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Exploring the Unknown: The Language Use of German RE-Students writing Texts about God

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Exploring the Unknown: The Language Use of German RE-Students writing Texts about God

Language does not only play an active part *in all processes* of comprehension, recognition, and learning, it is also essential for *specific religious learning processes*. Religious experiences and traditions have their own characteristic linguistic forms, and religious education has come to realize the necessity for an appropriate sensibility in religious language. Yet while linguistic features of religion or tradition have been widely discussed and developed, the use of religious language with regard to the learning subjects remains a significant, if not unknown, variable. What do we actually know about the religious language of students? How do we systematically assess their linguistic competence? By presenting selected results regarding the God-talk of German secondary school students, this paper shows how empirical research based on a corpus linguistic approach can provide access to the use of religious language. As such, the paper first aims to initiate a paradigm shift from looking at the linguistic features of content to exploring the language use of learners. Second, it aims to present a research framework that offers possibilities for further comparable and comparative research well beyond the original German speaking context.

Keywords: religious language, God-talk, corpus linguistics, everyday language

The paradigm shift to empirical language use

By its very nature, religious education is and always will be dependent on the phenomenon of language as key contents (i.e. biblical, faith and other traditions) rely on linguistic (oral and written) transmission (Astley 2004). The study and interpretation of texts is a core component of religious education across all countries and teaching approaches and the specific nature of these texts has led didactical approaches to look critically into the phenomenon of language. Religious education within an “Instructional Paradigm” has already questioned how contemporary understanding and interpretation

of biblical texts can be successful (Boschki 2012, 107–11). In the second half of the 20th century, the so-called ‘century of language’ (Brandom 2000, 5), we can identify a decisive turning point, driven by processes of secularisation and pluralisation in society (Copley 2008, 61–88), as well as severe criticism of the epistemological status of religious and theological language in the hands of disciplines such as analytical philosophy. As a consequence it is no longer a matter of course that sentences such as ‘I believe in the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth’ from the Apostles’ creed, or biblical language such as ‘Christ who died for our sins’ (1 Cor 15:3) share a common meaning. *What does this mean, for whom at which time, under which conditions and with which claim?*

On the basis of philosophical and theological theories of religious language following the *linguistic turn* (Stiver 1996), religious education has responded to such challenges by turning towards the “idiom” of religion advancing the view that religious traditions employ a characteristic use of language, as their linguistic forms transport meaning less through the description of matter and more through the interpretation of experiences (Astley 2004, 11–23; Meyer 2008). In other words, religion speaks of reality in a different language than the so-called “exact or empirical sciences”. For this it is important to discover that language cannot only describe reality in retrospect, but also disclose reality as a new and different way of seeing and understanding the world (Ramsey 1957). The languages of poetry and literature are prime examples of this form of non-actual speech. In the same way, religious language does not aim solely at informing, but tries to ‘change, transform, and jolt’ (Latour 2011, 34) using metaphor and symbol, myth, narrative, poem, for example (Avis 1999). In order to understand religion, it is crucial to guide learners in the ‘art of using religious language’ (Berryman 1985, 126; Ashton 2000, 29–44).

The general linguistic turn has also affected the theory and practice of religious education (Altmeyer 2011b). Early on, notable scholars called for new conceptions of religious education as language learning (Halbfas 1971; Zirker 1972; Ankoviak 1974; Harris 1978; Cavalletti 1983; Berryman 1985, 1991; Schweitzer 1987; Slee 1987; Moran 1989; Hull 1991). In Germany, entire course books are now didactically based on linguistic propaedeutics, and the concept is an important topic across most RE curricula (Altmeyer 2011a; Grözinger 2001). This change in approach is so fundamental, that it has been termed retrospectively as the loss of a naïve ‘linguistic innocence’ (Gärtner 2002, 53). Some decades after this first step away from linguistic innocence, we are now facing new fundamental issues: general models for the description of language learning show clear limitations to the above approach (Schleppegrell 2010, 40–2; Vollmer 2009, 11–2). Linguistic learning in an educational setting must by no means be approached one-dimensionally on the basis of content and subject specific lexica. However, this is exactly what religious education does in assuming that an understanding of the unique features of religious language suffices to develop an active competence in using religious language. Would it not perhaps be important to focus more strongly on language use and thus to become ‘multilingual’ (Foster 2004, 73) and to widen students’ ‘discursive repertoire’ (Beacco et al. 2010, 11)? Following this line of thought, it becomes immediately apparent that religious education should not only develop an understanding of the existing religious language, but also create opportunities for religious communication (Wright 1996, 174–5), e.g. by discussing personal concepts of God or deity, debating ethical norms that are important to society, expressing personal religiosity, etc. It seems remarkable that there has been next to no research regarding this linguistic field so that to date we *still* ‘really know very little about adolescents’ actual use of religious language, especially what use they

