

"Megan Fox is in a toxic relationship"

Representations of the 'Toxic' in Linguistic Community and Media Discourse

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Abstract The study investigates the figurative use of the term 'toxic' in contemporary German discourse. Beyond chemical and financial senses, the *Oxford English Dictionary* also records a figurative meaning in which 'toxic' is used in connection with mental states and social relations. A questionnaire study with speakers and the analysis of 100 online texts (69,081 tokens, 2022–2023) examine usage contexts, evaluations, and collocational patterns. The results reveal the semantic extension of 'toxic', highlight associated language attitudes, and demonstrate its role in the construction of social roles and identities.

Keywords Toxic, Attitudes, Usage Data, Discourse Analysis, Corpus Study

Abstract Die Studie untersucht die figurative Verwendung des Ausdrucks ‚toxisch‘ im zeitgenössischen deutschen Diskurs. Neben chemischen und finanztheoretischen Bedeutungen beschreibt das *Oxford English Dictionary* auch ebenjene figurative Bedeutung, nach der ‚toxisch‘ in Verbindung mit mentalen Zuständen und sozialen Beziehungen gebraucht wird. Eine Fragebogen-Studie mit Sprecher*innen und die Analyse von 100 Online-Texten (69.081 Tokens, 2022–2023) beleuchten Verwendungskontexte, Bewertungen und Kollokationen. Die Ergebnisse erschließen die Bedeutungserweiterung von ‚toxisch‘ und zeigen die verbundenen Spracheinstellungen sowie seine Funktion bei der Konstruktion sozialer Rollen und Identitäten auf.

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Schlagworte Toxisch, Haltungen, Gebrauchsdaten, Diskursanalyse, Korpusstudie

1. Toxic: A new attribute to describe social relations

As early as 2003 Britney Spears sang in her song *Toxic*: “With a taste of your lips, I’m on a ride // You’re toxic, I’m slipping under // With a taste of a poison paradise // I’m addicted to you // Don’t you know that you’re toxic” and, almost twenty years later and after becoming widely known via TikTok, the musician BoyWithUke sings in his equally named song: “All my friends are toxic, all ambitionless // So rude and always negative”. It is clear, not only from these examples, that the attribute is intended to convey something negative, a form of harm or threat. This negative sense is already contained in the meaning of the lexeme ‘toxic’: a body or object is adversely affected, endangered, or destroyed through the administration of a toxic influence. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 2025) records four distinct semantic dimensions in total: first, the – one might call it – traditional chemical meaning, namely “poisonous, harmful or dangerous to health or life”; secondly, „caused by or attributable to a toxic substance or substances”; thirdly, a technical, domain-specific meaning from the financial sector, which describes “[d]esignated securities which are based on debt which has a high risk of default, and for which there is not a healthy or functioning market.” Finally, the OED lists a fourth, figuratively marked sense: “[t]hat has a harmful effect on a person’s mental or emotional state, or on the social relations of a group, esp. in a pervasive or insidious way; extremely unhealthy, hostile, or negative; destructive or pernicious.” It is this fourth semantic dimension that is the subject of the present article.

We address the question of how this semantic specification is manifested in discourse and how the adjective ‘toxic’ is used concretely there: on the one hand, in the discourse of language users themselves – where we are interested in metalinguistic reflection – and on the other hand, in the media discourse – where we focus in particular on collocational patterns. The first study includes a questionnaire survey in which 434 speakers are asked extensively about their perception, their use, and generally their associations with the term ‘toxic’. In addition, the participants are asked to rate ‘toxic’ based on five seven-point

semantic differentials² (including correct–incorrect, formal–informal). The second contains a corpus analysis in which 100 online texts (69,081 tokens) from German magazines and online portals (including *Brigitte*, *ELLE*, *Gala*, *Märkische Allgemeine*, *Men's Health*, *Spieletipps.de*, *Stern*, *T-Online*, etc.) from the years 2022 and 2023, which deal with the topic of 'toxicity' in a non-chemical and non-medical context, are quantitatively analyzed. Through this examination of larger quantities of comparable texts from different media, access to the media-mediated discourse can be gained (Baker 2023). This will be flanked by individual qualitative approaches, which appear to be particularly useful with regard to role and identity constructions associated with 'toxic' (Motschenbacher 2018).

Initial contributions (Hoffmeister 2023a; b; Zifonun 2023) address this question from different perspectives. Hoffmeister (2023a) sheds light on the extension of the meaning of 'toxic', elaborates on various domains in which the labeling of something as toxic is found, and analyses the use of 'toxic' in newspaper texts. Zifonun (2023) addresses toxic masculinity in particular, asking how 'toxic masculinity' is used (Zifonun 2023: 3). This article takes these two studies as its starting point and asks: How is 'toxic' used in general in the German language community and media discourse? These papers mark some of the earliest scholarly attempts to address a phenomenon that has, to date, received little systematic attention within German-language research. Consequently, toxicity as a disciplinary concept has so far occupied only a marginal position in the German-speaking academic discourse.

