

## Original Papers

*Polish Psychological Bulletin*  
 2009, vol. 40 (4), 78-87  
 DOI – 10.2478/s10059-009-0018-y

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### Semantic Field Analysis in the Study of Parent-Child Relationships<sup>1</sup>

*This article discusses the applicability of semantic field analysis to the study of development and change in important interpersonal relations on the example of parent-child relationships. The narrative material was compiled from responses of 348 teenagers and young adults aged 13-30 years. Participants wrote about their parents (“Tell me about your parents”). On the basis of the context, semantic fields were generated for the high-incidence phrase “to love one’s parents”, which is the primary model of conceptualizing the parent-child relationship in our culture. The results demonstrate the material complexity of the „love for parents” semantic field in the study group, and reveal the associative network of other semantic relations involving this concept. They also confirm the hypotheses on subtle developmental changes in the understanding of “love for parents” between early adolescence and adulthood. The study presents the application of methods based on linguistic analysis of language to the analysis of developmental changes in important personal relationships.*

**Key words:** narrative, linguistic analysis, semantic field analysis, development, changes in personal relationships

#### Introduction

Few interpersonal relationships are of comparable importance to individual development as relations between children and parents. At the same time, there are not many issues of greater theoretical significance in psychology. The concept of the vital role of child-parent relationships is one of the fundamental contributions of psychology, not only to science, but also to popular thought: human behaviour, educational practice and cultural traditions. It is a basic premise found across a number of different theoretical paradigms. It tends to be evoked by researchers from the psychodynamic school (Kohut, 2000; Mitchell, 1988; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975), as well as representatives of attachment theory (Hazan, Shaver, 1994) and proponents of the social, interactive, and cognitive approaches to development (Tomasello 1994; Kegan, 1982; Dryll, 2001).

Such great theoretical and practical significance of child-parent relationships is due to their unique nature. The relationship with parents is our first, and, initially, the only social relation, the source of the first preverbal and linguistic experiences, and of our identity (McAdams, 2003). While classic research focused on the importance

of the bond with parents in infancy and adulthood, recent authors emphasize the role of these relationships across the life span (Labouvie-Vief 1995). Their defining features are stability and inalienability. Once you become a parent, you are the parent of your child for the rest of your life. Although this relationship is permanent, it is also subject to change: not only is it not the same over the course of one’s life, it undergoes constant development. And the transition from childhood to adulthood does not mark the end of this process. Relationships with parents remain dynamic for adolescents and grownups. The most profound changes occur in adolescence (Erikson, 1968). They are associated with the restructuring of the entire self-image and world-image. Later in life, both the events related to parents (such as their aging or health problems), and the experiences of adult children (e.g. becoming parents themselves), result in further reinterpretations (Noam, 1988). Thus, any change related to such a close personal relationship is, by definition, complex, occurring on multiple levels, and difficult to examine. Especially since the core issue here is less the individual’s behavioral layer, and more the whole network of meanings surrounding the relationship. Meanings determine actions. And the universal character of interpersonal relationships is determined by their

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<sup>1</sup> The study was supported from the Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw, BST 125027/2007.

being rooted in language, in the universe of symbols and meanings. This is why language appears to be the most important channel allowing us to analyze the subtlest of relationship changes.

According to Benveniste (1971) and other structural linguists (e.g. Grice, 1975; cf. Kurcz, 1983), meanings are constituted by the contexts in which elements of language are used. The same must be true of terms used to describe mutual relations between parents and children. In the process of recognizing a certain opposition between the two terms, we implicitly learn the basic form of their relationship, which in today's culture is, among others, mutual (though not identical) love. Parents "love" their children, and children "love" their parents.

In the light of the above model of meaning construction, it seems that the analysis of subtle, individual shades of the way we understand the expression "I love my parents" can and should be based on the context of its usage. This context is determined by the entire structure of the statement of which the analyzed expression is part. In particular, research on meanings and changes of meanings of key words in a language lends itself nicely to the methods of narrative analysis. A wide variety of these methods have gained in popularity and recognition among psychologists (Bruner, 1990, 1991; Atkinson, 1995). A number of them involve collecting free narratives of subjects triggered by a particular verbal stimulus (Pennebaker, King, 1999). The narratives can be autobiographical (Gurba, 2001), concerned with family or close and significant relationships. This method of collecting material makes it possible to reveal subjects' personal networks of meanings and the way in which they construct their understanding of the world and relationships (Dryll, 2008). By analysing a narrative, i.e. a linguistic product, we are able to draw on the methods of analyzing the language of utterances and use some elements of linguistic analysis. Linguistic analysis allows us to fully appreciate and reveal semantic spaces, and, consequently, individual changes and between-group differences in understanding common categories. This idea is intuitively shared by many clinicians, who emphasize the fact that important psychological information can be discovered not only in what people say, but primarily in how they talk about matters considered universal (Bandler, Grinder, & Satir, 1976; White & Epston, 1990).

