hosts the Cluster of Excellence “Beyond Slavery and Freedom”, which aims to overcome the binary opposition of “slavery versus freedom”. For that we approach the phenomenon of slavery and other types of strong asymmetrical dependencies (e.g. debt bondage, convict labor, tributary labor, servitude, serfdom, and domestic work as well as forms of wage labor and various types of patronage) from methodologically and theoretically distinct perspectives.

The research cluster is part of the framework of the Excellence Strategy of the Federal Government and the Länder and is free and independent in the selection and realization of its research projects.

Our Cluster of Excellence is a joint project of scholars from the fields of Anthropology, Archaeology, History, Law, Literary Studies, Area Studies (including The History of the Islamicate World, Japanese and Chinese Studies, Tibetan Studies), Sociology and Theology. We propose “strong asymmetrical dependency” as a new key concept that includes all forms of bondage across time and space.

The conference will be held in Bonn on October 1–2, 2020. The proceedings of the conference will be published in our Book Series Beyond Slavery and Freedom: Asymmetrical Dependencies in Pre-Modern Societies (published by de Gruyter).

Please inform us of your ability (or lack thereof) to cover your costs as the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies may cover part of the travel and accommodation costs of accepted speakers who cannot fund themselves through their own institutions.

Please send your paper proposal and a short biographical note to dependency@uni-bonn.de by May 15, 2020. An abstract (roughly 500 words) should describe the proposed paper, including topic, method, and sources used.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

The conference intends to approach the phenomenon of slavery and other types of strong asymmetrical dependencies (e.g., debt bondage, convict labor, tributary labor, servitude, serfdom, and domestic work as well as forms of wage labor and various types of patronage) from three methodologically and theoretically distinct perspectives. The conference will conclude the thematic year of the BCDSS which is dedicated to the topics of its Research Area A “Semantics – Lexical Fields – Narratives” (https://tinyurl.com/research-area-a).

SEMANTICS

Our approach to the semantics of the many different (predominantly pre-modern) languages represented in the BCDSS is interested in focusing on the word, i.e., the lexical dimension, as well as on pragmatics. The meaning often turns out to be dependent on the contexts in which a word is used. In addition to the linguistic context, the genre/text type and wider cultural contexts may also turn out to be relevant. We aim at identifying inventories of linguistic items (and their usage) that are pertinent to the topic at a particular time and in a specific historical (con)text.

Detailed analyses of key terms that are associated with the conceptualization of strong asymmetrical dependencies promise to provide new insights into the self-concept and knowledge of pre-modern societies. The majority of these key terms have as yet not been studied from a semantic or terminological perspective. Contributions may adopt a synchronic approach focusing on a single text or small set of texts; or analyze diachronic semantic changes. Both approaches are welcome and valued and shall be based on the assumption that the meaning of a word can only be identified by taking its usage into consideration.

LEXICAL FIELDS

Our understanding of lexical fields is based on an onomasiological approach – which linguistic items are used to refer to a concept? Which words are used to express a concept? This means that the concept is a semantic unit which is not directly accessible but may be manifested in different ways on the linguistic level. We are interested in single concepts such as wisdom or fear, but also in more complex semantic units like strong asymmetrical dependencies. We consider concepts to be abstract units that are expressed in a particular language — without, however, necessarily expecting or postulating precise correspondences between a concept and an individual word or other linguistic structure.

Lexical fields encompass the set of linguistic items in one language that can be linked to a particular concept (e.g., wisdom) and the related conceptual network based on semantic relations. In comparative studies which seek to examine different cultural contexts, the concept of lexical fields promises to be enormously useful, since it is a tool that helps us to reveal differences in terms of usage associated with otherwise similar concepts.

Generally, in each language (or diachronic stage), key terms emerge. The usage of these key terms should be analyzed in terms of its relations to linguistic items that can be shown to be syntagmatically and paradigmatically linked to the key term (synonymity and antonymity).

NARRATIVES

Finally, we will focus on the analysis of narratives of slavery and other forms of strong asymmetrical dependencies. This, first of all, means the definition of a relevant set of narrative texts. A narrative text is always a form of cultural self-perception and self-reflection. We define culture as the interaction of material, social and mental phenomena.

Studying the mental dimension of the culture of a society with the help of the methods supplied by literary studies, thus, means trying to reconstruct the system of values, norms, ideologies and collective concepts that is typical of a society, since this system (or at least segments thereof) manifests itself in condensed form in narratives.

We are especially interested in the relations between narrative texts and the discourses and the knowledge of a society, seeking to trace how texts draw upon the sociocultural knowledge of the time they were produced in and how they incorporate this knowledge in media- and genre-specific ways, thus fulfilling diverse cultural functions. A transcultural narratological analysis of literary strategies may provide insights into mental ways of making sense of reality and world-making.

In other words, narratives of slavery and other forms of strong asymmetrical dependencies draw upon elements which are part of the imagination, experience and knowledge of a culture, even if these elements of the cultural archive are taken out of their original contexts and thus may be fundamentally changed in the process of narration.