials.

(3) •gleich mal erstmal pennen geh•

shortly part for.the.time.being sleep.INF go.[STEM]
'go to bed right away' (Bücking & Rau 2013, p. 75, ex.14,15b)

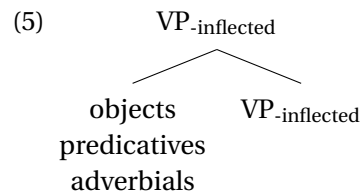
(4) a. *?•leider das Problem nicht versteh•

unfortunately the.ACC problem not understand.[STEM]

b. *?•wahrscheinlich bald schlafen geh•

probably soon sleep.INF go.[STEM]
(Bücking & Rau 2013, p. 76, ex.16)

On the basis of these data, they conclude that NICs are "simple VPs involving a complex internal structure but remaining deficient with regard to functional levels above" (Bücking & Rau 2013, p.73) and propose the following structure.



3. Revisiting the analysis: The analysis by Bücking & Rau (2013) faces several problems. I argue that German NICs contain more structure than simple VPs and are most probably VoicePs.

(i) First, NICs allow control into embedded infinitival purpose clauses (6).

(6) • X_i zeitmessung anfang um zu PRO_i sehen wie lang einer
 timing begin.[STEM] in.order to see.INF how long someone.NOM for
 zum selbstausbuddeln braucht fürs guinnes buch der rekorde•
 digging.himself.up need.PRS.3SG for.the guinness book of records
 ‘begin timing to see how long one needs to examine himself for the guinness book of records’
 (Bücking & Rau 2013, p.73, ex.12)

Availability of control presupposes the presence of a non-overt external argument. Bücking & Rau (2013), following Sternefeld (2006), assume a VP-internal agent PRO. However, this assumption contradicts modern theories where external argument is base-generated in SpecVoiceP/*v*P.

(ii) Second, NICs permit modification by causal adverbials (7). Frey (2003) shows that causal adverbials in German are base-generated higher than the base position of the subject, unlike manner, temporal, and locative adverbials. Thus, NICs contain VoiceP, where agent is introduced.

(7) •rumhust wegen der staubwolke•
 cough.[STEM] because.of.the.GEN cloud.of.dust
 (Bücking & Rau 2013, p. 75, ex.15c)

(iii) Third, direct objects in NIC are marked with accusative (3), which cannot be licensed inside a bare VP both in Dependent Case theory and in Case-under-Agree theory (e.g. Baker & Vinokurova 2010, Bány & Sheehan 2021).

(iv) Furthermore, NIC allow dative-marked indirect objects (8). As argued by Georgala (2011), indirect objects raise out of their base position inside VP to Spec(High)ApplP for licensing purposes. Thus, NIC must include (High)ApplP projection above *v*/VP (cf. Pylkkänen 2008).

(8) •Dir Kaffee ausschenk•
 you.DAT coffee.ACC serve.[STEM]
 ‘serve you coffee’ (Bücking & Rau 2013, p. 88)

(v) Finally, and most crucially, short scrambling of (pronominal) objects is attested in NICs. In a simple VP structure, objects can only move from CompVP to SpecVP, a movement that violates Antilocality (Abels 2003). To avoid a violation, at least one additional projection above VP must be present. I take the landing site of short object scrambling to be SpecVoiceP (cf. Lohninger 2025). This provides further argument that NICs are as large as VoiceP.

(9) •dich gleich mal für verrückt erklär•
 you.ACC immediatly PART PREP insane declare.[STEM]
 ‘immediately declare you mad’ (Bücking & Rau 2013, p.72, ex. 7b)

On the basis of these arguments, I conclude that NICs contain more structure than a bare VP and must include VoiceP. This analysis accounts for the presence of a silent external argument, the licensing of accusative case on direct objects, and the availability of short object scrambling.

3. Conclusion and outlook: This talk reviews the properties of non-inflectional constructions in German and argues against the view that NICs are bare VPs, as proposed by Bücking & Rau (2013). Instead, I argue that NICs project a richer functional structure and are best analyzed as VoicePs. Two issues remain open: (i) why overt subjects are not allowed in NIC, and (ii) why NICs do not exhibit voice alternations, but instead appear to be uniformly active/unmarked for voice.

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