DE GRUYTER MOUTON GCLA 2019; 7: 67–78

Olaf Jäkel

Denotational Incongruencies in TEFL: Cognitive linguistic solutions for a didactic problem

https://doi.org/10.1515/gcla-2019-0005

Abstract: Denotational incongruencies as a contrastive phenomenon of lexical-semantic analyses have been described in various respects in Cognitive Linguistics (Jäkel 2001, 2003, 2010a, 2014). This contribution based on authentic evidence from the *Flensburg English Classroom Corpus* (*FLECC*) (Jäkel 2010b) is going to demonstrate that and how denotational incongruencies also affect foreign language teaching by creating problems of intercultural misunderstanding. The proposed approach to their comparative analysis can hopefully provide solutions.

Thus, German “*Bitte*” is not always English “*Please*”, just as “*Seid ihr fertig?*” does not always translate as “*Are you ready?*” It will be argued that and why the common label of *false friends* is insufficient in this context. Especially the types of *granularity differential* and even *crosspiece incongruencies* pose a didactic problem for teachers whose origin needs to be recognized.

First of all, the cognitive field-semantic analysis contributes to a differentiated recognition by the teacher. In a next step, cognitive linguistics can contribute motivated solutions for TEFL and its teaching methodology. In sum, this makes for a two-stage *consciousness raising enterprise*: Teachers realize in how far denotational incongruencies interfere in their pupils’ foreign language learning. And they find appropriate methods to make their pupils aware of concrete cases of denotational incongruencies – an important ingredient for promoting intercultural communicative competence in foreign language teaching.

Keywords: denotation, denotational incongruency, EFL English as a foreign language, TEFL the teaching of English as a foreign language, classroom discourse, comparative semantics, semantic fields, granularity differential, crosspiece incongruency

Olaf Jäkel, Europa-Universität Flensburg, jaekel@uni-flensburg.de

1 Introduction

Denotational incongruencies as a contrastive phenomenon of lexical-semantic analyses have been described in various respects in Cognitive Linguistics (Jäkel 2001, 2003, 2010a, 2012, 2014). Based on authentic evidence from the *Flensburg English Classroom Corpus* (*FLECC*) (Jäkel 2010b), this contribution is going to demonstrate that and how denotational incongruencies also affect foreign language teaching by creating problems of intercultural misunderstanding.

Thus, German "*Bitte*" is not always English "*Please*", just as "*Seid ihr fertig?*" does not always translate as "*Are you ready?*" It will be argued that and why the common label of *false friends* is insufficient in this context. Especially the types of *granularity differential* and even *crosspiece incongruencies* pose a didactic problem for teachers whose origin needs to be recognized.

The cognitive semantic contribution suggested here is twofold: First of all, the cognitive field-semantic analysis contributes to a differentiated recognition by the teacher. In a next step, cognitive linguistics can contribute motivated solutions for TEFL and its teaching methodology. In sum, this makes for a two-stage *consciousness raising* enterprise: Teachers realize in how far denotational incongruencies interfere in their pupils' foreign language learning. And they find appropriate methods to make their pupils aware of concrete cases of denotational incongruencies – an important ingredient for promoting intercultural communicative competence in foreign language teaching.

This paper starts with a short introduction to the approach of denotational incongruencies (2), followed by the main section (3) exemplifying denotational incongruencies as problems in EFL classrooms, based on authentic corpus-evidence. A final summary and conclusion (4) will outline possible solutions.

2 Denotational Incongruencies: The general approach

The general approach to the study of denotational incongruencies introduced in Jäkel (2001) combines traditional structural semantics in a modified version of field theory with a cognitive linguistic approach in the investigation of alternative semantic construals within one and the same conceptual domain. The basic heuristic method employed is that of the theory of semantic fields, or rather the field approach (cf. Lehrer 1974: x), which goes back to the German linguist Trier (1931), and was introduced into English linguistics and elaborated mainly

by Lehrer (1974), Lyons (1977), and Lehrer & Kittay (1992). At the centre of this approach to a comparative lexical semantics is the structuralist tenet that “the single words determine each other’s meaning by their number and position in the overall field” (Trier 1931: 7, my translation).

