

## ON CONCEPTUAL AND AXIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE WORD *MUTTER* ‘MOTHER’ IN CONTEXT (BASED ON CORPUS MATERIAL)

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on a linguistic image of mother in German languages. It seeks to grasp it through a typical context of the German word *Mutter* ‘mother’. The research is based on results of distributional and thematic analyses of these words. These analyses are used as a base for reconstructing prototypical characteristics of “mother” and the related concepts used by speakers of German. The paper develops these findings into compiling the most frequent collocations and other (mostly contextual) information gathered by the use of corpus tools. The paper concludes with an outline of unconscious axiological processes used in evaluating the image of mother on the good/bad axis.

**Keywords:** corpus linguistics, collocation profile, context, linguistic image of a word, axiology

### 1 THE CONTENT OF THE WORD *MOTHER*

A wide range of connotations and associations of the studied word proves that it is a complex, emotionally varied notion. Its complexness is determined by the fact that this concept has biological (genetic, physiological), psychological, emotional, moral- ethical and social parameters that have been gradually mirrored – as modern linguistics progressed – in ever expanding definitions and descriptions of words. As part of the structuralist explanation it was the biological, or genealogical, basis of the word defined as a direct female ancestor from the previous generation [1].

For Lakoff [2], the meaning of this word is more complex than what can be expressed on a basis of necessary and sufficient conditions applied by the Structuralists. In his works, this author ([2], [3]) describes its meaning as a category whose central model is characterised by certain sub-models:

- (1) the model of birth: the mother gives birth to a child;
- (2) the genetic model: the mother is woman from whom her child gets one half of its genes;
- (3) the model of upbringing and care: the mother is a person who brings up a child and takes care of it;

- (4) the model of marriage: the mother is the wife of the child's father;
- (5) the genealogical model: the mother is the closest female ancestor of a child.

The author ([2], [3]) is aware of the fact that not all above-mentioned models are in all cases represented by the same person. The expressions such as genetic mother, surrogate mother, stepmother, adoptive mother etc. are used for such cases. He emphasises that the cases when all models can be applied are ideal and prototypical whereas he calls the variants such as genetic mother, surrogate mother, stepmother, and adoptive mother segments of the prototype.

According to Kiefer [4], the above-mentioned expressions prove that the meaning of the word mother covers exclusively the case of a child-bearer; this can change only with the context, including the above-mentioned combinations with attributes such as step-, surrogate etc. According to this author, the meaning of the word mother can be determined on the basis of necessary and sufficient conditions but we must distinguish between the semantics of the word and its use; however, the prototype theory does not take this into account.

Anna Wierzbicka [5], the founder of the natural semantic metalanguage, likewise acknowledges that it is a complex notion but she has nevertheless harshly criticised Lakoff's claim that the notion of mother is psychologically and cognitively so complex that necessary and sufficient conditions of structural semantics are not satisfactory for the description of its meaning. In the definition of the word mother (X is the mother of Y), Wierzbicka distinguishes between:

- the biological level of the meaning where we must, according to her, take into account the real state of affairs [5]:
  - “(a) *at one time, before now, X was very small*
  - (b) *at that time, Y was inside X*
  - (c) *at that time, Y was like a part of X*” [5, p. 155]:
- the psychological-social level of the meaning that is linked to certain expectations by the society [5]:
  - “(b) *because of, people can something like this about X: ‘X wants to do good things for Y*
  - X doesn't want bad things to happen to Y*” [5, p. 155].

Orgoňová and Bohunická [6] point out two divergent linguistic approaches to defining meanings of words. On one hand, it is the structural-semantic approach that operates with necessary and sufficient conditions of the meaning. Following this approach, these authors define the meaning of the word mother as “*a woman who has (at least one) child*”, or “*a woman who gave birth to a child / passed on genetic material / has a child*” [6, p. 35]. On the other hand is the ethno-linguistic approach

which, based on entrenched stereotypes, associations, connotations, and figures of speech such as collocations or idioms, sees the most important component of the meaning of the word mother to be “*a woman who brings up a child*” [6, p. 35].

