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► **To cite this version:**

Tim Geelhaar, Ludolf Kuchenbuch, Nicolas Perreaux, Juliane Schiel, Isabelle Schürch. Historical Semantics – A Vade Mecum. Claude Chevalyere; Juliane Schiel; Thomas Wallnig. *Work Semantics / Semantiken der Arbeit*, 34, Institut für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte, Universität Wien, pp.18-47, 2023, Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften, 978-3-7065-6308-6. 10.25365/oezg-2023-34-2-2 . hal-04265988

**HAL Id: hal-04265988**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04265988v1>**

Submitted on 9 Nov 2023

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## Historical Semantics – A Vade Mecum

*Abstract:* This paper presents the historical semantics approach as a method for social history. While usually understood either as a form of conceptual and intellectual history of ideas or as a subdiscipline of philology and digital humanities, the authors of this article use historical semantics to address the way historians read their sources. The approach is presented as a necessary extension of historical methodology: Historians need to distrust their own common sense, depart from presupposed analytical categories and concepts, and base their interpretative work on the emic vocabulary of the societies under examination and on the document(s) forming the material legacy of the past. By linking words to historical and potential situations of language use, the historical semantics approach reveals the social taxonomies and inherent power relations between the dominant and the dominated. The paper outlines the guiding principles and methodological implications of this approach before presenting four concise vignettes illustrating the analytical potential and methodological diversity of the approach based on concrete case studies.

*Keywords:* historical semantics, micro semantics, computational semantics, social history, conceptual history, digital history, corpora, onomasiological, semasiological, emic, etic, language use

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25365/oezg-2023-34-2-2>



Accepted for publication after internal and external peer review

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## Introduction

This vade mecum is an invitation: an invitation to turn an attentive ear to the disharmonic polyphony and semantic openness (as well as to the disharmonious monophony) of historical language use – in old languages of premodern times, in languages not directly linked to the colonial past of the West, and in languages of the so-called modern world. It is an invitation to understand language use as a plurality of voices and to consider the stocktaking of this plurality as an important end in itself for the empirical work of a social historian. In contrast to the traditional history of concepts, the analysis of semantic expressions and their shifts does not primarily contribute to an intellectual history of ideas but seeks to relate the historical and potential situations of language use in order to situate the social and to explain historical change.

This vade mecum provides some guidance by offering two things: Firstly, we would like to show how the historical semantics approach can contribute to the study of history in general and to social history in particular. This seems all the more useful since handbooks and introductions to historical semantics mainly focus on linguistics and digital humanities while comparable overviews for historians are still lacking.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, we offer a practical guide of brief vignettes as concrete examples illustrating the range and variety of ways of performing semantic analysis of historical sources. In four concise vignettes – all of which deal with social power relations in the broadest sense – we present the spectrum of the approach and encourage readers to apply historical semantics to their own topics and documents following their own paths.

The “we” is a group of mainly medievalists called “HiSem” (short for “historical semantics”). We got together in 2012 as a loose association of historians, philologists, and digital humanists meeting between Zurich, Berlin, and Frankfurt am Main to experiment with the semantic analysis of pre-modern documents.<sup>2</sup> The vade mecum is thus also an invitation to watch us experiment with historical semantics, investi-

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1 Ernst Müller/Falko Schmieder, *Begriffsgeschichte und Historische Semantik*, Berlin 2016; Gerd Fritz, *Historische Semantik*, Stuttgart 2006; Gerd Fritz, *Historische Semantik*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Stuttgart/Weimar 2006; Bernhard Jussen, *Historische Semantik aus der Sicht der Geschichtswissenschaft*, in: *Jahrbuch für Germanistische Sprachgeschichte* 2/1 (2011), 51–61. On historical semantics and digital humanities see also Barbara McGillivray, *Computational Methods for Semantic Analysis of Historical Texts*, in: Nick Riemer (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Semantics*, London/New York 2016, 261–274; Roberta Cimino/Tim Geelhaar/Silke Schwandt, *Digital Approaches to Historical Semantics: New Research Directions at Frankfurt University*, in: *storicamente* 2015, [https://storicamente.org/historical\\_semantics](https://storicamente.org/historical_semantics) (20 June 2022).

2 Its members are Gian Carlo Danuser, Janosch Faber, Tim Geelhaar, Tobias Hodel, Ludolf Kuchenbuch, Claudia Moddelmog, Kevin Müller, Marcel Müllerburg, Nicolas Perreaux, Paul Predatsch, Juliane Schiel, Silke Schwandt, Michelle Waldispühl, and Philipp Winterhager.

gating potential options for making documents speak in a new voice. The methodological diversity within the historical semantics approach should make it obvious that there is no clear-cut route to success. One can achieve one's goal in different ways – but one can also get lost. However, what ties the vignettes assembled in this *vade mecum*, as well as the contributions in this special issue as a whole, together, are three guiding principles for the work on historical documents as 'language sites':

Firstly, we distrust any intuitive claim to understand or presuppose the alterity of a historical document, no matter how familiar or unintelligible its words may appear at first sight. Historians need to distance themselves from their own presumptions to the same extent that a historical document needs to be resituated in its original and/or potential circumstance(s) of use. It is not non-understanding – the distance between oneself and a document – that is harmful, but rather the illusion of understanding. As Wulf Oesterreicher formulated in his seminal study: Once the historical situations of language sites fade, all that remains as a relic of their former liveliness is the textual petrifact. According to Oesterreicher, one must therefore assume "a decontextualisation, a de-enactment, and a reduction of the manifold semiotic modes of the original communicative event".<sup>3</sup> This 'textualisation' (*Vertextung*), the condensation into a text detachable from its situations of use, can only be counteracted by an attempt to resituate in order to "obtain an ultimately inconclusive historical understanding of a text, to elicit its position in the context of communication, and to open up the abundance of its modalities of meaning".<sup>4</sup> The main methodological turning point of the historical semantics approach is therefore to admit that historical social systems are spontaneously incomprehensible from the perspective of contemporary categories, and that the abundance and contradictory nature of language sites needs to be reconnected to (potential) historical circumstances of word usage.<sup>5</sup>

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3 Wulf Oesterreicher, *Textzentrierung und Rekontextualisierung*. Zwei Grundprobleme der diachronischen Sprach- und Textforschung, in: Christine Ehler/Ursula Schaefer (eds.), *Verschriftung und Verschriftlichung. Aspekte des Medienwechsels in verschiedenen Kulturen und Epochen*, Tübingen 1998, 10–39, 24 (highlighting in the original): "Der Betrachter ist gezwungen, hier grundsätzlich von einer *De-Kontextualisierung*, einer *De-Inszenierung* und einer *Reduktion* der vielfältigen semiotischen Modi des ursprünglichen kommunikativen Geschehens auszugehen."

4 Wulf Oesterreicher, *Zur Archäologie sprachlicher Kommunikation. Methodologische Überlegungen und Arbeit an Fallbeispielen*, in: Peter von Moos (ed.), *Zwischen Babel und Pfingsten. Sprachdifferenzen und Gesprächsverständigung in der Vormoderne (8.–16. Jahrhundert)*, Berlin/Münster/Wien 2008, 137–159, 158 (highlighting in the original): "[...] oder aber man lässt sich auf den anspruchsvollen Versuch ein, ein letztlich nicht abschließbares historisches Verständnis von einem Text zu gewinnen, seinen Sitz im Kommunikationszusammenhang zu eruieren und die Fülle seiner Bedeutungsmodalitäten zu erschließen – alles dies kann nur einer verantwortungsvollen, sorgfältigen *Rekontextualisierung* gelingen."

5 Alain Guerreau, *Vinea*, in: Monique Goullet/Michel Parisse (eds.), *Les historiens et le latin médiéval*, Paris 2001, 67–73; Alain Guerreau, *L'Avenir d'un passé incertain. Quelle histoire du Moyen Âge au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle?*, Paris 2001.

In this sense, each language site is understood as an “articulated written totality of which, as it were, everything counts or at least could count” and therefore must also be taken into consideration.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, this attitude to historical documents as language sites requires putting aside one’s own analytical categories and hermeneutic concepts. As Oesterreicher puts it, the attempt to resituate language sites can only succeed if the modern reader discards his/her own reading attitudes or at least reflects them critically. Even where the references of the document in question seem obvious, we should not be tempted “to identify the discourse references with the current forms and implications of written cultural practice we are familiar with. Rather, it is first necessary to radically rid oneself of contemporary notions to be able to perceive the specificity of these forms of communication at all.”<sup>7</sup> For language, this deliberate casting aside of accustomed frames of reference is particularly difficult because language inevitably implies the clamorous appeal: “Construe me, interpret me, understand me!” Methodologically, however, we can make use of Caroline Arni’s suggestion of a “recursive game of concepts”. Arni argues that historians should place the conceptualisations of historical actors on the same level as their own analytical categories and concepts. Instead of opposing ‘past’ and ‘present’ as the ‘object of study’ delivering historical evidence to the ‘inquiring subject’ providing the research question, historians should engage in a process of “reciprocal conceptual enrichment”.<sup>8</sup> This attempt to resituate the historical researcher herself or himself not only serves to “decolonise the past” and “provincialise the present”, as Arni advocates, but may also help to establish an attention to the historical document as a language site at eye level.

Thirdly, the assumption that the “modalities of meaning” (Oesterreicher) in the historical documents we study are abundant and contradictory and need to be resituated in their complexity as well as in their diachronicity and synchronicity also implies that we need to be ready to work with different scales. The way in which semantic analysis can be carried out depends first of all on the available historical

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6 Ludolf Kuchenbuch, Die dreidimensionale Werk-Sprache des Theophilus presbyter. “Arbeits”-semantische Untersuchungen am Traktat *De diversis artibus*, in: Ludolf Kuchenbuch (ed.), *Reflexive Mediävistik*, 2012, 341–401, 347 (highlighting in the original): “Die Sinnsuche gilt vielmehr dem Wortlaut als einer artikulierten schriftlichen Gesamtheit, an und von der gewissermaßen *alles zählt*, mindestens aber zählen könnte, und deshalb auch zu zählen sein *könnte*.”

