

Personalised Expressions in Learner German -- and the Bigger Picture

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The research reported on in this paper centres on a learner corpus investigation into usage patterns of personalised expressions in modality contexts by advanced learners of German. Personalised expressions “explicitly involve the writer in the assessment of propositional validity” (Hyland & Milton 1997:197), typically by use of a first person pronoun e.g. in expressions such as *ich denke* (I think) or *meiner Meinung nach* (in my opinion). “Impersonalised forms, on the other hand, avoid reference to the writer when commenting on the truth of a claim and typically conceal the source of epistemic judgements” (ibid). This is typically achieved by adverbs such as *wahrscheinlich* (probably), impersonal pronouns, e.g. *es ist möglich* (it is possible) or passive constructions.

Data from a 200,000 word corpus of written learner German by British post-A-level students of German at Lancaster University was investigated in a multiple-comparison approach both against a corpus of native speaker German and quasi-longitudinally in three groups of increasing proficiency. This procedure found a significant overuse of personalised adverbials of assumption in lower proficiency groups and, at the same time, an underuse of impersonalised expressions that denote roughly the same degree of epistemic certainty. Even in the highest proficiency group, a propensity for personalised expressions can be demonstrated across several categories of epistemic modality. Unlike the native speakers in the comparable corpus, learners also do not refrain from using evaluative expressions such as *zum Glück/glücklicherweise* (luckily) or *Gott sei Dank* (thank God), as well as personalised expressions of volition, e.g. *ich hoffe* (I hope) and *hoffentlich* (hopefully), all of which indicate writer involvement.

While these findings in themselves are interesting indicators in the learners’ development from novice to academic writers and possible cross-cultural differences in writing styles, what makes them remarkable is that they correspond with other findings that all point towards more abstract, universal and possibly L1- and L2-independent tendencies in learner language. These include the overuse of explicit agentive subjects in non-epistemic modality where native speakers prefer constructions that avoid assigning the action to any particular agent. Additionally, while the native speakers tend to avoid utterances that express positive likings or volitions, the learners overuse both modal verbs and adverbial construction to do exactly that.

It has to be added that the preference for personalised expressions and specified active agents is strongest in the two lower proficiency groups and diminishes greatly in the advanced group. This suggests that there is a developmental effect in the learners’ writing, which in turn suggests that the “model” the students are striving towards is the native speakers’ with fewer personalised expressions. Personalised expressions could therefore be considered as an indicator of L2 proficiency, especially as this feature of learner language seems to be language-independent.

It is exactly the language-independent universality of this particular aspect of learner writing that makes it noteworthy. If more of these universal tendencies can be found as we piece together findings of individual studies into specific lexical or grammatical aspects in learner language, then we can gradually move towards a better understanding of learner

language that would enable us to give more general – and therefore, I would like to argue, more useful – advice to foreign language teachers and materials designers on key areas of language teaching that go beyond singular lexical or grammatical phenomena. For the example presented here, this could mean shifting the focus from teaching modal verbs as a unit in themselves to a more integrated approach that includes different kinds of modal expressions and allows a comparative exploration of the different personalised and impersonalised usage patterns and their effects.

References

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