One of the techniques of uncovering semantic subtleties in people's narratives is the procedure of generating semantic fields of selected words based on text corpora. Such analysis takes into account key words selected for a given subject. An example would be the semantic field of the term „mother”, “father”, “child”, “love”, etc. in the narratives of a given group of people, e.g., school-children or young mothers. Instead of analyzing the entire lexical semantic network of a given word across the entire language, the focus is on the network emerging from the texts of a specific group of people, or even an

individual. This network can then be compared with others, e.g. the meaning of the word “love” in younger and older subjects, but also of the word “democracy” in corpora extracted from different newspapers, or “authority” in earlier and later utterances of a politician (Pennebaker, Mehl, Niederhoffer 2002). According to the classic technique described by Robin (1980), the semantic field of a word is defined as the sum of the contexts in which it appears in a given collection of texts and the sum of its relations with other linguistic elements (cf. Tomasello, 2003). These are relations of synonymy, antonymy, association, and opposition. They form a network of meanings whose explication, based on the text, reveals how a given subject or subjects understands a given aspect of reality. Another great advantage of this method is that the language of a narrative tends to reveal certain meanings and transformations that are not always readily accessible to the speaker himself, and which he/she would not be able to recount if asked directly.

This paper presents the semantic field analysis of the expression „I love” used in the context of parent-child relationships. „I love” was selected as the key expression, as it refers to fundamental issues and regulates many aspects of a relationship. Regardless of age, people say and write that they “love their parents”, often using the expression to conclude their stories. At the same time, since the relationship is subject to change, so is the meaning of this “love.” It becomes, as it were, a lens bringing into focus the picture of parent-child interactions.

The analysis involved 348 stories about parents written for the purpose of the present study by adolescents and young adults aged 13-30 years. The narrative stimulus was open-ended: “Tell me about your parents” and contained no suggestions as to the content. Another argument in favour of the key expression was that it was used spontaneously, often featuring in prominent points in the narratives (such as the first or last sentence). I was interested in analyzing both the semantic field of the word „to love” used with reference to parents and the subtle semantic differences in its usage by groups of older and younger participants. On the basis of existing approaches to transformations in parent-child relationships in adolescence (Labouvie-Vief 1995), we can expect to find the following differences in the semantics of the expression „I love”:

- gradually increasing complexity of the field's content
- enhanced reflection (usage in complex sentences containing additional information besides a simple „I love them”),
- changes of perspective – abandonment of an egocentric outlook (reflected by “noticing” one's own symptoms of love and ways of expressing it)
- and finally, that the content of the semantic field itself will reflect a new model of relationship formation between adolescent and adult children and their parents. (Fitzgerald, 2003).

## Methods

### Participants and Procedure

There were 348 participants from 13 to 30 years of age in the study. The first group was composed of students of Warsaw junior high schools (125 participants), the second of students of Warsaw's high schools (120 participants), and the last one of students of the Faculty of Philology at the University of Warsaw (103 participants). The total sample ( $N = 348$ ) included 110 males (31.6%) and 238 females (68.4%).

The study was conducted at schools and at the university. Participants received specially prepared sheets of paper to write a free response triggered by the narrative stimulus: "Tell me about your parents...", after which they completed a form asking for basic demographic information. There was no interference or direction from the investigator, who responded to questions such as "what should we mention" by asking participants to write as they wished and whatever they wanted to write about. The 348 narratives obtained in this way were then converted into computer files and used as material for linguistic and narrative analyses.

Part of the present analysis was done using CAQDA (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis) software with qualitative data analysis support, namely Atlas.ti (Atlas.ti 2008). Among other things, this utility offers precise extraction of words and sentences containing a selected phrase from the text, and calculation of incidence rates of words and sentences. For more information on the use of analysis support tools, see Konecki (2000), Bieliński, Iwińska, and Rosińska-Kordasiewicz (2007).

