What gives with *es gibt*? Typological and comparative perspectives on existentials in German, in Germanic, and in Indo-European[1]

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To the memory of Edgar Polomé, who inspired with his keen interest in Germanic and Indo-European

1. Introduction

As is well known, Modern German presents something of a synchronic puzzle with regard to one particular use of the verb *geben.* In particular, with *es* 'it' as a subject, and thus just in the third person singular form, when occurring with a direct object in the accusative case, the verb has an existential reading, with the accusative interpreted as the subject, as in (1):

(1)   Es gibt   einen Hund hier.

      es give/3SG a-dog/ACC here

      'There is a dog here'.

Elsewhere, however, *geben*   shows other syntactic and semantic possibilities; universally recognized as the prototypical sense and construction are those exemplified in (2), where *geben* is freer in terms of subject selection than in (1), occurs with direct and indirect object, and has the meaning 'give':[2]

(2)   Er   gibt   mir   einen Hund

      he/NOM give/3SG me/DAT a-dog/ACC

      'He gives me a dog.

The puzzle, therefore, concerns why *geben*, which has a more usual "other life" as in (2), should show the special syntax and the specialized semantics it does when occurring in the existential construction of (1).

      One solution to this anomaly would be to seek a path by which the semantics of 'give' could come — or have come, when the extension is viewed historically — to signal existence,

thus treating the existential sense of *geben* as a (relatively recent) innovation within the history of German. Indeed, this is the traditional approach that has been taken, e.g. by Hammer (1971: 221), where existence is treated as giving in a figurative sense: "The origin and explanation of this phrase [*es gibt*], 'it gives' is: Nature (or Providence) gives (provides, produces). This is a clue to the uses of *es gibt*, e.g. *Es hat letztes Jahn eine gute Ernte gegeben* 'There was a good harvest last year'". In a similar vein, Newman (1996: 163ff.),[3] working within a (Langacker-style) Cognitive Grammar framework, provides a basis for a path by which the semantics of 'give' could come to signal 'exist': "In this view the presented thing may be thought of as being put into relief, or 'thrown up' by the scene. One may therefore think of *es gibt* as putting some entity on an imaginary stage for contemplation or comment. In so doing, attention is focused on that thing itself, rather than, say, its location somewhere." Newman goes on to say (1996:272ff.), apparently agreeing with Hammer, that the posited semantic extension was mediated through a sense of *geben* attested in late Middle High German, namely 'yield, produce', so that the shift was 'transfer of possession' —> 'produce, yield' —> 'bring into existence' —> 'exist'.[4]

A few implications follow as a consequence of such accounts: first, that there is a direct historical connection among various senses of *geben* and second, that the verb is polysemous in Modern German, with the existence-meaning being an extension (thus both synchronically and diachronically) of the "manifestation" schema that also underlies the meaning 'to present' or 'to give'. And to be sure, it is appropriate to examine the history of the verb for insight into this question, as Newman (1997: 307) himself emphasizes: "[since] the relationship between these two constructions types is by no means obvious ... it is natural to turn to an historical investigtaion of *geben*, in order to shed some light on the relationship".

Still, alternative historical and synchronic scenarios are imaginable, since there are other types of historical relationships besides the putative semantic extension of 'give/produce' to 'exist' that can yield enlightenment into the seemingly odd synchronic connections shown by

geben. In particular, it could be the case that the current meanings in question of *geben* represent two accidentally homophonous verbs, i.e., originally distinct words that have come to be pronounced alike and are close enough in meaning that one can plausibly relate them synchronically.[5] Alternatively, the apparently unusual meaning could represent a retention of an earlier meaning, rather than an innovation.