7 Oesterreicher, *Textzentrierung*, 1998, 10–39, 22: “Es gilt vielmehr, sich zuerst einmal radikal von heutigen Vorstellungen freizumachen, um die Spezifik dieser Kommunikationsformen überhaupt wahrnehmen zu können.”

8 Caroline Arni, *Nach der Kultur. Anthropologische Potentiale für eine rekursive Geschichtsschreibung*, in: *Historische Anthropologie* 26/2 (2018), 200–223, 218–222. For a detailed reflection on Arni’s approach, see also Julia Heinemann/Margareth Lanzinger/Juliane Schiel, *Von der ‘Aneignung’ zur ‘Rekursion’. Drei Reflexionen zu Caroline Arnis Aufruf*, in: *Historische Anthropologie* 27/2 (2019), 281–295.

documents and corpora – and this is also where the great variedness of doing historical semantics emerges. The extent to which we proceed quantitatively or qualitatively – whether we use computers to count words and calculate different measures of significance or carry out cluster analyses, whether we create tally sheets in college notebooks with a biro, or whether we dispense with counting words altogether – varies from case to case depending on the relevant documentation at hand and on the preferences of the involved researchers. Large digital corpora and computational methods of analysis have obviously expanded the possibilities for scaling.<sup>9</sup> If the critical method is able to deal effectively with tens or even hundreds of occurrences, computational methods allow for the analysis of hundreds of thousands of mentions and more. They therefore provide opportunities to study the spread and evolution of words and expressions in heterogeneous corpora and over longer periods of time. Statistics enables a new form of semantic analysis that counts and calculates before reading and interpreting. This new form undoubtedly helps with the disregard for their own interpretive circumstances that modern readers so desperately need, as the computer is blind to semantics.<sup>10</sup> The distant reading of an algorithm enables us to evaluate and modify insights from close reading and vice versa. But although computational semantics can generate new forms of evidence and point to imbalances in the traditional history of concepts, it is by far not the only (promising) method available to historical semantics for increasing awareness of historical otherness and questioning historiographical master narratives or contemporary assumptions. Also, statistical analyses are not suitable for every language site. Some corpora may be too small, some questions too focused on specific nuances of meaning for statistics to be of any help. What is more, regardless of whether computer-assisted methods are used and whether historical evidence is acquired directly from documents or from statistics and its visualisation, e.g. a graph, the subsequent interpretive work done by historians remains just as challenging.

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9 Many corpora of Latin texts, for example, have been created during the past few years. Nicolas Perreaux established the *Cartae Europae Medii Aevi* (CEMA), see footnote 45. The *Patrologia Latina*, first established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Jean-Paul Migne, covers the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and is one of the key collections for medieval studies with about 100 million words. It is accessible via the *Corpus Corporum* directed by Philipp Roelli, <https://www.mlat.uzh.ch/> (21 June 2022). An improved version without editorial paratexts curated by Tim Geelhaar will be online at the Latin Text Archive, <https://lta.bbaw.de> (21 June 2022). Lemmatised Latin corpora are provided by the *Corpus Thomisticum*, <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/> (21 June 2022). Other text collections without lemmatisation and at different levels of digital preparation, which can be used primarily for reading, also exist, like the dMGH, <https://www.dmgf.de/> (21 June 2022) or the Archivio della Latinità Italiana del Medioevo ALIM, <http://en.alim.unisi.it/> (21 June 2022).

10 Silke Schwandt, *Digitale Methoden für die Historische Semantik. Auf den Spuren von Begriffen in digitalen Korpora*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 44/1 (2018), 107–134, 108.

Our plea for a historical semantics approach to social history is embedded in a long-standing historiographical reflection on the relation between the conceptual and the social, and on language as social fact situationally creating and re-creating meanings in all sorts of social interactions. This reflection has started long before the so-called linguistic turn and the era of discourse analysis in historical research. The broad shift in linguistics from structuralist approaches that do not care about language in use towards pragmatics, ethnomethodology, poststructuralist philosophy and sociology as well as (neo)pragmatism went in parallel with developments in historiography, most prominently in Italy and France.<sup>11</sup> In German-speaking academia, this historiography is an especially complex one. The Austrian social and legal historian Otto Brunner was one of the first stressing the importance of the emic vocabulary of the sources for the understanding of past societies. While his famous monography *Land und Herrschaft*, first published in 1939, was clearly affiliated to the national socialist body of thought he adhered to,<sup>12</sup> the voluminous post-war historical dictionary *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, co-edited by Reinhart Koselleck, Werner Conze, and Otto Brunner (who in the meantime had ideologically converted to ‘Old Europe’ as a key concept) represents a critical confrontation with that legacy.<sup>13</sup> In nine volumes published between 1972 and 1997, this seminal work of conceptual history in its German-language tradition of thought has influenced generations of historians and led to similar projects in other disciplines and beyond national borders.<sup>14</sup> In order to overcome the older notion of history of ideas as pure intellectual

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- 11 For linguistic approaches, see Sandra A. Thompson/Masayoshi Shibatani/Charles J. Fillmore (eds.), *Essays in Semantics and Pragmatics*. In Honor of Charles J. Fillmore, Amsterdam 1995. For the French discussion in philosophy and sociology, see for example Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, Paris 1967; Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, Paris 1969; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005. On Roy Harris’ integrationism see for example George Wolf/Nigel Love (eds.), *Linguistics Inside Out. Roy Harris and His Critics*, Amsterdam 1997. For reflections in French historiography, see Monique Goulet/Michel Parisse (eds.), *Les historiens et le latin médiéval*, Paris 2019; Alain Guerreau, *Situation de l’histoire médiévale (esquisse)*, *Medievalista online* 5 (2008), <https://journals.openedition.org/medievalista/6362> (accessed 17 June).
- 12 Otto Brunner, *Land und Herrschaft. Grundfragen der territorialen Verfassungsgeschichte Österreichs im Mittelalter*, Baden bei Wien u.a. 1939. For an English translation see Otto Brunner, *Land and Lordship. Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria*, Pennsylvania 1992. For a critical assessment of the legacy of National Socialism in this work, see Gadi Algazi, *Herrengewalt und Gewalt der Herren im späten Mittelalter. Herrschaft, Gegenseitigkeit und Sprachgebrauch*, Frankfurt am Main 1996.
- 13 Otto Brunner/Werner Conze/Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols., Stuttgart 1972–1997.
- 14 Rolf Reichardt/Eberhard Schmidt (eds.), *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1820*, München 1985–; Karlheinz Barck (ed.), *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch*, 7 vols., Stuttgart 2000–2005; Gert Ueding (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, 10 vols., Tübingen 1992–2012; Joachim Ritter/Karlfried Gründer (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 13 vols., Basel 1971–2007. On the international impact, see Iain Hampsher-Monk/Karin Tilmans/Frank van Vree (eds.), *History of Concepts. Comparative Perspectives*, Amsterdam 1998.

history, the editors of the *Grundbegriffe* aimed to interlace social history and the history of concepts by tracing the transition from a pre-modern to a modern society through the study of key political and social terms and their transformation before and after 1800.<sup>15</sup> Conceptual history in this sense identified terms like *class*, *bourgeoisie*, *democracy*, *authority*, *freedom*, or *work* as both indicators and drivers of the transformation process towards modernity.<sup>16</sup> In this understanding, word usage was not only shaped by social formations, but also actively influenced societal change in return. A key goal was to understand how word usage affected the way experiences, expectations, values, and ideas were expressed, claimed, challenged, or opposed. As the leading figure of this enterprise, Koselleck persistently emphasised the interplay of history and linguistics by taking into account pragmatics, semantics, and grammar, which eventually led to the integration of discourse analysis into conceptual history. In this sense, the conceptual history approach incontrovertibly opened up a path to the historical contextualisation of language use.

One major objection to *Begriffsgeschichte*, however, has been that it was a top-down selection of terms identified as key concepts of modernity by a group of historians. Instead of reflecting major social transformation processes and their conceptual expressions, so the complaint, the dictionary reflected a subjective assessment of post-war Germany and its historical roots – a retrospective and narrowing derivation of the present and thus a way of doing history ‘through the rear-view mirror’ rather than an open-ended, empirically based reconstruction of the past.<sup>17</sup>

Others have argued that the orientation around abstract key terms focused too much on conceptual language, while non-conceptual forms of expression were not sufficiently addressed.<sup>18</sup> The history of concepts, they claim, threatened to underestimate the heterogeneity of synchronic language use, the disputed and ambiguous meanings, by concentrating on the first records of each term’s formation and then on its evolution over time. Although Koselleck himself repeatedly stressed the importance of well-defined textual corpora for understanding the synchronicity and diachronicity of central terms, many of the articles in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* fell short of expectations in this regard.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, social historians in particular criticised the project for not living up to its own claims. They claimed that by focusing on central figures of classical political

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15 Reinhart Koselleck, Art. “Begriffsgeschichte”, in: Stefan Jordan (ed.), *Lexikon Geschichtswissenschaft*, Stuttgart 2002, 40–44.

16 See [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geschichtliche\\_Grundbegriffe](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geschichtliche_Grundbegriffe) (3 June 2022) offering the table of contents.

17 Müller/Schmieder, *Begriffsgeschichte*, 2016, 916–928.

18 See e.g. Dietrich Busse, *Historische Semantik. Analyse eines Programms*, Stuttgart 1987.

19 Bernhard Jussen/Gregor Rohmann, Historical Semantics in Medieval Studies. New Means and Approaches, in: *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 10/2 (2015), 1–6.



historiography as well as on well-known canonical texts and historical dictionaries, this form of conceptual history could only reflect the political and social language of elites, not that of society as a whole.<sup>20</sup> How to include the conceptualisation of the social by the non-writing population in a social history of concepts thus remained an unsolved question.

