

POLYVALENCE AND POLYMORPHY. MULTIFUNCTIONALITY IN GRAMMAR FROM A LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT. *Polyvalence and Polymorphy. Multifunctionality in Grammar from a Language-Specific Functional Perspective.* Eugenio Coseriu is widely recognized for his contributions to the theory of language, particularly in areas such as linguistic creativity, language change, the stratificational “architecture” and the layered “structure” of language, lexical structures, universals, and text linguistics. Less attention, however, has been given to his outlines of a theory of “functional syntax” (or “functional grammar”), which highlights complementary perspectives and distinguishes between different types of meaning (Coseriu 1973, 1989, 1996). Building on these distinctions, this article examines

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multifunctionality – specifically, polyvalence and polymorphy (or “grammatical synonymy”) – from a language-specific functional approach to grammar. While the polyvalence of grammatical elements parallels lexical polyvalence, polymorphy is far less common. To assess its significance, the article explores the functional status of syntactic patterns conceived as full-fledged constructions and illustrates the concept of polymorphy through a case study of the ditransitive (or “dative”) alternation in present-day German.

Keywords: *language-specific functional grammar (Coseriu), polyvalence, polymorphy (grammatical synonymy), multifunctionality, isomorphism, grammatical alternation, construction meaning, encoded meaning (signified) and designation, normal language use*

REZUMAT. Polivalență și polimorfie. Multifuncționalitatea în gramatică, din perspectivă idiomatice-funcțională. Eugenio Coseriu este larg recunoscut pentru contribuțiile sale la teoria limbajului, în special în domeniul precum creativitatea lingvistică, schimbarea lingvistică, „arhitectura” stratificată și „structura” nivelelor limbajului, structurile lexicale, universalitățile, lingvistica textului. S-a acordat însă mai puțină atenție propunerilor sale privind teoria „sintaxei funcționale” (sau a „gramaticii funcționale”), care evidențiază perspective complementare și distinge diferitele tipuri de semnificate (Coseriu 1973, 1989, 1996). Plecând de la aceste distincții coseriene, articolul examinează multifuncționalitatea – în mod concret polivalența și polimorfia (sau „sinonimia gramaticală”) – dintr-o perspectivă funcțională idiomatice-specifică asupra gramaticii. Dacă polivalența elementelor gramaticale se situează în paralelism cu polivalența lexicală, constatăm că polimorfia este mult mai puțin frecventă. Pentru a evalua semnificația acesteia din urmă, articolul explorează statutul funcțional al structurilor sintactice privite drept construcții complexe și ilustrează conceptul de polimorfie printr-un studiu de caz al alternanței ditransitive (sau „dative”) în limba germană contemporană.

Cuvinte-cheie: *gramatică funcțională idiomatice (Coseriu), polivalență, polimorfie (sinonimie gramaticală), multifuncționalitate, izomorfism, alternanță gramaticală, sens construcțional, sens codificat (semnificat) și designare, norma lingvistică*

1. Introduction

The multifunctionality of grammatical morphemes such as articles, prepositions, conjunctions, cases, verb tenses, verb aspects, pronouns, etc. has always been a theoretical as well as empirical challenge in modern linguistic research. Within the various approaches that have been developed in the 20th

and 21st century to accommodate multifunctionality, by and large three basic perspectives can be distinguished. Accounts in the structuralist vein assume that a grammatical morpheme has a general meaning which licenses its various uses from which the general meaning can at best be abstracted for analytic purposes. This approach is exemplified in Jakobson's and Hjelmslev's famous accounts of case systems in particular languages (Jakobson 1933; Hjelmslev 1935-1937). At the other end of the spectrum are accounts that assume wide-ranging structured polysemy, with the various senses of grammatical morphemes reflecting cognitive principles such as figure and ground (Brugman 1988; Brugman and Lakoff 1988) or semantic networks organized around prototypes and mirroring conceptual structures, as a rule based on the alleged cognitive primacy of spatial representations (Tyler and Evans 2003). A third strand of research provides the possibility to sidestep the question whether a multifunctional grammatical morpheme has a general meaning or several related meanings (or senses). The focus is rather on charting the "geometry" of the functions of morphemes in "conceptual space" based on cross-linguistic comparison. The aim of this third approach is to draw putative "semantic maps" which are believed to capture universal networks of grammatical functions by means of two- or three-dimensional representations in which related functions are linked by connecting lines (e.g., Haspelmath 2003). Of course, the abovementioned perspectives are often less clear-cut than presented here and various combinations of perspectives can be observed, e.g. when the model of semantic maps is combined with the cognitive theory of polysemy, metaphor and metonymy (e.g. Malchukov and Narrog 2009; Luraghi 2014).

What has received less attention in the literature on multifunctionality is whether a single grammatical meaning, or function, can have more than one expression within one and the same language. One of the main reasons is undoubtedly the peculiar turn the discussion about "synonymy" took in the heydays of generative grammar, when it was claimed, for instance, that active and passive sentences had the same so-called "deep structure" but different surface structures. Authors such as Bolinger (1968; 1977) were among the first to oppose such a point of view (which, by the way, has often been presented in an overly simplified way, see Kopf and Weber 2023: 3-5). Bolinger stresses that "in syntax there is no such thing as two different surface structures with the same deep structure (that is, with the same meaning)" (1977, 4). This has since been the underpinning of most research in functional approaches (cf. Givón 1985, Haiman 1985, among others) and also in cognitive linguistics. For instance, cognitive construction grammar adheres to the "Principle of No Synonymy of Grammatical Forms", which says that "if two constructions are syntactically distinct, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct" (Goldberg 1995, 67).

The point of view according to which a difference in expression (“form” in current parlance) implies a difference in meaning, is nowadays commonly referred to as “isomorphism”.² While isomorphism is embraced by most linguists across different frameworks, the further specification in the above quotation that the difference in meaning can either be semantic or pragmatic is – as will be shown in Section 3 – important. However, in present-day functional and cognitive approaches, pragmatics is either restricted to matters of information structure, illocution and register (e.g., Goldberg 1995, 68) or the distinction between semantics and pragmatics is altogether eliminated (“To the extent that we focus only on utterances, pragmatics is fully subsumed into a semantic characterization”, Taylor 2002, 104; cf. also Taylor 1999, 25-32, Kay and Fillmore 1999, 4, Langacker 2008, 40, Capelle 2017, 117, Hilpert 2019, 103, among others).

In this article, I outline how Eugenio Coseriu’s framework of a language-specific “functional syntax” (Coseriu 1984, 1989, 1996) accommodates not only the ubiquitous polyvalence of grammatical morphemes but also grammatical synonymy, or what Coseriu also terms “polymorphy” (Coseriu 1996, 18). Coseriu’s approach is particularly worthwhile because the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, broadly construed (see Section 2.2), is at the core of the approach. Already in the 1960s, Coseriu pinpointed the fallacy underlying the generative assumption that different syntactic structures have identical meanings. The identification of “deep structure” and “meaning” disregards the difference between the content that is systematically “given” in the grammar of a particular language (“Bedeutung”, i.e. signified) and the designationally and pragmatically enriched content in acts of discourse, texts and language use in general (“Bezeichnung”, i.e. designation) (Coseriu 1970c; 1975). Crucially, speakers always express and interpret more than what they “say” (Coseriu 1955-1956, § 3.1.1; 2007 [1980], 124; 1987, 182). This distinction is not only of central importance with regard to lexical items but also grammatical items.³ While the distinction between “encoded” (or “coded”) and “inferred” meaning is commonly acknowledged in Neo-Gricean approaches to pragmatics (cf. Belligh and Willems 2021; 2022), the distinction has remained a point of tension in many other frameworks. The holistic perspective on semantics and pragmatics has been the source of considerable confusion in the past decades. Not only is such

² The term “isomorphic” initially referred to the structuralist hypothesis that the expression and meaning of linguistic signs show “structural parallelisms” (Kuryłowicz 1949). The more recent use of the term “isomorphism” to designate the one-to-one correspondence between expression and meaning stems from the 1970s (see Willems 2013).

