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componential analysis

method of semantic analysis based on the assumption that the meaning of words can be adequately described by a set of primitive semantic features.

Komponentenanalyse: semantische Analysemethode, die auf der Annahme beruht, dass der Inhalt von Wörtern anhand von konstitutiven Bedeutungsmerkmalen beschreibbar ist.

Proponents of *componential analysis* agree that the contents of lexical items can be broken down analytically (*semantic decomposition*) into smaller units (so-called *semantic features* or *components*). This is considered to be proof of the fact that semantic analysis can be as systematic and verifiable as phonology and syntax. Yet it is imperative for a proper understanding not to mix up different versions of this method. One of the most important forerunners was *L. Bloomfield* (in particular with his elucidation of *class-meanings* in *Language* [1933]), but the two most influential early presentations of *componential analysis* were developed in the USA and Europe virtually at the same time in the 1950s and 1960s. On the one hand, American anthropologists and ethnolinguists (*F. Lounsbury*, *W. Goodenough*, *H. Conklin*, *A. Wallace*, *C. Frake*, among others) came up with a series of feature analyses of kinship and similar terms. Their method of analysis soon found its way into studies on word meaning and lexicology (*U. Weinreich*, *E. Nida*, *E. Bendix*) as well as on sentence meaning (cf. in particular the generative accounts by *J. Katz/J. Fodor* (1963) and *J. McCawley*, e.g., *kill* = ‘cause to become not alive’). Some authors even pursued the integration of componential word and sentence semantics

into a unified theory (e.g., *Nida* 1975). In Europe, on the other hand, the first structural methods for systematic linguistic feature analyses were developed independently of the early tradition in the USA and go back to the structuralist hypothesis, advanced in the 1930s by *R. Jakobson* and *L. Hjelmslev*, that the structural procedures used for phonological analysis can also be adopted felicitously in semantics. A famous example is *Hjelmslev's* (1943 / 1963: 70) account of *ram* vs. *ewe* in terms of 'sheep' + 'male' vs. 'female'. However, it was *Hjelmslev's* seminal paper (1957) which sparked interest in detailed feature analyses, e.g., by *L. Prieto*, *B. Pottier*, *E. Coseriu*, *A. Greimas*, *H. Geckeler*, among others (see *Geckeler* 1971: 205-232 for a succinct overview). Although (ultimately unsuccessful) efforts have been made to integrate the European and North-American versions of the componential method (e.g. by *G. Wotjak* and *G. Hilty*), these two traditions must not be identified with one another, as they are based on different theoretical assumptions and pursue different (partly complementary) goals. The North-American tradition is onomasiologically oriented and relies on the explicitation of truth conditions. Its purpose is to answer the question what the objective *features* are that constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions which an object must satisfy to be a denotatum of the lexical item or which allow words (including scientific terms) to be properly disambiguated in a sentence (cf. *bachelor* in the account presented by *Katz/Fodor* [1963]). Moreover, features are conceived as finite and universal constitutive atoms of meanings. In the European tradition, componential analysis is commonly intended as a semasiological account of meaning based on the explicitation of distinctive features. Its purpose is to determine the functional oppositions that hold between lexical items of a given natural language to the exclusion of universal scientific terms in order to establish, paradigmatically as well as syntagmatically, the invariant meaning of each lexical item in the language (see *Coseriu* 2001). Prototype semantics and cognitive semantics in general have partly emerged from a critique of the North-American version (*checklist theory*) of *componential analysis*.

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