The 'principle of no synonymy' and light verb constructions – A case study on German stative light verbs

Jens Fleischhauer

Heinrich-Heine Universität Düsseldorf, fleischhauer@phil.uni-duesseldorf.de

A central principle in, for instance, Construction Grammar is the avoidance of strict synonymy (e.g., Goldberg's 1995, 67 'Principle of No Synonymy'). The basic idea is: if two (complex) expressions are syntactically distinct, they must be semantically/pragmatically distinct as well. German light verb constructions (LVCs) provide an interesting test case for this principle. LVCs consist of a semantically light verb (LV) and a phrasal element, e.g., a PP (1). The main predicational content is provided by the phrasal element.

(1)   *unter Beobachtung stehen*
        under observation   stand
        'be under observation'

There is consensus in the literature (e.g., von Polenz 1987; Eisenberg 2013 that LVs contribute to the complex predicates aktionsart in contributing such features like 'causation', 'inchoation' and 'causativity'. LVs are subdivided into three general semantic classes depending on their specific semantic contribution: causative (e.g., *geben* 'give', *stellen* 'put'), inchoative (e.g., *kommen* 'come') and stative (e.g., *stehen* 'stand', *sein* 'be'). If the LVs' semantic contribution would consist only of the mentioned aktionsart features, the LVCs in (2a) and (2b) should be synonymous. The two only vary with respect to the LV and denote the same type of situation: the subject referent is under someone's control.

(2)   a. *unter jemandes Kontrolle stehen*   b. *unter jemandes Kontrolle sein*
            under someones control   stand   under someones control   be
            'be under someone's control'   'be under someone's control'

Whether two complex expressions are synonymous or not, cannot directly seen from corpus data. Therefore, we investigated the selectional restrictions of the two LVCs. Our hypothesis is: if the two LVCs are synonymous, we should not find any significant differences in their selectional restrictions. If, on the other hand, significant differences in the selectional restrictions exist, they should be related to the LC's meaning (since this is the only morphosyntactic difference between the two LVCs).

We used the two LVCs in (2) as a case study and searched for them in the German Reference Corpus DeReKo (Archiv W; Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache 2021). We followed the procedure described in Fleischhauer (2021) for identifying German LVCs within corpus data. After having compiled a list of 500 instances for each LVC, we annotated the semantic type of the LVCs' subject arguments. The results of the annotation are shown in table 1. The differences in the choice of subject arguments is statistically significant.

	sein	*stehen*
animate	18 (3,62%)	54 (11,04%)
concrete	110 (22,13%)	241 (49,28%)
abstract	62 (12,47%)	173 (35,38%)
eventive	308 (61,97%)	21 (4,29%)

Tab. 1: Results of the annotation of the semantic type of the subject arguments.

The results show that the LVCs differ in their selectional restrictions and therefore do not qualify as strict synonyms.

References

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