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Universität Klagenfurt / Celovec

The Language of Sugar

6. Dezember 2025 | Raum 11

The Language of Sugar

verbal Workshop at the ÖLT (Annual Conference of Austrian Linguistics)
at Klagenfurt University

Time: 6 December 2025, 9:00-18:00

Location: Raum 11 (N.2.57) (Nordtrakt, Main Building, Universitätsstraße 65-67)

Programme

09:00-9:30	Georg Marko & Eva Triebel & Hermine Penz (Graz & Vienna, Austria) Introduction
09:30-10:00	Georg Marko (Graz, Austria): The healthy balanced diet vs. the sweet starchy snack: The different roles of food and eating as tools for managing type-1 and type-2 diabetes (a corpus analysis of medical articles, self-help books and discussion fora)
10:00-10:30	Heike Ortner (Innsbruck, Austria): “May contain an abundance of sugar”: The representation of sugar on cereal packages
10:30-11:00	Coffee break
11:00-11:30	Esther Serwaah Afreh (KNUST, Ghana) & Emmanuel Kyei (AAMUSTED, Ghana): Sweet Words, Bitter Truth: Framing and Metaphor in Ghanaian Public Health Campaigns on Sugar
11:30-12:00	Emmanuel Kyei (AAMUSTED, Ghana) & Esther Serwaah Afreh (KNUST, Ghana): Sweet Talk and Power Play: Semantic Shifts, Figurative Uses, and Sociocultural Meanings of “Sugar Daddy” and “Sugar Mummy” in Ghanaian English
12:30-13:30	Keynote talk
13:30-14:30	Lunch break
14:30-15:00	Sofia Rüdiger (Berlin, Germany): Don’t Ever Do a Sugar Challenge Again: The Use of Sugar in Three Types of Eating-as-Entertainment Videos
15:00-15:30	Eva Triebel (Vienna, Austria): ★★★★★ Not Overly Sweet: Morality and Social Order in Online Food Reviews
15:30-16:00	Allison Burkette (Kentucky, US) & Susan Tamasi (Emory University, US):

	“A focused laser beam of hard lemon candy flavors”: The mitigation of sweetness in the language of wine reviews
16:00-16:30	Coffee break
16:30-17:00	Xenia Bojarski (Zurich, Switzerland): No Sugar Coating: A Corpus Pragmatic Analysis of the Sugar Discourse in Swiss Media in the Last 30 Years
17:00-17:30	Ljubica Leone (Campania, Italy): Linguistic features of <i>sugar</i> in English over the years 1400-1799: A corpus-based study
17:30-18:00	Michal Schwarz (Masaryk University, Czech Republic): Imagined Sweet Asia: Sugar and Sweet Products in Vietnam

Abstracts

The healthy balanced diet vs. the sweet starchy snack: The different roles of food and eating as tools for managing type-1 and type-2 diabetes (a corpus analysis of medical articles, self-help books and discussion fora)

Georg Marko (University of Graz, Austria)

Food and eating are central in the management of both type-1 (T1D) and type-2 (T2D) diabetes as controlling carbohydrates both qualitatively (what kind of carbohydrates) and quantitatively (in what amounts) is considered critical in keeping blood sugar levels within a healthy range. However, the roles that food and eating play for the two conditions are different. Changing one's diet (less sugar, fewer carbohydrates, more fibres) is usually recommended as a first measure for improving T2D. Always knowing about the amounts of carbohydrates in foods to be consumed (more so than trying to keep them low) is essential for insulin replacement therapy in T1D. The conceptions of food for diabetes management can also be expected to differ between those directly or indirectly affected by T1D or T2D (people with diabetes and their families and friends) and those professionally concerned with the conditions (doctors, healthcare professionals, researchers): for the former, eating is (also) a sensual experience and a social activity, for the latter, it is mainly an abstract metabolic process.

This paper will look at the construction of food in discourses on T1D and T2D, with a special emphasis on differences between expert-to-expert (represented by medical articles), expert-to-lay (represented by self-help books), and lay-to-lay (represented by discussion fora) scenarios. I will mainly focus on the conceptual strategies of technicalization (conceptualizing food as a quantifiable mix of nutrients), functionalization (food as fulfilling certain metabolic functions in the body), moralization (food and its consumption as something ethically right or wrong), sensualization (food as taste and source of pleasure), and socialization (food and its consumption as an occasion to be in social contact and interaction with others).

