

Theories and Methods in Linguistics

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lexematics

theory of word meaning in natural languages, conceived as a synthesis of lexical field theory and assumptions of structural-functional language theory.

Lexematik

Theorie der Wortbedeutung in natürlichen Sprachen, die aus der Synthese der Wortfeldtheorie mit Prinzipien der strukturell-funktionellen Sprachtheorie hervorgegangen ist.

The founding father of *lexematics* was E. COSERIU, professor in Tübingen, Germany, from 1963 onwards (*lexematics* is occasionally also referred to as the theory of the “Tübinger Schule”). Although COSERIU developed several theoretical approaches over the years, lexematics ranks among his most successful achievements and gained considerable support among German-, Spanish-, French-, Italian-, and Japanese-speaking linguists. However, in Anglo-American linguistic circles, lexematics has met with little interest, partly because virtually at the same time that the theory was being developed, an altogether different kind of field and componential analysis (which was first based on anthropological, subsequently on generative and finally on cognitive premises) became influential in the USA and other countries.

Lexematics is primarily conceived as a heuristic. It combines achievements in lexical field theory (as expounded by TRIER and WEISGERBER) with interpretations of “structural” and “proto-structural” (viz. componential and immanent) accounts of linguistic meaning in the writings of W. VON HUMBOLDT, L. HJELMSLEV and B. POTTIER, among others, complemented by insights drawn from studies in word formation and grammar. The result is a sophisticated model for determining, synchronically or diachronically, the language-specific paradigmatic and syntagmatic meanings of words and word formations. Two notions are of fundamental significance to the model, viz. “lexical paradigm” (lexical field) and

“lexical solidarity” (German *lexikalische Solidarität*). A lexical paradigm consists of lexical items pertaining to a single part of speech (i.e. they are all nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.) which together split up a semantic zone. They stand in opposition to each other through simple distinctive features (e.g., *hot, warm, lukewarm, cold, cool, chilly, frosty* etc.). It should be stressed that in lexematics, a lexical paradigm is very different not only from a lexical, or distributional, class (e.g., nouns designating living beings, or all nouns insertable in an argument slot of a syntactic construction), but also from a nomenclature (e.g., all words designating dermatological diseases or different kinds of cars). A case of lexical solidarity has to be distinguished from an ordinary collocation (e.g., *white snow* or *steam engine* vs. *electric motor*), its defining property being that one lexical item is semantically determined by another one (or by a class of lexical items), e.g. *blond* (< *hair*), *to bark* (< *dog*). Distinctive features are obtained by means of the commutation test. Contrary to other componential and field theories, however, in lexematics these features are conceived as non-taxonomic and non-universal traits of a metalinguistic kind. Following HUMBOLDT, features are not considered to be the constitutive, atomic properties of lexical meanings. In lexematics, meanings are systematic and uniform and as such constitute the foundation of the semantic variability of lexical items in discourse and “normal” language use. Thus, meanings (SAUSSURE’s *signifiés*) are rigidly distinguished from reference, which is by definition heterogeneous. Lexematics has occasionally faced criticism, e.g. from proponents of cognitive semantics (A. BLANK, R. TAYLOR), yet the theoretical assumptions and methodological procedures of the theory have also been misunderstood. However, supporters of lexematics also admit that several questions pertaining to the theory have still not been conclusively answered. These include the following: How can different but related lexical paradigms be delimited from one another in a coherent way? How are homonymous and polyparadigmatic lexical items to be distinguished? How important is neutralisation to the structure of paradigms? Does COSERIU’s detailed typology of lexical paradigms cover a sufficiently broad range of phenomena?

Literature

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