Another Slovak author dealing with conceptualisation of the notion of mother was Kmecová [7], who studied it as part of her research focusing on the linguistic image of a woman in the Slovak and Slovenian languages. This author gathered and thematically compiled idioms and non-idiomatic figures of speech based on various physiological, psychological, and social changes in various phases of a woman’s life, out of which pregnancy, childbirth, and a relationship with her child are linked to the concept of mother. Furthermore, she has studied equivalence and motivation for creating idioms. She also uses linguistic, historic, social sciences, and ethnographic impulses for uncovering converging and varied ways of perceiving the idiomatic image of the woman and mother in the Slovak and Slovenian languages. The author categorised the collected phrasemes and non-idiomatic expressions related to motherhood into the following topical groups:

- “(a) *biological-physiological preconditions for motherhood;*
- (b) the physical and mental condition of a woman during pregnancy;*
- (c) the social status of a child-bearer; labour and its process;*
- (d) allusions to the process of lactation and breast-feeding;*
- (e) the relationship between the mother (stepmother) and a child;*
- (f) the social status of an out-of-wedlock child”* [7, p. 62].

The results of a corpus and discourse analyzes from Černá and Čech [8] focused on motherhood provide a significant stimulus for the content analysis of the concept. Research of the lemma “motherhood” through corpus tools and methods like T-scores and CARDS has shown that “*the chief discourse-of-motherhood categories were: surrogate motherhood, relationship between motherhood and career, delight from motherhood, family relationships, financial and time aspects of motherhood, changes due to motherhood, and active motherhood*” [8, p. 252]. The biological, social, economic and legal problems of the career-motherhood relationship have proved to be topical.

Bañcerowski, a Polish hungarologist, uses specific approach ([9], [10], [11]). He describes the notion of mother – using the terminology of Langacker’s cognitive semantics [12] – as a multidimensional cognitive domain consisting of several profiles. Langacker [13] perceives the meaning as a matrix of cognitive domains. The profile and the base of the meaning can be separated in semantic structures by the opposition of a figure and a background through which the sense of a given word is profiled in the language use. According to Langacker, the cognitive domain represents a limited area of a given unit’s use. According to Langacker [14], there is no final, exhaustive list of domains; what domain we work with depends on our

particular goal. Bańcerowski's ([9], [11]) cognitive domain can be either a simple or a complex, experience-based notion containing all related knowledge and experience. According to him, each phrase evokes one or more cognitive domains. The profile is the result of profiling where the attention is focused on a concrete element of a particular cognitive base consisting of one or several cognitive profiles whereby this element is accentuated. After studying materials from lexicons, corpuses, religious texts and surveys ([9], [11]), he defines four main domains of the notion of mother: family, value, time and sacrum, assigning them individual phrases.

Bartmiński ([15], [16]) operates with a more detailed classification and attempts to reconstruct general concepts of a good mother through idioms, corpus research, research of folk songs, and surveys. He distinguishes biological, social, psychosocial, psychological, practical, and ethical aspects of the notion of mother. From the biological point of view, it is important that the mother gives birth to one or more children, she breastfeeds her child after the childbirth and the child inherits some of her features. Childcare dominates in the social area. This aspect also covers the mother's position in her family. Upbringing becomes prominent because the mother teaches her children and, when needed, punishes them (or beats them as part of punishment). According to Bartmiński, the mother gives advice to her children, teaches her daughter how to work etc. Obedience and gratitude are expected of children. The psychosocial aspect covers tenderness, warmth, and good heart of a mother who loves her children unconditionally. This aspect creates the space for children's love of their mother. According to this author, the psychological aspect of mother includes other internal characteristics such as sensitivity, understanding, wisdom, and strictness. The practical aspect covers usual roles of a mother who runs a household, gives orders, is overworked, is the only and irreplaceable person for her children and knows her child in every situation. As we can see, the understanding of the concept of mother has been widely affected by individual linguistic and later transdisciplinary tendencies. Through development of linguistic interpretation, progressed from a strictly structuralistic view to cognitive, psychological, and ethnographic approaches, as well as through stimuli from the field of corpus and discourse analysis, we approached the complexity of the semantics of the word linked to stereotypes and associations in the mental lexicon of users of the particular language. In the next section of the paper, we will seek to capture potential mental processes used in evaluating the image of mother, based on linguistic contexts where the corresponding word is used.

