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## Tutoring: meanings attributed to the term by tutors. An analysis of the semantic field

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### Abstract

The aim of the conducted research was to determine how academic teachers-tutors conducting tutoring activities understand the term tutoring. The research material comprised transcripts of a focus interview conducted in February 2022 with tutors participating in the programme “Masters of Didactics – Implementation of the Tutoring Model” at the Maria Grzegorzewska University. The transcripts were prepared by the researchers who authored this text. The study’s results were analysed using the qualitative approach of semantic field analysis, which was developed by Regine Robin and her colleagues and modified by Barbara Fatyga. The theoretical foundation for this study is based on semantic field theory. The analysis process employed the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. The conclusions drawn from the analysis suggest that reconstructing the

network of meanings can lead to a more accurate understanding of the term *tutoring* from the perspective of the university teachers-tutors participating in the programme.

**Keywords:** tutoring, tutor, “Masters of Didactics”, semantic field analysis.

## Introduction

The analysis of Polish professional literature devoted to academic didactics shows that for the last few years the term *tutoring* has been significantly present in the area of Polish higher education. Undoubtedly, the experience of the tutoring relation was strengthened thanks to the project “Masters of Didactics” realised in the years 2018–2023, which over 900 academic teachers and 10 000 students took part in<sup>1</sup>. The publication summarising this unprecedented undertaking in Polish higher education mentions the concept of a tutoring model based on the practice of tutoring implemented at universities at the time of project duration (Brdulak et al., 2022, p. 87). Tutoring is described there as a teaching approach comprising *education focused on a student*, where this focus is defined as “a personalized approach to a given student, taking into account their current knowledge, skills and personal development goals” (Brdulak et al., 2022, p. 86). This approach is realised by: diagnosing dynamically changing students’ needs, expectations and capabilities, monitoring their progress, relating them to the effects of teaching and using individualised teaching methods (Brdulak et al., 2022, p. 86).

Undertaken tutoring practice supported by experiences from a few leading European universities also proved motivating for the research area. Tutoring was analysed here from the perspective of:

- its assumptions and forms also in relation to Anglo-Saxon experiences (Dąbrowska and Dąbrowska, 2022);
- possibilities of its implementation in the academic world (Włodarczyk, 2018), together with experiences deriving from grassroots initiatives concerning its implementation in Polish higher schools (Dziedziczak-Foltyn et al., 2020);
- its importance for improving the quality of academic education (Machowska-Okrój, 2023);
- using it for teaching social skills (Bojanowicz, 2022), academic skills (Kędzierski et al., 2022), or entrepreneurial students (Kwaśny and Żur, 2019);
- the very perspective of tutees in the light of their reflectiveness and educational potential (Perkowska-Klejman, 2023);

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<sup>1</sup> The data comes from written information obtained by e-mail correspondence of 29.09.2023 from the Ministry of Education and Science, which supervised two editions of the “Masters of Didactics” project.

- its use in hybrid education and remote education, in particular at the time of COVID-19 pandemic (Cieszyńska and Dudziak, 2022; Waszczuk et al., 2022; Czyżewska et al., 2022);
- analysing tutoring tools, in this essay (Kowalkowska, 2022) or dialogue (Zawadzka 2022).

The aforesaid publications show tutoring not only as activities undertaken for the benefit of student development. The outcomes of the project “Masters of Didactics” show that regular tutoring practice was accompanied by a significant change at the institutional level, namely permanent of temporary introduction of individual teaching into the educational process. As a result, there were various structural and curricular modifications at universities. A complex role played by tutoring in higher schools in recent years lets us state that to understand what tutoring is today, it is crucial to understand meanings attributed to it by those participating in its creation, i.e. tutors. Their interpretation of the term *tutoring*, their personal “operational” definitions show how this term is understood and used in academic practice. This dimension has become the subject matter of the research presented in this article.

### **Tutoring – participating perspective/ meaning attributed in action**

Reality is created socially and understood socially, hence it is important to follow the way it is comprehended and interpreted by social actors. Each participant of the everyday life world has their supply of handy knowledge and, at the same time, they draw from handy knowledge of others they are in relationship with. That is why, in Schütz’s opinion, translatability of perspectives is possible. Following Schütz, we assume that the world of culture is intersubjective in nature, and knowledge is social in nature (Schütz, 1962; Berger and Luckmann, 1983). Being in a relationship, communication, language are foundations for creating the cultural space of intersubjectivity. The authors assume that the conceptual system is the social-cultural product, where language is one of the most important categories “constructing reality”. The research adopts the interpretative paradigm as well as the theory of relevance by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (2011) who attribute both the cognitive and communicative function to language.