³ This also explains its general importance for the theory of translation (Coseriu 1978), which has been succinctly captured by Jakobson (1959, 236) as follows: “Languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey” (italics in the original, KW). Compare, with almost identical wordings, Coseriu (1992, 74; 1999 [1981], 83).

a perspective found in earlier approaches to discourse such as van Dijk (1977), who identifies semantics with truth-functional semantics, but it has also been characteristic of recent cognitive-linguistic research, even though the cognitive approach – like most functional approaches, including Coseriu’s – rejects a truth-functional account of meaning (cf. Willems 2011 for discussion).

From a Coserian perspective, both polyvalence and polymorphy attest to the pervasive multifunctionality of grammatical morphemes. Whereas polyvalence is the common phenomenon in the lexicon and grammar alike, polymorphy is restricted to grammar. It stands to reason that the instruments of grammar serve multiple though related purposes in a range of syntactic constructions (polyvalence), yet it is less clear how to approach two expressions that encode one and the same grammatical meaning (polymorphy). I will argue in this article that Coseriu’s framework provides a coherent basis for the principled, unitary analysis of both polyvalence and polymorphy in grammar. This is particularly relevant regarding polymorphy because Coseriu already takes into account the constructionist assumption that constructions are schematic pairings of an expression and a meaning in which slots may be underspecified with respect to their expression. At the same time, it is important to note that Coseriu’s framework is at odds with the holistic perspective on semantics and pragmatics in current functional and cognitive approaches and instead observes a clear distinction between that which is encoded, as “signified”, in the grammar of a particular language and what is conventionally inferred in normal language use (see Willems and Belligh 2022 for a brief presentation of Coseriu’s concept of normal language use).

At this point, a brief note on terminology is called for. First of all, some authors use “encode” in a rather loose way, largely identifying “encode” with “refer”. For instance, it is maintained that a concept or an idea referred to is being “encoded” by means of a word or a sentence on a particular occasion. By contrast, I here use “encoded” as a term in the specific sense of being “given” as a signified in a particular language system (which encompasses both the lexicon and the grammar; see Belligh and Willems 2021, 3). Being encoded, in this sense, hinges on the delimitation of the signified on the basis of language-specific paradigmatic oppositions, which are to be distinguished from broader associative relations (Coseriu 1992, 139-141; 2001, 221-230) and which presuppose a clear distinction between semantics and pragmatics (cf. Belligh and Willems 2021 for further explication). Secondly, I use the term “pragmatics” in a broad, basically pre-theoretical, sense and within a perspective on discourse and texts, i.e. as referring to those factors of language use that pertain to concrete utterances rather than to the language-specific knowledge of the lexicon and grammar (cf. Levinson 2000, § 1.2). However, the focus of the article will be on the relation between the level of language-specific signifieds and the general,

non-language-specific level of designation (or “reference”), disregarding aspects pertaining to register, genre and interpersonal variation (or “social meaning”).

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 zooms in on the commonly acknowledged form of multifunctionality in grammar, which in Coseriu’s theoretical framework is just another instance of polyvalence, i.e. the semantic flexibility and pragmatic variability of lexical and grammatical items in natural language. Polyvalence in grammar is discussed against the backdrop of two important theoretical distinctions in Coseriu’s outline of a language-specific functional grammar, viz. three complementary types of grammar and five interrelated types of signified. In addition, the difference between polyvalence and polysemy is explained. Section 3 turns to polymorphy or grammatical synonymy. In comparison to polyvalence, polymorphy is a less common instance of multifunctionality in grammar. The section focuses on a case study of polymorphy in the context of alternating constructions, viz. the ditransitive (or “dative”) alternation in present-day German. It is shown that a coherent account of polymorphy requires a layered approach to meaning in grammar in addition to a corpus-based analysis of variation between syntactic structures, with a focus on the pivotal distinction between the encoded signified of a syntactic structure and its designationally and pragmatically enriched content in a body of texts and discourse. Section 4 concludes the article with some general observations about the difference as well as the complementarity between a language-specific functional approach and a constructionist account of syntactic constructions.

2. Multifunctionality: polyvalence

To understand Coseriu’s point of view regarding the multifunctionality in general, and of grammatical morphemes in particular, it is appropriate to first consider in more detail two of the cornerstones of his framework for a language-specific functional grammar as laid out in “Principes de syntaxe fonctionnelle” (1989).⁴

⁴ The article was first published in German translation (“Grundzüge der funktionellen Syntax”) as the penultimate chapter in *Formen und Funktionen. Studien zur Grammatik* (Coseriu 1987). The book contains nine chapters (mostly previously published articles), several of which for the first time published in this book in German translation. The original French article “Principes de syntaxe fonctionnelle” was published in 1989 and then again as a chapter in *L’Homme et son langage* (Coseriu 2001, 165-211). The article has been translated into Spanish and Romanian but unfortunately not (yet) into English. Much of the article is based, apart from a number of earlier studies that partly reach back to the 1950’s (e.g. on word categories and types of meaning), on a course Coseriu delivered in Tübingen in the summer term of 1983. Coseriu (1984) is an unpublished transcript of this course by Heinrich Weber, whom I here thank for generously providing me with a copy of the transcript. Several parts of the 1989 article are reprised by Coseriu in a later article (Coseriu 1996).

2.1. Three types of grammar

Coseriu outlines the contours of a theory of grammar which emphasizes the importance of three complementary perspectives depending on the object of enquiry (Coseriu 1989, 16-8; cf. also Coseriu 1973, 79-80). Formational grammar (“grammaire constitutionnelle”) is concerned with the expression side (signifiers, Fr. “signifiants”) of grammatical structures, on all levels of language (morphemes, words, phrases, clauses and even texts); relational grammar (“grammaire relationnelle”) investigates the multiple ways grammatical structures are used to refer to specific grammatical designations (also cross-linguistically, like in the “semantic map” approach); finally, functional grammar (“grammaire fonctionnelle”) is the study of the language-specific meanings or functions (signifieds, Fr. “signifiés de langues”, “Bedeutungen”) involved in a particular language’s grammar and as such the core and primary object of Coseriu’s functional grammar (Coseriu 1989, 16).

For the sake of clarity, I adopt in the remainder of this article the Saussurean term “signified” (“signifié”), which Coseriu himself also favours in many of his writings, in particular when dealing with the principle of “functionality” in language in general (Coseriu 1992, ch. 7) and syntax in particular (Coseriu 1987; 1989). “Signified” is the Saussurean term for what Coseriu consistently terms “Bedeutung” in his German publications and what in accordance with Neo-Gricean pragmatics has been termed “encoded” content (as opposed to “inferred” content; s. Belligh and Willems 2021). In the German translation of the “Principes”, too, the Saussurean term “signifié” is explicitly retained for the sake of clarity to refer to the content that is “given” in the grammar of a specific language (Coseriu 1987, 133, 145 etc.). This terminological choice is of particular interest because the common English term “meaning” is too broad and unspecific for the issues that interest us here and therefore bound to cause confusion (see Willems and Munteanu 2021, 42-44).

Coseriu underscores the importance of the abovementioned threefold distinction by pointing out that it is firmly based in the original grammatical knowledge of speakers. Firstly, competent speakers of, e.g., French know classes of expressions such as the so-called possessive pronouns along with their formal variation according to functional differentiations, e.g., gender and number as well as nominalisation (Fr. *mon, son, mes, la mienne* etc.). These are hence instances of speakers’ formational grammatical knowledge. Secondly, speakers are intuitively cognizant of what such classes of expressions encode as language-specific signifieds, including – and this is particularly important from the perspective of a theory of meaning that does not define signifieds in psychologicistic terms as “representations” – the functional remit these signifieds

delimit and specify. Consider the following examples in French (based on the discussion in Coseriu 1989, 17):

- (1) a. *ta maison*
 b. *mon livre*
 c. *son livre*
 d. *son école*
 e. *le livre de Jean*
 f. *ce livre est à moi*
 g. *ce livre m'appartient*

Speakers' knowledge of the grammatical signifieds encoded in these syntagms entails the following: the knowledge that *ta* in (1a) is a female form, whereas *mon* and *son* in (1b-d) are not simply masculine forms but forms that are either masculine or feminine (the latter before words that begin with a vowel, e.g. *école*); the knowledge that the relation between *son* and *livre* expressed in (1c) and the relation between *Jean* and *le livre* encoded by the preposition *de* in (1e) is the same, viz. a generic relation of dependency, which can be – but does not have to be – interpreted in terms of 'possession' or 'belonging to' someone;⁵ the knowledge that this relation is not simply a matter of interpretation (designation and/or pragmatic specification in context) but is actually encoded as slightly differing signifieds in the predicative structures (1f) and (1g). These aspects of the knowledge about signifieds fall within the purview of speakers' functional grammatical knowledge.