### The Process of Semantic Field Generation

In the present article, a semantic field is defined as the set of all attributes (regardless of grammatical category) which co-occur with the phrase „I love my parents” to make up its semantic network. It is the sum of meanings combined to form the representation of reality as experienced and described by participants, with all possible variety. Due to practical limitations (constructing a semantic field based on 348 narratives is a meticulous task), only those attributes that co-occurred in the same sentence with the analyzed expression were used.

The process of creating a semantic field was as follows:

- 1) Identification of all sentences containing the expression "I love" used with reference to parents; "I love my parents" in the simplest cases, but often much more complex structures. They permeated the analyzed narratives: 51% of all texts contained at least one such sentence.
- 2) For the purposes of the analysis, all those sentences were extracted from the narratives and collected in a separate text file (delinearisation).

- 3) The next step was to apply the procedure of semantic field analysis modelled on traditional techniques, in this case the classic method described by Robin (1980), modified slightly to include linguistic elements (some aspects of conjunction analysis, cf. Wajszczuk 1997). This was necessary, since the word "to love" as a verb appears in different syntactic relations than nouns (typically selected as keywords for analysis). The procedure itself involved identifying all expressions co-occurring in the same sentence with the phrase "... (I) love (my) parents (them)..." in accordance with their meanings (semantics).
- 4) As proposed by Robin (1980), the following semantic categories were identified:
  - a) Associations – phrases which co-occurred with "loving one's parents" by conjunction, often with the conjunction "and": "I love and ...",
  - b) "Symptoms", which covers the ways love manifests itself or is expressed,
  - c) Justifications, referring to the type of answer to the question "why do I love them?", often coinciding with conjunctions "I love them because" and the phrase "I love them for (*sth*)",
  - d) "Objections", involving conjunctions "I love them but, even though, despite, although" and introducing information depicting the boundary conditions of love (I love them, but there are some things I cannot forgive them), modifying the love itself, or the circumstances that love has to overcome.
- 5) The last stage was to divide expressions with similar meanings into groups, which made it possible to capture and interpret their similar meanings.

A group of such meanings together forms the semantic field of the expression "I love my parents." In addition, for the analysis to be complete, i.e. to account for every word in the set of sentences under investigation, it was necessary to include two more analytical categories. The first was "modifiers", i.e., words (often adverbs, e.g. "very much") that modify or intensify the meaning of the expression „I love." (Some of them are metatextual, e.g. "I truly love..."). The second category grouped purely metatextual sentences and phrases (cf. Wierzbicka, 1971), which, rather than refer to „loving one's parents", comment on the fact that loving was the subject.

## Results

Approximately 51% of analyzed narratives contained one or more sentences with the word „love" used with reference to parents. In all, 264 such sentences were analyzed. There were no significant differences in the incidence of sentences referring to love between the three groups in the study ( $F_{2,345} = 0,593$ , ns), which means that younger and older participants wrote about loving their parents with

Table 1. Semantic field – Associations

To love (one's parents):	Examples:	Suggested interpretation
Associations: "To love and ..."	– and they love me too	Associated with reciprocating
	– I know that so do they	
	– I have no doubt that they love me and my brothers	
	– I know that they love me too	
	– and respect	Associated with ascribing positive attributes and high esteem
	– and value	
	– and admire	
	– and think they are the best [parents] in the world	
	– They are nice and great	
	– and I need them	Associated with needing.
	– and I cannot imagine my life without them	
	– I go to them with all my problems,	
	– and I could not live without them	
	– and I could not overcome the difficulties I encounter if it wasn't for them	Associated with liking
	– I like talking with them	
	– and like	
	– I feel attached	Associated with emotional attachment
	– and feel a strong emotional bond	
	– And miss	
	– and feel attached	Associated with familiarity
– Each year I get to know them better		
– I know their faults, I fight with them		
– They are not without their faults		
– And I want them to live forever!!!!!!!	Associated with denying their mortality	
– I am terrified by the thought of losing them		
– I have not yet thought about the time when... no! I shut out this thought completely!		
– and I am grateful x 2	Associated with gratitude	
– These are the two most important people	Associated with ascribing importance	
– They are important		
– They are the most important		
– And I want us to be a happy family	Associated with wishing for happiness	
– and they love each other too	Associated with love between parents	
– and I only blame them for a few things.	To love and to limit the things parents can be blamed for	

equal frequency. However, further analysis demonstrated that the context and manner of describing that love was different for the older and younger age groups.

