THE GAME OF SENSES IN THE PARADIGM HANDICAP-DEFICIENCY-DISABILITY

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Abstract

This paper is focused on the analysis of specialized terms whose meaning has migrated to the common language, gaining a widespread use. By applying a semantic and terminological analysis to the terms handicap-deficiency-disability we shall identify the relationships established between them, at the same time stressing their specialized meaning.

Key words: *synonyms*, *semantic area*, *semantic analysis*, *terminological analysis*, *meronymic relationship*

Résumé

Notre analyse est axée sur certains termes spécialisés dont le sens a migré vers le langage commun, en acquérant une large utilisation. En appliquant une analyse sémantique aux termes handicap-déficience-infirmité on va établir quelles en sont leurs rapports, en soulignant en même temps le sens spécialisé.

Mots-clés: *synonymes*, *champ sémantique*, *analyse sémantique*, *analyse terminologique*, *relation métonymique*

The transition period meant, for Romanian society and culture, a favorable time for Western loans, loans aimed at the material and spiritual sphere, social life and political life. Language, as a living organism, wellspring of transformation and evolution is the faithful mirror of these metamorphoses.

In recent years, a word that has migrated from specialized language to common language makes career. Not once were we assaulted by its use in the media or watched specialist attempts to give it a place in the terminological hierarchy of a field of study in the social sphere, social care. The term "handicap" is associated, in the language of specialists, to "deficiency" and "disability", but the relationship between these terms has raised controversy among specialists. If we start from the premise that "the lexical-semantic paradigm is indivisible"[1], we believe that the intervention of a terminological specialist could settle this dispute. The question that we must ask ourselves is whether these terms form a paradigm, whether they are in a perfect replacement relationship or whether the synonymy between them is only partial.

When talking about a paradigm, we refer to an associative set of terms that possess virtual replacement relationships between them, and what we must keep in mind is the synonymy relationship existing between the components of a synonymic series "inside a synonymic series the relations may be of identity or just

[1]Angela Bidu-Vrănceanu şi Narcisa Forăscu, *Modele de structurare semantică*, Timişoara, Editura Facla, 1984, p. 158.

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quasiequivalence"[2]. The terms that we analyze are terms that in the context of "knowledge secularization"[3] were used in various more or less specialized situations of communication. The material that provides the linguist with an overview on these words can be cut out of specialized works and last but not least from the law text, because the legislature, being constantly confronted with the European legislative model, wanted to take elements from it and adapt them to the native substrate.

First we have to say, from the beginning, that if for the common language synonymy is a means of enrichment, innovation, transformation, for the specialized language, the same synonymy is nothing but a serious failure[4], for this synonymic terminology can affect more or less the clarity of the transmitted message. This phenomenon is contrary to the need for accuracy of expression and may lead to an erroneous interpretation of the message. To respect the specialized character of communication, the term should be "univocally precise and monoreferential"[5] in the conceptual hierarchy of a certain area, namely in the field of social care. The conceptual independence of a term results from these features. This aspect is important, especially if we consider that social care is symbiotically linked to the legislative language, the terms of this field, with all their semantic load, being found in the text of law which must be clear and precise and leave no room for interpretation. However, these terms are caught in a true warp, a true game of senses which highlights how terms are chained in semantic subordination and coordination relations, "the identity of meaning must be checked because we cannot agree that a class of synonymous terms grouped more or less intuitively are identical in meaning"[6]. The hypothesis we advance is that, although apparently synonymous, they form, in fact, a conceptual system[7].

To clarify this aspect, we shall initiate a semantic analysis of the terms discussed, starting from their definitions and etymology. Maybe at first sight, etymology may seem less important. But if we look closely, we shall see that the terms of the paradigm are of Western European origin and we cannot but wonder whether this is not a consequence of the attempts to reproduce the social Western model that was also linguistically manifested. We should point out the idea that "in a lexical-semantic paradigm words can enter with only one of their meanings"[8], and consequently this means that the terms proposed for discussion cover distinct semantic areas which intertwine even if they do not overlap perfectly. The words which in common language are considered partially synonymous, in the specialized one are part of a conceptual system in which they have hierarchical relationships. "The hierarchical

[2] Angela Bidu-Vrănceanu şi Narcisa Forăscu, *Cuvinte şi sensuri*, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1988, p. 115.

[3] François Gaudin, *Socioterminologie. Une approche sociolinguistique de la terminologie*, 2-eme ed. 2003, De Boeck & Larcier, Edition Duculot, Bruxelles, p. 151.