The paper is structured as follows: In section 2, we briefly outline the theoretical background of our argumentation – here we pay special attention to the notion of 'representations' of the toxic and locate our work within socio-pragmatic discourse linguistics. We then present the results of two studies (Section 3): firstly, the usage- and attitude-study within the speech community (Section 3.1), secondly, the corpus study (Section 3.2). Section 4 summarizes and discusses the findings and offers an outlook.

2 Semantic differentials (Osgood et al. 1957) are psychometric measurement instruments that use bipolar adjective pairs as endpoints of rating scales. Respondents are asked to indicate the perceived position of a given concept along the continuum between the opposing terms (e.g., helpful vs. useless).

2. What we mean by ‘representations’ of the toxic

The concept of ‘representation’ is multifaceted and used across linguistic and non-linguistic disciplines, often with an attributive qualifier such as linguistic or mental. In this study, we adopt a socio-pragmatic discourse-linguistic perspective, where the concept has received relatively little attention (Spieß 2025: 115). Its central contribution lies in linking socio-constructivist, collective perspectives with mental, cognitive, individual-level perspectives. Linguistic phenomena – including the adjective ‘toxic’ – are treated as actualizations or consequences of mental representations, which are not directly accessible but must be inferred from usage (ibid.: 116–117).

Following Spieß (2025), such representations are:

1. a ‘work of representation’ (Hall 1997),
2. non-intentional and non-reflective,
3. based on a common ground and thus constructive,
4. dynamic processes of knowledge negotiation, and
5. discursive signifying practices embedded in and generating contexts.

Representations are social constructs crucial to meaning-making through social practices (Spieß 2025: 117). They require active interaction to negotiate knowledge and meaning (1, 4), are neither intentional nor reflective (2), as meaning emerges from socio-constructivist rather than individual or object-intrinsic processes. Meaning-making is a cooperative endeavor, dependent on a common ground (3) for coordinating semantic components. Processes (1)–(5) constitute signifying practices that both shape and are shaped by diverse contexts (‘Lebenswelten’ (lifeworlds), usage contexts, co-texts). When we investigate ‘representations’ of the toxic, we are mainly interested in usage and evaluation data.

3. What people and media mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’

The following section discusses two studies that aim to provide a multidimensional reconstruction of the meaning of the attribute ‘toxic’ and, in doing so, examines its representation (in the sense outlined in Section 2).

3.1 Usage and evaluation in the linguistic community (study 1)

In our first study, we investigate the following six research questions, considering the areas perception, meaning, production and evaluation:

- 1. Where have people heard someone using the label ‘toxic’? (perception)
- 2. How do people understand the label ‘toxic’? (perception)
- 3. What do people mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’? (meaning)
- 4. Which different entities do they label as ‘toxic’? (production)
- 5. What associations are connected to the attribute? (production)
- 6. How do people evaluate the labeling of something/someone as ‘toxic’? (evaluation)

For this purpose, we conducted an online questionnaire study between September 2023 and December 2023, comprising a total of 10 questions and completed by n = 434 German speaking participants from all over the German speaking area. The questionnaire was distributed via social media and email lists. Among these 434 participants, 298 identified as female (68.66 %), 120 as male (27.65 %), 11 as non-binary or diverse (2.53 %), and five provided no information (1.15 %). The distribution of participants’ educational background is as follows:

Tab. 1: Information on the highest educational qualification

Highest Educational Qualification	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
University degree	196	45.16 %
General higher education entrance qualification ('Abitur')	115	26.50 %
Doctorate (PhD)	48	11.06 %
Secondary school diploma ('Mittlere Reife')	30	6.91 %
Vocational training	9	2.07 %
Postdoctoral qualification ('Habilitation')	8	1.84 %

Highest Educational Qualification	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
No response	28	6.45 %
Total	434	

Overall, the data reveal an education bias, which can be traced to the study’s distribution channels. This should be taken into account when interpreting the results.

The age distribution is presented as shown in table 2. The median year of birth is 1992.

