

Complex nouns as markers of academic register in L1- and L2-authored essays

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How do advanced learners of German acquire nominal style? This question is interesting for several reasons. First, nominal style (Biber & Gray 2010; Hennig 2020) plays a central role for discourse structuring in argumentative registers written in academic contexts in so far as it allows for a high concentration of information in a small number of words. Furthermore, terminology in academic contexts is to a large extent encoded in nouns. This is due to the fact that nouns are considered to convey precision and clarity, cf. Roelcke (2020). The key to mastering argumentative registers in German is therefore mastering the condensation of information into complex nouns that can then be heads of complex nominal phrases.

Second, nominal style has been shown to pose a prominent challenge for learners of German as a foreign language (GFL) (see Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007 for parallel effects in English). For advanced learners, acquiring a native-like command of a given register comes with the challenge to recognize the **adequate usage** and **distribution** of morphological patterns and possibilities for productive noun formation in that register. In our talk, we want to investigate RQ1 that results from the described situation:

RQ: Do advanced learners of German as a foreign language use nominal style in the same way as L1 speakers in argumentative essays?

A careful comparison of morphological patterns between L1 and L2 speakers in a tightly controlled setting helps us understand one facet of register knowledge in learners.

We discuss our research question using data from the Falko Essay corpus (Reznicek et al. 2012), a deeply annotated learner corpus of academic essays including a control group of L1-authored texts on the same topics. We manually annotated all nouns in Falko for the highest word formation process involved (derivation, compounding, conversion, non-productive nominalizations, transpositions, etc.) and a number of other morphological and lexical properties (origin, complexity), cf. the annotation guidelines (Lukassek et al. 2021). Based on these annotations, we present and discuss the following findings: (1) Overall, complex nouns are used in a similar way in the L2 and the L1 subcorpora. This implies that the learners cope well with identifying the adequate register features in the nominal domain. (2) A closer look at the distributions over the annotated noun types shows that the variance between texts is very high in both subcorpora. This variance can partially be explained by topic effects, but even within the same topic distributions over the noun types can vary massively (for the L1 speakers, see Shadrova et al., accepted). This finding entails new questions: What exactly is the target register that advanced learners are aiming at? How can we even compare L1 and L2 speakers in this domain if deviations from the mean are high? Is the distribution over complex noun classes a question of subjective preferences rather than register?

References

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