Conceptual history
The history of basic concepts

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Introduction

Historians have an issue with language. Most of the accessible information on what happened in the past is derived from written sources. Source criticism was developed to deal with the language of the past. Despite the importance that language has in forming what we might know of the past, historians have in general been quite reluctant to see this as a specific challenge. Until the so-called linguistic turn left its imprint on the discipline in the 1980s, only a few historians had engaged directly with the challenge presented by language. In 1930, Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch introduced a permanent section in their famous journal, *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*, on words and things because of the need to direct the attention of historians to ‘the delicate problem of the history and evolution of the semantics of words’ (Febvre 1930, p. 234). Decades later, the German-Israeli historian Richard Kroebner wrote an insightful article on semantics and historiography, which highlighted the role of words for the study of historical consciousness (Kroebner 1953). But it was only in the 1960s and 1970s that the role of language was forcefully recognised in historical studies and particularly in studies focusing on intellectual history.¹ In 1969, Michel Foucault published his *Archaeology of knowledge*, which presented discourse as a linguistically anchored approach to the study of epistemic changes. The same year, a young Quentin Skinner introduced a new programme for the history of ideas based on how meaning and understanding were formed in constant exchanges of speech acts (Skinner 1988). Foucault and Skinner both dug deep into linguistics in order to privilege the role of language in historical changes.

In 1967, the German historian Reinhart Koselleck introduced conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) as an approach developed to write a lexicon of political and social concepts in modern times (Koselleck 1967). Although *Begriffsgeschichte* had been coined by Hegel in his *Lectures on the philosophy of history* and adopted by the philosophers who, in 1955, established the journal *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* in order to develop building blocks for a future historical dictionary of philosophy (published in thirteen volumes between 1971 and 2007), Koselleck was the first to call for a study of concepts within the discipline of history. While he drew from his engagement with hermeneutics, and was
influenced by Carl Schmitt's work on legal and political theory, he was also strongly inspired by linguistics. This chapter focuses on his encounter with linguistics. First, I will discuss how conceptual history in its linguistic orientation develops in three steps. In the first section, I look at the representational dimension where concepts are anchored in a historical semantics. The second section deals with the question of referentiality and extra-linguistic reality. The third section discusses the contextual aspects of concepts in action. In the third section, I give an example of how key concepts can be studied.

Language

Koselleck's interest in language is founded on the basic premise of historical science – that the interpretation of past events mainly rests on sources in the form of texts. The historian is always confronted with the challenge that whatever the sources refer to in the past is rendered by the art of language. The interest in language was further nourished by the influence of Hans Georg Gadamer's philosophy of hermeneutics. Gadamer succinctly condensed his theory in this statement: 'All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of language' (Gadamer 1975, p. 350). Interpreting past experiences therefore relies on the language of the past. For Gadamer, as well as for Koselleck, this language is constituted by concepts. As Koselleck expressed it, conceptual history is an approach that 'interprets history through its prevailing concepts' (Koselleck 1985a, p. 85). But unlike Gadamer, who never went beyond a general acceptance of the necessary representational character of language, Koselleck took an interest from the beginning in the way language operated in order to represent objects.

The assumption that historians can only understand the past through the medium of the language expressed in the sources is just a first condition. Koselleck also endorsed the claim that language forms the reality of the historical actors. 'Without common concepts there is no society' (Koselleck 1985a, p. 74), as he pointedly remarked. His statement that '[a] concept is not simply indicative of the relations which it covers; it is also a factor within them' (Koselleck, 1985a, p. 84) has become something of a trademark for conceptual history. Before we place Koselleck too solidly in the company of social constructivism (itself a broad umbrella for different approaches as to how language is a 'factor'), it is worth noting that he still upholds the idea that concepts are also determined by what they refer to. But he repeatedly highlighted the formative role of concepts in language. Drawing on inspiration from the first generation of structural semantics, he stressed the link between concepts and words within the language system. He relied on Ogden and Richard's classic linguistic triangle, in which the left leg illustrated the signifying or symbolising mechanism within the language system based on the link between thought and symbol, or, in his own terminology, concepts and world (Ogden & Richard 1923). The right leg indicated the capacity of language to denote or refer to objects or matters of fact (Sache in German) through the relation between the concept and the referent.

