

SEMANTIC DYNAMICS OF THE CONCEPT OF “FAMILY” IN SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

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Abstract

Family is considered one of the concepts which suffered the most profound transformation and enrichment of the semantic content in modern society. This work intends to be an analysis showing how and in what way this concept has evolved at a semantic level.

Key words: *family, general definition, specialized definition, structural analysis, semantic analysis*

Résumé

La famille est considérée l'un des concepts qui a souffert la plus profonde transformation et enrichissement du contenu sémantique dans la société moderne. Ce travail est intentionné comme une analyse par laquelle on montre comment et dans quelle manière a évolué ce concept au niveau sémantique.

Mots-clés: *famille, définition générale, définition spécialisée, analyse structurale, analyse sémantique*

Within the context of laicization of information in different scientific fields, the study of terminologies becomes a concern of maximum importance for current general linguistics. Considered as an “independent science”¹ and “social practice”² which has as purpose the increase of effectiveness of communication, terminology extracts its study material from the most different fields of activity. Social assistance, subject which in the last years has known a real boom at the level of concepts, principles and methods with which it operates, provides terminology with a rigorous linguistic material which may be the object of an exhaustive research.

Among the concepts of this field of study which have recently emerged, there is an individualized concept which is used not only in the common language, where it is considered a word, but also in the specialized language where, due to the accurate and mono-referential character, we may talk about term meaning, about the linguistic form of the concept. The term “family”, as it will be the subject matter of this study, migrated in a slow but certain way from the common language to the specialized one. A first step to the quality of term is an accurate definition. It must ensure monoreferentiality, monosemantism and non-ambiguity. It must pertain to a certain terminological field for which it has an invariable value.

In general dictionaries, the term “family” is defined as “basic social form,

¹ Toma, Alice, *Un studiu lexical și textual-discursiv al terminologiei românești din secolul al XIX-lea. Cazul geografiei*, in *Limba română controversă, delimitări, noi ipoteze*, Editura Universității din București, București, 2010, p. 317.

² Idem.

fulfilled by the marriage which unites the spouses (parents) and their descendents (unmarried children)" (DEX) or the "totality of persons united through blood relations or by affinity" (MDA). We must also notice that in these dictionaries there are no diatrasitic marks which should indicate in what subjects the word is used as a term, and that a dictionary of social assistance does not exist yet. These two aspects and a careful analysis of the general definition lead us to the idea that the basic meaning is that which migrates to specialized vocabulary in the social assistance field.

In the absence of a social assistance dictionary, we will focus in our comparison on the extraction of definitions from law texts which regulate the social assistance field, on specialized works in this relatively new field, but also on specialized dictionaries in related subjects, such as law and sociology where the term "family" is frequently used.

Social assistance treatises assign flexible definitions to the term as they provide coverage as large as possible to the linguistic reality which the term must describe. We considered representative in this sense the structural definition expressed by Burgess, Locke and Thomas and the phenomenological one expressed by Hartman and Laird. The first of them stipulates that family is "a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood, or adoption; constituting a single household, interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social roles as husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister, and creating and maintaining a common culture".³ The second definition refers more to the family as to a complex social phenomenon "a family becomes a family when two or more individuals decide to form a family and this means that they live together at that moment, they develop an intimacy where they share intimate, emotional needs, live in a space called by them their home, where they define roles and tasks necessary to satisfy biological, social and psychological needs of involved individuals".⁴

Social assistance is a field which establishes relations almost symbiotic with public administration. Referring to the term "family", we are also interested in the definitions which we find in the law text for this term. Thus, in Law 272 of 21 June 2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, the term in discussion has the following meanings: "family – parents and their children"⁵, "extended family – child, parents and his relatives to the 4th degree inclusively"⁶, "substitutive family – persons, other than those pertaining to the extended family, who, as provided by law, ensure the child's growth and care"⁷. In Law no. 273/2004 on the legal regime of adoption we also find the collocation "adopting family" with the following meaning "the husband and the wife who adopted or want to adopt, as provided by law"⁸.

Analysing these definitions, we may distinguish some particularities which may be constituted in essential parts in the process of communication and knowledge. We must insist on the role the concept of "family" has in any definition of the

³ Burgess, E., W., Locke, J., Thomas, M. M., 1971, apud Neamțu, George, *Tratat de asistență socială*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2011, p. 660.

⁴ Hartman, A., Laird, J. apud Neamțu, George, *Tratat de asistență socială*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2011, p. 661.

⁵ Law no. 272 of 21.06.2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, art.4, lit. b).

⁶ Op. cit., letter c).

⁷ Op. cit. letter d).

⁸ Law no. 273/2004 on the legal regime of adoption, art. 2 letter a).

specialized term. The multitude of definitions leads to a pluridimensionality of the concept. In modern society, the concept of “family” is a real collection of perceptions.

The definitions which we presented above, both the general ones and the specialized ones, are “substantial definitions”⁹ and follow Aristotle’s model of the genus proximus and specific differences. In our case, genus proximus is represented by /social form/ and the /totality of persons/ for general definitions, and for the specialized definitions by the /group/. Specialized definitions, applying the principle of economy, do not specify many times the genus proximus, but it is understood from the context. This is specific to definitions which we extracted from the law text. Specific differences are represented by descriptive marks and functionality. In other words, in order to be a “family”, the group must have some well determined characteristics and to play certain roles.

A careful analysis of specialized texts both at the level of definitions and at the use level in different contexts, we notice the following particularity in relation to the structure of the term: while the social assistance treatises use the simple term /family/, in law texts and in the contexts which focus on the legal-administrative language, the legislator opts for specialized phrases (extended family, substitutive family, adopting family). These syntagmatic terms have a unitary and stable meaning, but the linguistic reality which they describe is reduced by the wish to be more accurate. They are consecrated by the frequent use in the specialized language and are perceived as distinct terminological units exactly because of the relative cement of component elements. These new concepts are derived from the concept of family and are introduced in a facile way in the specialized vocabulary, being easily understood and used by specialists. They correspond to spontaneous mechanisms of assignment which start from general to particular. At the grammar level, the constitutive elements of terminological collocations keep their morphological individuality, the unit is possible due to the meaning, but also to the keeping of a certain syntactic order. In the case of new terms which are related to the semantic area of the term family, the apposition substantive – adjective is used.

Keeping the analysis on the same trajectory, it is important to highlight the main semantic characteristics of these terms, too. In social assistance treatises, in order to surprise the complexity of the “family” concept, more meanings are given, the “family” term enjoys an encyclopaedic definition, which surprises its multitude of uses. In the law text, where the expression must be rigorous and accurate for each meaning, there is one corresponding specialized term.

The interest in the concept of “family” occurred with the challenges of modern society where social life suffered a process of profound metamorphosis. The terminology had to find forms to express the linguistic reality which has evolved and transformed a lot in the last century, especially regarding social life. New terms which enter the semantic area of the concept of “family” are a consequence, an answer to this social diversification.

As a conclusion, we may assert that at the semantic level, the concept of “family” was forced to evolve in order to keep pace with social reality.

⁹ Bidu-Vrăceanu, Angela, *Lexicul specializat în mișcare de la dicționare la texte*, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, Bucureşti, 2007, p. 53.

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