And thirdly, speakers know that there is a specific relation between the nominal paradigm exemplified in (1a-e) and the predicative paradigm exemplified in (1f-g) regarding equivalence in designation: speakers are able to switch between alternative ways of speaking that encode different signifieds but can coincide with respect to their designation (an object, a situation, an event, etc.) (Coseriu 1989, 18). This third type of knowledge falls within the scope of speakers' relational grammatical knowledge.

It may be added that this third section of grammar is also pivotal for translation studies and contrastive linguistics. For instance, German *mein Buch*, *das Buch ist von mir* and *das Buch gehört mir* are relationally equivalent to (1b), (1f) and (1g), but functionally partly different, given that G. *von mir* and Fr. *à moi* and G. *gehören* and Fr. *appartenir* do not have identical signifieds (see in

⁵ The exact semantic paraphrase of the signified runs as follows: "(a peu près) 'relation de dépendance générique entre deux entités, dans le cas où l'entité présentée comme régissante est pensée comme nommé par un pronom personnel'" (Coseriu 1989, 17).

particular Coseriu 1970a, b; 1978; 1981 for extensive discussions of this kind of difference).

2.2. Five types of signified

In addition to three types of grammar, Coseriu introduces a distinction between five types of signified that are involved in grammar (syntactic constructions) (Coseriu 1973, 82-3; 1989, 19-21). Grammatical content is by definition of a complex, “combinatorial”, nature. Distinguishing between different content types is therefore necessary in order to delimit the object of analysis, in particular when focusing on functional grammatical knowledge in contrast to relational grammatical knowledge. In subsequent sections, we will see that this contrast is of major importance for assessing the difference between polyvalence and polymorphy. I briefly discuss the five types of signifieds below.

- (i) Primary words of a language have ‘lexical’ signifieds as parts of lexical paradigms. They are language-specific and form the semantic basis for the innumerable instantiations of words in texts and discourse. Lexical signifieds are not simply “abstractions” from specific instantiations, which would be circular from a Humboldtian perspective on language as a “creative” activity (cf. Coseriu 2001, 333–354 and Coseriu 2015, II, 274–275, 372–379, 389–394; see also Willems 2023).
- (ii) ‘Categorial’ signifieds are the signifieds of parts of speech: verb, noun, adjective and adverb (Coseriu 1989, 20). Categorial signifieds are universal, not language-specific, even though it is a language-specific semantic fact what parts of speech a particular language possesses as encoded categories (Coseriu 1974: 2004 [1972]). Whereas lexical signifieds pertain to the “substance” of words and hence represent semantic classes, categorial signifieds concern their “form” and do not constitute classes but “categories” in the strict sense of the term. For example, a single lexical signified ‘white’ is realised as an adjective in *white* but as a verb in *whiten*. Pronouns (*she, it, they* etc.) and other pro-forms (e.g. the pro-verb *do*) typically represent categorial signifieds as they express parts of speech functions with only generic lexical content such as ‘person’, ‘activity or state’ etc.
- (iii) Prepositions, conjunctions, articles, affixes, word order, intonation rules etc. are functional elements and procedures that are not semantically independent, i.e., their ‘instrumental’ signifieds are dependent on other signifieds such as lexical and/or categorial signifieds (cf. Coseriu 2004 [1972] for extensive illustration). Functional elements and procedures

do not by themselves form paradigms. It is only when an instrumental signified is combined with another signified that paradigmatic relations are established (“oppositions”, Coseriu 1989, 21).

- (iv) Combining an instrumental signified with a lexical signified (*book* > *the book, a book*; *sea* > *in the sea, into the sea, on the sea, at the sea, from the sea* etc.) or with a categorial signified (*stone* > *a black stone, a stone wall, to stone a police car*) produces a new level of combinatorial content, which Coseriu calls the ‘syntactic’ signified. The instrumental signifieds of syntactic procedures such as diathesis (e.g., constructional patterns or “schemas” such active and passive voice), mood (e.g., indicative and subjunctive), tense (e.g. present tense and past tense) etc. also rely on lexical and/or categorial signifieds in order to get instantiated, and the resulting combinations are also syntactic signifieds (for a discussion of Coseriu’s views on schematic patterns, or constructions, in syntax and construction-like templates in word-formation, see Willems 2023).
- (v) Finally, ‘ontic’ signifieds constitute the ultimate level in the realm of grammatical content. Ontic signifieds are the existential functions of sentences or sentence-like structures that have propositional values such as assertion (*I agree with you*), question (*Is that a good idea?*), wish or desire (*Let’s take a walk!*) etc. Such values are commonly treated under the heading of “speech acts” in the pragmatic literature, but in Coseriu’s framework they are approached from the other end, viz. from the end of signifieds. This also explains why ontic signifieds are rather general.

The importance of the distinctions between three types of grammar and five types of signified lies in their contribution to a coherent clarification of the nature of multifunctionality. Like lexical signifieds, which are the encoded contents in the lexicon of a particular language, grammatical signifieds, too, are encoded contents in the grammatical system of a particular language. Moreover, again like lexical items, grammatical morphemes are realized as functional variants (“variants fonctionnels”, Coseriu 1989, 17): grammatical signifieds are never found in a pure state (“in reiner Form”, 1987, 185; cf. also 1981, 191) in concrete utterances. Functional variants are always based on the signifieds *and* the designations and pragmatic specifications in particular instances of language use (texts and discourse):

Die Bedeutung ist im strengen Sinne ein Faktum der Einzelsprache, des idiomatischen Wissens, und erscheint nicht als solche im Sprechen. Im Sprechen bedingt sie nur die jeweilige Gestaltung der Bezeichnung und

des Sinnes sowie die Verwendung der ihr entsprechenden materiellen Zeichen und Konstruktionen. (Coseriu 1987, 181; emphasis in the original)⁶

This is tantamount to acknowledging that grammatical morphemes (articles, prepositions, conjunctions, cases, pronouns, etc.) are by definition multifunctional, or, to use the term favoured by Coseriu with regard to the multifunctionality of lexical items, “polyvalent” (Coseriu 1979c, 435-6; see also Dietrich 1997). Polyvalence is the term I here adopt with regard to grammatical morphemes as well (cf. Coseriu 1970a, 105 and 1992, ch. 7).

