

The use of verb phrases in English and German – A quantitative case study using comparable corpus data

Format: oral presentation (20 minutes)

In the existing literature on English-German contrasts, claims as to the more frequent use of verb phrases in English, compared to a more “nominal” style in German, abound (e.g. Kortmann & Meyer 1992: 163, Königs 2004: 1) The empirical evidence on this is, however, scarce. The few existing empirical studies either use translation data (e.g. Fischer 2013), which is not adequate, focus on nominal style (e.g. Neumann 2020), or rely purely on the count of automatically assigned parts-of-speech tags (e.g. Berg 2017).

A thorough empirical investigation of the “verbality” of English and German is needed to complement the existing research. For such an investigation, it is essential to pay due attention to differences associated with register and mode in each language. It is a possibility that language-internal register/mode differences might be overall more pronounced than cross-linguistic differences, or that cross-linguistic differences are especially pronounced in certain registers (e.g. Königs 2004: 3, 5).

The study at hand uses GECCo, a comparable corpus of spoken and written texts from English and German (Kunz et al. 2021). Through a combination of automatic and manual processing, all verb phrases in the corpus are identified and annotated for finiteness, verb form, and grammatical function in the clause. The frequency of finite and non-finite verb phrases (in various functions) in English and German is then examined with the help of a Bayesian mixed-effects regression model. In total, 68,658 verb phrases are found in English (of which 15,508 are non-finite) and 50,289 in German (4,462 non-finite).

Preliminary results confirm existing assumptions that English uses more verb phrases overall, that in both languages verb phrases are used more often in spoken language, and that there are considerable differences by register. This is illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts the number of verb phrases (sum of finite and non-finite) per hundred words for the two languages, divided into the 14 registers that are included in the corpus. The regression model also provisionally shows that the effect of language appears to be more important than that of mode and of information density.

The data furthermore allows for a subsequent investigation of the contribution of non-finite verb phrases to these overall differences since the existing literature heavily suggests a central role of these structures (e.g. Fischer 2013: 169).

In sum, the study at hand

- provides new insights into verbal style through fine-grained measurements and statistical modelling based on non-translation data,
- offers empirical evidence for common claims about English-German contrasts,
- illustrates the value of advanced statistical procedures for contrastive linguistics,
- and contributes to the emerging branch of (corpus-based) “quantitative Contrastive Linguistics” (Gast 2015: 5).

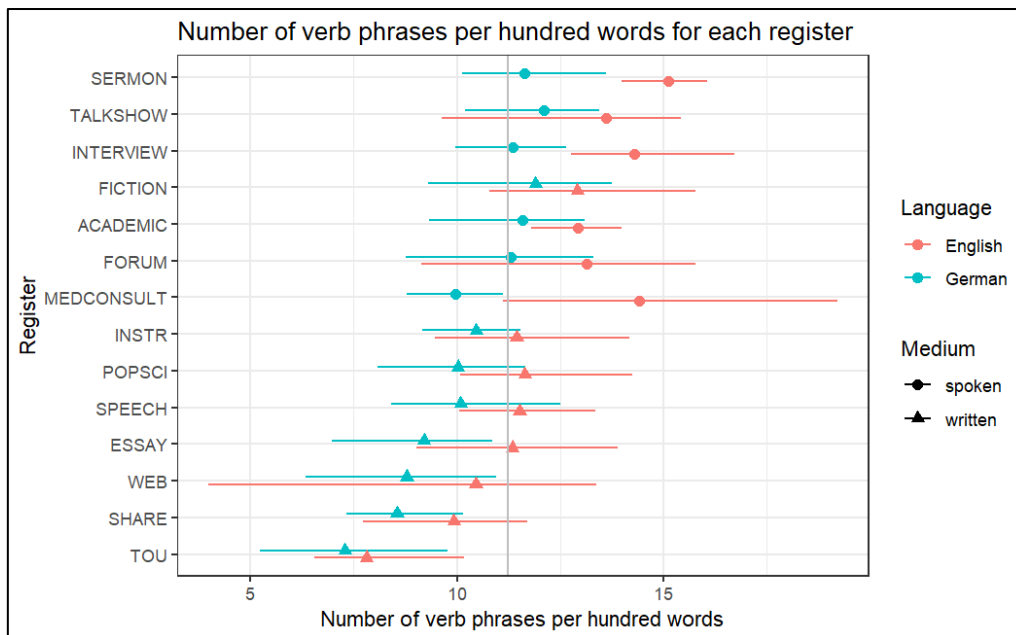


Figure 1: Frequency of verb phrases per hundred words in English and German by register (based on GECCo corpus, showing medium and range)

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