

The Role of Field Doublets in the Formation of Phraseology in the German Language

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Keywords	Abstract
field doublets phraseology German language idioms lexical variation semantic specialization diachronic linguistics	<p>This study examines the role of field doublets in the formation and development of phraseological units in the German language. Field doublets—lexical items that share a common semantic field but differ in origin, stylistic value, or historical development—are analyzed as a key mechanism underlying idiomatic expression. Drawing on qualitative corpus analysis, lexicographic data, and diachronic investigation, the study explores how doublets interact with processes of phraseological fixation, variation, and semantic specialization. The findings demonstrate that phraseological systems tend to select only one member of a doublet pair, typically favoring high-frequency, stylistically neutral, and native Germanic forms. This selective entrenchment contributes to the stability and rigidity of idioms while limiting lexical substitution. Simultaneously, doublets support functional differentiation across registers, thereby enhancing the expressive capacity of the lexicon. The study also highlights the conservative nature of phraseology, which preserves historically older lexical elements. Overall, the interaction between field doublets and phraseology reflects a balance between lexical diversity and structural stability in German.</p>

1. Introduction

Phraseology—the study of fixed expressions such as idioms, collocations, and set phrases—occupies a central position in understanding the richness and cultural depth of a language (Aslanova, 2025). As Burger (2015) emphasizes, phraseological units constitute an essential component of linguistic competence, reflecting grammatical structure as well as cultural conventions and communicative norms. In the German language, phraseology has been

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extensively investigated as a subsystem of the lexicon that bridges vocabulary, syntax, and pragmatics.

Within this framework, the concept of field doublets has attracted growing scholarly attention. Field doublets refer to pairs or groups of lexical items belonging to the same semantic field but differing in origin, stylistic value, or historical development. For example, native Germanic words frequently coexist with Latinate or French borrowings, producing lexical alternatives such as *anfängen* vs. *beginnen* or *Frage* vs. *Interrogation*. As Fleischer (1997) and Barz (2007) observe, such lexical duplications are not redundant; rather, they enrich the expressive potential of the language and contribute to stylistic differentiation.

The interaction between field doublets and phraseology is particularly significant. As Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005) note, phraseological units tend to favor certain lexical items over others, leading to the stabilization of specific variants within idiomatic expressions. This process reflects broader tendencies in language use, where frequency, familiarity, and cultural salience determine which elements become fixed in collective memory. Moreover, the historical layering of the German lexicon—shaped by sustained contact with Latin, French, and other languages—has produced a rich system of doublets that influence phraseological formation. Piirainen (2012) highlights that idioms often preserve older or more prototypical lexical items, thereby functioning as linguistic “archives” of earlier stages of the language.

Despite the recognized importance of both phraseology and lexical variation, the specific role of field doublets in the formation of German phraseological units remains insufficiently explored (Gataullina et al., 2017). Most studies have focused either on idioms as fixed expressions or on lexical doublets as isolated phenomena, without systematically examining their interaction. This article therefore aims to address this gap by investigating how field doublets contribute to the emergence, variation, and stabilization of phraseological units in German. By integrating insights from lexicology, phraseology, and historical linguistics, the study seeks to demonstrate that field doublets constitute a key mechanism in the development of German phraseology, shaping both the structure of idiomatic expressions and their stylistic and semantic diversity (Babayev, 2022).

2. Methods

This study adopts a multi-method qualitative approach, combining corpus linguistics, lexicographic analysis, and historical-comparative techniques to investigate the role of field doublets in German phraseology. The methodological framework draws on established approaches in phraseological research, particularly those outlined by Burger (2015) and Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005).

2.1 Corpus Selection and Analysis

The empirical basis of the study consists of data drawn from contemporary and historical German language corpora, including written sources (literary works, newspapers, and academic texts) and spoken sources (transcribed conversations and media broadcasts). A targeted sampling method was employed to extract phraseological units containing or related to lexical doublets within the same



semantic field (Gataullina et al., 2017). Instances were identified through keyword searches involving known doublet pairs, such as *anfängen/beginnen*, *Ende/Finale*, and *sterben/versterben*. Each occurrence was analyzed in context to determine whether it forms part of a fixed or semi-fixed expression, its stylistic register (formal, neutral, or colloquial), and its frequency and distribution across genres (Javid, 2025).