Polyvalence is the standard situation with regard to lexical items (Dietrich 1997), but it also undergirds the functioning of grammatical elements. Coseriu’s stock example is G. *mit X* and Fr. *avec x* (Coseriu 1970a, 117-8, 1989, 9-10). Prepositions have unitary, underspecified instrumental signifieds as elements of the grammatical systems to which they belong (i.e., the grammatical knowledge of the speakers), but they are realized in language use in a range of functional variants, e.g. *mit dem Messer schneiden, mit Mehl und Zucker backen, mit Ingrid spazieren fahren; couper le pain avec le couteau, faire un gâteau avec du sucre et de la farine, se promener avec Marie*, etc. With respect to the French construction *avec X*, Coseriu explains:

nous sommes très souvent portés à introduire dans nos grammaires ce qui, en réalité, n’y est pas. [...] Si l’on considère tous les types d’emploi de cette construction en français et qu’on s’efforce d’identifier ce que ces emplois ont en commun et ce qui les oppose aux emplois de *sans x*, on constate qu’elle ne signifie que “concomitance” ou “coprésence de *x*”. La langue française en tant que système grammatical ne dit que: “*x* participe à l’événement (désigné par le verbe)”, “*x y* est coprésent”, mais elle ne spécifie pas le type de coprésence propre de tel ou tel emploi. Bien sûr, dans la parole le type de coprésence est presque toujours clairement déterminé en tant que coprésence d’un instrument, d’une matière, d’un agent, d’une attitude ou circonstance simultanée, etc.; ceci, pourtant, non pas grâce à la construction *avec x* telle quelle, mais à l’aide de la connaissance des choses, de la situation et du contexte. (Coseriu 1989, 9)

The reference to the role of encyclopaedic knowledge, situation and context in the pragmatic specification of the general underspecified signified of

⁶ Coseriu here pursues a line of argument already developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his *Akademierede* “Über das Entstehen der grammatischen Formen, und ihren Einfluss auf die Ideenentwicklung” (1822), which for Coseriu represents a “Wendepunkt in der Grammatiktheorie schlechthin” (Coseriu 2015, II, 364). According to Humboldt, “alles durch Rede Gewirkte” ist “immer ein zusammengesetztes Erzeugniss des Geistes und der Sprache” (Humboldt, *Gesammelte Schriften* IV, 288).

the preposition is particularly important (Coseriu 1987, 177-86). At first sight, it might seem plausible to maintain that reference to a person by means of a proper name such as *mit Ingrid* or *avec Marie* yields the specification of a 'co-agent', but while this is arguably a likely interpretation in many instances of language use, it is by no means an encoded trait of the general signified 'concomitance' or 'copresence'. The signifieds of *mit X* and *avec x* do not rule out other possible specifications, and it would be fallacious to assume that there are systematic grammatical constraints that prevent a person from being conceived as, e.g., an instrument. One can refer to idiomatic expressions such as *G. mit jemandem den Boden wischen* 'demoralize someone, wear someone down', but more important as a matter of principle is that syntagms such as *mit Ingrid* and *avec Marie* do not entail, on the basis of their signifieds, that Ingrid or Marie are construed as co-agents. Likewise, in languages like German, French, English etc. the subject of a sentence that refers to a person does not encode the thematic role 'agent'. The thematic role 'agent' is a universal of designation, but there is no encoded semantic role 'agentive' corresponding to the subject of a sentence in these languages, as Coseriu has shown in his illuminating critical analysis of Ch. Fillmore's well-known example sentences *John broke the window* and *A hammer broke the window* (Coseriu 1970a, 109-112; cf. also 1979b, 44-5 and 1987, 179-83). The correlation of the thematic role 'agent' with the designation of a person as subject of a sentence (by means of a proper name, a common noun or a pronoun) is thus a matter of normal language use but not of grammar (cf. also Höllein 2021).

Importantly, a Coserian perspective on polyvalence does not preclude the possibility that a specific item's multifunctionality is structured in a way that allows for specific taxonomic conclusions such as those envisaged, e.g., in the framework of semantic maps (Haspelmath 2003), albeit without the focus on contrastive linguistics and cross-linguistic comparison typical of this latter approach. For instance, an example regularly mentioned by Coseriu is the polyvalence of the Spanish so-called "reflexive" construction with the pronoun *se*, which evinces a structured pattern of variation (Coseriu 1999 [1981], 207; see also Coseriu 1987, 183 and 1992, 192). While the different functional variants are hierarchically ordered in accordance to more specific constructional features, it is clear that 'reflexivity' is not the unitary general signified of *se*, which turns out to be more general and underspecified: 'reversal (or negation) of transitivity'. The expression of reflexivity is but a variant, albeit a highly ranked and frequent one, given that it typically involves an agentive subject (*Juan se lava*). Likewise, the reciprocal reading of *se* (*Juan y María se quieren*) is not encoded but inferred, hence not a signified (nor part of the underspecified signified), but a functional variant. Further down the hierarchy, other variants emerge which lack an

agentive subject: the passive-like medial construction (*La puerta se abre*) and the impersonal construction (*Se abre a los cinco*).

2.3. Polyvalence and “polysemy”

Unlike the term polyvalence, which is not very common in current semantic research (but see Widoff 2022), polysemy has had popular currency in modern linguistics at least since the advent of functional and cognitive semantic research. Polysemy is often contrasted with homonymy, even though it may occasionally prove difficult to distinguish between the two. While polysemy means that one lexical or grammatical item has several “senses” (or “meanings”, if no distinction is made between “meaning” and “sense”)⁷, homonymy means that a single expression – usually of a lexical item but possibly also, albeit less common, of a grammatical item – corresponds to different but unrelated meanings (see Nerlich and Clarke 2003). This current use of the term polysemy in present-day linguistics largely corresponds to its traditional use since it was introduced by Joseph Halévy and subsequently consolidated and made popular by Michel Bréal in the last decades of the 19th century (the intuition that words have multiple, related senses is, of course, much older; cf. Courbon 2020 for a brief historical overview).

Coseriu’s use of the term polysemy varies. He occasionally uses the term in accordance with the linguistic tradition, i.e. as an alternative term for polyvalence (e.g. in Coseriu 1976, 11; Fr. translation: Coseriu 2001, 338). However, in most of his publications, Coseriu’s use of the term differs from the common usage. “Polysemy” is then just another term for “homonymy” (e.g., Coseriu 1970a, 105; 1992, 174). The rationale behind this terminological decision is straightforward: if taken literally, polysemy means that several signifieds are paired with a single expression, which is what homonymy stands for if it is conceded that a signified is a unitary content such as it is encoded in a particular language (Coseriu 1992, 173; cf. also Coseriu 2001, 96-7, 250-1, 257, 358-9). By contrast, Coseriu’s concept of polyvalence accommodates the multifunctionality of a lexical or grammatical item (including constructions and construction-like templates, see Section 2.2) in accordance with different contexts of usage and conventionalized text and discourse practices in normal language use.

⁷ For instance, in cognitive studies the distinction between “meaning” and “sense” is usually either rejected, as e.g. in Cuyckens and Zawada (2001) and Taylor (2002, ch. 6; 2009, ch.s 6–10), or all senses of an item taken together are considered an open-ended “flexible meaning”, as in Nerlich and Clarke (2003). By contrast, the distinction between “meaning” and “sense” is of paramount importance in psycholinguistic studies such as Frisson (2009; 2015) and Neo-Gricean accounts such as Levinson (2000).

The insistence on the invariance of the signifieds of lexical and grammatical items in natural language vis-à-vis their multifunctionality in creative language use arises from the requirement to establish, and justify, the original linguistic knowledge mentioned in Section 2.1: speakers intuitively know that a lexical item (a word) or a grammatical item (grammatical morpheme) is applicable to a multitude of instances in designation with different pragmatic purposes, while at the same time recognizing that it is in a basic sense *the same item* in all these instantiations by virtue of pairing a signified with a signifier (Coseriu 1992, 175-194).⁸ Unlike the terms of specialised or technical terminologies and nomenclatures, the items of natural languages vary with regard to designation and pragmatics in language use, which necessarily entails, according to Coseriu, their invariance as linguistic signs understood as elements of a specific language system (Coseriu 2001, 343). It should be noted that the semantic invariance of a linguistic sign is perfectly compatible with the view that speakers' linguistic knowledge also includes specific individual senses which are to various extents conventionalized in language use. As a matter of fact, this is why Coseriu consistently attached great importance to a comprehensive and sufficiently detailed account of linguistic content, which carefully differentiates between that which is encoded in the language and that which is traditionally known as part of "normal" language use (Coseriu 1952; 1979a; 2001: 244-250; cf. also Kabatek 2020).

3. Multifunctionality: polymorphy

I now turn to a discussion of an altogether different kind of multifunctionality, viz. polymorphy or grammatical synonymy. Whereas polyvalence instantiates the common multifunctionality of a bilateral lexical or grammatical resource in discourse and texts, polymorphy reflects a less common, special kind of multifunctionality, as it involves variation on the expression side of a grammatical morpheme. Like polyvalence, polymorphy should be accounted for in its own terms and according to its proper place in a coherent language-specific functional approach to grammar.

