

CONCEPTUAL HISTORY AND DIACHRONIC SEMANTICS

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Throughout my career-long application of Cognitive Linguistics to the study of semantic change and variation, from Geeraerts & Grondelaers 1995 to Geeraerts 2016 and beyond I have emphasised the importance of studying language in a cultural-historical context: the dynamics of meaning construction can only be properly understood in terms of language history, and language history can only be properly understood in terms of cultural history. In this talk, I intend to flip the perspective and show how diachronic semantics on a cognitive linguistic basis can be relevant for cultural history, or more precisely, for conceptual history. On one hand, this looks like a no-brainer: if *Ideengeschichte* is the historical study of concepts, linguistic methods and models for describing concepts and conceptual change should be relevant. But on the other, in actual practice the methodological incorporation of cognitive linguistic ideas into the history of ideas is minimal. This is all the more to be regretted since conceptual history has gone through a ‘linguistic turn’: approaches like Quentin Skinner’s Cambridge school and specifically also Reinhart Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* (1979, 2006) place language at the heart of their methodology, considering it a primary site where ideas are shaped and contested.

In this talk, then, I will compare the semantic evolution of Big Ideas (i.e. the type of concepts that the history of ideas focuses on) with the diachronic semantics of ordinary language concepts. I will argue that both the similarities and the differences between both can be fruitfully described in cognitive linguistic terms, in particular in terms of prototype effects.

Keywords: conceptual history, diachronic semantics, prototype theory

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