Table 1 shows examples of phrases belonging to the first semantic category, namely that of associations. Some of these expressions were actually used in the very same form in multiple narratives. The semantic categories distinguished in the course of analysis are shown individually, each with suggested psychological interpretation.

The list of associations is long and heterogeneous. Not all of them are mentioned here. Some appeared repeatedly or in a number of similar variations. Overall, there were as many as 60 associations in the group. Out of that number, 19 came from the junior high school group, 13 from the high school

group, and 28 from the university group. The high rate of expressions in the university students group (over twice as many as in the high school group) is the first of many indicators that, in terms of content, the semantic field was the richest in the oldest group. The most popular subcategory in associations was the one related to ascribing positive attributes, respect and esteem. This subcategory, combining, or perhaps supplementing "love" with respect and holding the "object of love" in high esteem, was contributed to the semantic field primarily by university students. One possible interpretation of this association in the oldest group is the fact that unlike love, which is, as it were, a "natural" feeling, respecting someone and holding them in high esteem reflects a more mature, conscious evaluation. It is what grown-up

Table 2. Semantic field – Symptoms

To love (one's parents):	Examples:	Suggested interpretation
Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– And if I live far away, I will always be thinking of them and I will enjoy visiting them</li> <li>– And I will not turn away</li> <li>– I am always going to make sure I show them how much I love them and how important they are</li> <li>– I hope they can feel that I love them and know how important they are to me</li> <li>– and I know that they can feel how much I love them.</li> <li>– and I hope that our relations will keep improving</li> <li>– And I would sacrifice a lot</li> <li>– And I will always be trying to help them, to make their life sweeter</li> <li>– And they will always have my respect</li> <li>– And I would not exchange them for anybody else's parents x2</li> <li>– They will always be my parents for me</li> <li>– And I will always be their daughter</li> <li>– I try to (love them), although I am not always successful</li> <li>– although I don't always manage to show it</li> <li>– Although I spend little time with them</li> <li>– Each in my own way</li> <li>– both the same</li> <li>– I love them through my rudeness and talking back</li> </ul>	<p>Symptoms involving care and letting parents know they are loved.</p> <p>Symptoms involving recognition of how unique and permanent their role is</p> <p>Symptoms of love involving „awareness” of its shortcomings</p> <p>Symptoms involving giving both parents an equal share of love</p> <p>Symptoms involving a paradoxical expression of commitment to the relationship</p>

children, who are expected to have their own views on many everyday issues, feel towards their parents.

Another particularly popular subcategory present in all of the groups was reciprocity. It involves mentioning that you love your parents, and that they love you, in the same sentence. Reciprocity appears to be a special and somewhat universal feature of parent-child relationships. It would be difficult to say, however, whether the high rate of these semantic links found in the study group is due to a kind of tradition of talking, as if those two kinds of love tended to be mentioned together rather than separately, or whether it was due to deeper reflection on this link. Without doubt, love for one's parents, and being loved by them, seem to evoke one another; talking about being loved by one's parents may provoke a natural need to say that this feeling is reciprocated. If so, then reciprocity would be an element of the semantic field. There was only one narrative in which “love for parents” co-occurred with a reference to their mutual love. Again, in this case talking about one kind of love evoked the other.

Another interesting group of associations consists of descriptions of emotional bond, attachment, the importance of parents and the fact that they are needed. Such a combination of attachment, need and importance seems to capture the essence of closeness and the significance of the

relationship with one's parents. Similarly, a natural emotion resulting from the parents' special significance, and the course of development, is gratitude. A surprising aspect related to long-standing emotional attachment was the presence of another category in the analysed sentences: love associated with getting to know the other person and being familiar with them, also in terms of their „faults.”

The associations that combined “loving” and “liking” in one sentence were of a different kind. One participant put it this way: “I love them, and, perhaps more importantly, I like them.” The juxtaposition of loving and liking serves to emphasize emotional attachment, and, perhaps by referring to a less typical category (if loving one's parents is, as it were, “obligatory”), it appears to be more personal to say that one likes them. Among the other associations present in the semantic field of the expression “I love”, used with reference to parents, there is one more that merits closer attention. On three occasions, university students associated love for parents with the wish to have them around forever, and fear of their death. Perhaps the reality of parents' inevitable death becomes more apparent with age. Opposition to death is part of the meaning of “love.”