It is therefore essential to consider as wide a range of historical data as possible before deciding on the origin of the existential use of *geben*, and additional evidence, involving comparative data from within Germanic and from other branches of Indo-European, is brought forth here in an effort to present existential *geben* in its fullest diachronic perspective. Such a broader view is important, since it turns out, interestingly, that claims of recent polysemy for *geben* may well be exaggerated and unnecessary, since the existential sense of *geben* could represent an echo of (a "persistence" from) the verb's etymological source.

2. The Relevant Facts Within Germanic

Virtually all scholars who have examined the German existential use of 'give' note that it essentially is isolated, with few or no parallels within Germanic, and moreover that it actually occurs somewhat late in the German tradition, being first attested in the late Middle High German period (14th century, according to Newman 1996: 272) and gaining frequency only in the 16th century (so Dal 1966: 167, Ebert 1986:38, Newman 1996: 272ff.). Indeed, as Newman (1997: 308) notes, echoing the observation of Grimm (1837: 230), "Johann der Täufer Friedrich Fischart (1546/7-1590) ... appear[s] to be the first significant writer to make extensive use of the [*es gibt*] construction".[6]

Nonetheless, there are some comparanda within Germanic that deserve mention and which, despite the lateness of attestation in German for this construction, give a potential basis from which to impute a greater history to existential 'give'. For instance, a comparison can be made with the American English[7] (direct and indirect) question expression *what gives?*, meaning

'what's up; what is there', which like the German *es gibt* represents a synchronically unexpected existential(-like) intransitive use of 'give'.[8] Still, the status of this comparison must be carefully assessed, as it may well be that English *what gives* is a red herring, so to speak.

On the one hand, drawing on dictum of Antoine Meillet to reconstruct from anomalies, the apparent equation of the synchronically anomalous *(es) gibt* (as existential) with the similarly synchronically anomalous *(what) gives* (also as existential) suggests that existential 'give' may be an inheritance from Proto-West-Germanic. This conclusion, together with the fact that, as Bauer (1999: 591), for instance, citing Brugmann (1925: 35), observes, a 'give' existential "structure is found in ... Old Norse and Danish", it may well be that there is indeed a comparative basis for projecting an existential sense for 'give' back to Proto-Germanic.

Still, there is some cause for doubting this conclusion. The English expression *what gives* is attested in print for the first time only in 1940,[9] in John O'Hara's *Pal Joey*, according to Wentworth & Flexner (1960: 574, s.v. *what gives*), so that the two best comparanda for positing an existential 'give' for any early stage within Germanic — English *what gives* and German *es gibt* — are both attested late within their respective traditions, the English construction extremely so. Of course, archaic elements can be attested late,[10] showing that attestation really can be just a matter of chance, but another potential problem with the comparison is that some scholars see *what gives* as having arisen via language contact.

Wentworth & Flexner *ibid.*, for instance, suggest that *what gives* is a calque, a loan translation, from German, stating somewhat enigmatically that *what gives* is "perhaps a lit[eral] translation of Ger[man] *was ist los*?", and Chapman (1986: 463, s.v.) says it is "a translation of Yiddish or German *was gibt* 'What's going on?'". A contact origin for existential *give* in English cannot be excluded, and would certainly accord with its very late attestation. However, there are problems with such accounts. For one thing, taking *was ist los* as the direct basis for *what gives* cannot work, since it is hardly a "literal" source, being actually "what is loose". Moreover, while there is a more suitable source for calquing in the colloquial German usage *was*

gibt es? 'What is the matter? What's up?', the putative calquing did not lead to a direct counterpart to the German subject pronoun *es* (thus, *what gives*, not **what gives it* or **what does it give*).[11]

Also, the conditions under which a German phrase would have been the basis for an American English calque in the first half of the 20th century — assuming that the date of first attestation is a clear index of the expression's entry into English — are not clear. For instance, while Yiddish comes to mind as a possible conduit, as Chapman suggests, by which a German(-like) construction could find its way into English, Yiddish does not make use of existential 'give' and so could not have provided a model for the creation of *what gives* via calquing; indeed, his mention of "Yiddish *was gibt*" is puzzling. Moreover, while there are and have been historically several German-speaking communities in the Mideast and Midwest, e.g. in various Mennonite and Amish communities, the extent of their impact on American English remains to be assessed, and in any case, Pennsylvania German seems not to have existential *geben* either.[12] Finally, given anti-German sentiment in post-World War I America, it is hard to see what the motivation would be for the calquing of any German expression at that time.

