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# Light verb constructions and the Principle of No Synonymy – A case study on German *stehen unter*-LVCs

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**Abstract:** Light verb constructions (LVCs) are complex predicates that consist of a desemantized (light) verb and a phrasal element. A recurring element in the discussion of German light verb constructions is the claim that these multi-word units can be substituted by simplex verbs and are thus synonymous with simplex verbs. In this paper, I examine the question of synonymy based on a selected data sample of LVCs consisting of *stehen* ‘stand’ and the preposition *unter* ‘under’. Based on the assumption that total synonyms should not exist, I demonstrate that *stehen unter*-LVCs not only differ semantically from corresponding simplex verb constructions but also from seemingly synonymous LVCs, and therefore do not form synonyms with the mentioned construction types. While the first type of synonymy (LVCs and simplex verbs) has already been discussed in depth in the literature, the discussion of seemingly synonymous LVCs represents a new step in the discourse on LVCs.

**Keywords:** Light verb constructions, Synonymy, Event passive, Corpus study

## 1 Introduction

The English term ‘light verb’ was introduced by Jespersen (1942) and is meanwhile widely used in linguistics. Independently of Jespersen, a lively discussion about so-called ‘Funktionsverbgefüge’ (literally ‘function verb construction’) developed in German linguistics during the 1960s. The term ‘Funktionsverb’ – literally ‘function verb’ in English – was introduced by von Polenz (1963), and a few years later, the term ‘Funktionsverbgefüge’ was coined by Engelen (1968). One question that is occasionally discussed is whether German ‘Funktionsverbgefüge’ correspond to light verb constructions in other languages (e.g., Van Pottelberge 2001: 68–77). Put differently: Are German ‘Funktionsverbgefüge’ functionally and grammatically equivalent to, for example, light verb constructions (LVCs) in, for instance, Persian, Japanese, or English?

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So far, there is no cross-linguistic comparative concept on which a decision can be based regarding whether complex predicates in different languages fall under the same label ‘light verb construction’ or not. While there also exist cross-linguistic studies (e.g., Schafroth 2020; Harm 2021: 38–43; Alvarez-Morera et al. 2025; Wiskandt 2025 as well as the chapters in Pompei et al. 2023), the analysis often focuses on identifying language-specific characteristics. However, even at the level of individual languages, the situation is not much better. It has been repeatedly noted for German that there is no established definition of the term ‘Funktionsverbgefüge’ (cf. the brief historical overview of the discussion in Heine 2020). After attempts in 1970s and 1980s to determine necessary and sufficient criteria for classifying an expression as belonging to the category of ‘Funktionsverbgefüge’, some authors (e.g., Van Pottelberge 2001) have even questioned the relevance of this category, as the various proposals have not been successful. However, it seems that very few researchers take the drastic step of denying the validity of a category like ‘Funktionsverbgefüge’. In the present paper, I not only assume the existence of such a category but I also use the English term ‘light verb construction’ for it. The extent to which a comparative concept underlies this will not be addressed at this point.

In the present paper, I address the question of the functionality of German LVCs. In the relevant literature, it has been repeatedly discussed whether LVCs can be substituted by a corresponding simplex verb (e.g., Seifert 2004; Glatz 2006).<sup>1</sup> For some authors, this substitution even constituted a definitional criterion (e.g., Engelen 1968). However, substitution presupposes that the two expressions – the light verb construction and the simplex verb – are synonymous. While this aspect has been discussed in various ways in the literature (e.g., Wierzbicka 1982; Cattell 1984; Karimi 1997), in this work, I aim to demonstrate through specific language data that light verb constructions and simplex verbs exhibit semantic differences and therefore do not represent synonyms. This claim, however, is not novel but it is embedded in a broader semantic discussion of synonymy relations with respect to German LVCs.

Another aspect in which synonymy plays a role is the analysis of the semantic contribution of light verbs. In German linguistics, it is widely assumed that light verbs contribute semantically to the LVC (e.g., Klein 1968; Helbig 1984; von Polenz 1987; Fabricius-Hansen 2006; Harm 2021: 71–74). However, light verbs are assigned to very general meaning classes – i.e., stative, inchoative, causative – and if this is the only semantic contribution, numerous LVCs could be found that would have to be considered synonyms, e.g., *stehen* ‘stand’ and *sein* ‘be’ in *unter Kontrolle stehen* ‘be under control’ (lit. under control stand) and *unter Kontrolle sein* ‘be under control’ (lit. under control be). This form of synonymy has not been addressed in

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<sup>1</sup> Since the present paper focusses on German language data, I primarily cite works that also deal with German. However, the topic has also been addressed for other languages, see, for instance, Bonial and Pollard (2020).

the discussion so far, and in this work, I will demonstrate through a case study that these seemingly synonymous LVCs exhibit (subtle) semantic differences and therefore do not represent true synonyms.

The question of whether LVCs are synonymous with each other or with simplex verbs plays a central role in the investigation of the functional motivation of LVCs. If LVCs and simplex verbs are synonyms, then why do they exist? The answer to this question allows us to better understand why such multi-word expressions exist in a language like German, which has a well-developed verb inventory.<sup>2</sup>

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the relevant background on (German) light constructions. In Section 3, German LVCs containing the light verb *stehen* ‘stand’ are discussed which figure in the analyses presented in Sections 5 to 7. Synonym and especially the Principle of No Synonymy are subject of Section 4. In Section 5, I discuss the issue of putative synonymous pairs of LVCs and simplex verbs, whereas Section 6 focusses on putative synonymous pairs of LVCs with varying light verbs. The analyses presented in these two sections show that *stehen unter*-LVCs are neither synonymous to corresponding simplex verb constructions, nor to LVCs containing the light verb *sein*. Section 7 asks whether the results gained from an analysis of a limited data set are generalizable. The paper ends with a conclusion in Section 8.

## 2 Light verb constructions: Some background

Even though there is no consensus regarding a definition of the category of light verb constructions in (German) linguistics, some characteristics of this predicate type can still be described. LVCs are multi-word expressions consisting of a light verb and a phrasal element. In German, the phrasal element can either be a nominal phrase (1a) or a prepositional phrase (1b). Whether constructions with a nominal phrase belong to the narrower category of LVCs is indeed disputed in the research literature (e.g., von Polenz 1987), but it is irrelevant for the present work, as it only concerns LVCs of the second type.

- (1) a. *eine Antwort geben*  
       a    answer give  
       ‘to give an answer’  
       b. *zum Stehen kommen*  
       to.the standing come  
       ‘to come to rest’

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<sup>2</sup> The functional motivation for the existence of LVCs may be different in languages that have only a small verb vocabulary – such as contemporary Persian (e.g., Mohammad and Karimi 1992: 195; Samvelian 2018: 256) or some Northern Australian languages such as Wagiman and Bardi (cf. Bonial and Pollard 2020: 579) – or in those that do not integrate borrowed predicates as verbs into the language (cf. Wichmann and Wohlgemuth 2008; Wohlgemuth 2009).

The light verb is form-identical to a lexical full verb, and it is more precise to say that it represents a light verb usage of that full verb, which stands in opposition to a heavy verb usage. Thus, the term ‘light verb’ specifically refers to a verb usage and not to an independent grammatical class of verbs that differs from, for instance, lexically full verbs. For the sake of simplicity, I will nonetheless refer to light verb rather than light verb usage in the following discussion.