Many of these objections have later been addressed from different angles. First of all, the construction and incorporation of additional and increasingly sizeable text corpora soon became much easier thanks to advances in digitisation. New initiatives have established large and searchable digital collections that make not only 'high literature' but also some of the most comprehensive and representative cross-sections of historical language use ever researched accessible for analysis.<sup>21</sup>

Another reaction to the aforementioned criticisms was to incorporate linguistic-pragmatic approaches in the analysis so as to emphasise the openness and situatedness of language use<sup>22</sup> and "shift the investigation from conceptual history to identifiable constellations of communication whose conditions and contexts, actors and media must in turn be precisely situated".<sup>23</sup>

This is where the *vade mecum* comes in. Committed to a linguistic-pragmatic view onto language use, we believe that historical semantics offers a significant approach to social history; not just as a specific subfield, but as a general and necessary contribution. First: Unlike traditional *Begriffsgeschichte* which studies the genesis of modern terms and concepts 'through the rear-view mirror', we call for the study of language sites in a 'crab steering mode'. Rather than reconstructing genealogical lines in the evolution of terms, we are interested in the openness, the inconsistencies and the surprising and often improbable shifts of historical expressions and their social meanings from the perspective of the historical actors while we move

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20 Rolf Reichardt spoke polemically of "ideengeschichtliche Gipfelwanderungen" [roughly: "wandering along the summits of the history of ideas"] because sources of everyday life had been completely disregarded. See Müller/Schmieder, *Begriffsgeschichte*, 2016, 921.

21 For a digital project on pre-modern history, see e.g. Bernhard Jussen, *Confessio. Semantische Beobachtungen in der lateinischen christlichen Traktatliteratur der Patristik und des 12. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 126 (2003), 27–47. Methodological-theoretical reflections can be found e.g. in Bernhard Jussen, *Ordo zwischen Ideengeschichte und Lexikometrie. Vorarbeiten an einem Hilfsmittel mediävistischer Begriffsgeschichte*, in: Bernd Schneidmüller/Stefan Weinfurter (eds.), *Ordnungskonfigurationen im Hohen Mittelalter*, Ostfildern 2006, 227–256; Bernhard Jussen/Alexander Mehler/Alexandra Ernst, *A Corpus Management System for Historical Semantics*, in: *Sprache und Datenverarbeitung*, in: *Sprache und Datenverarbeitung. International Journal for Language Data Processing* 31/1–2 (2007), 81–89.

22 See Ludolf Kuchenbuch/Uta Kleine (eds.), *'Textus' im Mittelalter. Komponenten und Situationen des Wortgebrauchs im schriftsemantischen Feld*, Göttingen 2006; Willibald Steinmetz, *Neue Wege einer historischen Semantik des Politischen*, in: id. (ed.), *Politik. Situationen eines Wortgebrauchs im Europa der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt am Main 2007, 9–40.

23 Kathrin Kollmeier, *Begriffsgeschichte und Historische Semantik*, in: Frank Bösch (ed.), *Zeitsgeschichte. Konzepte und Methoden*, Göttingen 2012, 420–444.

back in time. Second: Unlike classical social history since the *Annales*, which confronts historical sources with the etic concepts and historiographical questions of the observing historian, historical semantics as an approach to social history uses the document (or corpus) and its emic expressions as its starting point, along with the situations in which the word usage of historical actors materialised. It seeks to reveal the links between the words and the social by trying to understand the situations in which texts were created and deducing processes of social change from the semantic analysis of these historically contextualised documents. The initial question that arises is an inquisitive, ethnographic one: “What does this mean?”

Some might respond that this declaration belongs to the peculiar standpoint of a pre-modern historian. Experts on ancient and medieval history are not only completely dependent on the written words (and archaeological artefacts) handed down to them, they are also confronted with a fragmented and often very sparse historical tradition. In the study of premodern history, it seems very intuitive to begin an enquiry with an individual document, a small data set, or a clearly delimited textual corpus, as any surviving historical testimony from these early periods may and must serve as an example of the “exceptional normal” and the “normal exception”.<sup>24</sup> It also appears to be a necessary – or perhaps even inevitable – procedure to resituate the fragment in its historical setting in order to make sense of words that premodern historians cannot relate to their own everyday environment and social reality. Both Ludolf Kuchenbuch and Alain Guerreau have shown that the sociohistorical shift taking place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries led to a massive semantic reconfiguration. In what Reinhart Koselleck once termed the “Sattelzeit”, a “twofold conceptual break” (“la double fracture conceptuelle”) impedes the historian’s direct understanding of texts and objects handed down from earlier periods. A linguistic-pragmatic approach to documents is therefore obviously very useful with regard to premodern records, since they have to be interpreted in terms of their own logics of use and materiality.<sup>25</sup> We at HiSem are convinced, however, that this mandatory sensitivity of the premodernist to the inner logics of historical documents can act as an

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24 The figure of the ‘exceptional normal’ was coined by Edoardo Grendi and taken up by Hans Medick and the community of microhistorians, signifying how an exceptional document of historical tradition may serve as an entry point for studying everyday life and general trends. See Edoardo Grendi, *Micro-analisi e storia sociale*, in: *Quaderni storici* 35 (1977), 506–520; Hans Medick, *Entlegene Geschichte? Sozialgeschichte und Mikro-Historie im Blickfeld der Kulturanthropologie*, in: Joachim Matthes (ed.), *Zwischen den Kulturen? Die Sozialwissenschaften vor dem Problem des Kulturvergleichs*, Göttingen 1992, 167–178, 168.

25 See also Ivan Illich, *Im Weinberg des Textes. Als das Schriftbild der Moderne entstand. Ein Kommentar zu Hugos ‚Didascalicon‘*, Frankfurt am Main 1991; Ludolf Kuchenbuch, *Reflexive Mediävistik. Textus – Opus – Feudalismus*, Frankfurt am Main 2012, 34–38 and 441–451; Alain Guerreau, *L’avenir d’un passé incertain. Quelle Histoire du Moyen Âge au XXI<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, Paris 2001, 19–41, 297 (Thèse 1).

eye-opener concerning the potential of the historical semantics approach for social history in general. Historical semantics not only increases awareness of the alterity of past documents; it also teaches us a different, more humble way of dealing with historical evidence – and this alternative manner of engagement is sometimes even more necessary when studying documents and situations closely related to our own living environment, as we risk assuming that we know and understand the social meaning of words and expressions without further translation work.

The following pages will therefore provide practical insights into the many possible ways of doing historical semantics. Our four vignettes are neither a complete nor a representative sample of possible approaches, however. They simply result from the respective research interests and methodological preferences of the contributors. The series begins with two examples illustrating an onomasiological and thus concept-centred approach in historical semantics. Both vignettes explore the historical conceptualisation of social power relations: The first attempts to understand the relationship between a lord and his people in early medieval Swabia, while the second reflects on the relation between riders and their horses in late medieval Iberia. Each of them is also centred around a single (text passage of a) document identified as a significant testimony containing pertinent information for the social relation in question. The third and fourth vignettes demonstrate semasiological or word-centred approaches in historical semantics.<sup>26</sup> They showcase the possibilities of computer-based corpus-driven analysis by investigating the different manifestations and the evolution of the terms *christianitas* and *pater* in several digital corpora and over longer periods.

## Vignette 1: Serfdom in Aichstetten (late 10<sup>th</sup> c.). A micro-semantic analysis of emic labelling practices

*Ludolf Kuchenbuch*

The first vignette presents a document-centred, onomasiological approach to the study of serfdom in early medieval Swabia and proceeds in two steps. The first – semasiological – part is about filtering out the nominal vocabulary of “serf-

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26 Silke Schwandt, *Virtus. Zur Semantik eines politischen Konzepts im Mittelalter*, Frankfurt am Main 2014, presents a semasiological study working with both a quantitative and a qualitative approach while concentrating on specific works by three different authors in a diachronic perspective. Katharina Behrens, *Scham. Zur sozialen Bedeutung eines Gefühls im spätmittelalterlichen England*, Göttingen 2014, focuses on the concept of shame in England during the Late Middle Ages while combining a purely hermeneutical version of historical semantics with the history of emotions and mentalities.

dom” and “lordship”, limited to the polysemy of the two word groups, not the individual words, and without quantification. The aim here is to gain a rough idea of both fields of meaning, which together form a socio-semantic framework. Based on this, in the second – interpretative – part, the actions described are thought through in terms of their particular social meaning.

From a methodological point of view, it is a question of combining the study of words with the study of fields of meaning within (only) one document. Based on the pioneering work of Jost Trier and Alain Guerreau, I have tested this method in individual studies on the basis of various testimonial genres under the programmatic concept of the *microsemantics of individual testimonies*.<sup>27</sup> Alice Rio’s important new book on early medieval *servitus* lacks precisely this, although many of her case studies would have suggested an examination of the respective semantic situation.<sup>28</sup> Microsemantic procedures require documents that are particularly rich in content and expression. The testimony excerpt chosen here, an anecdote in the run-up to a gift of land and people from the late tenth century, fulfils this condition. The incident is documented in a twelfth century compilation from the episcopal proprietary monastery of Petershausen in Constance. An anonymous chronicler wrote the history of the monastery by relying on a collection of preserved charters, reports from eye- and earwitnesses, and his own memory. The chosen expert vividly demonstrates the lexical and syntactical components of the rural power relations and inequalities of the time.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to writing styles determined by juridical or numerical unambiguity (edicts, deeds, registers), the narrator confidently uses his knowledge of language to profile the event and its meaning. The text passage in question is as follows:

Latin original:

Erat quidam comes nomine Adilhardus ... cui iure in hereditatem cesserant magna et multa predia in pago Illrigou (Illergau), hoc est apud Eichstat et Breitinbach, Riedin et Husin atque Steinbach<sup>30</sup>. Is ergo quandocumque de terra sua adveniens iam dicta sua predia adiisset, quod tamen rarissime faciebat, festinabant omnes habitatores, ut eum cum suis munusculis visitarent, sicuti omnes servi dominis suis facere solent. At ille, cum esset benignus et misericors, interrogabat, quid sibi vellent ista facientes. Cumque responderent, hos esse suos homines et cum debita benedictione advenisse, ut eum

27 Summary of these efforts and experiences in Ludolf Kuchenbuch, *Opus, labor, ars, merces, servitium*, ou un quintette sur le banc d’essai. À propos de la sémantique du “travail” dans la ‘Schedula diversarum artium’ (vers 1122–1123), in: Michel Lauwers (ed.), *Labeur, production et économie monastique dans l’Occident médiéval de la ‘Règle de Saint Benoît’ aux Cisterciens*, Turnhout 2021, 159–184.

