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Visions of lexicography of a semantic European

Abstract: In this essay, it is assumed that the languages of Latin Europe do have many semantic features in common, which contradicts the prevailing view of a general semantic particularity of every individual language and thus the exploitation for national-political purposes arising from that view. However, the proposition made here requires a summary and the assessment of different semantic concepts led by the idea of commonality. By means of individual cases that can be understood as relevant examples, a vision of lexicography will follow that aims at replacing the biologistic concept of a genetic explanation for contrastive semantics by the concept of a comparative semantics that is based on socio-historical, cultural-historical and textual-historical arguments. In doing so, a historiography relating to the subject-matter of "semantics" will be suggested that assigns a semantic bridging function to Late Antiquity / Early Medieval Latin in relation to all languages of Latin Europe. The logic of the argument implies that a new era of semantic history begins upon the development of a structure of national languages in Europe, whose historical basis can still be recognised in the semantic communalities.

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1 The proposition of a semantic European

Incorporating a noun like *vision* into the title of a presentation suggests that one does not take conventional lexicography for being visionary.[9] Assuming this supposed vision even contains "European", which is then characterised as "semantic", is downright offensive towards large portions of our lexicographic thinking and acting in the sense that the latter does not have any such thing as "European Semantics" in its stock at all. It certainly has a boldness to it to depict something as a "vision" that owes its existence to a presupposition based on a secret act of declaration; honestly, one could call it "fiction" or even "fantasy". The easiest arguments for such sceptical judgement are obvious: it is a truth universally acknowledged that there are several dozen languages in Europe; those, however, are so different that they are not mutually understandable; they determine our everyday lives and our scientific and political interests because they are different from one another. But assuming a unifying bond behind them, called "semantics", does not only contradict everyday's linguistic thinking and the prevailing views of language politics, but also common judgement. This reads as follows: the external differences of every single language entail, of course, individually different semantics. However, this applies with the restriction that semantics is initially perceived on a rather casual level, quasi as a by-product of perceiving the obvious differences in the external shape. The basis for this prioritisation can be learning a foreign language at school: you learn the vocabulary, but there is no talk of semantics at first. *Straße*[10] is 'street' in English, end of story. However, problems occur soon enough, or better: very soon and very often, that is whenever something does no longer fit on the contentual level, when *Straße* suddenly no longer means *'street'*.

2 Description semantics, cognitive semantics, action semantics

This is where the problems start: "semantics", in this case, neither denotes motivational semantics, nor fictional semantics or action semantics, but the naive, down-to-earth reference, which is simply description semantics. The core of it is that a given object is just denoted differently, depending on the language. Besides, the compound *description semantics* already.

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9 This article is a summary of a concern that I have pursued for about three decades and presented in various version with different focuses. I thus refer to the following works: Reichmann (1991; 2001; 2005; 2016). – For the sake of clarity I have maintained the lecture style in the present version.
10 Italics refer to the form of object-language units, whereas single quotations marks relate to semantic content.

The more you emphasize facts like these, the more it becomes clear: when German, French, and Czech lexical expressions are no longer translatable word for word because they differ semantically, then the presupposition of an European semantics transcending the boundaries of individual languages puts into perspective the prevailing idea of a general distinctiveness, uniqueness, specific character that distinguishes individual languages from one another. In other words: the hypothesis of an European semantics quite frankly undermines the objectivistic term of linguistic nation; this might even lead to an ideology of mobilisation towards "Europe", just like any language-related singularity hypothesis holds the reverse mobilisation potential, thus leading to semantic distinctiveness and then to linguistic-national isolation, as is reflected in the compound *Nationalsprache, national language*. These thoughts could be transferred to the realms of literature and art. Speaking of "national literature", "German music" and "German painting" already turns these factors into national manifestations. These few sentences truly convey that the targeted "European semantics" exactly matches the political tendencies wrapped around political Europe; the uniqueness of individual languages as the presupposition of the sovereignty of individual languages is equally true. In an underlying way, lexicography always does have a highly political dimension; and if this is always the case, it should be admitted, whether approvingly or disapprovingly.