## 2 THEMATIC AND AXIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

### 2.1 Contextual distribution as a basis of axiological interpretation of the word *Mutter* 'mother'

The linguistic image of mother is determined by extralinguistic reality, cultural customs, psychosocial relationships, and expectations based upon them. However, it

is an interdisciplinary question where psychological approaches are particularly significant. In addition to the semantic, distributional, context, and thematic analysis, we have integrated into our research also psychological terms figure, background and profile, originating in the Gestalt psychology, which are used also by cognitive linguists to explain semantic issues. These are terms that Bańcerowski ([9], [10]) uses to describe the concept of mother. However, we will seek to use these terms to describe an axiological process that participants in communication activate in the general use of language. We understand the figure as a lexical meaning of a unit in a collocation. In this case, we perceive the background in connection with an evaluation parameter used as part of the axiological process while using a unit with an evaluation component. At the same time, we develop a scheme according to which *“the evaluation subject applies an axiological function whose field of arguments is exhausted by a class with a single element designated as an evaluation parameter, and the field of values is exhausted by the class of evaluation concepts”* [17, p. 42]. With words oriented at the meaning of the axiological function (talented, genius, diligent, lazy, cowardly...) the point is that the axiological function assigns an implied component “good” or “bad” [17, p. 43] to the corresponding category (without referring to the value of appearance). By using collocates of the word *Mutter* ‘mother’ to describe the axiological process, we will seek to submit the evaluation parameter to a finer analysis and link it to the pair of terms profile – background. The profile is linked to the linguistic and extralinguistic implicates which are activated when one uses a lexical unit (and may initiate a positive or negative evaluation response), so they profile the meaning of a given unit. In that case, contextual dependency is characteristic of the profile: what kind of response the stimulus elicits depends on the context or on the information in the background. In this context, we can point out to extensive research of the context effect in the fields of cognitive psychology and marketing which develop analogical assumptions in that particular field and corroborate them with concrete proofs ([18], [19], [20], [21]). When using the word *Mutter* ‘mother’, the evaluation parameter, to which the axiological function assigns the evaluation concept, depends on the linguistic and extralinguistic context (circumstances of a situation, cultural particularities, individual abilities, and previous experience of the language user etc.). We say that the set of contextual circumstances profiles the meaning of this word (represents its profile) and as part of this profiling it identifies, among others, the evaluation parameter of the axiological function. Because of the binary nature of the opposition figure – background, we propose the following analytical scheme: the argument of the axiological function (the evaluation parameter) is an ordered pair of the figure (a lexical meaning of a lexeme) and the background (the context of evaluation) whereby the evaluation function assigns an evaluation concept to the above-mentioned ordered pair. The field of values of an evaluation function as such can thus be perceived as a Cartesian product of the set of lexical meanings and contexts;

the set of all ordered pairs where the first component is an element of the set of lexical meanings of units evoking axiological notions and the second component originates in the set of contexts in which these words are used and in relation to which it is necessary to relativize the application of the evaluation function. When we look at the second component of the argument more closely, we can divide it into n-ths of various types of contexts (the situation context including the way of expressing a certain characteristic, a cultural context including rules of behaviour in a particular society etc.).

## 2.2 Thematic analysis

As a background for the thematic analysis of collocations with the base word mother, we have used a complete collocation profile [22] created on the basis of corpus tools ([23], [24]), which contains system and text collocations (compare [25], [26], [27]). In order to define the image of mother more closely in a particular case, we need to know the context. After examining individual context appearances of collocations in the corpus by using the Sketch Engine tool (see examples), we have come to the following thematic subgroups linked to mothers or motherhood in execution of contexts. Following up on the previous study [28], we provide examples of individual thematic subgroups from the above-mentioned collocation profile, using Ďurčo's collocation matrix [29] based on the morphological principle (M. stays for Mutter, m. stays for mother):

### I. Body characteristics and their implications:

#### a) age

Adjective + Noun: *alte M.* 'old m.', *betagte M.* 'elderly m.', *junge M.* 'young m.', *minderjährige M.* 'minor m.'

#### b) health condition:

Adjective + Noun: *alkoholkrank M.* 'alcoholic m.', (*HIV/...*) - *infizierte M.* 'HIV infected m.', *krank M.* 'ill m.', *schwerkrank M.* 'severely ill m.', *pflegebedürftige M.* 'm. requiring care'

Noun + Verb: *M. erlitt etw. (Schock/Nervenzusammenbruch/Trauma/...)* 'm. suffered from sth. (shock/nervous breakdown/trauma...)'