28 Alice Rio, *Slavery after Rome, 500–1100*, Oxford 2017.

29 Ludolf Kuchenbuch, *Abschied von der Grundherrschaft. Ein Prüfengang durch das ostfränkisch-deutsche Reich 950–1050*, in: *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte. Germanistische Abteilung* 121 (2004), 1–99, 12–17.

30 The village Steinbach is part of the district Wangen near Leutkirch today.

visitarent, ille subiunxit: Facite, inquit, unumquemque eorum sua munuscula interim apud se conservare, usque dum post prandium ipse hec per memet valeam conspicere. Deinde omnibus plene et abundantissime satiatis, addebat illis munuscula de suis nihil accipiens ab ipsis, et dimisit eos abire, ita ut gauderent se illuc pervenisse.

(...) Ipse Adilhardus pius comes dedit nepoti suo beato Gebehardo episcopo quicquid habuit apud Eichstetin et Breitinbach et Riedin et Husin ad quadraginta mansus et eo amplius, in agris cultis et pratis, exceptis dumtaxat silvis valde spaciosis, cum populari ecclesia et decimis multis et pascuis et piscationibus et molendinis; et multos tributarios cum diversis utensilibus, que haberi vel dici possunt, iam dictus comes Adilhardus Gebehardo venerabili episcopo ... in proprietatem legitime contradidit, et ipse beatus vir monasterio suo (...) perdonavit.

English translation:

There lived a count named Adilhard. [...] He had inherited great and numerous estates (*predia*) in Illergau, near Aichstetten and Breitenbach, Rieden, (Ober)Hausen, and Steinbach. When this count left his lands (*terra*) and visited his estates, which happened very rarely, all of the inhabitants (*inhabitatores*) hurried to greet him with small gifts (*munuscula*), as all bondsmen (*servi*) tend to do with their lord. As the count was good and kind, he asked why they did this. They answered that they were his people (*homines*) and had come in indebted devotion to visit him. He replied, “Keep all of your gifts for now, until I am able to inspect them personally after the feast.” Then he ate with them fully and richly and gave them gifts, but took nothing from them and sent them home, so that they rejoiced that they had come. [...]

(Several years later) The pious Count Adilhard donated the abovementioned estates to his nephew, the late bishop Gebehard, 40 plots of land (*mansi*) and more in Aichstetten, and Breitenbach and Rieden and Hausen, with cultivated fields and meadows, except sprawling forests, with a popular church (*ecclesia popularis*) and various tithes, and pastures and fisheries and mills; as well as tributaries (*tributarii*) with implements proper – all this was given by Count Adilhard to the honourable bishop Gebehard [...] as legitimate property.

This short excerpt from the mentioned chronicle illustrates the possibilities available to a well-educated clergyman of the twelfth century to write not only about the basic conditions of life but also about the behaviour of subjects towards their lord. What is specifically of interest here is the narrative field of expression (‘narratives Ausdrucksfeld’), i.e. the semantic precision and variation and the nominal and phraseological polysemy used by the clergyman to express social differences and meanings. The micro-semantic approach as suggested in this vignette can contribute to a better understanding of the social power relations in the context of high medieval serfdom by following a two-step procedure: (a) analysing the basic nominal vocabulary

of the ruling party, and (b) interpreting the scene described by the chronicler in the broader context of ritual encounters.

Semantic analysis: the basic nominal vocabulary of lordship

The first section of this brief micro-semantic analysis focuses on the basic nominal elements of the language of rulers – their seigniorial vocabulary. Three semantic fields can be distinguished in this context:

*Homo: labelling the people*

Depending on the situation and intention, the narrator selects different terms to designate the lord's people. Focusing on the social or the material side of their power relation respectively, the same individuals are referred to in five different ways:

- a. They are *habitatores* (inhabitants, residents) of their *villae* (villages).
- b. As *homines* (people), they belong to their *dominus* (lord).
- c. They behave like *servi* (serfs) when they offer *munuscula* (small gifts) to their *dominus* (lord).
- d. The narrator calls them *tributarii* (tributaries) when the owners of the *mansi* (land-provided peasant households) dispose of them.
- e. The attribute *popularis* (belonging to the people) qualifying the church (*Eigenkirche*) expresses the affiliation of the people with the diocese.

Five fitting words for five different social dimensions of these people's servile existence: one to designate the connection to the spatial reference (a); one to identify the seigniorial base relation (b); one to assign an estate-based behaviour to them (c); one to describe the tenancy-based duty to deliver taxes and services (d); and one referring to the local ritual community, the parish (e).

The list of words used to refer to the servile population could be continued even further if one imagines that the narrator could also have mentioned other areas of activity and social belonging like *vulgus*, *rusticus*, *agricola*, *laboratores*, *colonus*, *mancipium*, *familia* – to name just a few. Quite surprisingly, he never uses the word *mancipia*, the juridical term usually used in legal documents when servile people are transferred, sold, or loaned to another lord. We can be sure, however, that he chose his words intentionally and carefully.

Within this long list of (potential) designations, it seems difficult to decide which of them served as an umbrella term or as a primary expression to designate the power relation between the lord and his people in the episcopal monastery of Petershausen. Instead of grafting a general term like 'peasant' or 'serf' onto this open and

complex situation of the servile people, it therefore seems more appropriate to stick to the fivefold sense indicated above and point out the polyfunctionality of the terms used.

#### *Terra: labelling spatial relations*

With regard to the words used to localise the lord's relation to his people (*predia*, five named villages, *villae*, and *mansi*), it is astonishing that the spatial information provided in the document remains blurred. None of the designations contain the exact position or number of elements. The 40 tenancies (*mansi*) are located "near" the villages mentioned (which neighboured each other, as we know), but there may also have been more than 40. They seem to have encompassed fields, meadows, pastures, and inshore waters. Yet we do not know where they were located within the boundaries of the respective villages. Mills also seem to have been included, but again we are not told whether there was a mill in each village or only one or two for the entire territory. In addition, a church with several tithes was part of the property, but its spatial extent and significance likewise remains unclear. Rather than designating a measurable and connected three-dimensional space in the way we would imagine such property to be defined today, the vocabulary and mode of description point to a scattered and lordship-centred form of spatial description.

#### *Dominium: labelling property relations*

The same applies to the vocabulary used to designate the estate (*predium*) and its power and ownership structures. No matter who owned or acquired the *predia*, the designation of the tenure status of the various land units does not paint a clear picture. For the capacity to dispose of land, the narrator uses six different expressions in the following order: *ius*, *hereditas*, *proprium*, *proprietas*, *potestas*, *utilitas* – law, heritage, property, power, and finally utility. These terms used for the practice of disposing appear more like a conglomerate of roughly synonymous meanings than a clearly structured semantic field. Broadening the empirical basis by looking at the entirety of the document from which the extract was taken might help to clarify the subtle differences between these terms.

What has already become clear in this compact analysis, however, is how variable the terms for designating the rule and social belonging of the people (1), describing the space and localising rulership (2), and declaring the ownership structure of the land (3) were. The first semantic field – the naming of the people – was meant to be flexible; the second semantic field for localising rulership clearly reflected the seigniorial perspective; and the third semantic field designating ownership structures con-

tained a series of terms with similar meanings. A typical situation for the Early Middle Ages.<sup>31</sup>

This brief examination of three seigniorial vocabularies illustrates how micro-semantic analysis of a single document can prevent us from hastily substituting the historical range of possible and potential expressions with modern umbrella terms such as ‘peasant’ or ‘serf’, ‘village’ or ‘property’. It points to the disharmonic polyphony and semantic openness of medieval Latin and increases our awareness for the multi-layered power relations between medieval lords and their people.

*Hermeneutic interpretation: negotiating power relations in ritual encounters*

In order to fully understand the relation between the medieval lord and his people, however, a semantic examination of the choice and use of nominal terms is not sufficient. In addition, we need to situate the ritual encounter as reported by the anonymous chronicler within the broader setting of early medieval practices of lordship and servitude: It must be understood as an event that renegotiated and reaffirmed the underlying structures of seigniorial dominance and the survival strategies of the servile people.

High lords rarely met with their people in person; they only did so on important occasions. Similar to imperial administration, it was not the lords themselves who ruled locally and controlled the territories – even when visiting their widely scattered lands. Rather, to be ruled meant to hear the dominical mass and to confess, to deliver the monthly and weekly bond labour and seasonal taxes, and to witness, testify, and be judged in court. It was the priests, bailiffs, and earls rather than the high lords themselves whom the servile people met in person on a more regular basis. Each of these seigniorial relations had its own pace, its own logics, and its own regime of rigour. The anonymous author of the Petershausen chronicle was not exaggerating when he classified the visit by Lord (*dominus*) Adilhard in the remote area of Aichstetten as *rarissime*. But was Adilhard the only lord of these people?

When the lord and his peasants met, each side sought to benefit from the situation. The ritualised encounters can thus be viewed as attempts to engage in the difficult business of (re-)building and (re-)negotiating existing bonds. In the story of Aichstetten, the people (*homines*) tried to pay homage to their lord, Earl Adilhard, by being the first to offer gifts. But Adilhard shifted the situation into his favour by insisting that his own gift, the lord’s meal, had to come first. The meal thus became the ‘pre-gift’, and the people had to accept it and wait before being allowed to present their own *munuscula*. It is this inversion that asserted and confirmed the proper order for a ritualised encounter between the lord and his people. Research on the

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31 Cf. Wendy Davies/Paul Fouracre (eds.), *Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1995.



function and meaning of these gifts from the lord's perspective is still in its infancy.<sup>32</sup> What seems clear, however, is the fact that the physical presence of any lord or superior usually provoked acts of gift-giving: the transit of an earl or king, the presence of a lord in a secular and ecclesiastical court, the passing of the superior while collecting taxes and claiming services, the act of homage, the weekly Holy Mass, and ceremonies and feasts. Both sides were involved to various degrees on all these occasions, with the dependants giving and the lords receiving and graciously reciprocating. The gifts confirmed social rank – in other words, the prevailing social otherness. They established a good atmosphere for the encounter while at the same time helping each side to promote its own interests: They could provoke, counterbalance, or create new facts. The people generally tried to propitiate their lords; lords might not feel honoured enough or might blackmail their people to give even more. The reports of such situations during ritual encounters are numerous.

