Heteronymy in dialect data:
three case-studies on the influence of semantic concept features

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The number of heteronyms in a dialect area varies for different concepts. Pilot studies have indicated that features related to semantic properties of the concepts (viz. vagueness, salience and negative affect) can influence the amount of lexical dialect variation (Geeraerts & Speelman 2010, Speelman & Geeraerts 2008). For example, concepts that are less salient for a language user show a larger amount of variation than more salient ones. In the Limburgish dialects of Dutch, for instance, only 2 names occur for the salient concept EAR, while for EYELASH, a less salient concept, more than 20 names exist. In this paper, we discuss three case-studies that expand on these pilot studies in several ways. Overall, we present systematic converging evidence for the influence of semantic features on lexical variation.

In the first study, we replicate the results of the pilot studies, which only focused on the semantic field of the human body. Using linear regression analysis, we show that the influence of semantic features is stable across five other semantic fields. The second case-study focuses on the relationship between lexical diversity (i.e. the number of lexemes per concept), on the one hand, and geographical heterogeneity (i.e. the degree to which the lexical variants are distributed across geographical space in a heterogeneous way), on the other hand. This case study shows that the influence of semantic features is still evident if we control for the geographical signal in the data. The third case-study consists of a fine-grained analysis of the relationship between the everyday frequency of a concept and the amount of variation that it shows. By zooming in on the names for plants in the dialects of Dutch, we are able to confirm that more frequent and, thus, more experientially salient plants tend to show a smaller amount of lexical diversity.

References

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