"Is this gun cake or fake?" - A corpus-based study of German privative adjectives

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In formal semantics, adjectives are traditionally classified based on how their denotation interacts with the denotation of the noun that they combine with in adjective-noun combinations. There are, for example, *subsective* and *privative* adjectives. Examples for both classes are shown in (1).

(1)   a.   [Subsectivity]: $[\![$short giraffe$]\!] \subset [\![$giraffe$]\!]$
        b.   [Privativity]: $[\![$fake gun$]\!] \cap [\![$gun$]\!] = \varnothing$

The adjective *short* in (1a) is subsective because short giraffes are a subset of the overall set of giraffes. This is not the case for the privative adjective *fake* in (1b). A *fake gun* is not a gun and is therefore not a subset of the overall set of guns. However, this traditional classification runs into problems quickly if adjective-noun combinations such as *fake article* are considered. A *fake article* is still an article, and usages of privative adjectives of this kind are common in English (Capelle et al. 2018).

In this talk, we present a corpus-based study of nine counterfactual German adjectives that allegedly behave privatively. Since Partee's (2010) influential suggestion that privative adjectives actually behave subsectively on the shifted denotation of the noun they combine with, a lot of research has investigated the way these adjectives shift the noun denotation. The intention of our corpus-linguistic work is to learn more about noun shifts that can actually be observed in natural language when privative adjectives are involved and how often subsective and privative uses of the respective adjective occur. This allows us to add more much-needed empirical evidence to a discussion often exclusively based on theoretical arguments.

Manual annotation of the ten most common adjective-noun combinations found in *DeReKo* (IDS 2023) involving nine counterfactual privative adjectives discussed by Nayak et al. (2014) reveals that the results regarding the behavior of English *fake* reported on in Cappelle et al. (2018) extend to German. We find that all of the adjectives under investigation here mostly behave subsectively and that all adjectives consistently either behave subsectively or privatively depending on the adjective-noun compound. Although all theoretical accounts of privative adjectives we discuss run into problems when it comes to explaining our data, we argue that Dual Content Semantics (Del Pinal 2015; Del Pinal 2018) provides a fruitful basis for explaining the behavior of privative adjectives.

References

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