Yet the story of Aichstetten tells us even more: Adilhard, the distant high lord and *pius comes*, turns out to be benevolent in a twofold sense. On the one hand, he declines his people's *munuscula* and presents them with gifts in return. On the other hand, he later turns his people over to his nephew, bishop Gebhard, who in turn passes them on to the abbey. They thus become “people of the Church” (*homines sancti Petri*). In the chronicle of Petershausen, the gift-giving story comes immediately before the deed of donation seeking to highlight the person giving gifts – the donor. Summarily, local dominion in the Early Middle Ages meant ruling in absentia, interspersed with ritual encounters during which the visiting and the visited sides had the opportunity to renegotiate and confirm their unequal stations.

Beyond these ritual encounters, however, we must not forget the fundamental setting: The people of Aichstetten, Breitenbach, and other villages were strictly bound to their farmsteads (*mansi*), which could be sold, exchanged, or rented out at any time without them having a say in the matter. This becomes clear in the text passage on the donation. The annual dues to be paid out of the inhabitants' earnings (*tributa* and *decimae*) must not be confused with the gift-giving on extraordinary occasions such as the described ritual encounter. The story told there makes no mention of the normal dues, contains no language pertaining to the regular deliverables. It seems that the people of Aichstetten had no obligations for arduous agricultural services: No manor is mentioned in the listing of the structure of the estates; no *mansus indominicatus* with extensive plough land required this type of compulsory labour. We may therefore speak of a twin serfdom combining rent and tithe.

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32 Cf. Ludolf Kuchenbuch, Porcus donativus: Language use and gifting in seigniorial records between the eighth and the twelfth centuries, in: Gadi Algazi/Bernhard Jussen/Valentin Gröbner (eds.), Negotiating the Gift. Pre-modern Figurations of Exchange, Göttingen 2003, 193–246, 225.

Did the levels of income, subsistence, and payments remain stable? Were they to change in the future? The narrator did not have a rent roll at hand in which the peasant's liabilities and their compliance were recorded, and we therefore do not know what the monks of Petershausen actually did with the estates after receiving them. Quite typically for a narrative text, there are almost no occurrences of 'economic semantics'. The same holds true for the situation of the courts and the church – the bailiwick and the parish. Only later, in 1043, do we learn that 14 *mansi* in Aichstetten were given to an unknown Erimbrecht and his wife as a *beneficium* for life.<sup>33</sup> This in turn means that the people of Aichstetten had four different lords within a period of 50 years: the earl, the bishop, the monks, and the vassal Erimbrecht.

The word-field semantic breakdown of the main social references and the subsequent considerations on the embedding of the forms of relationships between the peasants and their (changing) masters in a testimony should show how its language stock opens up the opportunity to trace a “world in a drop” (*mundus in gutta*) – consistently based on the traditional wording and without the mediation or imposition of modern key terms.

## Vignette 2: Human-equine interactions (15<sup>th</sup> c.). Investigating adjectival and verbal co-occurrences

Isabelle Schürch

The second vignette offers another example of an onomasiological approach focusing on a single document. This time, however, it is the adjectives and verbs rather than the nouns that help to situate the social. The example investigates the social interaction between riders and riding horses in late medieval Iberia, with an explicit focus on the animals rather than on the riders. In historical research, questions of the extent to which animals are not just historical “factors” but actively shape and constitute what we understand as “the social”, especially in premodern times, has gained prominence in recent years.<sup>34</sup> In order to move beyond traditional readings of the cultural and symbolic “value” of animals that leave them unreflected in their object status, so the claim of this vignette, the historical-semantic approach can help make visible social agency beyond the human. For it is precisely human language that can bear witness to (human) attempts to master non-human action – and in the process reveal human communicative inadequacies.

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33 Otto Feger (ed.), *Die Chronik des Klosters Petershausen*, Lindau 1956, 94f. See also Arno Borst, *Mönche am Bodensee 610–1525*, Sigmaringen 1978, 136f.

34 See e.g. Matthias Pohlig/Barbara Schlieben (eds.), *Grenzen des Sozialen. Kommunikation mit nicht-menschlichen Akteuren in der Vormoderne*, Göttingen 2022.

In the following, the *Livro de bem cavalgar* of the Portuguese king Dom Duarte I, which is considered the earliest medieval European riding manual, is used as a starting point for the analysis of the late medieval spectrum of equine activity.<sup>35</sup> The *Livro* is particularly suitable not only because of its innovative focus on horseback riding but also because it was written in the vernacular of medieval Portuguese. This means that there are no known textual or genre precursors on which the work could draw, and that it thus represents an ideal case for a single-text approach.

Writing before and during his short reign as king (1433–1438), Dom Duarte addressed young lords, knights, and squires whose very function as medieval *bellatores* was in the process of being redefined and refined away from battlefields at princely courts. Riding manuals of the time were therefore attempts to conceptualise a ‘doing’ – in this case, riding as a practice – in written form, and it consequently comes as no surprise that Dom Duarte’s focus lay on the human rather than the equine part of the riding ensemble. As Erica Fudge’s research into early modern farm animals has demonstrated, however, nonhuman animals in close proximity to and relationships with humans have a way of appearing repeatedly in texts even when the respective subject matter are men, as in Dom Duarte’s case.<sup>36</sup> And here, the historical semantics approach can help significantly to reveal the status of the horse as a historical agent. The vignette asks two simple, yet effective questions: Firstly, how do horses appear in the text? And secondly, what do riding horses actually *do* in the text?

In a first step of analysis, all references to horses (*cavallo/cavillos*) in the text are collected and listed with their co-occurrences, i.e. with the words appearing in proximity to the keyword *cavallo*. From this list, it immediately becomes clear that Dom Duarte tended to use a certain categorisation when writing about horses’ behaviour. While the animals sometimes occur as a generic category without any specific qualifiers (no significant co-occurrence), there are also two adjectives that appear as significant co-occurrences of *cavallo*: “good horses” (*cavillos boos*) and “headstrong horses” (*cavillos fazedores*). Normally, one would now switch to a hermeneutical approach and interpret this binary categorisation – and it could easily be dismissed as a simple objectification on Dom Duarte’s part. Looking at the manuscript as a whole, however, it seems that certain forms of equine behaviour are so conspicuous – and indeed almost unavoidable – that they cannot go unmentioned and unaddressed, even if this is done by way of a seemingly strongly objectifying categorisation.

In a second step of historical semantic analysis, this vignette will therefore now examine where exactly in the manual the categorisation into *cavillos boos* and *caval-*

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35 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS 5 portugais, fol. 99–128.

36 E.g. Erica Fudge, *Milking Other Men’s Beasts*, in: *History and Theory* 52/4 (2013), 13–28.

*los fazedores* is used. Dom Duarte mentions several times that he intends to write a section on horses' shortcomings and faults (*mynguas, tachas*) and how to eradicate or amend them, as well as another section on recognising, maintaining, and fostering a horse's good qualities (*bondades*). In some respects, this form of expression in binary characteristics could be understood as a simple transfer of human virtues and vices to horses. But if we look more closely at what *boo* and *fazedor* meant in this specific equestrian context, a more complex use of the terms becomes apparent.

In a third step, an investigation of the verbs used by Dom Duarte to describe the behaviour of the "good" and the "headstrong" horses provides further insights. When writing about "good horses", the king almost always does so in contexts where it most likely means "well-trained" and "well-behaved". Keeping in mind that we are reading about riding, this means that "good horses" were riding horses who were good co-practitioners of the activity of riding. Horses considered *fazedores*, on the other hand, were horses whose behaviour more frequently interfered with this practice. However, Duarte refrains from using adjectives denoting "bad" or "vicious" behaviour. *Cavallo fazedor* therefore quite literally means "a horse that does something" of its own accord.

The following are some of the verbs used to describe what *cavallos fazedores* do: They can balk, buck, bolt, kick with their hind legs, rear, jump, throw themselves into ditches, shy, turn hard, and perform sliding stops.<sup>37</sup> What we learn by looking at these words is that Duarte made riding horses the subjects of many different activity verbs presumably describing the diversity of equine actions that could not be controlled by riders. *Cavallos fazedores*, it seems, made riding a difficult sport for noblemen. The important point, however, is that horses exhibit a wide range of comportment, and this affects the way riders must adapt to their horses' actions. Even in this sense, it was not a question of intentional or unintentional behaviour, of good or bad traits, or of useful or less useful activities. Riding horses who wilfully 'did' things were perhaps not the best co-practitioners, but they still had to be accepted as co-practitioners.

Interestingly enough, *cavallos fazedores* play an important role in a novice rider's education according to Dom Duarte. Initially, it is the task of a *cavallo boo* to introduce a young rider to the art of riding. Upon having acquired sufficient basic equestrian skills and no longer being afraid of the horse's movement, the rider may then practise with different kinds of riding horses. Finally, it is the *cavallo fazedor* that takes the equestrian's skills to the highest level. Although Duarte talks about the edu-

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37 See MS portugais 5, fol. 103r: "Pera tras me pode derribar alvorando, pullando, saltando logo no começo, começando a correr, subindo rvjo por huũ lugar muyto agro de sospeita, ou muyto spesso que alguũ mato me torve e caya por desacordo."

cation of young riders, we can clearly detect traces left by the horses in this training programme. What becomes apparent in these passages is that riding horses could – and often did – exhibit their own distinct range of doings. From the human perspective of the text, this may appear to be a form of allowance: The horses were permitted a certain range of behaviour. However, if we take Duarte’s binary categorisation into well-trained and wilful riding horses seriously, it may also provide us with glimpses of some actions by riding horses that are considered beyond any notion of (human) control. *Cavallos fazedores* do what they do, and this has to be accepted and endured by the rider. When talking about late medieval riding horses, it could therefore make more sense to see them as co-practitioners exhibiting a considerable spectrum of comportment and actions, some of which were trained, learned, and refined over time. Not all riding horses became perfect co-practitioners, but even then they could be employed to train young but already somewhat experienced riders, helping them to hone their horsemanship skills. After all, not every rider became a perfect co-practitioner either.