As Lyons (1977: 253; cf. Lehrer 1974: 15) explicates, one and the same *conceptual domain* (Trier’s *Begriffsbezirk*) can be covered by different *lexical fields* (Trier’s *Wortfelder*). Using the conceptual field of colours as an example, Lyons states that “the *denotational boundaries* between roughly equivalent colour terms in different languages are often *incongruent*” (Lyons 1977: 246, my italics). The Welsh colour term *glas*, for example, has a wider denotational range than English *blue*, with aspects of the neighbouring lexemes *green* and *grey* included (cf. Palmer 1986: 69).

This is where I have borrowed my central term: I speak of *denotational incongruencies* when roughly equivalent lexemes in different languages are used without full synonymy in the sense of *denotational equivalence* (cf. Lyons 1977: 213), or when the use of even one and the same term in different varieties of the same language displays differences in denotation.

Figure 1: Comparative field semantics

As a number of comparative investigations have revealed (Jäkel 2001, 2003, 2010a, 2012, 2014), such differences can be brought out best by studying the different patterns of internal boundaries displayed by the lexical fields (*A* vs. *B*) of two languages, varieties or lects, L (A) vs. L (B), within one and the same conceptual field (cf. Figure 1). Differences displayed in the lexical patterns or usage are then taken as indicators of different cognitive models or construals.

That it is particularly worthwhile for cognitive linguists to revisit the almost forgotten tradition of Trier (1931) and Lehrer (1974) may be underlined by two more quotes from these protagonists of the field semantic approach: “The advantages of this kind of investigation starting from a whole conceptual field [...] can be summarized in the belief that this research approach will take us closer than ever to the consciousness of the language user” (Trier 1931: 10, my translation). “The study of linguistic fields should prove to be a rich source of hypotheses

about human conceptualization, and perhaps some day linguists will generally agree that the 'correct' or at least best semantic analysis is one that describes a speaker's conceptual structure" (Lehrer 1974: 17).

This modified version of the field approach is conceptually close to prototype semantics of the Rosch (1978) type, a characteristic that needs to be argued in more detail elsewhere (Jäkel in prep.). If for descriptive purposes, sense components or semantic features are employed at some stages during the investigation, they serve only as *diagnostic components* (cf. Nida 1975: 112) or *distinctive features* (cf. Lipka 2002: 115), without subscribing to any of the more controversial tenets of componential analysis of the Katz and Fodor (1963) type.

While Jäkel's (2001) original account distinguishes seven different types of denotational incongruency, this contribution will focus on those types that were found to pose actual problems for German learners of English as a foreign language. The four types of denotational incongruency found to play a role in EFL classes will be explained in the exemplary analyses below. They are: staggered incongruency, diagonal incongruency, crosspiece incongruency, and granularity differential. While in most contexts, denotational incongruencies typically affect content words (see, e.g., Jäkel's 2003 study of lexemes denoting *times of the day*), one finding of the present investigation lies in the fact that denotational incongruencies can also affect certain function words. We will, however, start here with one more typical example from the realm of content words.

In one quite common type of incongruency, the denotational boundaries between the lexemes in question do not meet head-on, but face each other in a 'staggered' pattern (see Figure 2).

English
German
pupil
Schüler
student
Student

Figure 2: Staggered Incongruency: *student – Student*

While the German lexeme *Student*, incompatible with *Schüle*r, denotes only a person who has entered university, its English cognate *student* is used for young people at an earlier stage of their educational career. With *pupil* denoting mainly the very young children at school in a British context, already juveniles in their

final years (like Sixth Form) of secondary school are called *students* (cf. Jäkel 2001: 158). Thus, the closest translational equivalent of the German NP “ein Oberstufen*schüler*” in British English is “a 6th form *student*”.

If we enter another major variety of English into this comparison, we encounter one more type of denotational incongruency: In American English, where the lexeme *pupil* is rarely used, the denotation of *student* comprises even younger learners in primary school (see Figure 3).

AmE	BrE	German
student	*pupil*	*Schüler*
	student	*Student*

Figure 3: Staggered Incongruency plus Granularity Differential: *student – student – Student*

The field pattern displayed here between BrE and AmE exemplifies the common type of denotational incongruency in which “one of the two fields compared is split up into smaller lexical sectors than the other, resulting in a *granularity differential*” (Jäkel 2001: 161). Thus, the best AmE equivalent of the BrE NP “a primary school *pupil*” is “an elementary school *student*”.