In this section, I first present Coseriu's stance on synonymy in general, which departs in important respects from mainstream approaches. I will then

⁸ Coseriu draws on Aristotle, F. Hegel, W. von Humboldt, among others, to further substantiate this position in the philosophy of language (see Coseriu 2015, I, ch. 6 and II, ch.s 11-12). Coseriu (p.c.) found additional support in the work of the Dutch scholars Anton Reichling and Cornelis Stutterheim, in particular Reichling (1935, ch. 8) and Stutterheim (1949, ch.s 6-9) (see also Willems 2016).

explain the notion of polymorphy in syntax and discuss the few examples Coseriu provides to support his approach. I will go on to illustrate polymorphy with a more elaborate example based on corpus research and show why the very concept of polymorphy is particularly appealing when it is integrated into an approach that considers constructions as pairings in their own right of a content and an expression, which however are both underspecified at the language-specific level of grammatical encoding.

3.1. Coseriu's stance on synonymy

In the narrow sense, “synonymy” designates a relation of complete semantic identity of lexical items, yet there is a long tradition in the language sciences of considering words with similar but not identical meanings as “synonyms” (cf. Gauger 1973; Bally 1963, vol. 1). In present-day linguistics, too, the term is customarily used in a broad sense and stands for “near-synonymy” (s. Lyons 1995, 60-5), mainly under the assumption that complete semantic identity does not exist anyway. The nowadays common usage of the term “synonymy” to refer to “near-synonymy” also arises from the more general assumption, currently shared by many linguists, that words do not “have” meaning on their own but rather serve to “create” meaning in communication, i.e. texts and discourse, and as part of general cognitive processes. On this account, even the slightest difference in expression at least potentially spells a difference in content in terms of pragmatics, broadly construed, viz. including differences in language variety, register, style, formality, expressiveness, affect, the use of loanwords, etc. (for discussion and illustration, see Murphy 2009; 2010, ch. 6).

Once again, Coseriu sees things differently. The observation that two near-synonymous linguistic signs may differ with regard to language variety, register, expressiveness etc. is not in dispute. However, it is important not to mix up a full-fledged bilateral linguistic sign (“signified + signifier”) and the mere expression (“signifier”) of a linguistic sign. Except for instances of “suppositio materialis”, which abstract away from the signified (as, e.g., in *‘Okay’ has four letters* or *How do you spell ‘okay’?*), designation in actual language use is always done on the basis of bilateral linguistic signs. From a Coserian point of view, which gives pride of place to the bilateralness of linguistic signs in the system (“langue”) of any one particular language, there is no apriori reason why synonymy could not exist, both in the lexicon and the grammar. Homonymy – or, better still, homophony (Coseriu 1976, 17; 2001, 345; 1992, 182) – is universally accepted as a genuine phenomenon in natural languages, with its relative uncommonness primarily due to motivations of transparency. The

reverse situation, with one expression and more than one signified, is theoretically equally possible. However, approaching synonymy with regard to the bilateral linguistic sign requires a focus on the potential identity of content at the level of the lexical and instrumental signified (“Bedeutung”), i.e. language-specific semantics, under the exclusion of considerations pertaining to pragmatics, including register, style, expressiveness etc. as well as designation (“Bezeichnung”). From this perspective, synonymy can only apply to what is semantically encoded (the signified), not to the various aspects of language use based not merely on signifieds but on linguistic signs as bilateral entities, each of which consists of a signified and a signifier.

If one takes into account the differentiation between the five types of signified outlined in Section 2.2, then it is possible to distinguish between two main types of synonymy, viz. lexical synonymy and grammatical synonymy. Lexical synonymy stems from the fact that one and the same lexical signified can be combined with different instrumental signifieds. Suppletive grammatical paradigms of one lexical item are a case in point; compare the paradigm of the French verb *aller* ‘go’ (Coseriu 1992, 174):

- (2) a. *(je) vais*
 b. *(nous) allons*
 c. *(j’)irai*

The example is taken from Bally (1965, 144).⁹ The identity of the lexical signified ‘go’ throughout (2a-c) is not affected by the variation in the expression form. (2a-c) are therefore synonymous in terms of one of the signifieds (viz. the lexical signified) involved in the compound semantics of the words. Other well-known examples of suppletive allomorphy are Engl. *good–better–best*, *bad–worse–worst* etc., whereas alternations such as Fr. *détruire* – *destruct-ion*, *construire* – *construc-tion* are cases of transparent allomorphy.

This type of lexical synonymy with regard to a single lexical item is the counterpart of homonymy/homophony (or “polysemy” in Coseriu’s terminology). Whereas lexical synonymy means that one identical lexical signified is instantiated in more than one signifier, homonymy/homophony obtains when one expression (signifier) corresponds to more than one signified. Within inflectional paradigms, homonymy/homophony is common and traditionally

⁹ This is not the place to compare Coseriu’s account of polyvalence and polymorphy with Bally’s extensive discussion of “plurivalence” and “plurivocité” under the heading of “polysémie” (Bally 1965, 171-190). Despite a number of correspondences, Coseriu’s focus on the distinction between signifieds and designation redresses several points in Bally’s account, not only regarding lexical semantics (cf. Coseriu 2001, 215-252) but also with regard to grammar.

referred to as syncretism, as in the case of Sp. *cantaba* (1st and 3rd person imperfect indicative forms of the verb *cantar* ‘sing’, Coseriu 1992, 174; cf. Bally 1965, 172-4). It is worth mentioning that homonymy/homophony in inflectional paradigms does not constitute an instance of “polysemy” in the currently common understanding of the term, nor is it to be equated with neutralization. A desinence such as Sp. *-ba* is the expression form of two different signifieds, which are maintained as different encoded contents despite the fact that in one particular section of the inflectional paradigm the difference is not formally expressed. In other sections of the paradigm, the signifieds are expressed differently, compare, e.g., 1st and 3rd person present indicative *canto* ‘sing’ and *canta* ‘sings’ (Coseriu 1992, 226-7).

Note that the combination of a so-called “basic” lexical signified with different categorial signifieds – cf. type (ii) in Section 2.2 – does not count as an instance of synonymy. For instance, series of words such as Sp. *blanco*, *blancura* and *blanquear*, Engl. *white*, *whiteness* and *whiten* differ primarily in categorial signifieds, yet the lexical signified cannot be said to be the same in the adjective, noun and verb, respectively, because the lexical base is already categorially specified in these languages, namely as an adjective (*blanco*, *white*) (Coseriu 1974, 61-2; 2001, 90-91). A limiting case occurs in languages in which there is no lexicalization of categorial signifieds. For instance, according to Sapir (1921, 133-4), lexical signifieds in Nootka can be categorially unspecified:

The radical element *inikw-* “fire” is really as much of a verbal as of a nominal term; it may be rendered now by “fire,” now by “burn,” according to the syntactic exigencies of the sentence. The derivational element *-ihl* “in the house” does not mitigate this vagueness or generality; *inikw-ihl* is still “fire in the house” or “burn in the house.” It may be definitely nominalized or verbalized by the affixing of elements that are exclusively nominal or verbal in force. [...] It is not an unambiguous verb until it is given a form that excludes every other possibility, as in the indicative *inikwihl-minih’isit-a* “several small fires were burning in the house”.

Sapir’s description entails, strictly speaking, that all verbs and nouns with *inikw-* ‘fire’ in Nootka are lexically “synonymous”, given that the basic lexical signified is, unlike in Indo-European languages, neither specified as a verb nor as a noun in the lexicon. In Nootka, then, lexical and categorial signifieds are entirely separate levels of signified in the language system.