Document-driven analysis can thus help to find keyword constellations without predefining or presupposing a specific concept. In our case, Dom Duarte did not use a word for “riding horse” – rather, the horses referred to in the text were “used for riding”: They could be good horses for riding, or wilful horses for riding. The focus on adjectives co-occurring with the term ‘horse’ reveals a qualitative specification of horses’ behaviour. Only at first glance does the manual seem to focus exclusively on the good rider and his actions, commands, and skills. Once we begin looking for the horses in the text, however, the document reveals that riding horses were conceived as subjects of ‘doings’ just as much as riders, which becomes apparent when analysing the verbs using horses as their subjects. Focusing on adjectives and verbs helps us re-evaluate the text in the sense that becoming a good rider was considered nothing more than constant self-reflexive alignment of one’s posture and actions with what the horse was doing. In Dom Duarte’s words, it was about knowing “how to ride upright in everything the horse does” (*andar dereito em todallas cousas que a besta faz*).<sup>38</sup>

### Vignette 3: *Christianitas* in contexts (4<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> c.). A computational one-word-approach

Tim Geelhaar

The third vignette in this vade mecum changes the focus from qualitative to quantitative long-term analysis of larger digitised corpora and proposes a semasiologi-

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

cal one-word-analysis of the Latin word *christianitas*.<sup>39</sup> The aim of this study is to answer the question: What were people in late antiquity and the Carolingian period referring to when they made use of the word *christianitas*? The study challenges conceptual history and the notion that *christianitas* stood for the realm of all Christians united under the leadership of the papacy. Guided by this idea of ‘Christendom’, Jean Rupp attempted to find proof of this usage by analysing the medieval papal use of *christianitas*. Written shortly before the beginning of the Second World War, his work remained influential in medieval history for decades, fostering the idea of the Christian Middle Ages as a historical unit. However, he neither verified whether the idea was widely accepted and used among Christians at the time, nor what happened to the word’s rich polysemy. It therefore seems requisite to examine the various usages of the word without preconceptions so as to understand how the meaning of *christianitas* evolved and changed over time. However, the following word study merely serves as a means to the end of better understanding the political, social, and religious contexts in which the word found use in its respective meanings. Only with this knowledge is it possible to evaluate the relevance of the concept of ‘Christendom’ – expressed by the term *christianitas* – during the period in question and comprehend how it may have influenced the Christianisation of Europe.

The study searched for all occurrences of *christianitas* in a corpus of all digitally retrievable and searchable Latin writings from different genres (historiography, hagiography, theological and paraenetic writings, law texts, letters) between ca. 360 and 920 CE.<sup>40</sup> The most immediate challenge is the word’s comparative rarity: It appears only 819 times (in all inflected forms) in 438 works, and rarely more than once in a single work. By comparison, the lemma *labor* occurs 14,819 times in the same corpus with its more than 6,300 works. It is therefore necessary to combine distant and close reading approaches to understand a word like *christianitas* that cannot be fully examined by distant reading methods alone. A four-layered analysis seems appropriate: The first layer deals with the lexicological and grammatical properties of the word itself (*christ-ian-itas*) and its inflections. The second layer is the corpus-based statistical approach, which is very useful for obtaining a comprehensive picture of the term’s usage in the historical evidence. Thanks to full-text

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39 The following is based on Tim Geelhaar, *Christianitas. Eine Wortgeschichte von der Spätantike bis zum Mittelalter*, Göttingen 2015; and Tim Geelhaar, *Talking About christianitas at the Time of Innocent III (1198–1216). What Does Word Use Contribute to the History of Concepts?*, in: *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 10/2 (2015), 7–28.

40 For this purpose, the study uses (a) the digital *Patrologia Latina* accessible via the Latin Text Archive (LTA), see <https://lta.bbaw.de> (21 June 2022), (b) the digital *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* at <https://www.dmgh.de>, which will be completely available through the LTA, (c) the Library of Latin Texts (LLT-A) by Brepols and specialised databases like eSawyer, see <https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/about/index.html> (27 June 2022).

databases like the Latin Text Archive (LTA), which include all inflections and different spellings of Latin lemmas, it is possible to count the occurrences of the word and their distribution among the cases. The genitive proves to be statistically dominant, accounting for more than 60 per cent of all occurrences on average for all six diachronic sub-corpora.<sup>41</sup> It is possible to identify collocations (like *nomen christianitatis*) as well as recurring or exceptional patterns of use, and to observe the distribution in single works and genres that changed considerably over time. The word almost never appears as the subject or object of a sentence, and it is rarely accompanied by adjectives since it is itself a replacement for the adjective *christianus* in many collocations. These observations alone challenge the existence and the relevance of a concept of ‘Christendom’, since *christianitas* does not seem to have been used frequently to talk about this idea.

The scarcity of occurrences makes it necessary to proceed on a microscopic level to understand the context of specific usages. The third layer of analysis therefore concentrates on the individual sentences in which *christianitas* appears. A particularly interesting finding here is that the position of the word within the sentence boundaries shifted over time: In Late Antiquity, it is mainly used as an adjective and – in a specific pattern – as part of the address in letters. At first, the emperor is addressed as *vestra christianitas*, meaning “Your Christianity” (like “Your Majesty”), to remind him of his virtue as a Christian ruler. While the addressee changes later on, the grammatical construction and position do not. In the eighth century, the popes addressed the Carolingian rulers in the same way to entreat their support against Rome’s enemies. Remarkably, this practice stopped immediately after Charlemagne defeated the latter. A hundred years later, the popes begged for help again – but this time they implored the Carolingian ruler to hurry to the defence of the entirety of *christianitas*.<sup>42</sup> The word thus moved from the beginning of a sentence to a different grammatical and semantic position.

To understand these shifts, the fourth layer includes the perspective of discursive analysis, the theory of frame semantics (Charles Fillmore and others), and the idea of ‘Situationsgeschichten’ (roughly “situation histories”) coined by Ludolf Kuchenbuch. This makes it possible to understand why the word remained open to semantisation when Augustine refused to discuss the unity of Christians with his opponents in these terms. In addition, the singular occurrences of *christianitas* can be analysed with respect to possible frames of knowledge that may have impacted its use and,

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41 The entire corpus is divided into six sub-corpora according to the distribution of *christianitas* occurrences: (1) 360–490, (2) 491–605, (3) 606–740, (4) 741–814, (5) 815–882, (6) 883–920.

42 See Tim Geelhaar, L’autorité du pape sur la chrétienté, développement d’une idée au IXe siècle? Auctoritas et christianitas dans les lettres de Jean VIII (872–882), in: Hypothèses (2011), 225–237.

even more importantly, its reception.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, it becomes clear that the term *christianitas* was not related to a concept of ‘Christendom’ until the beginning of the ninth century. And even then, it was only a single author who attempted (unsuccessfully) to introduce the notion during the heyday of Charlemagne’s reign. Instead, the word found much greater reception as the denominator of a political virtue to be shared by all peoples ruled by Charlemagne. The idea of a transregional rather than a universal unity of all Christians was expressed in the term *populus christianus* – the “Christian people”.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, all other usage patterns persisted, so that subsequent attempts at the end of the ninth century to semantise *christianitas* as ‘Christendom’ remained unsuccessful.

A final remark: This type of analysis leads to various insights, but not to a single consolidated story. Such word studies capture the diversity of usage patterns and the diversity of societies that use them, especially when the scope of the study is so large. Breaking the results down into one single narrative may not always be possible. In this case, however, it is possible to contrast Rupp’s interpretation of the dominant papal usage with another view: The popes did not shape the idea of ‘Christendom’ and did not succeed in imposing this meaning during the Early Middle Ages. The path of *christianitas* leads from the personal trait of being a Christian in late antiquity to the political quality of a group of people in the Early Middle Ages. The lemma would later become a denominator for the group itself, and only much later a term for the totality of all Christians. By this time, the use of the word among this multitude of Christians was already so diverse that it could no longer actually suffice for all those whom *christianitas* should have designated as a collective and appellative term.

#### Vignette 4: Medieval paternity (2<sup>nd</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> c.). A corpus-driven, statistical analysis of *pater*

Nicolas Perreaux

The final vignette in this series of examples presents a case of statistical semantics. Based on digital corpora of varying size,<sup>45</sup> it presents semantic modelling for the

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43 See Charles Fillmore, Frame Semantics, in: The Linguistic Society of Korea (ed.), *Linguistics in the Morning Calm*, Seoul 1982, 111–137; Dietrich Busse, *Semantik*, Paderborn 2009, 83.

44 See Tim Geelhaar, *Der populus christianus in den lateinischen Konzilsakten des ersten Jahrtausends. Semantische Untersuchungen zu einer Figur des großen Ganzen*, in: Wolfram Brandes/Alexandra Hasse-Ungeheuer/Hartmut Leppin (eds.), *Konzilien und kanonisches Recht in Spätantike und frühem Mittelalter. Aspekte konziliarer Entscheidungsfindung*, Berlin/Boston 2020, 191–221.

45 Among the main corpora used in the following case studies are the *Cartae Europae Medii Aevi* CEMA, a corpus of medieval charters developed by Nicolas Perreaux and based on earlier databases,



medieval lemma *pater* with calculations on its co-occurrences and collocations. The calculations are performed according to different algorithms corresponding to various semantic degrees: the immediate context, the broader context, the vectors of meaning, and the modelling of the entire text.