[4] Marin Bucă, *Vocabulary synonymy and richness*, AUT, VIII, series Philological Sciences, 1970, p. 222-225.

[5] L. Depecker, *Entre signe et concept: éléments de terminologie générale*, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, 2002, p. 103.

[6] Angela Bidu-Vrăceanu şi Narcisa Forăscu, *op. cit.* p. 116.

[7] Mariana Pitar, *Manual de terminologie şi terminografie*, Timişoara, Editura Mirton, 2013, p. 101.

[8] Angela Bidu-Vrănceanu, *Structura vocabularului limbii române contemporane*, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1986, p. 67.

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conceptual intercoditioning"[9] of the terms handicap-deficiency-disability can be easily detected by a specialized speaker, but the elements that provide the terminological monosemantism can be disregarded by the common language.

The term *handicap* had an exciting development. Originated in English this term entered the Romanian language in the twentieth century, but it was used more in sports language where it means "score given to a weaker competitor" or "all the points that put a team into inferiority". The figurative meaning of the same term was synonymous with "disadvantage" or "state of inferiority". The specialized language of social care takes exactly this figurative sense and turns it into a basic sense. The term began to be used with that sense in the post-communist period as a possible response to attempts to align the legislation of social care in our country with the Western one. Even though this term is a neonym which is based on a semantic calque, the mentality and social stereotypes concerning this term are hard to change. In Romanian society, a handicap is something bad, something that bothers us and many of us prefer to ignore it, still being tributary to the 50 years of communism. The pejorative meaning is easy to see if we observe communication situations involving the word *handicap*/ **'***handicap'* and its derivative *handicapat/ 'handicapped'*. To prevent the spread of this pejorative meaning from common language to specialized language, instead of this noun we prefer *persoană cu handicap*/ *'disabled person'*[10]. Although not defined in the text of law, this phrase is used with the following meaning "person having a disadvantage that puts him/her in a state of inferiority".

On the other hand, the text of law clearly defines the term disability, "the generic term for impairments/ disabilities, activity limitations and participation restrictions, as defined in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, adopted and approved by the World Health Organization, and which reveals the negative aspect of the individual-context interaction"[11]. This definition also puts emphasis on the negative aspect of the term disability, but the sense that the term is used with is not pejorative. It induces the idea that a person is experiencing a handicap when the perception on the disability occurs. The synonymy between the two terms does not exist because they define two essentially similar but different concepts. Their semantic areas do not overlap, although they have some common elements. If the linguist may consider them partially synonymous, the specialist in terminology is obliged to observe the causal relationship between the two concepts.

If we follow the specialized definition we outlined above, another concept will attract our attention, namely that of *deficiență/ 'deficiency'*. Deficiency has, in general dictionaries, the following sense / absence / + / of certain / + / physical or mental faculties /. We shall notice that in the specialized definition, this concept replaces the term handicap. This is because the sense of this term does not awaken pejorative connotations in the collective mind. Secondly, the proximity of the two concepts could be favored by the fact that both are semantic calques after French words, this favoring their closeness in context.

Following the above definitions, we should remark the fact that they are

[9] Angela Bidu-Vrănceanu, *Lexicul specializat în mişcare de la dicţionare la texte*, Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2007, p. 56.

[10] George Neamţu, *Tratat de asistenţă socială*, Iaşi, Editura Polirom, 2011, p. 511.

[11] Law 448/2008 on the rights of disabled persons.

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restricted, reduced in terms of linguistic economy. They work strictly on the specialized context, addressing a certain type of speaker who has knowledge about the social field. In this sense, the content of terms is restricted to ensure contextual disambiguation. By following definitions we must emphasize that there is no total synonymy of these terms.

What we have to notice, after semantically analyzing these concepts, is that their meanings are intertwined without ever fully overlapping. They are, in point of terminology, in a hierarchical partition relationship. In this relationship, the concept of disability can be considered the whole, and the concepts handicap and deficiency its component parts. This relationship has a meronymic correspondent in semantics, where the integral concept or holonym is considered a superior notion, and the part or meronym is a subordinated notion. The concepts analyzed have a mutual homeomeric relationship, therefore the holonym, namely the disability, has the same nature as the meronyms handicap and deficiency. We can see that by using these terms we aimed at eliminating any ambiguity in specialized communication. Specialists in social care make a distinction between the three concepts, therefore ensuring their mono-conceptual, mono-referential and mono-semantic character, goals of a specialized language.

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*** Legea 448/2008, legea privind protecția și promovarea drepturilor persoanelor cu handicap

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