

REVIEWS

Among the Pyramids

Ernst Müller and Falko Schmieder, *Begriffsgeschichte und historische Semantik: Ein kritisches Kompendium* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016), 1,027 pp.

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About ten years ago, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht pronounced conceptual history dead, buried beneath the “pyramids of the spirit” of its gigantic lexicon projects.¹ Now, Ernst Müller and Falko Schmieder, both of the Berlin Center for Literary and Cultural Research (ZfL), have taken it upon themselves to chart these pyramids and the intellectual landscape in which they were erected. The authors approach their topics as archeologists, tracing the history of the major figures, currents, schools, institutions, and developments of the field of conceptual history and historical semantics. Yet at the same time, their maps are charted with an immediate purpose in mind: providing orientation to travelers in a field of study that—as the authors emphasize—is alive and kicking and immensely fertile (11–12).

In their introduction, the authors sketch their twofold objective to give a historical overview of the development of this field as well as to provide a basis for future interdisciplinary debates and transfers. They differentiate historical semantics as a “superordinate term” for the multitude of methodical approaches addressing linguistic change in the widest sense from the more specific field of conceptual history, which—following Willibald Steinmetz²—they understand to be concerned with “nodal points in the diachronic change of meaning of single words” (18). The first five chapters each trace the genesis of conceptual history and historical semantics within a particular academic field. Their sequence, ranging from philosophy (chapter 1), history, politics, and social sciences (chapter 2), linguistics and literature (chapter 3), and history of science and knowledge (chapter 4) to cultural studies (chapter 5), evokes not only the wide variety of disciplinary contexts in which historical semantics has been developed, but also the temporal succession of its dominant

1. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Dimensionen und Grenzen der Begriffsgeschichte* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2006), 7.

2. Willibald Steinmetz, “Vierzig Jahre Begriffsgeschichte: The State of the Art,” in *Sprache—Kognition—Kultur: Sprache zwischen mentaler Struktur und kultureller Prägung*, ed. Heidrun Kämper and Ludwig M. Eichinger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 174–197.



paradigms. Accordingly, the first chapter opens with its long-term prehistory, starting with the linguistic debates of what would later be called the *Sattelzeit*, and the fifth closes with a discussion of the major challenges and prospects facing future research, highlighting developments in the field of digital humanities, the study of processes of transfer and translation, and the issue of interdisciplinarity. The sixth and final chapter stands somewhat alone, focusing on the institutions, journals, and lexica that have given historical semantics its concrete academic reality.

A review cannot hope to do justice to a work so comprehensive (and voluminous) as this. Instead of enumerating the wealth of topics, debates, and arguments included, it seems more useful to give an impression of the volume's general approach. For this purpose, there could be worse places to start than with the paragraph on Reinhart Koselleck (278–337). In many ways, it can be thought of as the compendium's centerpiece. At almost sixty pages divided into thirteen subparagraphs, it is the longest paragraph. Moreover, others are very often structured with reference to it, pinpointing where the theoretical approach under discussion is a precursor to, influenced by, related to, or even just “similar” to one or the other of Koselleck's theorems. The fact that Koselleck's entry in the index of names refers to almost three hundred individual pages underlines his pivotal importance to the work's approach.

Throughout the compendium, the paragraphs combine the summary and critical discussion of major works, theorems, and arguments with their historical contextualization. In addition, short digressions apply the methods of conceptual history to its own development, tracing the history of prominent theoretical concepts like *mentalité* (241–243) or *figure* (37–39, 440–441) within the field. With reference to Koselleck's work, the authors put particular emphasis on its multiplicity, analyzing the intricate relations between various parts of the *œuvre* as well as its contradictions. More than in other paragraphs, the critical appreciation of Koselleck's work is developed in detailed discussion with the wide-ranging existing literature. In such parts, Müller and Schmieider's own theoretical positions come to the fore most prominently, accepting some critical arguments (306, 311) while rebuking others as “one-sided” (279), “deficient” (294), or even “trivializing” (280). With reference to the famous and influential concept of the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous, to mention just one example, the authors discuss Achim Landwehr's objection that this concept implicitly presupposes a homogenous, universal, and ultimately Eurocentric temporal framework from which all differences are subsequently derived.³ Although the authors appreciate the analytical openness of Landwehr's alternative concept of multiple and equal “contemporaneities,”

3. Achim Landwehr, “Von der ‘Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen,’” *Historische Zeitschrift* 295, no. 1 (2012): 1–34, doi:10.1524/hzhz.2012.0350.

they remain ultimately unconvinced, pointing to the empirical reality of a “pressure to monolithic contemporaneity” (315) in an increasingly entangled world marked by the pressures of global capitalism and power structures.

In their historical contextualization of the developments of historical semantics, the authors emphasize the period of National Socialism both as a caesura and, in its aftermath, a major motivating force in the development of historical semantics. Quoting the ancestral lineage of conceptual history (Erich Rothacker, Werner Jaeger, Johannes Kühn, Carl Schmitt, Walter Schlesinger, Otto Brunner) outlined by Koselleck in his introduction to *Historische Semantik und Begriffsgeschichte* (1978), the authors note the dominant presence of conservative authors implicated in the National Socialist ideology (619–623). In this light, they argue, conceptual history’s strong focus on the birth of the modern era since the Enlightenment may also be taken as an implicit downplaying of the importance of National Socialism as an epochal turning point. Calling attention to a postwar international dictionary project funded by UNESCO, which aimed to clarify the concepts of Western democracy and promote international understanding, the authors point out how its collapse in the face of German reluctance to cooperate makes the specifically German tradition of conceptual history that would emerge from this failure appear as a “German response to the allied imposition to concern themselves with the causes and effects of the political catastrophe after 1933” (137). In terms of academic careers, the field provided many scholars implicated in the former regime with a politically “unburdened research niche, in which one could cultivate old contacts” (853).

If the canon sketched by Koselleck already seems very one-sided at first glance, it is also significant in what it leaves out. There is no mention of any non-German thinkers or influences, nor indeed of any of those alternative traditions in the German-language field that were violently cut off by National Socialist persecution and exile. In view of this, Schmieder and Müller put a special focus on what they call the “other genealogy” (255) of historical semantics. They excavate alternative routes and roads not taken, highlight international transfers, networks, and entanglements, and rediscover key figures that today have largely been forgotten. A case in point is the Jewish historian Richard Koebner (254–268), one of the early founders of historical semantics whose fall into oblivion the authors perceive to be an especially blatant example of the enduring effects of National Socialist exclusionary policies (254). Koebner also provides an example for the ambivalent role of Koselleck as a point of reference. Although there is no evidence for direct influence between the two thinkers, the compendium’s authors believe it is “not improbable” (255) that Koselleck may have known Koebner’s work before its rediscovery in 1990. Still, even as the authors examine Koebner’s work very strongly in terms of its similarity (or dissimilarity) to Koselleck’s, they seem hesitant to

do so, stressing that Koebner, “who made diametrically opposed experiences,” should not be “measured” solely by Koselleck’s standard (254–255, 268).

Without a doubt, this work will be an instant classic—another pyramid, perhaps. In conclusion, we may ask for whom exactly it was written. In calling it a “critical compendium,” the authors evoke several functions at once. As a reference work, it is unparalleled in its comprehensiveness. Its clear-cut structure and two indexes make it easy to use. One can only hope that it will soon be translated into English so that even more readers can profit from the concise and well-written introductions to a wide range of thinkers, methods, and theories. Introductions? Well, yes and no. Although the authors have done their very best to make the material accessible, their topic does not always make for easy reading. Accordingly, the book will be most useful to advanced students and researchers already familiar with at least one of the many sub-fields of historical semantics. To them, this work offers many useful vistas into other areas of research, such that the work may indeed function as a catalyst of the interdisciplinary dialogue its authors deem to be among the field’s major future challenges.

“Working” (on) the Concept of Work

Jörn Leonhard and Willibald Steinmetz, eds., *Semantiken von Arbeit: Diachrone und vergleichende Perspektive* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2016), 413 pp.

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From antiquity to modernity and beyond, the interpretation of *work* has oscillated between ideologies and philosophical systems, being turned and twisted by and through politics, economics, and moral and political religions. Its meanings have evolved from *molestia* (displeasure) to *opus* (work, *œuvre*), from *slavery* to *freedom*, from *Taylorism* to *Stakhanovism* and the *hero of socialist labor*. Nowadays it is generally accepted that work is central in the lives of most people, for it defines status.¹ *Oxford Book of Work* defines work as:

1. Andreas Eckert, “What Is Global Labour History Good For?” in *Work in a Modern Society*, ed. Jürgen Kocka (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 169–182, here 170.