Nonetheless, despite these misgivings, it must be admitted that a contact explanation for *what gives* cannot be completely excluded, especially in light of its very recent attestation.

Thus, the comparison with *es gibt* is somewhat speculative, and, as a result, the basis for a Proto-West Germanic reconstruction becomes less compelling. A consideration of relevant facts from outside of Germanic is therefore important for judging the status of the emergence of the existential use of *geben* in German.

3. The Relevant Extra-Germanic Facts

Forms cognate to *geben*/*give* occur in branches of Indo-European outside of Germanic. *geben* implies a Proto-Germanic root *geb-,[13] and this points to a Proto-Indo-European *ghVbh-.[14] Outside of Germanic, one finds Old Irish *gaibid* and Latin *habeō*; both from PIE *ghabh- but

with semantics different from Germanic, meaning rather 'take; hold; have'. The semantics will turn out not to be problematic, and it is significant that both of these verbs participate in existential(-like) constructions that make for an interesting comparison with existential *geben.*

The existential use of *gaibid* in Old Irish is quite limited, but thus potentially quite important for the claims being developed here. Regarding the expression of existentials in general in Irish, for the most part the so-called "substantive" verb is used. This lexeme is a conflation mainly of Indo-European *staH- 'stand, be (in a location)' (e.g. 3SG present indicative *-tá*) and *bhewH- 'be(come)' (e.g. 3SG preterite *-boí*), though the form *fil* (originally the imperative of a verb *wel- 'see') with an object pronoun substitutes in some contexts. Interestingly, *gaibid* substitutes for the substantive verb in one very restricted syntagm, occurring only in so-called "nasalizing relative clauses" (i.e., those that have infixed nasalization, triggered by certain conjunctions and relative words and syntactic configurations), only in the perfect tense (consisting of the preterite with the perfectivizing marker *ro-*, and only with an empty infixed 3SG.NTR pronoun); some examples are given in (3), from Thurneysen (1946: §781):

(3)   a. amal ro-nd-**gab**

         as   PERF-it-took/3SG

         'as he is' (literally: "as he has taken it")

      b. is   follus rund-**gabsat**

         is/3SG clear   PERF-it-took/3PL

         'it is clear that they are' (literally: "is clear that they have taken it").

Similarly, in Late Latin (see Bauer 1999 for discussion and relevant literature), the impersonal use of the third person singular form of *habet* 'have', namely *habet*, occurred in an existential construction, often with the locative adverb *ibi*, thus literally "it has there"; this collocation is the source of Romance existentials such as French *il y a* and Spanish *hay.*

As with the inner-Germanic comparisons, however, these extra-Germanic parallels to the use of *geben* as an existential are not without problems. For one thing, the lateness of the

attestation of the Latin use of *habet* is admittedly difficult (as above with the West Germanic evidence), and it has usually been claimed (most recently by García-Hernández 1992) that Latin could have calqued this usage on the late-ish Ancient Greek use of 3SG ἔχει 'it has', as an existential. Although Bauer 1999 has recently countered the claim of Greek influence being responsible for Latin *habet* — for one thing, existential ἔχει occurs late in the Greek tradition, being attested first in Hellenistic papyri in the post-Classical period — she nonetheless claims that *habet* is an innovation within Latin; if so, it would not be suitable as a comparandum to existential *geben.*

With regard to Irish *gaibid,* the severe constraints on its existential use make it a potentially important comparandum (following Meillet's dictum), but these specific restrictions are not matched by any found with *geben* (or *habet,* for that matter). Moreover, Irish has a number of "solutions" to what to do with existentials (as the mix of roots in the substantive verb shows) and the substantive verb is not used only existentially, covering "existence, presence, being in a certain condition" (Thurneysen 1946: 475) and even some simple copular uses; indeed, the uses in (3) are not really robustly existential. Thus, the Irish parallel can at best remain no more than suggestive.