might make of it in every day discourse.’ (Dykstra 1986, 177) Astley speaks of this ‘primary religious language’ (2004, 7) and the ordinary theology therein as ‘routinely ignored’ (2004, 126, see also 2002).

Empirical findings show that we are dealing with a ‘genuine and highly idiosyncratic language’ (Porzelt 1999, 254), yet to date no systematic study of this “large unknown” has been carried out. A rethinking of this kind, however, would have the consequence that it would no longer be possible to define religious language on the basis of a canon of prescribed forms (i.e. Bible, Dogma etc.). Instead, religious language would be created by the actual use of language ‘looking at the range of expression made possible by particular doctrinal determinations’ (Williams 2002, 209) or religious traditions in general. Following the loss of “linguistic innocence” we are now at the point where we have to overcome “linguistic blindness.” Which language do students actually use, when they start to employ religious language? The new approach lies in exploring the language that learners actually use when they are talking about God (Schweitzer 2006).

Methodology: corpus linguistics in religious education research

Any attempt to implement this research approach has to go beyond the established methods of social-empirical study. While such approaches aim at gathering, analysing, and interpreting experiential knowledge, the approach at hand aims at developing a systematic awareness of a specific way of using language (Bubenhofer 2009, 43–6). Empirical research in linguistics provides the required methodology to explore patterns of language use that can be interpreted not just in terms of intra-linguistic interest, but also from an extra-linguistic and inter-disciplinary perspective. A widely accepted research paradigm along these lines can be found in corpus linguistics (for an introduction see Lemnitzer and Zinsmeister 2010; Lüdeling and Kytö 2008-9; Biber,

Conrad, and Reppen 2006; Scott and Tribble 2006; Sinclair 1995b).

Corpus Linguistics aims at methodically describing a concretely defined authentic use of language and developing hypotheses regarding its linguistic features. The empirical material is the corpus, a digitally available collection of authentic examples of written or transcribed speech that is gathered on the basis of clearly defined criteria (Leech 2007; Sinclair 2005). By use of quantitative and qualitative methods, patterns of language use within the corpus are identified and interpreted on the basis of their usage contexts. The theoretical foundation can be found in the language model of the so-called British Contextualism (Lemnitzer and Zinsmeister 2010, 28–32; Tognini-Bonelli 2001) featuring the central premise that meaning can only be identified through an analysis of contextual language use. In other words, the decisive factor in understanding language is not the linguistic competence of a speaker, but the relationship between form, content, and context of specific expressions in language use. This leads to the key task of corpus linguistics that is to ‘explain specific expressions and their various linguistic aspects as functions of their linguistic and non-linguistic contexts’ (Lemnitzer and Zinsmeister 2010, 28; Sinclair 2007). As such, corpus linguistics deals with authentic language use in different contexts, ranging from the immediate context of a single word to the social context of an entire phrase. Context analyses based on language use lead to the inductive formation of hypotheses regarding the structure of the empirical language, i.e. the way meaning is created and transported in everyday language use (Scott and Tribble 2006, 3–10).

Linguistic analysis of students’ texts about God

Coming back to the original question: What religious language do students speak? The following will present some examples of studying this “large unknown”. The precise research question is: which characteristics define the language used by students in

Religious Education classes when they articulate their understanding of God in writing. The selected examples address the core topic of God-talk and outline the potential of key methodical instruments such as key words, collocations, and visualisations. Holding the contextual theory of language in mind, the study provides more than just a description: studying the language used means studying the authors' perceptions of God that are realised in these texts.

Corpus description

The study is based on a corpus of 2,186 texts (summing up to about 325,000 words in total) written by students in Religious Education classes (Altmeyer 2011a, 189–234). As Religious Education in Germany is generally divided according to confession, most texts were produced in either Protestant or Roman Catholic Religious Education classes. The corpus was not specifically accumulated for this project, but makes use of an earlier compilation of data carried out by the German magazine 'Christ in der Gegenwart' during the course of a nationwide writing activity at schools (from 2003-2008). The stimulus for the texts was the open question 'What does "God" mean to me?', which had to be answered in text form. This study selected only texts that could clearly be linked to a specific age group and school type (age group between 14 and 19 years at secondary school level). More detailed demographic data is only partly available, as many texts were composed anonymously or in groups. 1,769 texts can be assigned to a specific gender group – of these 1,147 were produced by girls (64.8%) and 622 by boys (35.2%). Therefore it is not really possible to form representative conclusions regarding the use of religious language by German pupils. However, we can provide well-founded hypotheses as starting points for further research.

Overall landscape: key words

The first step in the linguistic analysis was a so-called *key word analysis* (Scott and Tribble 2006, 55–72; Wynne 2008, 730–3), where statistics are employed in order to identify typical words within the corpus on the basis of their frequency of use. ‘Key words are those whose frequency is unusually high in comparison with some norm.’ (Scott 2012, 178). They are calculated by comparing relative frequencies in two different corpora one of which serves as norm, and by estimating the probability of a word being more frequent than would be expected by chance. For the degree of typicality, a measure of significance can be specified called *keyness* which is calculated on the basis of a Log likelihood procedure (Dunning 1993). The comparative norm is represented by a second *reference corpus*. There are several large public corpora that act as reference corpora for present language use (Lemnitzer and Zinsmeister 2010, 102–7; Sinclair 1995a). By using such a reference, in this case the core corpus of the “Digitales Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache” (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities), it was possible to identify typical expressions and words that characterise both content and style of the corpus of students’ writings. Of course, there are certain limits to this approach as the frequency of someone’s usage of a word does not necessarily coincide with the salience of this word in her/his worldview and ‘a word which only occurs once in a text may sometimes be “key”’ (Scott 2012, 194). But nevertheless, looking on a high number of texts, a concise impression of the motivating topics and semantic contexts is provided. Table 1 gives an overview of the results of the key word analysis. It was filtered by word types and reduced to nouns. These, in turn, were heuristically grouped into semantic classes. The visualisation of results shows the 50 nouns of highest significance¹.

Table 1

The table should be read like a satellite-image, roughly mapping the expressions students used when talking about God. . It is immediately apparent that the texts are constructed using an elementary core vocabulary. This contains some words that can be attributed to a *theological language* in a narrow sense. Significant categorical terms here are ‘Faith’, ‘Church’, ‘Bible’, ‘Religion’, ‘Prayer’ and ‘Commandments’, and the name ‘Jesus’. The only theological concepts that can be identified as key are ‘Creator’ and ‘Heaven’. This core of theological vocabulary and concepts is supplemented by further highly charged terms such as ‘Human’, ‘Life’, ‘Existence’, ‘Person’, ‘World’, ‘Feeling’, etc. that indicate *philosophical reflection* on the question of God.

It is apparent that the linguistic context which students use when writing about God exists practically without referring to specific theological concepts. Core Christian and particularly biblical notions and concepts of deity; classical metaphors for God (Father, King etc.), attributes of God (Almighty, graciousness, mercy) or any reference to Trinitarian thinking, cannot be found. Certain more philosophical concepts of God-talk like ‘Power’ and higher ‘Being’, on the other hand, are very clearly represented. Of particular interest is that the God-talk of students is highly linked to anthropological references within the coordinates of ‘God’-‘Human’-‘Life’-‘Person’. This observation leads to two further groups of key words such as ‘Hope’, ‘Comfort (*Geborgenheit*)’, ‘Strength’, ‘Support’, ‘Help’, ‘Love’, ‘Courage’, ‘Sense’, ‘Solace’ on the one hand (called “experiential positive” in Table 1), and ‘Sorrow’, ‘Death’ and ‘Fear’ on the other (“experiential negative”), showing that students are employing a language based on *experiences* that allows them to connect their God-talk with their own ‘everyday lives’ as well as the lives of their ‘peers’. The relevant *situational references* can be identified in the last and smallest group of key nouns.

