

## LEXICAL FIELD THEORY. TRIER'S CONCEPT OF LEXICAL FIELDS

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**Abstract.** *The paper discusses theoretical basis of the lexical field approach in linguistics. The basis and development of Trier's concept of lexical field are also mentioned here.*

**Key words:** *theoretical, lexical field, approach, terminology, demarcation, semantic, relationship, contents, borrow, structuralist, vocabulary, changes*

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**Анотація.** *Обговорюється теоретична основа лексичного підходу в лінгвістиці. Також зазначається база та розвиток концепції семантичного поля Тріра.*

**Ключові слова:** *теоретичний, лексичне поле, підхід, термінологія, демаркація, семантичний, взаємовідносини, зміст, запозичення, структураліст, словник, зміни*

## ТЕОРИЯ ЛЕКСИЧЕСКОГО ПОЛЯ. КОНЦЕПЦИЯ ЛЕКСИЧЕСКИХ ПОЛЕЙ ТРИРА.

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**Аннотация.** *Обсуждается теоретическая основа лексического подхода в лингвистике. Также упоминается теоретическая база и развитие концепции семантического поля Трира.*

**Ключевые слова:** *теоретический, лексическое поле, подход, терминология, демаркация, семантический, взаимоотношения, содержание, заимствования, структуралист, словарь, изменения*

Although the theoretical basis of the lexical field approach was established by Weisgerber, the single most influential study in the history of lexical field theory is Jost Trier's monograph *Der Deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbezirk des Verstandes: Die Geschichte eines sprachlichen Feldes* of 1931. In this work, Trier gives a theoretical formulation of the field approach, and investigates how the terminology for mental properties evolves from Old High German up to the beginning of the thirteenth century. In Trier (1932) [ 2 ] and (1934) [ 3 ] an appendix was added which dealt with Middle High German, but the study which

he originally anticipated, and which was intended to trace the lexical field in question up to contemporary German, was never completed. We will first have a closer look at Trier's work, and then explore the developments to which it gave rise.

Theoretically, Trier starts from the fundamentally structuralist insight that only a mutual demarcation of the words under consideration can provide a decisive answer regarding their exact value. Words should not be considered in isolation, but in their relationship to semantically related words: demarcation is always a demarcation relative to other words; the notion 'demarcation' is vacuous to begin with unless at least one other entity is involved. Trier illustrates the idea with the image of a mosaic. The substance of human knowledge – the contents of cognition – is divided by language into a number of adjoining small areas, in the same way in which a mosaic divides two-dimensional space by means of contiguous mosaic stones (1931: 3) [ 1 ]:

*Das es [the word] im Gesamtfeld umgeben ist von bestimmt gelagerten Nachbarn, das gibt ihm die inhaltliche Bestimmtheit; denn diese Bestimmtheit entsteht durch Abgrenzung gegen Nachbarn. Die Stelle an der es, von ihnen umdrängt, in dem grossen Mosaik des Zeichenmantels als kleiner Stein sitzt, entscheidet über seinen Gehalt, sie weist ihm zu, was für einen Teil aus dem Gesamtblock der fraglichen Bewusstseinsinhalte es herauschneidet und zeichnerhaft darstellt.*

*(The fact that a word within a field is surrounded by neighbours with a specific position gives it its conceptual specificity; because this specificity derives from its demarcation with regard to its neighbours. The exact position in which it is placed as a small stone in the grand mosaic of signs decides on its value, it determines which part exactly from the global mass of the cognitive representation under consideration it carves out and represents symbolically.)*

The image of the mosaic, as well as the term *field* to refer to a collection of sense-related words which delineate each other mutually, were borrowed by Trier from Ipsen (1924), a paper in which the field concept only plays a minor role. Apart from Ipsen, other precursors of the field idea may be found, even in the nineteenth century. Structuralist semantics may stress the importance of a systematic study of onomasiology, but an onomasiological point of view was not completely absent from historical-philological semantics, as we have seen.

Analogical change, for instance, can hardly be conceived of without an onomasiological perspective.

To get an idea of how Trier brought the theoretical view into descriptive practice, we will focus on Trier (1934) [ 3 ], in which a sub-area of the vocabulary concerning intellectual properties is dealt with, viz. the words denoting knowledge. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, courtly language possesses three core notions referring to types of knowledge: *wisheit*, *kunst*, and *list*. The distinction between the latter two reflects the architecture of the medieval class society. *Kunst* conveys the knowledge and skills of the courtly knight (viz. courtly love, the chivalric code of honour, and the liberal arts), whereas *list* is used to indicate the knowledge and the skills of those who do not belong to the nobility (such as the technical skills of the craftsmen). *Wisheit* is a general term which is used for the noblemen as well as for citizens; it is predominantly employed in a religious and ethical sense, similar to the Latin *sapientia*. One could say that *wisheit* refers to the general ability to occupy one's position in society (whatever that might be) with the appropriate knowledge and skills. The general term *wisheit* indicates that the distinct spheres of the noble *kunst* and the civil *list* are embedded in a common religious world order.

A century later, the division of the field had undergone considerable changes. *List*, which gradually acquires a derogative sense, somehow conveying 'artfulness, shrewdness', is replaced by *wizzen*, which does not however have exactly the same meaning as the earlier *list*. *Kunst* and *wisheit* as well have acquired a different scope. *Wisheit* has ceased to be a general term. It conveys a specific type of knowledge: instead of the original reading, referring to the knowledge of one's own position in the predestined divine order and the skills which are required to occupy that position, *wisheit* now refers to religious knowledge in a maximally restricted sense, i.e. the knowledge of God. *Kunst* and *wizzen* indicate higher and lower forms of profane knowledge, without specific reference to social distinction. *Wizzen* gradually begins to refer to technical skills,

like the skills of a craftsman, whereas *kunst* starts to denote pure forms of science and art. The example as a whole, summarized in Figure 2.1, demonstrates how lexical fields internally develop from one synchronic period into another: the way language carves up reality differs from period to period.

In the second place, historical case studies are well suited to establish one of the quintessential principles of structuralist semantics, i.e. that vocabularies do not change purely through the semantic shift of individual words, but that they change as structures. Trier's study demonstrates precisely that, to be sure: by analysing the synchronic stages of the language separately, he is able to reveal that the vocabulary undergoes *structural* changes from one period to the other.

This terminological diversity is obviously not purely terminological: it involves substantial questions about what to incorporate in a lexical field. Do fields contain words only, and could these be words belonging to different word classes? And if you go beyond words, would you include inflected word forms next to multiword expressions? Questions such as these about the internal constitution of lexical fields are not restricted to the question of what type of elements go into the field: they specifically also involve the question of what relations to envisage. Two crucial points arise here: while the field conception introduced by Weisgerber and Trier takes into account semantic relations of similarity (the words in the field have similar meanings), should a field not also encompass formal relations, and should it not also consider co-occurrences between words? These are the two points that we will consider in the following two sections.

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**4.** Webster Dictionary.