

Felix Bildhauer

AN HPSG APPROACH TO THE GERMAN AM-PROGRESSIVE

HPSG 2025, Lisbon, 3 September

The *am*-progressive in German

- German: progressive aspect not obligatorily expressed by syntactic means
- Progressive may be emphasized by several syntactic constructions: always optional
- Syntactic marking of progressive is relatively rare
(less than 10% of the time when speakers describe a situation without a change of state)
(Behrens et al. 2013)

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- the word *am*, glossed as AM
- an infinitive or nominalized infinitive, glossed as INF

- Well-studied phenomenon

(Andersson 1989, Flick & Kuhmichel 2013, Anthonissen et al. 2016, Kempf 2023, among others)

- More strongly grammaticalised in dialects than in Standard German, particularly strongly in Western varieties (e.g. Rhineland, Westphalia, Switzerland)

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(e. g. Flick & Kuhmichel 2013)

- Frequently conveys ‘subjective’ meanings such as surprise, intensity or (mostly negative) evaluation with regard to the event

(Anthonissen et al. 2016, Bildhauer et al. 2025)

This talk: analysis based on joint empirical work with Thilo Weber and Arne Zeschel (IDS Mannheim)
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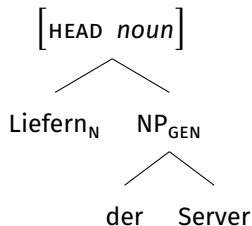
Data drawn from:

- German Reference Corpus (DeReKo): newspaper texts, standard written language
(Kupietz et al. 2010)
- DECOW16B web corpus: internet discussion forums, informal written language
(Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012)
- FOLK corpus: spoken language (Reineke et al. 2023)
- Total: 459 instances, samples of approx. equal size from each corpus
- Additional: 368 instances with direct object (from DECOW16B)

Nominal: occurrence with a genitive object

- (2) Sie_i sind am Liefern [der Server]_j.
they are AM deliver.INF the.GEN.PL server.GEN.PL
'They are delivering the servers.'

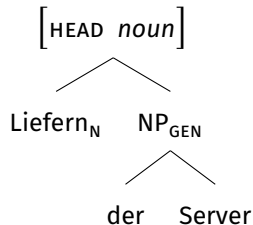
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$deliver'(e, i, j) \wedge present(e) \wedge progressive(e)$

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(DECOW16B)

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(DECOW16B)
- (5) [über die Ursache] bin ich auch am rätseln
about the cause am I also AM speculate.INF
'I am speculating about the cause, too.'
(DECOW16B)

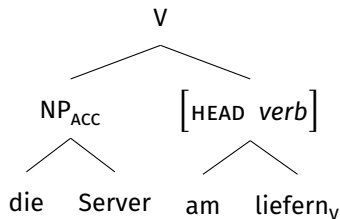
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Occurrences with (acc. or dat.) object: relatively rare

- about 6% in spoken and informal written German
(Bildhauer et al. 2025)
- about 1% in standard written German
(Flick & Kuhmichel 2013, Bildhauer et al. 2025)

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Accusative and dative objects attach to verb(al projection), not noun

→ **am liefern** is a verbal projection

---> **liefern** is a verb

$deliver'(e, i, j) \wedge present(e) \wedge progressive(e)$

Infrequent, but attested in informal written German

(all examples from DECO16B)

- (4) a. Server sind am geliefert werden.
server.NOM.PL are PRP delivered.PTCP be.INF
'Servers are being delivered.'
- b. Die dritte Staffel ist fleißig am gesendet werden
the third season is busily AM broadcast.PTCP be.INF
'The third season is being broadcast.'
- c. diese Seite ist gerade am umgestaltet werden
this page is currently AM redesigned.PTCP be.INF
'This page is currently being redesigned.'

(5) Ich bin heute abend wieder ein bißchen am **testen**

I am today evening again a little AM test.INF

‘Tonight, I am testing again.’

(DECOW16B)

- vast majority of cases: is ambiguous in this sense
- tendency to use transitive verbs without their direct object
- even verbs that do not easily drop their object in other syntactic contexts

- originally a contraction of the preposition *an* and the definite article *dem*
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- in any case: *am* seems to be a word rather than an affix attached to the noun/verb

(6) die (...) waren am [Reden und Diskutieren]

they were AM talk.INF and debate.INF

‘They were talking and debating.’