After this introduction, our topic will be the following: we will speak about the lexicon of a language as an open inventory of – let us assume – 100,000 entities per language, and about several hundreds of thousands recognisable usages as a result of the systematic polysemy of said entities.[11] Firstly, using these entities, the speakers of a language refer to objects that can be assumed as anyhow given in a material or metaphorical way. It is to be assumed that these entities are, realistically, denoted in some way; it is thus possible to speak of *description semantics* (in a very simplified and contentious way with regard to language theory). Second, and more important: the referential reference which I just defined as "denotation" is generally done in a particular way; and this is the point when things get interesting. The moment that I am stressing this "particular way" of references, supposed objects – things –, "first-type realities" turn into "reference objects", into "second-type realities". These aspectualised realities are fictionally formative social accesses, or, in linguistic terms: sociocognitive semantic identities of societal origin created in / through speaking / writing. *Valley* and *mountain*, *justice* and *injustice*, *love and hate*, *weed* and *vermin*, *faith* and *law*, *street and road* are thus no longer objects that undoubtedly exist someplace; actually, they are "realities" of said second-type. They do exist only in social classes and groups, in some text traditions, linguistic com-

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[11] To convey an idea of the inventory of such 'recognisable usages', reference is made to HTOED, which determines 797,120 such 'usages' (or *meanings* and, in the wider context, *concepts*). Cf. Reichmann (2012: 379–404).

munities as the German, or in historical-socially evolved large groups, or rather, to be exact: in their texts only. Of course, identities of that kind – e. g. literary, confessional, political – do not abide by linguistic borders, but behave crosswise towards them, no matter whether we think of Augustinus, Luther, Shakespeare, Goethe or Karl Marx. Additionally, there is a third point: the semantic identities I just mentioned and declared as being "sociocognitive" are not factors that only come from my head; in fact, they have an additional quality to them, in particular recommendations for action; they are taking action in a figurative way. In German, *mountain – Berg –* and *valley – Tal –* are not only more different on a cognitive level than in many comparison languages; they also have to be treated differently, even within a single language area; from that perspective, Luther's "Christian man" (master and servant unified in one free Christian person) is not only interesting on a cognitive level, but implies a corresponding behaviour. A fourth component of the word usage, Peirce's indexical sign, can be left aside here, as it plays only a minor role with regard to our topic.

3 References to the practice of lexicography

As a matter of fact, conventional lexicography does not have the directions I was just pointing out, but rather the following:

Mentioning the number 100,000 refers to an ideal completeness – that is referring to "quantity" – of an open inventory; this is a contradiction in itself. Moreover, semantics is overlooked, or put in a poor light. The latter becomes apparent when looking at the specification of several hundreds of thousand usages, which also suggests a countability of object language that simply does not exist. At most, the distinctions a lexicographer makes are countable.

Semantics is mostly described with regard to denotational-related aspects, not so much with regard to sociocognitive-semantic aspects and almost never from the perspective of action semantics. The prevailing simplicity of the description too frequently dominates semantic differentiation.

Conventional lexicography has a strong focus on single words and is hardly ever related to networks, which means that bridges to other expressions are built, if ever, in the realm of word formation and semantics when giving synonyms, this being rather word-related than sememe-related, occuring rather on an accidental level than in a systematic way.

Conventional lexicography strictly relates to the individual language of German and its varieties (apart from external borrowings).

It mainly satisfies the selective queries of dictionary users.

It allows for a strikingly generous and semantically mostly irrelevant part that addresses phonetic and morphological variants.

The underexposure of semantics as the purpose of speaking and writing fosters the tradition of copying, which is plagiatory in parts; this would not be possible in the context of an ambitious semantics.

In general, dictionaries treat their lemmas without involving the dictionaries of neighbouring varieties and neighbour languages; they are bluntly centered around individual languages.