Another section of the semantic field is presented in Table 2.



Table 3. Semantic field – Justifications

To love (one's parents):	Examples:	Suggested interpretation
Justifications:	– For who they are and what they are like	To love them for who they „are.”
Because, for	– For what they are like. – because they are there – because they are always there	
	– Because they are real parents – Because they are my parents – Because they are my parents – You only have them once in your life	Because they “are parents”
	– For what they have taught me – For what they have given me, not only in the material sense – Because they love me more than life – Because they had done a lot to make sure I had a happy childhood and youth – For warmth, support, trust, love, understanding – because I can always count on them x2 – they are always there for me and they will never reject me when I need help or advice. – for investing in me (not materially). – they want the best for me x 3 – because they make sacrifices for me – I always feel safe when I'm with them – They never harmed me and they want me to do well – Because they've always had time for me – because they both help me in their own way when I have a problem – Because we need one another – they are part of my world, one that is permanent and unchanging	Love as „gratitude” for what they have done for me.
	– Because thanks to them I am alive – after all they brought me to this world.	Love as gratitude for “the gift of life.”
	– I have to love my parents, because that is what children are supposed to do – I have to, because they love me	Because you “have to”
	– They complement each other perfectly	Because they are “a good couple”

Since the “symptoms” part of the semantic field consisted of 19 elements, all are listed in the table above. Out of that number, the vast majority were extracted from the university students' narratives (14 items), with only two items taken from the high school group, and 3 from the junior high school group. The “symptoms” category involves a component of decentration. It is not only important to “love”, but also for the other party to know they are loved and for that love to be somehow expressed. The most abundant subcategory of symptoms involves caring for one's parents, as well as being as if obliged to extend that care (“always”). Perhaps the underlying motivation here is the growing awareness among university students, still young, yet grown up, that parents are getting older and will some day require more support and care. Perhaps the participants' own choices – the fact that some of them are planning to have their own families, or have moved out from their family homes to go to the university, helps them recognize the need for a new type of care. Maintaining a good relation-

ship with parents when living away from home certainly demands a different and perhaps more conscious effort.

The second subcategory of “symptoms” are those that involve recognizing the unique (“I would not exchange them for any other parents”) and permanent role of parents. Again, the certain “always”, hence permanence, appears to be the semantic anchor for the meanings. This, in turn, is reminiscent of another universalism, namely that, unlike other social relations, parents indeed „always” remain our parents. In the university group, there were 3 responses in which the willingness to love one's parents was linked with the awareness of the fact that this love is not expressed often enough, or in the proper way. This is another sign of increased reflectivity. “Loving one's parents” loses its „obviousness” („everybody loves their parents” as one high school student wrote) and becomes a task at which one can fail.

Another part of the semantic field, this time related to justifications, is shown in Table 3.

Table 4. Semantic field – Reservations

To love (one's parents):	Examples:	Suggested interpretation
Reservations: (But, however, despite, even though)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– but there are also some things I cannot forgive them...</li> <li>– but [I love] dad only because he is a human</li> <li>– but I cannot be with them</li> <li>– however, I cannot spend too much time with them</li> </ul>	To love, but ...
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Even though I was never on good terms with them</li> <li>– despite our differences</li> <li>– in spite of all x2</li> <li>– even though it may seem that things are different</li> <li>– even though I sometimes think I should hate them</li> <li>– Difference of opinion</li> <li>– although sometimes I am angry with them</li> <li>– although they sometimes get on my nerves</li> <li>– even though both me and my brother see their narrow-mindedness.</li> <li>– despite the fact they are far from perfect</li> </ul>	To love despite ...