More generally, the fact that in each case, i.e., in Latin, in Greek, in German, and in English, the potentially interesting existentials are attested only late in their respective traditions must be considered unsettling from the point of view of trying to make something significant out of the parallels. Nonetheless, it is possible to impose a reasonable interpretation on them, in a way that has important implications for the status of the German *es gibt* construction.

4. Interpreting the Preceding

If the Irish and the Latin existential uses of *ghabh- 'take, hold, have' reflect an old usage,[15] then so could *es gibt.* On the other hand, if the Irish and Latin uses in section 3 are not related, then they are independent developments and point to TAKE/HAVE —> EXIST as a "natural"

development. Either way, however, since Germanic *geb- ultimately comes to have a meaning of 'give', a semantic shift must be posited, either just to existence, if 'give' was the original meaning, or to existence and to 'give', if 'take, hold, have' was the original meaning of that root. Moreover, it is likely that 'take, hold, have' was the original meaning for Germanic *gVb-, based on the evidence of the derivatives of this root in Gothic, namely *gabei* 'wealth' (i.e., 'that which one has (taken)') and *gabigs* 'wealthy' (i.e. 'one who has (taken) much').[16] .

Therefore, the real issue with *geben* and *es gibt* is not the existential sense per se, which now can be seen as a reflection of original 'take, hold, have' semantics of its root, but rather the shift in the basic meaning of the root away from 'take, hold, have' in the direction of 'give'. This, however, is a shift that can be motivated, thus adding further plausibility to the scenario offered here in which existential *geben* is an archaism.

The essential background for understanding the shift is the semantics of reciprocal exchange transactions in Indo-European, as discussed by Benveniste (1969: 65-86), drawing on the observations of Mauss 1925 about bidirectional giving practices in various societies.[17] In particular, there are several cognates across the Indo-European family where the forms match up perfectly but the semantics differ as 'give' versus 'take', e.g. Gothic *niman*/German *nehmen* 'take' are cognate with Greek νέμω 'distribute, give out', Latin *dō*/Greek δίδωμι (etc.) 'give' are cognate with Hittite *dā*- 'take', and Greek αἴνυμαι 'I take, lay hold of (1SG.MID)' is cognate with Tocharian B *ai-tsi* 'to give/INF'. Relevant also is the fact that 'give' in Sanskrit, the root *dā*-, means 'take' when used with the directional preverb *ā* indicating direction towards the subject. These facts taken together suggested to Benveniste that these verbs originally referred globally to the transaction of exchanging, in the social context of reciprocal giving, rather than just to one side (or the other) of the exchange; specialization of the semantics to one aspect of the overall exchange scenario occurred independently in the various languages, and the *geben/gaibid/habē-* connection fits into this broader set of reciprocal exchange terms, with Germanic on the one hand and Irish and Latin on the other focussing on different sides of the

transaction, just as Germanic and Greek did with regard to *nem-. Moreover, there is an independent indication of a connection between 'give' and 'take' within Germanic[18] in the vocalism of the verbal root *geb- 'give' — the Germanic *e, as opposed to the *a (thus, *ghabh-)in the Latin/Irish cognates and the Germanic substantival derivatives (e.g. in Gothic), is said to reflect analogy with the root *nem- underlying *niman/nehmen* 'take' (so Kluge 1995: s.v.).[19]