Here, I will take a closer look at how Koselleck developed his theory of conceptual history based on the two legs in the linguistic triangle. To guide this journey into the language theories that undergird conceptual history, I rely on Ekkehard Felder's elaboration of the triangle (Felder 2006, p. 15). According to Felder, the legs indicate the two ways of understanding the sign. The first way, which he terms the representational understanding of the sign, corresponds to what, since Saussure, has been called signification. Here signs (or words) relate to a cognitive world of concepts. The second understanding of the sign is referential because signs refer to, or denote, things or matters in the world. To these two
understandings, he adds a third, which points to the effect of speech actions on the sign. Representation and reference are also dependent on the use of the sign in actual speech and on the conventions underlying communication in specific contexts. In the following section, I will consider the linguistic reflections that Koselleck presented in support of his conceptual history, based on these three forms of understanding: representation, reference and action.

Representation

In his programmatic outline for a theory of conceptual history (Koselleck 2011), Koselleck underlines the importance of investigating the relations between concepts and words. In traditional semantics, and even more so in lexicography, representation concerns the meaning of particular words in the lexicon (de Saussure 1969). This semasiological approach was soon joined by an onomasiology that ‘takes its starting-point in a concept, and investigates by which different expressions the concept can be designated or named’ (Geeraerts 2006, p. 37). Koselleck emphasised that conceptual history was anchored in an onomasiological approach, which looked at the way actors had conceptualised their experiences in the past. As he noted, conceptual history ‘must register the variety of names for (identical?) materialities in order to be able to show how concepts are formed’ (Koselleck 1985a, p. 86). He used the word state as an example of the difference between word and concept. As a concept, STATE can include other words such as territory, sovereignty, legislation and administration. The onomasiological approach will open up for a study of the semantic range of the concept state, or – to use Andreas Blank’s elegant formulation – the lexical pathway that concepts take (Blank 2001, p. 7). Koselleck was certainly aware of the complex relations between word and concept. Unlike his predecessors within the historical discipline, who rather directly connected words to things, he emphasised that not only were concepts bound to words, but that a concept was more than a word (Koselleck 1985a, p. 84). Although he did not clearly distinguish between when he was studying the lexical pathways of a concept, and when he was interested in the emergence of a basic concept in a particular historical situation, he was conscious of the mechanism for lexical change. His primary focus was ‘the semantic field’ in which a concept moved. The term ‘field’ was directly borrowed from Jost Trier, who shifted the focus of structural semantics from the paradigmatic relations introduced by Saussure to a larger understanding of how words related to each other characterised ‘a conceptual field’ (Trier 1931). Koselleck used

![Figure 8.1 Ogden and Richard’s linguistic triangle (Ogden & Richard 1923, p. 11)](image-url)
the example of FEDERATION to demonstrate how a semantic field around words such as Bund, Liga, Union and Einigung formed the concept. Koselleck has been criticised for not being terribly precise in his definition of concept. Linguists will certainly accept that concepts are not necessarily tied to a single lexeme. But some clarity of the semantic boundaries between concepts is needed if onomasiological studies are to be conducted.

The fact that Koselleck might have conflated the representational link between words and concepts with a referential understanding of how specific concepts became basic within communication in historical situations does not invalidate his claim that concepts are tied to words and therefore have to be studied in semantics. As a historian, he is mainly interested in studying how concepts partake in historical change. At one level, he is well aware that concepts can have their own rhythm of change, which is not directly aligned to changes occurring in broader social and cultural contexts. Sometimes, he speaks of semantics as having a slower rate of change than the events themselves (Koselleck 1989, p. 657). This observation opens up the possibility for a more systematic study of semantic change.

