

Meaning in discourse: Word sense divergences and registers

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Particles are a lexical domain which is particularly open to patterns of language variation and change that support divergences in word sense, and such developments can be linked to register differences in interesting ways. In our talk, we discuss examples for German, a language that is known for its rich use of particles. We present findings on two ways in which word sense divergences in the domain of particles can interact with registers, cf.:

- (1) dann hab ich einfach so ein bammmm gehört (RUEG corpus, WhatsApp)
 then have I PTCL such a whammm heard
 ‘Then I suddenly heard a “whammm”!’
- (2) (a) wallah isch liebe sie überTRIEben (KiDKo, MuH19WT/SPK1)
 PTCL I love her exaggeratedly
 ‘Really, I love her so/too much.’
- (b) ischwöre dümmer geht’s nisch (KiDKo, MuH19WT)
 PTCL dumber goes.it not
 ‘Really, it couldn’t be more stupid.’

In one pattern, word sense divergences occur when certain registers support the development of new particles from lexical words through semantic bleaching. This leads to two diverging variants: one with a pragmatic/discourse function, and one with the original, full lexical semantics. While the first is associated with specific registers, the second can remain register neutral. E.g., in (1) *einfach* developed from an adjective meaning ‘simply’ into a particle associated with informal registers, where it can be used to mark a central, surprising incident in a narrative. Another example is the development of *und zwar* from a (fixed) phrase meaning ‘namely’ / ‘and specifically’, which specifies previous content, into a particle that introduces a narrative and takes on a pragmatic meaning associated with politeness in formal registers.

In the second pattern, register interacts with word sense divergences when particles spread to new linguistic varieties, where they can take on specific register associations and related social and pragmatic meanings. Examples for this are the spread of *wallah* as a confirmative particle from Arabic and Turkish to German (cf. 2), and the development of a related expression *ich schwöre* / *(i)schwör(e)* (based on German ‘I swear’), leading to associations with informal registers that signal multiethnic urban youth identities. Another example is the spread of *halt* as a modal particle from the South to Northern Germany, where it is associated with formal, rather than informal spoken registers.

We present qualitative and quantitative analyses for such word sense divergences and show how patterns outside standard language can throw a light on general linguistic tendencies, with younger speakers and multilingual communities often at the forefront.