### II. Motherhood:

#### a) stages of motherhood:

Adjective + Noun: *frischgebackene M.* 'fresh m.', *werdende M.* 'future m.', *potenzielle M.* 'potential m.'; *M. bei der Geburt* 'm. in labour'

Noun + Verb: *M. werden* 'to become a m.'

b) activities:

Adjective + Noun: *einkaufende M.* 'shopping m.', *stillende M.* 'breastfeeding m.'

Noun + Verb: *M. rettete ihr Kind* 'm. saved her child', *M. stillt ihr Baby/ihr Kind* 'm. breastfeeds her child', *M. trägt ihr Kind auf dem Arm* 'm. carries her child in arms', *M. vernachlässigt ihr Kind* 'm. neglects her child'

c) experience linked to motherhood:

Adjective + Noun: *erfahrene M.* 'experienced m.', *frischgebackene M.* 'new m.', *kinderreiche M.* 'm. with many children', *mehrfache M.* 'multiple m.', *x-fache M.* 'x- times m.'

III. Mother in relationships:

a) the relationship between the mother and her child:

a. 1) the biological relationship between the mother and her child:

Adjective + Noun: *biologische M.* 'biological m.', *eigene M.* 'own m.', *leibliche M.* 'own, biological m.'

a. 2) emotional relationship between the mother and her child:

Adjective + Noun: *liebende M.* 'loving m.', *geliebte M.* 'beloved m.'

Adjective + Verb: *M. liebt ihre Kinder* 'm. loves her children'

b) legal relationships:

b. 1) family law relationships:

Adjective + Noun: *ledige M.* 'single m.', *geschiedene M.* 'divorced m.', *verheiratete M.* 'married m.', *unverheiratete M.* 'unmarried m.', *verwitwete M.* 'widowed m.'

b. 2) criminal law and similar relationships:

Adjective + Noun: *angeklagte M.* 'accused m.', *getötete M.* 'killed/murdered m.', *verschwundene M.* 'missing m.'

Noun + Verb: *M. tötete ihr Kind/ihren Sohn/ihre Tochter/ihr Baby* 'm. killed her child/son/daughter/new-born baby), *M. klagt jdn. an* 'm. accuses someone'

b. 3) socioeconomic status, labour law relationships, profession:

Adjective + Noun: *erwerbstätige M.* 'working m.', *nicht berufstätige M.* 'unemployed m.', *nicht erwerbstätige M.* 'unemployed m.', *notleidende M.* 'needy m.', *teilzeitbeschäftigte M.* 'm. in part-time employment'

Noun + Verb: *M. braucht Hilfe* 'm. needs help', *M. arbeitet* 'm. works'

IV. Personality of mother:

a) character:

Adjective + Noun: *aggressive M.* 'aggressive m.', *dominante M.* 'dominant m.', *gefühllose M.* 'emotionless m.', *fleißige M.* 'diligent m.', *liebe M.* 'kind m.', *liebvolle M.* 'loving m.', *nachsichtige M.* 'tolerant m.'

b) feeling, emotions, mental state:

Adjective + Noun.: *geschockte M.* ‘shocked m.’, *gestresste M.* ‘stressed m.’, *glückliche M.* ‘happy m.’, *verzweifelte M.* ‘desperate m.’

c) behaviour, methods and models of upbringing:

Adjective + noun: *aggressive M.* ‘aggressive m.’, *dominante M.* ‘dominant m.’, *fürsorgliche M.* ‘caring m.’, *interessierte M.* ‘interested m.’, *schimpfende M.* ‘swearing m.’, *rauchende M.* ‘smoking m.’

d) the identity of mother:

Adjective + Noun: *deutsche M.* ‘German m.’, *gute M.* ‘good m.’, *moderne M.* ‘modern m.’, *schlechte M.* ‘bad m.’

Noun + Verb: *meine M. kommt aus ...* ‘my m. comes from...’