Tab. 2: Age distribution

Decade of Birth	Absolute number (relative number)
1930s	2 (0.46 %)
1940s	5 (1.15 %)
1950s	12 (2.76 %)
1960s	35 (8.06 %)
1970s	40 (9.22 %)
1980s	81 (18.66 %)
1990s	153 (35.25 %)
2000s	100 (23.04 %)
No entry	6 (1.38 %)
Total	434

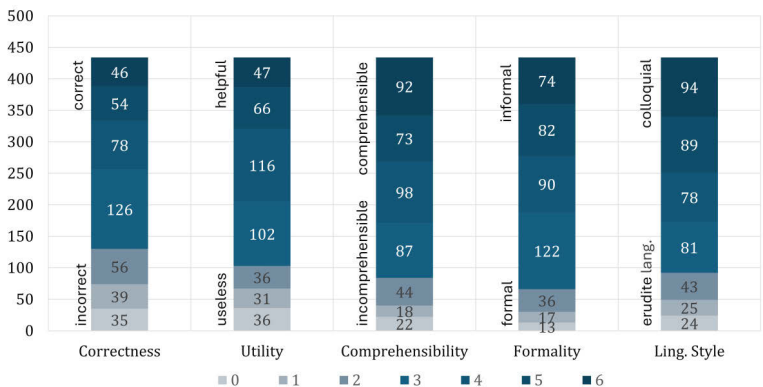
Accordingly, the participant group can be characterized as predominantly female, relatively young, and highly educated. All answers were inductively encoded, following a Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) paradigm (Kuckartz 2014; Mayring 2014; 2015). The responses were systematically collected and coded according to semantic criteria. These coded responses were subsequently consolidated into broader clusters, representing groups of thematically related answers resulting in a structure of meta- and subcodes that

together provide a comprehensive picture of production, perception, and evaluation. The categories were subsequently checked and adjusted, if necessary, after assigning the answers. In summary, the study uses an approach between inductive and deductive methods.

When asked whether they were familiar with the use of the term ‘toxic’ to describe something –that is, whether they had encountered it before – 98 % of participants responded affirmatively. But only 27.87 % are using the attribute themselves quite regularly or regularly. On the other hand, 53.92 % are using the attribute never or very rarely and 18.20 % are using it sometimes.

The evaluation of this attribute (fig. 1) was conducted using seven-point semantic differentials (0–6) across the following dimensions: correctness (correct–incorrect), utility (helpful–useless), comprehensibility (comprehensible–incomprehensible), formality (informal–formal), and linguistic style (colloquial–erudite language). Overall, participants rated the attribute ‘toxic’ as somewhat correct (mean = 3.2), rather helpful (3.4), neither particularly comprehensible nor incomprehensible (3.0), somewhat informal (3.8), and quite clearly tending toward colloquial (3.9).

Fig. 1: Overview of the evaluation based on semantic differentials



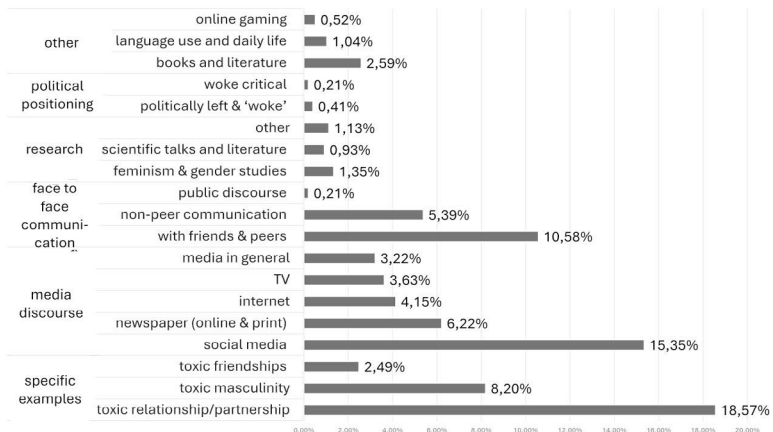
Responses to the first question ‘Where have you encountered the term ‘toxic?’ revealed a wide range of contexts (cf. fig. 2). The term is frequently linked with specific examples such as ‘toxic relationships’, ‘masculinity’, or ‘friendships’, and appears predominantly in social media discourse. Occurrences in newspapers, on the internet more generally, or in television and other

media are reported much less frequently. Furthermore, the data indicate that the term is primarily heard in peer-to-peer communication (cf. fig. 2) and – especially relevant for this volume – some, albeit very few, people connect ‘toxic’ with online gaming (0.52 %). 3.41 % of the people have heard of ‘toxic’ in research, especially in feminism & gender studies (1.35 %) and scientific talks and literature in general (0.93 %). For a small group of people ‘toxic’ is linked to a specific politic ideology, namely a rather left, referred to as ‘woke’ ideology.

