

„Ich werde sie versuchen zu erklären“: The ‘third construction’ in German from the perspective of language production

German infinitival complements can be realized in different positions in a sentence. They can follow the matrix verb (1), precede it (2), or occur discontinuously, partly preceding the matrix verb and partly following it (3). This third linearization option is known as the third construction and is the topic of the present article.

- (1) Dass ich versuche, [den Tisch zu reparieren]
that I try the table to repair
- (2) dass ich [den Tisch zu reparieren] versuche
that I the table to repair try
- (3) dass ich [den Tisch] versuche [zu reparieren]
that I the table try to repair

The third construction is often perceived as marked in the written language (Wöllstein-Leisten 2001) and is rarely attested in corpora of written German (Bosch et al. 2023). It is also judged as rather unacceptable by native speakers (Bosch et al. 2022, 2023). From the perspective of language comprehension, the third construction has proven to be more difficult to process than the other linearization patterns (Bosch et al. 2022; Felser/Bosch 2024), and the results of production experiments seem to indicate that it is also difficult to produce. What remains puzzling is that while the third construction is rarely attested in writing, it has been found to be more common in spoken spontaneous communication (Wöllstein-Leisten 2001; De Cesare 2021; Bosch et al. 2022). Based on the assumption that the third construction is difficult to produce, it should not be expected to occur more frequently in real-time language production. From a processing perspective, complex structures are more likely to be found in asynchronous written language as the latter can be processed and edited several times and at any speed (Weiß 2005; Speyer 2013; Ortman/Dipper 2020; De Cesare 2021).

This study looks at the third construction from the perspective of real-time language production and proposes an explanation for its occurrence in spoken language despite being more difficult to process. It is hypothesized that the third construction exhibits information-structural properties that interact with a principle of real-time language production that favors the early utterance of accessible elements (e.g., the *Easy First* production bias, MacDonald 2013). Building on Cook (2001), it is assumed that, with respect to information structure, the infinitive exhibits dissociated discourse functions in third construction patterns. Combining this idea with considerations from the perspective of real-time language production such as the *Easy First* production bias allows us to make more detailed predictions about the exact distribution of the information. It is thus hypothesized that accessible, given elements of the infinitive are realized early, i.e., preverbally, while new information appears after the matrix verb. In sum, the study argues that, despite possible processing difficulties from the point of view of language comprehension and language planning, the third construction represents a simpler variant from the point of view of real-time language production than other word order patterns, given the right information-structural conditions.

The hypothesis was tested using spoken language data from the FOLK corpus (IDS, Datenbank für Gesprochenes Deutsch). The corpus is well suited for the study in that it consists of spontaneous interactions in different communicative contexts (ranging from private to institutional ones) that allow the analysis of language production under real-time conditions. Sentences including an infinitival complement were extracted and coded for word order as well as the information structure of the infinitive, that is whether it exhibits dissociated discourse functions or not. In total, 210 observations were analyzed. The third construction was attested in 43 of them, that is in approx. 20% of all possible cases. Concerning the information structure, the results show that when the infinitive verb and its argument do not exhibit dissociated discourse functions, extraposition is attested in nearly 100% of the cases. When the embedded object is given and the infinitive verb is new, however, the relative frequency of the third construction pattern increases to about 50%. These results have been confirmed statistically: using a mixed-effects logistic regression, it can be shown that the probability of the third construction being used increases when the infinitive exhibits dissociated discourse functions, independently of the communicative context.

The article also explores the role of the matrix verb on the occurrence of the third construction. Previous studies had found that third construction patterns occur predominantly with the verb *versuchen* 'try'. This observation was confirmed by the present study. Looking at both the lemma frequency of the individual matrix verbs as well as their frequency of occurrence with an infinitival complement, two possible explanations are discussed. On the one hand, *versuchen* is much more frequently attested with an infinitive than the other verbs in the study, which might increase the probability of a non-canonical pattern occurring for purely statistical reasons. On the other hand, *versuchen* has the highest lemma frequency, which makes it a good candidate for an accessible word from the perspective of language production. Its early realization in the utterance could, thus, also be motivated by the *Easy First* bias.

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