

# **Polysemantic personal nouns as a challenge for psycholinguistic investigations: A corpus-based study on personal nouns with shifting semantics between generic role and job titles**

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In several psycholinguistic studies, gender stereotypicality norms have been investigated on the basis of extensive lists of personal nouns (as in Misersky et al., 2014), often grouped into occupational and non-occupational roles (as in De Backer & De Cuyper, 2012). Although this methodological approach is widely accepted and employed (Kotthoff & Nübling, 2024, pp. 103–144), it presents several shortcomings from a semantic perspective.

As object of this case study, we choose four lexemes from the list provided in Misersky et al. (2014) – two referring to artistic disciplines, i.e., *Bassist* (“bass player” or “bass singer”) and *Künstler* (“artist”), and two referring to sport activities, i.e., *Kletterer* (“climber”) and *Surfer* (“surfer”) – to illustrate the semantic issues that have been overseen in previous psycholinguistic investigations. First, according to the Duden and the DWDS dictionaries, these personal nouns are polysemantic and present each two possible interpretations depending on their reference. Second, they could not be univocally interpreted either as a job or as a generic role without looking at the context in which they appear into. For example, *Surfer* could not only refer to a person either catching waves or browsing through the Internet, but, even within the same semantic framework (catching waves), could indicate either a professional or non-professional athlete. Lastly, it has not been taken into consideration that gender reference could play a role in disambiguating the meaning of polysemantic lexemes (Fleischhauer & Turus, 2025).

Analysing the occurrences of *Bassist*, *Kletterer*, *Künstler* and *Surfer* in German language use, we hereby intend to gain more empirical knowledge about the quantitative distribution of meanings of these ambiguous personal nouns. Based on our corpus findings, we discuss whether such lexemes are suitable for psycholinguistic surveys or, given their polysemantic nature, should be narrowed down semantically. To help disambiguating their meaning, we build a subcorpus of newspaper articles from two national (the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*) and two regional sources (one from East Germany, i.e., the *Sächsische Zeitung*, and one from West Germany, i.e., the *Neue Westfälische*) extracted from the German Reference Corpus (DeReKo). All texts are randomly sampled and annotated for nominal person reference by two annotators. Depending on the linguistic and extra linguistic context, personal nouns are therefore classified 1) with the corresponding semantic meaning as by dictionary definition, 2) either as professions or as general roles, and 3) according to the gender reference (male or female, specific or generic) of the designated person.

By analysing their quantitative distribution across different newspaper types and across grammatical and lexical gender categories, we will acquire initial insights into the disambiguation of these lexical items and the frequency distributions between occupational and non-occupational occurrences. This will lead to the implementation of a scale that not only captures the predominant semantic interpretation of each lexeme but also the grey areas between job and generic role titles. In this way, we will provide future research with more empirical linguistic knowledge on polysemantic personal nouns as well as with important methodological considerations for selecting lexical items for psycholinguistic studies.

## References

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