

Concept characteristics and lexical variation in dialectological data

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Lexical divergence can be examined from different perspectives. Most studies take a semasiological perspective, studying the evolution of the central and less central senses of a particular word and the features that may influence their lectal or diachronic distribution. In this paper, however, we showcase the importance of taking an onomasiological perspective to lexical variation, i.e. starting from particular senses or concepts and determining to which extent characteristics of these senses interact with the distribution of lexical items.

We focus on the spatial distribution of lexical items in dialects of a single language variety. In practice, we rely on large-scale systematic lexical dictionary data collected between 1960 and 1990 for the Dictionaries of the Brabantic and Limburgish dialects of Dutch. Our analysis focuses on the effect of three concept characteristics, related to prototype-theoretical approaches to lexicology (e.g. Berlin et al. 1973, Rosch 1978, Geeraerts et al. 1994). First, we take into account concept salience, the degree to which a concept is familiar for a language user. For example, a concept like 'spoon' is more salient than a concept like 'weighbeam', e.g. because present-day humans use (and talk about) spoons more than weighbeams. Second, we examine the effect of vagueness, i.e. the degree to which a concept is characterized by fuzziness at its boundaries. Concepts with a high degree of vagueness in our dialect data include 'to cry', 'to weep' and 'to whine', as their conceptual boundaries are ambiguous and context- and speaker-dependent. Finally, we also include concept affect, which concerns the fact that many concepts in everyday life have a positive (e.g. 'to caress') or negative connotation (e.g. 'to brag'), whereas others are generally neutral (e.g. 'to miaow'). Previous work has shown that negative concepts have a tendency to be replaced by novel variants more quickly (e.g. Allan & Burridge 1988). To operationalize the three features in a systematic way for all the concepts in the database (N=3136), we rely on a mixture of sources, including psychometric data and a forced-choice task, but also information available in the dictionaries themselves.

Our linear regression model reveals clear evidence for the importance of concept salience, vagueness and affect on the spatial distribution of the dialectal lexical items. Concepts with a low degree of salience show significantly more variation than their more salient counterparts. Concepts with a high degree of vagueness or affect show more lexical diversity than less vague and more neutral meanings. Thus, using quantitative techniques to study lexical variation in historical dialect data, we contribute to linguistic theory by exemplifying the importance of the interaction between onomasiological differences and semasiological variation.

References: Allan, K. & K. Burridge. 1988. Euphemism, dysphemism, and cross-varietal synonymy. *La Trobe WPIL* 1. 1-16. Berlin, B., D. E. Breedlove & P. H. Raven. 1973. General principles of classification and nomenclature in folk biology. *American Anthropologist* 75(1), 214-242. Geeraerts, D., S. Grondelaers & P. Bakema. 1994. *The structure of lexical variation: Meaning, naming, and context*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. Rosch, E. 1978. Principles of categorization. In E. Rosch & B. B. Lloyd (eds.), *Cognition and categorization*. New York: Wiley. 27-48.