Methodologically, the study adopts a CADS (corpus-assisted discourse studies) approach, seeking to identify linguistic patterns and their meanings in six 600,000-word corpora (one corpus each for T1D and T2D medical articles, self-help books, and discussion fora).

“May contain an abundance of sugar”: The representation of sugar on cereal packages

Heike Ortner (University of Innsbruck, Austria)

Cereals have long been associated with sugar, not only as a means of enhancing their taste, but also as a contested element in public debates on health and nutrition. This talk examines how sugar is represented on breakfast cereal packaging. Drawing on 30 packaging examples from corporations such as Kellogg’s and Nestlé, supplemented by material from commercial websites, both quantitative hints (e.g., nutritional tables, ingredient lists) and qualitative characteristics of negotiating sugar in cereals are analyzed. The focus is on direct and indirect evaluations, the manifestation of stance towards sugar, sweetness, and a healthy diet, as well as the multimodal strategies employed in presenting the product, its materiality, and the tactics used to conceal, reinterpret, or distract from the connection between the product and sugar. The methodological approach is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis, conducted within the broader context of discourses on healthy nutrition, thereby allowing for an examination of how language and visual strategies on packaging negotiate, justify, or obscure the role of sugar.

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Sweet Words, Bitter Truth: Framing and Metaphor in Ghanaian Public Health Campaigns on Sugar

Esther Serwaah Afreh (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana) & **Emmanuel Kyei** (Akonte Appiah-Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (AAMUSTED), Mampong Campus, Ghana)

In Ghana, while previous studies on sugar (e.g., Mensah et al. 2019; Aryeetey et al. 2017) have focused on biomedical and epidemiological impacts, little attention has been paid to how language and discourse shape public understanding and health ideologies. This study addresses that gap by analysing a purposively selected corpus of Ghanaian public health materials – posters and social media content from 2015 to 2025. Using Framing Theory (Entman 1993) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), it explores how sugar is discursively constructed as both desirable and dangerous. Preliminary findings identify dominant frames of fear (“Sugar kills”), moral responsibility (“Protect your family”), and economic burden, reinforced by metaphors like “sugar is poison.” These strategies foreground individual responsibility while downplaying structural causes. The paper offers a critical African perspective on global sugar discourse.

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Sweet Talk and Power Play: Semantic Shifts, Figurative Uses, and Sociocultural Meanings of “Sugar Daddy” and “Sugar Mummy” in Ghanaian English

Emmanuel Kyei (Akonten Appiah-Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (AAMUSTED), Mampong, Ghana) & **Esther Serwaah Afreh** (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana)

In Ghanaian English, the expressions *sugar daddy* and *sugar mummy* have evolved far beyond their literal lexical components, functioning as culturally loaded labels tied to gender, sexuality, and economic exchange. This study investigates the semantic shifts and cultural meanings attached to these terms within contemporary Ghanaian discourse. Drawing on data from Ghanaian newspapers and social media posts, the research integrates corpus linguistics with qualitative discourse analysis to uncover how these expressions are framed, contested, and redefined across different communicative contexts.

The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions: (1) semantic evolution – tracing the shift from literal connotations of sweetness to figurative associations with transactional relationships; (2) gendered discourse – examining how the terms reflect, reinforce, or challenge societal perceptions of masculinity, femininity, and power; and (3) cultural pragmatics – exploring the humorous, pejorative, or moralising undertones these expressions acquire within Ghanaian interaction, informed by local metaphorical systems such as the Akan *de* (‘sweetness’) frame. Preliminary findings reveal that *sugar daddy* is predominantly associated with male economic dominance in heterosexual relationships, often carrying moral judgment and humour, while *sugar mummy* reflects shifting gendered power dynamics and is linked to female economic agency. The analysis also uncovers playful, pejorative, and ironic uses, demonstrating how Ghanaian English adapts global English expressions to local moral economies. By situating the figurative use of “sugar” within the interplay of local moral economies, popular culture, and global media influences, the study contributes to scholarship on semantic change, gendered discourse, and the cultural localisation of English in non-native contexts.

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Don't Ever Do a Sugar Challenge Again: The Use of Sugar in Three Types of Eating-as-Entertainment Videos

Sofia Rüdiger (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany)

In this talk, I draw on corpus-based discourse analysis to investigate how *sugar* is used in three eating-as-entertainment video types: competitive eating and eating challenge videos, eating shows (also known as mukbang), and excessive cooking shows. Each dataset consists of 100 YouTube videos (by ten different performers). Frequency and bigram analysis of their orthographic transcriptions was conducted with AntConc.

