Indexicality in a usage-based perspective: A corpus linguistic approach to characterize the indexical potential of German communication verbs

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When we encounter a verb such as *plaudern* ('to chat') or *erzählen* ('to tell'), we think of a private communicative situation such as a meeting with family members or friends, rather than a public speech or a meeting in a professional or institutional context. The phenomenon that the use of a linguistic expression can signal or evoke certain situational contexts of communication is captured by the term indexicality. Within a usage-based approach to language, the indexicality of linguistic expressions would be expected to emerge from their re-occurrence in certain situational contexts, i.e., that speakers abstract commonalities from perceivable co-occurrences of linguistic and situational features and build up their linguistic knowledge regarding indexicality on this basis (cf. Schmid, 2020). Corpus linguistic analysis is seen as a methodological implementation of the assumptions of usage-based models, as it enables the study of linguistic phenomena in terms of their frequency of occurrence in natural language use (cf. Stefanowitsch, 2011). In the corpus-as-input view, a corpus is understood as a representation of the (potential) input of a language community, and it is assumed that usage patterns identified in the corpus allow for conclusions to be drawn about the linguistic knowledge of the speaker community (cf. Stefanowitsch & Flach, 2017). If corpus analysis is considered not only as a technique for testing hypotheses, but as a genuine way of accessing a phenomenon (corpus driven, cf. Biber, 2015), it offers structure-discovering procedures that identify unexpected patterns (cf. Perkuhn et al., 2012, pp. 18-21; Bubenhofer & Scharloth, 2015). Taken together, these aspects characterize the potential of corpus linguistic methods for the investigation of indexicality in a usage-based conception. In this talk, I first introduce the concept of usage-based indexicality. I then present a methodological procedure proposed in Meißner (2025) for accessing it through corpus analysis, and report on the results of an exploratory study investigating the usage-based indexicality of German communication verbs (cf. Harras et al. 2004) on the basis of a reference corpus of spoken German (FOLK, cf. Kaiser, 2018). Finally, I give an outlook on a research project that is will investigate usage-based indexicality in more detail, triangulating data on language use and speaker knowledge.

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