On the whole, these comments result in arguing against conventional lexicography: in fact, lexicography holds true while it is also entrenched; it relates to the less interesting features of the lexicon and is outdated in terms of linguistic theory, to a larger extend in German than in Dutch or English. This judgement neither pleases me nor you, neither with regard to its details or its tone, but might be received as understandable in parts. If this is really true, the visions that were referred to in the title cannot be limited to improve the daily life of lexicography in a few details. The fundamental concern should be to capture the lexicon where it is linguistic to the utmost extent, that is at its original purpose, which is semantics; and semantics is not bound to the borders of varieties on the internal level or to linguistic borders on the cross-linguistic level. In this regard, some of my statements need to be taken up again and be reconsidered in terms of their consequences. I will start with the applied differentiation of three types of semantics (that is description, cognitive, and action semantics).

Description semantics loses interest the moment that semantics is determined as the original purpose of speaking and language: descriptions just have to be studied. In doing so, it is completely irrelevant whether a given reality like a tree is denoted as *tree* or as *Baum*; you just have to know. By contrast, content-related semantics acquires a prominent role by the aforementioned components "cognition" and "action". In particular, expressions of the type *reason* or *Vernunft* and especially words like *belief* or *Glaube* are neither fully congruent on an internal level in individual languages or on the cross-linguistic level, but lose their often assumed so-called sharp images. In particular, that is (in the sense of the Age of Enlightenment:) a loss of clarity and distinctness; this loss applies per semantic nuance on the level of linguistic signs, it applies per sememe and sememe-related field, with a tendency of the latter to become a spectrum. The same applies across signs with a view on the semantic relations to synonyms, which are only feasible with regard to certain aspects. It applies within varieties and across varieties; and it applies to individual languages on an internal level and across languages. In short: as we are pushing this approach forward, lexical semantics shifts from the idea of clearly distinguishable, lucid counting units to the picture of a rather netlike structure, consisting of strong and weak links between thin and thick knots, all of them showing the famous open texture that Wittgenstein spoke of, withstanding countability and strictly not being knots anymore. But this is not enough.

The "netlike, open texture" becomes even more obscure / indistinct when focussing on the so-called metalanguage, that is the lexicographer. His thinking and acting

is always socially controlled in the same way as historical speaking in the object language is, which he intends to describe but which he cannot really describe, shaping it along his own horizon, in a cognitive and action-relevant way that matches his recipients. To that extent, the person using metalanguage is using object language at the same time; if she was not doing this, she would have no audience. The lexicographer creates a construct that is bound to his own interests, forcing it onto the realities of object language while being determined by his own background, be it rationalistic, religious, Marxist or of another kind. As a lexicographer he should have guiding principles that are able to create an interest.

I will interrupt my critical reflection at this point and change to narrative mode, presenting an interlude with narrative characteristics: I have been working on the Early New High German Dictionary – "Frühneuhochdeutsches Wörterbuch" (FWB)[12] – as its founder, editor and practical lexicographer for about 40 years. In doing so, the following situation is repeating itself time and again: I have a surpassing amount of attestations for a given word, let us say about 1,000. Assuming that the clipped attestation will consist of ten lines (five before the particular word and five after that), we would get 200 pages in total. Reading and arranging them will lead to sheer desperation due to the time requirement. The key difficulty is to find a way of creating a possible guiding principle in the aforementioned sense by using trial and error and then establish a structuring framework for a so-called second-type object, which – due to its general open texture – is not arranged at all, at least not in the sense of rational clarity and distinctness. Even the structuring framework of the lexicographer inevitably oscillates between drifting in chaos and being systematic; assigning the attestations to any provisional point in the (lexicographic) structure is accordingly problematic. Consequently, one starts looking for help in other dictionaries. In doing so, one comes across surprises such as these:

One of the possible meanings of Early New High German *arbeit*, which is 'fermentation of wine' (FWB 2: 39), has a metonymical equivalent in the English heteronym *work*, namely 'fermenting foam in the manufacture of alcoholic beverages'; additionally, there are other possible meanings of *arbeit*, involving the aspect of 'effort', which can also be found for French *travail* and Italian *lavoro*. Please note: this is not about etymologically corresponding heteronyms, but about expressions of another kind of etymology. I found the Early New High German lemma *arche* particularly impressive. Its semantic scope is so extensive that I kept looking for several origins, following certain etymological doubts on the correctness of my attribution, in order to possibly split the semantic field to make it more manageable. To give an idea about the extensive scope of the semantic field, I need to say: *arche* does not only denote Noah's Ark but also the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament, the body of the Virgin Mary, some small boxes in general, the treasure box in particular, a brushwood wick-

