

Goethe's Vocabulary and Semantics in nuce

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1. Scope and Proportions of his Vocabulary

Goethe's written (and oral) legacy has been almost completely edited. This textual corpus acts as the point of reference for any analysis of his vocabulary and word use. A textual representation of an author's vocabulary has its own distinctive physiognomy. This immediately becomes clear in comparison with the lexical standard of the era as codified in representative dictionaries. The Goethe texts with their ad-hoc word creations and individual nuances in meaning boast a resounding surplus when compared with the common vocabulary. Striking lexical and semantic gaps, which one would not expect from such a linguistically capable author, also appear, though, even in the area of common basic words, (e.g. words listed by Adelung such as *Flechse*, *flennen*, *fletschen*, *Flicker*, *Flieder*, *Florett*, *Flunder* are not found in Goethe's writings). In order to determine the scope of the individual vocabulary, a strictly empirical approach based on the findings of the corpus must be adopted. This means neither to supplement according to reasons of plausibility, nor to reduce according to a rigid notion of the lexeme. The decision in favour of a particular lexis excludes the vocabulary of texts written in foreign languages. Moreover, only literarily and cultural-historically significant names are included. The Goethe Dictionary will provide around 90,000 words (as individual dictionary entries). The number of entries in the Adelung Dictionary is estimated at around 60,000; Campe estimates 141,227 for his dictionary. Goethe's vocabulary is exceptionally large in comparison with the previously assessed vocabularies of other authors; around 23,000 words have been counted for Luther's German writings, 22,400 for Storm (without his letters), 27,000 for Ibsen, 29,000 for Shakespeare, 12,500 for Milton, 21,200 for Puschkin, and 12,400 for Cervantes. The main source of Goethe's lexical abundance lays not so much in his literary work contained in Section I of the Weimar Edition (poems, dramas, epics, novels, autobiographic writings, translations, editings, writings on art and literature), but rather in the sections of letters, diaries, and scientific writings, as well as in the diverse supplementary editions, especially in the official writings. The archive of the Goethe Dictionary contains 3 million citations of which 1,2 million apply to Section I of the Weimar Edition; the literary work has a stake of around 40% of the entire vocabulary. According to a rule in textual statistics, the number of single-usage words that occur in a corpus is very high. In Goethe, such single-usage words comprise almost half of the vocabulary; words that occur 1-3 times comprise around two-thirds.

2. Language Biography and Architecture of the Vocabulary

Vocabulary in its entirety is the cumulative result of a long and complex language biography, which in turn is embedded in the whole historical-linguistic process. One of the most formative influences upon the architecture of the vocabulary is the successive addition of special language parts to the communicative centre of everyday language. Technical and scientific terminologies open up rich reservoirs. Within the sphere of professional activity there is a strong dependence upon the legal and administrative language tradition, a consciously conventional way of treating different types of texts, stylistic patterns, and technical terminology. After a brief stint as a legal associate in Frankfurt, Goethe took on an extensive administrative role in the Weimar Civil Service,

which encompassed the following areas: judiciary and administration, finance, tax, war, mining, road construction, hydraulic engineering, castle building, stage management, superintendence of schools for higher education, universities, and libraries. The vocabularies of each of these fields of activity are subdivided according to genre-specific styles and levels of communication and are frequently intertwined with one another. The adaptation of special expressions, either manual-technical or from a particular group (i.e. mining terminology, the student jargon of Jena) is often connected with official functions.

In contrast to work-related linguistic forms, the writings of the private scholar and naturalist Goethe exhibit clear characteristics of individualization. Personal inclinations, perspectives, and modes of thought were able to make an impact here, in particular when writing in opposition to prevailing scientific models. For instance, Goethe opposes Linné's static anatomizing taxonomy of the plant kingdom with his dynamic concept of *metamorphosis* and its idea of an original identity of all plant species (*Urpflanze*) and all parts of the plant (*Blatt*). In contrast to Linné's strictly objective nomenclature, Goethe's terminology is characterized by variations in synonyms and interpretive paraphrasing; the expressions play around with a fluctuating conceptual content, at the same time attempting to forge contact with nature itself. This reveals an outlook on language which strongly relativises any systematic terminology ('Nature has no system'). Goethe's breadth of scientific interests – with focus on botany, comparative anatomy, theory of colours (i.e. physical optics), geology, mineralogy, meteorology – and in particular the intensiveness of the empirical and theoretical pervasion, are probably unique in a poet. This has consequences right down to the choice of poetical comparisons and metaphors. The growth ratio of the vocabulary may be illustrated by some data: the letter A contains around 120 German simplexes, plus an additional 53 botanical terms (from *Acanthus mollis* to *Azalea*) and 34 for rocks and minerals (*Abrazit* to *Axinit*). Such appellations, which are partly only traceable in lists or notes, extend to the periphery of the technical vocabulary. The writings in natural sciences published during Goethe's lifetime generally tend towards a moderately terminologized, educated diction. Similarly, the early and late historical-biographical and critical-theoretical writings on art and literature aim at being generally comprehensible. Although self-reflection is rarely expressed explicitly in writing, the characteristic leading definitions for the artistic programme are nevertheless developed here, through to the vision of a 'Weltliteratur'.