Light verbs differ from their corresponding heavy verbs at the semantic level. While *kommen* ‘come’ as a heavy verb describes a directional movement from a spatial source along a path to a spatial goal (2), no directional movement is expressed in the light verb usage. Rather, the LVC in (1b) denotes a transition into a state (‘being at rest’).

- (2) *Das Mädchen kommt [von der Schule]<sub>SOURCE</sub> [die Straße entlang]<sub>PATH</sub>  
 the girl comes from the school the street along  
 [zur Bücherei]<sub>GOAL</sub>  
 to.the library  
 ‘The girl is coming from the school along the street to the library.’*

Compared to the heavy verb, the light verb is semantically reduced. In the literature, *kommen* ‘come’ is referred to as an inchoative light verb, which denotes a transition into a state or a process (e.g., Heringer 1968; von Polenz 1987; Fleischhauer and Hartmann 2021, 2023; Harm 2021; Smirnova and Stöber 2022). The state or process into which the subject referent enters is specified by the phrasal element. The primary predicative content – what kind of eventuality<sup>3</sup> is denoted – is contributed by the phrasal element, while the light verb, according to assumptions in the literature, contributes aspectual meaning (Helbig 1984; von Polenz 1987; Winhart 2002; Storrer 2006; Eisenberg 2013; Harm 2021 among others). This means that the light verb specifies whether the subject referent is in a state (3a), transitions into another state or process (inchoation; 3b), or whether an eventuality is caused (causation; 3c).

- (3) a. *Der Verdächtige steht unter Beobachtung (durch die Polizei).*  
 the suspect stands under observation by the police  
 ‘The suspect is observed/ under surveillance (by the police).’  
 b. *Der Verdächtige gerät unter Beobachtung (durch die Polizei).*  
 the suspect gets under observation by the police  
 ‘The suspect is getting observed/ under surveillance (by the police).’  
 c. *Das Gericht stellt den Verdächtigen unter Beobachtung*  
 the court puts the suspect under observation  
*(durch die Polizei).*  
 by the police  
 ‘The court places the suspect under surveillance (by the police).’

3 Following Bach (1986), the term ‘eventuality’ is used as a cover term both for states and events.

Due to the lack of a definition for the term ‘light verb construction’, it is unclear which verbs can be classified as light verbs. The German verbs that are frequently mentioned include *stehen* ‘stand’, *kommen* ‘come’, *geraten* ‘get’, *bringen* ‘bring’, *geben* ‘give’, *stellen* ‘put’ (lit. cause to stand), and *setzen* ‘put’ (lit. cause to sit). Other verbs, such as *sein* ‘be’, *haben* ‘have’, and *machen* ‘make’, are more disputed in their status as light verbs (cf. Krefß 2017 and Harm 2021: 163–171 concerning German *machen* and Eisenberg 2013: 305 and Harm 2021: 171–205 concerning *sein* ‘be’ and *haben* ‘have’). According to Kamber (2008), *stehen* ‘stand’ is one of the most frequent light verbs in German, and constructions with the light verb *stehen* ‘stand’ will serve as a case study in this paper.

### 3 *stehen*-light verb constructions

In its heavy verb usage, *stehen* ‘stand’ denotes the static localization of the subject referent. The location is specified by the PP argument. Thus, in (4), the referent of *das Mädchen* ‘the girl’ is described as being located under the tree. In many cases, *stehen* also conveys that the subject referent is in an upright body position, contrasting with verbs like *sitzen* ‘sit’ or *liegen* ‘lie’ (see, Gamerschlag et al. 2013 for an extensive analysis of German posture verbs like *stehen*).

- (4) *Das Mädchen steht unter dem Baum.*  
 the girl stands under the tree  
 ‘The girl is standing under the tree.’

As a light verb, *stehen* does neither provide a spatial localization nor a predication about the posture of the subject referent. Rather, the verb contributes an underspecified state predication (Fleischhauer and Gamerschlag 2019). For instance, in (5), it is stated that the subject referent is stressed. We could add without contradiction, *während sie in der Klasse sitzt und eine Klausur schreibt* ‘while she is sitting in class and taking an exam’. This is not possible in (4); if we were to add *während sie dort sitzt und ein Buch liest* ‘while she is sitting there and reading a book’, it would result in a contradiction. The predication about the subject referent’s posture is part of the heavy verb usage but not of the light verb usage.

- (5) *Das Mädchen steht unter Stress.*  
 the girl stands under stress  
 ‘The girl is stressed.’

The preposition contributes to the meaning of the LVC. We can see this in the examples in (6), which differ only in the preposition. With *unter* ‘under’ in (6a), a passive

interpretation arises, where the subject referent of the LVC is the direct object of the verb *beobachten* ‘to observe’, from which the nominalization *Beobachtung* ‘observation’ is derived. The LVC can also be paraphrased using the passive construction *beobachtet werden* ‘be observed’ (Heine 2003: 238). In contrast, the example in (6b) has a prospective interpretation: the subject referent is in a state that precedes an observation (cf. Fleischhauer and Gamerschlag 2019; Fleischhauer et al. 2019; Boogards and Fleischhauer 2023; Fleischhauer 2023a for the discussion of prospective aspect).

- (6) a. *Die Partei steht unter Beobachtung durch die Polizei.*  
 the party stands under observation by the police  
 ‘The political party is under observation/ surveillance by the police.’
- b. *Die Partei steht kurz vor der Beobachtung durch die Polizei.*  
 the party is short in\_front\_of the observation by the police  
 police  
 ‘The political party is close to be observed by the police.’

Fleischhauer (2021a, 2022, 2023a) identified various families of *stehen*-LVCs, with the notion of an ‘LVC-family’ defined as follows: Light verb constructions form a family if (i) they only show variance with respect to their NP element, and (ii) they exemplify the same interpretational pattern (Fleischhauer 2021a: 64). The five families identified in the mentioned literature are summarized in Table 1.

In the further course, the LVCs of the event passive-family are the focus of the investigation. For this family, Fleischhauer (2022) has identified a total of 34 members, which are listed in Table 2. Since both the light verb and the preposition remain constant, only the distinct nouns occurring in the family are listed in Table 2.

With regard to the LVCs of this family – but also, in principle, the other families – we can observe two types of apparent synonymy relationships. On one hand, there is an apparent synonymy with the paraphrase of the construction (7). The sentence in (7b) is a suitable paraphrase of the one in (7a). On the other hand, there are apparent synonymy relationships with corresponding LVCs that only vary in the realization of the stative function verb (compare the example in 7a with the one in 8).

