Directive infinitives in German: Fragments of fragments
Robert Külpman (University of Bonn) & Vilma Symanczyk Joppe (University of Wuppertal)

In German, insubordinated infinitives can be used with directive function, e.g. in instructions (1a), requests (1b), and orders (1c).

(1) a. Den Kuchen für vierzig Minuten in den Ofen stellen.
   “Put the cake into the oven for 45 minutes.”

b. Diese Mail bitte an alle eure Freunde weiterleiten!
   “Please forward this mail to all of your friends.”

c. Sofort die Waffe fallenlassen!
   “Drop the weapon immediately!”

These directive infinitives function as complete directive sentences conveying a complete proposition and a full illocution. Formally, however, they are fragments and deviate from regular sentences in that their structure consists of a VP containing an infinitive in final position; NPs referring to the addressees of such a non-subordinated infinitive are no subjects (cf. Reis 1995). This mismatch character can be captured by an analysis as a sentence type construction, as proposed by Jacobs (2016) (cf. (2)). Further evidence for constructional status is their high productivity, the incompatibility with certain discourse particles in German (cf. Gärtner 2013), a special behavior towards reflexives, and an observation already made by Fries (1983): the possibility to reduce directive infinitives further by omitting the direct argument. The resulting fragments of fragments after argument omission (AO) will be at the center of our talk and can be formalized in a sentence type construction as in (2):

(2) cat: [S[VP inf pro akk ... X_{v,inf/akk,x}-sub]]
sem: DIRinstruct[X(x) (adr)]

The construction in (2) is read as follows: Functionally, the construction is a directive speech act, directed to an addressee who shall perform an action X related to an entity x. Formally, it consists of a non-subordinated VP with an infinitive verb form. The verb is transitive; the valency requirement for an NP with the referent x in the accusative, however, is filled by a pro element with accusative case, resulting in a surface form identical with an directive infinitive with an intransitive verb.¹ Jacobs (2016) gives several examples as instances of (2), repeated here in (3):

(3) a. Bitte (das Bild) nicht berühren.
   “Please don’t touch (the picture).”

b. Dann (Kartoffeln) abkühlen lassen.
   “After that, let cool (the potatoes).”

¹ The representation of the omitted argument as pro instead of an ellipsis can be explained by sentences as (i), in which the omitted argument is clearly syntactically active as it controls the secondary predicate ohne Anchovis.

(i) Bitte diesmal (die Pizza) ohne Anchovis bestellen.
   “Please order the pizza without anchovis this time.”
Corresponding declarative examples like (4) suggest that this kind of argument omission (AO) is not governed by the subcategorization frame of the verbs which are involved:

(4) Egon berührte *(das Bild) nicht.
Egon touch-PST.3SG the[ACC] picture[ACC] NEG
“Egon didn’t touch (the picture).”

The examples in (3), however, are not necessarily evidence for a general directive infinitive sentence type construction. Similar examples are treated in the literature in the context of AO in certain restricted genres, e.g. recipes (Massam/Roberge 1987, Culy 1996), labels (Ruppenhofer/Michaelis 2010) and communications in high risk environments like surgery (Uhmann 2010).

In a set of acceptability rating studies we examined the possibility to omit direct arguments in directive infinitives in less restricted environments. We tested 43 transitive verbs across several sentence types to determine whether the subcategorization frame of the verb, the sentence type construction or both had an influence on AO. 828 test items of German were evaluated by 1,206 participants, who had to chose whether they found a sentence acceptable or not (only binary options) in a given context. The function of the context was to exclude additional factors which literature discusses to have an influence on AO, among them genre: All of the infinitive sentences which we tested were presented as dialogues in normal everyday communication.

As we will show in our talk, we could indeed find strong statistical evidence that AO in directive infinitives in everyday communication is independent from AO in other sentence types and from valency requirements of individual verbs (cf. also Külpmann/Symanczyk Joppe 2015). Furthermore, our data suggest that the schema in (2) proposed by Jacobs, i.e. the fragmentated version with AO, is not some minor variant of a “full” directive infinitive construction: it was the only sentence type in our study for which the variant with AO received higher acceptability ratings than minimal pairs with the direct argument realized. We conclude with an outlook on other infinitive constructions with further fragmentizing, e.g. with omission of definite articles.

References: