

The connection between morphological patterns and discursive meaning

An empirical investigation of selected adjectival pairs of paronyms with the suffixes *-frei/-los* with some general comments on word formation

Based on the headword list in the new dictionary of paronyms, pairs of paronyms can be grouped by identical (morphological) patterns. This empirical study explores two derivational suffixes: *-frei* and *-los* (*-free/-less*). I only glossed a term once (and decided that it was unwieldy to do so in the title). Ten pairs of paronyms were taken from this group in order to ascertain the extent to which classifications and descriptions from theoretical morphology match what happens in real language use. All of the pairs of paronyms ending in *-frei/-los* recorded in the dictionary illustrate a transposition from noun to adjective. The semantic function of these suffixes is to express a privative relation to the base noun, i. e. 'not having' or 'not present'. Adjectives ending in *-frei* are said to have positive connotations and are particularly used in technical, objective contexts (cf. Fandrych 2011). The suffix *-los* represents a neutral depiction of a state of affairs but can also have negative connotations; it is principally used in reports, descriptions and scientific contexts (cf. Eichinger 2000, Fleischer/Barz 2012).

First of all, synonymous paronyms will be investigated, followed by those with overlaps in use and finally paronyms with discourse-bound differences. *Kostenlos* (*costless*) and *kostenfrei* (*cost-free*) can both be paraphrased with 'no costs'. Costs which have to be paid are seen as something negative, meaning that *kostenfrei/kostenlos* have positive connotations. According to theoretical morphology, such a connotation should only be possible for *kostenfrei*. As this form appears with much lower frequency than its paronym partner *kostenlos*, actual language use and theory diverge greatly.

Fehlerfrei (*error-free*) and *fehlerlos* (*errorless*) both have two different, synonymous meanings. *Fehlerfrei/fehlerlos* usually denotes an action, a result or a person acting in a particular way 'without a mistake', i. e. without a self-inflicted disadvantage. In addition, a product, its manufacture or functionality can be described as being *fehlerfrei/fehlerlos*, i. e. 'without (technical) defects'. Both expressions definitely have positive connotations. As *fehlerfrei*, theoretically the term with the positive connotation, occurs around five times more frequently than *fehlerlos*, everyday language prefers the term which would also be 'correct' according to theoretical morphology.

Autofrei (*car-free*) is the preferred expression rather than *autolos* (*car-less*). Both expressions have three interpretations in common: 'no motorised traffic', 'not owning a car' and 'before cars became widespread'. Only the third interpretation of *autofrei/autolos* does not involve any evaluation. In relation to (time-)space or people, an evaluation does take place, which depends on the speaker's attitude. In accordance with theoretical morphology, the much higher frequency of *autofrei* suggests that times, spaces and people 'without a car' have a positive connotation.

Zinslos (*without interest*) occurs much more frequently than *zinsfrei* (*interest-free*). Both expressions refer to a financial product on which interest does not have to be paid. When interest has to be paid, not having to do so is positive for the one making the payment; when it is a question of dividends, not being paid interest is negative for the one earning interest, although this interpretation was not statistically significant in the corpus. *Zinsfrei* should be associated with a positive connotation; however *zinslos* is more dominant in everyday language. According to theoretical morphology, the latter is more neutral and is used in a factual context, meaning that here the use of the word is oriented to the context in which it is used.

Schmerzfrei (*pain-free*) is more than twice as frequent as *schmerzlos* (*painless*); both expressions can be paraphrased with ‘without pain’ or ‘without symptoms’ or ‘without suffering’. The semantic content of the two adjectives overlaps greatly in the context of ethical discussions. In the medical context, too, *schmerzfrei/schmerzlos* are largely used synonymously; in contrast, in connection with individual parts of the body or people, only *schmerzfrei* is used. Generally, *schmerzfrei/schmerzlos* have positive connotations. This complies with theoretical morphology in that *schmerzfrei*, along with its semantically more diverse characteristics, is more common. Thus, the paronym which is more dominant in everyday language use is the one which is ascribed a positive connotation by theoretical morphology.

