

Semantics – Lexical Fields – Narratives

In Research Area A, we approach the phenomenon of slavery and other types of strong asymmetrical dependencies from three methodologically and theoretically distinct perspectives.

(1) Semantics.

Our approach to the semantics of the many different (predominantly pre-modern) languages we are interested in focuses on the word, i.e., the lexical dimension, as well as on pragmatics, in so far as 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 turn out to be relevant as well. We aim at identifying inventories of linguistic items (and their usage) that are pertinent to our topic at a particular time and in a specific historical (con)text. Most of us will first adopt a synchronic approach and focus on a single text or a small set of texts. These case studies will of course not be able to provide a comprehensive account of the semantics of slavery and asymmetrical dependencies, but they will allow us to compare different ways of conceptualizing asymmetrical dependencies linguistically, which may or may not turn out to be specific to particular regions or points in time. An analysis of diachronic semantic changes, which amounts to a history of the terms pertinent to our topic, would of course be very interesting, but for most of the participating subjects a diachronic perspective can hardly be a short- or mid-term goal since the prerequisites for such an approach are simply not given: for instance, there simply is not a sufficient number of edited texts that are relevant to our theme for many regions and/or periods. Our approach is based on the assumption that the meaning of a word can only be identified by taking its usage into consideration. 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 not been studied from a semantic or terminological perspective so far.

(2) 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 manifested in a particular language. Yet, there are not necessarily one-to-one correspondences between concepts and individual words or other linguistic structures. In some cases, we can identify anthropological constants, which suggest that there are at least some universal concepts, i.e., concepts that can be expressed in all of the languages we examine. What provides deeper insight into the specific societies we are interested in is an analysis of the concrete expressions of concepts, which may look similar, but usually are not identical for people in different cultural contexts and language communities. A lexical field encompasses the set of linguistic items in one language that can be linked to a particular concept (e.g., ‘wisdom’) and the related conceptual network due to 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. Thus, it seems reasonable to compare specific conceptual networks and their lexical manifestations in different languages as well as in different diachronic stages of the development of a society and a language. 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 (synomy and opposition).

(3) *Narratives.*

Finally, the Research Area also focuses on the analysis of narratives of slavery and other forms of strong asymmetrical dependencies. This, first of all, means that we need to define a relevant set of narrative texts. Our definition of the term ‘narrative text’ is based on Dietrich Weber (*Erzählliteratur: Schriftwerk, Kunstwerk, Erzählwerk*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998). According to Weber’s principles of narrative theory, a narrative text can be defined by the following criteria:

1. it consists of serial accounts of temporally specified objects;
2. it represents what is not current;
3. it has two centres of orientation – that of the narrator in his/her ‘world’ and that of the characters whose stories are told;
4. it is addressed to someone;
5. it is an elaborate account;
6. it typically does not only consist of telling (the core features of a narrative are narrating speech and, optionally, the presentation of characters’ speech; further speech on the object of narration, or triggered by the object of narration as well as speech on speaking or the occasion of speaking constitute additional, marginal components of a narrative. We follow Weber in assuming that these criteria can be applied to any kind of narration in any kind of literature.

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. The analysis of selection processes with respects to what is addressed and to the literary forms that are characteristic of a particular genre or period promises to provide insights into the mental disposition typical of a particular historical period. 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 interested in the relations between narrative texts and the discourses and the knowledge of societies, seeking to trace how texts draw upon the sociocultural knowledge of the time they were produced in and incorporate this knowledge in media- and genre-specific ways, thus fulfilling diverse cultural functions. A transcultural narratological analysis of literary strategies provides insights into mental ways of making sense of reality and world-making. Nevertheless, with respect to their production and cultural reception, narratives of slavery and other forms of strong asymmetrical dependencies – just like all other narratives do not represent cultural realities mimetically; nor can they be accounted for in terms of straightforward relations of cause and effect. Instead, such narratives articulate individual and collective experiences, restructure these experiences and, last but not least, may have a significant impact on cultural symbolic inventories. In other

words, these 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.