**Table 1:** *Stehen*-LVC families.

Family	Example
event passive-family	<i>unter Beobachtung stehen</i> ‘to be under observation’
state passive-family	<i>unter Stress stehen</i> ‘to be stressed’
Motto-family	<i>unter dem Motto ‘X’ stehen</i> ‘to have ‘X’ as one’s motto’
prospective-family	<i>vor der Beobachtung stehen</i> ‘be close to being observed’
confrontation-family	<i>vor einem Problem stehen</i> ‘to face a problem’

**Table 2:** List of nouns occurring in the event passive-family (Fleischhauer 2022: 266).

<i>Aufsicht</i>	<i>Fittiche</i>	<i>Schirmherrschaft</i>
‘supervision’	‘guidance’ <sup>4</sup>	‘patronage’
<i>Befehl</i>	<i>Fuchtel</i>	<i>Schutz</i>
‘command’	‘guidance’	‘protection’
<i>Behandlung</i>	<i>Führung</i>	<i>Strafe</i>
‘treatment’	‘leadership’	‘punishment’
<i>Belastung</i>	<i>Herrschaft</i>	<i>Überwachung</i>
‘burden’	‘rule’	‘monitoring’
<i>Beobachtung</i>	<i>Kommando</i>	<i>Verdacht</i>
‘observation’	‘command’	‘suspicion’
<i>Besatzung</i>	<i>Kontrolle</i>	<i>Verschluss</i>
‘occupation’	‘control’	‘closure’
<i>Beschuss</i>	<i>Kritik</i>	<i>Vertrag</i>
‘bombardment’	‘criticism’	‘contract’ <sup>5</sup>
<i>Betreuung</i>	<i>Leitung</i>	<i>Verwaltung</i>
‘care’	‘management’	‘administration’
<i>Bewachung</i>	<i>Moderation</i>	<i>Vorherrschaft</i>
‘guarding’	‘moderation’	‘predominance’
<i>Einwirkung</i>	<i>Observation</i>	<i>Vorwurf</i>
‘influence’	‘observation’	‘accusation’
<i>Entzug</i>	<i>Organisation</i>	
‘withdrawal’	‘organization’	
<i>Federführung</i>	<i>Sachverwalterschaft</i>	
‘leadership’	‘stewardship’	

(7) a. *Der Verdächtige steht unter Beobachtung durch die Polizei.*  
 the suspect stands under observation by the police  
 ‘The suspect is under observation by the police.’

b. *Der Verdächtige wird von der Polizei beobachtet.*  
 the suspect becomes by the police observed  
 ‘The suspect is observed by the police.’

(8) *Der Verdächtige ist unter Beobachtung durch die Polizei.*  
 the suspect is under observation by the police  
 ‘The suspect is under observation by the police.’

Before I examine these two apparent types of synonymy relationships in turn, I will first address the concept of synonymy and the principle of No-Synonymy.

4 The two nouns *Fittiche* and *Fuchtel* are used metaphorically in the LVCs in the sense of ‘guidance’; their literal meanings are ‘wings’ and ‘little sword’, respectively. See Fleischhauer (2023b) for a discussion of the metaphorical use of these nouns in LVCs.

5 For a detailed analysis of the LVC *unter Vertrag stehen* ‘be under contract’, see Fleischhauer (2021b).

## 4 The Principle of No Synonymy

Two expressions are synonymous when they have the same meaning. Following Lyons (1977: 292), we can characterize ‘synonymy’ as a sense relation such that two expressions A and B symmetrically imply each other, i.e., A implies B and B implies A. Typically, synonymy is identified by the possibility of mutual paraphrase. If expression A is a paraphrase for expression B (and vice versa), then A and B are synonyms. This is also the procedure used in the preceding section to establish the putative synonymy of *stehen unter*-LVCs with corresponding event passive constructions as well as *sein unter*-LVCs. However, we must distinguish between partial synonymy on the one hand and total synonymy on the other (cf. Löbner 2015: 231). Two expressions exhibit total synonymy when they can be interchanged in all contexts and are thus the same on all levels of meaning. Partial synonymy does not imply that the expressions have the same meaning on all levels of meaning. Relevant levels of meaning, according to Löbner, include descriptive meaning, social meaning, and expressive meaning. Descriptive meaning refers to the concept for the potential referents of the expression (Löbner 2015: 26). This is the aspect of meaning that serves to describe and identify extralinguistic referents. An expression has expressive meaning when it conveys subjective feelings or evaluations (Löbner 2015: 39). The German word *Köter* ‘mutt, cut’ shares its descriptive meaning with the noun *Hund* ‘dog’ – in terms of descriptive meaning, they are synonyms – but it carries a negative evaluation that is absent in the noun *Hund*. Therefore, regarding expressive meaning, these expressions are not synonyms. Social meaning arises when an expression indicates a specific social context or membership in a social group (Löbner 2015: 43). Regional variants like *Brötchen* and *Semmel* – both meaning ‘bread roll’ – are differentiated by social meaning. At this point, we can also subsume under social meaning the attribution of an expression to a specific genre – such as formal bureaucratic language or legal language. In literature, there is occasionally a claim that LVCs are characteristic of bureaucratic or legal language, suggesting that they may vary from corresponding simplex verbs concerning this aspect of social meaning (e.g., Herrlitz 1979: 150; Pape-Müller 1980: 168; Eckardt 2000: 33; Hansen-Schirra and Neumann 2004: 169f.; Fluck 2017: 430; Kordić and Marušić 2017: 14).<sup>6</sup>

In the following, I will focus on descriptive meaning, and synonymy will always be understood as partial synonymy in relation to descriptive meaning. In particular, I will not address whether LVCs are restricted to certain text types or what discourse-pragmatic differences exist between LVCs and simplex verbs (see, for

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<sup>6</sup> See Fleischhauer and Turus (2022) for a critical discussion of this claim.

instance, Van Pottelberge 2007: 440–441; Kabatnik 2020 and Harm 2021: 281–294 for the latter issue).

While partial synonyms occur in languages, total synonyms seem to be rather rare. The existence of two expressions as total synonyms would be uneconomical, as they would only differ in their form, not in their use. Haiman (1980: 516) speaks of a commonly accepted axiom that “no true synonyms exist, i.e. that different forms must have different meanings”. This perspective is expressed, for example, in Goldberg’s Principle of No Synonymy, which states: If two (complex) expressions are syntactically distinct, they must be semantically/pragmatically distinct as well (Goldberg 1995: 67).<sup>7</sup> If two expressions differ in their form, they also differ in their meaning. What Goldberg refers to as ‘pragmatic’ I encompass under the notion of discourse pragmatics, as well as expressive and social meaning.

The claim that LVCs and their corresponding simplex verbs are total synonyms is not at issue; however, the linguistic examination of LVCs in German stems from critical remarks about the use of this form of complex predicates – instead of the corresponding simplex verbs (cf. von Polenz 1963, 1987; Engelen 1968; Heblig 1984; Herrlitz 1979: 150). While older works make no explicit reference to the Principle of No Synonymy, a number of more recent works explicitly take the position that LVCs and corresponding simplex verbs could pose a challenge to this principle (Bonial and Pollard 2020; Alvarez-Morera 2022; Harm 2021; Pisciotta and Maisini 2025, among others). Harm (2021: 282), for example, argues that LVCs and simplex verbs can be identical in terms of their truth conditions, but differ in terms of the perspectivization expressed. Thus, the question of synonymy has always played a central role in the investigation of LVCs, but has not yet been addressed in a systematic way (an exception is Storrer’s 2006 corpus-based investigation of German LVCs). This paper aims to do so based on an investigation of the descriptive meaning of *stehen unter*-LVCs.