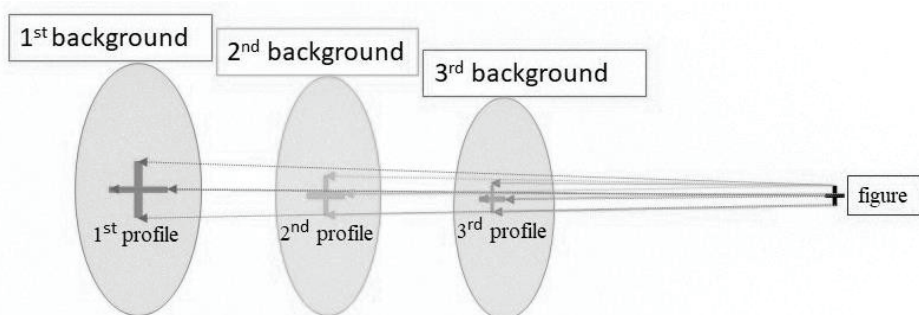
### 2.3 Process of the collocation base word profiling in context

When we study the appearance of individual collocations in the context, we can pay attention to the process of profiling. We perceive the thematic characteristic (see the previous part) in connection with the contextual information; its identification is linked to the knowledge of appearance of a given collocation in the contexts. The thematic circle of the collocation can be perceived as a domain and the collocation itself as a figure. When the collocation such as an aggressive mother appears in a different domain, a different image is profiled. This fact is evident in multivalent attributes (aggressive mother, dominant mother; the psychological or behavioural characteristic in relation to a child or in general). The profiling is contextually dependent; as an outcome, on the basis of contextually conditioned thematic characteristics, we can demonstrate that by spotlighting the figure through the prism of a type of theme, we identify different evaluation parameters to which the axiological function assigns different evaluation notions. The thematic characteristic – as a contextually conditioned parameter – thus participates in profiling the meaning of the given unit and also in the nature and the outcome of the process of evaluation, e.g., the evaluating subject can in one case evaluate the dominant mother as complying with the evaluation standard, i. e., good, and in another case it can be the opposite. Again, we can point to the significance of the theory of context effect.

When we change the domain, we get a different profile of the figure, e.g., the meaning of collocations such as *Hausfrau und Mutter* ‘housewife and mother’, *Ehefrau und Mutter* ‘wife and mother’, *Frau und Mutter* ‘woman and mother’, *Mutter und Lehrerin* ‘mother and teacher’ profiles differently depending on the chosen domain. When we project these figures onto backgrounds such as “socioeconomic status, profession” and “social-family relationships”, we get different profiles. Depending on the context, it can be the same person who fulfils



various roles in her life, e.g., mother and teacher. In this case, it can also be a positive or negative evaluation of that person because the word teacher can be interpreted on the background of a nice, patient, and creative person who likes children and can lead and motivate them thanks to a well-chosen way of communication but on the background of a strict and authoritative person, it can lead to negative expectations. Another option is that they are two different persons who are the subjects of the same sentence. In this case, they are often participants in a conflict. Collocations such as *liebe Mutter* ‘dear mother’, *liebvolle Mutter* ‘loving mother’, *nachsichtige Mutter* ‘tolerant mother’, *aggressive Mutter* ‘aggressive mother’, *schimpfende Mutter* ‘swearing mother’ can be interpreted on the background of themes of behaviour and habits; mental states and internal characteristics of the mother, or a relationship between the mother and the child. Depending on the chosen domain, the speaker automatically operates with specific, empirically sound psychological, social and other expectations, stereotypes and implications of meanings that determine his evaluation of the profiled entity. As a consequence, the result on the good-bad axis is strongly affected by extralinguistic factors including beliefs and experience of the language user. In this context we can remind ourselves of Miko’s earlier conclusions about anchoring of a language expression in the extralinguistic context and involvement of an experience-related complex in the process of its specification [30, p. 14.], however, they were not formulated in relation to the process of interpretation but production. Such perspective opens a wide range for interdisciplinary research dominated by psychological<sup>1</sup> and pragmatic approaches.



**Fig. 1.** Simplified profiling of a figure on the basis of various backgrounds

<sup>1</sup> For pragmatic aspects of collocations in spoken communication, see [31].