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12 Intended: 15 volumes, completed: 10 volumes.

erwork in a basket-like shape in rivers, the box for dead people, a storage room, and the torture ferrule. A comparison to New High German *haus* revealed the following: the eleven semantic approaches for *Haus* that Duden offers display a similarly high polysemy in the corresponding heteronym of 10 neighbour languages (those being English *house*, French *maison*, Polish *dom* etc.); each of these polysemies has a roughly similar content structure.

A graphic representation would look like this: imagine a wall painting now: the semasiological field of New High German *Arbeit* and New High German *Haus* (fig. 1) compared to the respective field of some heteronyms in other languages.

SPRACHE/WORT SIGNIFIKATE	dt. *Haus*	engl. *house*	nl. *huis*	franz. *maison*	ital. *casa*	port. *casa*	ung. *ház*	schwed. *hus*	tschech. *dům*	russ. *dom*
1. ‹Gebäude zum Wohnen›	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
2. ‹Gebäude für andere Zwecke›	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
3. ‹Wohnung, Heim›	x	(x)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
4. ‹Gesamtheit der Hausbewohner›	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
5. ‹Personen eines Gebäudes; Publikum, Parlament; Firma›	x	x	x	(x)	x	x	x	x	(x)	(x)
6. ‹Familie›	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
7. ‹Haushalt, Wirtschaft›	x	x	(x)	x	x	x	x	x	x	
8. ‹Dynastie›	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
9. von Personen	x					x	x			
10. Tierkreiszeichen	x	(x)				x	x			
11. Abschnitt […]	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x
		[…]	[…]	[…]	[…]	[…]				

Figure 1: *The semasiological realm of* Haus *and the heteronyms of some comparison languages (legend: x: meaning that is similar or considered as equal; (x): meaning that is considered as partially similar; space: no similarity relation could be established; […]: further meanings of the heteronyms that are not listed here).*

4 The Europeanness of the semantics of the individual languages in Europe

Now the question arises, of course, whether observations of the kind that has been presented here are individual cases of a random nature that might occur time and again in an inventory of a total of 100,000 entities, or if they are related to examples which allow to conclude that there is an open number of similar cases. I cannot present an empirically demonstrable solution to this problem, but I would refer you to a series of articles I wrote, as well as two dissertations that were prepared at my professorial chair in Heidelberg. The work of Peter Schlesier addresses the "German-Skandinavian Linguistic Semantics"; the work of Martin Sandhop contrasts the linguistic semantics of German, Czech, Croatian, French, and English. The result is the following:

Firstly: the languages that were considered here show a high degree of semantic similarities and equivalencies in the semasiological field of lexical expressions; I will call them "Europeanisms". To put it more provocatively: the lexis of European individual languages is subject to an European network of images and connotations, a proper basis of semantic similarities and resemblances. Or (in other words): the languages of Europe are, to a greater or lower degree, closely intertwined in a dense network of metaphors, metonymies and other tropes. To give you a fictitious example, I can assume with reasonable certainty that it is possible to adopt the imagery of any given Italian text when translating it to German or Czech. In contrast, I would have serious problems when translating it to Japanese. The possibility to mutually relate to the imagery belongs to "language", understood here as language ability, which is a characteristic of any human being, and which is considered as universal, thus being an object of anthropology. The actual use of the "possibilities" follows individual patterns shaped by historical factors, thus being an object of the history of semantics.