## 5 Synonymy 1: LVCs and corresponding simplex constructions

In the literature on LVCs, it is often emphasized that LVCs can be replaced by simplex verbs (e.g., Engelen 1968; Helbig 1984; von Polenz 1987). A prime example is the LVC *einen Kuss geben* ‘give a kiss’, which is equated with *küssen* ‘kiss’. Generally,

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<sup>7</sup> There is a critical discussion of Goldberg’s ‘Principle of No Synonymy’ (see, for instance, Leclercq and Morin 2023 for references). However, I am not asking whether the principle is, for instance, ‘overrated’ (Uhrig 2015) but just apply it as a heuristic principle guiding the analysis of putative synonymous expressions.

a morphological relationship is assumed between the nominal element of the LVC and the corresponding simplex verb, in the sense that both stand in a derivational relationship to each other. However, since the nouns occurring in LVCs do not have to be deverbal, there does not necessarily have to be a corresponding simplex verb for the noun. This, however, does not affect the paraphrasability by a simplex verb; it only concerns the question of whether a derivational relationship exists between the noun and the verb.<sup>8</sup>

Less attention is given to the fact that LVCs do not always correspond to a simplex verb, but rather to a more complex construction, such as the event passive construction in the case of LVCs from the event passive family. In the case of the mentioned LVCs, we are therefore not examining the synonymy relationship with a simplex verb, but rather with the event passive construction of simplex verbs.

I had already pointed out that not all LVCs of the event passive-family exhibit deverbal nominal elements, and thus there is no morphological relationship between the nominal element and the corresponding simplex verb (e.g., the metaphorically used nouns *Fittiche* and *Fuchtel*) occurring in the event passive construction. However, for most of the LVCs, such a morphological relation exists, as in *unter Besatzung stehen* ‘be under occupation’, where the noun *Besatzung* ‘occupation’ is derived from the verb *besetzen* ‘to occupy’ by *ung*-suffixation. Among the deverbal nouns, derivations with *-ung* are rather common, but other deverbal formations (e.g., *Aufsicht* ‘supervision’ derived from *aufsehen* ‘supervise’) are also present.

To identify differences between the LVCs of the event passive-family and the corresponding event passive constructions, I will first examine the formal level, and then I will address the semantics.

## 5.1 Formal differences between LVCs and corresponding event passive constructions

In this section, I will develop the analysis based on the LVC *unter Beobachtung stehen* ‘be under observation’, which I consider representative of the entire event passive-family. The LVC is formally an active construction. The light verb *stehen* ‘stand’ is in active voice; the passive form of the verb would be expressed as in (9), which is an impersonal passive.<sup>9</sup> The impersonal passive does affect the realization of the

<sup>8</sup> The apparent synonym of *give a kiss* and *kiss* is addressed by Wittenberg and Snedeker (2014), Wittenberg et al. (2014), and Wittenberg and Levy (2017) on the basis of experimental data.

<sup>9</sup> For convenience, I simply speak of ‘passive’ rather than ‘eventive passive’ since I am only dealing with this type of passive construction. For an overview of other passive constructions in German, see, for example, Pape-Müller (1980) and Maienborn (2007).

PP-complement, which does not become the subject of the impersonal passive construction. There exists no corresponding personal event passive for *stehen*. In fact, PP-complements can never be realized as the subject in German. For the current discussion it is important to note that the LVC is formally active and that there exists a clear formal difference between the LVC and its semantically close passive paraphrase.

- (9) *Hier wird nicht unter Schirmen gestanden.*  
 here becomes not under umbrellas stand  
 'Here one does not stand under umbrellas.'

Is it reasonable to claim – as Pape-Müller (1980: 153f.) does – that *unter Beobachtung stehen* is a lexical passive? The LVC has a passive-like interpretation, which becomes evident by its passive paraphrase. This passive-like interpretation is contributed by the prepositional phrase. The example in (10) shows that the PP *unter Beobachtung* 'under observation' has a passive-like interpretation even without the light verb *stehen*. In the example, the PP is realized attributively to the subject argument *ein Verdächtiger* 'a suspect' and the subject argument is still interpreted as being observed by the police. It seems as if the light verb is only required to realize the PP in predicative rather than attributive function. However, the light verb contributes a state predication which I will demonstrate in 5.2. Therefore, I will argue, its function is not just licensing the predicative realization of the PP (this is in agreement with the general analysis of German light verbs as sketched in Section 2).

- (10) *Ein Verdächtiger unter Beobachtung durch die Polizei verhält sich  
 a suspect under observation by the police behaves REFL  
 selten auffällig.  
 rarely conspicuous(ly)  
 'A suspect under observation by the police rarely behaves conspicuously.'*

Rather than analyzing *unter Beobachtung stehen* 'be under observation' as a lexical passive, I treat it as an active construction expressing a passive-like meaning. Following Helbig and Buscha (2001: 163), and Eisenberg (2013: 311) among others, I analyze the LVC as a passive paraphrase (German 'Passivumschreibung'). Adopting this view, I restrict the notion of 'passive' to constructions which morphosyntactically diverge from plain active voice constructions (this is in line with the analysis of the passive constructions in the typologically oriented literature, e.g., Haspelmath 1990).

Thus, the most obvious difference between *unter Beobachtung stehen* 'be under observation' and the corresponding event passive construction *beobachtet werden* 'be observed' concerns voice. The light verb construction is active voice, whereas

*beobachtet werden* is passive voice. Based on this morphosyntactic difference, I argue against treating the LVC as a specific subtype of passive constructions. But are there further formal differences between the two constructions?

There exists an obvious difference in the make-up of the two constructions. The eventive passive is a verbal construction formed by a combination of a passive auxiliary and a verbal participle. The LVC, on the other hand, consists of a verb and a prepositional phrase which is internally complex, i.e., consists of a preposition and its NP complement. The crucial difference is that there is an obligatory nominal element within the LVC which can be the target of attributive modification. An example is shown in (11a), in which the adjective *ständig* ‘permanent’ is realized attributively. A corresponding passive construction requires the modifiers to be realized adverbially (11b).

- (11) a. *Im Wahllokal steht er unter ständiger Beobachtung von*  
 in.the polling\_station stands he under permanent observation by  
*drei Wahlhelfern.*  
 three polling\_officers  
 ‘In the polling station, he is under permanent observation by three polling officers.’  
 (M06/APR.25213 Mannheimer Morgen, 01.04.2006; Von den Zählcomputern überzeugt)
- b. *Im Wahllokal wird er ständig von*  
 in.the polling\_station becomes he permanent(ly) by  
*drei Wahlhelfern beobachtet.*  
 three polling\_officers observed  
 ‘In the polling station, he is permanently observed by three polling officers.’

The LVC also licenses attributive modifiers which do not have adverbial correspondents (Bonial and Pollard 2020: 595–596). Neither the adjective *medizinisch* ‘medical’ (12a) nor the adjective *erhöht* ‘increased’ (12b) can be realized in a corresponding passive construction. Thus, the LVC bears some modification potential which the passive construction lacks. Bonial and Pollard (2020) basically argue that LVCs express event descriptions which are more flexible with respect to modification than simplex verbs. Thus, the difference in the modificational potential is definitely a motivation for using LVCs instead of corresponding simplex verbs (a similar claim is made by, for instance, Storrer 2006: 155; also Daniels 1963: 230–232). However, while the literature (including Bonial and Pollard 2020 but also Kabatnik 2020 for German) argues that the differences in modification potential are due to the categorical difference of the event description – a noun in the case of the LVC versus a verb in the case of simplex predicates – the present results show that there are also differences in modification potential that arise directly from the semantic differences of the expressions (here: state versus event predication).