One can therefore say that *es gibt* could well be an archaism in retaining an aspect of the earlier semantics of the root that ultimately, in other contexts, yielded the meaning 'give'. Whether the shift from 'have, hold, take' to 'exist' took place independently in Germanic, in Celtic, and in Italic or instead represents an innovation common to those three groups, perhaps even what may be termed a common "western" Indo-European innovation,[20] is unclear. In any case, though, this development is reminiscent of the "Principle of Persistence" (Hopper 1991: 28ff.) in grammaticalization, namely that "the meaning and function of a grammatical form [is related] to its history as a lexical morpheme", though the fact that *es gibt* is not robustly grammatical in nature reminds us that this "principle" is really just a property of language change in general (as suggested also by the facts in footnote 16) and not a property of "grammaticalization" as distinct from other types of morphological and lexical change.[21]

5. Conclusion

Despite the preceding discussion, it must be admitted that the attestation problem for the West Germanic 'give' existentials does not disappear (nor do the similar problems with the Latin and Irish *ghabh- existentials), so that questions must inevitably remain regarding the history of German *es gibt* and English *what gives*. What one is left with is nothing more than some very suggestive parallels — whatever the suggestion, however, clearly the etymology of *geben* offers some interesting questions concerning the existential usage *es gibt.* This may be a methodologically somewhat unsettling outcome, but it is perhaps a realistic one. Finally, from a

methodological standpoint, one important result is that while Meillet's dictum about reconstructing from anomalies is undoubtedly useful, it cannot be applied blindly — as with all good historical work, the relevant data must be sifted carefully and each potential comparison must be evaluated critically.

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[1]This paper is based on a paper with the same title presented at GLAC 4 (the Fourth Germanic Linguistics Annual Conference) held at The Ohio State University April 17, 1998. An earlier version, under the title "The Reconstruction of Existentials in Germanic and Indo-European", was presented at the Third Spring Workshop on Theory and Practice in Reconstruction, held at the University of Pittsburgh, April 6, 1990. Audiences at both presentations are to be thanked for their useful comments, though ultimate responsibility for any lapses naturally resides with me.

[2]There are other meanings and uses as well, but the ditransitive use in (2) and the existential use in (1) are by far the most common and pose the most interesting problem in terms of their relationship.

[3]This argumentation is developed further in Newman 1997.

[4]Newman (1996: 164) mentions quasi-existential uses (emphasizing "the manifestation of a thing") of a verb that otherwise means 'give' in Brazilian Portuguese, with a possible parallel also in Jacaltec with the expression of weather events.

[5]Such is the case, for instance, with two senses of *ear* in English, the body part meaning (as in *eyes and ears*) and the agricultural meaning (as in *ear of corn*), which, though conceivably connected synchronically via metaphor (both, e.g., are appendages of a sort), in fact are etymologically distinct, the former deriving from Old English *ēare* (Germanic *auzon-, from a Proto-Indo-European root *(H)ous- 'ear', cf. Greek οὖς, Latin *auris*, etc.) and the latter from Old English *æhher* / *ēar* 'spike, ear of grain' (Germanic *ahuz, from a Proto-Indo-European root *(H)ak'- 'sharp', cf. Greek ἄκρος 'topmost').

[6]Newman (1997: 308) refers to Kehrein (1854: 56) for a collection of some early, pre-16th century, instances of existential *geben.*

[7]I attribute this expression specifically to American English since it is mentioned both in Wentworth & Flexner's *Dictionary of American Slang* (1960) and the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (3rd edition, 1992, Houghton Mifflin Co.) with its orientation towards American usage. Also, the 1989 on-line version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (www.oed.com) lists this usage as "colloq[uial]" and "orig[inally] U.S.".with its chiefly British orientation.

[8]Admittedly, unlike the German construction, English *what gives* is not at all productive, and is quite restricted in its syntax, occurring only with *what* as the subject and only in question (direct and indirect) forms.

[9]Wentworth & Flexner (1960: 574) give 1939 as the date for *Pal Joey*, but other sources, including the first edition of the work itself, give the date as 1940.