The specific answers (originally in German, translated by TH/LSV) show the focus on media on the one hand (cf. also our second study in section 3.2) and the focus on public communication and the linkage to specific examples such as ‘toxic masculinity’ on the other:

- 1. “In the media, for example in articles in Süddeutsche or ZEIT, there is often talked of ‘toxic’ relationships or even ‘toxic’ masculinity. Just recently, an article in Süddeutsche (I think) was titled: ‘And what if I’m toxic myself?’ Or something like that”
- 2. “Mainly in the context of ‘toxic masculinity/relationships’. Occurs verbally and in writing; public communication rather than private conversations.”
- 3. “You hear/read it very often in the news, newspapers, etc. Toxic masculinity is mentioned particularly often. I can’t think of any specific individual situations in which I’ve noticed it.”

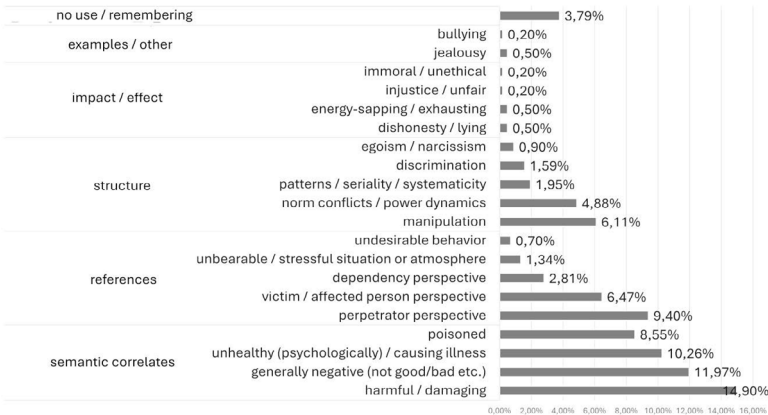
Fig. 2: Contexts in which participants have encountered the label ‘toxic’



The second question was: ‘How have you understood the utterance? What do you think was intended to be expressed by this (cf. fig. 3)?’

Most respondents mention semantic correlates (45.68 % in total) such as harmful/damaging (14.9 %), generally negative features (such as not good/bad, 11.97 %), unhealthy in a psychological manner or causing illness (10.26 %), and poisoned (8.55 %). Multiple responses naturally occurred in the open-text answers. In addition, a specific perspectivization is also taken via references (20.72 % in total), for instance by emphasizing the perpetrator’s (9.4 %) or the victim’s perspective (6.47 %). We also find perspectivizations that highlight dependency between people (2.81 %) or an unbearable/stressful situation or atmosphere (1.34 %). A third major thematic block concerns structural characteristics (15.43 % in total): here, the focus is primarily on manipulation (6.11 %) and norm conflicts or power dynamics (4.88 %) underlying the attribute ‘toxic’. Further structural features include patterns, seriality and repetition, discrimination, as well as egoism and narcissism (cf. fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Perception and interpretation of ‘toxic’



In more detail, participants in the questionnaire reported the following on how they understood the attribute:

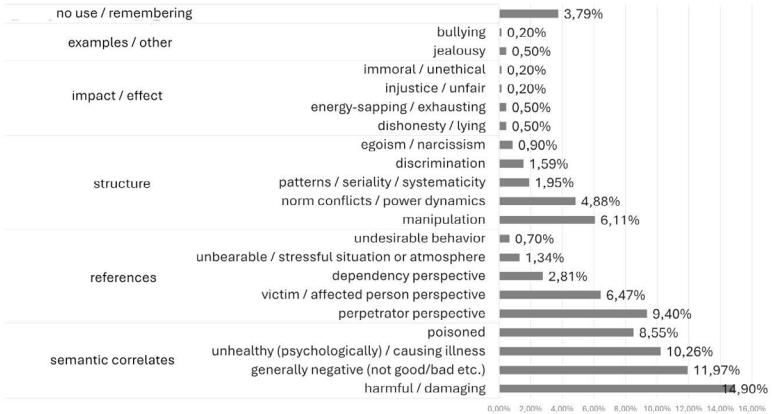
- 4. “‘Toxic masculinity’ refers to behavior that is ultimately based on conservative and mostly heteronormative, socially constructed ideas of gender re-

lations: men/people read as masculine are expected, for example, to provide for the family, protect the woman, not show (have?) any feelings, be ‘strong’. This can result, for example, in men who want to meet these supposed (normative) expectations of their own behavior, acting possessive, domineering, dominant towards women, or not allowing themselves to be affected by emotions such as sadness, despair or similar. [...]“

5. “The situation is unbearable, strong negativity emanates from a person or a group, destructive attitude, poor work organization, no leadership, hurtful remarks, bullying”

Thirdly, we asked what people themselves mean by labeling something as ‘toxic’ (cf. fig. 4). Most respondents, who use ‘toxic’, refer to negative and threatening behavior or behavior patterns (14.93 %). Moreover, they mean an unhealthy or hurting (7.81 %), destructive, dysfunctional or damaging (7.64 %) process, they state negative consequences that come with a certain kind of behavior that is labeled as ‘toxic’ (7.29 %) or simply mean something not good or bad (6.94 %). Several other semantic features <6.0 % can be retraced in fig. 4.