The denotation of AmE *student* encompasses learners of all ages ‘from the cradle to the grave’, whereas the same denotational space is divided up between two lexemes in the BrE field, between which speakers can and need to differentiate. One conclusion to be drawn from this example is that denotational incongruencies cannot only be found between different languages, but also between different dialects or varieties of a language.

3 Denotational Incongruencies as Problems in EFL Classrooms: Authentic Corpus-Evidence

In this main section we will exemplify denotational incongruencies as problems in EFL classrooms, based on authentic corpus-evidence, mainly taken from the *Flensburg English Classroom Corpus* (*FLECC*, Jäkel 2010b). The first excerpt (1)

comes from a fourth grade of primary school (Jäkel 2010b: 76). The context is that of a group activity or exercise in which small groups of pupils playact a dialogue between a waiter and some guests:

(1)
(260) P1: Hello!
(261) P2: What would you like to eat?
(262) [Waiter P2 lays the table. Then he brings the food.]
(263) P2: Please!
(264) P3: Nein, du musst sagen (*No, you have to say*), "Here are you"!
(265) Here are you ... Nein, ich glaub (*No, I think*) "Here you are"!

The pupil (P2) who serves as waiter in this group activity uses "*Please*" as his best translation of German "*Bitte*" (l.263). He is instantly corrected by one of his peers (P3), who remembers that the appropriateness of *please* depends on the context. In this situation, in which the illocutionary act is not one of asking for something, but of providing something to the benefit of the addressee, "*Here you are!*" is the appropriate politeness formula. The transcript reveals that this girl P3, in rummaging through her English repertoire first (l.264) seems to go through a syntactic transfer error caused by the German "*Hier bist du*", before she is able to correct herself, producing the syntactically correct and pragmatically appropriate form "*Here you are*" (l.265). The result is her successful peer-correction, which must be noted as a remarkable achievement for an EFL learner in her second year.

German	English	
Bitte ...	*Please ...*	[+ when asking]
	Here you are!	[+ when providing]

Figure 4: Granularity Differential: *Bitte!*

The problem for German learners of English displayed in this example can be analysed as a case of granularity differential, in which the wide denotational range of German "*Bitte!*" is split up between two smaller subsectors in the English field (cf. Figure 4). Notice that EFL learners failing to use the necessary

differentiation appropriately would surely cause misunderstanding or irritation on the part of their English interlocutors.

The next excerpt (2) comes from a tenth grade of a secondary (*Realschule*) comprehensive school (Jäkel 2010b: 213). In this case it is the teacher (T) who falls prey to some denotational incongruency of the granularity differential type:

(2)
(42) [T writes on blackboard: *2. Dec 25th: the children find their presents*]
(43) T: I see you all write it down, that's really really good!
(44) [The blackboard is copied by the pupils.]
(45) T: You all got it? Are you ready?
(46) [...]

In all likelihood, the teacher's erroneous use of "*Are you ready?*" (l.45) in a context in which "*Have you finished?*" would be the appropriate question is due to her lack of awareness of a particular granularity differential between German and English: The common German adjective *fertig* can be seen to cover the whole ground that in English is subdivided between the two lexemes *ready* and *finished*, whose use is determined by two different illocutionary forces. *Ready* is appropriate when someone is prepared to start a new activity. *Finished* is appropriate when the previous activity or job is done (cf. Figure 5).

German	English	
Wir sind fertig.	*We are ready.*	[+ prepared to start]
	We have finished. / We are done.	[+ job done]

Figure 5: Granularity Differential: *fertig*

Whereas in a context like "Achtung – *fertig* – los!", the English translation can opt for "*Ready* – steady – go!", the situation witnessed in the transcript above is the teacher wanting to know if the learners have finished their copying from the board. In German this illocution is expressed by "Seid ihr fertig?", which caused the teacher's error. Her lack of competence, which is certainly lamentable, could be remedied by some consciousness raising training in order to bring out the underlying denotational incongruency.

The following excerpt (3) is taken from the individual classroom corpus included in a student's master thesis in the wake of the *FLECC* (Matthies 2016: 85). What we are witnessing is a scene from another fourth grade of primary school:

(3)
(203) T: Now, take three cards.
(204) Maybe your favourite animals.
(205) Several P: Hä?
(206) T: Take three cards.
(207) [T shows three fingers.]
(208) [Several P are still looking puzzled.]
(209) T: So. [səʊ]
(210) [While T is speaking, she takes three cards from the
(211) box of one P to explain and demonstrate.]
(212) You have three cards and hold them like this.

