

**“Star Wars ist eben mehr so ein Männerding.”**

**(“Star Wars is more a man thing.”)**

**A corpus study of the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of the construction [X copula *ein* Y-*Ding*]**

**Object of investigation**

This study investigates the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of the construction [X copula *ein* Y-*Ding*] within a corpus linguistics framework in which the *passe-partout* word *Ding* (‘thing’) appears as a determinatum in a compound. The construction can be used to verbalize the fact that something is particularly (stereo)typical for a specific entity, for example, in relation to an individual or a group of people (*Tanzen ist wohl eher ein Frauen-Ding*; ‘Dancing is rather a woman thing’) or a period of time (*Frauenhass, das ist doch so ein Siebzigerjahreding*; ‘Misogyny is such a 1970s thing’). This article describes the morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of the construction, paying particular attention to morphosyntactic variations, the range of meanings, the formal and semantic characteristics of the fillers and typical contexts of use.

**Theoretical contextualization: *passe-partout* words and schematic idioms**

The *passe-partout* word *Ding* (‘thing’) is a lexically fixed element within the construction, an integral component of the compound. So-called *passe-partout* words are lexical units which have a very vague meaning and which are primarily found in conceptually oral language (Koch/Oesterreicher 2011, p. 108). At the same time, the construction [X copula *ein* Y-*Ding*] can be described as a schematic idiom due to its partially lexicalized structure and generally stereotypical meaning (Dobrovolskij 2011; Stumpf 2017). Such partially lexicalized constructions are an important object of investigation in construction grammar, located as they are at the interface between phraseology/lexis and syntax and, thus, being one piece of evidence for the syntax-lexicon continuum postulated in construction grammar (Goldberg 2013, p. 17; Ziem 2018, p. 4). In addition to having a phrasal/syntactic empty slot, the construction [X copula *ein* Y-*Ding*] has also a partially lexicalized word-formation structure in the form of a *passe-partout* compound [Y-*Ding*]<sub>N</sub>. Thus the construction is not only located at the transition between lexicon and grammar in general but also between the poles of phraseology, syntax and word formation.

**Source of data**

The study is based on the German Reference Corpus (Deutsches Referenzkorpus; DEREKO)<sup>1</sup>, with the data extracted from the DEREKO being complemented by data from the Database for Spoken German (Datenbank für Gesprochenes Deutsch; DGD)<sup>2</sup>. A total of 752 examples of the *passe-partout* construction were found in the DEREKO and 9 came from the DGD.

<sup>1</sup> [cosmas2.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2-web](https://cosmas2.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2-web) (last access: 13 June 2020).

<sup>2</sup> [dgd.ids-mannheim.de/dgd/pragdb.dgd\\_extern.welcome](https://dgd.ids-mannheim.de/dgd/pragdb.dgd_extern.welcome) (last access: 13 June 2020).

## The syntax, semantics and pragmatics of the construction

An analysis of the corpus makes it clear that the construction appears in a broad range of morphosyntactic variations. Its stereotypical meaning is not only generated in combination with a copular verb but also in combination with other types of syntactic embedding (e. g. in an elliptical sentence without a subject and verb, as an apposition or in conjunction with other verbs). Different tenses and modes are used in the predicative construction although the present indicative (*ist*; ‘is’) is the most frequent by far. The construction can also be negated with both *kein* (‘no’) and *nicht* (‘not’). From a syntactic and textual perspective, it is interesting that the X-slot within the predicative construction [X copula *ein* Y-Ding] can also be filled with a pronoun (*das* (‘that’) or *es* (‘it’)), which refers anaphorically (and sometimes cataphorically) to an entity mentioned previously (or subsequently) in the text. Moreover, in 239 cases (approx. 32 %) the compound is preceded by the particle *so* (‘so’), which is a typical lexical element in spoken German (Schwitalla 2012, p. 155). The predicative construction is not limited to simple declarative sentences, although this syntactic realization is the norm. It can also appear in other types of clauses, primarily in interrogatives and (conjunctive) subordinate clauses. In 108 cases, the word formation construction includes an attributive adjective. It is worth mentioning that the most frequent adjectives (*typisch* (‘typical’), *rein* (‘pure’), *richtig* (‘real’), *echt* (‘true’) and *klassisch* (‘classic’)) reinforce the (stereo)typical meaning of the construction.

