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Metaphorical Comprehensibility Features in the Plagiarism Debate in Germany

Introduction

Between 2011 and 2013, a debate was held in the German public that was often times unintelligible to the widest readership. On the one hand, the debate generated major sociopolitical attention as it was centred around the instances of plagiarism committed by the former minister of defence Guttenberg as well as by the former federal research minister Schavan. On the other hand, the debate was also very specific to the scientific community as it was a highly academic affair and thus unintelligible for many members of the general public. The debate quickly created two camps: those who supported the accusers and those who stood by the defendants. Both cases differed from former polarising topics as the broad public was unsure as to what exactly constituted the two plagiarists' offences. Controversial discussions were publicly held with many participants attempting to explain the scientific offence to the non-academic readership in order to convince them of the plagiarists' guilt.

This analysis[1] will focus on press releases discussing the two plagiarism scandals taken from the online editions of *Spiegel*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Zeit* in the period from 2011 until 2013.[2] The majority of the corpus texts are opinion-marked texts that present the facts but mainly express an opinion on the topic by stating views, judgements and criticism (see Lüger 1995, p. 125) and use linguistic devices such as rhetorical figures, loud metaphors, puns, effect-seeking word creations, lexemes with many connotations or evaluative adjectives, interjections, questions or imperatives (see Elsen 2013, p. 163; Sandig 1978, p. 159).

The aim of our article is to reconstruct the plagiarism debate and show how the topic of PLAGIARISM is communicated to the reader as well as which linguistic constructs are used to exemplify the entire topic and thus put it into an argumentative perspective.

Comprehensibility features

If discourse leaders assume that the average newspaper reader is not communicatively able to comprehend the sociopolitical significance of scientific plagiarism but want to inform them accordingly, linguistic devices are used to transfer the topic of plagiarism from the scientific-technical knowledge background to the shared knowledge background. The use of appropriately selected devices makes complex and polarising topics not only more comprehensible but also creates a comprehension template with which to interpret these topics from a specific perspective. Following Jost (2007), we refer to the linguistic

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[1] The texts included in a discourse analysis are always merely a "subset of the respective discourse" (Busse/Teubert 1994, p. 14). Niehr (2014, pp. 31 f.) observes that the research objects of all hitherto conducted discourse analyses are determined thematically and focus on a specific period of time.

[2] The corpus texts and a some of the analysis results are based on the dissertation *Der Plagiatsdiskurs in Deutschland im Zeitraum 2011–2013* by Almina Lisičić-Hedžić.

devices that accomplish rhetorical comprehensibility in discourse as **comprehensibility features**. These features are structures that bridge the interpretative gap between the sender's scientific-technical knowledge and the recipients' shared knowledge. Due to their specific application, metaphors and metaphorical phrasemes are therefore particularly suited to "establishing the comprehensibility of a speech or a text" (Jost 2007. S, 105) as they are ubiquitous and exist in shared knowledge, and can further be formalised to varying emotional and linguistic degrees (Jost 2007, pp. 331–364). And it is precisely this use of comprehensibility-enhancing, argumentative and emotionalising metaphors and phrasemes, which – due to their connotation – confer a plagiarism debate-related interpretation frame to the topic, that we will focus on here.

Ever since Lakoff and Johnson (1980), we have known that the main objective of conceptual metaphors is to transport a fact or situation from one conceptual area to another with certain features being either hidden or highlighted (see Lakoff/Johnson 2011, pp. 18–21). In addition to metaphors, phrasemes can also be understood as comprehensibility features as they "illustrate topics using concrete imagery" (Filatkina 2007, pp. 144 f.) and thus contain metaphors. Burger (2015, p. 87), by contrast, postulates that "metaphorical idioms play an important role in the metaphorical conceptualisation of certain spheres of reality" and are used as means of clarification and perspectivation. We are mainly interested in the so-called discourse metaphors in accordance with Zinken/Hellsten/Nerlich (2008) that are bound to the socio-cultural context, are used over longer periods of time, exhibit stability, contain discursive knowledge but are nonetheless so strongly embedded in language that they evoke concepts and meanings associated with general knowledge.

Results of the analysis

We identified the following metaphorical concepts and phrasemes whose function is to make the topic of plagiarism more comprehensible for the recipient: Plagiat ist Diebstahl, Plagiatsaufdeckung ist Jagd, *sich mit fremden Federn schmücken*, *aus jemandes Feder sein/stammen*, *einen Persilschein ausstellen/bekommen*, *eine saubere/reine/weiße Weste haben und jemanden an den Pranger stellen/am Pranger stehen/sein*.