I now turn to the second type of synonymy in Coseriu’s framework. Grammatical synonymy obtains when one and the same syntactic signified can

be expressed by means of more than one signifier. This is what Coseriu also refers to as “polymorphy” (Coseriu 1996, 18). On a basic level, polymorphy is already found on the layer of instrumental signifieds. For instance, in many languages the grammatical morpheme that turns the singular of nouns into a plural, is polymorphous. Thus, in German, *-e*, *-en*, *-er*, *-s*, *Umlaut*, \emptyset etc. are all among the plural allomorphs (variants) for nouns; similarly, the past tense of verbs is realized by a range of allomorphs. This allomorphy is the rule rather than the exception in inflectional paradigms cross-linguistically, and it proves that synonymy at the innerlinguistic level of signifieds is in fact not uncommon.

At the level of syntactic signifieds, synonymy is undoubtedly far less common. We already encountered an example in French in Section 2.1: the semantic relation between the pronoun *son* and the noun *livre* expressed in (1c) *son livre* and the relation between *Jean* and *le livre* expressed by the preposition *de* in (1e) *le livre de Jean* are the same. As pointed out, the encoded relation is a generic relation of dependency. It is on the basis of this general signified that functional variants which further specify the relationship, e.g. in terms of ‘possession’, ‘membership’ or ‘belonging to’, are established.

Polymorphy entails that a language-specific difference between different structures or procedures on one grammatical level is suspended on the next higher grammatical level. The preposition *de* in French and the paradigm of the (confusingly) so-called “possessive” pronoun (*mon/ma/mes*, *ton/ta/tes*, *son/sa/ses* etc.) are two different structures in French grammar with different instrumental signifieds. However, in the grammatical combinations of the type *son livre* and *le livre de Jean*, they contribute to the same syntactic signified, with the encoded semantic relation of generic dependency that ensues.

3.2. Polymorphy, semantic encoding and normal language use

Although polymorphy entails that a language-specific functional difference on one grammatical level is suspended, i.e. rendered inactive, on a higher grammatical level, the difference is normally used to differentiate a message on the level of discourse or text. In this section, I first present an illustration Coseriu provides in his *Textlinguistik* (Coseriu 2007 [1980]). I then discuss a more elaborate example based on corpus evidence and illustrating the importance of a layered approach to syntactic structures along the lines of Coseriu’s account of polymorphy.

3.2.1. Sp. en lo que sigue and en lo siguiente

The two syntagms *Sp. en lo que sigue* ‘in what follows’ and *en lo siguiente* ‘in the following, next’ are obviously not identical in terms of instrumental

signifieds: *que* and the 3rd person singular present indicative form of the verb *sequir* contrast with the nominalized adjective (old present participle) *siquiente*. However, according to Coseriu (2007 [1980]), the two syntagms are systematically synonymous as grammatical structures which pair lexical with instrumental signifieds into two higher level syntactic constructions with one and the same syntactic signified (roughly ‘in that which follows’), hence there is polymorphy. But we saw that on the level of discourse and texts, syntactic constructions fulfil specific functions in communicative interactions that go beyond the resources of signifieds provided by the language system. Speakers additionally rely on world knowledge, context and situation in acts of languaging, i.e. when they produce discourse or texts. On this level of concrete language use, the two syntagms can be shown to customarily serve slightly different purposes: whereas *en lo siguiente* is normally used, according to Coseriu, to designate that which immediately follows in the discourse or the text, *en lo que sigue* is normally used to refer to what follows irrespective of whether it follows immediately or later (Coseriu 2007 [1980], 234).

The layered underpinning of Coseriu’s account of polymorphy, which takes into account the difference between the systematic encoding of a structure and its conventional realisations in normal language use, is particularly noteworthy because it constitutes an avenue to avoid a seemingly subtle but impactful confusion. As laudable as a principle of no synonymy of grammatical forms may be, as long as it is not established against the backdrop of the distinction between an invariant language-specific grammatical signified and a designationally and pragmatically enriched functional variant, such a principle runs the risk of circularity. To substantiate this claim, I conclude this article with a more extensive discussion of the so-called ditransitive alternation, a subject that has received a lot of attention in recent scholarship, in particular since it became a major topic in research on alternating constructions in English (cf. Goldberg 1992, 1995 and 2006, Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2008, Bresnan and Ford 2010, among others).

3.2.2. *The ditransitive alternation in German*

Many studies have been devoted to the ditransitive (or “dative”) alternation in English (in the older literature also called ‘dative shift’) illustrated below:

- (3) a. *Phebe gave her boyfriend a guitar.*
- b. *Phebe gave a guitar to her boyfriend.*

Verbs that in English alternatively occur in the double-object construction (3a)¹⁰ and the prepositional “*to*-dative” construction (3b) include trivalent verbs such as *give*, *send*, *throw* and *sell*. In the currently influential construction grammar approach it is generally assumed that the two alternative structures are full-fledged argument structure constructions in their own right. This entails that the differences on the expression side (i.e., the lack or presence of the preposition *to* and different orderings of the arguments) are paired with a difference in “meaning”. Whereas (3a) is said to express a ‘caused possession meaning’ (‘X CAUSES Y to RECEIVE Z’), (3b) is taken to express a ‘caused motion meaning’ (‘X CAUSES Y to MOVE Z’) (Goldberg 1995, ch.s 6 and 7; 2006, 31-3). Furthermore, the double-object construction can host bivalent verbs such as *bake*, which then is said to be coerced into an intended caused possession meaning:

(3) c. *Sally baked her sister a cake.*

The ditransitive alternation has in the meantime been studied in many languages. The contrast between a ‘caused possession meaning’ and a ‘caused motion meaning’ has been widely adopted with regard to the ditransitive alternation in these languages as well, including German (cf., e.g., Proost 2015 and Welke 2019). However, in a large-scale corpus-based synchronic investigation of the ditransitive alternation in written German standard language, De Vaere (2023) showed that it is important to study the alternation from a language-specific perspective, in line with the basic principles of Coseriu’s functional approach to syntax.¹¹ Specifically, one has to be aware of potentially fallacious assumptions regarding the expression and the content of the two alternants in German based on findings about the English alternation (see De Vaere et al. 2018, Willems et al. 2019 and Willems 2020 for discussion). The main differences between English and German concern instrumental signifieds: prepositions, case and word order. From a Coserian point of view, this raises the question whether the two alternative structures in German actually differ with regard to their syntactic signified or whether differences in content are due to variable

¹⁰ Confusingly, some authors (Goldberg 1992, 1995, 2006, Hilpert 2019, among others) only call the double-object construction “ditransitive”, but not the variant with the prepositional object. I here use the term “ditransitive” as a cover term for both alternants, in line with typological practice (Haspelmath 2007, Malchukov, Haspelmath and Comrie 2010); see also Willems (2020) and De Vaere (2023) with regard to German.

¹¹ Van Damme (2025) is a follow-up diachronic corpus study of German based on data from 1650 until the present. For an overview of the main findings of the two studies and a theoretical discussion of their implications for a language-specific functional perspective on syntax, see Willems et al. (2025).

interpretations of designationally and pragmatically enriched instantiations of the alternants in discourse and texts, including normal language use. To answer these questions in an empirically valid manner, De Vaere (2023) conducted a corpus-based investigation of a representative dataset of sentences with various verbs drawn from a diasystematically relatively homogeneous corpus (i.e. restricted to written standard language and disregarding the potential role of regional variation). In what follows, I first consider the main findings of the study regarding the expression side of the alternation in German and subsequently those that regard its content side.

Firstly, the variant in German corresponding to (3a) is not, as often assumed, a double-object construction like in English but a construction with a case-marked dative object (Indirect Object) that differs in case from the Direct Object in the accusative (4a). Only the variant with a prepositional object in German (4b) is structurally equivalent to the English structure with the preposition *to*, albeit with the additional difference that in German the prepositional phrase (PP) has accusative case-marking.

- (4) a. *Der Kassierer gab dem Räuber das Geld aus der Kasse.*
b. *Leider muss sie das schwarze Pulver an den Bösewicht geben.*

Secondly, with verbs such as *senden* and *schicken* (both 'send'), the dative case (5a) regularly alternates not only with the preposition *an* (5b) but also with the preposition *zu* (5c), whereas in English only the preposition *to* is found in the ditransitive alternation.