3. The Development of the Literary Language

If one considers the literary work in terms of the development of the vocabulary, one must first dismiss the notion that beyond common language there is a special vocabulary for literature in the sense that there is a terminology for botany. Rather, the literary use of language draws generally from all language varieties and lexical registers in creative combination, alteration and formation. Goethe was involved in the external and internal multilingualism in a special way. He learned the most important old and new languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Italian, English) and he grew up in the imperial city of Frankfurt, in the literary language type of south (west) German. Later he started using the sophisticated east middle German literary language standard. Through his changes in location and his travels he came into contact with various regional dialects (aside from the Frankfurt-Hessian dialect, also Leipzig-Upper Saxon, Strasbourg-Alsatian, Weimar-Thuringian, in addition e.g. Swiss) and entertained communicative relationships with various social groups, not least with scientists. His literary language was receptive to all of these influences, and above all it

was eminently versatile, not only in its variability according to subjects, genres and forms, but also in its individual historical profile. Goethe's linguistic development is generally divided into three periods:

(a) New views on language, poetry, and genius, essentially introduced to Goethe by Herder, gave substance and direction to the literary revolution of the turbulent 'Sturm und Drang' period. Qualities of originality, natural spontaneity, sensual figurativeness, and powerful dynamism were viewed as instantly transforming an idiom into the language of genius and poetry. This explains the interest in the stylistic elements of the animated, melodic, emphatic spoken language of folk poetry and of the German of Luther's time (aside from the literary models). Dialect-specific vocabulary, colloquialisms and archaisms are incorporated (e.g. *haudern, Maidel, Buhle*), bold word formations amass. The range in lyric poetry spans from the folk song tone of 'Heidenröslein' to the ecstasy of the free rhythms in 'Wandrer's Sturmlied', both of which are far removed from ordinary language use and rule-abiding poetry.

(b) Goethe's distance from the basic substance of the (German) language is already evident before the Italian journey. He shows greater awareness of the idiosyncrasies of his mother tongue, the self-contained regularities of language in general, the symbolic character of the word. Attempts have been made to capture the transition from the language of genius to the classical style by use of contrasting terms such as individualising/stereotypical and dynamic/static. New tendencies in the presentation of expression can be clearly recognised in the textual revisions of the first complete edition (1787-90), in which Goethe drew closer to the linguistic standard (set by Adelung) in his aim to achieve measure and clarity: *haudern* to *zaudern*, *Reuter* to *Reiter*, *Berge wolkenangetan* to *Berge wolkig himmelan*, and so forth. At the same time there are also huge swings of the pendulum in the use of language during the classical period. Considering only 'Iphigenie', one could falsely conclude that Goethe had suppressed his impulse for word formation and suspended his use of foreign words.

(c) Goethe's mature style is already fully developed in 'West-östlicher Divan' and culminates in 'Faust II'. This is his most personal style and in its amalgamation of quite disparate linguistic and stylistic means it amounts to a unique art form, beyond any model character. Noticably, Goethe's ability to create words reached its climax during his old age, although some features do refer back to the language of his youth, for instance in his inclination towards occasionally odd word-forms such as *Fettbauch-Krummbein-Schelm*, *Flügelflatterschlagen* and *Fratzengeisterspiel* in 'Faust II' or *Scheitholzflößanarchie* and *Weltgeschichtsinventariestück* in later letters.

