

# WG1: Possessive Alternations with German Idioms

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## Possessive constructions English vs. German

**English:** Common construction: Possessive determiner

(1) I have already put on my make-up, but I still have to powder my nose.

**German:** Four roughly equivalent constructions.

(2) Ich hab mich schon geschminkt, aber ... (I have already put on my make-up, but ...)

- ich muss noch **die** Nase pudern. (Def)  
I must still the nose powder 'I still need to powder my nose.'
- Ich muss noch **meine** Nase pudern. (Poss)  
I must still my nose powder
- Ich muss **mir** noch **die** Nase pudern. (DatDef)  
I must myself still the nose powder
- Ich muss **mir** noch **meine** Nase pudern. (DatPoss)  
I must myself still my nose powder

## Possessive constructions in idioms

**English:** Strategy with possessive determiner prevails: *keep one's cool, lose one's mind, ...*

**German:** All four construction types are possible, but not with all idioms.

- (3) a. Er hat **ihr** Herz gebrochen. (Poss)  
He has their heart broken 'He broke their hearts.'
- b. #Er hat **das** Herz gebrochen. (Def)
- c. Er hat **ihnen das** Herz gebrochen. (DatDef)
- d. Er hat **ihnen ihr** Herz gebrochen. (DatPoss)

- 145 possessive idioms from *Duden 11*
- Tested for occurrence in the four possessive patterns in corpora and internet

# (N=145)	Def	Poss	DatDef	DatPoss	example idiom
2	ok	ok	ok	ok	(sich) etwas an den Fingern abzählen (können)
2	ok	ok	ok	*	sich etwas aus dem Ärmel ziehen
0	ok	ok	*	ok	—
29	ok	ok	*	*	für jm. die Hand ins Feuer legen
0	ok	*	ok	ok	—
2	ok	*	ok	*	(sich) die Ärmel hochkrempeln
0	ok	*	*	ok	—
5	ok	*	*	*	die Nase voll haben
17	*	ok	ok	ok	jm. das Herz brechen
14	*	ok	ok	*	jm. die Füße küssen
0	*	ok	*	ok	—
1	*	ok	*	*	in jms. Fußstapfen treten
36	*	*	ok	ok	sich die Hacken ablaufen
36	*	*	ok	*	jm. im Weg stehen
1	*	*	*	ok	sich seine Gedanken machen

Observations:

- 15 possible patterns: 5 common, 5 rare, 5 quasi inexistent
- Datives are very common in possessive idioms.
- Few idioms allow for both a dative (DatDef, DatPoss) and plain definite (Def).
- Whenever DatPoss is possible, so is DatDef.
- Some idioms forbid a redundant possessive marking (Def-only, DatDef-only, Poss—DatDef).

## Datives as Affectees

- Hole (2005): Dative has *Affectee* role: Affectee is consciously involved and causally affected
- Affectee Lexical Rule: A dative affectee argument is added.
- Syntax:  $[ARG-ST \langle \square | \square \rangle] \Rightarrow [ARG-ST \langle \square, \square NP[CASE \text{ dat}] | \square \rangle]$
- Semantics:  $\exists e(\dots) \Rightarrow \exists e(\dots \wedge \text{Affectee}(e, x_{\square}))$

## External possessors

- Haspelmath (1999), External possessor construction
- External Possessor Lex. Rule: Add generalized possessor relation between two arguments.
- Syntax: no change.  $[ARG-ST \langle \dots, \square, \dots, \square[DEF +], \dots \rangle]$
- Semantics:  $\exists e(\dots \wedge \text{Arg}_i(e, x_{\square})) \Rightarrow \exists e(\dots \wedge \text{Arg}_i(e, x_{\square}) \wedge \text{Poss}(x_{\square}, x_{\square}))$
- Haspelmath (1999): Dative external poss. as areal phenomenon of Standard Average European Sprachbund.

## Background: Lexical Resource Semantics (LRS)

- Version of underspecified semantics, integrated with a surface-oriented syntax (HPSG)
- Underlying Idea: Words and phrases constrain the semantic representation of their utterance by specifying what must occur in the representation and where.
- Special properties of LRS (Richter & Sailer, 2004; Penn & Richter, 2004):
  - Several words can make a partly or wholly identical contribution. (Redundant marking)
  - An introduced contribution can be used multiply. (Multiple occurrence)
  - Redundant marking can be blocked, multiple occurrence cannot!
  - Bits of semantic representation can be required even if non-contributed ( $\dots \wedge \text{Poss}(\_, \_)$ )