From a semantic perspective, two different meanings can be identified for the construction:

- 1) The X-slot [subject] is specified by the Y-slot of the word-formation [predicative]:  
subject ← predicative

The word-formation is employed to characterize an entity in more detail (realized syntactically as the subject in the predicative construction) which is explicitly named in the co-text.

- 2) The X-slot [subject] specifies the Y-slot of the word-formation [predicative], foregrounding the (stereo)typicality: subject → predicative

In contrast to the first meaning, a particular entity is not specified with the help of the word-formation but the characterization happens in reverse. In other words, something verbalized in the co-text (the subject, from a syntactic perspective) characterizes the determinatum of the compound in more detail. The meaning of the construction can be paraphrased as follows: ‘the entity realized in the X-slot (e. g. [the genre of music] *dubstep*) is something that is (stereo)typical of the entity which appears in the Y-slot (e. g. *London*)’. It is also possible that something is not only typical of something else but that the construction can also be used to express that somebody is interested in something. For this reason, an additional meaning can be ascribed to the construction, as follows: ‘the entity realized in the X-slot (e. g. [the music by] *Philipp Poisel*) is something which (stereo) typically interests the entity which is in the Y-slot (e. g. *Mädchen*; ‘the girl’)’.

An important question concerns the words which can appear in the Y-slot. The corpus revealed that the lexeme *Männer* (‘men’) is most frequent by far (95) while the lexemes *Frauen* (‘women’; 35), *Familie* (‘family’; 33) and *Jung(en)s* (‘boys’; 29) appear with a similar frequency. There were also 229 lexemes which only appeared once (e. g. *Detroit*, *Eltern* (‘parents’), *Promi* (‘celeb’), *Rentner* (‘pensioner’)). From an onomasiological per-

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spective, nouns in the following categories, amongst others, fill the empty slot: (individual) people, groups of people and demographic groups, human relations, professions and places as well as time spans and points in time (in individuals' lives).

All in all, an analysis of the DEREKO instances coupled with a case study on the lexemes *Männerding* (‘men thing’) and *Frauenting* (‘women thing’) highlights that the *passe-partout* construction is used to express stereotypical beliefs and bodies of knowledge which exist in a society at a particular point in time. Due to its syntactically fixed form and evaluative semantics, the predicative construction is a kind of linguistic stereotype par excellence.

In relation to the medium and text type in which the construction is found, in the DEREKO it appears almost exclusively in informal speech or in conceptually oral text types. It is most frequently found in direct and indirect speech but also in more informal text types like comments, commentaries or discussions.

### Future research perspectives

The present study suggests two future research perspectives. Firstly, there are other constructions in German which are similar to the construction presented here from a structural and/or semantic point of view (e.g. [*etw. ist*] *typisch* X<sub>Substantiv</sub>; [*sth. is*] *a typical* X<sub>noun</sub>). Moreover there is an almost identical *passe-partout* construction in which *Ding* is simply replaced by *Sache* (‘thing’), as in *Holzmachen ist Männersache* (‘chopping wood is a men thing’). It would be worthwhile doing corpus studies on these related constructions and to model them as a family of constructions (Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez/Luzondo Oyón/Pérez Sobrino 2017). Secondly, it would be interesting to compare them with similar constructions in other languages in order to reveal cultural similarities and differences in the verbalization of social stereotypes; the *passe-partout* construction also appears in English, for example (*Surfing's a man thing*).

### References

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