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COMMONLY CONFUSED WORDS IN CONTRASTIVE AND DYNAMIC DICTIONARY ENTRIES

Abstract This paper discusses changes in lexicographic traditions with respect to contrastive dictionary entries and dynamic, on-demand e-lexicographic descriptions. The new German online dictionary “Paronyme – Dynamisch im Kontrast” is concerned with easily confused words (paronyms), such as *effektiv/effizient* and *sensibel/sensitiv*. New approaches to the empirical analysis and lexicographic presentation of words such as these are required, and this dictionary is committed to overcoming the discrepancy between traditional practice and insights from language use. As a corpus-guided reference work, it strives to adequately reflect not only authentic use in situations of actual communication, but also cognitive ideas such as conceptual structure, categorisation and knowledge. This paper will illustrate the contrastive structure of the new e-dictionary and demonstrate which information can be compared. It also focusses on various dynamic modes of dictionary consultation, which enable users to shift perspectives on paronyms accordingly.

Keywords Paronyms, lexicography, contrastive entries

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1. Introduction

In German, as in other languages, there are lexical items with related morphological roots and similarities in sound, spelling and/or meaning. These are easily confused by native speakers and language learners. They are referred to as paronyms, and examples include *effektiv/effizient*, *legal/legitim*, *autoritär/autoritativ* and *sensibel/sensitiv*. Paronyms have so far only been documented in two printed dictionaries (Ammon 2004; Wulf/Shea 2002, p. 211). Both reference books base their descriptions on introspection and arbitrary evidence taken from fiction. They are traditional dictionaries, prescriptive in nature, their entries are limited to specific aspects of meaning, and they do not cover polysemous items in detail. Their central aim is to guide users to the allegedly correct use and describe a clear distinction between the items in question.

Among other criteria, it is the referential/ontological categories underneath the definitions that enable users to distinguish patterns and help them to encode/decode contexts and identify metonymic and metaphoric mappings (cf. Delbecque/van der Auwera/Geeraerts (eds.) 2005). Users can more easily relate the adjectives to their meanings and then relate these to the preferred contextual reference (here modified nouns), e.g.

- 1) *sportlich* means ‘concerning sports’ with respect to a PROCESS, EVENT or MATTER, for example performance, pursuit, success, ambition, highlight,
- 2) *sportlich* means ‘powerful and sleek’ with respect to a CAR, for example car, Sport Utility Vehicle, chassis, SUV, coupé,
- 3) *sportlich* means ‘comfortable’ with respect to CLOTHES, for example clothing, leisure wear, apparel, casual clothes, evening dress.

2. Why contrastive and dynamic structures?

In recent years, the focus of numerous meta-lexicographic studies of German electronic dictionaries has been on users. These studies have helped lexicographers to develop a better understanding of the needs of users and their dictionary consultation behaviour. By scrutinising a variety of language forums, the project “Paronymwörterbuch” has been able to answer numerous questions regarding its users in advance. As is argued there, “professional lexicographers may learn about their users’ needs by studying the topics discussed in these projects” (Auer 1997, p. 131). They all face situations of linguistic doubt and many are familiar with well-established dictionaries. Nonetheless, in a number of cases, we have learned that they consult online forums because existing dictionaries do not provide them with satisfactory answers to their linguistic problems:

[...] these days people wanting to know about word usage may well tweet their question to hundreds of followers, ask it on an internet forum, or email it to a language blogger. Sometimes they do so after encountering ‘dictionary-based problems’. (Ekström 2012, p. 287)

3. Corpus, Methods and Editorial Practice

3.1 Concise entry overview and detail view

2.2 Dynamic consultation of overview

Traditionally, users have had to laboriously look up individual entries when learning about paronym behaviour from general monolingual reference guides. One lexical entry had to be compared with another lexical entry in the same or another dictionary, with the user switching between the two. Alternatively, users could consult existing paronym reference books, provided they were familiar with these, where they usually encountered brief normative descriptions of single uses of two confusable words. The central aim of the new German paronym dictionary is to offer contrastive entries of two (or sometimes three) lexical items.

- (1) He swam his way into the final.
- (2) Hij zwom zich (een weg) naar de finale.
- (3) Er schwamm sich ins Finale.

With respect to German, there is no empirically sound and user-friendly dictionary covering paronyms in contemporary language use. The aim of the project “Paronymwörterbuch” has been to carry out a thorough examination of paronyms, based on their usage in context, using contrastive corpus-linguistic methods. It takes a descriptive and empirical approach and documents easily confused words in German with respect to their actual use in public discourse. Its analyses and descriptions are corpus-based and cover contemporary German. The results of this work are explanatory, contrastive entries in a new dynamic and multi-functional e-dictionary called “Paronyme – Dynamisch im Kontrast” (Paronyms – Dynamic in Contrast) (cf. Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache 2020). To date, some 100 paronym pairs/sets, mostly adjectives, have been compiled. The corpus-derived list of paronyms has revealed that the phenomenon of paronymy is much larger than previously thought, including almost 2000 cases which range from commonly known word pairs to specific technical terms and a large number of compounds (Belica 1995). Since 2018, the new online resource has been freely accessible via the linguistic platform OWIDplus. This reference work breaks new ground with respect to the following four issues:

Country/State	Students	Teachers	Administration
Austria	381	103	125
Bavaria	89	10	2
North Rhine-Westphalia	14	6	1
Rhineland-Palatine	31	17	6
Hesse	591	156	149

Table 1: Students, teachers and administrative personnel per country/state

Optionally, more data can be expanded for each contextual use. In addition, an explanatory definition, more typical lexical combinations, corpus examples, synonyms/antonyms and typical constructions in different contexts can be looked up in a more complex detail view (see fig. 1).

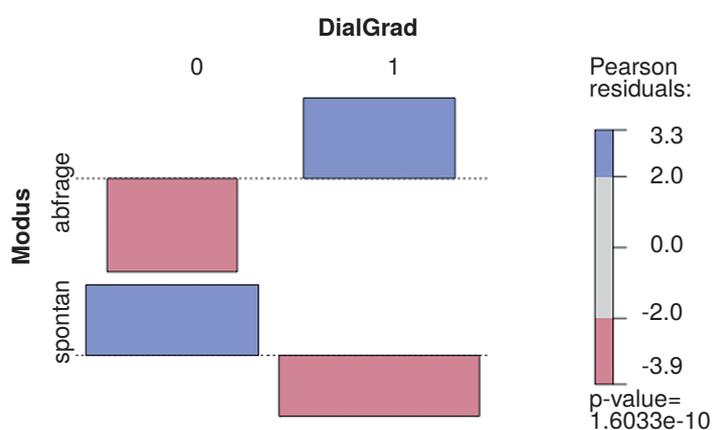


Fig. 1: Statistical analysis

The relevant ontological category is specifically illustrated by up to ten collocates, which function as examples of lexical preferences in actual contexts (COBUILD 1987).

4. Summary

The new dictionary “Paronyme – Dynamisch im Kontrast” represents a radical change from existing German lexicographic conventions. Users can expect direct access to meaning and use of two or three easily confused words together in concise contrastive overviews or in detailed contrastive descriptions. As an e-dictionary,¹ the new guide can go far beyond the depth of information found in the two existing printed paronym dictionaries. In situations of linguistic doubt, native speakers and learners can learn about thematic domains and semantic environments in which confusable words are likely to occur, together with their natural lexical preferences.

¹ For a definition of e-dictionary see COBUILD (1987).

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