

Corpus-semantic influences on the features and functions of paronyms

The phenomenon of paronymy (easily confused words) has not attracted much attention so far, neither from a corpus linguistic nor from a cognitive linguistic perspective. Previous studies and initial attempts at defining the phenomenon were not based on empirical evidence but followed a differentiated structuralist model primarily involving morphological-syntactic criteria (cf. Lăzărescu 1999). The project “Paronymwörterbuch” (Dictionary of paronyms) is concerned with an empirically sound, usage-guided investigation of commonly confused words based on a large corpus. Therefore, corpus-linguistic investigations of contemporary German form a large part of recent research in this field. The results are documented in a new, innovative online dictionary.

The objective of this paper is to discuss initial findings on the lexicological treatment of paronyms from a corpus-based and, hence, language-oriented perspective. This paper outlines some results regarding the criteria for distinguishing types of paronyms with regard to their communicative function, discourse affiliation and semantic properties. As a starting point, chapter 2 describes a classification model developed by Lăzărescu (1999). His model treated paronyms from a structuralist point of view, looking at this relation from a language learners’ perspective and with approaches used in translation studies. Lăzărescu developed an elaborate model based on strict formal criteria, primarily on word formation and syntax. He aimed at clear-cut boundaries between paronymy and other phenomena of lexical confusion such as homographs, homophones, lexical alternatives and false friends etc. Fundamentally, his model consists of the following main categories:

phonetic-orthographic aspects:	<i>Föhn/Fön</i>
morphological aspects:	<i>Kinderliebe/Kindesliebe; seiden/seidig</i>
syntactic aspects:	<i>nachts/nächtlich; schuld/schuldig</i>
stylistic aspects:	<i>essen/fressen</i>

Overall, his investigations relied on linguistic models, accounting for language as a formal and logic system, and not on empirical evidence in real communicative situations.

From a corpus perspective, such categorisations are incompatible with language in use and with cognitive elements relating to confusion and misuse. This research gap is about to be closed. Our investigations focus on research into paronymy as a lexical-conceptual phenomenon, aiming at developing an empirically driven classification of paronyms using diverse genres of language material and including written and spoken texts. For this purpose, however, we will also discuss how traditional views can be useful as a starting point for corpus studies. It is then argued that usage-based and cognitive parameters are indispensable for a new approach and a more differentiated view on this rather complex phenomenon.

Chapter 3 then deals with the different types of paronyms. On the basis of our empirical analyses, examples taken from the dictionary demonstrate concrete forms of paronymy. Different linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects have an impact on the potential lexical misuse of words that are similar in sound, writing and/or meaning. It is the aim of this project to find out about all the possible factors as well as their influence on paronym fea-

tures and discourse functions. Through this, we aim to gain a better understanding of behavioural aspects of paronymy in general, as well as of its linguistic parameters and extent in particular. We also hope to be able to develop a full definition model that accounts for cross-linguistic categories and characteristics. Another goal is to find out under which circumstances speakers mix up or misuse paronyms. This corresponds to the question as to what impact regular misuse can have on processes of the semantic establishment of patterns, conventionalisation and meaning change.

So far, we have gained valuable insights into functions in specific contextual instances, communicative functions, thematic domains, discourse and style, text types and degrees of semantic similarity or contrast between easily confused words. Furthermore, speakers' attitudes can be expressed through their choice of paronyms while encyclopaedic knowledge and cultural experience also play a key role in the use and interpretation of specific discourse-bound word pairs. These influential elements can be detected through collocations and grammatical constructions in context. They are more or less conveyed meta-linguistically and therefore explicit in written communication.

A classic case of paronymy is caused by similarity in sound and spelling as in *ethisch/ethnisch* (*ethical/ethnic*). Semantically, they do not refer to similar concepts; there is no semantic overlap at all. They are confused due to their formal likeness in both directions. As a result, linguistic mistakes appear which cause communicative problems. A second group comprises paronyms that are similar in meaning but exhibit slight semantic-pragmatic nuances in terms of preferences for corresponding discourse. The case of *sportlich/sportiv* (*sporty/athletic*) shows how both adjectives depict a person as being athletic, healthy and fit. *Sportlich* often relates to *Figur, Fitness, Statur, Mann, Täter, Pensionär* (*figure, fitness, stature, man, culprit, pensioner*) and is preferred in the context of crime and police reports in order to describe offenders. *Sportiv* is often used together with *Typ, Menschen, Erscheinung, Biker, Damen* (*type, people, appearance, biker, ladies*) and occurs in the context of sport and health issues. As both items can describe appearances, their meanings and references are identical. Still, they differ with respect to their function of reflecting the appropriate discourse. Confusing both terms, however, does not cause communicative misunderstanding. A third category concerns opposites such as *konkav/konvex* (*concave/convex*). These have very similar collocates which are characterised as having a specific type of curvature (*Spiegel, Augen, Linse, Scheibe – mirror, eyes, lens, disc/plate*). Curvature relates to a bipolar concept describing an entity having an outline that curves inwards or outwards. Each way is lexically realised by its corresponding paronym. Lexical confusion is motivated by extra-linguistic circumstances and not caused by semantic uncertainties. In this case, speakers confuse the concept and its lexical realisation. Often they are aware of their own linguistic doubts and mnemonic tricks are common to avoid misuse. A fourth class is formed by semantic alternatives without differences or semantic nuances. The adjectives *patriarchisch/patriarchal/patriarchalisch* (*patriarchal*) or *provokant/provozierend/provokativ/provokatorisch* (*provocative*) cause speakers to have linguistic doubts because they expect there to be differences. They doubt that lexical abundance derived from the same noun can co-exist and denote the same concept. Then there are technical terms which are used synonymously in public discourse but are strictly defined in their specific technical discourse (e. g. *Parodontose/Parodontitis* (*periodontitis/parodontitis*) in medicine or *antisozial/asozial/unsozial/dissozial* (*antisocial/asocial/unsocial/dissocial*) in psychology). A number of pairs can be detected which behave dif-

ferently in the official language (e. g. the discourse of administration). To avoid political incorrectness, to dispense with stigmatised items and/or to adapt to new social or cultural circumstances, new terms are officially introduced causing uncertainties in public discourse, such as *unehelich/nicht ehelich/außerehelich* (*misbegotten illegitimate/out of wedlock*). By far the largest group of paronyms concerns lexical items which share a number of contexts in which they can be used synonymously and a number in which this is not the case. The degree of similarity and difference can vary largely, allowing for further sub-classifications.

Overall, defining and classifying paronyms is a complex matter. So far, eight different categories have been identified in our cross-linguistic model, looking at both the behavioural and functional characteristics of paronyms. Each category is described in detail with the help of paronym examples and corpus citations. In the coming years, the project aims to develop a larger theoretical framework striving for a functional typological description which allows for overlaps instead of distinct classes. In addition, linguistic as well as non-linguistic parameters and, above all, their interaction in the mental lexicon are the main focus of our research. Paronymy is not a lexical relation but a dynamic conceptual relation with cognitive implications which are visible on a linguistic level. In order to develop a full model, the identification of communicative functions and influences on lexical confusions are necessary. The effects of lexical misuse open up a number of questions concerning misunderstanding or semantic change. The description of the components involved in lexical confusion allow for a better understanding of paronymy in authentic use in all its complexity and with all its facets.

References

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