The semantic analysis of the lemma *pater* illustrates vividly how the alterity of the medieval world is constantly at risk of being intermixed with modern assumptions.<sup>46</sup> A lemma that is generally translated as “father”, “père”, “padre”, or “Vater” in modern European languages may easily provide a false impression of clear continuity between medieval Europe and our own time. The figure of the father appears to us twenty-first-century Europeans as a perfectly universal one. Most of us remember the famous quote by Darth Vader in the well-known 1980 film *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*: “I am your father.” Beyond its iconic dimension, this scene appears to be perfectly revealing of the current semantics of the word ‘father’. Indeed, the answer to the question “What/Who is a father?” is relatively unambiguous in our modern society. According to the *Trésor de la langue française*, “le père” (“the father”) is first and foremost “a man who has begotten (biologically implied)” or more rarely “who has adopted”.<sup>47</sup> The *Cambridge Dictionary* adds that the father is a “male parent” who “becomes the father of a child by making a woman pregnant” (incidentally, a somewhat misogynistic definition). Of course the term ‘father’ can also be used in a metaphoric sense to refer to the originator of an idea, for example – like Ferdinand de Saussure is said to be “the father of structural linguistics” – but the biological meaning remains predominant in contemporary discourse, even if technical developments in the field of procreation have begun to shift these boundaries.

Within the available ancient Latin corpora, there are no less than 300,000 mentions of the noun *pater*, thereby placing it firmly in the category of common vocabulary. In the *Patrologia Latina*, its occurrence is quite regular from the second to the

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which to date contains more than 270,000 documents or 75 million words, see <https://cema.lamop.fr/#aimsoftheproject> (21 June 2022). The *Patrologia Latina* and other important collections like the Vulgate, the OpenMGH/dMGH, the *Corpus Thomisticum*, and other more disparate but nevertheless complementary collections were employed as well. In our experiments, we systematically used a corpus of ancient “pagan” Latin documents (6 million words, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE), which provides a very strong contrastive semantic point since ancient semantics is generally opposed to that of medieval Europe.

46 See Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, L'Arbre de Jessé et l'ordre chrétien de la parenté, in: Dominique Iogna-Prat/Éric Palazzo/Daniel Russo (eds.), *Marie. Le culte de la Vierge dans la société médiévale*, Paris 1996, 137–170; Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes 4 (1997): Être père à la fin du Moyen Âge, ed. by Didier Lett; Jérôme Baschet, *Le sein du père. Abraham et la paternité dans l'Occident médiéval*, Paris 2000; Sylvie Joye, *L'autorité paternelle en Occident à la fin de l'Antiquité et au haut Moyen Âge*, Paris 2016; Nicolas Perreux, *In nomine patris. Éléments pour une sémantique de la paternité médiévale*, in: Léo Dumont/Octave Julien/Stéphane Lamassé (eds.), *Histoire, langues et textométrie*, Paris 2022. The latter text develops all the arguments presented in this vignette.

47 See *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé*, <http://atilf.atilf.fr/> (27 June 2022).

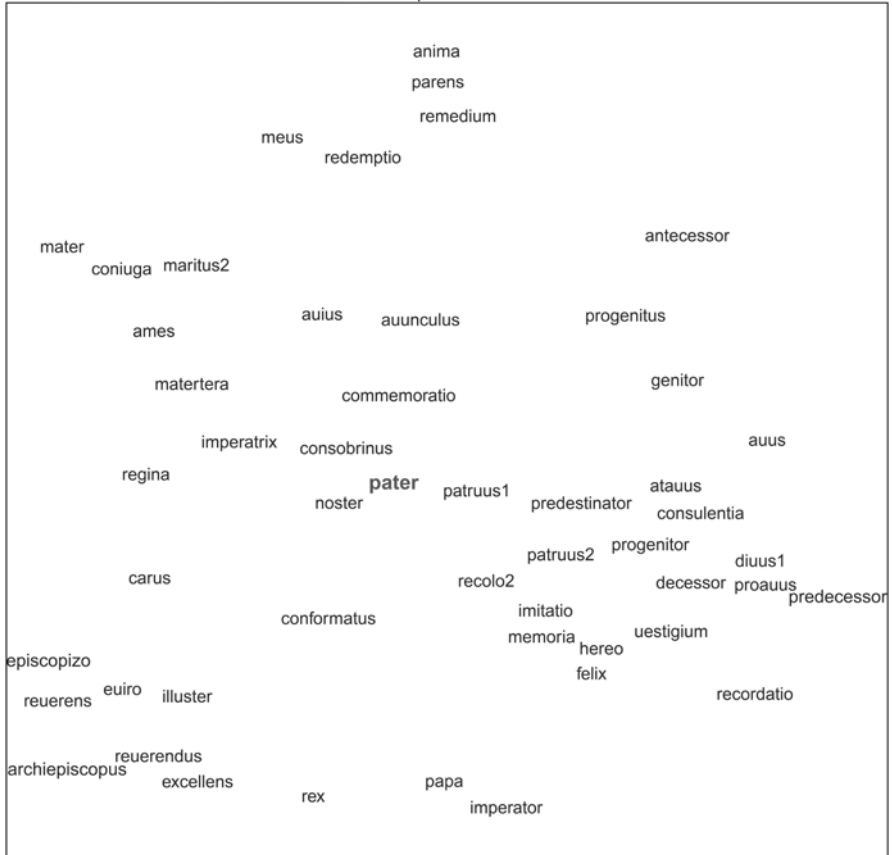


Figure 1: Semantic field of the lemma *pater* in the European Latin charters of the CEMA (6<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries). Method via R: WSDSM (Stefan Evert) and Cooc (Alain Guerreau)

thirteenth century. The word is also present in Roman pagan documents, with 8,670 occurrences in a corpus of six million words comprising texts from the fourth century BCE to the first century CE. A global count of different lemmas related to kinship in these corpora shows, however, that the importance of *pater* during the ancient period is counterbalanced by numerous references to the maternal figure (*mater*). In fact, there are only slightly more than two occurrences of *pater* for each occurrence of *mater* in Roman antiquity. This ratio increases significantly in the Vulgate, however, where there are four times as many mentions of *pater* as of *mater*. Finally, in the first part of the *Patrologia Latina* covering the period from Tertullian to Boethius (third to fifth century CE), the ratio is 6.2 to 1. *Pater* thus appears to significantly gain in importance between the end of antiquity and the High Middle Ages. This rise of the paternal figure – in close connection to the figure of the ‘son’ (*filius*) – is obviously

linked to the development of Christianity and the establishment of the ecclesial system, and therefore to the dogma of the Holy Trinity. A comparison of the main co-occurrences with *pater* in the corpus of ancient Roman texts as well as in those of St. Augustine reveals obvious and expected differences.<sup>48</sup> For Latin antiquity, lemmas related to the senatorial system, the grandfather, the Roman *familia* and household, and the Roman system in general (*plebs*, *populus*, etc.) stand out. For Augustine, lemmas relating to the Holy Trinity (*spiritus*, *dominus*), to the verb (*verbum*), to creation (*natura*, *homo*, *substantia*), or to the word pairs ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ (*caro/spiritus*) and ‘creator’ and ‘creatures’ are dominant.<sup>49</sup> This represents a major shift in the semantic field of *pater*. The rise of the figure of the godly father – and more broadly of a spiritual, divine paternity – at the transition from the fourth to the fifth century thus plays a decisive role in the emergence of a specifically medieval discourse on ‘fatherhood’.

But what can be determined beyond the increasing importance of the godly father? Who else was called *pater* in medieval Europe? A visualisation of the semantic field of the term in the corpus of charters (CEMA) using distributional semantics through the WordSpace-Cooc function for R delivers interesting results (figure 1).<sup>50</sup> The x-axis contrasts the dead, the ancestors, and memory (*genitor*, *antecessor*, *progenitus*, *progenitor*, *avvus*, *atavus*, *predecessor*, *memoria*, etc.) on the right with the living characters on the left. The y-axis places terms related to carnal kinship (*mater*, *conjuga*, *maritus*), which was present in the formulas of gift for the soul’s salvation (*anima*, *parens*, *remedium*, *meus*, *redemptio*) in the top half of the graph, while terms referring to spiritual kinship, to community or hierarchy, appear in the bottom half: the “bishop” (*archiepiscopus*, *episcopizo*, *reverens*), the “pope” (*papa*), and the “sovereign” (*rex*, *imperator*) were regarded as ‘fathers’ of their subjects. Thus the medieval *pater* represented a link between the living and the dead on the one hand, while on the other hand also designating multiple forms of paternity extending far beyond the biological meaning. This reading is clearly confirmed by contemporary dictionaries such as the *Novum Glossarium*<sup>51</sup>: *Pater* can certainly designate

48 Perreaux, *In nomine patris*, 2022.

49 Alain Guerreau, Stabilità, via, visione. Le creature e il Creatore nello spazio medievale, in: Enrico Castelnovo/Giuseppe Sergi (eds.), *Arti e storia nel Medioevo*, tome 3: *Del vedere: pubblici, forme e funzioni*, Torino 2004, 167–197; Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, Occident médiéval et pensée analogique: Le sens de *spiritus* et *caro*, in: Jean-Philippe Genet (ed.), *La légitimité implicite*, Paris/Rome 2015, 457–476.

50 See <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/wordspace/index.html> (27 June 2022); on this statistical package, see Stefanie Evert, Distributional semantics in R with the wordspace package, in: Proceedings of COLING 2014, the 25<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Computational Linguistics: System Demonstrations (2014), 110–114.

51 *Novum Glossarium Mediae Latinitatis*, vol. Passibilis–Pazzu, ed. by Jacques Monfrin, Copenhagen 1993, col. 651–668, presents the different meanings of the term, albeit without ever articulating them or providing the link between these multiple meanings and the social structure in which they made sense.

the carnal father, but also a father by fosterage, the parents as a unit, an ancestor, or predecessors without genealogical links.

Paternity in medieval times was thus a *type* of relationship rather than a biological category, roughly divided into carnal and spiritual forms of paternity.<sup>52</sup> The term *pater* stood for a whole range of possible and potential affiliations of equal importance. The multitude of ‘fathers’ made it possible to articulate social relationships with many living people, as well as with deceased persons, in varying intensity and with differing effects. Furthermore, the carnal and spiritual forms of paternity were complemented by the paternal model par excellence: the divine paternity. The Carolingian author Raban Maur († 856) therefore devoted several paragraphs of his *De Universo* to clarifying the different meanings of the *Deus pater*. To him, all paternity derived first and foremost from that of God, the “godly father of everything” (*Deus pater omnium*, even if it was an adoptive form of paternity.<sup>53</sup> The idea of a creator as the father of all things is obviously present in the Vulgate, and in particular in the Gospel of Matthew (23:9), which insists on the paramount and total fatherhood of God. It is thus understood that, by extension, *pater* refers to all types of spiritual fathers: The father is the one who baptises, the godfather, the founder of an order or monastic rule, of a monastery or church. The term also designates teachers, apostles, and prophets: the Church Fathers, the Desert Fathers, and the Fathers of the First Six Councils. The pope, the patriarchs, the cardinals, bishops, abbots, and in fact all members of the Church down to the simple priest could likewise be referred to as ‘fathers’. And finally, lay lords such as sovereigns, kings, and the like could be called spiritual ‘fathers’ as well.