Secondly: according to present studies, Europeanisms are not related to language-genetic circumstances in the sense of historical-genetic linguistics. Thus, the common etymology of German *Haus*, Dutch *huis* or English *house* does not guarantee a higher degree of semantic similarity compared with Slavonic *dom* or French *maison*. Noticeably, German and Czech, the latter of which belongs to the "Satem" group of Indo-European languages, display a higher degree of semantic similarity than German and the genetically closer English. Quoting Sandhop (2003: 213), one may "take from this that the factor of language genetics does not affect the development of semantic parallels" (my translation).

Thirdly: to me, the most important exponent of Europeanisms is metaphors, not metonymy. This prioritisation results from the fact that metonymy is based on similarities of "objects" and is thus less subject to an individual culture than is the metaphor, which is based on the "setting" of similarities and thus endowed with considerably more freedom. The metaphor thus constitutes the central lingual place of inventing semantics, pragmatics, texts, and the fabrication of cultural objects. It is typically

found in literature in the broadest sense. By this, I mean sublime religious, literary, philosophical, educational, even specialist threads of textual history, including its many intersecting fanned out dimensions. This development starts with Greek, then passes on to Latin (in several major phases) and the individual languages. Europe thus turns out to be a literary unity (relatively, of course), containing the aforementioned network of images and connotations. There is no translator of a Greek tragedy into Spanish, German or Polish with the preceding translations into Latin, their paraphrasing in late antiquity, their medieval German versions etc. on his desk who would not consider the respective semantics in the sense of the aforementioned semantic open structures and imprecisions, adjusting them for his own purposes. Yet there is no student in any secondary school who has not studied languages on the basis of these traditions, using them to understand the semantics of his first language and thus becoming a part of an extensive European bond of reading, studying and translating. He has thus obtained his topics: religion, law, philosophy, specialist literature and the human being as an individual, as a zoon politikon, these are all objects of the aforementioned second type. The hypothesis that it is literature which shapes these objects, handing them down as semantic Europeanisms, is seen as proved in the eyes of Schlesier (1998: 321):

> "the crucial factor [in terms of semantic contact, O. R.] is the linguistic and cultural contact, [...]. In that, at least a part of the transfer of meaning [...] can be traced back to a common European textual canon, which, besides [...] the first-ranking Bible, also includes, for example, Greek philosophers, and Latin classics [...]".

I could continue here with further characteristics of the Europeanism hypothesis. This would include some positive aspects and a lot of critical ones. But I will only mention the most important ones: on the bright side: the epistemological value of the hypothesis for the history of semantics, and thus for the so-called history of concepts, its political mobilisation potential, its suitability for language teaching which focusses more on the comprehensibility of language than on its so-called purity, its relevance for the practice and theory of translation. The list of critical aspects is heartbreaking: the tie between the hypothesis and the higher social classes, the difficulty of proving it empirically, its affirmation by antitheses from outside of Europe, even the concept of Europe. Nevertheless, my vision of a European semantics based on text traditions is likely to be debated.

There is an ideological precondition to that vision; I will introduce it e contrario: with an enchanting logic, the tradition of focussing on differences concerning the expressive side of the European languages leads towards assuming that there is a natural, which means pre-political, reason for large human communities. I say "natural" because this reasoning is done from a historical language-genetic point of view; and, as a matter of fact, "language-genetic" is a biological metaphor (amongst the many others); as such, it carries around the shade of a pre- or outer social exist-

ence, which might not be necessary but goes in line with the circumstances of the 19th century, when linguistic differences were more or less taken as being natural and then were used to point out given differences of nationalities. The other way round, and also with an enchanting but different logic, focussing on semantic similarities leads to attributing a common ground to human communities on the basis of socio-historical differences, that is differences whose possibilities lie in the hands of the individual linguistic agents and require a cooperative mutuality. The adjective *socio-historical* is thus ideological as well, but contradicts *genetic* as a biologistic metaphor. Provided one agrees with this argumentation, this means: we need a general reorientation of lexicography in the sense of the aforementioned, beyond any genetics, towards a sociomorphological and action-related semantics. And we need – as a virtual point of reference for future prioritization – a dictionary of Europeanisms.