In order to evaluate these first findings, it is important to return to the question that initiated the texts. It was deliberately left open, with no guidance in any direction at all. So it is highly relevant to observe which themes and contexts the students connect with their God-talk. If the goal is the development of competence in religious language, it appears less important to state the highly selective use of theological concepts than to discover that the language of positive and negative experiences provides two contexts in which the students locate their reflections on and about God. In order to foster religious language competence, it would be useful (and necessary) to develop this further (Schweitzer 2006). Nonetheless, key questions have not been answered so far. The fact that some expected terms are used does not necessarily shed light on how they are used, e.g. the terms 'Church' and 'Bible.' Or, what is the connection between 'Sorrow' and 'Sense,' if any? These are questions that need to be addressed. Additionally, the possible influence of factors such as gender, age, type of school, or social background should be checked.

Propositions about God

While key word analysis provides a macro-view of textual patterns, corpus linguistics offers other methods to refine this rough understanding. One of these is the study of *collocations* (Evert 2009; Scott and Tribble 2006, 33–5; Sinclair 1995b, 109–22), in which the immediate linguistic context of a search term is studied to create a micro-view of its usage patterns. In general, 'collocation is the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text' (Sinclair 1995b, 170). A collocation analysis intends to identify words that significantly occur in combination with search-terms and therefore help to clarify their precise meaning. Basically, the method is a systematic search of neighbouring words (Scott 2012, 141). Collocations can be visualised in structure diagrams, showing collocates together with their

interconnections. For the study at hand, it was possible to identify the most significant patterns formed with 'God' as the subject. These are expressions such as 'God is...', 'God can...', 'God gives...', 'God helps...', 'God listens...' and 'God protects...'.

Figure 1 shows the significant links between statements that follow this pattern.

Figure 1

The diagram can be read like a net of connected elements in which the nodes signify the linguistic building blocks with which students construct their statements regarding God as acting. Starting from the root, 'God', one can follow the arrows to reconstruct typical statements such as: 'God is somebody who is always here' or 'God can give me strength'. This pattern can be described as showing personal and impersonal concepts of God (i.e. God as 'Creator', 'Father', 'Friend', or as 'Power'). At the same time, abstract positive attributes (i.e. God as 'Love', 'Life', 'Strength', etc.) are articulated. To start with personal concepts, one can conclude that when compared to the large repertoire of biblical-metaphorical God-talk (i.e. God as King, Lord, Architect, etc.) there is a concentration on only three images reflecting a strongly anthropological concept of God. But the majority of statements include open characterisations that describe God as a reality that can be experienced, but hardly caught in concrete personal metaphors. A common description of God characterises him as 'Somebody' who unites certain positive human attributes: 'Somebody who is always there when you need him; somebody whom you can trust even if you don't see him; somebody who gives strength and knows my fears,' etc.

A general observation that may be added is that almost all students projected the statements onto themselves. Around half of the statements that begin with the words 'God is' also use the phrase 'for me'. Students do not write about God with any universal claim, they define their very personal relationship and understanding. Even

where the texts deal with God in an explicitly non-personal matter, direct references to experiences remain. The impersonal understandings of God depict him both as an entity and an abstraction. Where God is connected with 'Strength', we can identify a close relationship between God and personal life and experience ('Life', 'Support'). Whereas whenever forms such as 'Being' or 'Power' are used, it is possible to observe more distance between God and the individual. The most significant observations can be made from simple attributive statements. These verbalise the same thought of presence and closeness in different ways: 'God is here, he is everywhere'. God is again treated as an entity that is relevant in various different life situations. Nominal attributes underline this relationship, as they connect key experiences with aspects of God: 'God is Hope, Life, Love'. In talking about God, students talk about his relationship to an individual and their life.