The intersubjective world of culture generates supplies of handy knowledge available to people in their everyday life, used in typical situations and interpersonal communication. In typical situations we read others’ intentions properly and react in a typical way, hence our ability of communicating on various issues (Schütz, 1962). The notion of a “cognitive environment” introduced by Sperber and Wilson (2011) constitutes a certain supply of handy knowledge. Language is

a means of communication, thus it is necessary to read meanings of words used by speakers in a particular context, to confirm their interpretation and emotional colouring in social interactions.

In everyday interpersonal contacts we convey and obtain hundreds or thousands of pieces of information, we interpret many messages thanks to our knowledge of the context in which they occur. Communication is a process of negotiating meaning between participants, created by both of them, taking place in a certain situation, defined time and space. Our cognitive environment, knowledge, context of acting and communicating make it possible to interpret situations or utterances in a typical way. Making use of typisation, we are able to take interpretation decisions in acceptable time as well as receive messages in majority as intended by the author. Actions of social actors in the everyday world are tightly linked with relevance structures, which leads to mutual understanding. In social interaction, reading communication intentions and mutual attention drawing in the we-relation make it possible to share our perspectives and understand the surrounding world.

## Research methodology

The aim of the research was to determine the ways in which the term *tutoring* is understood by academic teachers – tutors who use this method in their work with students. The aim of the research led to formulating the research problem: which images of tutoring in terms of its contexts and meanings tutors have. As far as qualitative research is concerned, it is rarely possible to establish a research hypothesis and it is similar in the research undertaken by the authors. The study's results were analysed using the method of semantic field analysis (Robin, 1980; Fatyga, 2000), whose theoretical foundation is based on semantic field theory (Trier, 1931; Ullmann, 1972; Zhou, 2001). As for semantic field theory, it is assumed that words are not autonomous lexical units of language but are linked with others, creating semantic categories, defining themselves, and the meaning of each element of the field depends on the whole network, network of semantic relationships. In her article "Semantic Field of the Term Culture in Definitions of Culture," Zina Jarmoszuk (2001, p. 19) points to the fact that "Particular fields, their range and inner relations between expressions reflect the way a certain group of language users comprehends and sees the world."

The method of semantic field analysis used in the research was developed by Regine Robin and her team in 1980, and further on Barbara Fatyga (2000) introduced certain modifications concerning the determination of emotional temperature of selected networks. In the methodology developed by her, Robin suggests choosing a particular key word. Robin claims that

Text is not transparent. Looking for the meaning of a text, sentence, word requires certain work with that text, apparent dismantling the string of words and its sequence in order to put it together again in accordance with significant readability [...].

To find the meaning of a given word is to analyse all its uses or contexts (Robin, 1980, p. 252). The key word chosen by the authors for their analysis is tutoring. As far as the key word is concerned, it is important to find expressions and words with a particular function.

The collected material (expressions and words) was ordered according to categories listed by Robin: definitions of the subject, its associations, opposites, equivalents (synonyms), the subject's actions and actions towards the subject. Using the method of semantic field analysis for the word *tutoring*, we order its aspects in accordance with belonging to a given semantic category, i.e.:

- a) definitions – show the features of tutoring, what tutoring is like;
- b) associations – show what tutoring is associated with, linked with, what accompanies it;
- c) opposites – show what tutoring is not, what opposes tutoring;
- d) equivalents – occur interchangeably with tutoring, inform which words, expressions tutoring can be replaced with;
- e) descriptions of tutoring's actions – show what tutoring “does” and what the outcomes of these actions are/ might be;
- f) descriptions of actions towards tutoring – show actions directed towards tutoring, describe actions undertaken towards tutoring.

The analysis of the semantic field of the key-word *tutoring* also employs the idea of determining more precisely the emotional temperature of each selected relation/ link, network: positive (+), negative (-), ambivalent ( $\pm$ ), neutral ( $\emptyset$ ) and indifferent if making a choice is not possible (Fatyga, 2000).