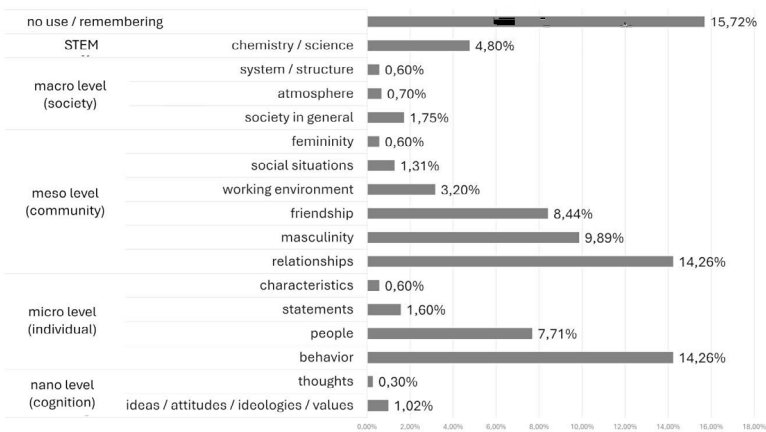
Fig. 4: Meaning attributed to the label ‘toxic’



Concrete examples of people's reasons to use 'toxic' are:

- 6. "Because it's a great word :-) as I said, I wanted to express that something is not 'healthy', but somehow poisoned. That it's the way it shouldn't be or the way you don't imagine it to be in an ideal state, perhaps"
- 7. "The connotation of the use of 'toxic' in comparison to, for example, 'destructive', 'harmful' would be the reference to a 'modern' discourse within which a great sensitivity to power imbalances plays a central role."
- 8. "I wanted to specify the balance of power and make it clear that there is a situation that cannot be fruitful for good relationships. Sometimes to warn people, sometimes to make myself aware of it. However, I only use the term when many things come together and the situation is really extreme."

Fig. 5: Entities labeled as 'toxic'



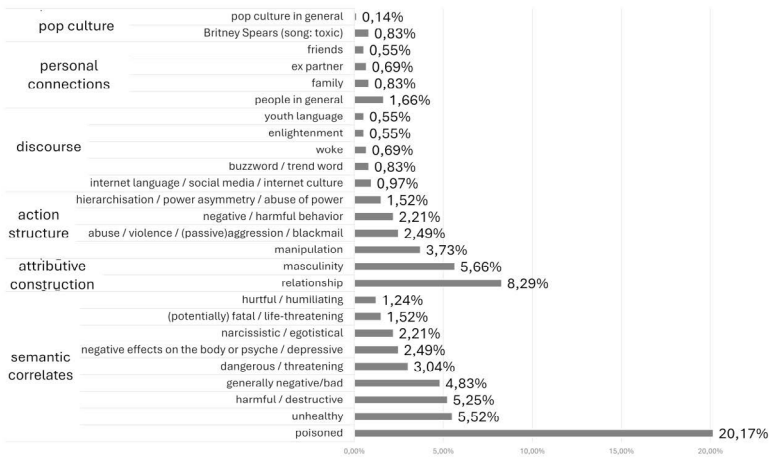
It has already become evident that masculinity and relationships in particular play a significant role in relation to toxicity and are frequently attributed as such. However, it remains unclear what the quantitative proportions of these designations are and which other entities may also be conceived of as being described as toxic. Fig. 5 lists those entities that the respondents identified as toxic. While 15.72 % reported never having used the term in this way themselves, relationships (14.26 %) – together with behavior – represent the entities most frequently attributed as toxic. Masculinity ranks third with 9.89 %. Fur-

thermore, friendships (8.44 %) and people in general (7.71 %) also play a substantial role. In addition, there are further entities mentioned by fewer than 5.0 % of respondents, including objects from chemistry and the natural sciences. We can thus conclude that ‘toxic’ has become established in everyday language as an attribute used to describe social relations.

Finally, we asked participants which cognitive associations they have with the expression ‘toxic’ (fig. 6). One fifth of the respondents indicated the meaning ‘poisonous’ as their association. Relationships were mentioned by 8.29 % of participants, making it the second most frequent association. Further associations include masculinity (5.66 %), unhealthy (5.52 %), harmful/destructive (5.25 %), and generally negative or bad (4.83 %). These associations once again illustrate the semantic shift of ‘toxic’ from a technical term originating in the domains of chemistry and medicine (Hoffmeister 2023a) toward a social attribute.

In addition, a small number of respondents (0.83 %) – as already noted in the introduction to this paper – also referred to Britney Spears and her song *Toxic*.

Fig. 6: Cognitive associations connected to ‘toxic’



Overall, the findings demonstrate that ‘toxic’ has undergone a notable semantic and pragmatic shift from a technical term within the natural sciences to a socially and discursively embedded evaluative attribute. Participants pre-

dominantly encounter the term in everyday and media discourse – especially in connection with relationships, masculinity, and behavior – and tend to interpret it as denoting harmful, unhealthy, or destructive patterns within social interaction. The associations and self-reported uses further underscore the term's function as a moral and relational qualifier, reflecting contemporary sensitivities to power dynamics, psychological well-being, and norm conflicts. This extension from its original chemical and medical meaning to the social sphere illustrates an ongoing process of metaphorical transfer and semantic broadening characteristic of modern public discourse.

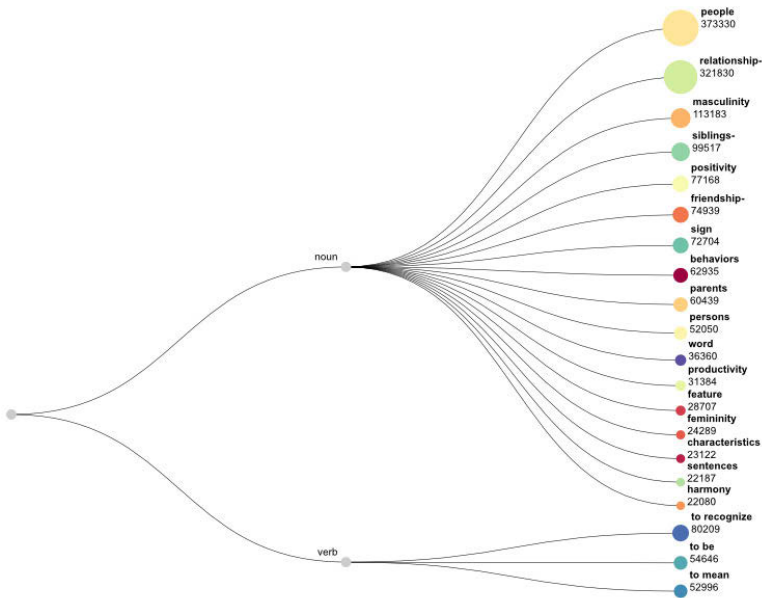
3.2 The media discourse – a corpus-based approach (study 2)

The second analysis is conducted as a corpus-based discourse analysis (e.g. Kennedy 2014; Lemnitzer, Zinsmeister 2015, for corpus linguistics, and e.g. Schiffrin et al. 2005; Busse, Teubert 1994; Spitzmüller, Warnke 2011, for discourse analyses). It is based on a corpus comprised of 100 texts that are publicly available online. To compile the corpus, a search was conducted on Google News using the keywords 'Toxizität' and 'toxisch' on July 16, 2023. This approach ensured that the selected media articles were both current and, above all, pertinent. The first 100 articles addressing social toxicity were collected and processed. The corpus represents therefore an excerpt from the media discourse as a network of statements about social toxicity. The selected texts were published between September 30, 2022, and July 9, 2023, and originated from various media outlets (including *Brigitte*, *Business Insider*, *Glamour*, *Mein MMO*, *Myself – das Magazin für starke Frauen*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Stern*, *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, and *WMN – Das Lifestyle-Magazin*, $n > 2$), totaling 69,081 tokens. Within this corpus, forms of the word 'toxic' (such as 'toxisch', 'toxische', 'toxischer') appear 1,014 times.

The analysis employed AntConc (Anthony 2022) to identify collocations within a five-word window to the left and right of the word forms of 'toxic', which were then summarized (e.g. singular and plural forms) and sorted by their likelihood (i.e., their statistical probability of collocation), with those exceeding a likelihood threshold of 22,000 being selected for detailed examination. Complementing this quantitative approach, a qualitative approach was chosen, in which the texts were subjected to close reading and the evidence for individual collocations was examined more closely (e.g. Motschenbacher 2018). To maintain analytical clarity, and due to the research interest, contexts involving 'toxic' combined with pronouns, articles, adverbs, or adjectives were

excluded. The results can be seen in fig. 7 (created with RawGraphs; the hyphen indicates that word forms, mostly declensions, have been combined).