All videos show food overconsumption and excess for the entertainment of others, but *sugar* occurs least frequently in the competitive eating and eating challenge videos (n=26; 0.2 ptw). This is where we find expressions such as *sugar buzz* and *sugar shakes*. Interestingly, however, this is the only dataset in which sugar is mentioned as an 'exgredient', i.e., *sugar-free* and *no sugar*. In the eating shows (n=73; 0.3 ptw), *sugar* is also used to refer to the results of overconsumption as demonstrated by the use of *blood sugar*, *sugar spikes*, and *sugar rush*, but here we also find references to different types of sugar (e.g., *powdered*, *cane*, *coconut*, *granulated*) used in detailed descriptions of the items being consumed. In addition, performers draw on metaphorical uses such as *sugar baby*, *sugar daddy*, and *sugar mama*. Finally, *sugar* is most frequent in the excessive cooking shows (n=223; 1.2 ptw). Even though these are clearly impractical and not to be emulated, their origin in instructive recipe performances is reflected in the use of *sugar* as part of lists of ingredients and the most differentiated list of sugar types (11 types). The frequent use of quantification (*a lot of*) and specification of unusually high quantities for a recipe (e.g., "forty kilograms of sugar") though remain as clear indicators of the videos' excessive and carnivalesque nature. Thus, sugar, as a theme, unites excessive food video types but is also part of their discursive differentiation from each other.

Not Overly Sweet: Morality and Social Order in Online Food Reviews

Eva Triebel (University of Vienna, Austria)

This paper examines how online food discourse orients toward notions of class, gender, and cultural hierarchy through the language of sweetness. Public debates around sugar (over-)consumption and health conditions associated with it are frequently framed in moral terms, mobilizing ideas of personal responsibility and discipline that legitimize the stigmatization of vulnerable groups such as overweight children or chronically ill people. Exploratory analyses of sugar in large English-language corpora suggest that this moral framing rests on an ambivalence: sugar functions both as a sign of luxury and symbolic power, and as an index of inferiority and dependence. The “right dosage” marks a discursive boundary between indulgence and excess, benevolence and corruption. Building on work on semantic derogation (e.g. Schulz 1975) and viewing sweetness as a social indexicality, the study investigates how moralized distinctions of taste are negotiated in digital evaluative discourse. A corpus of online food and restaurant reviews will be compiled, and references to sugar and sweetness levels analyzed in relation to star ratings and other evaluative practices. Comparing how “sweetness” is represented in positive versus negative reviews reveals how digital assessments reproduce social hierarchies – for instance, by praising the subtle sweetness of expensive products and mocking overly sweet desserts associated with inferior quality or non-Western “others”. The paper thus traces how seemingly mundane food reviews reproduce broader moralized orders of dependence, taste, and social worth.

“A focused laser beam of hard lemon candy flavors”: The mitigation of sweetness in the language of wine reviews

Allison Burkette (University of Kentucky, US) & **Susan Tamasi** (Emory University, US)

A 2024 *Wine Enthusiast* article addressed US consumers’ perceptions of sweet wines, quoting winemaker Pauline Lhote as saying that traditionally, “a lot of people associated [sweet wine] with unsophisticated wine”. Although the negative perception of American sweet wines is changing, it is still “tough to get consumers to buy a bottle of wine labeled ‘sweet’”.

How do expert wine reviewers communicate the sweet characteristics of a wine given these negative associations? Employing methodologies from corpus linguistics and discourse analysis, we investigate how sweetness is expressed and how sugar-related words are used in wine reviews, uncovering the strategies used to downplay or mitigate the sweetness of the varietals under review.

Unsurprisingly, wine reviews often rely on metaphor and the copious use of modifiers to communicate what is, at its essence, a private, bodily experience. The potential negative impact of sugar-related terms is frequently mitigated by these metaphors and modifiers. For example, *sweet* often modifies tastes not normally associated with sweetness (“sweet smoke,” “sweet spice”). The noun *sugar* is frequently itself modified to tone down the amount of sweetness being communicated (‘caramelized sugar’, ‘burnt sugar’). Our study examines such strategies, considering *sugar* and *sweet* along with related terms like *honey*, *candy*, *syrop*, and *marzipan*.