- (12) a. In der Schweiz stehen heute 5000 Personen wegen früheren  
 in the Switzerland stand today 5000 persons due\_to former  
*Asbestkontakts unter medizinischer Beobachtung* [...].  
 asbestos\_contact under medical observation  
 ‘In Switzerland, 5000 persons are under medical observation due to earlier contact  
 with asbestos [...]’  
 (A07/DEZ.08824 St. Galler Tagblatt, 20.12.2007, S. 19; Altlast im Körper)
- b. *Hanspeter Heeb dürfte künftig in Sachen Umgang*  
 Hanspeter Heeb should future in things treatment  
*mit Kritik und Respekt vor dem*  
 with criticism and respect in\_front\_of the  
*Souverän unter erhöhter Beobachtung stehen.*  
 sovereign under increased observation stand  
 ‘Hanspeter Heeb should be under increased observation concerning his future  
 dealings with criticism and respect of the sovereign.’  
 (A08/MAI.07824 St. Galler Tagblatt, 24.05.2008, S. 49; Richtig und wichtig)

Finally, I would like to turn to the realization of the actor argument. In her volume on German passive constructions, Pape-Müller (1980: 152) proposes that *stehen unter*-LVCs differ from passive constructions with respect to the realization of the actor argument. Whereas the event passive realizes the optional actor argument in either a *durch*- or *von*-PP (13), the LVCs only allow the realization within a *von*-PP (11a).

- (13) *Der Verdächtige wird durch die Polizei/ von der Polizei*  
 the suspect becomes by the police by the police  
*beobachtet.*  
 observed  
 ‘The suspect is observed by the police.’

Contrary to Pape-Müller’s claim, *unter Beobachtung stehen* ‘be under observation’ also allows the realization of the actor argument within a *durch*-PP (14). Crucially, in this particular example the *durch*-PP even cannot be substituted by a *von*-PP.

- (14) *Der Verdächtige steht unter Beobachtung durch die Polizei.*  
 the suspect stands under observation by the police  
 ‘The suspect is under observation by the police.’

It is not clear what factors determine the choice of preposition introducing the actor argument in the light verb construction (but see Pape-Müller 1980: 73ff. for a discussion of the choice of preposition with regard to the eventive passive construction). Thus, there is no systematic difference with respect to the realization of the actor argument in *stehen unter*-LVCs and passive constructions.

I argued above that *unter Beobachtung stehen* is formally not a passive construction. This raises the question whether the actor argument in the passive

construction should really be compared to the actor argument in the LVC. In the case of the passive construction, the oblique actor argument is identical to the subject of the corresponding active sentence. As I argued, there is no corresponding active sentence for a sentence containing a passive-like LVC. Thus, where does the actor argument come from? *Beobachtung* ‘observation’ is a deverbal relational noun which inherits the arguments from its base verb (15). The noun’s undergoer argument, which is the more patient-like argument of a transitive predicate, is realized as the subject argument of light *stehen* ‘stand’. The light verb and the noun need to share one argument, otherwise they would not form a coherent predication. The noun’s actor argument, which in (15) is realized within a *durch*-PP, is realized as an argument of the noun within the LVC. Like in the passive construction, the argument structure of the LVC is derived from the underlying active base verb. Since *stehen* is a stative verb, we can postulate that it unifies its subject argument with the argument of the noun, which is subject to similar restrictions; in our case, being an undergoer argument rather than an actor argument.

- (15) *die Beobachtung des Verdächtigen durch die Polizei*  
 the observation of\_the suspect by the police  
 ‘the observation of the suspect by the police’

## 5.2 Semantic differences between LVCs and corresponding event passive constructions

After addressing the formal differences between the LVCs discussed here and event passive constructions, the next focus will be on semantic differences. Although the LVC can be paraphrased by the mentioned passive construction, the two show subtle semantic differences.<sup>10</sup> A main difference can be observed concerning the predicates’ aktionsart properties: The passive construction denotes an event, while the LVC denotes a state (a similar claim is made by Helbig and Buscha 2001: 164 and Lenz 2006: 125). Only eventive predicates allow anaphoric reference with *geschehen/passieren* ‘happen’, stative ones do not (Maienborn 2003: 59f.). For illustrational purposes, the test is shown in (16) with respect to the two expressions under discussion.

<sup>10</sup> The existence of semantic differences has also been recognized by Heine (2003: 238), but without explicating them in more detail.

- (16) a. *Der Verdächtige wurde von der Polizei beobachtet. Dies geschah*  
 the suspect became by the police observed this happened  
*gestern im Restaurant.*  
 yesterday in.the restaurant  
 ‘The suspect was observed by the police. This happened yesterday in the restaurant.’
- b. *Der Verdächtige stand unter Beobachtung durch*  
 the suspect stood under observation by  
*die Polizei. #Dies geschah gestern im*  
 the police this happened yesterday in.the  
*Restaurant.*  
 restaurant  
 ‘The suspect was under observation by the police. #This happened yesterday in the restaurant.’

The difference in aktionsart is expected since *beobachten* ‘observe’ is an eventive predicate; in terms of Vendler’s (1967) classification *beobachten* is an activity predicate, i.e., an atelic dynamic and potentially durative event predication. The event passive does not affect the aktionsart of the passivized predicate and therefore *beobachtet werden* is an activity predicate as well. *Stehen* ‘stand’, on the other hand, is a stative predicate irrespective whether it is used as a light or a heavy verb. It is therefore not surprising that it heads a stative complex predicate as (16b) shows. According to Ehrich and Rapp (2000: 252), *Beobachtung* ‘observation’ is a process<sup>11</sup> noun, which shows that the stativity is contributed by the light verb and not by the (deverbal) noun. As a consequence, certain event modifiers are acceptable with the passive construction but not with the LVC. A particular example is instrumental PPs headed by the preposition *mit* ‘with’. As (17a) shows, the passive sentence licenses the instrumental PP *mit einem Fernrohr* ‘with a telescope’, which modifies the denoted activity. The LVC *unter Beobachtung stehen* ‘be under observation’, on the other hand, is not compatible with such an instrumental PP (17b). The unacceptability does not depend on the position of the PP within the sentence but on the incompatibility of instrument-PP to co-occur with state predicates as instrument-PP as ‘event-related modifiers’ (e.g., Schlücker 2005).

- (17) a. *Der Verdächtige wird mit einem Fernrohr von der Polizei*  
 the suspect becomes with a telescope by the police  
*beobachtet.*  
 observed  
 ‘The suspect is observed with a telescope by the police.’

<sup>11</sup> ‘Process’ is an ontological term denoting the specific subtype of event denoted by activity predicates.

- b. *Der Verdächtige steht* (\*mit einem Fernrohr) unter Beobachtung  
 the suspect steht with a telescope under observation  
*durch die Polizei.*  
 by the police  
 ‘The suspect is under observation by the police (\*with a telescope).’

At this point, we can conclude that LVCs of the event passive-family and their corresponding event passive constructions are not synonymous. In terms of their descriptive semantics, they differ in that LVCs denote states, while passive constructions denote events. A correlate of this difference is that event-related modifiers, such as instrument-PPs, are compatible with passive constructions but not with LVCs. Furthermore, there is a functional difference in that LVCs are not passive constructions; rather, they are active constructions whose passive meaning arises from the prepositional phrase and not from the meaning of the LVC itself. Thus, for the sake of completeness, we must ask how LVCs of the type *unter Beobachtung stehen* differ from prepositions of the form *unter Beobachtung* ‘under observation’. As mentioned, these are also not synonymous, as the prepositional phrase does not make a state predication but is only transformed into such a predication through its combination with the verb (cf. Fleischhauer and Gamerschlag 2019: 147).