## Characteristics of the source material

The research material which was subject to analysis is the transcript of a focus interview conducted in February 2022 with academic teachers – tutors using the method of tutoring at the level of academic education. Six tutors took part in the interview, all of them participating in the project “Masters of Didactics – Implementation of the Tutoring Model” at the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw. The interview was directly focused on obtaining information on the way tutoring is described, hence the collected research material illustrates the way it is understood, deriving from tutors' experience of almost 1.5-year participation in the programme, expressed in everyday language. Such specificity of the material proves its high empirical value, especially in the context of constructing the semantic field for the term *tutoring*. The interview lasted two hours.

The interview transcript comprised a text counting 78 thousand signs. In accordance with the conventions of running an interview, the transcript included the questions asked by the researcher and the answers given by the tutors, according to the order of volunteering to answer or choice made by the interviewer. The text's semantic analysis was conducted with the use of MAXQDA, qualitative data analysis software. The software was used independently by the two researchers. The next step consisted in combining both analyses' results, and in case of divergences in result interpretation, in agreeing on the common outcome resulting from the discussion of both researchers analysing the text.

## Research results

We identified 61 references to tutoring in the transcript of the interview with the tutors. This part of the article presents them in the order defined by the assumptions of semantic field analysis. Additionally, the analysis should be enriched by information concerning their temperature, classifying them as positive, negative or neutral.

The first component of the semantic field of the term *tutoring* are equivalents which were present 6 times in the analysed text, adopting a neutral character. Thus, tutors associated tutoring with relations ( $n = 2$ ) that were closer than traditional contact between the lecturer and their students, which was illustrated by calling each other "by the first name". It should be remarked in this context that this way of addressing each other, although suggested by the tutor to all her tutees was not a constitutive element of their relations as the academic teacher noticed that some students, due to their personality, "could not bring themselves to call her by her first name". A similar, yet not identical equivalent, was associating tutoring with interaction ( $n = 1$ ) based on mutual influence directed towards the realization of objectives defined together. What is more, tutoring was understood as individual work with a student/ students ( $n = 3$ ) of a heterogenic nature. An example of this variety is tutoring taking a dual form – the scientific one associated with work on scientific activities, showing certain possibilities, directions of development offering the students the approach of independently made choices ( $n = 1$ ), or the one conditioned by the occurrence of issues requiring the implementation of activities from the area of coaching ( $n = 1$ ).

The network of references ( $n = 7$ ) as one of components of the semantic field of the term *tutoring* referred to expressions (most often neutral epithets) used by the research subjects to describe tutoring features. Thus, tutoring can be associated with the scientific character of tutorials ( $n = 3$ ): being "typically scientific" or "more scientific than developmental" or even "directed towards individual scientific work with a given student." Tutoring was also described as

“my” (n = 1) – it was the only description of a clearly positive connotation (temperature). There were also references to organizational matters, namely the expression “post-trip” tutoring (practising tutoring at one’s own university after one’s training abroad within the framework of the programme “Masters of Didactics”, n = 1). According to the research participants, tutoring can vary, depending on where it takes place, for instance, tutoring observed at a foreign university was fragmentary (only some tutoring components were used) and took a form of a lecture for a few hundred people (n = 2).

The next component of the semantic field called associations comprises associations with the term constituting the root of the analysis. The collected material included 20 phrases that could be assigned to the area of associations, out of which 17 were neutral in nature, 2 were negative and 1 positive. Most often the researched tutors associated the analysed term with a method (n = 7) or a technique (n = 1) used in didactic work with students, both before the activities pertaining to their participation in the programme “Masters of Didactics” and during their participation. In that context, it is worth emphasizing that in case of people using that method, participation in the ministerial programme motivated them to “dig” deeper and order its assumptions, to define it more precisely, to name activities performed or to broaden possibilities of its implementation. The remarks of the researched participants let us conclude that they were convinced that using that method “turns out best” with some subjects and they like working with it (the only positive association), and that they had doubts whether it is an appropriate way to work with bigger groups during a limited period of time (one semester, half a semester). References to group size are also reflected in the next abstract association where tutoring is associated with individual work or work in small groups (n = 2) and the necessity and possibility to juggle these two strategies in order to adjust tutoring to students’ individual preferences. At the same time, one tutor stressed, based on Dutch experience, the possibility of implementing tutoring for bigger groups (30-people) and perceiving it from their perspective. One tutor remarks that the concept analysed is linked with “group tutoring” classes that she used to run once. Thus, the afore-said association referred more to the subject matter of tutoring than to the very process that the charge took part in.

