

Occasionalisms in spoken German

Explanations of meaning ranging from a necessity to an interactive resource

Occasionalisms, i. e. situational ad-hoc expressions that are coined for a specific occasion, are a recurrent phenomenon in verbal interactions. The meaning of an occasionalism is not conventionalized and thus potentially unknown (Michel 1997; Barz 1998; Altmann 2014).

Most studies on occasionalisms are lexicological in nature. While they focus on occasional expressions in written texts (like newspapers, literary texts, and advertising), systematic corpus-based comparisons suggest that there are hardly any quantitative differences between written and spoken language corpora (Stumpf 2021a). Occasionalisms have rarely been investigated in authentic spoken interactions, however, and even more rarely adopting a conversation analytic approach. Studies that use spoken language data (e. g., Wildgen 1982; Weber 2014; Stumpf 2021a, 2021b, in print) focus on word formation and the functions of occasionalisms, like the expansion of the lexicon (especially when adequate expressions do not exist, see, e. g., Matussek 1994; Motsch 1999; Ronneberger-Sibold 2015; Arndt-Lappe et al. 2018), linguistic economy and the condensation of information (Matussek 1994; Hohenhaus 1996; Weber 2014; Stumpf 2018) as well as stylistic and humorous functions (Hohenhaus 1996; Stumpf 2018).

Explanations of and negotiations about the meaning of occasionalisms tend to be dealt with in a subordinate manner (cf. Weber 2014; Stein 2007; Stumpf in print) and are generally not investigated systematically from a conversation analytic perspective. In conversation analysis and interactional linguistics, on the other hand, semantic and morphological aspects have mostly been neglected.

Against this background and using a conversation analytic approach, this paper investigates under what conditions the meaning of occasional expressions is subsequently explained in self- or other-initiated repairs and when this is not the case.

My focus is on three questions:

- 1) Under which conditions and in which sequential contexts are occasionalisms used without their meaning being negotiated?
- 2) When and how is the meaning of occasionalisms explained in or after self- or other-initiated repairs?
- 3) How are occasionalisms or explanations of their meaning used as an interactive resource, i. e. what possibilities do occasionalisms offer for speakers to shape the ongoing interaction in a specific way?

My data stem from the FOLK corpus (Research and Teaching Corpus of Spoken German), which at the time of collecting the occasionalisms (summer 2020) consisted of about 285 hours of authentic conversations of different interaction types. My final collection comprised 1,068 occasionalisms.

It turns out that the overwhelming majority of the occasionalisms that were analyzed, despite being potentially unknown, did not cause an observable problem in understanding for different reasons. Comprehension problems do not seem to occur in the case of seman-

tically transparent word formations, like in noun chains (e. g. *lieblingshamburgerbraterei* ‘favorite hamburger grill’) or derivations (e. g. *straßigkeit* ‘roadiness’). Other occasionalisms are comprehensible in that their meaning can be inferred by cues or anchoring in (often prior) context, e. g. by using contrasting expressions (e. g. [*hellsichtig* –] *dunkelsichtig* [‘clairvoyant –] darkvoyant’) or because the reference has been established in prior context (e. g. using the *passe-partout* compound *larryaktion* ‘larry action’ after telling an eventful story about rescuing a cat named Larry). In other cases, a precise understanding of the meaning of occasionalisms just does not play a role. Instead, the purpose of using the occasional expression is a shared humorous interaction (e. g. saying the expression *teenager* with a German pronunciation, which results in an ad-hoc compound that could be translated as ‘tea rodent’; see Moulin 2018 on the playful use of language as a driver of lexical innovation).

Of the 1,068 occasionalisms, only 184 are explained subsequently. In 144 cases, speakers did this in self-initiated repairs, for example because they anticipated problems of understanding due to very idiosyncratic or vague expressions whose meaning could not be deduced even from context. If comprehension issues are unlikely and the meaning of an occasionalism is nevertheless explained in self-initiated moves, this often serves purposes other than ensuring understanding, for example self-positioning (see also Torres Cajó in print), often to highlight a positive skill or trait like in example 1:

Example 1: FOLK_E_00173_T05_c386–394

https://dgd.ids-mannheim.de/DGD2Web/ExternalAccessServlet?command=displayTranscriptVideo&id=FOLK_E_00173_SE_01_T_05_DF_01&cID=c388&wID=w1584&textSize=300&contextSize=8

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01      TB  *&wie gesagt ich ich bin n absoluter &$REIse#typ.=
           like I said I am an absolute travel guy
02 -> TB  =ich kenn
           I know
03      (0.67)
04 -> TB  f (.) FAST alle ecken deutschlands*:=
           almost all corners of Germany
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In only 40 cases did speakers explain the meaning of an occasionalism after an other-initiated repair. This happens because speakers do not always anticipate a problem in understanding. When recipients lack epistemic access to decode the meaning but understanding the meaning of the expression is crucial (e. g. because a certain action is required), they ask for an explanation, often repeating (part of) the source of the problem, i. e. the occasionalism itself.

However, the fact that epistemic access and common ground is necessary for decoding some occasionalisms also offers speakers the opportunity to use them strategically. The ‘puzzling’ ad-hoc expression (see Schenkein 1978 on *puzzle-pass-solution sequences*) then serves as an interactive resource to make recipients curious, to elicit follow-up questions, and thus to license subsequent utterances (see ‘unpacking the gloss’, Jefferson 1985) that sometimes elaborate on the subject like in example 2:

Example 2: FOLK_E_00287_SE_01_T_03_1824–1848

https://dgd.ids-mannheim.de/DGD2Web/ExternalAccessServlet?command=displayTranscript&id=FOLK_E_00287_SE_01_T_03_DF_01&cID=c1830&wID=w8170&textSize=600&contextSize=20

- 01 MB netti hat **SPEcialwein**.
Netti has specialwine
[...]
- 02 FB WAS für_n **SPEcialwein**?
what kind of specialwine
[...]
- 03 -> MB °h wovon se b beim letzten mal geKOTZt << :-) > hat;>
the one she threw up from the last time
[...]
- 04 -> MB °h ja SIE is ja der meinung des wär nUr von dem WEIN;=
well she believes it was only from the wine
- 05 -> MB =und ich hab gesagt das liegt dran dass du zwischendurch noch
bier und SCHNAPS getrunken has;
*and I said it is because you had drunk beer and schnapps in
between*

As other interactional semantic studies have already pointed out (cf. Deppermann/De Stefani 2019; Deppermann 2020; Helmer 2020), this study on occasionalisms also shows that meaning in interaction is negotiated and constituted in a locally situated way but that the interactional function of negotiating meaning is not limited by this.

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