2.2 Identification and Classification of Field Doublets

Field doublets were defined as lexemes sharing a semantic core but differing in etymology, stylistic marking, or usage domain (Alisoy, 2024). The classification followed criteria proposed by Fleischer (1997) and Barz (2007), distinguishing among etymological doublets (native vs. borrowed forms), stylistic doublets (formal vs. colloquial variants), and functional doublets (specialized vs. general usage). A database of representative doublet pairs was compiled and used as the basis for further phraseological analysis (Ulduz, 2022).

2.3 Lexicographic and Phraseographic Sources

Authoritative German dictionaries and phraseological reference works were systematically consulted to verify the status of expressions as idioms or fixed collocations. These sources provided information on the degree of idiomaticity, lexical fixedness, stylistic labeling, and historical usage. Cross-referencing multiple sources ensured the reliability of the identified phraseological units and helped distinguish between productive combinations and established idioms.

2.4 Comparative Phraseological Analysis

For each identified doublet pair, a comparative analysis was conducted to examine whether both variants appear in phraseological constructions, whether one variant is preferred or exclusively fixed in idioms, and how meaning and stylistic tone differ between variants. This step involved close semantic analysis and contextual interpretation, enabling the identification of patterns of lexical selection within phraseological units.

2.5 Diachronic and Etymological Investigation

To account for historical influences, selected doublet pairs were traced diachronically using etymological dictionaries and historical corpora. This analysis aimed to determine the origin and period of entry of each lexical item, shifts in meaning and usage over time, and the stage at which phraseological fixation occurred. The diachronic perspective, consistent with approaches advocated by Piirainen (2012), made it possible to interpret phraseological units as outcomes of long-term lexical competition and stabilization.

2.6 Analytical Framework

The collected data were interpreted using a functional-semantic framework, with particular attention to the role of frequency and entrenchment in idiom formation, the influence of stylistic markedness on lexical selection, and the degree of compositionality versus idiomaticity. Rather



than relying on quantitative statistical modeling, the study prioritizes depth of analysis and interpretive accuracy, aiming to reveal underlying linguistic mechanisms (Zeynalova & Ismayil, 2023). While the methodology ensures a comprehensive qualitative overview, certain limitations must be acknowledged: corpus data may not fully capture regional or dialectal variations (Ismayil, 2021), frequency observations remain indicative rather than statistically exhaustive, and the selection of doublet pairs is representative but not exhaustive. Despite these constraints, the triangulation of corpus, lexicographic, and historical data provides a robust basis for the analysis.

3. Results

The analysis provides a detailed picture of how field doublets function within German phraseology. The findings confirm that doublets are not distributed randomly across idiomatic expressions but follow identifiable patterns shaped by frequency, stylistic marking, and historical development (Sabir, 2015).

3.1 Asymmetrical Distribution in Phraseological Fixation

A central finding is the clear asymmetry between members of a doublet pair. In the majority of cases, only one variant becomes entrenched in phraseological units, while the other remains marginal or entirely excluded. For example, *den Anfang machen* is fully idiomatic, whereas **den Beginn machen* is unattested in idiomatic use. Similarly, *zu Ende gehen* functions as a standard phraseological unit, while **zu Finale gehen* lacks idiomatic status. This finding supports Burger's (2015) observation that phraseological systems tend toward lexical stability and economy: the preferred variant is typically shorter, more frequent, and stylistically neutral.

3.2 Preference for Native Germanic Lexical Elements

The data reveal a strong tendency for phraseological units to favor native Germanic lexemes over borrowed or Latinate equivalents. The expression *ins Leben rufen* is fully standard, whereas a hypothetical Latinate alternative (**ins Existenz rufen*) is not idiomatic. Likewise, *Hand und Fuß haben* persists as a fixed expression, with no comparable construction using formal or foreign-derived synonyms. This pattern reflects what Fleischer (1997) identifies as the “colloquial anchoring” of phraseology, wherein everyday, historically entrenched vocabulary forms the basis of idiomatic expressions.