The functional motivation for the existence of the event passive-family lies in its ability to realize a passive meaning with an active form and to express this as a state predication. This combination of features is not realized by any of the alternative constructions: active simplex verb, event passive construction or *unter*-PP.

## 6 Synonymy 2: LVCs with varying light verbs

This section is divided into two parts. First, I discuss the question of whether light verbs that carry similar meanings are synonymous with each other (6.1), before moving on to a corpus study that tests this question using concrete language data (6.2).

### 6.1 Are (stative) light verbs synonymous with each other?

In the last section, I argued that the analysis stating that *stehen* in its light verb usage introduces a state predication is correct. But does this imply that the meaning of light *stehen* is limited to such a state predication? In other words: Does *stehen* contribute a state predication and nothing else in all LVCs? Such a claim can be found – at least implicitly – in the research literature, as I argued in Section 2. Furthermore, it is even claimed that the contribution of light verbs is generally

restricted to the specification of aspectual features. Accordingly, two LVCs that differ only with respect to the light verb should be synonymous if both light verbs belong to the same aspectual class, such as state predicates. A supposed synonym pair would be, for example, *unter Kontrolle stehen* ‘be under control’ and *unter Kontrolle sein* ‘be under control’, which differ only in that in the first case *stehen* is used as a light verb and in the second case *sein* ‘be.’

LVCs represent multi-word expressions (MWEs), and a central formal characteristic of such MWEs is fixedness. MWEs can be syntagmatically fixed, meaning that they form a fixed sequence that cannot be interrupted by a modifier, for example. German LVCs do not exhibit syntagmatic fixedness, as the individual components of LVCs do not have to be adjacent and can be separated from each other (cf. 19 below). However, there is also paradigmatic fixedness, which Masini (2019: 4) explicates as ‘unsubstitutability’, i.e., they form restricted collocations (Howarth 1993: 60; Zarco 1999: 324). When pairs like *unter Kontrolle stehen* and *unter Kontrolle sein* are synonymous, it suggests that at least regarding the verb, substitutability exists and thus there is no absolute paradigmatic fixedness. However, if the LVCs do not represent synonyms, we can say that LVCs are paradigmatically fixed because substituting the verb, if possible, leads to a different meaning which means that it results in the formation of a different LVC.

That the two expressions *unter Kontrolle stehen* and *unter Kontrolle sein* are not interchangeable in all contexts is demonstrated by the examples in (18). While *unter Kontrolle sein* ‘be under control’ (18a) can take the NP *der Brand* ‘the fire’ as a subject argument, this is not possible with *unter Kontrolle stehen*, lit. ‘stand under control’ (18b). Thus, the two LVCs cannot be exchanged in this specific context. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that the LVCs differ with respect to their selection restrictions.

- (18) a. *Nach etwa einer Stunde war der Brand unter Kontrolle.*  
 after about one hour was the fire under control  
 ‘After about an hour, the fire was under control.’  
 (K00/SEP.70198 Kleine Zeitung, 20.09.2000, Ressort: Lokal; Brennender Lkw im Tunnel Fahrer lenkte ihn hinaus!)
- b. *#Nach etwa einer Stunde stand der Brand unter Kontrolle.*  
 after about one hour stood the fire under control

That (supposed) synonyms differ in their selection restrictions can be observed, for example, in the pair *schwanger* ‘pregnant’ and *trächtig* ‘pregnant.’ Both predicates denote the state of a female carrying an unborn child. The difference lies in the fact that *schwanger* is preferred for human referents, while *trächtig* is used for animals. What they have in common is that the argument of the predicate must be saturated by an expression that has a living referent. However, they diverge regarding the subtype: human animate vs. non-human animate.

## 6.2 Corpus study

To prove that the contrast in (18) is indeed a systematic difference between the two LVCs and not merely due to the specific sentence context that prevents their interchangeability, I have examined the selection restrictions more closely in a corpus study. In a case study, the selectional restrictions of the LVCs *unter Kontrolle stehen* and *unter Kontrolle sein* were examined using data from the German Reference Corpus DeReKo (Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache 2021). The German Reference Corpus is divided into different archives, and for the present investigation, archive W, which contains the largest dataset, was selected. The data comes from various text genres (including newspapers, Wikipedia, biographies) and primarily consists of contemporary language use.

For the data query, the search strings ‘&stehen /s0 unter w2 Kontrolle’ and ‘&sein /s0 unter w2 Kontrolle’ were used. The result of this query are all sentences in which the inflected (&) lexeme *stehen* or *sein* occurs within the same sentence (/s0) with the preposition *unter* ‘under’, followed by the noun *Kontrolle* ‘control’ with a maximum word distance of 2 words. The word distance between the preposition and the noun allows for not only *unter Kontrolle* ‘under control’ but also, for example, *unter der Kontrolle* ‘under the control’ to be found. The condition that the inflected verb and the preposition do not have to be adjacent allows for examples like (19) to be captured by the search:

- (19) a. *Unter seiner Kontrolle standen die Polizei, der Geheimdienst,*  
 under his control stood the police the intelligence\_service  
 [...] *und die Staatsanwälte.*  
 and the prosecutors  
 ‘Under his control were the police, the intelligence service, [...], and the prosecutors.’  
 (U14/JUL.04101)
- b. *In Wyoming sind die seit neun Tagen*  
 in Wyoming are the since nine days  
*brennenden Buschfeuer [...] unter Kontrolle.*  
 burning bush\_fire under control  
 ‘In Wyoming, the wildfires that have been burning for nine days are [...] under control.’ (L01/AUG.00102)

In (19a), the PP *unter Kontrolle* precedes the verb, while in (19b), the verb is separated from the *unter*-PP by adjuncts and the subject NP. A stricter search criterion would exclude positive examples like those in (19) on one hand. On the other hand, it would reduce false hits, such as those in (20), which now need to be manually sorted out. In (20), the *unter*-PP does not belong to the verb *stehen*, but forms an LVC with the light verb *bringen* ‘bring.’

- (20) *Feuerwehrmänner brachten die Flammen unter Kontrolle, jede Menge*  
 firefighters brought the flames under control every amount  
*Autofahrer standen [...] im Stau.*  
 car.drivers stood in.the traffic\_jam  
 ‘Firefighters brought the flames under control, while a large number of drivers were stuck in traffic.’ (M09/FEB.15978 Mannheimer Morgen)

The search queries yielded 6,730 hits for ‘&stehen /s0 unter w2 Kontrolle’ and 44,337 hits for ‘&sein /s0 unter w2 Kontrolle’. A selection of 5,000 randomly sorted hits was extracted for each LVC. The sample size was chosen to ensure that there is a sufficient number of instances for both constructions to allow for a comparable number of positive examples. In an initial annotation step, 500 hits were identified in which the preposition *unter* is associated with the target verb. In cases where the prepositional phrase does not belong to the target verb, it is usually connected with another verb (cf. 20).

After 500 positive examples were identified for both LVCs, a second annotation step was conducted to annotate the subject referents regarding their semantic type. The relevant annotation criteria, which are derived from the research literature, are: animate, concrete, abstract, and eventive. Examples for each category are listed in Table 3.