Exemplified in this excerpt is a small but typical EFL teacher's error due to interference from her L1 German. That her "*so*" (l.209) is not a German word thrown in during her all-English instruction is indicated by the IPA transcription in brackets. What we can detect instead is the contextually inappropriate use of the English function word *so* not as a causal conjunction, but as some discourse marker signalling a new stage in the lesson. This function, which in English could be expressed through markers such as "*now*" or "*right*" is exactly what the German word *so* can be used for (the equivalent of English *so* as causal conjunction, on the other hand, being German *also*). Figure 6 shows the field pattern displayed in the German-English comparison:

German	English
So!	*Now. / Right.* *... like this ...*
Also ...	*So ...!*

Figure 6: Diagonal Incongruency: *so – so*

Whereas in cases of staggered incongruency and granularity differential there is at least some denotational overlap of the lexemes compared, here we have another type of incongruency without any such overlap. "If the same word

form is used with a completely different denotation, the resulting structural pattern in the lexical fields compared motivates the technical term of *diagonal incongruency*" (Jäkel 2001: 159). This is the case with the German-English cognates *so* and *so*.

Notice that there is an alternative – though more unlikely – reading of the excerpt above. The teacher may have intended her utterance of "*so*" (l. 209) not as a discourse marker, but as a deictic expression accompanying her following demonstration. In this case, it would be just as unfitting as in the more likely reading discussed above, and just as mistakenly transferred from her L1 model of German *so*, which can be deictic. As indicated alternatively in figure 6, the proper English rendering of such an illocutionary force would be "(Do it…) *like this*!"

Finally we may have a rare case of *double* diagonal or *crosspiece incongruency* in the context of early EFL learning by German pupils. In a primary school environment, the following dialogue (4) is quite common:

(4)
T: "*Where is your teacher?*" – P: "*Our teacher is Mrs Brook.*"

What happens here is the pupil's misinterpretation of the English question word *where* to mean 'who', which is due to some L1 interference with the German question word *wer*, which is used to ask for an agent. The German question word equivalent to English *where*, used to ask for a location, however, is *wo*. The crosspiece pattern between these German and English question words is displayed in Figure 7:

German	English	
Wer?	*Who?*	[+ Agent]
Wo?	*Where?*	[+ Location]

Figure 7: Crosspiece Incongruency: Question words

Even another potential crosspiece-error is almost predictable from this analysis, though more likely in a written context, in which the question "*Who is your teacher?*" would be erroneously answered by some German learners as "*Our teacher is in the classroom.*"

4 Summary and Conclusion: Possible Solutions

Once again, a general finding has been corroborated: In basic conceptual domains and between closely related languages such as English and German, lexicalisations display denotational incongruencies (cf. Jäkel 2001, 2003). In the context of EFL classes, comparative investigations have shown evidence of four different types: staggered incongruency, granularity differential, diagonal incongruency and crosspiece incongruency. The corpus examples featured competence errors – by pupils or teachers – that could be explained as a result of denotational incongruencies of various types that the speaker was not aware of. Interestingly enough, these denotational incongruencies affected not only content lexemes, but also some basic function words which are central to classroom discourse. Some of the subtle differences in lexicalisation would not have been revealed without the field approach in its modernised cognitive semantic version (cf. Jäkel 2001, in prep.). Thus, the comparative field approach has proven useful for descriptive purposes not only in Semantics and Lexicology, but also in Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis.

In bilingual or interlingual contexts (e.g., in Translating, or in Foreign Language Teaching), these denotational incongruencies can be perceived at work and in action, to be experienced as both challenging and rewarding. They allow learners to experience linguistic relativity, and therefore put their own conceptualisations in perspective. Here lies one of the many reasons for the enormous educational value of learning foreign languages in the first place. The widening of learners' L1-based perspectives can of course be intensified and supported by systematic consciousness-raising efforts from the teacher.

