

Fabian von Auerswald's "Ringer kunst" :
Interpretation through language and organization
by James Klock

Having recently completed a modern English-language translation of a 16th century wrestling manual, I have begun to turn my attention towards understanding, interpreting and teaching the martial arts system described in that book. Along the way, two observations about the structure and linguistic content of the book immediately presented themselves. This paper attempts to justify, through an analysis of the word usage in the text, a very close and literal reading of the individual words, while also attempting to make sense of some potentially confusing organizational elements with respect to the order in which information is presented.

Context

Fabian von Auerswald's "Ringer kunst: funf und Achtzig Stücke" is one of the earliest printed books of wrestling, and has legitimate claims to a significant academic legacy: the eighty five plates described by the title, as well as the title plate and a portrait of the author, were created in the school of the notable painter and illustrator, Lucas Cranach the Elder. In addition, a note from the publisher, on the final page of the text, indicates that it was printed in Wittenberg in 1539, by Hans Lufft, who was also responsible for printing Martin Luther's translation of the Bible, in the same city and at about the same time.

However, this interpretation will not be concerned with the importance of the figures involved in the creation of the book, but will focus solely on its content, looking in particular at the language that is used, and the manner in which the book is organized. It is hoped that this analysis may both improve the reader's understanding of the system of martial arts described, and give some insight into the author's intention in writing the book.

Verbal Analysis

Purpose: In reading this text, it became apparent that von Auerswald was using a tightly limited vocabulary, with a very specific and careful choice of wording throughout. In order to test this idea, and look more closely at how the word choices influence the reader's understanding of the text, I

performed a basic analysis of the word usage, the results of which will be used to draw some conclusions about the significance of the limited vocabulary, and the specific words, that are used.

Methods: The verbal analysis presented here is based on the individual words used in the book. In order to focus on the technical material, I have discarded the forward, title plate, printer’s mark and author’s portraiture, including only the eighty five pieces of wrestling technique. The individual words in the text were considered, without reference to the context in which they appear: the individual words were collated into an alphabetically ordered list, without any indication of where each word appeared in the original text.

Different tenses and cases of each word were then convert into their root words (so, for example, the English words *eat*, *eaten* and *ate* would all be considered to be instances of the root word, *eat*), and root words were placed into one of six categories:

Verbs (which include all verbs, in any form)

Descriptors (which include words that direct placement, such as “in”, “out”, or “above”)

Anatomical words (which refer to a specific part of the body :“foot”, “hand”, “leg”, etc.)

Technical words (which refer to specific, named techniques, including locks, throws, etc.)

Timing words (which include any words that suggest when, in an engagement, an action occurs. Examples include “then”, “when”, “before”, “while”, “thereafter”, etc.)

Miscellaneous words (including articles, possessives, and all other words that do not fit any of the above categories).

TABLE I: Results of verbal analysis

Category	Words	Tokens	Top 5 tokens, English translation (number of occurrences)
Descriptors	717	32	right (132), left (126), in (~80)*, to (45), on (43)
Verbs	524	74	come (39), take (35), step (31), go (28), trap (17)
Anatomy	360	24	arm (74), hand (61), leg (60), thigh (52), hip (~17)*
Timing	285	21	then (118), when (41), before (27), as (10), thereafter (10)
Technical	161	17	hook (37), break/counter (20), hip-throw (~17)*, balance (15), wind (14)

Results: The eighty five pieces of von Auerswald's book are annotated by 3,527 German words; however, when the text is collated into "tokens", or root words, as described above, there are fewer than 300 unique token words used. Of those, if we consider only the ten most common root words, (the, I, and, with, his, my, right, left, then, arm), they account for over 1400 words, nearly half of the words in the text. The results of this analysis are presented in Table I.

Known problems: Several words could not be reliably assigned to any category, without contextual clues, either because the same spelling was used to refer to two distinctive concepts, or because a single word may fit into either of several categories, depending on its usage. For example, the words "him" and "inside", in modern German, translate as *ihn* and *in*, respectively, but in von Auerswald's text, both are generally spelled as *in* (the same is true for the dative case, *ihm* and *im*). Also, some words may legitimately be placed in more than one category, depending on the context within which the word is used. For example, *Hüffe* (hip) can refer either to the anatomical body part, or to any of several hip-throw techniques (which are generally labeled with names such as "the short hip", "high hip", "half hip", etc.). *As an approximation, the results above count half the the occurrences of any questionable word in each of its possible categories (so, for example, I assume that half of the uses of the word *Hüffe* refer to the hips themselves, and so are counted in the anatomical category, while the other half are assumed to refer to hip-throw techniques, and are accounted for in the technical category).