In the plagiarism debate, *Plagiat* is conceptualised as *Diebstahl geistigen Eigentums* by referring to the accused as *Diebe* and to their offence as *Diebstahl*. The metaphors from the source area Kriminalität conceptualise instances of plagiarism as gestohlenes Gut and the act of plagiarising as kriminelles Handeln and in particular as Diebstahl.

(1)   Allerdings entdeckt selbst die beste Software nur die einfältigen ***Diebe*** […]. (ZG32)[3]

(2)   Im Fall Guttenberg ist über ***Ideendiebstahl*** und Betrug zu reden – nicht über allzu menschliches Schummeln. (SZG30)

As plagiarism constitutes a form of theft in which nothing tangible is stolen, scientific laypeople may struggle to understand what this has to do with the ministerial post. The question regarding the plagiariser's aim and benefit also remains unanswered. An answer to this question can be found in the analysis of the phraseme *sich mit fremden Federn schmücken*, which means "appropriating the merits of others, boasting about third-party

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[3]   The references consist of abbreviations. The full information can be found in the list of sources.

goods" (Röhrich 1991, p. 423) and has its roots in the fable of the crow that decorated itself with stolen peacock feathers (see Mackensen 1973, p. 665; Lessing 1827, p. 122). Plagiarism is a stolen good that is displayed in order to become a member of a prestigious group:

(3)   "Guttenberg *schmückt sich mit fremden Federn*", sagte Müller […]. (SZG2)

If phrasemes are modified, their "markedness increases" (Sandig 2007, pp. 159 f.). The same applies to the play on words *die fremden Federn rupfen* which stands for the demand for Guttenberg to renounce his title or to have it withdrawn. Guttenberg's political opponents wish to expose him and banish him from politics.

(4)   Guttenbergs Gegner wollen dem Polit-Star *die vermeintlich fremden Federn* nun *rupfen*. (SZG6)

The search for instances of plagiarism is conceptualised as a hunt in the sense of a societal event and not as an actual food procurement measure. It is a strategy used by the defendants to qualify plagiarisms and insinuate that the critics have nothing but bad intentions:

(5)   Die *Jagdgesellschaft* ruht nicht, *ihre Beute treibt sie bei Tag und Nacht vor sich her*. Aus der Ferne, wie aus dem Nichts **feuert** die unsichtbare Meute immer **neue Pfeile** auf den längst *Waidwunden* – und *trägt ihre Treffer fein säuberlich in Listen ein*. Das Internet *jagt* den Verteidigungsminister, und es ist erbarmungslos dabei. (SZG23)

While mutual criticism is commonplace in politics, it is frowned upon when the criticism is intended to discredit the person and not the political position. And that is precisely what the defendants of Guttenberg and Schavan accuse their political opponents of doing when they use the phraseme *jemanden an den Pranger stellen*:

(6)   Aber die Internetjagd löst manchmal auch unangenehme Gefühle aus, sie kann wirken wie ein *Pranger*, an den Menschen vorschnell und für geringste Vergehen *gestellt* werden. (SSch4)

If we analyse the metaphorical expressions in the context of an argumentation strategy, we arrive at the following conclusions: The metaphorical concept PLAGIATOR IST DIEB makes the reference person appear to be a criminal which further emotionalises the recipients. Emotionalisation through metaphorical expression creates "a form of knowledge acquisition and understanding" (Jost 2007, p. 356) and is used as a means of clarification and perspectivation. As a consequence, readers are urged to not only acknowledge a fact but also to become active, e. g., by actively supporting the demand that the plagiarisers should resign from their positions.

The metaphor PLAGIATSAUFDECKUNG IST JAGD and the phraseme *an den Pranger stellen*, the object of which are the plagiarisers themselves, appear as metaphorically conceptualised arguments that insinuate that the plagiarism hunters participate in their hunt without considering whether their approaches remain within the realm of the morally and ethically acceptable. The defendant's goal is to accuse the hunters of lacking objectivity and immoral methods in order to qualify the accusations of deception.

The analysis showed that it is possible to speak of two partially differing debates in the context of the sub-discourses, which can also be determined by the analysis of the metaphorical phrasemes. In the debate, the phraseme *jemandem einen Persilschein ausstellen* in the sense of *guaranteeing someone's integrity*, *absolving someone of their guilt* proved to play an important role. It stems from the period of denazification. The *Persilschein* was

a certificate of a clean political past.[4] The phraseme is still used today when someone is acquitted of their guilt – even if their innocence is implausible. It was only used in the Schavan discourse to explain that she was not to be absolved of her guilt as the undisputed instance of plagiarism could not be whitewashed due to being relatively minor.