Fig. 7: Collocations with ‘toxic-‘ (sorted by word class and likelihood)



The most frequent context – in the sense of probability of collocation – for ‘toxic’ describes it as an attribute of people in general (likelihood=373,330, frequency=258; ‘Mensch’, ‘Menschen’ mostly in plural) – in both predicative and attributive position. These contexts often involve broad statements about toxic people or general ways to deal with them, such as “Toxic people are jealous and envious” (DP 05/23), or “Recognizing toxic people: Common signs at a glance” (NB 11/22).³ The second major context pertains to relationships, particularly ro-

3 Here and in subsequent sections, the cited examples are original texts translated by the two authors. Due to the size of the corpus, not all sources can be listed in detail. For reference, the medium and date are provided. The abbreviations are decoded as follows: B = Brigitte, DP = Die Presse, G = Gala, MH = Men’s Health, M = Myself, NB = Nordbayern.de, N = NZZ, P = plan.de, R = RTL News, S = Stern, SN = Stuttgarter Nachrichten, W = WMN.

mantic or couple-related (likelihood=321,830, frequency=245), discussing the definition of toxic relationships (e.g. "What is a toxic relationship?", M 02/23), specific instances like „Megan Fox is in a toxic relationship" (N 06/23), and behaviors related to toxic relationships, including questions about the possibility of fixing such relationships (e.g. "Can a toxic relationship still be saved?", R 07/22).

The third most frequent context involves masculinity (likelihood=113,183, frequency=52), interestingly with no evidence of 'toxic' men in the corpus. These references include explanations of 'toxic masculinity' (e.g. "Toxic masculinity refers to problematic behaviors, attitudes, or thought patterns exhibited by men toward women, but also toward marginalized people [...]", MH 04/23), discussions about their (negative) consequences (e.g. "What negative effects does toxic masculinity have for him?", MH 04/23), and reflections on the term on a meta-level (e.g., "Toxic masculinity is currently a popular term, especially on social media" P 07/23). 'Toxic femininity' is also addressed in the texts, but the references are comparatively less frequent (likelihood=24,298, frequency=11). It is mostly mentioned in comparison to 'toxic masculinity', emphasizing differences between both (e.g. "This is a key difference from toxic masculinity.", SN 01/23). In addition, 'toxic femininity' is generally addressed (e.g. "Is there such a thing as toxic femininity?", MH 04/23), or even questioned, such as "Toxic femininity sounds like something invented by men's rights activists who want to counter accusations of toxic masculinity" (SN 01/23).

Additional frequent references of being toxic concern other individuals and social groups, including siblings (likelihood=99,517, frequency=33), parents (likelihood=60,439, frequency=58), and people in general (likelihood=52,050, frequency=31). Furthermore, another kind of relation appears often in the texts, namely friendships (likelihood=74,939, frequency=32). Moreover, there is a connection with 'signs' (likelihood=72,704, frequency=47) and 'words' (likelihood=36,360, frequency=18). Signs of toxic phenomena (see 'toxic harmony' below) are regularly mentioned in the discourse. The collocation with 'word' can be traced back to the metalinguistic commentary on 'toxic' (e.g. "The word toxic is used almost inflationary today.", G 06/23, see also below).

Behaviors (likelihood=62,935, frequency=82), features (likelihood=28,707, frequency=13), and characteristics (likelihood=23,122, frequency=17) are frequently described as 'toxic'. They are often not specified in detail but outlined at a general level (e.g. "Find out here how to quickly identify toxic characteristics and what the signs are.", NB 11/22). In some cases, examples of behaviors

and characteristics are then given in the text, but these are not explicitly and directly attributed as 'toxic'.

Initially surprising is, that 'toxic' even occurs in rather positive contexts. Specifically classified as toxic are positivity (likelihood=77,168, frequency=38), productivity (likelihood=31,384, frequency=15), and harmony (likelihood=22,080, frequency=10). 'Toxic positivity' is often defined in general and distinguished from optimism (e.g., "The difference between optimism and toxic positivity [...]" S 07/22), and illustrated by concrete examples (e.g., "Just look at it positively.' This sentence is toxic positivity in its purest form.", S 07/22). The last evidence can also explain the collocation with 'sentences' (likelihood=22,187, frequency=17), as statements (in the texts: 'sentences') are often given as examples of toxic phenomena. Similarly, 'toxic productivity' is often basically explained (e.g., "Essentially, toxic productivity can be described as an endeavor to be productive at all times", W 02/23), supplemented sometimes by practical suggestions on how to overcome it (cf. "Toxic productivity: How to escape the vicious cycle", W 02/23). References to 'toxic harmony' often center on signs observable in relationships (e.g. "3 Signs of Toxic Harmony – Toxic harmony exists in many relationships [...]" B 02/23). Notably, the evidence "Toxic harmony – now what on earth is that?" indicates a current change in the usage of the term 'toxic', reflecting new phenomena being labeled as 'toxic' in discourse.