While it has been demonstrated that the concrete and detailed investigation of denotational incongruencies can make a valuable contribution to the analysis of *classroom discourse*, there is more. The analysis of authentic classroom discourse also proves the practical applicability of this cognitive semantic research: Many misunderstandings in EFL classes can be explained as L1-interferences due to denotational incongruencies of various types going unnoticed. In consequence, what seems desirable for teachers is an awareness of the general types of denotational incongruencies between L1 and target language as well as some knowledge of those subtle cases of incongruencies in particular lexical fields.

Finally, some concrete solutions can be formulated. What is called for from a didactic perspective is the EFL-competent presentation and authentic contextualisation of incongruent forms. This applies regardless of school type, or age of learners. Moreover – depending on age, or rather EFL-competence of learners – some consciousness-raising concerning concrete cases of denotational

incongruencies seems desirable: This can be regarded as an important ingredient for promoting intercultural communicative competence in TEFL, or FLT in general. One suitable hands-on method to support this can be found in simple schematic diagrams such as those displayed above for contrastively displaying relevant field structures.

References

Jäkel, Olaf. 2001. Denotational Incongruencies: A Very Short Introduction and Typology. In Wolf Kindermann and Gisela Hermann-Brennecke (eds.), *Echoes in a Mirror: The English Institute after 125 Years* (HSAA, vol. 9). Münster/Hamburg/Berlin/London: LIT. 156–169.

Jäkel, Olaf. 2003. 'Morning, Noon and Night': Denotational Incongruencies between English and German. In Cornelia Zelinsky-Wibbelt (ed.), *Text Transfer: Metonymy and Metaphor, Translation and Expert-Lay Communication.* Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 159–178.

Jäkel, Olaf. 2010a. Questions of Life and Death: Denotational Boundary Disputes. In Hans-Jörg Schmid and Susanne Handl (eds.). *Cognitive Foundations of Linguistic Usage patterns.* Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter. 33–61.

Jäkel, Olaf. 2010b. *The Flensburg English Classroom Corpus (FLECC): Sammlung authentischer Unterrichtsgespräche aus dem aktuellen Englischunterricht auf verschiedenen Stufen an Grund-, Haupt-, Real- und Gesamtschulen Norddeutschlands.* (F.L.A.I.R., vol.3) Flensburg: Flensburg University Press.

Jäkel, Olaf. 2012. 'No, they can't' ... Translate President Obama into German: A Case Study in Critical Cognitive Linguistics. In Kwiatkowska, Alina (ed.), *Texts and Minds: Papers in Cognitive Poetics and Rhetoric.* Frankfurt a.M./Berlin/Bern/Bruxelles/New York/Oxford/Warszawa/Wien: Peter Lang. 259–273.

Jäkel, Olaf. 2014. Denotational Boundary Disputes in Political Discourse: 'Defining the Definition of Marriage'. *Journal of Language and Politics* 13(2); Theme Issue 'Cognitive Perspectives on Political Discourse'. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 336–363.

Jäkel, Olaf. in prep. *Denotational Incongruencies and Contested Concepts: Applied Comparative and Intercultural Semantics in English and German.* Book manuscript, Flensburg University. [226 pp.]

Katz, Jerrold J. and Jerry A. Fodor. 1963. The Structure of a Semantic Theory. *Language* 39: 170–210.

Lehrer, Adrienne. 1974. *Semantic Fields and Lexical Structure.* Amsterdam/London: North-Holland Publishing Company.

Lehrer, Adrienne and Eva Feder Kittay. 1992. *Frames, Fields, and Contrasts: New Essays in Semantic and Lexical Organization.* Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lipka, Leonhard. 2002. *English Lexicology: Lexical Structure, Word Semantics, and Word-formation*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.

Lyons, John. 1977. *Semantics Vol. I & II.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1990).

Matthies, Loreen. 2016. *Arbeitsaufträge im Englischunterricht der Grundschule*. Unpublished Master Thesis, Europa-Universität Flensburg.

Nida, Eugene A. 1975. *Language Structure and Translation.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Palmer, Frank R. 1986. *Semantics.* 2nd edition. London/New York: Cambridge University Press.
Rosch, Eleanor. 1978. Principles of Categorization. In Eleanor Rosch and Barbara B. Lloyd (eds.), *Cognition and Categorization*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. 27–48.
Trier, Jost. 1931. *Der deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbezirk des Verstandes: Die Geschichte eines sprachlichen Feldes.* Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung.