

Proposal for a Special Issue on

Historical Semantics for Labour and Social History. Conceptual and Empirical Insights from the Collaborative Database Project “Grammars of Coercion”

Accepted by the Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichte (ÖZG)

Guest Editors:

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Call for Research Papers

This issue focuses on historical semantics as approach to labour and social history. Historical semantics have long time been primarily understood as linguistic subdiscipline or as a subfield of area studies. It is only in recent years that more and more historians refer to historical semantics as a relevant methodological approach to history. Yet, up to today, no standard definition, no handbook or introductory literature exists on what historical semantics means to historians. Historical semantics, it seems, stands in contrast to a traditional history of concepts. While the history of concepts – both in its German (Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and most importantly Reinhard Koselleck) and in its British (Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School) traditions – is conceived as intellectual history of political thought, historical semantics adheres to a more materialistic and more comprehensive approach to language analysis. Instead of taking ideas and abstract lead terms as a starting point for historical analysis, the semantics approach studies situations of word usage (“Situationen des Wortgebrauchs”, Ludolf Kuchenbuch) as semantic representatives and producers of contextual social taxonomies and power relations. By doing so, this approach owes much to Michel Foucault’s notion of “microphysics of power” and his idea of an “archaeology of knowledge”. Yet, other than in classical discourse analysis, the historical semantics approach calls for a much more radical historical contextualization. The study of social change as a historical anthropology of scripture (“Schriftanthropologie”, Ludolf Kuchenbuch) is understood as a constant searching movement between the onomasiological and the semasiological level of analysis.

This new interest in historical semantics as an approach to social history has met with the rise of digital humanities and its new possibilities of textual analysis and data mining. Here, historical semantics serves as one of the primary battlefields for ongoing debates on the use of computational tools of textual analysis. While supporters of quantitative analyses of digitized mass corpora celebrate the computer’s agnostic way of recognizing semantic patterns and modelling topics, adherents of classical hermeneutic interpretation, in return, warn that the external exploitation of data through computer-based pattern detection must go hand in hand with careful introspection. The computer, by being “semantically speaking blind” (Silke Schwandt) and calculating algorithms, raises the awareness for the blind spots of classical hermeneutic interpretation and points to the patterns we would otherwise have overlooked.

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At the same time, textual data mining risks to create new contortions and blind spots due to programming errors or a naïve trust in technology. Thus, how to combine human and computational reading, how to bring together close and distant reading is one of the main methodological challenges discussed in historical semantics.

The international COST Action network “Worlds of Related Coercions in Work” (WORCK) discusses historical semantics as one of four methodological approaches to the long history of bondage and coercion. While the global history of work and labour relations usually relies on analytical categories belonging to the conceptual world of the modern West (i.e. free vs. unfree, productive vs. unproductive/reproductive work, wage labour vs. unpaid work, etc.), working group 1 (“Grammars of Coercion”) of the WORCK network uses the historical semantics approach as an entry point for the study of historically contextualised social taxonomies and the empirical study of concepts of work and logics of coercion. By creating carefully selected micro-corpora and annotating exemplary source documents from different world regions and time periods, the project not only seeks to develop an ontology (in the digital humanities sense) for the diachronic and transregional study of labour and coercion. It also attempts to find a new analytical language to conceptualize and speak about historical forms of bondage and logics of coercion in a truly global, bottom-up perspective.

The issue suggested for the “Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichte” (ÖZG) is divided in three parts. The first part shows the methodological range of the historical semantics approach stretching from hermeneutic micro-semantics to the critical digitisation of small text collections and to big data and mass digitisation. It also includes a report from the working process and the conceptual discussion in working group 1 of the COST Action WORCK. The second part offers five research papers derived from the collaborative project “Grammars of Coercion”. All research papers present one micro-corpus of the collaborative database project. They are conceptualized as empirical case studies on bondage and coercion, representing each a different time period, world region and type of source. All research papers apply the historical semantics approach to their analysis of historical documents and reflect explicitly on analytical tools and the hermeneutic benefits of computer-based pattern recognition. The third part aims at a meta reflection on the potentials and challenges of the historical semantics approach. It includes an interview on historical semantics as an approach to social history, led by master students of the University of Vienna with Ludolf Kuchenbuch. Finally, the issue concludes with a round table discussion of scholars from classical hermeneutics, from discourse analysis and from digital humanities on the methodological insights and empirical findings of the volume.