In addition to different people, relationships, traits, and masculinity, primarily phenomena traditionally deemed positive, such as positivity or harmony, are labeled as 'toxic' in the discourse – highlighting one tendency in this discourse to label exaggerated manifestations of beneficial qualities, without any reflection, as harmful (in the sense of toxic).

Beyond the collocation with 'word' (see above), the meta-linguistic reflections on the term 'toxic' can be observed in collocations with forms of (to) 'mean' (word forms of 'toxic' as subject, e.g. 'toxic means'), indicating a linguistic shift, in the sense of a new emerging usage respective meaning of 'toxic' that still seems to require explanations and discussions. This reflects precisely the change that was already evident in the data from the first study (see above).

Various constructions with forms of (to) 'be' are also commonly used to describe toxic phenomena at a meta-level, explaining 'toxic' in its new meaning and in new contexts, as in "What is a toxic person?" (SN 06/22). Another connection with a verb can be observed between 'toxic' and (to) 'recognize'. Thus, the discourse is often about 'recognizing toxicity'. This recognition frequently

appears as an explicit goal or advice, such as "Find out here how to quickly recognize toxic characteristics and what the signs are." (NB 11/22), indented as a first step in dealing with toxicity.

Overall, the analyzed texts reveal that it is predominantly people – with varying degrees of specificity – who are described as 'toxic'. This should be understood within the context of the research subject's constitution, viewing 'toxic' as a social phenomenon. The connection between 'toxic' and masculinity, which has already been addressed in previous research (cf. Zifonun 2023) and was also evident in the first study, remains clear in the discourse excerpt examined here. The numerous general, nonspecific mentions and the metalinguistic references reflect the ongoing change in the meaning and usage of 'toxic'. A potentially new and specific context of usage identified here is the attribution of inherently positive phenomena as 'toxic', such as harmony or positivity. However, when these phenomena are exaggerated, they are constructed as toxic in discourse, often accompanied by references to recognition of toxicity and cautionary warnings.

4. What we can learn from the two studies: Conclusion, Discussion and Outlook

The findings of the two studies collectively demonstrate that the attribute 'toxic' has undergone a substantial semantic and pragmatic shift from its original technical meaning in chemistry and medicine to a socially and discursively embedded evaluative term. Study 1 shows that the term is widely recognized among German-speaking participants, yet self-reported use remains moderate, suggesting that 'toxic' functions more as a socially mediated evaluative label than as an integral part of everyday vocabulary. Participants predominantly encounter the term in peer-to-peer communication and on social media, particularly in contexts relating to relationships, behavior, and masculinity. The semantic associations provided – ranging from harmful, destructive, and unhealthy to norm conflicts and power dynamics – highlight that 'toxic' has acquired a morally and relationally evaluative dimension, reflecting contemporary sensitivities to interpersonal dynamics and psychological well-being.

Study 2 corroborates these findings within media discourse, revealing that 'toxic' is most frequently used to describe people and relationships, particularly in discussions of toxic masculinity. Notably, the corpus analysis also identifies

emerging contexts in which traditionally positive phenomena – such as positivity, productivity, or harmony – are framed as toxic when exaggerated or dysfunctional. This indicates a further broadening of the term's evaluative scope, which extends beyond its initial association with negative traits or behaviors to include cautionary evaluations of social or personal excesses. The frequent meta-linguistic usage observed, including constructions with 'to mean' and 'to recognize', underscores an ongoing negotiation of the term's meaning and the necessity of interpretive guidance in contemporary discourse.

Together, the two studies suggest that 'toxic' functions as a flexible, context-dependent label with a dual role: it identifies harmful social phenomena while simultaneously participating in broader public discussions about norms, relational ethics, and power dynamics. The convergence of survey and corpus data indicates that semantic broadening and metaphorical transfer characterize its current trajectory in both everyday language and media discourse.

In conclusion, 'toxic' exemplifies a term in transition, reflecting a shift from a technical descriptor to a socially evaluative label. Its frequent application to relationships, behavior, and masculinity highlights both its diagnostic and normative functions, while emerging uses in describing exaggeratedly positive phenomena signal ongoing semantic innovation. The combination of perception, production, and evaluation captured in Study 1, along with the corpus-based discourse insights from Study 2, underscores the multidimensional nature of the term and the importance of contextual sensitivity in understanding its contemporary usage.

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