Within structuralist semantics, there is a long tradition for the study of semantic change. Koselleck mentioned Eugenio Coseriu’s seminal study of structural diachrony of signification (Coseriu 1964). Although Koselleck did not subscribe completely to Coseriu’s structuralist approach to change, he borrowed his view of privileging the concepts and not the signs, and he included semantic fields in his study of how concepts were formed or changed. The acceptance that semantic structures had their own rhythm of change did not lead him to study the mechanism of lexical change in more detail. The conceptual changes he observed were explained by changes of a socio-cultural nature. As Andreas Blank has succinctly pointed out, ‘new concepts emerge when we change the world around us or our way of conceiving it’ (Blank 2013, p. 71). Semantic change, narrowly understood, concerns the particular verbalisation of these new concepts. If we stay within semantics proper, we look at the mechanisms that make changes possible. Among the most effective mechanisms is the broadening or the narrowing of a word, the change from positive to negative, or vice versa, borrowing from foreign languages, and not least, the use of metaphor and metonymy. In the view of many linguists, metaphorisation – ‘using words for the look-alikes of what you mean’ – or metonymisation – ‘using words for the near neighbours of the things you mean’ (Nerlich & Clarke 1992, p. 137) are the most effective operators of semantic change. Of the different semantic mechanisms that lead to concepts, Koselleck only really considered metaphorisation. Köselleck’s interest in the transfer of concepts from one field to another is a step in this direction. So is his sensitivity towards the polysemic or blurry nature of conceptual meaning. He clearly understood that polysemy is at the core of semantic change. When concepts enter new fields and emerge in the shape of new verbalisations, earlier meanings tend to live on. As Traugott states, ‘all semantic change arises by polysemy’ (Traugott 2006, p. 126).

Koselleck studied the emergence and change of an array of concepts. Many studies were undertaken in the monumental work on basic historical concepts in Germany, Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland, which appeared in seven volumes with him as the main editor between 1972 and 1997. He had a particular interest in following the emergence of temporal concepts such as CRISIS, PROGRESS, REVOLUTION, HISTORY and their role in the formation of modern German society. The lexicon covered a broad range of concepts, but tended to focus on those concepts that dominated the political imaginary in the crucial period of transformation towards modernity. As Koselleck pointed out in the introduction to the lexicon, the main assumption behind studying the history of these basic concepts was that the period from
around 1750 to 1850 was marked by the dramatic emergence of the concepts that formed our society. ‘What is posited’, he said, ‘is the emergence of a threshold period (Sattelzeit) in which the past was gradually transformed into the present’ (Koselleck 2011, p. 9).

In his many studies of concepts, he was certainly aware of tracing out the different semantic paths that a concept would take on its way to becoming an important modern concept. By following the verbalisations in different national languages, and the borrowings that took place, he was able to observe important conceptual transfers. When studying the concept of CRISIS, he noticed that it transferred from religion and medicine into first the psychological and then the political and economic sphere (Koselleck 2006a, p. 362). In his study of REVOLUTION, he underlined the role of metaphorisation as the concept moved from a naturalistic universe and to denote political events (Koselleck 1985b,). He might not have examined these transfers in all their semantic complexity, but they are precisely at the core of conceptual history. His typology of concepts entails quite a number of ordering principles in the form of ‘totalising concepts’, ‘distributional concepts’, ‘supraconcepts’ and ‘counterconcepts’, but they are not related to the traditional semantic taxonomy with their synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, hyperonyms, and so on. Koselleck did not conduct any systematic studies of the paradigmatic relation, and he hardly gave any thought to the syntagmatic relations through which language operates.

The challenge of developing a more systematic approach to semantic relations in conceptual history was taken up by the historian Rolf Reichardt, who, together with Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, edited a Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1820. Reichardt worked out a method to describe what he called semantic nets in small text corpora.5 He was particularly interested in locating the central concepts in these nets. To do this, he examined the collocations as they appeared in syntagmatic relations and also looked at the paradigmatic link between the search word and other words to determine those words that could function as a ‘switch’ between different semantic fields. He also included frequency to determine the centrality of a concept. Although he did not draw on corpus linguistics, he came close to using what has later been termed KWIC (key words in context).6 The lack of digitalised corpora did, however, severely limit the scope of the analysis.

