'Differing only in dialect', or How collocations can co-shape concepts☆

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to show that a specific phrase, 'to differ only in dialect', was coined before the middle of the sixteenth century in the Zurich region as an effective way to describe the superficial nature of the differences between two speech varieties. Originating in commentaries on the historiographic works of the classical Latin authors Caesar and Tacitus, this originally Neo-Latin phrase became widely used in other types of text from the 1560s onwards (mainly in works devoted to ethnic history, language, and theology), where it served a wide range of divergent purposes and discursive strategies. From the seventeenth century onwards, the collocation 'to differ only in dialect' impacted on theoretical reflections on the conceptual pair 'language' and 'dialect'. This case study thus shows that scholars interested in the emergence and development of a concept could benefit greatly from closely examining collocations and their history.

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1. Aims

The present paper strives to contribute to the history of ideas—or concepts—in a twofold manner. Its main goal is to trace a key development in the history of the concept of 'dialect'. Nowadays, the concepts 'language' and 'dialect' are closely related and often bracketed together, either to determine the status of a particular variety (e.g., "Is X a dialect of Y or is it an independent language?") or precisely to discuss the problematic status of the twin concepts (e.g., "What is the difference between a language and a dialect?").[1] In a previous study, Van Hal (2010: 471) observed that Humanist scholars tended to indicate a relationship of close kinship between two languages—and hence between two peoples—by perceiving that the two were similar, 'differing only in dialect'.

The high frequency with which this expression occurs in early modern books prompted us to take a closer look at the origins, development, circulation, and impact of this phrase. In this paper, we present our findings and provide tentative answers to some key questions: where did this phrase come from? Is it firmly rooted in the classical tradition or is it an early modern innovation? Why was it used so often in the early modern period? In pointing out the significance of collocations and phrases in co-shaping concepts, we also address methodological questions in conceptual history. Above all, we seek to

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[1] The dichotomy is politically, culturally, and ideologically motivated (see, e.g., Löffler, 2003: 3–10 and Chambers and Trudgill, 1998: 4–5).

demonstrate that the phrase 'differing only in dialect' was at least partly responsible for the shaping of the early modern (and, eventually, modern) concept of 'dialect': the phrase affected the meaning of the term *dialect* to such an extent that it contributed to crystallising the concept of 'dialect', so as to stand in direct opposition to that of 'language'.

2. Methodological background

It is our basic assumption that the meaning of the term *dialectus* has not remained stable over time. Whilst we will not engage with theoretical discussions in related fields, such as the history of ideas, intellectual history, the history of concepts, historical semantics, and historical discourse analysis,[2] we do want to make explicit our practical approach to tracing the history of the concept of 'dialect'. We agree with Quentin Skinner's (1969: 39) observation that the persistence of words—in our case *dialect(us)*, in Skinner's *utopia*—does not necessarily presuppose that the notions expressed by these words have remained consistent over time. In other words, it would be deceptive to treat 'concepts' and 'words' on the same level. Hence, for the sake of clarity, it is beneficial to make an explicit distinction between ideas (or concepts) on the one hand and words (or terms) on the other (Haßler and Neis, 2009: 81; Dutt, 2011; see also Stierle, 1979). The acceptance of the necessity to distinguish between concepts and words in order to gain an understanding of the history of concepts implies that concepts should be studied within both their textual and extra-linguistic contexts.[3] The task of a conceptual historian is therefore very demanding, as (s)he must trace an abstract idea that can adopt various terminological guises. In the past, as Pumfrey et al. (2012: 397) have pointed out already, conceptual historians had to rely on a (necessarily restricted) set of pre-identified texts to conduct their research. This method of proceeding entails a certain danger of circularity, since potentially relevant sources remain undetectable without explicit references from within an initially defined corpus.

This paper aims to understand the emergence and spread of a specific *phrase*, viz. 'to differ in dialect only', which seems to have crucially affected the early modern and present-day 'career' of the concept of 'dialect'. The idea that collocations can influence the interpretation of a word is certainly not new. In corpus linguistics, for instance, scholars such as John Sinclair (2004: 134–135) have stressed that "[s]ituations [often] […] arise in texts where the precise meaning of a word or phrase is determined more by the verbal environment than the parameters of a lexical entry" and that "[t]he textual environment will nearly always have some effect on the meaning of a unit", without, however, "the accepted features of the meaning" being "totally ignored" on the lexical plane. Similarly, in construction grammar (a grammatical model that is generally closely associated with both cognitive and corpus linguistics, see Hilpert, 2014 for a recent introduction), it is emphasized not only that lexical units have meanings, but also that syntactic constructions are intertwined with a specific semantics which is often pragmatically determined (*i.e.* by concrete usage in a specific context). Goldberg (2006: 5) has defined *construction* as follows:

> Any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as some aspect of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other constructions recognized to exist. In addition, patterns are stored as constructions even if they are fully predictable as long as they occur with sufficient frequency.

We argue that these linguistic insights and models deserve more attention from conceptual historians. True, scholars in the field of historical semantics have stressed that collocations can be helpful in sketching the history of a concept (see, e.g., Jussen, 2011: 60), which made them develop electronic tools that are capable of tracing co-occurrences (see, e.g., Jussen and Rohmann, 2015). To the best of our knowledge, however, researchers have not yet explored the extent to which constructions can co-shape concepts. The present contribution therefore seeks to demonstrate, by means of a case study, that paying closer attention to constructions can also be very revealing for the history of a particular concept.

In order to explore the history of the collocation 'to differ only in dialect', we seek to make optimal use of all present-day digital tools and possibilities. The emergence of online full-text libraries and repertories, such as Google Books, Internet Archive, and Early English Books Online (EEBO), has opened up new avenues for historians and allows them to investigate relevant texts that did not belong to their initial corpus. Once these archives become more sophisticated and full-fledged longitudinal historical corpora, conceptual history will probably be revolutionized (see the promising results obtained by Pumfrey et al., 2012; Jussen and Rohmann, 2015). However, it is important to emphasize that the research underlying this paper could not fully benefit from ongoing digital revolutions. First and foremost, the attention directed to the digital searchability of early modern Latin texts has been very limited, despite the fact that Latin "dominated literature production in Europe up to the 17th century" (Springmann et al., 2014: 71). This implies that a Google Books query such as "*dialecto tantum*" yields a number of results that are far from complete, especially given that Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology often fails to recognize the typographical ligature <*ct*> (see Fig. 1).

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[2] See, e.g., Pumfrey et al. (2012: 395–397 and Wimmer (2015)) for a clear sketch of this tangle of disciplines. Müller and Schmieder (2016) offer a very detailed overview.

[3] See Haßler and Neis (2009: 84): "Da sich metasprachliche Begriffe in Texten konstituieren und auch über Texte verbreitet werden, ist ihre rein lexikographische Erfassung nicht ausreichend. Vielmehr muss ihre Konzeptualisierung in Texten gleichfalls betrachtet werden." See Dutt (2011: 41). It is worth pointing out that scholars specializing in critical discourse analysis and historical semantics tend to attach great importance to the context beyond the sentence level.