



SEMASIOLOGY: A STUDY OF MEANING

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Abstract

Semasiology, a crucial branch of linguistics, investigates the meanings of words and expressions independently of their phonetic and grammatical forms. Emerging in the 19th century, semasiology has played a significant role in understanding the dynamic relationship between language and thought. This paper explores the evolution, scope, and methods of semasiology, discusses its relationship with other linguistic disciplines, and examines contemporary issues and applications. Particular attention is given to the distinction between semasiology and onomasiology, as well as to the role semasiology plays in cognitive linguistics and semantics today.

Keywords: Semasiology, Linguistics, Semantics, Onomasiology, Language Meaning, Cognitive Linguistics, Word Study, Lexical Semantics.

Introduction

Language is not only a means of communication but also a repository of human experience and thought. Understanding how meaning is conveyed, altered, and interpreted through words is a fundamental concern in linguistics. Semasiology, often considered synonymous with lexical semantics, specifically addresses these questions. While modern linguistics tends to use the broader term “semantics,” semasiology focuses on the development, classification, and variation of meaning in individual words. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of semasiology, examining its origins, theoretical frameworks, and relevance to contemporary linguistic studies.

1. Origins and Historical Development

Semasiology emerged in the 19th century as scholars sought to systematically study the meanings of words. The term is derived from the Greek “semasia” (signification) and “logos” (study). Early linguistic theorists like Christian Karl Reisig (1792–1829) laid the groundwork by distinguishing between grammatical forms and meanings.

Initially, semasiology was considered distinct from onomasiology, another branch of semantics focused on how concepts are expressed through linguistic forms. While onomasiology moves from concept to word, semasiology moves from word to meaning, making it an essential tool in historical linguistics, lexicography, and philology.

2. Scope of Semasiology

Semasiology primarily concerns itself with: Polysemy: the phenomenon of words having multiple meanings. Homonymy: different words sharing the same form.

Semantic change: how the meanings of words evolve over time. Synonymy and antonymy: the study of words with similar or opposite meanings. Furthermore, semasiology examines metaphorical and metonymical shifts, which are vital for understanding not only linguistic evolution but also cognitive processes.

3. Semasiology and Related Disciplines

Semasiology intersects with several areas: Lexicology: the study of the vocabulary of a language. Semantics: broader study of meaning, including sentence and text levels.

Pragmatics: how meaning is influenced by context. Etymology: historical origins of words and their meanings. The division between semasiology and semantics has blurred over time, with many contemporary scholars treating semasiology as part of lexical semantics.

4. Methodologies in Semasiology

Semasiological studies employ a range of methodologies: Descriptive analysis: documenting meanings of words and their uses. Comparative analysis: comparing meanings across different languages or historical stages. Cognitive approaches: understanding how mental categorization influences language. Corpus linguistics: using large digital text collections to analyze meaning patterns. Advances in technology have significantly enhanced semasiological research, making it possible to trace meaning shifts with greater accuracy.

5. Contemporary Issues in Semasiology

Modern semasiology addresses complex issues such as: Semantic fields and prototypes: understanding clusters of related meanings. Cultural influences on meaning: how social and cultural factors shape word meanings. Lexical

innovation: how new words and meanings emerge in response to technological and societal changes. Cognitive linguistics, in particular, has rejuvenated interest in semasiology by emphasizing that meaning is embodied and experience-based, not just a matter of arbitrary symbols.

6. Case Studies

Several studies illustrate semasiology in practice: The word "mouse" evolving from an animal to a computer device shows semantic shift driven by technology. The concept of "freedom" exhibiting different semantic nuances across political and cultural contexts reflects semasiology's socio-cultural dimension. Such cases demonstrate semasiology's relevance beyond purely academic circles, affecting translation, education, artificial intelligence, and intercultural communication.

Conclusion

Semasiology remains a vibrant and evolving field within linguistics. Although its distinct identity has sometimes been overshadowed by broader semantic studies, its focus on the meaning of individual words provides vital insights into language functioning and development. In an era of rapid technological and societal change, understanding how meanings evolve is more critical than ever. By continuing to refine its methods and embrace interdisciplinary approaches, semasiology contributes significantly to our broader understanding of human language and cognition.

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