A significant group of associations are those referring to people participating in tutoring. Thus, tutoring is associated with a tutee (n = 1) and a tutor (n = 1) who “all that story is based on.” In the context of a tutee, there occurs the next association regarding the fact that tutoring is a student’s independent choice (n = 2), as they could choose their tutor and activities proposed by them within the framework of the programme realised at their university. This term is also associated with meetings and talks between the aforementioned subjects (n = 1), whose dates are arranged individually.

The last three associations refer to the beginnings of the programme “Masters of Didactics” and, what follows, the beginnings of tutoring at the university and its organization. As for the first one of a neutral character, it is associated with something unknown ( $n = 1$ ), whose assumptions regarding its goals, undertaken activities, rules of cooperation are negotiated during tutors’ meetings and tutorials. As for the latter two of a negative character, the term tutoring is associated with something unorganized at the beginning ( $n = 1$ ) and disorganization requiring many hours of work from all the persons engaged in it ( $n = 1$ ).

The research does not contain even one phrase classified as tutoring’s opposite. We qualified 22 extracts of the participants’ utterances as “the subject’s actions” component. The majority of the phrases (except one) were positive in nature. Tutoring can “act” both towards tutees ( $n = 13$ ) and tutors themselves ( $n = 9$ ). Among the phrases used by the tutees, one can single out a category of “offering a student a possibility of choosing independently their course of action” ( $n = 2$ ), where tutoring helps students via the person of a tutor to discover their educational and personal potential. Tutoring can “open” ( $n = 3$ ) students to interpersonal relations, to more personal topics than those discussed during traditional classes, and also to speaking sincerely about worldview issues. Tutoring “teaches communication” ( $n = 1$ ) – while discussing the course of action they would like to follow, during tutorials tutees have many opportunities to practise talking about their needs. Those opportunities are created by a tutor, who somehow models those situations. Tutoring “enters the developmental area” ( $n = 1$ ) which is neither scientific, professional nor private. Tutoring also “provides support” ( $n = 3$ ): students can count on their tutor’s help in the moments of crisis, e.g. while looking for a job. One tutor said she had an impression she was like a “mother” to her tutees when they talk to her about their difficulties. Tutoring “helps to study better” ( $n = 3$ ): the tools used in tutoring facilitate asking questions (“A tutor’s role is to ask appropriate questions.”) and provide students with feedback.

Among the phrases classified as tutoring’s activities towards a tutor, there was one saying that tutoring “lets a tutor develop” ( $n = 1$ ), especially during their trainings abroad that prepared them for running tutorials. Tutoring is an opportunity for teachers to “work with students in an interesting way”, less planned than in case of classes or lectures, offering a possibility to experiment as far as one’s teaching style and used techniques or tools are concerned ( $n = 1$ ). Tutoring can also make one “stressed” (it was the only negative phrase among all the expressions referring to “the subject’s actions”) due to the fact that it is not strictly scientific, happens to touch upon personal issues, and tutors – despite their preparations – might not feel comfortable with it ( $n = 1$ ). Finally, tutoring “builds relationships” ( $n = 6$ ) among academic teachers: this category consists of utterances showing that it offers a tutor an opportunity to get to know their



colleagues better, to cooperate with other teachers/tutors, which translates into receiving support in more difficult situations. Tutoring also “lets one appreciate how worthy students are”.

The last component of the semantic field, i.e. “actions towards the subject” is represented by 6 phrases that are neutral ( $n = 4$ ) or positive ( $n = 2$ ). They referred to the realisation of tutoring assumptions ( $n = 1$ , neutral temperature) by undertaking individual work or work in small groups on a particular topic. The next category of actions regards the beginning of one’s participation in tutoring in two dimensions. The first one regards the tutor and is manifested by undertaking actions, “pressing” to participate in a tutoring programme ( $n = 1$ , positive temperature), giving one’s consent ( $n = 1$ , positive temperature) and filling in documents necessary to realise that goal ( $n = 1$ , positive temperature). The latter one concerns the student, and actions towards tutoring regard having doubts whether “it is worth having a go” ( $n = 1$ , neutral temperature), which was conditioned by the student’s little scientific expertise and her more traditional approach. The last action towards the subject concerns thinking about one’s expectations towards tutoring.