## Example

	$\exists e(\text{hurt}(e) \wedge \text{Agent}(e, x))$	$\wedge \text{Theme}(e, \iota z : \text{feelings}(z) \wedge \text{Poss}(z, y))$
(3a) Er <sub>x</sub> brach ihr <sub>y</sub> Herz <sub>z</sub>	$\exists e(\text{hurt}(e) \wedge \text{Agent}(e, \_))$	$\wedge \text{Theme}(e, \iota z : \wedge \text{Poss}(\_, \_))$ $\wedge \text{Poss}(z, y)$ <b>feelings(z)</b>
(3b) # Er <sub>x</sub> brach das Herz <sub>z</sub>	$\exists e(\text{hurt}(e) \wedge \text{Agent}(e, \_))$	$\wedge \text{Theme}(e, \iota z : \wedge \text{Poss}(\_, \_))$ <b>feelings(z)</b>
	$\exists e(\text{hurt}(e) \wedge \text{Agent}(e, x) \wedge \text{Aff}(e, y) \wedge \text{Theme}(e, \iota z : \text{feelings}(z) \wedge \text{Poss}(z, y)))$	
(3c) Er <sub>x</sub> brach+Aff+ExPoss ihnen <sub>y</sub> das Herz <sub>z</sub>	$\exists e(\text{hurt}(e) \wedge \text{Agent}(e, \_) \wedge \text{Aff}(e, y) \wedge \text{Theme}(e, \iota z : \wedge \text{Poss}(\_, \_))$	$\wedge \text{Poss}(\_, \_)$ $y$ <b>feelings(z)</b>
(3d) Er <sub>x</sub> brach+Aff brach+Aff+ExPoss ihnen <sub>y</sub> ihr <sub>y</sub> Herz <sub>z</sub>	$\exists e(\text{hurt}(e) \wedge \text{Agent}(e, \_) \wedge \text{Aff}(e, \_) \wedge \text{Theme}(e, \iota z : \wedge \text{Poss}(\_, \_))$	$\wedge \text{Poss}(\_, \_)$ $y$ $\wedge \text{Poss}(z, y)$ <b>feelings(z)</b>

## Analysis of example alternation patterns

### Idioms with Def—Poss alternation

(4) Ich würde **(\*mir)** für euch **die/meine** Hand ins Feuer legen.  
I would myself for you the/my hand in.the fire put 'I would vouch for you.'

- Lexical representation:  
Syntax:  $NP_x [für NP_y] [Det[def] Hand_z] [ins Feuer] legen$   
Semantics: 'X put X's trust in Y'  
 $\exists e(\text{invest}(e) \wedge \text{Agent}(e, x) \wedge \text{Theme}(e, \iota z : (\text{trust}(z) \wedge \text{Poss}(z, x))) \wedge \text{Goal}(y))$
- Verb: contributes **Poss**-relation lexically.
- Determiner: either definite article or **redundant marking of Poss** by poss. determiner
- Possessor: either **multiple occurrence** of subj. index or **redundant marking** buy subj. and poss. det.
- Semantics incompatible with an Affectee  $\Rightarrow$  no dative

### Idioms with DatDef—DatPoss alternation

(5) Wir laufen **(\*uns)** **die/unsere** Hacken ab, um euch zu helfen.  
we run ourselves the/our heels away to help you 'We run off our feet to help you.'

- Lexical representation: Affectee role included, **Poss required**.
- Determiner: either definite article or redundant marking of the possessor by poss. determiner

### Idioms with Poss—DatDef alternation

(6) Alex küsst **(\*euch)** **die** Füße/ Alex küsst **(\*euch)** **eure** Füße  
Alex kisses you the feet/ Alex kisses you your feet 'Alex licks your boots.'

- Lexical representation:  
Syntax:  $NP_x [Det[def] Fü\beta_e] k\ddot{u}ssen$  Paraphrase: 'x obey y's will'
- Verb: **Poss required**, Affectee possible  $\Rightarrow$  either poss. det. or *Affectee LR + External Poss. LR*
- Verb blocks redundant marking: Possessor (y) can only be introduced once within verb's arguments.

## General patterns

- **Observation 2:** Dative possessors are common in MWEs, just as they are in German in general.
- **Observation 3 (DatDef/DatPoss rarely alternates with Def):** Possessively interpreted Def requires a possessor as co-argument. So the subject or another argument must be the possessor. A dative is then only possible if it is an inherent reflexive or the subject referent is an Affectee as well.
- **Observation 5 (Redundant marking excluded) Poss-only, DatDef-only, Def—DatDef, Poss—DatDef**
- **Observation 4 (DatPoss implies DatDef):** If dative is an Affectee, DatPoss and DatDef have the same semantics. We can exclude red. marking (DatPoss) but not multiple occurrence (DatDef).
- **Observation 1:**
  - 5 non-existing patterns: would require DatPoss without DatDef.  
Special case *sich seine Gedanken machen* ('make oneself one's thoughts', 'contemplate'): inherent reflexive dative, possessive syntactically required.
  - 5 rare patterns
    - \* **Def—Poss—DatDef—DatPoss, Def—Poss—DatDef, Def—DatDef:**  
Dative but also plain Def possible, see observation 3
    - \* **Poss-only:** Lexical requirements that possessor not affected nor co-argument.
    - \* **Def-only:** Possessor is subject and non-redundancy is enforced.

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