

'Non-inserted' meaning? A metacommunicative perspective on the conceptualization of *empty/hollow words* in English and German news discourse

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Reddy's (1979) *conduit metaphor* refers to the phenomenon that interlocutors who engage in the use of metalanguage construe language itself as the conduit connecting the speaker and the hearer, and words as containers into which the speaker 'inserts' meaning which is then 'unpacked' by the hearer. While this metaphor surfaces in sentences such as *I'm struggling to get my idea across* or *Try to put your idea into different words* (cf. also Lakoff & Johnson 1980), it is also reflected in notions such as *empty/hollow words* in English, and *leere Worte* or *Worthülsen* in German. Crucially, the ordinary notion of *empty/hollow words* is not a linguistic-functional one, but an attitudinal and evaluative one: No linguistic expression functions conventionally as an *empty/hollow word* itself, but speakers assign this notion to linguistic items based on their own (negative) evaluation of the item's meaning(fulness) in context. The aim of the present study is to take a corpus-based metacommunicative approach to exploring how the notion of *empty/hollow words* is conceptualized in English and German news discourse. In particular, inflectional and derivational paradigms of relevant forms such as the English *empty* or *hollow word* and the German *leeres Wort* and *Worthülse* were searched for in various news corpora (e.g., NOW, DWDS Zeitungskorpora, etc.), and the analysis of the dataset was aimed at answering the following research questions:

1. How often are the relevant forms used in news discourse?
2. How often are concrete linguistic expressions assigned the notion of *empty/hollow words*?
3. Which words/phrases are assigned the notion of *empty/hollow words*?
4. How do the results vary across English and German news discourse?

Preliminary results indicate that while (normalized) frequencies of use are comparable across the two languages, German media discourse – in contrast to British media discourse is further characterized by the speakers' and writers' preference to relate the notion of *empty/hollow words* to concrete linguistic items. Most prominently, items assigned this notion are compounds and/or phrases such as *Teamfähigkeit* ('ability to work in a team', lit. 'team capability') and *gesunder Menschenverstand* ('common sense', lit. 'healthy human mind/wit'), which can display ambiguous conceptual blending effects in the mind (cf. Coulson & Fauconnier 1999). These and other results are discussed against the background of (a) the cognitive salience of the notion of *empty/hollow words*, (b) ambiguity in conceptual blending as a potential explanatory variable, and (c) possible genre effects of (online) newspaper articles and commentaries.

References

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