This brief survey allows us to formulate a hypothesis: Any dominant male person in medieval society – in other words every lord (*dominus*) – could be classified as a ‘father’ in specific social contexts. This situation may result from the semantic proximity between the term *dominus* (designating the Lord of Heaven as well as earthly lords) and the term *pater* (referring to the fatherly figure of God but also to all carnal and spiritual forms of paternity). The closeness between these two terms means not only that God never ceased to affirm himself as the ‘ultimate father’, but also that a progressive reinforcement between being a lord (with God also being the ‘ultimate lord’) and being a spiritual father resulted from this relationship. This interrelatedness between the medieval seigniorial logic the spiritual properties attributed

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52 Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, *Spiritus et caritas*. Le baptême dans la société médiévale, in: Françoise Héritier-Augé/Élisabeth Copet-Rougier (éds.), *La parenté spirituelle*, Paris 1996, 133–203.

53 Bernhard Jussen, *Patenschaft und Adoption im Frühen Mittelalter*, Göttingen 1991; Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, *Qu’est-ce que l’adoptio dans la société chrétienne médiévale?*, in: *Médiévales* 35 (1998), 33–50; Christiane Kalpisch-Zuber, *Lombre des ancêtres*. Essai sur l’imaginaire médiéval de la parenté, Paris 2000; Hans Hummer, *Visions of Kinship in Medieval Europe*, Oxford 2018.

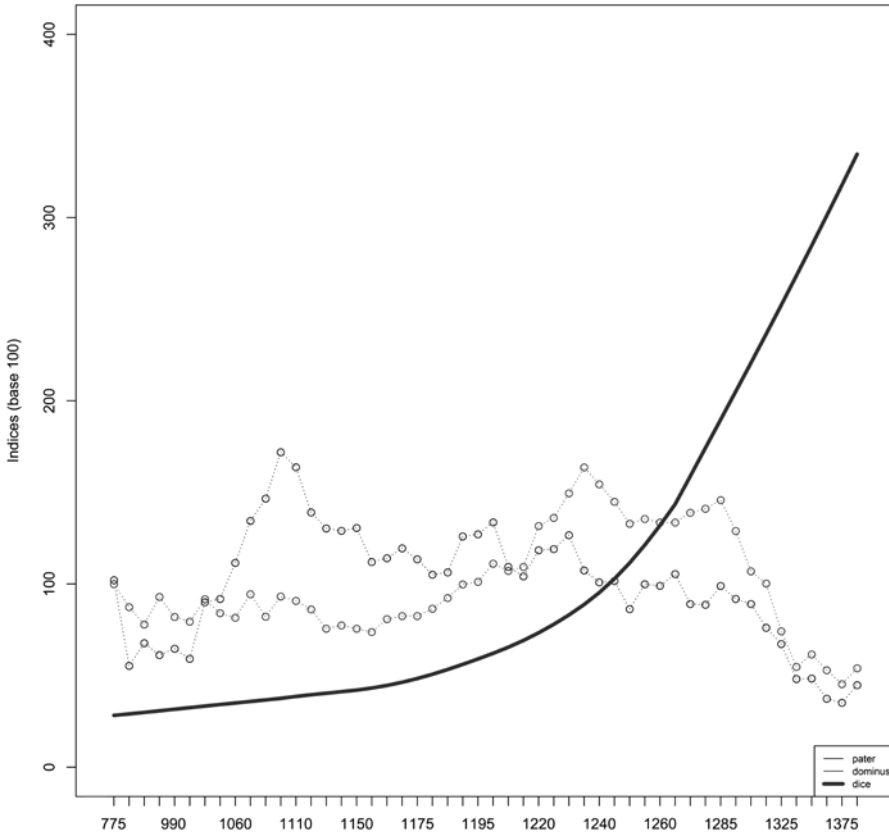


Figure 2: Chronology of co-occurrences of pater and dominus in the CEMA (green curve, smoothed by approximate values). Freqcooc:Cooc method.

to earthly lords creates a very dynamic situation. Indeed, it seems that individuals in medieval Europe found themselves in a situation of multi-paternity, both carnal and spiritual (including the divine). This was because they were simultaneously the *filius* (or *filia*) of a biological father, of various lords, and of holy and divine characters, but also because this relationship depended on the analogous logic of domination underpinning the entire structure of social and production relationships. The saints, popes, bishops, and abbots were regularly referred to as “lord and father” (*domino et patri*).<sup>54</sup> A simple comparison with ancient Roman texts confirms this impression: There are only 45 co-occurrences associating *pater* and *dominus* in the surveyed non-Christian corpus, while 9,778 co-occurrences are to be found in the CEMA charters. This means that the association between the two lemmas is 41 times

<sup>54</sup> See Perreaux, *In nomine patris*, 2022.

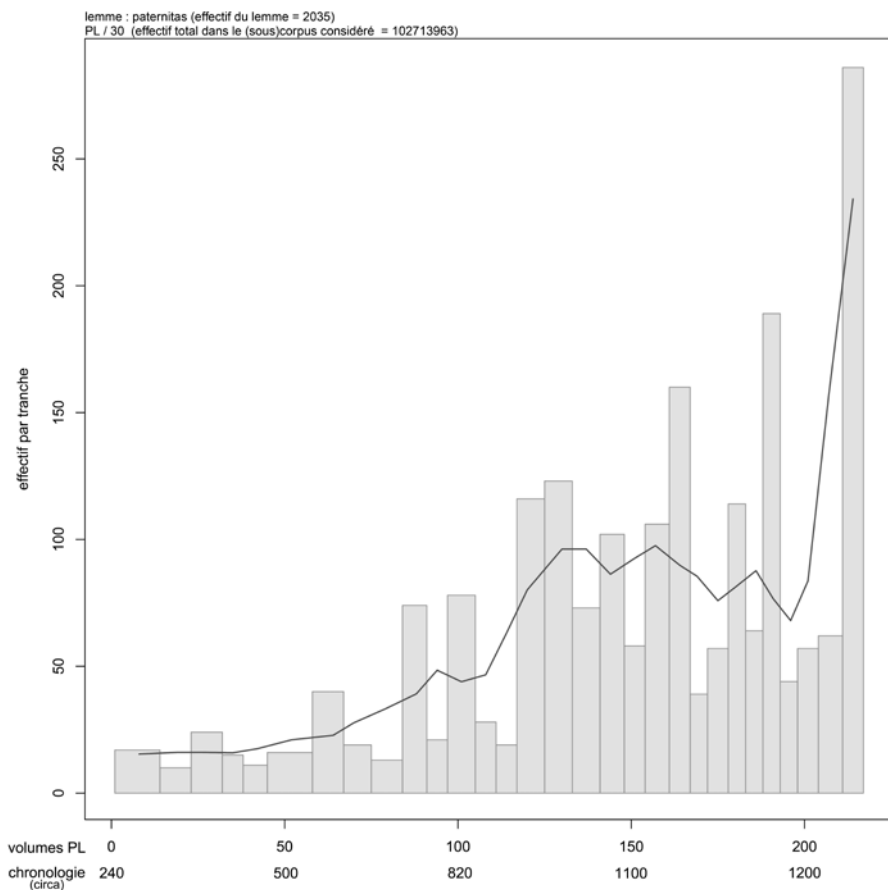


Figure 3: Chronology of the lemma *paternitas* within the *Patrologia Latina*. The corpus is divided into slices containing an equivalent number of words, so that the trend reflects the dynamics of the term, not the dynamics of the corpus itself. Cooc:Frequem2 method.

stronger in the Christian corpus. Moreover, the association between *pater* and *dominus* was not only fundamental in medieval Latin Europe; it was also reinforced over the centuries by progressively emphasising the spiritual dimension of the ‘father’, as shown in figure 2. It is this situation that may have favoured the emergence of the term *paternitas* as an abstract noun. While *paternitas* is totally absent from ancient pagan texts, it appears in the Vulgate to describe divine paternity before developing throughout the pontifical letters of the fourth to seventh centuries to designate first the pope, then also bishops and finally abbots (see figure 3).<sup>55</sup> *Paternitas* as a concept denoted perfect paternity derived from that of God, and it was exclusively spiritual.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

With four practical illustrations, this *vade mecum* proposes historical semantics as a paradigm shift in social history. Historical semantics moves the focus from a history of concepts to a history of word usage: Instead of applying the etic concepts and historiographical questions of the historian to the historical sources, the emic expressions in the historical documents serve as starting points for a reconstruction of past taxonomies and power relations. And instead of translating these multi-layered emic forms of expression into abstract analytical categories and etic concepts of historiographical discourse, researchers using historical semantics seek to transliterate the word usage of the sources with its social meanings and its historical complexity. By reflecting on the concrete situations of language use – including the actual, the possible, and the actively avoided expressions of the writing population – historical semantics offers an approach that reads words and documents against the grain and helps to reveal the (potential) actions and conceptualisations of the non-writing groups of past societies.

By choosing a ‘crab steering mode’ rather than writing history ‘through the rear-view mirror’, the historical semantics approach reconstructs the past in its open-ended complexity and sometimes unrelated alterity, thereby helping to uncover fractures and gaps in history rather than drawing genealogical lines of descent. Conversely, reading and interpreting historical situations through their own expressions and conceptualisations automatically assists in identifying and questioning the interpreting historian’s time-bound, ethnocentric assumptions and can set in motion what Caroline Arni has called the process of “reciprocal conceptual enrichment”. In this sense, we hope that this brief collection of reflections and practical experiments will be followed by more extensive and far-reaching studies of a semantically informed new social history – in this special issue and beyond.