Reference

Within semantics, the referential or denotational dimension of language has typically been treated as independent from the internal language system. It is generally accepted that denotation is not simply the answer to a philosophical question of how to deal with reality, but also a formal question of understanding the relationship between representation and what is represented. Here, I will rely on Felder’s view that referentiality concerns the ways in which non-linguistic objects and matters are expressed linguistically in specific situations of utterance.7 Koselleck repeatedly insisted on the importance of the non-linguistic or the world in conceptual history. He sometimes referred to the relation between the world and language as ambiguous:

Language is and remains ambiguous: on one hand, it registers […] what happens outside itself; it states what pushes itself onto […] the world, that is, as the latter presents itself pre- and extralinguistically. On the other hand, language actively transforms all extralinguistic objects and facts.

(Koselleck 2006b, p. 6, my translation)
Language is thus not only a factor, it is also ‘indicative’. Gadamer had insisted that there is no point of view outside the experience of the world in language (Gadamer 1975, p. 410). Koselleck critically replied that ‘experience goes much beyond its linguistic interpretation’ (Sebastián & Fuentes 2006, p. 125). He even saw the ambiguity of language as a tension between representation and world: ‘There exists between concept and materiality a tension which now is transcended, now breaks out afresh, now appears insoluble’ (Koselleck 1985a, p. 85) The analysis of this tension is at the core of conceptual history.

Koselleck moves rather hastily from pointing to the referential function of language (where language ‘registers’) to granting the world its own being, omitting any mentioning of the formal features of referentiality within language. He furthermore opens a Pandora’s box of complex ontological questions by granting the world a being-in-itself independent of language. Critics have claimed that by overstressing the indicative role of language, he risks facing ‘the danger of a realistic ontology’ (Bödeker 1998, p. 60). As I see it, whether this claim is dangerous or not depends on how the world in itself is understood. Through the influence of existential phenomenology, he posits human experience as the basic point of orientation. Experiences are formed by concepts, but they are also structured by universal or metahistorical categories that make social life possible. Temporality or being-in-time is one of these categories. As long as language is seen as referring to object or matters, and not simply mirroring the world, there is no risk of any strong realism.

Koselleck always insisted that conceptual history had to be paired with a social history. He opened his most programmatic text on conceptual history by first stating that politics and even social life as such would be unimaginable without common concepts, but then added that ‘concepts are founded in socio-political systems that are far more complex than would be indicated by treating them simply as linguistic communities organized around specific key concepts’ (Koselleck 1985a, p. 76). These systems were to be studied by a social history, which would unveil the social structures of the common space of experience. Although a social history would need a conceptual history to ‘unlock’ the language of the past in order to access the structures, it also contained its own method oriented towards the study of ‘extra-linguistic series of events’ (Koselleck 1998, p. 33). At first glance, this division of labour between conceptual history and social history seems reasonable. But it begs the question of how the latter can circumvent the linguistic nature of the historical sources. While social facts can be used to demonstrate social structures, they have to be interpreted mostly from written sources.

