

# SEMANTIC (LEXICAL) FIELDS

SEMANTIC DOMAINS

# Emergence of the theory of semantic fields

- heavily influenced by de Saussure's structuralism and German idealism
- Origins: ideas of Humboldt and Herder in the mid 19th ct.
- first proposed by German and Swiss l. in the 20s and 30s of the 20th ct.: **Trier**, Porzig, Ipsen

# Trier (1931; 1933)

- S. Ullmann: Trier's theory of s.f. opened a new chapter in the history of semantics
- s.f. demonstrate vocabulary organization on the paradigmatic level
- basic assumption: vocabulary of a l. is an integrated system of lexemes which are interrelated in m. The whole of l. consists of a large number of s.f. which accumulate lexemes which are close in m.

- vocabulary of a l. is a mosaic **without gaps or overlaps**
- that system of lexemes is not fixed- not only can lexemes disappear and new ones appear, but what also changes are the m. relations between neighbouring lexemes
- drawback of traditional, diachronic semantics:  
atomic description of the history of change in m. of individual l. instead of investigation of m. changes in the whole vocabulary structure

- doesn't describe successive states of the whole v., but compares the structure of a l. field in  $t_1$  with the structure of the l. field in  $t_2$  (comparable because 2 l. fields refer to the same **conceptual field**)
- fields are realities which are midway between individual words and the whole of v.

# Example of a **conceptual field**

- lexeme 'braun' covered a wider area of the c. field of colours in the 18th ct. German than it does today as a part of that area is covered by the lexeme 'violett': what has changed is the internal structure of the c. field.
- semantic field # conceptual field

- if sth. happens to the m. of one lexeme, it automatically influences the m. of neighbouring l.
- sees lexical items as very **orderly** without gaps in the system
- most interesting idea: behind every **s. field** there is a **c. field**- there is a **concept** behind every **lexeme**

## Comp. of 2 diachronically different lexical f. covering the same c. field

- 1. no change in the set of lexemes nor in the m. relations between them
- 2. one l. is changed (substituted) by a new lexeme without change in internal structure
- 3. no change in the set of lexemes, but change in the internal structure of the c. f.
- 4. one or more l. is substituted by new one(s) and the structure of the c.f. changed
- 5. one or more l. added or lost with a change of the internal structure of c.f.



## Trier's example (of the 4th situation)

- change in the structure of the c.f. of knowledge and understanding (with lexical substitution) in the period 1200-1300 in Middle High German
- 1200: c.f. covered by l.f. consisting of: 'wîsheit', 'kunst', 'list'
- 1300: covered by l.f. consisting of: 'wîsheit', 'kunst', 'wizzen'

- By 1300 'list' transferred to another f. which covers a different c.f. and 'wizzen' transferred to the l.f. of knowledge and understanding but didn't simply fill the place of 'list'
- 1200: 'kunst' referred to higher, courtly knowledge and 'list' to lower, technical k.; 'wîsheit' was their alternative or synthesis

- 1300: 'wîsheit' covers the deepest form of knowledge (religion, myth) and couldn't be used as alternative for 'wizzen' (lowest form of k.) or 'kunst' (area between)
- same c.f. shaped by different l.f. in different periods
- caused by changes in society and breakdown of Medieval synthesis of what is today known as: science, philosophy and theology

# Trier's general points

- lexical fields are **neatly** structured
- the **whole** of voc. is organized in **fields**
- introduction of the notion of **concept. field**
- **conceptual field**-when concepts change in our heads, so does the m. of a lexeme
- his followers: disregarded c.f.; preserved very neat and rigid structures, but couldn't explain how and why l.f. change

# Examples of l.fields

1. lexical field of striking: kick, punch, slap
  - but, not so neat, borders are vague; m. overlap so part of m. lies in interrelatedness
2. lexical field of cooking expressions
  - but, everything connected to cooking is culturally coloured
  - vocabulary **is** structured and organized, but not in such a neat and unnatural way

# Lexical gaps (“holes in the pattern”)

- absence of a particular lexeme in a point in a particular lexical field
- Trier: there are no gaps in the system. If they arise (by conceptual innovation), quickly filled by **borrowing** or by **extending the m. of an existing lexeme**
- Chomsky: there are no gaps in the system

- l. field containing lexemes referring to the 'dead of sth'
- no concept behind the hypothetical lexeme to refer to the 'dead of plant' to demonstrate that there actually is a gap
- no l. gap from the viewpoint of a particular native speaker; each l. structures the r. between l. and reality in its own way

- gaps appear when you compare languages-  
**cultural lexical gaps** (Yorkshire pudding/  
štrukle; aunt/ujna, strina, teta)
- gaps in grammatical system? yes, but native  
speakers do not feel it (cup/cups,  
dress/dresses, 0/trousers, chaos/0;  
may/might, can/could, must/0)



# Evaluation of Trier's theory

## Accepted points:

1. vocabulary **is** structured (but not as neatly as he proposes)
2. **no l. gaps** (from the viewpoint of native s.)
3. endurance of the notion of **c.fields**

- Weak points:
  1. his field is a **rigid** and **limited** structure; in reality boundaries btw. lexemes and fields are not so rigid
  2. imposes structures where they cannot be found
  3. proposes strict **Aristotelian categories**

# Aristotelian (traditional) categories

1. categories are defined in terms of a conjunction of necessary and sufficient features
2. features are binary
3. categories have clear boundaries
4. all members of a category have equal status

- Trier's view-similar to de Saussure's
- words do not exist in isolation, their m. is defined exclusively in relation to the m. of other l.
- l. is a product of historical change-necessity to analyze particular synchronic stages
- Wortfeld- linguistic reality, reflection of Begriffsfeld (conceptual field)

# Porzig

- criticizes Trier: defines the field by extralinguistic means; excludes the syntagmatic relations
- develops a theory of s.f. based on the relations btw. pairs of syntagmatically related lexemes
- relations- not inherent to l. itself but connected to man's worldview and perception: verb-noun, verb-object
- similar proposals: C.Fillmore (1970s)

# Weisgerber

- Trier's drawback: fields are not neatly structured wholes (there are overlaps btw. meanings of words and gaps in the system)
- Greatest contribution: first to realize Trier's failure to explain the relation btw. the linguistic and the extralinguistic
- American anthropologists: independent, corpus analysis similar to field theory

# Evaluation of the field theory

- most agree that what lacks is a more explicit formulation of the criteria on what can be called a l.f.
- most l.f. are not clearly structured or separated
- no clear boundaried btw. lexemes in a particular field
- no clear boundaried btw. fields themselves