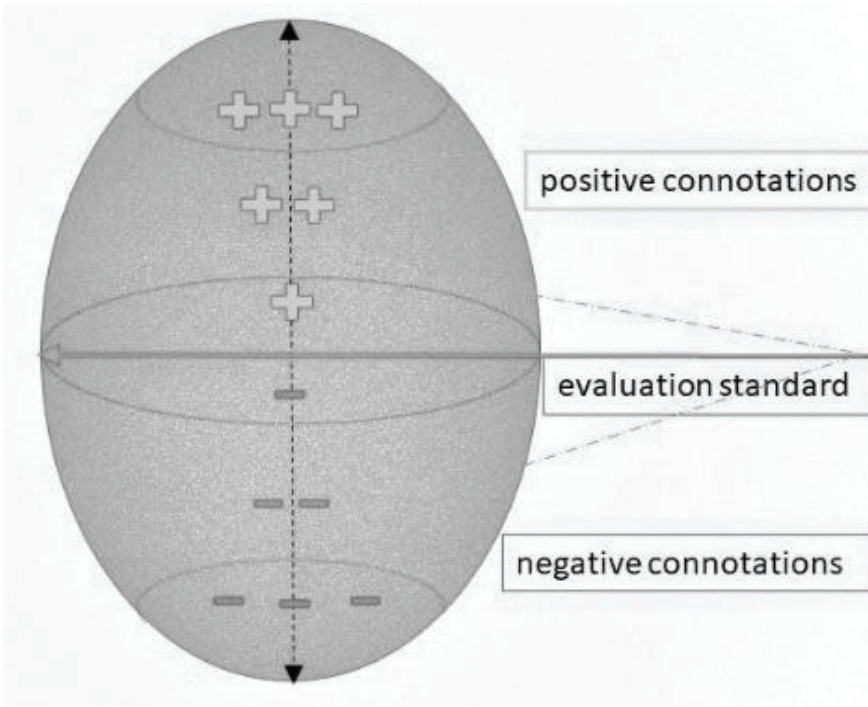


Fig. 2. Simplified scheme of evaluation standard and connotations

Collective experience, as written about by Kmecová [7, p. 70], plays an important role as part of understanding the linguistic image of evaluation. The evaluation standards in the sense of standardised evaluation parameters, and the stereotypical attribution of values on a given value scale, “are in a certain sense collectively conventionalised mental representations of attributes, which are in the base of the evaluation of the entities, as well as stereotypical attribution of values on the basis of these attributes” [32, p. 11].

Love, care, and proper upbringing are important concepts in the research of Rakhimova, Mukhamadiarova and Tarasova [33], who analysed German proverbs describing the family and concluded that “*the relationship between mother and child is characterized, in the first place, by the indispensability of maternal love and care. ... Proverbs emphasis that the main task of parents is to educate children properly and prepare them for adulthood*” [33, p. 1054]. These factors seem to form the basis of the mother’s assessment standard in German language culture. Based on how the mother performs her tasks as defined above, it is decided whether she is a good mother or a bad one. Thus love, care, and proper upbringing can be considered the basis of axiological Qualia in the sense as Hanks [34] writes.

### 3 CONCLUSION

Just as with other polysemantic lexical units, the meaning of the German word *Mutter* ‘mother’ is specified by the context in which it appears. As a lot of research by earlier scholars showed, substantive denominations of “mother” are connected with the notion that is – from the point of view of cognitive linguistics – characterised by a high degree of complexity. This has been proved also by results of the distribution and thematic analyses of these words on the basis of corpus material. Processing of contextual information (collocations and wider contextual data) allows us to reconstruct prototypical characteristics of “mother” and the related concepts of German speakers. In the subsequent analysis focused on the axiological aspects of the notion of mother, employment of psychological terms figure, background, and profile as well as the theoretical bases linked with the theory of context effect has proved to be beneficial. (Further research may in the future relate to the relationships of the mentioned concept with the phenomena of semantic prosody and semantic preference (for example [35], [36]). The submitted proposal is that the argument of the axiological function (the evaluation parameter) is an ordered pair of the figure (a lexical meaning of a lexeme) and the background (the context of evaluation), whereby the evaluation function assigns an evaluation concept to the above-mentioned ordered pair. Similarly, the thematic characteristic of words *Mutter* ‘mother’, derived from the thematic analysis of corresponding contexts, participates in profiling the meaning of the given unit and thus also in the nature and result of the evaluation process. The application of this process onto the context of words *Mutter* ‘mother’ recorded in the corpus material allows us to outline the unconscious axiological processes in evaluating the image of mother by German speakers.

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