

## What do you want for a drink? The structure of the German *was für*-construction in light of historic data.

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**Introduction.** Due to its split form in (1b) below, the *what for* ('what kind of') construction (WFC) has been much called on in literature on extraction and syntactic theory. However, opinions on its internal syntactic structure differ. The presented work is based on corpus research on historical WFC in German. I argue that the German WFC originated from a predecessor kind-structure consisting of the wh-item *was* ('what') and a genitival DP. The element *für* ('for') in German WFC contexts is not (and never was) a preposition, but serves as a predicator that identifies the (*kind*-) relation between a wh-item and a DP.

**Background.** The WFC can be found in Germanic, Slavic and Baltic languages. It consists of the wh-element *what* and a DP preceded by the element *for*, as in (1). It is usually assigned a *kind*-interpretation (Pafel 1996, Leu 2015) as opposed to a *token/set*-reading (for a definition of the terms *token/set* in WFC-contexts see Vangsnes 2008, Bennis et al. 1997) that identifies one specific referent (in English associated with the element *which*).

- (1) a. **Was für Bücher** hast du gelesen? [Adjacent WFC]  
*what for books have you read*
- b. **Was** hast du **für Bücher** gelesen? [Split WFC]  
*what have you for books read*  
 'What kind of books did you read?'
- c. **Welches Buch** hast du gelesen?  
*which book have you read*  
 'Which book did you read?' - Leu's 'The architecture of determiners.' vs. \* 'A novel.'
- (2) **Mit was für einem Buch** hast du den Mann geschlagen?  
*with what for a.DAT book have you the man beat*  
 'With what kind of book did you beat the man?'

A number of peculiar properties have been noted for the WFC cross-linguistically: the wh-item may be extracted from the *for*-DP as in (1b) with no change in meaning; the element *for* does not assign case, nor intervene in Agreement relations in WFC contexts: In (2), the *für*-DP *einem Buch* 'a book' receives Dative case assigned by the preposition *mit* 'with', instead of the expected Accusative usually assigned by *für* in German. According to Blümel (2012), among others, the WFC first emerged around 1700 in its split version. If so, German WFC is far younger than its Slavic counterpart, which was first attested in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century (Kwon 2015). Paul (1909) and Behaghel (1923) assume the substitution reading '*in place of X*' to be the original semantics of the WFC, from which modern WFC derived. Table (3) illustrates the grammaticalization pattern of the WFC according to Behaghel (1923). According to (3), the WFC first occurred with Accusative case, assigned by German *für*. At stage 2 the adjacent form and nominative case on the DP emerged.

(3)

Stage 1	→	Stage 2	→	Stage 3
<i>what ... für + DP<sub>ACC</sub></i>		<i>what for + DP<sub>ACC/NOM</sub></i>		<i>what for a + DP<sub>NOM</sub></i>
<i>,in place of + DP'</i>		<i>,what for + kind'</i>		

So far, to my knowledge, the claims found in the literature have never been verified by empiric work (for German).

**Proposal and Findings.** I gathered historical data using four corpora that cover two language periods: the GerManC corpus, the Bonner Frühneuhochdeutschkorpus (both Early New High German, ENHG) and the ANNIS and Titus corpora (Middle High German, MHG). I coded my instances of W(F)C w.r.t. their syntactic function, split vs. non-split occurrence, case marking, sentence type and semantics. The data suggests that the German WFC emerged far earlier than assumed: it was first attested in 1474. There is no evidence for the split version to have preceded

the adjacent version in (1a), contrary to (3). The element *für* never assigned Accusative in WFC contexts in German, suggesting that *für* either never occupied a position that enabled it to assign case (as suggested by Leu 2015) or that it never functioned as preposition, but as ‘predicator’ establishing a relation between the *wh*-item and the DP (as suggested by Kwon 2015; the notion of predication in WFC contexts was first introduced by Pafel 1996).

Furthermore, my findings suggest a predecessor structure consisting of the *wh*-element *was* and a genitival DP as in (4). It occurred in *kind-wh*-contexts since Old High German, was still productive in MHG and slowly declined during the ENHG period, when the WFC construction first emerged. Note the lack of the element *für*:

- (4) wundert in, **waz steines** ez müge sin (Flore, MHG)  
*wonders him what stone<sub>GEN</sub> it might be*  
 ‘He wonders what kind of stone it might be.’

I argue that *für* entered the WFC-structure at stage 3 as a means of identifying the semantic predication of the *wh*-element over the associated DP in WFC contexts (see Kwon 2015, Bennis, Corver and Den Dikken 1997 for similar approaches), when case could no longer supply this function due to the degeneration of Genitive case in German. I argue that WFC developed as in (5):

(5)

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
<i>what</i> + DP <sub>GEN</sub>	→ <i>what</i> + DP <sub>NOM/DAT/ANY</sub> →	<i>what+for</i> + DP <sub>ANY</sub>
<i>kind-reading</i>	<i>kind-reading</i>	<i>kind</i> + ( <i>temp.</i> ) <i>in place of x</i>

In stage 1, since OHG-times, the construction *what* + genitival DP inquired after kinds of objects. At stage 2 Genitive case started to give way for other cases assigned by embedding PPs (as in (2)) or the syntactic position of the whole WFC. Only at stage 3, in ENHG, did the element *for* occur in *kind*-contexts, temporarily introducing a substitution-interpretation ‘*in place of x*’ as suggested by Behaghel (1923), probably due to a related association of *für* with replacement, parallel to the interpretation of English *for* in (6):

- (6) Go to the store for me. (from: Merriam Webster entry for ‘for’)

Note that there is no reason to assume all instances of WFC at the beginning of stage 3 to have a supplementation reading as Behaghel (1923) suggests (for stage 1 in (3), when *for* was part of the WFC); in fact the data hardly support this reading to be available at all (no instance of undebatable ‘*in place of x*’-semantics could be found). The (lack of) case properties of the element *for* at all times during the emergence of the construction and its lack of semantic content point towards an analysis of *for* as what Den Dikken (2006:2) specifies as ‘relator’.

## References

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