Absentive

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Altres idiomes: Absentiu
Absentivo

The **absentive** consists in the grammatical expression of absence. Thus, the absentive is a grammatical procedure specialised in highlighting that one person, who at the utterance time is performing some activity, is not present in a specific place. For instance, in Italian, the utterance *É a mangiare* 'He has gone to lunch" implies that a person is performing the action of eating in a different space from the person who is speaking. Sometimes the *absentive* is called *absentive aspect*; notwithstanding, the absentive is not exactly the expression of the verbal aspect.

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Explanation

In some languages —such as Spanish or English—, there is not a grammatical structure specialised in marking someone's absence. This information is contextually inferred or expressed by lexical means. In contrast, other languages do

have specialized grammatical structure to marking the absence.

In English or Spanish, the utterance of (1) will be uttered whether Joseph/Pepe is eating in a shared place with the speaker or not. Instead, in Catalan, the sentence of (2) is only highlighting a progressive aspect of the action. By contrast, the statement of (3) emphasizes that the action of eating takes place in a spaced not shared. That is, the utterance of (3), in Catalan, indicates the absence of Pep.

(1) *Joseph is eating*

Pepe está comiendo

'Pepe is eating'

(2) *En Pep està dinant*

(3) *En Pep està a dinar*

'Pep is off eating'

Something similar happens in Italian, where (4) only expresses the progressive nature of the action, while (5) stresses Silvio's absence.

(4) Silvio sta mangiando

(5) Silvio é a mangiare

'Silvio is off eating'

The absentive expresses four kinds of information about the referent of the subject:

- The subjecte is absent
- The subject is performing an activity
- How long will the subject be absent is predictable
- The subject will come back after a period of time

The European languages that have a grammatical construction for expressing the absentive are German, Frisian, Dutch, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish,

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Finnish and Catalan.

Syntactic structures used for absentive expression are:

(i) **Copula+ infinitive**

(6)   German

Jan ist boxen

Jan is box:INF (de Groot 2000)

'Jan is off boxing'

(ii) **Copula+ at + infinitive**

(7)   Catalan

En Pere és a patinar

Pere   is at sk:INF

'Pere is off skating'

(iii) **Copula+ and + finite verb**

(8)   Norwegian

Jan er   og boksar

Jan is   and   box:PRES (de Groot 2000)

'Jan is off boxing'

(iv) **Copula + to + infinitive**

(9)   Fering (north Frisian dialect)

Jan   as   tu   boksin

Jan   is   to   box:INF (de Groot 2000)

'Jan is off boxing'

(v) **Copula + infinitive-inessive**

(10) Finnish

Jussi on nykkeile-mä-ssä

Jussi is box-3INF-INESS (de Groot 2000)

'Jan is off boxing'

Communicative situations that favour the absentive

Absentive is specially frequent in communicative exchanges consisting of a dialogical sequence, like the one in (6), taken from Hungarian.

(6)   A. Peterrel   szeretnék   beszélni

    Peter:COM   like: COND:1SG   speak

B. De hiszen   úszni   van

    Well   swim:INF   is (de Groot 2000)

'A. I would like to speak with Peter

B. Well, he is off swimming

Absentive is also characteristic of the notes hanged on the doors in order to indicate that somebody has gone out, as the following taken from Catalan:

(7)   Estic a fer un encàrrec

'*I am off on an errand*'

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In some languages, absentive is expressed with some syntactic constructions very similar to those of the progressive aspect. So, in Old and Early Middle English, it was documented an absentive construction, which would give place to the progressive aspect.

Absentive imposes lexical restrictions to the verbs that can appear in the absentive construction. Thus, only agentive verbs can appear; verbs lacking an agent typically cannot be used in the absentive construction. Similarly, in some languages absentivity cannot be expressed through a passive voice. In both cases, the restrictions imposed seem to come from the fact that a subject typically involves an agentive subject controlling the action. Hence, the great propensity to agentive verbs and the short presence of passive voice, that emphasizes the patient rather than the agent.

Discussion about the absentive existence

The existence of the absentive is controversial, since some authors consider that the expression of absence is not a grammatically codified piece of information, but an effect of meaning of some constructions that also express other values.

Related concepts

Progressive Aspect

Related links

The absentive: http://www.lotpublications.nl/publish/articles/002545/bookpart.pdf

Basic bibliography

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