Abstract

Kinship semantics – complex relationship between kinship terms, basic notions and social statuses

Analysis of kinship terms seems to be quite simple when the researcher deals with kinship terms within one language and within a certain epoch but it becomes rather complicated when more than one language and in more than one period of time are under study:

> Das Feld der Verwandtschaftsnamen erfreut sich einer gewissen Beliebtheit in der strukturellen Semantik (vgl., Fritz 1974; Lounsbury 1978 [1964]), da es ihr stark taxonomischer Charakter erlaubt, das gesamte Feld mit Hilfe einer Handvoll Merkmalsoppositionen zu beschreiben. Der Nachteil bei der Analyse von Verwandtschaftsnamen ist, dass sie erstens immer relational sind und, zweitens oftmals nicht nur reine Verwandtschaftsbezeichnungen ausdrücken, sondern auch kulturelle und rechtliche Beziehungen. (Blank 1997: 213)

For the historical linguists who study kinship terms and try to find their etymology an absence of a common and reliable semantic theory of how terms of relation are formed and how they change is a serious problem. It is obvious that as any other items of vocabulary kinship terms must change their meaning through time but it is not quite clear how it happens and which meaning should be considered to be primary and which – secondary. This gap is usually filled with personal experience and general knowledge (which is completely unimaginable when a historical linguist is working with phonological or morphological questions).

For (social and cultural) anthropologists, whose main research question is how the human race and social institutions emerge(d) and evolve(d), and for whom kinship terms are interesting not simply as lexical items but first of all as designators of an underlying reality, an absence of such a theory has been even a more acute problem. That is why first attempts to create it were made by them (e.g., Lang 1908 with references).

In my talk I would like to present my theoretical assumptions concerning semantic change in terms of social relation based on a linguistic reanalysis of the anthropological discussion of this topic.

References:

Blank, Andreas. 1997. *Prinzipien des lexikalischen Bedeutungswandels am Beispiel der romanischen Sprachen*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.

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