3.3 Register-Specific Distribution of Doublets

Field doublets contribute to a clear division of labor across stylistic registers. Colloquial and idiomatic expressions strongly prefer informal or native variants (e.g., *loslegen*, *draufgehen*, *aufhören*), whereas formal and institutional contexts allow or favor Latinate or elevated forms (e.g., *beginnen*, *versterben*, *beenden*). However, phraseological fixation overwhelmingly occurs in the informal or neutral register. As Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005) note, idioms are typically rooted in spoken language and only later extend into formal usage.

3.4 Partial Doublet Integration in Variant Patterns



In certain cases, both members of a doublet pair appear in phraseological constructions, but with different meanings or pragmatic functions. For instance, *eine Entscheidung treffen* and *einen Beschluss fassen* both function as phraseological units, yet they differ in semantic nuance and register. By contrast, *in Gang setzen* forms an idiomatic construction, while *initiieren* does not enter similar fixed expressions. Here, the doublets occupy complementary niches rather than competing directly, demonstrating that phraseological systems can accommodate variation without losing structural stability.

3.5 Semantic Specialization Within Phraseological Contexts

Doublets frequently undergo semantic narrowing when incorporated into phraseological units. The word *Zug* in *am Zug sein* develops a metaphorical meaning distinct from its literal sense, and potential doublet equivalents (e.g., *Bewegung*, *Transport*) do not enter similar idiomatic constructions. This indicates that phraseology not only selects among doublets but also actively reshapes their meanings, reinforcing specific semantic associations.

3.6 Role in Intensification and Binomial Structures

Field doublets also contribute to binomial and reduplicative phraseological structures, where semantic overlap enhances emphasis. Expressions such as *null und nichtig*, *ganz und gar*, and *Art und Weise* exemplify this pattern. Although not all such pairs constitute strict etymological doublets, they function analogously by combining semantically related elements. As Barz (2007) observes, such constructions increase rhetorical force and memorability—key features of phraseological units.

3.7 Diachronic Stability and Conservation Effects

The diachronic analysis reveals that phraseological units frequently preserve older lexical variants even after newer doublets emerge. The expression *Fersengeld geben*, for instance, retains archaic lexical elements that are no longer productive in the general lexicon. Newer synonyms do not replace these components within the idiom. This finding confirms Piirainen's (2012) characterization of idioms as “linguistic fossils,” preserving earlier stages of the lexicon and acting as a stabilizing force that resists lexical change.

3.8 Frequency and Entrenchment as Determinative Factors

Corpus observations indicate that frequency plays a decisive role in determining which member of a doublet pair becomes phraseologically fixed. High-frequency items are more likely to appear in repeated collocations, undergo semantic bleaching, and become entrenched as idioms. Less frequent or more specialized doublet members rarely achieve this level of entrenchment. Even when two lexical items function as near synonyms, substitution within phraseological units is typically impossible without loss of idiomatic meaning (Aslanova, 2017). For example, *ins Gras beißen* cannot be replaced by **ins Grün beißen*, and *Nägel mit Köpfen machen* does not permit lexical variation. This underscores the rigidity of phraseological structures and the limited functional interchangeability of doublets once an expression is fixed.



4. Discussion

The findings reinforce the view that field doublets are not peripheral phenomena but structurally significant elements in the formation and stabilization of German phraseology. Their role becomes particularly evident when examined through the interaction of frequency, stylistic markedness, semantic specialization, and historical persistence.

A key principle emerging from the analysis is that of selective entrenchment. Although doublets coexist at the lexical level, phraseological systems tend to “choose” only one variant for fixation. This selection is not arbitrary but reflects usage-based principles grounded in cognitive and corpus linguistics. As Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2005) emphasize, idioms are shaped by repeated usage patterns, where frequency and familiarity determine their degree of conventionalization. Bybee (2010) similarly argues that high-frequency constructions become cognitively entrenched, increasing their resistance to variation. In this sense, field doublets undergo a process of competition in which only the most entrenched form achieves phraseological fixation.