## Conclusion

The last step of the analysis is an attempt to construct the term *tutoring* based on the semantic network. As far as the theoretical part of this article is concerned (Sperber and Wilson, 2011), it should be born in mind that the researched tutors firstly learned about and practised tutoring, but, at the same time, tried to comprehend this special academic function they had undertaken and could give meaning to all this. Therefore:

- tutoring is associated with personalised work with students and relationship with them, realization of common goals;
- tutoring is described by such words as “my” and “varied”;
- tutoring is most often associated with a work method or technique, both individual and in small groups, but is implemented more and more often as a way of working with bigger groups, which raises doubts among some tutors;
- tutoring is influential as it supports and helps, offers an opportunity to choose, teaches communication, and above all, makes students more open;
- there are certain actions taken towards tutoring. First of all, one has to decide to participate in it, voluntarily or under some pressure. Next, its assumptions have to be completed and the documentation filled in.

Tutoring, together with the programme “Masters of Didactics” that propagated it at Polish universities, offered the tutors participating in the programme an opportunity to develop their competencies and in this way offered much more: raising in their eyes the significance of their didactic activity. Tutoring responds to challenges posed to academic teachers as far as teaching methods and forms are concerned. It lets them use the potential of generational differences and capture current and foreseeable future labour market needs. Tutors are aware of their students’ expectations, which evolve in the direction of more personalized teaching and developing closer relationships with lecturers whose mentorship and managing role comes to an end (Karpińska-Musiał, 2019). Nevertheless, a tutor can still be a scientific role model for their tutees, and also a guide helping to take strategic scientific, professional and personal decisions (Lejzerowicz, 2021). In their article, the authors focused on tutors, how they define their own work and tasks, and what significance they attribute to it. As far as the theoretical part of this article is concerned, it should be emphasized that the whole narration on tutoring lacks any threads characteristic of traditional or hierarchical paradigm of education with the dominant role of the teacher and the subordinate role of the student as a recipient of educational activities. On the contrary, the researched tutors were in favour of personalized education, responding to its participants’ needs. In this context, it is worth emphasising that academic teachers, perceiving tutoring as varied, and also describing it as “my”, seemed to create a platform for reconstructing its meanings promoted during trainings realised within the framework of the ministerial programme, as well as designing its shape reflecting the individualised educational situation between them and their tutees. In conclusion, the reconstruction of the semantic network makes it possible to define the term *tutoring* more precisely from the perspective of academic teachers – tutors participating in the programme.

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## Tutoring: znaczenia nadawane pojęciu przez tutorów. Analiza pola semantycznego

### Streszczenie

Celem przeprowadzonych badań było ustalenie, w jaki sposób nauczyciele akademicy – tutorzy prowadzący zajęcia tutorskie rozumieją termin *tutoring*. Materiał badawczy stanowiły przygotowane przez badaczki (autorki tekstu) transkrypcje wywiadu fokusowego przeprowadzonego w lutym 2022 roku z tutorami biorącymi udział w programie „Mistrzowie Dydaktyki – wdrożenie modelu tutoringu” w Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej im. Marii Grzegorzewskiej. Do analiz wyników badań zastosowano podejście jakościowe – metodę analizy pola semantycznego opracowaną przez Regine Robin i jej współpracowników, a następnie zmodyfikowaną przez Barbarę Fatygę. Podbudowę teoretyczną stanowiła teoria pól semantycznych. W procesie analiz został wykorzystany program do jakościowej analizy danych MAXQDA. Tutoring przez badanych określany jest jako zindywidualizowana praca ze studentami obejmująca relację i realizację wspólnych celów, a określają go takie sformułowania, jak „mój” i „różny”. Tutoring najczęściej kojarzony jest z metodą bądź techniką pracy zarówno indywidualnej, jak i w małych grupach. Wnioski wynikające z analizy wskazują, że dzięki rekonstrukcji sieci znaczeń możliwe jest trafniejsze ujęcie terminu *tutoring* z perspektywy nauczycieli akademickich – tutorów uczestniczących w programie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** tutoring, tutor, „Mistrzowie Dydaktyki”, analiza semantyczna.