Under the label ‘animate,’ nouns whose referent is a living entity are categorized. Generally, the intuition regarding which referents are animate is well-developed. Linguistic borderline cases such as *Muschel* ‘shell’ or *Mikroben* ‘microbes’ may certainly be an interesting topic, but they can be excluded at this point since they do not occur in the relevant data sample. The category ‘concrete’ includes all inanimate referents that are perceivable and spatially locatable. The properties of perceivability and spatial locatability are shared by concrete nouns and those that refer to animate referents. In these properties, they differ from abstract nouns, which have referents which are neither perceivable nor spatially located (Lyons 1977; Ewald 1992; Fleischhauer and Hartmann 2021, 2023). Eventive nouns refer to events (*Explosion* ‘explosion’, *Feuer* ‘fire’) or states (*Friede* ‘peace’). Such nouns can easily be combined with temporal (*gestern* ‘yesterday’) and aspectual modifiers (*andauernd* ‘ongoing’). An example is: *die gestrige Explosion* ‘yesterday’s explosion’,

**Table 3:** Annotation categories and examples.

Category	Example
animate	<i>Frau</i> ‘woman’, <i>Katze</i> ‘cat’
concrete	<i>Bein</i> ‘leg’, <i>Stadt</i> ‘city’
abstract	<i>Freude</i> ‘joy’, <i>Gerechtigkeit</i> ‘justice’
eventive	<i>Brand</i> ‘fire’, <i>Explosion</i> ‘explosion’

lit. ‘the yesterday explosion.’ In contrast, non-eventive nouns require the inference of an event when combined with such modifiers. If acceptable at all, *die gestrige Frau* lit. ‘the woman yesterday’ would mean something like ‘the woman I saw/met/ran into/spoke to/called... yesterday.’ Unlike eventive nouns, non-eventive nouns do not refer to temporal entities and therefore cannot be combined with *gestern* ‘yesterday’ and similar modifiers.

Both LVCs occur with all types of subject arguments, as demonstrated by the examples in (21) to (28).

animate + *unter Kontrolle stehen*

- (21) *Wenn man heute einen Hund richtig ausbildet, wird er nicht*  
 if one today a dog properly trained will he not  
*unkontrolliert beißen und unter der Kontrolle seines Besitzers*  
 uncontrollably bite and under the control his  
*stehen, betont Michael Winter.*  
 stand emphasizes Michael Winter  
 ‘If a dog is properly trained today, it will not bite uncontrollably and will be under the control of its owner,’ emphasizes Michael Winter.’ (RHZ96/OKT.03341)

animate + *unter Kontrolle sein*

- (22) [...] *meist waren sie in den Betrieben angestellt und somit*  
 mostly were they in the companies employed and thus  
*entsprechend unter Kontrolle.*  
 accordingly under control  
 ‘[...] they were mostly employed in the companies and thus also under control accordingly.’  
 (VDI18/MAI.00402)

concrete + *unter Kontrolle stehen*

- (23) *Die Falklandinseln stehen seit 1833 unter Kontrolle der Britten [...]*  
 the Falkland\_islands stand since 1833 under control of\_the Brits  
 ‘The Falkland Islands are under British control since 1833 [...].’ (U13/MAR.03332)

concrete + *unter Kontrolle sein*

- (24) *Nachdem Palermo eingenommen, damit ganz Westsizilien unter*  
 after Palermo captured with\_that all Western\_Sicily under  
*allierter Kontrolle war [...], befahl Alexander einen*  
 Allied control was ordered Alexander a  
*Angriff [...].*  
 attack  
 ‘After Palermo was captured, with that all of Western Sicily was under Allied control, Alexander ordered an attack [...].’ (WPD11/O06.30809)

abstract + *unter Kontrolle stehen*

- (25) *Er macht für dessen Tod russische „Geheimorganisationen“ verantwortlich,*  
 he makes for his death Russian secret\_organizations responsible  
*die aber nicht unter der direkten Kontrolle*  
 which but not under the direct control  
*des Kreml stünden.*  
 of\_the Kremlin stood  
 ‘He blames Russian “secret organizations” for his death, which are not directly under the control of the Kremlin.’ (RHZ06/DEZ.0664)

abstract + *unter Kontrolle sein*

- (26) *Dank einer konsequenten Ausgabenbremse sind unsere Staatsfinanzen unter Kontrolle.*  
 thanks a consequent spending\_cap are our public\_finances under  
 control  
 ‘Thanks to a consequent spending cap, our public finances are under control.’ (WWO12/OKT.00186)

eventiv + *unter Kontrolle stehen*

- (27) *Die Operation steht unter dem Kommando der regulären Armee*  
 the operation stands under the command of.the regular Army  
*sowie unter der Kontrolle von Parlament und der*  
 as\_well under die control of parliament and the  
*Regierung [...].*  
 government  
 ‘The operation is under the command of the regular army as well as under the control of Parliament and the government.’ (P14/OKT.02431)

eventiv + *unter Kontrolle sein*

- (28) *Die Inflation ist [...] unter Kontrolle [...].*  
 the inflation is under control  
 ‘Inflation is under control [...].’ (NZZ01/AUG.01854)

Although any combination is possible, they do not occur with the same frequency, as shown in Table 4. Rather, the LVCs exhibit different preferences regarding the individual subject categories. A pairwise  $\chi^2$  test shows that the differences between the two LVCs are statistically significant for all four categories ( $p < .01$ ).

The most notable contrast is found in the category of eventive nouns. While around 2/3 of the subject arguments of *unter Kontrolle sein* are realized by eventive nouns, these account for less than 5% of the subjects of *unter Kontrolle stehen*.

**Table 4:** Absolute and relative frequency of the semantic types.

	<i>unter Kontrolle stehen</i>	<i>unter Kontrolle sein</i>
animate	56 (11.2%)	20 (4%)
concrete	248 (49.6%)	116 (23.2%)
abstract	174 (34.8%)	62 (12.4%)
eventive	22 (4.4%)	302 (60.4%)
Total	500 (100%)	500 (100%)

Thus, we can break down the difference into the contrast pair of eventive vs. non-eventive (i.e., animate, concrete, abstract). *Unter Kontrolle sein* favors eventive subjects, while *unter Kontrolle stehen* has an even stricter preference for non-eventive subjects.

Even though the two LVCs occur with subject arguments of all four semantic types, there is hardly any overlap regarding the specific eventive nouns. Only two eventive nouns appear within the sample as subject arguments with both LVCs: *Brand* ‘fire’ and *Tätigkeit* ‘activity’. The noun *Tätigkeit* appears once with both LVCs, while the situation is different for *Brand*. This noun occurs only once with the light verb *stehen* and 84 times with the light verb *sein*.

The overlap in nouns is somewhat higher for non-eventive nouns, as, for example, in the case of nouns with animate referents, proper nouns and personal pronouns occur for both LVCs. The abstract nouns are particularly interesting, as most nouns that appear with *stehen* as a subject argument (e.g., state institutions, specific companies) also occur with *sein*, although the frequency with *stehen* is indeed greater. On the other hand, there are nouns that only appear as subject arguments of *sein*, but are excluded from *stehen*: *Probleme* ‘problems’, *Risiken* ‘risks’, *Schulden* ‘debts’, and also *Krankheiten* ‘diseases.’ In (29), the light verb *sein* cannot be substituted by *stehen*.

- (29) *Bocklet verbreitete Optimismus, daß die Krankheit [sic!] in Bayern*  
 Bocklet spread optimism that the disease in Bavaria  
*unter Kontrolle sei* [...] .  
 under control is  
 ‘Bocklet spread optimism that the disease was under control in Bavaria [...]’  
 (U94/DEZ.06845 Süddeutsche Zeitung, 29.12.1994, S. 44; Landwirtschaftsminister  
 legt positive Jahresbilanz vor)

In order to identify any further differentiations in the selection restrictions, a finer-grained annotation is necessary that distinguishes subclasses within the four semantic classes.

