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Speech Act Verbs in Academic German

Melanie Andresen

Motivation: An observation on students' texts

At the 'Schreibwerkstatt Mehrsprachigkeit', a writing center at the University of Hamburg (Knorr/Neumann 2014), students can get advice on the texts they have to write during their studies. In return, the writing center is allowed to carry out analyses of the texts received this way. Among many other aspects, speech act verbs (SAV) seem to cause problems. In their introduction, two students (non-native speakers of German) of educational studies write the following sentence:

(1) Im Theorie-Teil der Arbeit werden wir über Mehrsprachigkeit in Deutschland diskutieren und den Begriff definieren. (13-08-25_Einleitung_21-02-74_MA)

The use of the verb *diskutieren* ('discuss') is remarkable: The pronoun *wir* ('we') as well as the preposition *über* ('about') imply that an actual dialogue will be following. As the statement refers to a text, this is not the case. The use of the verb in this example could be influenced by the way the verb is used in everyday language. To be able to jugde this, my research aims at **describing the differences in the use of SAV in German academic and journalistic texts**. I considered the aspects of frequency, grammar, semantics and function.

Speech Act Verbs: A Definition

In his research on SAV in academic texts, Fandrych (2004, 269) defines SAV as all verbs used for referring to simple or complex acts of speech. A more precise definition is given by Harras & Proost (2005, 319), who use the term 'communication verbs'. These can be defined as **all verbs referring to situations that consist of 'a speaker, a hearer and an utterance** which, in the prototypical case, contains a proposition.' In addition, Fandrych includes metaphorical verbs.

In this research, I consider the verbs *behaupten*, *beschreiben*, *darstellen*, *diskutieren*, *nennen*, *sagen* and *zeigen*, of which only the last is clearly metaphorical.

According to Fandrych (2004), the two major functions of SAV in academic texts are presentation of literature and text comments.

Corpora

To answer the research question, I compiled two corpora:
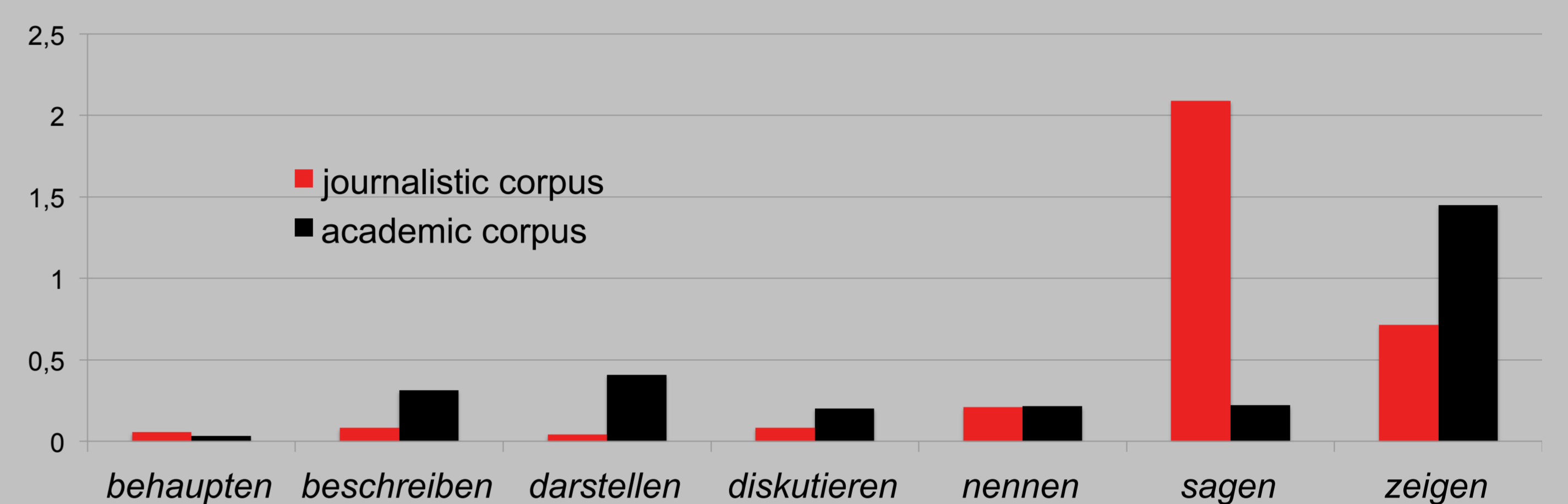a) **Academic Corpus**
    consisting of 101 online journal articles from educational studies I annotated for lemma and pos using WebLicht (https://weblicht.sfs.uni-tuebingen.de/) (704,855 tokens)
b) **Journalistic Corpus**
    subsection of the German newspaper corpus DeReKo (www1.ids-mannheim.de/kl/ projekte/korpora/) comprising local newspapers that are annotated for morphosyntax (1,428,874 tokens)
Both corpora were searched for the verbs in question and the resulting sentences were annotated manually for aspects of grammar, semantics and function. If the number of sentences exceeded 150, a random sample of that size was drawn. Altogether, 722 sentences were annotated for the academic corpus and 733 for the journalistic corpus.