- (5) a. *Der Verband soll uns bitte öfter mal eine Frau schicken.*
b. *Kommt es zur Einigung, schickt Pfandy den Vertrag an beide Parteien.*
c. *Indien schickte Unterhändler zu Airbus-Entführern.*

Thirdly, German has relatively free word order. To be sure, both alternants have distinctly preferred word orders, the Indirect Object in the dative case mostly precedes the Direct Object, while the reverse ordering is standard with a prepositional Indirect Object; the variant with the prepositional object is only occasionally found with the Indirect Object preceding the Direct Object in the clause. Still, both alternants are attested with variable orderings of the objects in the corpus, compare (6a) with the relatively infrequent Direct Object–Indirect Object order in the variant with a dative NP and (6b) with the even less frequent Indirect Object–Direct Object order in the variant with a PP (corpus examples taken from De Vaere 2023).

- (6) a. *So beabsichtigt zum Beispiel die Stadt Boppard, eine CD-ROM-Version ihrer Partnerstadt Ome in Japan zu schicken.*
 b. *Sie schicken an die NÖN eine Kopie des Jahresabschluss-Zeugnisses.*

Apart from the above findings regarding the variability on the expression side, the corpus analysis reveals that the contrast between a ‘caused possession meaning’ of the double-object construction and the ‘caused motion meaning’ of the prepositional object construction, which has been widely adopted with regard to the ditransitive alternation in English, misconstrues the German data. First of all, particular readings (the functional variants with their particular “Redebedeutungen”, see Coseriu 1970b, 10; 1992, 74) of trivalent verbs found in both alternants cut across the differentiation between ‘possession’ and ‘motion’. Consider, e.g., the distribution of a handful of readings of the three complex verbs *übergeben*, *weitergeben* and *preisgeben* over the two alternants shown in Table 1 (data drawn from De Vaere 2023).

Table 1. Distribution of readings of three verbs over the alternants in a sample dataset

Verb	reading	sentences with dative NP	sentences with <i>an</i> + N
<i>übergeben</i>	‘confide’	34	73
	‘hand over’	79	70
	‘deliver’	19	3
<i>weitergeben</i>	‘(re)tell’	13	65
	‘pass on’	1	16
	‘transmit’	9	66
	‘delegate’	–	27
<i>preisgeben</i>	‘disclose’	16	16
	‘condemn to’	62	–

Furthermore, in line with previous multivariate statistical investigations of the ditransitive alternation in English (Bresnan 2007, Bresnan et al. 2007 and Bresnan and Ford 2010, among others), a range of variables also appear to play a role in the occurrence of one or the other alternant, including animacy of the two objects, the difference between nominal and pronominal objects, diathesis and the information-structural factor of the relative length of the two objects (De Vaere 2023, ch. 6).

These findings point to the conclusion that in German the variant with a case-marked dative object and the variant with a prepositional object are, in Coseriu’s terminology, functional variants of a single construction. The basic ditransitive construction turns out to be underspecified both regarding its

signified and its expression. As regards the level of expression, there is polymorphy between the case-marked dative object and the prepositional object. The analysis runs as follows.

The instrumental signifieds that undergird *an + N[accusative case]* and *N[dative case]* are by definition different. This is reflected in the different distributions of the two corresponding syntagmatic structures, compare, e.g.:

- (7) a. Er denkt an die alten Zeiten (Er denkt *den alten Zeiten).
 b. Er trauert den alten Zeiten nach (Er trauert *an die alten Zeiten nach).

However, on the next higher – and, in constructionist parlance, more “schematic”¹² – level of the ditransitive construction, the two structures *an + N[accusative case]* and *N[dative case]* are synonymous as components within the syntactic signified of the ditransitive construction. This leaves us with two important conclusions.

Firstly, as part of the prepositional variant of the ditransitive construction the preposition *an* no longer constitutes the two-way preposition that alternatively governs the accusative or the dative case according to its function in ordinary prepositional syntagms. Traditionally, accusative entails that a relationship to an object is being established (e.g., motion, as in *an die Wand hängen*), whereas dative is chosen when the relationship is conceived of as already established (e.g., *an der Wand hängen*) (cf. Willems 2011). However, in the prepositional variant of the ditransitive construction, *an* is a one-way preposition that exclusively governs the accusative. There is no possibility of case variation. Recall that functional elements and procedures with instrumental signifieds such as prepositions and cases do not form paradigms by themselves (Section 2.2). The function of the preposition has changed in the transition from the PP as a syntagm to its role as an integral part of the ditransitive construction at the higher level of the syntax. The signifieds involved differ accordingly: whereas *an + N* forms paradigmatic relations with other PPs, in particular those with other two-way prepositions such as *in + N*, *auf + N*, *unter + N*, etc., no such paradigmatic oppositions obtain at the level of the three-place ditransitive

¹² Here I adopt the concept of “schema” with regard to syntactic structures, i.e. in the sense of a schematic signified, as it is found in Coseriu’s seminal study “Sistema, norma y habla” (Coseriu 1962 [1952], § 5.2). For this concept, Coseriu draws on several authors, including I. Kant, W. von Humboldt, E. Cassirer and L. Hjelmslev (see Willems 2023, 22-27 for further explication). By contrast, in current cognitive and construction grammar approaches, “schematic” refers to a level of abstraction in conceptualization and cognitive experience that represents information in the holistic sense. This entails that pragmatics is merged with semantics as described in Section 1, but at a coarser level of detail (s. Tuggy 2007).

construction. In addition, *an + N[accusative case]* of the prepositional alternant does not contrast paradigmatically with *N[dative case]* of the other alternant, but the ditransitive construction as a whole contrasts with other syntactic constructions such as the monotransitive construction and the extended type of applicative construction found in sentences such as *Kinder mit Geschenken beschenken* and *Geschäfte mit Lebensmitteln beliefern*, which also signify a transfer.

Secondly, the common understanding that the dative NP encodes the semantic role RECIPIENT, whereas the *an*-PP encodes a (spatial) DESTINATION cannot be maintained. The assumption of such a contrast is based on traditional introspective accounts of the corresponding structures of the English ditransitive alternation. The corpus analysis of the German data reveals that at least in this language both variants of the ditransitive construction can be used to designate either a RECIPIENT or a DESTINATION. There is no one-to-one-matching between dative NP and RECIPIENT or *an*-PP and DESTINATION; compare:

- (8) So müssen alle Aktiengesellschaften [...] ihre wirtschaftlich Berechtigten an das Transparenzregister mitgeteilt haben.
 (9) Die Medikamente werden der Klinik per Kurier geschickt.

Whereas (8) invites an interpretation of the PP in terms of a RECIPIENT by virtue of the verb *mitteilen*, the verb *schicken* in (9) profiles *Klinik* as a DESTINATION despite being marked as a dative NP (and not, as one would perhaps expect, a PP *an die Klinik*, which would be synonymous). Hence the conclusion that the ditransitive construction in German encodes neither a RECIPIENT nor a DESTINATION, which are not part of the syntactic signified of the construction. Instead, the syntactic signified of the construction is host to a general encoded argument slot that is best labelled, also in accordance with typological research (e.g., Bickel 2011), as an overarching GOAL argument. Importantly, “GOAL” is here used without any spatial connotation but in the sense of Gr. “telos”, i.e. as a cognitive reference point that is the target of a (positive or negative) transfer involving, apart from the GOAL object, an AGENT-like subject and a THEME-like object (cf. Willems 2020, 153-7; for critical analyses of the “spatial bias” in prepositional semantics, cf. Van der Gucht et al. 2007 and De Cuypere 2013).