Koselleck uses the division between concept and world as the basis for understanding historical change. From a theoretical point of view, both language and society have their own systems or structures. Structures are not simply abstract ordering principles: they also express themselves in the constant repetition of human activity. Koselleck makes use of the well-known distinction between structure and event to emphasise that every expression is a unique event, which, when repeated, manifests a structure. Language has its own semantic system, which is expressed through utterances. Society is permeated by a multitude of daily actions whose constant repetition reveals the social structures. Since historians see structures in a temporal perspective, they prefer to talk about duration and change. Koselleck focused on durations and temporal layers. Within language, these layers were represented by the duration of the various concepts. Some concepts had entered the language a long time ago and were deeply layered in the vocabulary; others were of more recent provenance. But the main point is that conceptual history as a method allows us to study the ways linguistic events are ‘semantically preprogrammed’ (Koselleck 1989, p. 685).
The nature of historical analysis is also, however, to explain historical change. Linguistic events cannot be reduced to individual speech acts. Conceptual history has to explain semantic changes. The first step in explaining semantic change is to bring forward the asymmetry between changes in language and changes in the world. Koselleck expresses this asymmetry in a remarkable way: ‘The transformation of words and the transformation of things, the change of situation and the urge to rename, correspond diversely to each other’ (Koselleck 1985a, p. 85). The asymmetry lays out a matrix of change. The world might be changing rapidly without the concepts following. But the existence of semantic structures will certainly also determine what might occur in the future. Our horizons of expectations – to take a term Koselleck used to understand the future-orientated behaviour of all human existence – are grounded in existing concepts. Our plans for the future are formed by concepts of the past. Logically, as pointed out by Heiner Schulz, the asymmetries could be reduced to four modes (Schultz 1978, pp. 65–67). The first mode would characterise all situations where the reference of a concept would stay unaltered. A good number of trivial examples could be mentioned. The referent of HORSE has probably not changed much over the centuries. It does not make much sense, however, to claim that abstract concepts referring to political life have stayed unchanged. The second mode describes situations where the world changes without concepts following. Life is full of situations in which human beings encounter objects or matters they unsuccessfully try to understand using existing concepts. Sometimes, they have to recognise that there are things they cannot conceptualise. Koselleck gives the example of how the Soviet communists used the concept of fascism after 1945 to fit Western capitalism into their ideology of progress in an effort to deny that the world had changed. In the third mode, we find situations where a new concept is introduced without any worldly changes ‘calling’ for it. The concept somehow belongs to an imaginary, which is unfounded in the context. Koselleck mentions REVOLUTION, which became a concept for constitutive but peaceful political change in the latter half of the eighteenth century. But in the French Revolution, the concept was used to describe the kind of violent events that had previously been described as CIVIL WAR. The fourth mode points to situations where a concept follows its own path independently of what happens in the world. This mode is the most difficult to grasp in Koselleck’s matrix of change. He takes the example of STATE, which – in German – changes the concept of STAND (estate) into a unifying and totalising entity. It becomes what he calls ‘a collective singular’, which is introduced to capture the direction of the future (just like HISTORY, CIVILISATION, or PROGRESS). STATE is therefore a concept for something that does not exist yet. Because it is out of sync with the world, it is contested. However, the problem with this mode is that the conceptual changes mentioned (from STAND to STATE) are not completely independent of how the political system develops. It would probably be more correct to say that STATE as a new concept only affects the world slowly and therefore does not have a clear reference, or that there is a difference between how the concept evolves and how it intersects with political life.

With his matrix of change, Koselleck demonstrates that the relations between concepts and the world are complex. Even if concepts are to be understood as factors in social life, they do not control the world. The dynamics of historical change are produced by a constant tension between what is semantically manageable and what is not. The latter depends on what happens in the world. What is missing in Koselleck’s matrix is, however, the innovative force of language itself, as well as of the language users, who in their dialogue with the world, invent new concepts. There is an evident risk that if the two legs of the linguistic triangle (representation and reference) are separated, his theory breaks apart. Conceptual
history is first and foremost a history of how conceptual changes take shape through semantic changes that were produced in a dialogue with the world.

