

# Expertise Meets Experience: Psychiatric Jargon Versus Lay Descriptions in Historical Patient Documents of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

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Prior to the establishment of psychiatry as a medical discipline around 1900, the lack of consistency in disease concepts and terminology resulted in mental illness being categorised according to general pathology (cf. Schott & Tölle 2006: 327). The initial phase of the emergence of psychiatric jargon is characterised by a high degree of discursivity. Moreover, psychiatrists were compelled to adopt terminology from other disciplines, leading to a vast array of terms (cf. Schuster 2010: 80–83).

This presentation aims to examine the complex interplay between this newly emerging scientific jargon and vernacular expressions describing mental illness found in patient documents from German psychiatric institutions of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The data for this qualitative study comprises German letters written by mostly lower-class, inexperienced writers extracted from the Corpus of Patient Documents (cf. Schiegg; <https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/copadocs/>) describing concepts of mental illness “from below” as well as medical reports or journals composed by their physicians. These documents provide insights into both the formal scientific discourse of medical professionals as well as the informal narratives of individuals in psychiatric institutions. This comparative analysis illuminates the fluid boundaries between specialized medical terminology and the expressions of laypersons, which are at times metaphorical or euphemistic (cf. Freund 2024: 137). By exploring the divergence or convergence of language within these documents, this study aims to contribute to an understanding of how scientific jargon in psychiatry was spread, negotiated, and adopted in different linguistic contexts.

## References

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