The table lists all 32 phrases included in the “justifications” category. Again, the majority have been supplied by the university students’ group (17), with 9 provided by the high school group and 6 by the junior high school group. There is an inner tension of sorts in the very structure of this category (“to love because” or even “to love for something”). According to a certain way of thinking, you cannot really love someone for something. Quite the contrary, love should be selfless or have a deeper object, the very „essence” of the person we love. This tension is reflected in the discrepancy between various subcategories of utterances. The first two refer simply to the fact of the loved ones’ existence and to who they are, as well as to the fact that they are parents. This way of reasoning suggests that to the speaker, the sheer existence or being a parent is enough to justify love; in fact this is an admission and an attempt to confirm the permanence and universality of love for parents (“I love them because they are my parents”). By contrast, the third and fourth subcategories in the table share the equally natural association of love with gratitude. A special form of that gratitude is being grateful for the gift of life itself as the kind of gift that is an inherent part of the term “parents” and is reserved for them. We receive care and help from other people in life, but “life” itself is a singular “gift.” For some participants, this is how they justify their love for their parents. However, the most common associations between love and gratitude refer to issues more important to participants: help, support, love, counting on a certain way of selfless “giving” from parents - these are the factors that justify their love in their opinion, a way of saying “I love [them] because I have experienced goodness.” Two participants (one high school and one junior high school student) combined the justification of love with the phrase “I have to”, once in a social context, and once in the context of reciprocation (reciprocity principle), which may be seen as recognition of an obligation. The first utterance

can be interpreted as a commentary of sorts on the participant’s own family circumstances, while the interesting aspect of the second one is the type of internal experience that could have produced the association between parental love and the sense of “having to love them.” There are multiple ways to interpret this phrase. Similarly to the previous tables, one justification refers to parents being a good couple. The sentence: “I love them, because they complement each other perfectly” is fascinating, because it shows that the internal experiences of children, and even their justification of “love” are affected not only by the things done for them directly and the attitude shown towards them, but also the quality of the relationship between parents.

The final part of the semantic field – Reservations – is shown in Table 4

The “reservations” category groups those phrases in the analyzed sentences that directly follow conjunctions „but”, “however”, “despite”, “even though.” There were 15 phrases in total: five in the junior high school group, two in the high school group and 8 in the university group. In principle, this category is subdivided according to the semantics of conjunctions into phrases that can follow “but” (in this case it is the ability to be together and to forgive, and that „despite” which love still exists: differences, difficult emotions, perceived faults, and even “in spite of all.” One distinct sentence: “I love them, but [I love] dad only because he is a human” is related to the idea discussed in the above paragraph, that the semantics of love include a quality of “obligation”: love may be due to someone without “merit”, for being human alone, but such feelings as liking and respect must be earned.

As far as modifiers are concerned, both those determining intensity and metatextual operators changing the meaning of the expression “I love”, narratives in the study contained the following: (I love) very much – 23 times, more than life x 2, with all my heart x 2, beyond words. As well

Table 5. Distribution of individual categories between groups

	Junior high school N= 125	High school N = 120	University N = 103	Total N = 348
Associations	19	13	28	60
Symptoms	3	2	14	19
Justifications	6	9	17	32
Reservations	5	2	8	15
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>126</b>
Modifiers and metatext	16	15	11	42
Total phrases:	49	41	78	168
Total sentences with the expression "I love"	106	88	70	264

as metatextual phrases: "really" (love them), "for sure" x 2, "obviously", "generally speaking", "like that" and „I don't know if I love them" x 2. Combining the expression „I love my parents" with adverbs such as „very much" is not surprising. Intensity and exclamatory expressions are to be expected from phrases describing love for parents. Such intensifiers were equally abundant in all study groups. Of more interest to the semantics under analysis are metatextual operators. The reader- (or self-) directed persuasive quality of phrases such as "to really love", "to love for sure" is particularly noteworthy. The operators such as "I love them, obviously", "Generally speaking, I love them", "I love them like that" are related to the aforementioned sense of „banality" or „obviousness" in talking about love for one's parents. In that context, there seems to be a lot of depth in the responses of two participants, who closed their narratives with the sentence „I don't know if I love them."

There were five more sentences in the semantic space whose function as a whole was primarily metatextual, in that they more or less referred to what it is like to "talk" about love and what the recipient might think about it. I quote them without comments.

- I wrote that I loved them and that's what matters most.
- Whatever you think, I love my parents.
- If someone asked me who do I love more, my mother or my father, ... ?
- I don't think saying I love them is enough.
- It's a cliché to say that I love them, but I guess everyone loves their parents.

Table 5 again presents numerical data related to the saturation for individual parts of the semantic field of the phrase "I love my parents" in the analysed narratives.

The number of sentences containing the expression "I love" in the above table does not add up to the number of phrases analyzed in the semantic field because some of the sentences contained more than one phrase, while other sentences with the expression "I love" referring to parents

were very simple ("I love my parents") and did not introduce any new elements to the semantic field. There were plenty of these very simple, short sentences, especially in the youngest group. Some junior high school students simply concluded their narratives by stating „I love my parents", with no further comments.