The observations presented above only deal with positive statements. It is apparent that none of the potentially critical key words like 'Bible', 'Church,' or 'Sorrow' appear. One would expect that they appear together with negative statements. This is, in fact, reflected in the corpus, which contains a wide spectrum of questioning or even doubting, critical and even negative statements. Almost all discussed positive statements also appear in the negative ('God is not always there', 'God is not an entity' etc.). While it is hardly possible to quantify ratios by means of corpus linguistic methods, it is interesting to note that frequently statements containing a denial of a deity may be found next to affirmative ones in the same text. One particular example is the way in which negative experiences such as 'Suffering', 'Death', 'Fear' etc. are treated. Texts that include these or similar terms (n=575) include a significantly higher number of negated statements. But at the same time the texts are by no means limited to negative experiences; practically all positive experience descriptors can also be found

and are used in the affirmative. God provides ‘Hope’ and ‘Strength’, possibly precisely because of the suffering of the self or of others. It is primarily the question for an overall ‘meaning/sense’ that is described in the negative.

While this is not an apt platform to present an analysis of the content of individual texts, even an analysis of the surface level of the language used allows for some conclusions. Direct examination of negative experiences appears to correlate frequently with descriptions of positive aspects of God. This leads to the hypothesis that the perception of negativity may cause questioning of particular aspects of God, but does not necessarily negate every aspect – although it does negate a concept of God that is identified solely through the ‘Bible’ and the ‘Church’. Content analyses clearly show that in two thirds to three quarters of the texts ‘Bible’ and ‘Church’ are seen as obstructive to a personal relationship with God, representing stereotypic ‘ways not to talk about God’ (Pannikar 1997).

Differences concerning gender and age

The last question to be addressed is to clarify whether the above observations change if the texts are sorted according to gender or age group. Further key word analyses were carried out to this end, now comparing different subcorpora directly with one another (female vs. male etc.). The following results are based on 1,769 texts in the case of gender differentiation; the age group differentiation draws on the entire corpus. Figure 2 shows key words for the texts produced by girls and boys in the form of so-called word clouds (Scott 2012, 100–2). In this, the font size reflects the key word’s statistical estimate of *keyness* as computed by Log likelihood test. The visualisation only includes nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs.

Figure 2

A marked difference is immediately apparent: female authors use the first person singular ('I', 'me') significantly more often. Their writing of God uses typical I-sentences: 'I know...', 'I feel...', 'I think...', etc. This is congruent with their divulging of information about themselves. They write about their feelings ('Sad', 'Fear'), their relationships ('Family', 'Mother'), and their perception of negativity ('War', 'Suffering', 'Guilt'). It is fitting that for them the concept of God as a 'Father', as well as the experience of 'Love' are significant. The diagram showing the key words used by boys confirms the obvious conclusion that the stronger personal language amongst females stands in direct contrast to a more pronounced impersonal language amongst male authors. Boys speak of 'Being' and the 'Existence of God'. They broach questions regarding a 'Beginning' and an 'End' of life and the world. Fittingly, there is far more interest in 'Creation', terms such as 'Religion/s' and 'Conscience' further underline the tendency of a more removed stance towards the question of God.

Table 2

Table 2 provides an overview of the differences in God-talk on the basis of age groups. It shows nouns that are either key words for the respective (approximate) age group or, in contrast, used significantly rarely (negative key words). The German grade 11 (ages 16 to 17) proves to be a turning point. Younger groups (ages 14 to 16) show a language oriented more strongly along a personal understanding of God, talking of God as a 'Friend' and 'Father' while 'Jesus' appears as an important figure. At the same time, the issue of God is brought into direct connection with 'Commandments'. This is also the only age group in which theological terms (in the strictest sense) are used in significant numbers. Such terms and contexts are particularly untypical for the language used by students from German grades 12 and 13 (ages 17 to 19). This age group prefers to speak of God in abstract categories of experience. 'Joy', 'Force', 'Power', 'Sense' are given as

the coordinates of God-talk, presenting a language of philosophical contemplation of God ('Existence', 'Concept', 'Sense'). No such language is found in the age groups younger than German grade 11. This grade forms the meeting point of concrete-personalised God-talk and abstract-experimental language. The key category for this group is more intimate: 'Comfort (*Geborgenheit*)' (also found in grade 10). It may be that it is this age group that begins to experience the important and often polarising role of the 'Church Service': either this provides a feeling of comfort and succour (for example "Taizé"), or it frustrates this very expectation.