## 7 Generalizability of the results

In the previous chapters, various supposed synonym pairs were examined exemplarily based on individual LVCs of the event passive family. This raises the question of the generalizability of the results. First, it needs to be asked whether the results can be generalized for the LVCs of the same family, and then whether the results can also be generalized beyond the specific LVC family.

Regarding the supposed synonymy relationships of the LVCs to the event passive constructions of the corresponding simplex verbs, the results are generalizable. Fleischhauer and Turus (2022) have shown for the LVC *unter Schutz stehen* ‘be under protection’ (lit. under protection stand) that it behaves like *unter Beobachtung stehen* ‘be under observation’. Thus, there is robust evidence that the LVCs represent state predications, while passive constructions represent event predications. This finding is particularly relevant in light of the fact that Van Pottelberge (2007) states that in many cases LVCs do not show any aktionsart differences from their related base verb and that the relevance of aktionsart features for the description of LVCs is therefore overestimated. The examples discussed here thus show that action type is a relevant semantic parameter, although this cannot be generalized for all LVC families.

The differences for other LVC families compared to corresponding simplex verbs, or grammatical constructions that contain simplex verbs, are of a different nature. The LVCs of the state passive-family – e.g., *unter Stress stehen* ‘be stressed’, lit. ‘under stress stand’ – are also state predications. The corresponding state passive constructions (e.g., *gestresst sein* ‘be stressed’) are as well. In this case, there is no aspectual difference, and any differences between the two types of predications must lie elsewhere, if they exist at all. However, an examination of these LVCs exceeds the scope of the present analysis.

The situation is more complex regarding the supposed synonym relationships between LVCs with different state verbs as verbal elements. The comparison between the LVCs *unter Kontrolle stehen* lit. ‘under control stand’ and *unter Kontrolle sein* lit. ‘under control be’ has shown different preferences in the choice of subject arguments and has also identified some subject nouns that can occur only with one but not with the other light verb. However, is this result generalizable for all LVCs of the family?

In Table 5, the results of a smaller case study of the selection restrictions of the two LVCs *unter Beobachtung stehen* lit. ‘under observation stand’ and *unter Beobachtung sein* lit. ‘be under observation’ are summarized. The data were extracted from the DeReKo using the procedure described in the last section and subsequently annotated. We again see that the proportion of eventive subject arguments with *sein* ‘be’ is larger than with *stehen* ‘stand.’ Additionally, we observe once more

**Table 5:** Absolute and relative frequency of the semantic types.

	<i>unter Beobachtung stehen</i>	<i>unter Beobachtung sein</i>
animate	37 (37%)	22 (22%)
concrete	57 (57%)	54 (54%)
abstract	1 (1%)	5 (5%)
eventive	5 (5%)	19 (19%)
Total	100 (100%)	100 (100%)

that *stehen* is more frequently combined with animate subject arguments than *sein*. Regarding the abstract nouns that occur rarely with *unter Beobachtung* ‘under observation’, we see that, unlike with *unter Kontrolle* ‘under control’, the combination with *sein* is more common than with *stehen*.

Partially, we can observe similar preferences in the selection restrictions of the two LVCs, but they also vary to some extent. One factor that is likely to influence the numbers is the nominal element in the prepositional phrase. *Beobachtung* ‘observation’ tends to occur more frequently with concrete nouns than with events or abstract nouns, which explains the high number of concrete nouns in the subject position of both LVCs.

To what extent we can attribute the observable differences between the LVCs to semantic differences in the light verbs – and if so, which specific differences – cannot be answered at this point. It is also possible that the differences in selection restrictions do not arise from the verbs themselves, but rather emerge for individual exemplars of the LVC type ‘*stehen unter NP*’ – as an emergent property of the complex predicate (for an exemplar-based approach to the development of English LVCs, see Sundquist 2022, 2025). As a consequence, complex predicates would possess grammatical and/or semantic properties which cannot be derived from their components and therefore partially resist a compositional analysis. However, I do not advocate a non-compositional approach to LVC formation but leave open whether – and if yes to which degree – LVC formation is a matter of (non)-compositional processes or maybe a combination of both. As a consequence, I see this as a test case for the limits of a strictly compositional approach of German LVCs.

Regardless of the source of the restrictions, we can observe that the LVCs differ in their selection restrictions and are therefore not freely interchangeable. However, with regard to selection restrictions alone, there is an area of overlap where interchangeability exists. This raises the question of whether there may be additional differences between the LVCs that have not been described in this

study; for example, aspectual<sup>12</sup> differences between the LVCs could potentially be observed.

A final aspect that must be noted with regard to the data is the question of the representativeness of the selection of the two LVCs *unter Kontrolle stehen* and *unter Beobachtung stehen*. Both LVCs belong to the event passive-family, which – as already mentioned in Section 3 – has 34 members. *Unter Beobachtung stehen* is one of the five most frequent LVCs of this family within the data sample examined in Fleischhauer (2022). *Unter Kontrolle stehen* is an LVC with a medium frequency of occurrence. The two LVCs can therefore be considered reasonably representative of the LVC family. The fact that these are not atypical LVCs can be recognized by the fact that they are also mentioned in other works (e.g. Klein 1968: 25; Helbig and Buscha 2001: 81; Heine 2003; Fabricius-Hansen 2006: 268 for *unter Beobachtung stehen*; Rösch 1994: 24 for *unter Kontrolle stehen*, and Herrlitz 1973: 162–163 for both LVCs).

## 8 Conclusion

In the discussion of German light verb constructions, synonymy – in relation to simplex verbs – is a central theme. In this paper, I have addressed this topic and expanded it by adding a further dimension – the synonymy of different LVCs. The results regarding the simplex verbs, or the event passive constructions of simplex verbs, are clear. The LVCs are state predications, while the corresponding passive constructions are event predicates, as event passives only modify argument realization but not event conceptualization.

Regarding the comparison of LVCs with the same PPs but different stative light verbs, the results are more difficult to interpret. We see that the various LVCs exhibit different preferences in their selection restrictions, suggesting that they are not (freely) interchangeable and do not represent synonyms (in terms of their descriptive meaning). However, it is harder to pinpoint where these differences in selection restrictions originate. On one hand, we observe that there are partially similar selection restrictions for different LVCs with the same light verb. On the other hand, they are not exactly the same selection restrictions, and it is far from evident how these should arise from the respective verb meanings. However, the

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<sup>12</sup> *Aspectual* refers here to such categories as ‘imperfective’, i.e., grammatical aspect, rather than *Aktionsart* which is sometimes subsumed under the notion of ‘lexical aspect’ (cf. Comrie 1976 for the distinction between the two notions).

investigation of selection restrictions is still too preliminary to draw concrete conclusions from it. Nevertheless, it points in an interesting research direction that has largely been overlooked in the treatment of German LVCs and thus represents a first step in examining the specific semantic contributions of light verbs.

Regardless of whether the Principle of No Synonymy is valid or not, it becomes evident that it can serve as a heuristic principle to motivate a critical examination of the assumption of apparent synonymy and to turn it into a subject of empirical linguistic investigations. However, the conclusion can still be drawn that the results of the present investigations support the Principle of No Synonymy, as meaning differences were indeed found for the supposedly synonymous expressions.

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