(FOLK)

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This talk (preview):

- 1 *am* is a preposition when its complement is unambiguously nominal
- 2 it may or may not be a preposition in ambiguous cases
- 3 it is *not* a preposition when its complement is unambiguously verbal

Analysed as the predicative copula verb (cf. Müller 2009: 226) in nominal and ambiguous cases:

- in addition to *sein* ('to be'), *bleiben* ('to remain') can be used

(7) dass die gute Laune am Sieden **blieb**

that the good mood PRP boil.INF remained

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Tentatively analysed as a progressive auxiliary in ambiguous and verbal cases:

- the German predicative copula raises *all* the arguments from its complement:
seems inappropriate with the *am*-progressive
- other copular verbs not attested in unambiguously verbal cases:

(8) ?? Sie **bleiben** [die Server] am liefern.

they remain the.ACC.PL server.ACC.PL AM deliver.INF

Intended: 'They continued delivering the servers.'

Modifiers can occur after *am* with nouns, but not with verbs:

- (9) Wir sind im Moment *am* [sorgfältigen] *Prüfen* *der* *Vorschläge*.
we are in-the moment AM careful evaluating.INF the.GEN.PL proposals.GEN.PL
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we are the proposals in-the moment AM carefully evaluating.INF
Intended: 'We are currently carefully evaluating the proposals.'
- (12) Wir sind die Vorschläge im Moment [sorgfältig] *am* *Prüfen*
we are the proposals in-the moment carefully AM evaluating.INF
'We are currently carefully evaluating the proposals.'

No object-NPs between *am* and the verb:

- (13) a. Wir sind [die Server] **am liefern**.
we are the.ACC.PL servers.ACC.PL AM deliver.INF
'We are delivering the servers.'
- b. * Wir sind **am** [die Server] **liefern**.

Bare nouns do occur between *am* and the verb:

(13) Wir waren ständig *am* [Geld] *wechseln*

we were constantly AM money change.INF

‘We were constantly changing money.’

(DECOW16B)

- not attested with determiners or modifiers (**am viel Geld wechseln*, **am sein Geld wechseln*)
- relatively rare, about 7% in spoken German and 3% in informal written German; even less in standard written German (Bildhauer et al. 2025)
- probably best described as word formation (compounding or noun incorporation, although not always reflected graphematically)

am + verb/noun form a constituent:

- (14) Ich bin die Wohnung [am streichen] und [am umbauen].

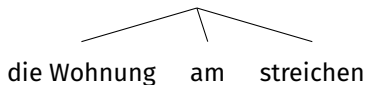
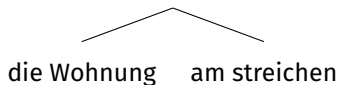
I am the.ACC.SG flat.ACC.SG AM paint.INF and PRP remodel.INF

'I am painting and remodelling the flat.'

- (15) [Am streichen] ist er die Wohnung noch nicht.

AM paint.INF is he the.ACC.SG flat.ACC.SG not yet

'He is not yet painting the flat.'



Object NPs form a constituent with the “*am*-phrase”:

- (16) a. Ich bin [die Wohnung am putzen] und [deine Sachen am wegräumen]

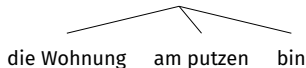
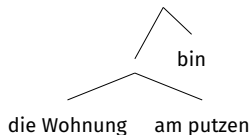
I am the flat AM clean.INF and your things PRP put.away.INF

‘I am cleaning the flat and putting away your things’

- b. [Die Wohnung am putzen] bin ich schon seit Stunden

the flat AM clean.INF am I already since hours

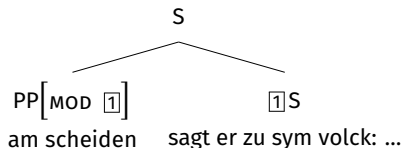
‘I have been cleaning the flat for hours’



- Origin: temporal extension of the spatial preposition *an* ‘at’, combined with a nominalised infinitive
- Earliest progressive uses (Middle High German): PP is used in adverbial function
- Only later used as a complement of the verb *sein* ‘be’