Frequencies per 1,000 tokens

Differences in usage of the SAV *diskutieren* between academic and journalistic language

journalistic corpus

(2) Schon bald will die Verwaltung mit den Anliegern über die Gestaltung **diskutieren**. (RHZ, 18.04.2009)

academic corpus

(3) Wenn die Kategorisierungen nicht übereinstimmten, **diskutierten** die Beurteilerinnen und Beurteiler das entsprechende Item, bis sie zu einer einvernehmlichen Entscheidung gelangten. (ZEP_Krolak-Schwerdt)

(4) Das didaktische Potenzial umfasst somit verschiedene Aspekte, die in der Fachliteratur zumeist in Form von Erfahrungsberichten oder als didaktisch-methodische Vorschläge **diskutiert** werden. (InfoDaF_Stork)

(5) In diesem Aufsatz werden zunächst die Besonderheiten beider Sprachen auf lexikalischer und syntaktisch-semantischer Ebene **diskutiert**. (InfoDaF_Bauer)

Type 1: **dialogical**, typically **oral** communication typical for journalistic language
If used in academic language, it refers to communications outside academic texts.
The topic can be realized by a prepositional phrase beginning with *über* ('about') or a direct object.

Type 2: **dialogical**, **written** communication
The discussion is taking place between several people in certain (sub)disciplines.
The topic is usually realized by a direct object.

Type 3: **monological**, **written** communication
One author presents different perspectives on a subject and evaluates them.
The topic is realized by a direct object.

Depiction in the 'Duden'

diskutieren
1a. in einem Gespräch, einer Diskussion Ansichten, Meinungen austauschen,
1b. um etwas eine Diskussion führen, eine Auseinandersetzung haben,
2. reden, verhandeln, um zu einer Einigung, Übereinstimmung in einer bestimmten Sache zu kommen,
3. in einer Diskussion eingehend erörtern.

(Duden 2011, 427)

The most widely used dictionary for German, the Duden, does not represent the type 3 meaning. While meanings (1a), (1b) and (2) are clearly dialogical, in (1b) even emotional, the last meaning (3) seems at first to be suitable, but is in fact tautological.
A consultation of the definition for *Diskussion* (Duden 2011, 426) shows that one meaning ('in der Öffentlichkeit stattfindende Erörterung') could be said to cover type 3, but the examples indicate a different focus (e.g. discussions in the media).

Conclusion and further questions

The example of the verb *diskutieren* shows that there are **clear differences in the use of SAVs when comparing academic and journalistic language**. These differences concern the aspects frequency, grammar, semantics and function. It could also be shown that these levels interact, as the type 1 meaning can be combined with a prepositional phrase while this is uncommon for type 2 and 3.
The Duden aims at everyday language and thus does not represent the type 3 meaning. Therefore it might be desirable to launch **lexicological projects for academic German** (see also Wallner 2010). However, the results of this research could already be used to sensitize students for differences between everyday language and academic language.
As the analysis also showed **great variation within the academic corpus**, I will describe the variation in academic German in my doctoral thesis using, among others, methods of stylometry (e. g. Oakes, 2009).

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