This investigation reveals not only tactics for expressing sweetness in wine reviews, but also underlying assumptions about wines (and perhaps other things) described as ‘sweet’; one wine, for instance, was described as “sweet but racy and refined”, implying that ‘sweet’ is not usually racy or refined. By tracing how reviewers strategically reframe sugar-related descriptors, we show how the language of wine both manages audience perceptions of sweetness and shapes broader cultural narratives about taste, refinement, and values.

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No Sugar Coating: A Corpus Pragmatic Analysis of the Sugar Discourse in Swiss Media in the Last 30 Years

Xenia Bojarski (University of Zurich, Switzerland)

We all know sugar primarily as the component in dishes or that we bake with and associate it with sweetness and dessert – but is that really all there is to it? Over the past 30 years, media discourse has diversified the framing of sugar ranging from an ingredient to an object tied to health, obesity and responsibility.

In this study, I explore the semantics and pragmatics of the discourse surrounding sugar and sweetness in a versatile corpus of Swiss German media texts that covers a time span of the last 30 years. Through a corpus pragmatic toolbox which we developed in Zurich (Knuchel et al. in print) I show the variety of meaning that sugar and similar words offer or have offered within the last 30 years and how they have changed or whether they stayed the same by analyzing the pattern of language use surrounding the discourse (Bubenhofer 2009). To show this I use keywords, dispersion analysis, collocation profiles and word embedding models. The results are presented using specifically developed visualizations that present the data in innovative ways and allow new ways of reading them (Bubenhofer 2020). By applying the concept of data philology (Bubenhofer 2024), an iterative process combining qualitative and quantitative approaches towards discourse analysis, the results will be critically reflected by putting the cotext of found phenomena into the centre of analysis and interpretation and thus focusing on a hermeneutic interpretation.

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Linguistic features of *sugar* in English over the years 1400-1799: A corpus-based study

Ljubica Leone (University of Campania *Luigi Vanvitelli*, Italy)

In English the word *sugar* is used as an exclamation to express annoyance and frustration, or as a noun referring to various referents: *sugar* is a substance obtained from various plants in agriculture, is used in food, or conceptualized as a carbohydrate.

There are no studies examining the linguistic features of this word and its diachronic evolution over time. The present study aims to fill this gap by describing the syntactic and semantic features of the word *sugar* in English, and changes affecting functions and meanings over the years 1400-1799. These centuries are characterized by advances in science and technology, social changes, and important historical events including the discovery of America in 1492, which supported sugar trade to European countries and favoured the spreading use of sugar within population of all social classes. Adopting a social conceptualization of language defining a close link between language and socio- historical issues (Fairclough, 1992), all these happenings may have influenced the frequency of use and linguistic features of *sugar*.

The present study is a corpus-based investigation undertaken on the *Early English Books Online (V.3)*, which is a corpus of 1,202,214,511 words, including the transcriptions of major books published in English from 1400 to 1799. The corpus is freely accessible via the CQPweb server (Hardie, 2012). It is expected that there is an increasing frequency in the use of the word *sugar*, which is a consequence of the increasing interest in the sugar trade, and meaning reconceptualization derived from new visions on possible uses in society.

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Imagined Sweet Asia: Sugar and Sweet Products in Vietnam

Michal Schwarz (Masaryk University, Czech Republic)

Sweet fruits and tea belong to traditional images of exotic Asia, including Vietnam. As a highly developed language, modern Vietnamese uses usual metaphors with sugar and honey, cf. *lời đường mật* (lit. word/speech-sugar-honey) “honeyed words, honey speech”, *Bà ta nói giọng ngọt xớt* “she said with honey on her tongue” or *Hãy cẩn thận với tất cả những người ăn nói ngọt xớt* “Beware of all smooth-tongued persons” (Bùi 2003: 736, 1385). Other expressions and habits related to fruits and sweeteners are more specific due to local Vietnamese products, but higher sugar consumption comes only with colonial and international cuisine (Peters 2012). This paper further documents the background of this development. Vietnamese ethnic minorities attested to insufficient resources (Hoang 2019), because sugar(cane) was an important cash crop exported to China. Besides basic food consumption, remaining crops and fruits were fermented for rice wine, because the tropical climate made any sweet product perishable. Modern sweet food was thus not widespread among the Vietnamese, creating satirical cartoons criticizing colonial obesity and alcohol factories (Sasges 2017). Even though the idea of sweet tropical abundance was then more imagined than real, the traditional sweeteners and language of sugar still have their universal role in Vietnam.

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