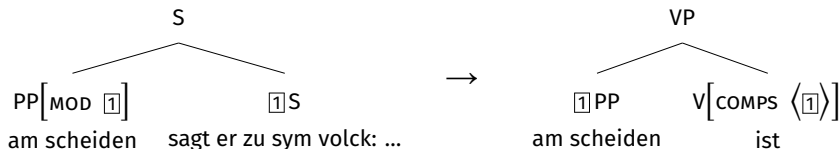
(17) Und *am scheiden* sagt er zu sym volck: [...]
and PRP part-INF says he to his people
‘And while parting he says to his people: [...].’
(Lancelot II, cited from Flick & Kuhmichel 2013: 56)

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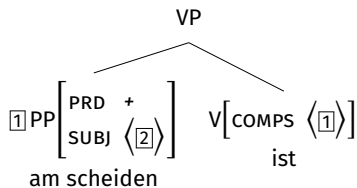


- originally: PP_{am} as an event modifier

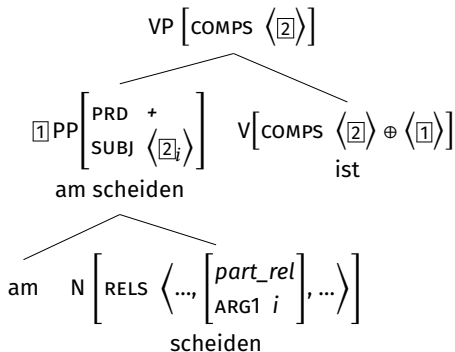
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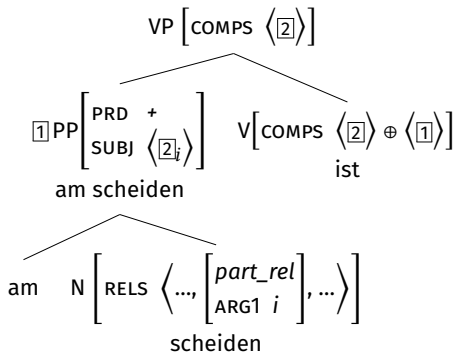
- originally: PP_{am} as an event modifier
- *am*-progressive: PP_{am} as main predication



- PP is predicative (subject represented on HEAD|SUBJ-list; cf. Müller 2025: 351; Kiss 1992)



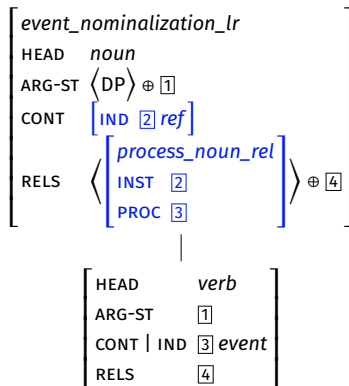
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- subject is co-indexed with first semantic role of the embedded noun

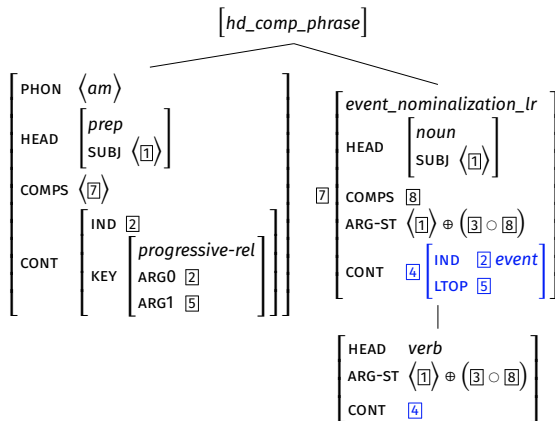
- PP_{am} : semantics should be an event
- PP_{am} : additional EP *progressive_rel* taking the noun's semantics as its argument
- But nominalized infinitive is usually taken to be a referential object

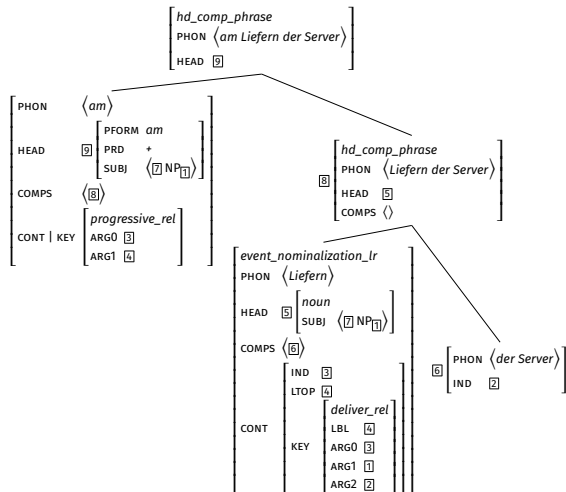
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Event Nominalisation Lexical Rule (adapted from Machicao y Priemer 2017: 145)