**Action and context**

Referentiality is the dimension through which language is orientated towards the world. Although it is a formal element within the language system, it is also an element in language use. Our words are used to communicate messages about objects or matters. Communication has a purpose. Precisely what the purpose might be depends on our intentions, as well as on the situation in which we speak. The latter I will call the context. This term is purely analytical and must not be conflated with world. Context is what orientates language users when they communicate. Language users address their communication to an audience and have knowledge of the context in which communication takes place. But the context is also what sets the rule of communication. These might be the various media or genres; they can be existing conventions or institutions. Communication is thus dependent on a particular context. To understand how concepts have changed in history, we therefore need to reconstruct the processes of communication in which concepts were used and transmitted. This involves reconstructing the contexts that informed and restrained communication. Koselleck is certainly aware of this. As he states: ‘Intellectual or material meanings are indeed bound to the word, but they feed off the intended content, the written or spoken context, and the historical situation’ (Koselleck 1985a, p. 85). ‘The intended content’ is what the speaker or writer wants to achieve when communicating. The intention is dependent on contexts. Obviously, there may be many reasons for communicating, one of which could be to invent new concepts and words. The example of the American engineer who constructed the torpedo and invented the word is well known. As a historian, Koselleck is careful when reconstructing contexts. They might be linguistic contexts, that is, the semantics and the discourses available, or they could be an institutional framework. The only problem, as I see it, is that due to his alignment with social history, he tends to turn contexts into a world of their own. His contextualism is thus hampered by a realist approach that actually tends to disclose the contextualist features, which inform the text.

Koselleck underlined the importance of studying the use of concepts in communication. He emphasised the need to examine who used concepts, who the addressees were, and how concepts were used by the communicating subject. He stressed the fundamental role of studying language use: ‘The record of how their uses were subsequently maintained, altered or transformed may properly be called the history of concepts’ (Koselleck 1998, p. 62–63). To underline the importance of language use, he distinguished between semantics and pragmatics within conceptual history. Semantics concerned the structures of meaning, whereas pragmatics was about ‘what, where, why somebody says something’ (Koselleck 2003, p. 14). He used the distinction to differentiate between the semantic reservoir available for the actors and the particular choices made by specific actors in political or intellectual controversies. In his reference to pragmatics, he sometimes refers to the approach developed by the so-called Cambridge School, and in particular, Quentin Skinner. But he does not include speech act theory in his theoretical reflections – as Skinner did – and nor does he agree with Skinner’s main theoretical argument that conceptual changes can only be observed in language use.

Koselleck never grounded his use of pragmatics in any strong, theoretical reflections. Within linguistics, there has been a long discussion on how to draw the borders between semantics and pragmatics. A narrow definition restricts pragmatics to those relations
between language and context that are encoded in the structure of language (Levinson 1983, p. 9). These would typically be features such as deixis, presuppositions and speech acts. But a broader definition would also include conversational implicatures and capture the differences between the literal meaning of an utterance and what the speaker means to say. In speaking of pragmatics, Koselleck avoids the use of linguistic terminology. But he is aware of the formal linguistic features through which communication operates. At one point he speaks of how ‘reified units of actions’ such as states, churches, classes or parties act through linguistic patterns of identification (Koselleck 1998). In a study on how counterconcepts are used to exclude others from a concept with universalising potentials, he examines how the pronoun *we* plays a strategic role. The most remarkable influence from pragmatics within conceptual history is, however, to be found in the understanding of how concepts formed part of political and social struggles. Koselleck speaks of concepts ‘consciously developed as weapons’ (*Kampfbegriffe*) in political struggles (Koselleck 1985a, p. 78). Not only are concepts introduced by political actors to change a political situation, they can also become objects that actors will struggle for. Let us take the concept of human rights as an example. In one way, the concept is introduced in a struggle against a hierarchically organised society. In another, it is controversial and will be fought over. It is thus formative as well as being itself formed by action. As Hans-Erich Bödeker, a leading conceptual historian, has constantly reminded us, concepts do not act by themselves, they are invoked by actors in particular situations (Bödeker 2011, p. 34). The history of concepts is therefore also a history of what actors do with concepts.

