

THE SEMANTIC LOAD OF MYTHOLEXEMES ACROSS CULTURAL LAYERS

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Abstract: this article investigates the semantic load of mytholexemes across distinct cultural layers, drawing on cognitive linguistics, linguistic anthropology, and cultural semiotics, we examine how myth-related lexical units (mytholexemes) encode cosmological models, value hierarchies, and social practices, and how their meanings shift across diachronic strata (archaic, classical, medieval, modern) and synchronic registers (ritual, folklore, literary, popular). Methodologically, we combine descriptive, componential, conceptual field, and frame-semantic analyses with corpus-supported examples. The findings suggest that mytholexemes operate as dense semiotic nodes that integrate logical, figurative, evaluative, and axiological components, with their nucleus–periphery structures reconfigured by cultural translation, religious reforms, nationalism, and mass media.

Keywords: mytholexeme, cultural layer, semantic load, conceptual field, frame semantics, cognitive linguistics, nucleus and periphery, cultural translation, intertextuality, diachrony, ritual discourse

When we call a word a mytholexeme, we treat it as a lexical unit whose core meaning originates in mythic narratives, ritual practices, or mythopoetic worldviews. Such words «fate», «taboo», «chaos», «hero» or culture-specific items like Greek «moira», Polynesian «tapu» or Turkic «qismat» carry more than denotations; they import plots, characters, cosmologies, and value judgments. Our goal in this article is to map how the semantic load of these units travels across cultural layers and how their conceptual fields expand, shrink, or reorganize in response to historical change and genre.

Theoretical background

Concept and conceptual field: we treat concept as a multi-layered cognitive unit with logical, figurative, and evaluative strata. A conceptual field gathers related lexemes and images around a nucleus (prototypical meanings) and periphery (metaphorical, specialized, or attenuated meanings).

Mytholexeme: a mytholexeme is a lexeme whose nucleus is anchored in mythic frames (creation, hero's journey, ancestors, taboo, fate), often linked to ritual scripts and sacralized values.

Cultural layers: we operationalize layers as (a) diachronic strata archaic, classical, medieval, modern, late modern; (b) synchronic registers ritual/legal, folklore, religious doctrine, literary canons, scholarly discourse, and popular media.

Frame semantics and cognitive models: Meanings cluster as frames (participants, scenarios, values). Mytholexemes activate culturally specific frames while allowing cross-cultural mappings via metaphors and narrative schemas.

Methodology. We combine: descriptive and componential analysis to identify semantic features (agent, transgression, sanctity, punishment). Conceptual-field and nucleus–periphery modeling to chart prototype vs. extended meanings. Frame semantics to capture role structures (e.g., taboo: transgressor–guardian–sanction). Corpus-informed checks using bilingual dictionaries and parallel texts to trace shifts across genres and periods.

Mytholexemes in archaic and classical layers. Fate (moira/qismat): nucleus impersonal cosmic allotment; periphery personal destiny, luck. In classical texts, fate constrains gods and humans; in epic, it legitimizes heroic sacrifice. The evaluative layer frames acceptance as virtue. Taboo (tapu/haram): nucleus – sacred prohibition; periphery – social impropriety, trend-based



avoidance. Ritual frames specify guardians, sanctions, and purification rites. Chaos (chaos/uluq-sav): nucleus – primordial undifferentiation; periphery – disorder in politics or psyche. Mythic cosmology contrasts chaos with order (cosmos) via creation acts.

Medieval transformations. Christian and Islamic hermeneutics re-code fate as providence or qadar, shifting agency from impersonal allotment to divine will. Taboo integrates into legal-theological taxonomies (halal/haram), stabilizing sanctions and introducing juristic nuance. Hero migrates into saint and ghazi frames, reweighting valor with piety.

Early modern to modern recontextualizations. Secularization relocates mythic nuclei into literary-symbolic registers. Fate becomes existential condition or statistical probability; hero reframes as national subject; chaos becomes scientific entropy metaphor. Peripheries expand in journalism and education, while nuclei persist in ritualized state ceremonies and holidays.

Popular culture and mass media. Film, gaming, and advertising recycle mythic frames for affective immediacy. The hero's journey supplies narrative economy; taboo marks edginess; chaos sells disruption. Memetic circulation compresses frames into icons and keywords, accelerating semantic bleaching yet preserving archetypal silhouettes.

Nucleus-periphery dynamics. Compression: intensified ritual use narrows meaning to sacred core (e.g., fasting taboos in Ramadan). Diffusion: cross-genre borrowing broadens peripheries (e.g., «taboo topics» in journalism). Re-centering: political or religious revivals re-elevate nuclei (e.g., destiny in nationalist rhetoric). Hybridization: contact zones produce blended frames (e.g., syncretic saints/heroes), creating nested peripheries around multiple partial nuclei.

Comparative case sketches. Fate: Greek moira vs. Persian qismat vs. English fate. Greek nucleus apportionment; Persian divine decree blended with fortune; English blend of classical and Romance inheritances, now secularized in probability talk.

Taboo: Polynesian tapu vs. Islamic haram vs. modern taboo. Polynesian nucleus – sacral contagion; Islamic – legal-soteriological prohibition; modern normative impropriety, therapeutic discourse. Hero: Indo-European warrior-king vs. Sufi wali vs. modern celebrity. Nuclei shift from martial charisma to sanctity to media visibility.

Analytical model. We model each mytholexeme L with:

Nucleus N(L): prototype semantic features tied to ritual-mythic frame.

Periphery P(L): metaphorical/specialized extensions by domain (politics, psychology, marketing).

Layer mapping M(L): {archaic → classical → medieval → modern → media} with transition rules (secularization, doctrinalization, commodification).

Evaluation vector E(L): {sacred, heroic, transgressive, redemptive} weights per layer.

Discussion. The semantic load of mytholexemes is path-dependent. Shifts are driven by institutional power (church, state, academy), media technologies, and intercultural contact. Yet nuclei persist because they offer minimal narrative programs (forbidden – act – sanction – purification; call – ordeal – return) that are cognitively economical and emotionally potent.

Conclusion. Mytholexemes concentrate cultural memory. Tracking their nucleus-periphery structures across layers clarifies how societies translate mythic capital into ethics, law, science, and entertainment. For comparative linguistics, a field-based, frame-aware model explains cross-linguistic equivalence, divergence, and partial overlaps without reducing culture-specific meanings.

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