Use a lexical rule that **does not** introduce a special EP and that keeps the event index:





Lexical entry (Müller 2009: 226)

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{ARG-ST } [1] \oplus [2] \oplus \\ \text{CONT } \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{IND } [3] \\ \text{LTOP } [4] \end{array} \right] \\ \text{RELS } \langle \rangle \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{HEAD } \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{PRD } + \\ \text{SUB } [1] \end{array} \right] \\ \text{COMPS } [2] \\ \text{CONT } \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{IND } [3] \\ \text{LTOP } [4] \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{hd_comp_phrase} \\ \text{PHON} \langle \text{am Liefern der Server sind} \rangle \\ \text{COMPS} \langle \boxed{1} \text{ NP}_{\boxed{7}} \rangle \\ \text{RELS} \langle \dots, \boxed{6} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{ind_pres_rel} \\ \text{ARG0} \boxed{3} \\ \text{ARG1} \boxed{4} \end{array} \right], \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{progressive_rel} \\ \text{LBL} \boxed{4} \\ \text{ARG0} \boxed{3} \\ \text{ARG1} \boxed{5} \end{array} \right], \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{deliver_rel} \\ \text{LBL} \boxed{5} \\ \text{ARG0} \boxed{3} \\ \text{ARG1} \boxed{7} \end{array} \right], \dots \rangle \end{array} \right]$$

$$\begin{array}{l} \boxed{2} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{PHON} \langle \text{am Liefern der Server} \rangle \\ \text{HEAD} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{PFORM} \text{ am} \\ \text{PRD} + \\ \text{SUBJ} \langle \boxed{1} \rangle \end{array} \right] \\ \text{COMPS} \langle \rangle \\ \text{CONT} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{IND} \boxed{3} \\ \text{LTOP} \boxed{4} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \end{array}$$

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{PHON} \langle \text{sind} \rangle \\ \text{COMPS} \langle \boxed{1}, \boxed{2} \rangle \\ \text{CONT} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{IND} \boxed{3} \\ \text{LTOP} \boxed{4} \end{array} \right] \\ \text{RELS} \langle \boxed{6} \rangle \end{array} \right]$$

<i>hd_comp_phrase</i>	
PHON	$\langle am \text{ Liefern der Server sind} \rangle$
COMPS	$\langle [1] NP [7] \rangle$
RELS	$\langle ..., [6] \left[\begin{array}{l} ind_pres_rel \\ ARG0 [3] \\ ARG1 [4] \end{array} \right], \left[\begin{array}{l} progressive_rel \\ LBL [4] \\ ARG0 [3] \\ ARG1 [5] \end{array} \right], \left[\begin{array}{l} deliver_rel \\ LBL [5] \\ ARG0 [3] \\ ARG1 [7] \end{array} \right], ... \rangle$

[2]	PHON	$\langle am \text{ Liefern der Server} \rangle$
	HEAD	$\left[\begin{array}{l} PFORM \text{ } am \\ PRD \quad + \\ SUBJ \quad \langle [1] \rangle \end{array} \right]$
	COMPS	$\langle \rangle$
	CONT	$\left[\begin{array}{l} IND [3] \\ LTOP [4] \end{array} \right]$
	PHON	$\langle sind \rangle$
	COMPS	$\langle [1], [2] \rangle$
	CONT	$\left[\begin{array}{l} IND [3] \\ LTOP [4] \end{array} \right]$
	RELS	$\langle [6] \rangle$

- special lexical item
(a noun with verbal semantics)
- special preposition *am*
- no special phrase / construction
- describes cases where the complement of *am* is clearly a noun(phrase)
- also describes cases where the complement of *am* is ambiguous between a noun and a verb

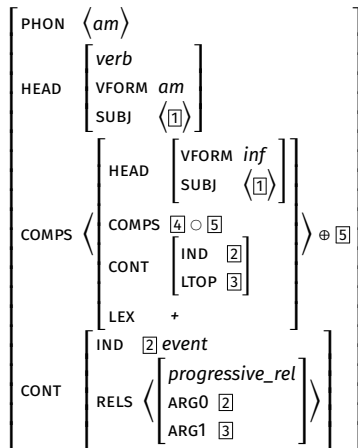
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- evidence that speakers re-analyse *am* + infinitive as a periphrastic verb form

