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lexical field theory

theory based on the view that the lexicon of a language consists of paradigms of semantically related words which stand in opposition to one another.

Wortfeldtheorie: Theorie, die davon ausgeht, dass der Wortschatz einer Sprache aus Paradigmen bedeutungsverwandter Wörter besteht, die in Opposition zueinander stehen.

Lexical field theory had several forerunners in the 19th century, and in the first decades of the 20th century papers by *G. Ipsen* and *W. Porzig* proved particularly important to its development (*Geckeler* 1971: 86-100). However, it is *J. Trier's* (1931) diachronic study of the semantic changes of the words *wîsheit*, *kunst*, *list* and *wîzzen* in Old and Middle High German which is commonly referred to as the breakthrough of lexical field theory in modern linguistics. After being integrated by *L. Weisgerber* into his content-based grammar, lexical field theory was elaborated in various forms from the 1960s onwards, in particular in synchronic linguistics. Proponents of the theory share several general assumptions with regard to the relationship between semantically related words (e.g. concerning antonymy, hyperonymy and (co-)hyponymy, partial synonymy, semantic features, etc.) and the importance of lexical fields in the hierarchical structuring of the lexicon. Nevertheless, definitions of the central concept *lexical field* differ considerably among scholars. For example, this is evident in the way the notions *lexical field* (German *Wortfeld*) and *conceptual field* (*Begriffsfeld* or *Sinnbezirk*) are contrasted by different scholars; incidentally, in recent years this distinction has been partly supplanted by a new, typological interpretation in the

cognitive theory of *semantic maps*. The history of lexical field theory is far from uniform. At least the following approaches have to be distinguished: the early conceptual-sociological approach (*J. Trier, L. Weisgerber* and their followers in Germany), the referential-relational approach in the USA, which is partly based on anthropology and ethnolinguistics (*A. Lehrer, L. Barsalou*, among others), the approach known as “lexematics” in Europe, which is concerned with language-specific semantic paradigms (*E. Coseriu, H. Geckeler* and their students), and finally recent approaches in which several aspects of lexical field theory are integrated into cognitive semantics (*Lehrer/ Kittay* [eds.] 1992 and *Lutzeier* [ed.] 1993) as well as *Fillmore’s Frame Semantics*. Many assumptions of the early approach have been called into question in the course of time. Among these the following figure prominently: the alleged discreteness of lexical fields and the absence of gaps; the belief that changes in one lexical field inevitably entail changes in other fields as well; the uniformity and discreteness of the meanings of the field members; the assumption that a field consists of simple words only, to the exclusion of compounds and derivations; the distinction between fields that are purely linguistically structured and (folk) taxonomies as well as the distinction between lexical fields and “families” of words (the latter term commonly refers to morphologically or etymologically but not necessarily semantically related lexical items) (*Geckeler* 1971: 84-204 and *Lutzeier* [ed.] 1993). The following questions are still a matter of controversy: Are the members of a lexical field confined to a single part of speech? Can the members of a lexical field be established syntagmatically or only paradigmatically? Do related lexical fields have clear boundaries? What are the semantic structures a fully developed typology of lexical fields has to consider? Is it possible and desirable to expand the field concept so as to cover “grammatical fields” of semantically related syntactic constructions as well?

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