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Shifting the meaning through social interaction: a case of noble and its synonyms in Medieval literature

The concept *noble* plays a paramount role in representing the knightly world of the Middle Ages for it is an essential characteristic of courtly life. As the transformations in social life influenced the knightly discourse, the literature caused both: changes in linguistic meaning and social behaviour: “just as medieval history is unexpectedly like romance, so medieval romance is unexpectedly like history” [Schmidt, 1982: 39]. The adjective 'noble' appeared in the English language in 13th century as the key landmark in history of the country and language itself; however, during merely one century its meaning changed dramatically from “superior birth” related to gentry to “having high moral qualities”. The study of the text of *Morte D'Arthur* by Thomas Malory and a number of other sources including corpora of the period shows the gradual blending of various existing meanings and the birth of the new ones due to changing social situation.

The application of linguistic, cognitive and corpus approaches makes it possible to assume that the shift of meaning accounts for the shift in the structure of the concept of knighthood, that is well-represented in the texts of the period and supported by historical accounts.

We grouped all contexts according to the type of nouns combined with *noble*. When the adjective is used with nouns denoting people (*lords, ladies*), it is likely to reveal its primary meaning or is used to point at a set of characteristics which were thought to be indispensable of gentle birth. When we deal with '*noble knights*', the situation becomes more complicated for a man could only become a knight belonging to aristocracy, so his moral qualities are not that easily revealed. In this case, we analyze the nearest context and study the adjectives making up the representation of knightly world e.g. *worthy*. The adj. *noble* shifts in meaning when combined with non-human nouns (*swords, books, deeds*), but what is more important – with abstract nouns such as, *courage*, while the concept is elaborated through extension of the *radial category* (Lakoff). Morphological derivation also sheds light on further conceptual derivation.

The analysis demonstrates that the adj. *noble* is transformed and recategorised in the medieval texts through the abstract conceptualization of nobility and knighthood being gradually complicated and brought to a highly abstract domain of knowledge.

By applying the integrated approach with cognitive taken as the leading one I hope to demonstrate how the semiosis is taking place on the crossroads of culture, society and literature.