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Analysis: *am* as an infinite verb

cf. the analysis of the English infinitive marker *to* as a defective auxiliary in Gazdar et al. (1985: 114) and Pollard & Sag (1994: 125)

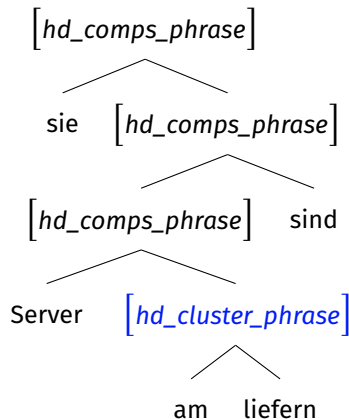
A lexical entry for *am*



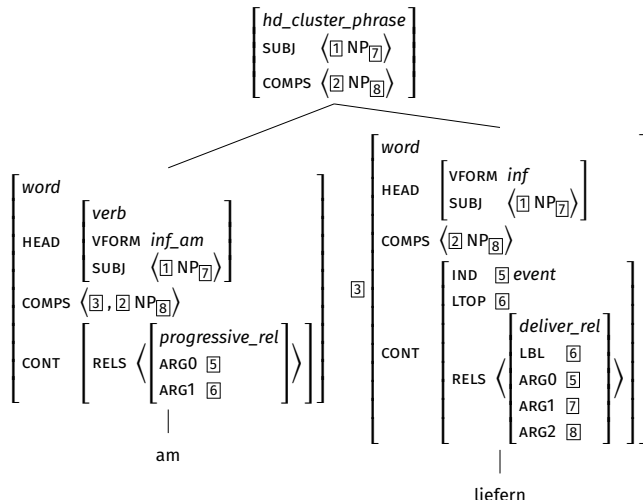
- *am* analysed as a verbal head
- takes infinitival verbal constituent as complement
- complement is LEX +
- raises the element from the SUBJ-list
- optionally raises complements
- introduces appropriate semantic relation

(dass) sie Server am liefern sind
(that) they server.ACC.PL AM deliver.INF are
'(that) they are delivering servers'

- *am* combines with the infinitive in a *hd_cluster_phrase*
- phrase type that licenses verbal complexes in German
(Müller 2025: 316)



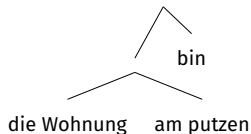
Example analysis with direct object: *am* + infinitive



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- complement is LEX +
- raises the element from the SUBJ-list
- optionally raises complements
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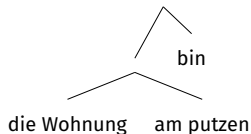
The verb *sein*: copula or auxiliary?

- predicative copula: raises all elements from its complement's SUBJ and COMPS lists
- *am*-progressive: complements must not be raised



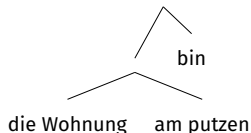
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- *am*-progressive: complements must not be raised
- alternative #1: specify *am* as LEX -, so it cannot be a non-head-daughter in *hd_cluster_phrase* (but need to exclude other copula verbs like *bleiben*)



The verb *sein*: copula or auxiliary?

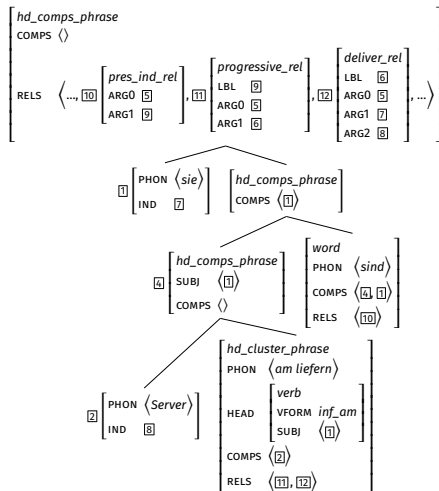
- predicative copula: raises all elements from its complement's SUBJ and COMPS lists
- *am*-progressive: complements must not be raised
- alternative #1: specify *am* as LEX -, so it cannot be a non-head-daughter in *hd_cluster_phrase* (but need to exclude other copula verbs like *bleiben*)
- alternative #2: use a dedicated progressive auxiliary that does not raise complements