[10]Two excellent examples from Indo-European are the following: Sanskrit *parut* 'last year' is attested only late in Sanskrit tradition (in lexicographical works only) but is clearly old, being cognate with Greek πέρυτι and showing an archaic composition of adverbial prefix (*per) + zero-grade (*ut-) of *wet- 'year' + locative ending (*-Ø, in the case of Sanskrit, *-i in the case of Greek); also, Greek ἔορ 'female kin', attested only late in Greek tradition (in the works of Hesychius, a 5th century AD lexicographer), is clearly cognate with the widespread 'sister' word *swesor-, being derivable directly from *swesor- by regular sound changes, and thus must be an "old" word, even though not attested in the nearly 2000 years of Greek documentation prior to Hesychius.

[11]Although Chapman, as noted above, gives *Was gibt* as a source for *What gives*, there does not seem to be any support for the occurrence of such a construction without the expletive subject *es* in German; the largest Duden dictionary (Drosdowski 1993) gives only *Was gibt es*, and no mention is made of a colloquial variant without *es* (though reduced *'s* does occur) either in Duden or in Küpper 1963, a dictionary of colloquial usage.

[12] I would like to thank Neil Jacobs and Steven Hartman Keiser of The Ohio State University for confirming these claims about Yiddish and Pennsylvania German, respectively.

[13] Gothic *gabei* 'wealth' points to *a*-vocalism, which may well have been original with this root; see below, in section 4, regarding the *e*-vocalism of *geben*.

[14] The connection, endorsed by Justus (1999a, 1999b), of the root *kap- (as in Latin *capiō* 'take') with *ghabh-, the composite form having an undifferentiated 'have/take' meaning, is unacceptable, primarily because of insurmountable phonological difficulties, that, *pace* Justus' discussion, are not solved in the Glottalic theory of Gamkrelidze & Ivanov (1984/1995).

[15] Admittedly, given this may be a big "if", but recall footnote 10 about late-attested archaicisms.

[16] These would thus be a case of derivatives showing older semantics even after their base root underwent a change in meaning, similar to the way English *with*, which originally meant 'against' retained the older semantics in the compound *withstand* (literally "stand against") even when the primary meaning of the preposition came to be that of expressing accompaniment.

[17] Justus (1999a, 1999b) also calls attention to Benveniste's analysis of the vocabulary of exchange in her discussion of 'have' in Indo-European, including Germanic cognates of *ghabh-.

[18] Janda 1999 discusses mutual influences among Slavic verbs meaning 'give', 'have', and 'take'; she demonstrates that these "verbs of possession and exchange ... have informed and influenced one another in terms of their semantic and syntactic expressions" (p. 249).

[19] Alternatively, it could be that case that, as Justus (1999a: 626), following Kuryłowicz (1968: 245), suggests, the *a in this root is a reflex of a schwa inserted into a zero-grade of an Indo-European TeT- root (where T = any obstruent).

[20] It is not at all certain that there ever was anything like a "Western Indo-European" as a subgroup within the larger Indo-European family, and this is especially so if such a group were to have consisted just of Italic, Celtic, and Germanic. Still, as inferrable from the checklists of

Bird 1982 (based on Pokorny 1959), there appear to be some innovative aspects of certain roots that are restricted to just these three branches, e.g. *dhē- 'pass away' (if somehow a specialization of the more widespread root *dhē- 'set, put'), *ghasto- 'rod, pole' (if the *a* is an innovation, with semantic specialization, away from *ghesto- 'hand, arm'), and *kadh- 'protect' and *kagh- 'grasp' (if their root structure, with a voiceless stop and a voiced aspirate in the same root, indicates an innovation away from Proto-Indo-European root-structure conditions).

[21] See Joseph (2000, 2001) for some discussion of the question of how distinct and separate so-called "grammaticalization" is as a type or process of language change.