The guest editors as well as the research paper contributors of this issue are members of the WORCK network. All research papers will be submitted to an external double blind peer review process. In addition to the feedback of the external reviewers, the research papers will be discussed within the WORCK network in a series of authors’ workshops. Furthermore, the selection of research papers accepted for this issue respects the COST guidelines: the issue shall include contributors from Eastern and Western European academic institutions, young as well as senior scholars, and authors of all sex. All contributions of this issue are published in English and open access, receiving a language editing from the COST Action WORCK.

Preliminary Table of Content

<i>Title / Type of Contribution</i>	<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Pages</i>
Part I: The Historical Semantics Approach. Methods and Tools		
Editorial	Branimir Brgles (HR), Claude Chevalleyre (FR), Juliane Schiel (AT)	3–4 pages 8.000 characters
Historical Semantics. A Vademecum	HiSem Group (DE, CH, AT, FR)	12–15 pages / 25.000–30.000 characters
Historical Semantics. Digital Text Analysis and Data Mining Tools	Tobias Hodel (CH), Silke Schwandt (DE)	12–15 pages / 25.000–30.000 characters
Grammars of Coercion. Report from a Collaborative Database Project of Historical Semantics	Branimir Brgles (HR), Claude Chevalleyre (FR)	12–15 pages / 25.000–30.000 characters
Part II: Grammars of Coercion. Micro-Corpora and Empirical Cases		
Peer-reviewed research paper 1	tbd	25–30 pages / 50.000–60.000 characters
Peer-reviewed research paper 2	tbd	25–30 pages / 50.000–60.000 characters
Peer-reviewed research paper 3	tbd	25–30 pages / 50.000–60.000 characters
Peer-reviewed research paper 4	tbd	25–30 pages / 50.000–60.000 characters
Peer-reviewed research paper 5	tbd	25–30 pages / 50.000–60.000 characters
Part III: Historical Semantics. Potentials and Challenges		
Historical Semantics as an Approach to Social History	Ludolf Kuchenbuch (DE) (interviewed by a group of master students, June 2019 in Vienna)	12–15 pages / 25.000–30.000 characters
Historical Semantics, Digital Humanities and the Prospects of Social and Labour History	tbd	12–15 pages / 25.000–30.000 characters

Time Schedule For Publication

1 October 2020	Deadline for WORCK members to submit a research paper proposal
1 November 2020	Feedback and comments from the guest editors of the special issue
22–24 February 2021	Authors' Workshop (WORCK Meeting 2, Lisbon): <ul style="list-style-type: none">- discussion of first drafts of the methodological papers (Part 1)- discussion of extended paper proposals and annotated exemplary source documents (Part 2)
1–3 September 2021	Authors' Workshop (WORCK Conference 2, Vienna): <ul style="list-style-type: none">- discussion of revised methodological papers (Part 1)- discussion of first drafts of the research papers (Part 2)
1 November 2021	Submission of research papers for external review process
15 January 2022	External reviews sent to the contributors
February 2022	Authors' Workshop (WORCK Meeting 3): <ul style="list-style-type: none">- internal review: discussion of revised research papers (Part 2)
1 June 2022	Submission of final research papers to a professional language editing
Summer 2022	Authors' Workshop (WG 1 Meeting/WORCK Meeting 4): <ul style="list-style-type: none">- round table discussion on the methodological insights and empirical findings of the special issue (Part 3)
1 October 2022	Submission of the manuscript to ÖZG board for editing and print
January 2023	Publication of the issue