5 Pending issues: language-genetic versus socio-historical basis of semantics

This will lead to questions like the following: where to set the starting point of a semantic European? Does it include a possibly abrupt or gradual end? Which areas or scopes should be taken into account to a greater extent and which should not? Which textual threads can be identified exactly as bearers of the assumed commonalities? Which languages play a prominent role at which time? Which social classes function as the decisive agents? This bunch of questions involves the entire history of the Europeanisation of lexicons. But there is one scope that should be taken into account in particular, and that is Latin of the late antiquity, and Medieval Latin.

Undoubtedly, Latin of the late antiquity, the Renaissance, Humanism and the Reformation is especially important in terms of the development of Europeanisms. This is already true due to its temporal dimension and the vast area it relates to. This raises the question of the role of etymology. I will thus refer back to what I said earlier, namely: the etymology of heteronyms is irrelevant. If, according to this, the Dutch noun *huis* coincides with German *Haus* in terms of its semantic scope, then it is not the identity of the etymon that has caused this, but the cultural-historical contacts, especially the text-historical involvement in the European network of images and connotations. Now, believe it or not, doubts start to arise. Especially when thinking of Latin of the late antiquity. So we have an area reaching out from Portugal to Romania for a period of at least 500 years, where, for all we know, Latin was written and spoken. This Latin, however, was so different in itself that it moved towards one of the so-called Romanic languages in the early Middle Ages but also continued to exist in the form of a less differentiated educational language allover Europe until the times of neo-Latin. This extensive scope of time and space seems to yell the following question at us: is there, within the common European semantic basis of the Romanic

languages – that is between Portugal and Romania – apart from the mostly common inventory of "signs", a common Latin-Romanic basis of "semantics" in the sense of the aforementioned hypotheses, a common cornerstone for the whole of Europe? And if so, does this semantic basis stop at the borders of certain possible Germanic or Slavonic parts of that basis? There is the question concerning the historical architecture of European semantics, and the question concerning a specific kind of dependency of the semantic of words on the expressive shape of a word.

6 Vision of a history of a semantic European

I did not mean to question the important role of Medieval Latin by posing questions like the ones on etymology. This would be unadvisable, firstly because of the argument of time and space and, secondly, with regard to the following facts that can hardly be denied: Latin was the language of one of the Christian churches, that is the Catholic church; it did function as the language of the Holy (Roman) Empire, however one may choose to understand that Empire; it was the prevailing connection across each and every cultural area. Quoting the terminology of Peirce (1998), it was the undisputed interpreting authority, that means: the linguistic system of signs against which all other systems of signs were measured, the world of senses that was even responsible for the semantic content of the vernacular languages and which nobody is able to ignore.

At this point, the question arises whether, after the phase of medieval Latin that ended in the decades around 1500, similar long-term, spacially extensive and undisputed phases and condensations of the history of semantics can be assumed. If we take this bunch of time, space, and validity seriously, the answer can only be "no". We do not have the one and only church anymore, but various denominations; the Holy Roman Empire, now of the German Nation, may well exist, but it is the nation states that have become the shaping line of European history. Thus, the formula reads as follows: "one" language, "one" state, "one" nation, if possible "one" denomination relating to "one" world of senses each. Emphasizing the individual might lead to losing sense of what is possibly universal, which is tangible even in language teaching in schools. But still, we might not be able to exclude certain condensations in the pan-European structures of power and culture. Candidates for such condensations might be German during the Reformation, French of the 17th and 18th centuries, and, as from the 19th century, English.

This essay pursued the following objectives: the first aimed at a rebalancing of semantics, in particular one specific semantics that is directed towards sociocognition and action theory. To me, this is the presupposition for my second objective. This was aimed at developing a hypothesis of a semantic European, or, to put it less demanding: at carving out a common semantic basis of the European languages, and

within that basis a part that has been particularly shaped by the Latin Middle Ages and that does not seem to have been equally substituted in modern times. The aim of my third objective was to define lexicography as a highly politically relevant science that is able to foster denationalization, also in practice. Besides, I will not object if you express doubts on what I presented, as long as these doubts encourage new research.

7 Bibliography

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