Conclusions: Von Auerswald describes his entire martial system using fewer than 300 unique root words (or "tokens"), and fewer than 100 words account for over 90% of the text. This does indeed suggest a precision in language, which may in turn suggest that a close reading of apparently similar words is appropriate: notably, the words *bein* (leg) and *schenkel* (thigh) appear with approximately the same frequency, and refer to the student's own appendages about as often as they refer to the opponent's. It is suggested, using this example, that the wrestling techniques described rely upon the accurate use of the upper and lower parts of the leg, depending on which word (*schenkel* or *bein*, respectively) is used (in other words, *bein* should be assumed to refer specifically to the lower part of the leg, as any action with the thigh may reasonable be assumed to be so labeled. At the same time, some indication of the important elements of the system can be gained, simply by examining the words that are used to describe it: the most common category of words are the verbs, and in particular, the verbs that refer to stepping, coming, going; this suggests a strong reliance on accurate footwork.

Organizational analysis

At first glance, “*Ringer kunst*” appears to have some peculiarities to its organizational system. Perhaps the most notable example is the sequence of “breaks against the hook”, that is to say, techniques that defend against a leg hook. Plates 45 through 49 describe three different breaks against the hook, while plate 50 gives a break *against* those breaks (ie, a counter-defense):

Break against the break of the entering hook
I stay under him in his balance
and with my right arm I force his left arm out
just exactly
as if I would run him into the hook
but stay standing with my legs
Thereby I learn
if he can break the entering hook
If he can,
then he comes to it
then I come with my right over his breast
and bring him back over my right knee
but if he cannot
then I take the hook with his help.

What is interesting about this sequence is that the hook itself is not described until *later* in the book (plate 58: The entering of the hook). In effect, what we see here is a series of defenses against a technique, as well as a counter-defense with the possibility of entering the technique, and only then the actual technique itself. The discovery of this sequence led me to create an index of the 85 pieces. Acknowledging that some techniques actually are described over the course of two or three pieces (each page of the book is described, by von Auerswald, as a separate piece), the index quickly reveals that all of the breaks or counters come in plates 38 through 57, and that the final eight plates of the book are a special reference to an outdated form of sport wrestling, where one player stands with his foot in a hole, and the other hops on one leg (other references to this are seen in Tahlhofer’s 1459 manuscript, as well as other sources).

With some analysis of the techniques that are described before and after the section on breaks, it becomes clear that the book is basically divided into several sections:

Plates 1-30: Entering techniques

Plates 31-37: Techniques for “rough people”

Plates 38-57: Breaks and counter-breaks

Plates 58-77: Finishing techniques

Plates 78-85: Wrestling in the hole

Taken from this perspective, the development of techniques in the original example becomes clear: the student of von Auerswald's system is expected to first learn the fundamentals of wrestling, including techniques that allow one to safely enter into engagement, to capture the opponent's hips and constrain his movement, and to manipulate his arms and legs. Having learned these basics, the student is then taught a few techniques for dealing with an overly violent opponent (interestingly, plates 1-30 and 38-85 all show the same, consistently recognizable player acting as von Auerswald's opponent, while plates 31-37, the rough techniques, use a different opponent from the rest of the book). After this, the reader is taught how to counter his opponent's techniques-- in most cases, we have not yet learned to execute those techniques, ourselves, but the descriptions of the counters give us adequate information to recognize the situation: it is not required that we be able to *perform* the hook, in order that we learn to *defend against* it. Then, at last, having learned to defend ourselves, we are taught finishing techniques, which will throw the opponent to the ground, or (in a few cases) break his limbs. Lastly, we are given a diversion into a historical style of wrestling (antiquated even in von Auerswald's time, according to his own comments on it).

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Auerswald, Fabian von. *Ringer kunst: fünf und achtzig stücke zu ehren Kurfürstlichen gnaden zu Sachssen*. Wittemberg, 1539.

Tahlhofer, Hans. Untitled manuscript. 1459.

Secondary sources:

Amberger, Christopher. *The Secret History of the Sword*. Unique Publications, New York. 1999

Anglo, Sydney. *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*. Yale University Press, New Haven. 2000

Carruthers, Mary. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Cultures*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1992

Conversations, correspondence and thanks:

Bob Charron (class on Fiore dei Liberi's *Fior di Battaglia*, and private conversations)

Roger Siggs (private conversation and correspondence)