Finally, the corpus analysis provides evidence that there are tendencies of conventionalized preferences in normal language use which differentiate the two alternants in their occurrences in texts and discourse. Some of these tendencies are fairly general, others verb-specific. For instance, generally speaking the prepositional variant strongly correlates with the information-structural factor of relative length of the PP. This tendency reflects a cross-linguistically

well-established preferred word order principle, viz. Behaghel's law according to which shorter constituents tend to precede longer ones (cf. Behaghel 1909), in this case shorter Direct Objects preceding longer Indirect Objects. With regard to specific verbs, the correlations between one or the other alternant and a specific verb reading as illustrated in Table 1 are revealing. They are strong evidence that the general, underspecified syntactic signified of the ditransitive construction cannot be specified on the level of the two alternating functional variants but only when these variants are further specified by means of the lexical signifieds of the instantiating verb and the arguments. Much of what is easily considered part of the "meaning" of constructions turns out to be conventionalized usages which however are not encoded in the construction itself (cf. Coene and Willems 2006). For instance, whereas the concrete reading 'deliver' of the verb *übergeben* favours the ditransitive variant with a dative NP, the concrete reading 'pass on' of the verb *weitergeben* favours the variant with a PP. By contrast, in the concrete reading 'hand over' of the verb *übergeben*, both variants appear to be equally frequent. The latter also holds for the verb *preisgeben* when the reading 'disclose' applies, but in the reading 'condemn to' (as, e.g., in *dem Hungertod preisgeben*, De Vaere 2023, 166), the same verb is only found in the variant with dative NP. Tendencies of habitualized readings such as these reflect the variable frequencies of specific instantiations of the alternants in normal language use, which therefore must be carefully distinguished from the ("encoded") signified of the construction as part of the grammatical system.

In this context, it is also important to point out that the prepositional variant with *zu* instead of *an* (an alternation found with verbs such as *senden* and *schicken* and their complex counterparts like *weitschicken*, *zurücksenden* etc.) typically emphasizes the preference of the prepositional variant for spatial designations, as the inherently directional signified of *zu + N* (in the dative) is retained in the instantiation of the ditransitive alternant with a PP, compare:

- (10) a. Das Hormon Insulin sendet dem Gehirn Sättigungssignale.
 b. Der König ermordete seinen Sohn und sandte ihn in Stücken an seine Mutter zurück.
 c. Experten begannen damit, Signale zu dem Vehikel zu senden.

Examples such as (10b-c) show that the variation in prepositions found within the variant with a PP adds to the further specification of one of the two alternants, in line with the status of functional variants in normal language use as conceived in Coseriu's language-specific functional approach to grammatical paradigms.

4. Concluding remarks

In this article, I presented Coseriu's multifaceted perspective on multifunctionality in grammar. After outlining two of Coseriu's basic distinctions, one regarding complementary types of grammatical analysis and another regarding the types of signified that interact in grammatical combinations, I considered both polyvalence and polymorphy in grammar in more detail against the backdrop of Coseriu's outline of a language-specific functional approach to grammar.

Both polyvalence and polymorphy are grounded in the creativity of the speaker understood as 'enéргеia', i.e. the creative activity of speaking as a historically-based cultural practice (Coseriu 2007 [1988], § 2.2). Whereas polyvalence instantiates the common creativity of a bilateral lexical or grammatical resource in discourse and texts, polymorphy reflects a special kind of creativity, as it involves variation on the expression side of a grammatical resource with regard to different "idiomatic" levels of language (Coseriu 2007 [1988], ch. 2). Like polyvalence, polymorphy should therefore be accounted for in its own terms and according to its proper place in a coherent functional approach to grammar that takes a focus on the language-specificity of grammar as its starting point. In this article, I concentrated on one instance of polymorphy in particular, the ditransitive alternation in present-day German, in order to illustrate the concept in the framework of a corpus study (the details of the corpus annotation, the methodology and the quantitative analysis could not be provided in detail due to limitations of space, cf. De Vaere 2023 for exhaustive information).

In German, like in any other language in which it occurs, the ditransitive construction is a syntactic (hence "combinatorial", Coseriu 1989, 21) pattern with language-specific syntagmatic features that are paradigmatically anchored in the grammatical system. Thus, from a Coserian point of view, similarities and differences of the ditransitive construction between different languages can only be established coherently against the background of the language-specific features. When approached from this perspective, the German ditransitive construction is underspecified both regarding its expression and its signified at the level of the grammatical system. It undergirds two functional variants which possess more specific features both on the expression side (either dative NP or PP, and either *an*-PP or *zu*-PP with a number of verbs) and the content side (types of transfer understood as different designations in relation to the lexical material that instantiate the constructional pattern). The empirical findings presented in Section 3.2.2 underpin the importance of presenting data in a way that not only pays attention to the language-specific features of the ditransitive

alternation but also takes into account different types of signified and the difference between the grammatical system of a particular language and its continuous creative instantiation in texts and discourse.

If integrated with a constructionist approach, it is possible to adopt the differentiation between an overarching schematic “constructeme” and two more specific “allostructions” to further clarify the hierarchical distinction that emerges from the analysis. This terminological differentiation was introduced in the construction grammar framework by Cappelle (2006; 2009) and in the meantime found its way into a number of studies, including Perek (2015), Zehentner and Traugott (2020), De Vaere et al. (2020), Belligh and Willems (2022), De Vaere (2023), Zehentner (2023), among others. To the extent that the differentiation parallels that between morphemes and allomorphs (and, albeit only regarding the expression side of linguistic signs, the difference between phonemes and allophones), it fits well into a Coserian functional framework, yet with an important qualification. The encoded content (signified) of a constructeme is the object of a “functional grammar” in the sense outlined in Section 2.1, whereas the possible variation of allostructions in language use goes beyond the constructeme’s signified and manifests itself as an object of “relational grammar” with regard to designation. The allostructions moreover do not simply share the constructeme’s encoded features, it is equally important to emphasize that only allostructions are found as functional variants of the constructeme in actual language use. On one hand, the constructeme’s underspecified signified is dependent on the allostructions in order to be instantiated. On the other hand, allostructions are designationally and pragmatically enriched in accordance with the context and situation of the text or discourse. As De Vaere (2023, 81) notes,

Perek (2015:153) defines a constructeme as “a formally underspecified higher-level construction [...] associated with the meaning shared by the variants of the alternation”. In Cappelle’s and Perek’s approach, a constructeme encapsulates the different formal uses of a construction in one underspecified form, and the meaning is shared with the allostructions. However, given the single-layered approach adopted in Construction Grammar, the constructeme and the allostructions have meanings that are not further differentiated in qualitative terms.

The layered account that emerges from the analysis presented in Section 3.2.2 is able to further differentiate the types of content involved in the alternation and therefore particularly important for the theory of “functional grammar”. The position in most present-day accounts of synonymy, according to which there is no such thing as strict synonymy but only near-synonymy, is in large part a consequence of the decision to dismiss the distinction between signifieds (“Bedeutung”) and designationally and pragmatically enriched interpretations (“Bezeichnung”) in

favour of a holistic approach to semantics-*cum*-pragmatics (see Section 1). Whereas usage-based approaches in grammatical analysis try to merge “functional grammar” and “relational grammar” into one unified account, Coseriu’s altogether different functional vantage point pays particular attention precisely to the language-specific signifieds of grammatical structures, which are distinguished from their enriched realizations in language use. This focus on language-specific features opens up a new perspective not only on polyvalence but also on polymorphy without falling into the pitfall of either reducing “meaning” to designation (as in early generative grammar) or “reducing” – actually “expanding” – it to a combination of signifieds and designation (as in many current functional strands of research: “Meaning reduces to conceptualization (mental experience)”, Langacker 1988, 49).

In the account presented in this article, polymorphy is the counterpart of homonymy (homophony) on the level of syntax, compare: one expression/ different signifieds (homonymy) vs. different expressions/one signified (polymorphy). Whereas homonymy is universally acknowledged in all linguistic frameworks, polymorphy is not. The fact that the analysis not only takes into account homonymy but also polymorphy, shows that a language-specific functional approach to grammar is geared towards overcoming traditional dichotomies with a view to establishing an innovative theoretical basis for investigating complex and variable empirical data in different languages. Moreover, given that polymorphy necessarily involves the formal and semantic properties of “constructions” (i.e., the patterned combinations of elements, which in turn form linguistic paradigms, Coseriu 1989, § 3), a layered approach along the lines of Coseriu’s language-specific functional grammar constitutes an avenue for research that is theoretically and observationally both consistent and complementary to current constructionist approaches to variation and optionality in grammar.

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