

snippets

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Root Infinitives are said to occur in limited cases in German (the same is claimed for English, see for example Huddleston and Pullum 2002): in exclamative 'Mad Magazine'-readings (1a), in subjectless root wh-clauses (1b) or (usually also subjectless) non-wh infinitives (1c) which are interpreted as imperatives (Repp 2009).

- (1) a. Ich – (und) die Fenster putzen? Niemals!
 me - (and) the window clean? never!
 'Me, clean the window? Never'
- b. Wohin fahren?
 where go?
 'Where to go?'
- c. Den Eierkuchen wenden{./!}
 the pancake flip
 'Flip the pancake{./!}'
- (examples from Repp (2009, ex. 4))

However, on the social media platform Twitter, we find root infinitives that do not fall under these categories. Rather, they report a personal experience in a pseudo-generic statement:

- (2) a. Erstmal barfuß in Hundescheiße laufen. Guten Morgen!
 first barefoot in dog_poo walk. good morning!
 'Stepping in dog poo first thing (in the morning). Good morning!'
- b. Dem Tag ein entschiedenes "Nein!" entgegenrufen wollen, aber nur ein müdes
 the day a decisive "no!" shout_at want, but only a tired
 "Ncccchhh..." rausbringen und sich in einem Büro wiederfinden.
 "Ncccchhh..." get_out and self in an office find.
 'Wanted to greet the day with a decisive "No!", but could only get out a tired
 "Ncccchhh..." and found myself in an office.'
- c. Durch eine Scheibe Toast einen Schlag bekommen.
 by a slice toast a shock get
 'Get /got zapped by a piece of toast.'

Existing analyses of another genre, diary ellipsis, have it that subjects and auxiliaries can be elided, but that there can be no root infinitives. While sentences like (2c) could potentially lend themselves to such an analysis, sentences like (2a,b) do not,

since they contain unambiguous infinitives ('laufen', 'wollen', 'rausbringen', 'wiederfinden'). Note that the punctuation indicates that the authors think of these utterances as full clauses.

Bare (non-wh) root infinitives like (1c) can, according to Reis (2003), receive one of two interpretations: (i) directive as in (1c) or (ii) what she calls optative/expressive, as in (4):

- (4) a. Ah, dem Jauch alles beantworten, was er fragt.
'Oh, to answer (Jauch) all that he asks.'
b. Noch einmal 20 sein.
'To be 20 again!'
(exs. from Reis 2003, my translations)

Reis proposes a modal analysis of the meaning of German wh-infinitives like (1b), based on an analysis for English wh-infinitives by Bhatt (2000). She claims (p. 180) that non-wh root infinitives in German also always have a modal interpretation (except for the 'Mad Magazine'-cases as in (1a)). In contrast, the examples in (2a,b) cannot have a modal interpretation. In (2a), stepping in dog poo is neither deontically or optatively modalized. And although (2b) arguably could include a covert possibility modal in the second clause (= 'be able to speak'), the third clause is clearly unmodalized. Instead, a diary-like interpretation is reasonable, since the authors presumably report their own recent experiences. If one were to rephrase the meaning of these statements, the infinitive clauses would receive the status of nominalizations, references to facts/events that are (implicitly) evaluated:

- (5) a. This is a bad start to the day (for me): Stepping in dog poo first thing in the morning. (~ 2a)
b. Do you know what this feels like: Wanting to greet the day decisively but only managing a tired "Ncccchh" and finding yourself in an office. (~ 2b)

References

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