Conclusion

The portrayal of the characteristics of the religious language used today by learners in Germany is of high relevance for theology and religious education as they do not deal with a side aspect, but affect the core of religious language competence, the articulation of the concept of God. The paper ends with hypotheses resulting from the findings of the presented study.

- (1) A first general, but fundamental insight is that young people evidently possess language skills to articulate their concept of God. Any argument suggesting that modern young people are incapable of religious articulation has been refuted by the presented study. God-talk is not disappearing, nor can we talk generally of a linguistic 'God-crisis' (Johann B. Metz). It is apparent, however, that students do not necessarily communicate in the theological language that we might expect. Core theological concepts are missing (at least in the upper school levels). As such it would be more apt to talk of a fundamental transformation of God-talk: away from the (Christian) religious language in the singular, to a plurality of individual religious languages or 'accents' (Astley 2004, 115).

- (2) When questioned with regard to their concepts of God, students write about God in a personal manner. This trend is more pronounced amongst girls than amongst boys. The manner of expression shows a characteristic duality of the articulated God concepts: the plausibility of a concrete God-talk appears to be highly subjective (personal claim of validity) and in terms of content, the relations to God and to oneself are deeply connected (individual religiosity).
- (3) This results in a concept of God that – despite all plurality in detail – can be (paradoxically) termed as an abstract entity of direct personal relevance that is generally described by means of positive experiential language. On the one hand, God is a being of relevance to daily life and has all major characteristics of a relevant person; on the other hand God is an abstract entity that is difficult to project as a specific image.
- (4) Negative experiential language is nearly as characteristic as its positive counterpart. As such, it plays an important role in articulating a concept of God in a dual and connected way. On the one hand, it allows questions and doubts, thereby facilitating the determination of specific and concrete concepts of God (in the sense of the question of theodicy), on the other hand it actually appears to give more plausibility to the fundamental question of God itself. The experience of negativity does not necessarily make God-talk less plausible; rather, it gives meaning to questioning the existence of God.
- (5) Finally, the religious semantics used by young people, are often rooted in a traditional context that facilitates religious communication in the first place. Basically none of the attributes identified here would be out of place in traditional religious language: the positive experiences, the experience of suffering, the communication of the personal relationship with God as ‘I’, the

references to humanity as well as – albeit often distanced – to the Church and the Bible. All of these attributes are central to Christian God-talk. As such, students are by no means outside of this religious tradition. They do, however, very clearly place their own emphases and seem to creatively ‘play at the edges of their knowing and being so as to ... discern meaning and purpose in life.’ (Hyde 2011, 350)

- (6) This personal language is very much an expressive language: God-talk is a form of language that speaks of oneself, one’s own life and perception. Religious language in this understanding is not so much concerned with the conciliation of tradition and individual life, but rather an ‘authentic presentability’ (Armin Nassehi) of individual religiosity.

The empirical assessment of the (religious) language of students enters uncharted theological waters ‘listening out for theology’ (Astley 2004, 126) in ordinary language use. The above observations are examples and could be differentiated further in various points and details. Furthermore, they leave several important follow-up questions for further discussion. What do we know, for example, of the practical language competence in other key content areas aside from the question of God? In what way do external factors such as social background, cultural origin, family, school type, etc. affect religious language competence? What do we know about the articulation of God in other languages than German, or other religions than Christianity?

At this point, it seems clear that competence in religious language is best developed by promoting active God-talk amongst students. The research methods of corpus linguistics provide a reliable understanding of the structures and characteristics of the religious language that develops in this open field. Here with, we possess an empirical tool to systematically assess religious language competence. Particularly by

comparison to characteristic attributes of traditional religious language we can identify areas where systematic fostering of language competence would be beneficial, how this competence could be achieved and where typical difficulties are to be expected.

Notes

1. At this point, and in the following, English translations for the words from the corpus are used. A precise translation using one English expression, however, is nearly always impossible. In order to communicate the results of the study, however, this method was employed. The original tables and figures, employing German terms, are available on the author's homepage.

Notes on contributor

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