4. Semantic Individualization

Semantic individualization refers to the emotional and thematic charging of certain words so that they gain author-specific value. This involves the creation of meaning, of innovative semantics. In order to make valid statements about the type and degree of such lexical-semantic individualization in the area of common language one would have to undertake a comparison with the era-specific vocabulary and with the language of other contemporary writers. Some things can, however, be learned by studying the internal relationships within the author's language. This can be primarily exemplified by attempts to record the basic elements of Goethe's experience, emotions, thoughts, and works in specific terms and ultimately in words or word groups. A series of monographs was written, mostly during the preparatory phase of the Goethe Dictionary Project, dealing with high-frequency words with a rich development in meaning and diverse transitions to the visual and symbolic world of the poet. These include: *Anmut/anmutig, fromm, Gegenwart, Gemüt, genießen/Genuß, gesund, Ruhe/Stille*,

Tat/tätig/Tätigkeit, zart and on the phrase *offenbares Geheimnis*. The word analyses aim to determine idiosyncratic and recurring nuances in meaning or application which transcend the conventional spectrum of meaning and which can be viewed as individually typical. In doing so, some consideration must be given to the fact that each specific quantity and distribution of occurrences already incidentally boasts a unique profile of usage. These efforts are applied to the entire vocabulary contained in the Goethe dictionary, as well as to dictionaries on specific works such as 'Götz', 'Werther' and most importantly 'Divan'. Goethe's individual language had already been the topic of previous research, as far as it did not anecdotally pursue favourite expressions or make assumptions on the relation of linguistic style and world view. The developmental aspect, the temporal progression of the use of a word has significantly more weight in the older investigations. The two main lines of research are:

- a) Which words are being charged with a special 'significance' or changed semantically? A striking example for an 'individual' change in meaning' is *dumpf*, having had positive connotations during the first Weimar years, (most probably on the basis of group jargon) as relating to a 'generating' state of mind. However, this change remains an episode, as it would be misguided to think that Goethe as an individual could create new definitions for words (in a lexical and linguistic-historical sense). The results nevertheless prove interesting for the theory of an individual language.
- b) The other *line of questioning* is arguably even more important for the identification of lexical comprehension barriers: Which words are being used to approximate the etymon in their 'original' or outdated sense? Such linguistic patinating is only partly the result of the influence of older texts (for instance the Luther Bible) or outdated varieties (e.g. legal and barrister's language). Sensual (e.g. spatial) perceptions are often preserved in word use, e.g. *entgegenen* 'entgegenkommen, begegnen', *ereignen/eräugnen* 'vor Augen kommen, sich zeigen', or reactivated ad hoc (e.g. *verwickelt* und *entwickelt*). Imagery also works with such revitalizations (e.g. *ein bißchen Übel wiederkauen*).

Apart from the word-related studies there are others that analyse Goethe's concepts, for instance *Bildung, Ganzheit, Hoffnung, Idee, Typus*. Goethe's scientific word creations are relevant for historical-technical language studies. Research into onomasiological structures, e.g. the structuring of word-fields or antonymical complexes, has largely been neglected. Complementary and contrasting terms, which are frequently elevated to a higher synthesis, evidently played an important structuring role in Goethe's semantics, although he avoids fixed terminology. (Compare terms such as *Augenblick/Dauer, Diastole/Systole, Dilettant/Künstler, Einzelnen/Ganzes, Finsternis/Licht, Form/Gehalt, Freiheit/Gesetz, Geist/Natur, genießen/streben, klar/verworren*).

The author's phrasing methodology provides evidence for investigations in synonymics - for instance in the variation of expression according to context - in translation, in fine differentiations (e.g. *anschauen/ansetzen, einsam/allein, Gegner/Widersacher*), in rephrasing and in stylistic corrections. Although Goethe maintained his distance from the linguistic debates of his time, expressions reflecting on language are scattered in abundance throughout his entire work. A word theory in nuce is offered by the 'Divan'-poems 'Offenbar Geheimnis' and 'Wink'; both the euphemistic and revealing character of the linguistic symbol is attested in the pivotal sentence 'Das Wort ist ein Fächer!' Goethe often comments on single words, terms, or concepts. He welcomes, for example, the characterisation of his mode of thinking as 'gegenständlich'. Concerning the lexicographical indexing of a poetic linguistic world he was ready with the comment: 'If a dictionary can encompass an author, he is not worth much.' (Maximen und Reflexionen)

5. Legacy

Goethe as a remedy against the shallowness of language, Goethe as the (mistaken) aim of linguistic pedagogy, these are notions that featured as topoi in the 19th century. Intellectual and (to some extent) literary language has drawn from the source of this classic poet well into the 20th century; this is as certain a fact as single verification and overall evaluation are uncertain. From the collections of familiar quotations from 'Faust I' alone there are e.g. 'des Pudels Kern' and 'Gretchenfrage' (not found in this form in Goethe). Terminological coinages such as *Morphologie*, *Urphänomen*, *Wahlverwandtschaft*, *Weltliteratur* remain well known. It is, however, hard to distinguish between the effects of reading Goethe and reading on Goethe.