Due to his intuitive understanding of the pragmatic dimension, Koselleck could point out different functions that concepts could have in historical change. He persistently lists these functions. Among the more general, we find concepts of movement, concepts of time, concepts of expectation, concepts of the future, concepts of action, intentional concepts and not least basic concepts (to which we shall return in a moment). He kept refining this list, albeit without developing a clear system. But more importantly, the functions that the different concepts were set to perform were related to a grand social change that began around 1750. What took shape was modernity (*die Neuzeit*), which marked a radical break with the existing space of experience and the introduction of our modern political and social concepts. According to Koselleck, four major processes incorporated the new experiences and laid out the patterns for the use of political and social concepts. The first was a process of democratisation, which dramatically broadened the use of political language; the second process indicated a temporalisation of concepts in order to capture the growing expectations about the future. The third process was characterised by the insertion of concepts into ideologies, where they acquired strong universalising potentials in the form of collective singulars. The fourth process, finally, was an increasing politicisation of concepts, during which, they became attuned to political conflict. By outlining these processes, Koselleck was able to place the different uses of concepts in a larger sociological perspective, which could be said to underline major patterns of speech action.

Conceptual history can no doubt be developed further in the direction of pragmatics. There are certainly advantages to be gained by taking a more formal look at speech actions as done by Quentin Skinner, at the manifestation of subject positions in line with discourse analysis, at speaker positions as they manifest themselves in the semantic designators, or in the strategic use of deictic references, and at the conventions and rules embedding political communication as practised by Willibald Steinmetz and his colleagues.
Basic concepts and politics

The goal of conceptual history is to study the changes of basic concepts in the political and social lexicon. Koselleck limited his study of historical semantics to what he termed basic concepts. In order to properly understand his theory and method, we need to take a closer look at his use of the term. Basic concepts do not only belong to the domain of representation. To grasp the full range of the term, we have to include the two other dimensions of language we have scrutinised. If basic concepts are simply seen as concepts within the representational understanding of meaning, they hardly make sense (as many linguists have critically remarked). As all concepts, basic concepts too are linked to words, but this link does not make them basic. Koselleck makes a careful distinction between word and concept: ‘In terms of our method, a word becomes a concept when a single word is needed that contains – and is indispensable for articulating – the full range of meanings derived from a given sociopolitical context’ (Koselleck 2001, p. 19). Obviously, the formulation only makes sense if the term ‘concept’ as used here is understood as ‘basic concept’. Consequently, a word can become the label for a basic concept, which includes a range of meaning in a particular context. Basic concepts are not only the result of activities in a particular context, they also ‘condense’ an entirety of experience in the context, to use another formulation by Koselleck (1985a, p. 85). This ‘condensation’ is a way of saying that basic concepts are made into headers in order to influence or even control a situation. If we take basic concepts in politics (itself a basic concept), they appear and are used to influence and frame events. Condensation works through the ability of a word to label a concept of a rather general or abstract nature. The word *state* labels the concept STATE, which contains a range of meaning. This polysemy is thus an inherent part of a basic concept. But basic concepts are precisely also basic in the sense that they ‘become indispensable to any formulation of the most urgent issues of a given time’ (Koselleck 1996, p. 64). It is up to the conceptual historian to demonstrate how concepts become basic by being ‘an inescapable, irreplaceable part of the political and social vocabulary’ (*ibidem*). To do this, we need the long-term perspective of the historian. In the Lexicon, Koselleck and his co-editors chose those political and social concepts that they saw as irreplaceable in our modern society. The basic concepts studied in the Lexicon, in their view, made up the conceptual architecture of modern politics and modern social life. The general nature of basic concepts also made them controversial and contested. By their nature, they contained a political dimension in the sense that they would always generate debate or conflict. In a larger perspective, they might become conventionalised, or part of a dominant discourse, but they would still be subject to different interpretations and play the role of empty or floating signifiers, to borrow a terminology from Ernesto Laclau.