The term *schuldfrei* (*guilt-free*) only appears 42 times in the corpus, making its use marked in comparison with the more common *schuldlos* (*guiltless*). Both expressions are used when a person or their behaviour, usually in a legal context, is characterised as conforming to the norm and/or the law, or when a person is said to be only passively involved. *Schuldfrei* can also be used for an action which can be carried out without having a bad conscience. Although *Schuld* (*guilt*) expresses a concept with a negative connotation and the absence thereof, accordingly, has a positive connotation, the suffix which fits in with the expected word-formation pattern, namely *schuldfrei*, is only used marginally.

Steuerfrei (*tax-free*) can be paraphrased as ‘without taxes’ in the sense of ‘without financial costs’. As the speaker probably sees the matter of paying taxes in a negative light, the absence of this obligation has a positive connotation. *Steuerlos*, a rare occurrence in the corpus, either refers to a vehicle which cannot be steered or a group of people/an action without a leader, with both state of affairs having negative connotations. Thus, this pair of paronyms complies with theoretical morphology as *steuerfrei* has positive connotations and *steuerlos* negative ones.

Kinderlos (*childless*) appears much more frequently than *kinderfrei* (*child-free*) and is particularly controversial in nature. This is because the evaluation of *Kind* (*child*) depends on the speaker’s personal opinion. If they prefer to experience (time-)space without children, *Kind* is seen as annoying and then *kinderfrei* expresses a positive state of affairs. Alongside a general devaluation of the concept of *Kind*, *kinderfrei* can also describe a temporary state of affairs in that a person described as a child is not present at a particular moment in time but does generally exist. This second interpretation can be contrasted nicely with *kinderlos*, which is used in connection with individuals or couples who generally have no children. Thus, this pair of paronyms can be considered to follow theoretical morphology if and when *Kind* is interpreted negatively in the sense of ‘annoying’. Above and beyond that, fundamentally different categories can be identified which differentiate

between (temporarily) limited (time-)space (*kinderfrei*) and an indefinite state of affairs (*kinderlos*).

The pair of paronyms *wertfrei/wertlos* (*value-free/worthless*) is related to two different lexemes, namely *Bewertung* (*evaluation*) and *Wert* (*value*). The rarer of the two, *wertfrei*, describes an action, a state of affairs or a domain as being neutral, objective and impartial, which generally precludes both a positive and a negative connotation. With its negative connotation, *wertlos* can be paraphrased as ‘without value’. In everyday language, the form ending in *-frei* is used for neutral statements and the one with the suffix *-los* for negative evaluations, exactly the opposite of what is to be expected from the hypothetical assumptions of the word-formation pattern.

Rauchfrei (*smoke-free*) is much more frequent than *rauchlos* (*smokeless*) and, with its three interpretations, semantically richer. Usually it refers to a place or a period of time in the sense that the condition of being ‘without smoke’ is imposed from outside and the consumption of tobacco is not allowed within these specific parameters. In contrast, *rauchfrei* can also refer to a person who voluntarily refrains from consuming tobacco. Finally, in relation to a specific environment, *rauchfrei* indicates that it does not smell of nicotine. In everyday language, all three interpretations of *rauchfrei* generally have positive connotations, which would match the classification of the suffix in theoretical morphology. The situation is quite different with the extremely rare *rauchlos*, which can be paraphrased as ‘without the emission of gaseous waste’. Primarily, it is used to refer to products and less frequently to circumstances or branches. A common characteristic of these reference groups is that they are generally associated with smoke, steam or fumes, which are, however, absent in a setting described as *rauchlos*. In combination with smoke, the suffix *-los* does not involve an evaluation but instead expresses the anomaly that, contrary to expectations, there is no smoke.

This analysis revealed that pairs of paronyms within a group behave quite distinctively although they all follow the same morphological pattern. The use of individual pairs of paronyms ending in *-frei/-los* in everyday language often corresponds to theoretical morphology but mostly in relation to the relative frequency of the individual words to each other.

References

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