

Article

Lexical-Semantic Fields in Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great

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Abstract: This article examines the lexical-semantic fields employed in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (Parts I and II) and analyzes how vocabulary choices construct themes of power, conquest, identity, and Renaissance humanism. Using a lexical-semantic field approach grounded in structural semantics and discourse analysis, the study identifies dominant semantic domains such as war, sovereignty, divinity, violence, and transformation and demonstrates how their interaction intensifies *Tamburlaine's* characterization and ideological force. The findings contribute to Marlovian scholarship by showing that lexical organization is not merely stylistic ornamentation but a core mechanism through which meaning, ideology, and dramatic tension are produced.

Keywords: Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*, lexical-semantic field, Renaissance drama, power discourse, stylistics.

1. Introduction

Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* occupies a foundational position in Elizabethan drama, both for its revolutionary blank verse and its radical reimagining of heroic ambition. While extensive research has addressed Marlowe's political ideology, rhetoric of power, and use of classical and biblical allusion, less systematic attention has been paid to the lexical-semantic organization of the play. This article argues that Marlowe's dramatic vision is realized through carefully structured lexical-semantic fields that shape the audience's perception of conquest, authority, and transgression.

Lexical-semantic field theory provides a productive framework for examining how clusters of semantically related words function collectively within a text. In *Tamburlaine the Great*, these clusters form a dense network that reinforces thematic oppositions such as order versus chaos, humanity versus divinity, and limitation versus boundless ambition. By analyzing these fields, the article seeks to demonstrate how Marlowe's language constructs *Tamburlaine's* mythic identity and supports the ideological thrust of the play.

Theoretical framework

The concept of the lexical-semantic field originates in structural linguistics, particularly in the work of Jost Trier, who viewed vocabulary as an interconnected system rather than an isolated set of lexical items. Later developments in semantics and stylistics have refined this approach, emphasizing contextual meaning, discourse function, and pragmatic force.

In literary studies, lexical-semantic field analysis allows scholars to uncover recurring semantic patterns that contribute to thematic coherence. Words associated with

a shared conceptual domain such as war or religion form a field whose cumulative effect exceeds the sum of individual lexical meanings. This method is especially relevant to Renaissance drama, where elevated rhetoric and repetition are central to characterization and persuasion.

2. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative lexical-semantic analysis of selected passages from Parts I and II of *Tamburlaine the Great*. Lexical items were grouped into semantic fields based on shared conceptual meaning and contextual usage. The analysis focuses on frequency, distribution, and interaction of these fields across key speeches and scenes. Attention is also given to metaphorical extensions, collocations, and evaluative language.

Dominant lexical-semantic fields in *Tamburlaine the Great*

The field of war and violence

One of the most prominent lexical-semantic fields in the play is that of war and violence. Lexemes such as sword, blood, conquest, battle, siege, slaughter, and enemy recur throughout both parts. This field establishes a persistent atmosphere of conflict and legitimizes violence as a means of self-realization.

Marlowe's repeated use of martial vocabulary elevates warfare to an almost aesthetic experience. Violence is not merely destructive but creative, enabling Tamburlaine to remake the political world. The density of this lexical field reinforces the idea that power, in the *Tamburlaine* universe, is inseparable from military dominance.

The field of power and sovereignty

Closely related to the war field is the lexical-semantic field of power and sovereignty. Words such as crown, throne, emperor, king, dominion, rule, and majesty function as markers of political authority. Tamburlaine's speeches are saturated with such terms, emphasizing his obsessive pursuit of absolute rule.

The interaction between the war and sovereignty fields suggests that political legitimacy in the play is achieved through force rather than inheritance. Marlowe thus destabilizes traditional notions of kingship and reflects Renaissance anxieties about authority and social mobility.

The field of divinity and cosmic order

Another significant lexical-semantic field is that of divinity and cosmic order. References to gods, heaven, fate, stars, fortune, and Jove abound in Tamburlaine's rhetoric. These lexemes situate his ambition within a cosmic framework and blur the boundary between human and divine.

Tamburlaine frequently appropriates divine language to describe himself, presenting his conquests as divinely sanctioned. This lexical strategy contributes to the play's central tension: whether Tamburlaine is an agent of cosmic destiny or a blasphemous usurper of divine authority.

The field of transformation and excess

The field of transformation and excess includes words and metaphors related to growth, expansion, and boundlessness, such as infinite, aspire, rise, mount, stretch, and exceed. These lexical items encode Tamburlaine's refusal of limitation and his desire to transcend human constraints.

This field interacts with both the divinity and power fields, reinforcing Tamburlaine's self-fashioning as a figure who exceeds ordinary human categories. Linguistically, excess becomes a defining feature of his identity.

3. Discussion

The interaction of lexical-semantic fields in *Tamburlaine the Great* reveals a highly structured linguistic system underpinning Marlowe's drama. Rather than relying on isolated rhetorical flourishes, Marlowe constructs meaning through sustained semantic

repetition and variation. The dominance of war, power, and divinity fields reflects a worldview in which ambition is limitless and moral boundaries are destabilized.

Moreover, the lexical fields contribute to the play's performative force. Tamburlaine's speeches function as acts of linguistic conquest, where language itself becomes a tool of domination. This supports interpretations of the play as a meditation on the power of rhetoric in shaping political and social realities.

4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that lexical-semantic field analysis offers valuable insights into the thematic and ideological structure of *Tamburlaine the Great*. Marlowe's systematic use of interrelated semantic domains intensifies the play's exploration of power, violence, and transcendence. The findings suggest that Marlowe's linguistic strategy is central to his dramatic innovation and to the enduring impact of *Tamburlaine* on Renaissance drama.

Future research may extend this approach through corpus-based methods or comparative analysis with other Marlovian and Shakespearean plays to further explore the relationship between lexical organization and dramatic meaning.

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