



THE CORE AND PERIPHERY OF THE SEMANTIC FIELD

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Annotation: This article examines the concept of the semantic field and focuses on its two main structural components: the core and the periphery. A semantic field is understood as a group of lexical units that are interconnected by common or related meanings. The core consists of the most central, frequently used, and semantically significant words that represent the main meaning of the field. In contrast, the peripheral elements have less direct semantic connections and may overlap with other semantic fields. The article discusses the relationship between core and peripheral units and highlights the flexible nature of boundaries within a semantic field. Particular attention is given to the role of context, semantic similarity, lexical relations, and frequency of use in determining the position of a linguistic unit within the field.

Keywords: Semantic field, core, periphery, lexical units, meaning, semantic relations, vocabulary.

The semantic field has an important place in the modern linguistics, especially in the study of lexical semantics. The words of a language are not just a bunch of unrelated words. Instead, different semantic, functional and conceptual relations link the lexical units to each other. The theory of semantic fields provides linguists with a tool to understand the construction of words in the lexical system of a language. One of the important principles of this theory is the distinction between the **core** and the **periphery** of a semantic field. A semantic field is normally understood as a group of lexical units having a common semantic component or belonging to the same conceptual sphere. For example, the semantic field of education may include such words as teacher, student, school, university, lesson, examination, knowledge, textbook and classroom. These words have different meanings but are related through the general concept of education. Similarly, the semantic field of emotions can cover happiness, sadness, anger, fear, love, excitement, and disappointment. Such fields demonstrate the relational character of lexical meaning, and the fact that the meaning of a word can often be better understood in terms of its relation to other words¹.

The core is the central part of a semantic field. It includes lexical units

¹ Cruse D.A. Lexical Semantics. — Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. — 310 p.



that are most closely and directly connected to the basic meaning of the field. Generally, core elements are semantically highly relevant and can be often used in communication. They are generally the most general and most easily recognisable concepts associated with a particular semantic domain. For example, in the semantic field of education, words such as teacher, student, school and lesson can be considered relatively central as they denote fundamental aspects of educational activity².

The significance of core elements is that they represent the semantic foundation of the field. Other lexical units can often be interpreted in relation to these central elements. The core therefore functions as the organizing centre of the semantic field. But the precise makeup of the core may vary, depending on the linguistic context, communicative purpose, frequency of use, and cultural characteristics of a particular language community. Therefore the core should not always be understood as a fixed and fully identical group of words. The periphery, in contrast, comprises lexical units which are connected with the central meaning of the field, but possess a weaker or more indirect semantic connection with it. Peripheral elements may express more specific, specialized, figurative, contextual, or secondary meanings. They may also belong simultaneously to more than one semantic field. For instance, in the semantic field of education, words such as *graduation*, *scholarship*, *curriculum*, *laboratory*, *diploma*, and *academic performance* can be regarded as more peripheral because they refer to particular aspects of education rather than the most general concept itself. An important characteristic of the relationship between the core and the periphery is that their boundaries are not always clear-cut. Semantic fields are generally gradual and dynamic structures. There may be intermediate zones between the central and peripheral elements. A lexical unit may therefore be somewhere in between the core and the periphery and not exclusively in one category³. Where it goes can depend on the context and how you're using it. A word peripheral in one semantic field may be central in another. For example, the semantic fields of the word class may not coincide. It could refer to a social category in a social context, or a group of students or a lesson in an educational context. Therefore, the semantic position of the lexical unit is not always determined out of context. This is an indication

² Fillmore C.J. Frame Semantics and the Nature of Language // Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences. — 1976. — Vol. 280, No. 1. — P. 20–32.

³ Geeraerts D. Theories of Lexical Semantics. — Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. — 372 p.



of the flexibility and multidimensionality of lexical meaning⁴.

The core-periphery relation is also closely related to the concept of semantic proximity. The closer a lexical unit is to the core of a field, the more likely it is to be semantically related to other core elements. Peripheral units, in contrast, may possess less direct semantic links, and only some of the semantic features are shared with the field. This relation can be written as a continuum: CORE → NEAR CORE → MID ZONE → PERIPHERY. Such a structure underlines the fact that semantic organisation is not necessarily a binary one. Instead of splitting the vocabulary into two mutually exclusive groups, the core-periphery model acknowledges different degrees of semantic centrality. Another important feature of semantic fields is that they overlap. There might be several meanings or semantic features of the lexical units. This can also result in overlapping of different semantic fields. For instance, the word *home* can belong to the semantic fields of family, housing, emotions, and social relationships. Where it is located is determined by the particular meaning that is activated in a given context. This phenomenon shows that the boundaries of semantic fields are often flexible and not rigid⁵.

The core-periphery model is also relevant for the understanding of polysemy. Polysemous words have several meanings that are related to each other. Different meanings may occupy different positions in semantic fields. There may be a core meaning that is basic, and other meanings, figurative or specialised, may be nearer the periphery. For instance, the word *bright* generally refers to a lot of light but it can also refer to an intelligent person. The physical meaning may be in the semantic field of light. The figurative meaning may be in the semantic field of intelligence. This is an example of how semantic extension can relate different domains. The position of lexical units is also affected by the frequency of usage. The more often a word is used in everyday communication, the more strongly it is associated with the central concepts of a semantic field. But frequency alone is not enough to decide whether a word belongs to the core or the periphery. Semantic relevance, conceptual significance, context, stylistic features, and cultural connotations should also be taken into account. The study of the core and periphery of semantic fields is of practical importance for various branches of linguistics. In

⁴ Lyons J. *Semantics*. Vol. 1. — Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. — 371 p.

⁵ Palmer F.R. *Semantics*. — 2nd ed. — Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. — 164 p.



lexicography it can help researchers organise dictionary entries and explain relationships between related words. Semantic-field organisation is useful in vocabulary teaching for language learners because they can learn words by conceptual groups rather than learning isolated items. In translation studies, the knowledge of the position of lexical units in semantic fields helps translators to choose appropriate equivalents and to avoid misinterpretations. The model also has relevance for cognitive linguistics, as it reflects the way speakers categorise concepts and organise knowledge⁶. From a cognitive perspective, the core-periphery structure reveals that certain concepts are more central, and more cognitively accessible, than others. Speakers can recognise central members of a category faster because they have a strong association with the general concept. The core is the most central and semantically important lexical units, and the periphery is made of units with weaker, more specialised, contextual or indirect relations with the central meaning. The border of these two areas is fluid and lexical units can move closer or further away from the centre depending on context, frequency, meaning and communicative use. The core-periphery approach shows that vocabulary is a dynamic system of networks, rather than a random collection of words. Hence, the study of the semantic fields in terms of the relationship between the core and peripheral members provides a valuable framework for understanding lexical organisation, semantic change, polysemy, conceptual categorisation, and the functioning of language as a whole⁷.

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⁶ Trier J. Der deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbezirk des Verstandes: Die Geschichte eines sprachlichen Feldes. — Heidelberg: Winter, 1931. — 347 p.



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