## Discussion

There is no one answer to the question "what does it mean to love one's parents?" The present study demonstrates that meanings change and evolve as we grow older. As mentioned earlier, there were no significant differences between groups in terms of the number of sentences with the expression "I love." Love for parents in children's narratives was mentioned with such frequency that it was practically omnipresent. However, statistical analysis revealed qualitative and quantitative differences in the content of sentences "about love", in particular, the semantic field was clearly more developed and complex in the narratives of participants from older age groups. University students, in contrast to junior high school students, supplemented their statements of „love for parents" with a network of associations, justifications, reservations and symptoms. The youngest participants' references to "love" were often limited to a simple statement of fact.

The most developed part of the semantic field of the phrase "I love my parents" was the one containing various associations. Love is associated with holding parents in high esteem, ascribing positive attributes, respecting and liking those we love, being grateful and willing to reciprocate. As such, it is the opposite of death. It is associated with the sense of importance and closeness, emotional attachment, needing the other person and treating them with kindness. There were numerous associations of this sort in all age groups in the study. The second best developed component of love's semantic field is the "justifications"



category. Love for parents is predominantly justified by values associated with the „existence” sphere, i.e., who parents are, that they “are there”, with frequent emphasis on the fact that simply being a parent is enough of a justification, or even that it creates an obligation to feel some sort of love. However, values related to care and giving (not necessarily in the material sense), were often quoted to substantiate love for parents; here, love is mediated and justified by gratitude. Interestingly, the vast majority of “justifications for love” were found in the responses of the oldest group of participants in the study, namely university students. Perhaps in this particular group of participants, the simple fact of loving their parents and talking about that love transcends the level of purely habitual description and becomes more reflective. As such, it prompts them to find and provide a justification instead of simply stating the fact, which was the case in younger participants. This interpretation supports the conjectures of developmental psychologists with respect to transition from childhood to adulthood. Children love their parents “just because”, with no explanation required. However, young and older adults feel compelled to redefine their relationship with parents, which provokes them to ask such questions as: Why? What does it actually mean? We can therefore say that the cognitive representation of love and the related semantic field undergo both an expansion and re-evaluation between early adolescence and adulthood. The result is an expansion and deepening through discovery and integration of new meanings. Representations develop from being simple and conventional to being complex and cogitative. This process is consistent with the general trend of increasing cognitive complexity in adulthood coupled with changes in terms of self awareness and understanding of others.

Two other themes that emerged in the semantic field under investigation merit closer attention. As is often said to be the case with parental love, so can the love of children for their parents often persist “in spite of” various difficulties and regardless of negative experience. The semantics of the word itself imply the possibility of such love “in spite of all.” A number of participants found it important to emphasize this type of attitude towards their parents. For older respondents, an important resource appears to be the combination of love with the whole set of experiences with a particular person over the course of their lives. To love means also to know someone well, to be aware of their “faults”, and to “love” them in spite, or perhaps because of that knowledge. In addition, even the oldest participants emphasized that it was important for their love not only to „exist”, but also to be manifested in practice, usually by declaring the willingness to offer care and assistance to their aging parents. To love would thus mean to be able to assume the perspective of another person, to offer them support and to feel at least co-responsible for your relationship. For some of the older participants, high esteem and idealization are not sufficient as expression of love, which

requires the ability to forgive, accept parents’ limitations and offer them practical assistance. Thus, in line with previously proposed hypotheses, we can tentatively trace the final trend in the development of the “love for parents” semantic field. It progresses from love as an idealization of sorts, associated primarily with positive emotions and high esteem, towards an emotion which finds its expression to a larger extent in the ability to accept difficult aspects of the relationship (if they exist) and offer practical help.

The study has shown that semantic space analysis in text corpora can be very useful not only in reconstructing their meaning for a specific group of people, but also in examining subtle changes and differences in those meanings. This is particularly applicable to close personal relationships, where changes proceed over extensive periods of time and as such can sometimes escape introspection. Here, linguistic analysis can reveal new areas for investigation and help articulate them in more subtle ways. The study of changes in personal meanings assigned to important concepts or relationships makes it possible to account for those conjectures in psychological theories of development that elude questionnaire-based and experimental research.

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