Closely related to selective entrenchment is the tension between variation and stability. Field doublets introduce lexical variation into the language system, yet phraseology operates as a stabilizing force. As Burger (2015) argues, idioms are characterized by a high degree of fixedness that limits internal variation and substitution. This observation aligns with the broader theoretical position that idiomatic expressions resist lexical replacement even when synonyms are available. Thus, while doublets expand lexical choice at the systemic level, phraseological units narrow that choice through conventionalization.

The analysis further confirms that doublets reflect stylistic stratification across registers. Native Germanic forms dominate in everyday and idiomatic usage, whereas borrowed or Latinate forms tend to be associated with formal or technical contexts. This distribution is consistent with observations by Fleischer (1997) and Barz (2007), who emphasize that phraseology is deeply rooted in colloquial communication. Piirainen (2012) additionally notes that idioms rely on culturally shared knowledge and imagery, which further favors familiar, native lexical material over abstract or learned borrowings.

The role of semantic conventionalization also merits attention. When a lexical item becomes part of a phraseological unit, its meaning frequently undergoes metaphorical extension or specialization. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrate in their work on conceptual metaphor, such semantic shifts are grounded in embodied and culturally shared experiences. Once a metaphorical meaning becomes conventionalized within an idiom, alternative doublet forms are effectively excluded, even if they are semantically similar at the literal level. This explains the rigidity of many German idioms and their resistance to lexical substitution.

From a diachronic perspective, the study confirms that phraseological units function as repositories of linguistic history. As Piirainen (2012) observes, idioms frequently preserve archaic or otherwise less productive lexical elements, functioning as “linguistic fossils.” This observation is supported by Keller’s (1994) account of language change as an emergent phenomenon shaped by usage and convention. Field doublets illustrate this process clearly: while newer lexical items enter the



language through borrowing or innovation, older variants may remain entrenched within phraseological units, creating a stratified lexicon.

Furthermore, the presence of doublets contributes to functional differentiation within semantic fields. Rather than simply duplicating meaning, doublets frequently specialize across contexts. One variant may dominate in idiomatic expressions, while another is reserved for formal discourse or technical usage. This complementary distribution aligns with the principle of communicative efficiency. As Barz (2007) notes, such differentiation enhances the expressive richness of the lexicon while maintaining clarity in usage.

These findings carry important implications for applied linguistics. In the domain of language acquisition, learners must acquire not only vocabulary but also phraseological competence. As Schmitt (2000) emphasizes, mastery of formulaic language is essential for fluency and natural communication. Field doublets pose a particular challenge, as learners may incorrectly assume interchangeability between synonyms, leading to non-idiomatic usage. In translation studies, the constraints imposed by phraseological fixation require translators to prioritize functional equivalence over formal similarity. Baker (1992) highlights that idioms must often be translated using equivalent expressions in the target language rather than literal renderings. The presence of doublets further complicates this process, as translators must recognize which variant is phraseologically appropriate.

Finally, the study suggests productive directions for future research. While the present analysis is primarily qualitative, integrating quantitative corpus-based methods—as advocated by Biber et al. (1998)—could provide more precise measurements of frequency and distribution. Additionally, cross-linguistic comparisons may reveal whether similar patterns of doublet selection and phraseological fixation occur in other languages, particularly within the Germanic language family.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that field doublets play a crucial and multifaceted role in the formation and development of phraseology in the German language. While doublets introduce lexical variation by providing alternative forms within the same semantic field, phraseological systems exhibit a clear tendency toward selection, stabilization, and restriction. As shown throughout the analysis, only one member of a doublet pair typically becomes entrenched in idiomatic expressions, reflecting patterns of frequency, familiarity, and stylistic neutrality.

The findings confirm key theoretical positions proposed by Burger (2015) and Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2005), particularly regarding the fixedness and conventionalization of phraseological units. At the same time, the study highlights the importance of historical and cognitive factors, as emphasized by Piirainen (2012), in explaining why certain lexical variants persist within idioms while others do not. Ultimately, field doublets reveal the dynamic interplay between lexical diversity and phraseological stability. They enrich the German lexicon while simultaneously illustrating the restrictive nature of idiomatic usage. This dual function underscores the importance



of integrating lexicology, phraseology, and historical linguistics in future research, particularly through corpus-based and cross-linguistic approaches, to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of language structure and use (Babayev et al., 2025).

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