(7)   "Ich kann ihr keinen **Persilschein ausstellen**", sagte die Plagiatsexpertin. (SZSch8)

The phraseme *eine saubere/weiße/reine Weste haben* has a similar modifying meaning and only appears in the Schavan corpus:

(8)   Unvergessen ist der Satz, den sie in der Affäre Guttenberg sprach: "Als jemand, der selbst vor 31 Jahren promoviert hat und in seinem Berufsleben viele Doktoranden begleiten durfte, schäme ich mich nicht nur heimlich." Wer so redet, dessen **Weste** sollte **sauber** und **rein** sein. (SSch2)

Opponents wanted to deny her the right to criticise Guttenberg as she did not adhere to the same standards she applied to others.

The last two phrasemes were not used for Guttenberg as the serious instances of plagiarism were identified very quickly. But, by contrast, the metaphorical formulation *sich mit fremden Federn schmücken* does not appear for Schavan as she was not interested in self-presentation or belonging to a certain prestigious group. She is not an entertainer who brags about her achievements or, as Guttenberg did, seeks out the limelight and contact with the public.

The same applies to the phraseme *aus jemandes Feder sein/stammen*, which means that someone is the author of a text. The fact that this phraseme is not used in the Schavan corpus qualifies the plagiarism allegation directed at Schavan, as the extent of the instances of plagiarism were considered to be considerably fewer than those associated with Guttenberg.

Finally, it can be concluded that the discourse leaders use metaphorical formulations if they wish to address the readers on an emotional level and attempt to win them over to their side. If the discussed topics are not immediately understandable by a broad readership, metaphorical expressions are used both as comprehensibility features and as argumentation tools. The main aim of making something comprehensible is so that arguments for own positions become more plausible. The analysed metaphors are explanatory and interpretative as they are used for illustration and comprehensibility purposes. However, their main aim is to evaluate and emotionalise and therefore put something into perspective.

The comprehensibility features analysed here are, with the exception of the Jagd metaphor and the *Pranger* phraseme, predominantly applied by critics as they were most invested in making the plagiarism issue accessible to the broad public while the defendants were most interested in dissociating the plagiarism problem from the political activity and positions of the plagiarisers.

The existence or lack of some metaphors or phrasemes in one of the two sub-discourses shows that the plagiarism debates ran differing courses both in terms of content as well as argumentation structure.

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[4]   The explanation was taken from the Redensarten-Index: www.redensarten-index.de/suche.php?suchbegriff= ~~jemandem%20einen%20Persilschein%20ausstellen&suchspalte%5B%5D= rart_ou (last access: 15.2.2021).

Text corpus

SZG2 = Plagiatsvorwurf: Guttenberg soll auch in Einleitung abgeschrieben haben, 16.2.2011. www. sueddeutsche.de/politik/plagiatsvorwurf-guttenberg-soll-auch-in-einleitung-abgeschrieben-haben-1.1061084 (last access: 11.1.2015).

SZG6 = Reaktionen auf Plagiatsverdacht: Bayern-SPD will Guttenberg die fremden Federn rupfen, 17.2.2011. www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/reaktionen-auf-plagiatsverdacht-bayern-spd-will-guttenberg-die-fremden-federn-rupfen-1.1061019 (last access: 11.1.2015).

SZG23 = Jagd auf Plagiate im Internet: Wir sind der Gegendruck, 22.2.2011. www.sueddeutsche.de /digital/ jagd-auf-plagiate-im-internet-wir-sind-der-gegendruck-1.1063242 (last access: 11.1.2015).

SZG30 = Guttenberg und die Plagiatsaffäre: Das Ding mit fremden Federn, 25.2.2011, www.sueddeutsche. de/politik/guttenberg-und-die-plagiatsaffaere-das-ding-mit-fremden-federn-1.1065136 (last access: 11.1.2015).

ZG32 = Plagiate, Eine Frage der Ehre, [www.zeit.de/2011/09/N-Plagiat-Hochschulen], DIE ZEIT Nº 09/2011, 25.2.2011 (last access: 11.1.2015).

SSch2 = UNION – Schavans Schweigen, DER SPIEGEL 20/2012, 14.5.2012, www.spiegel.de/spiegel/ print/d-85734056.html] (last access: 11.1.2015).

SSch4 = REGIERUNG – In Autopsie, DER SPIEGEL 42/2012, 15.10.2012. www.spiegel.de/spiegel/ print/d-89079761.html (last access: 11.1.2015).

SZSch8 = Plagiatsvorwürfe gegen Bildungsministerin: Schavans Dissertation ist "ein Grenzfall", 15.5.2012, www.sueddeutsche.de/karriere/plagiatsvorwuerfe-gegen-bildungsministerin-schavans-dissertation-ist-ein-grenzfall-1.1347929 (last access: 11.1.2015).

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