

Polysemous Connectors in Historical Patient Letters from the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

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Koch & Oesterreicher (1994: 590) claim that precise connectors are features of the language of distance. Accordingly, Nitta (2002) describes the reduction of polysemy for German subordinating conjunctions towards New High German. However, a variety of forms is preserved in the historical language of immediacy for causal connectors (Elspaß 2005: 304).

In this paper, I investigate if polysemy not described for the modern standard variety can be found for different types of connectors in recent language history using a ‘from below’ approach. I will also investigate if variation regarding writing experience and addressee reflects the categorisation of polysemous connectors as features of the language of immediacy (Ágel & Hennig 2006: 381).

For this study, I analyse 202 letters written by 12 patients of a psychiatric hospital in Southern Germany in the 19th and early 20th centuries, taken from the Corpus of Patient Documents. My corpus consists of private and official letters with experienced and inexperienced writers. I manually annotated all connectors and their meanings in the corpus to perform qualitative as well as quantitative analyses.

The analysis reveals a broad spectrum of polysemy in the corpus with attestations of meanings that are not described for the respective connectors for present-day German. Polysemous connectors are widely used by writers with different writing experience and in both letter types. Different forms show disparate patterns of variation. Therefore, polysemous connectors cannot indiscriminately be regarded as features of immediacy.

References

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