Selects phrase headed by *am*, with empty COMPS list:

$$\left[\begin{array}{ll} \text{HEAD} & \text{verb} \\ \text{ARG-ST} & [1] \oplus \left\langle \left[\begin{array}{ll} \text{HEAD} & \left[\begin{array}{ll} \text{verb} \\ \text{VFORM} & \text{inf_am} \\ \text{SUBJ} & [1] \end{array} \right] \right] \right\rangle \\ \text{COMPS} & \langle \rangle \end{array} \right]$$

Example analysis with direct object: Details



Two different structures for the German *am*-progressive:

- 1 copula + predicative PP_{am}
 - 2 aux (or copula) + V_{am} + infinitive
- unambiguously nominal cases: structure 1
 - unambiguously verbal cases: structure 2
 - ambiguous cases: structure 1 and structure 2

- analysis reflects assumptions about language change and grammaticalisation of the *am*-progressive
- predicative use (as opposed to older adverbial use) constitutes a ‘critical context’ (in the sense of Diewald 2006)
 - licenses a re-analysis of *am*+infinitive as part of a periphrastic verb form (but does not require it)
- uses with accusative or dative object: ‘isolating context’ (Diewald 2006)
 - requires re-analysis of *am*+infinitive as part of a periphrastic verb form

Analysis of unambiguously nominal cases:

- lexical rule (as presented), lexical rule (with semantic type shift), phrasal schema (with another semantic type shift)?
- analyse *sein* as a copula or as a progressive auxiliary?
- adjectival modification of a noun with (assumed) verbal semantics ('sind *am* gründlichen Prüfen')
- bare nouns between *am* and noun/verb (*am Geld zählen*): what are they?
 - *Geldzählen* as a compound noun: should be modifiable by an adjective, but: **am fleißigen Geldzählen*

Two different structures for the German *am*-progressive:

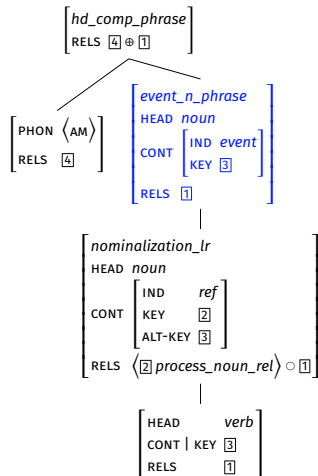
- 1 copula + predicative PP_{am}
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- unambiguously nominal cases: structure 1
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Appendix

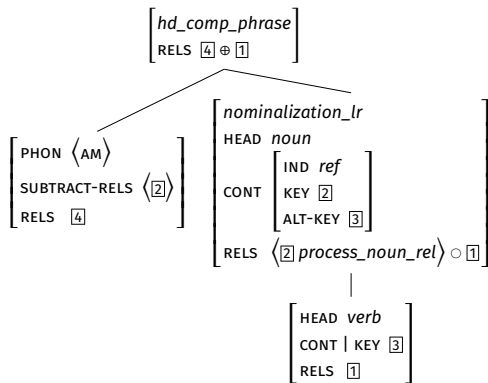
Use a nominalization rule that produces a referential object, and make another type shift later:

- change index type from *ref* to *event*
- get rid of the *process_noun*-relation
- restore the original verb semantics
→ key relation of the underlying verb must be recorded on the noun (e. g. via CONT|ALT-KEY)

Nominal, alternative IIa: Unary-branching phrase



Feature SUBTRACT_RELS: EPs that will not be collected and not passed on to mother



- Should perhaps be restricted to neutral/unmarked/non-scrambled order.
- At least if a pronoun is involved, raising more than one object seems acceptable

(19) Ich bin [es] [ihr] gerade am erklären.

I am it.ACC she.DAT just PRP explain.INF

'I am just explaining it to her.'

(20) Ich bin [es] [meiner Mutter] gerade am erklären.

I am it.ACC my.DAT mother.DAT just PRP explain.INF





'I am just explaining it to my mother.'

(21) Ich bin [meiner Mutter] gerade [alles] am erklären.

I am my.DAT mother.DAT just everything.ACC PRP explain.INF

'I am just explaining everything to my mother.'

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