The pivotal role of basic concepts can be seen as central to efforts for ordering and managing society. Basic concepts are carriers of discourses framing social and political expectations. Koselleck’s understanding of basic concepts bears resemblances to Raymond Williams’ famous work on keywords. Williams studied the changing experiences following modernisation through the changing meaning of a number of keywords that were able to ‘bind’ meanings together and ‘indicate’ important thoughts (Williams 1976, p. 15). He had a particular eye to those situations in which keywords were at the centre of conflicts of values. While drawing less on semantic theory in his studies of keywords, Williams still placed his work within historical semantics. In the lexicon project, Koselleck and his colleagues precisely undertook a study of key concepts in the sense that they were factors in the emergence of our modern society. They followed the semantic forms in which concepts were verbalised and pointed out the context in which they became central or even inescapable.
Conclusion

Although linguists working within the field of historical semantics have shown some interest in conceptual history, the relations between linguistics and conceptual history are weak. Conceptual history is not mentioned in standard encyclopedia of linguistics. There have been closer ties to discourse analysis. Koselleck mentions the role of the discursive context in which concepts move. Foucault points to the role of the conceptual architecture in the formation of discourses. In France, in particular through the works of Jacques Guilhaumou, conceptual history has thrived in an encounter with discourse analysis (Ifversen 2009). Guilhaumou combined the analysis of relations and position within discourses with the semantics at use in designations of symbolic positions such as people, aristocracy, nation and revolutionaries. Scholars working within Critical Discourse Analysis have made use of conceptual analysis to demonstrate how policy discourses are being framed through the semantic relations of key concepts (Krzyżanowski & Wodak 2011). In a similar vein, studies of political ideology have focused on the role of conceptual morphologies in forming and changing ideology (Freeden 1996). Scholars drawing on the Cambridge School have been engaged in discussions with conceptual historians on how to include language use, and more specifically rhetoric in the analysis of conceptual change (Palonen 2014). In more recent years, conceptual history has been strongly inspired by methods from corpus linguistics, not least in dealing with digitalised corpora. It is expected that this new encounter with linguistics – hosted within the umbrella of digital humanities – will increase the interest for studying conceptual changes.

Conceptual history is to be understood as a historical investigation of those semantic, referential and contextual conditions in which basic concepts were formed. The approach follows the long diachronic lines that concepts will take on their way to becoming basic concepts. Concepts develop through semantic changes. The meaning of words is changed, new words appear and words go out of use. Through the investigation of conceptual changes, the focus is on the durations and rhythms of concepts. When looked at synchronically, the different rhythms are perceived by the historian as different time layers forming the experiences of past actors. The study of semantic changes is only the first dimension in conceptual history. The work on historical semantics is followed by a study of the dynamic relation between concept and world. The second dimension of conceptual history examines this relation as it is played out linguistically in what the concepts refer to. Sometimes, concepts directly form the world. At other times, things happen that need conceptualisation. But in order to identify basic concepts, conceptual history draws in a third dimension, which allows it to follow what actors do with concepts when they communicate with each other in particular situations. Only the study of how concepts are formed in language use and influenced by specific contexts will fulfil the requirements for a history of basic concepts.

Notes

1 In line with the programmatic statement of Lucien Febvre, some French historians also called for a closer engagement with semantics or lexicography, notably Louis Girard (1963) and Alphonse Dupront (1969).
2 For an overview of the different intellectual inspirations that formed Koselleck’s conceptual history, see Richter (1995) and Olsen (2012).
3 I have followed the conventions within the study of semantics and write the lexemes in italics and the concepts in capital letters.
4 Schäfer (2012).
5 Reichardt developed his method in a number of articles (see Reichardt 1985).
6 According to the corpus linguist Paul Baker, keyness is simply defined through relative frequency: ‘any word is potentially to be key if it occurs frequently enough when compared to a reference corpus’ (Baker 2004, p. 347).
7 John Lyons prefers to distinguish between denotation, which is utterance-independent and thus part of the systemic meaning, and reference, which is utterance-dependent and therefore part of a speech act (Lyons 1995, p. 79).
8 The distinction was used as the subtitle for one of his books, published after his death, Begriffsgeschichten: Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache.
9 The role of designators has been studied extensively by what I have called the French school of conceptual history, and in particular by the linguist and historian Jacques Guilhaumou (see Ifversen 2009).
10 Steinmetz 2012, p. 89.

References
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