

THE SEMANTIC CHANGE OF WORDS



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ABSTRACT

In this article, semantic change may also occur when native speakers of another language adopt English expressions and apply them to activities or conditions in their own social and cultural environment. Common types of semantic change include amelioration, pejoration, broadening, semantic narrowing, bleaching, metaphor, and metonymy. The categorization of semantic change – that is in this case the ways in which words can change their meanings – used to be the major field of interest in historical linguistics for a long time.

Keywords: semantic shift, lexical change, narrowing, bleaching, broadening.

АННОТАЦИЯ

В этой статье семантическое изменение может также произойти, когда носители другого языка перенимают английские выражения и применяют их к действиям или условиям в своей собственной социальной и культурной среде. Общие типы семантических изменений включают улучшение, уничтожение, расширение, семантическое сужение, обесцвечивание, метафору и метонимию. Категоризация семантических изменений — то есть, в данном случае, способов изменения значения слов — долгое время была основной областью интересов исторической лингвистики.

Ключевые слова: семантический сдвиг, лексическое изменение, сужение, обесцвечивание, расширение.

INTRODUCTION

In semantics and historical linguistics, semantic change refers to any change in the meaning(s) of a word over the course of time. Also called semantic shift, lexical change, and semantic progression. Common types of semantic change include amelioration, pejoration, broadening, semantic narrowing, bleaching, metaphor, and metonymy. Semantic change may also occur when native speakers of another

language adopt English expressions and apply them to activities or conditions in their own social and cultural environment. Before actually entering the discussion about the reasons for semantic change in the English language, it is first helpful to give some background information on semantic change. The kinds of semantic change most extensively studied in the last 40 years are changes leading to grammatical, procedural meaning, typically in the context of work on grammaticalization, the study of work on morphosyntactic change.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Much of the work has been conducted from typological and cognitive-linguistic perspectives. It has revealed that semantic changes correlated with the types of morphosyntactic changes associated with grammaticalization are regular in the sense that they are replicated not only in the same language but cross-linguistically. They are almost exclusively unidirectional in that lexical meaning may become grammatical meaning. The changes are conceptualized as on a continuum, from contentful (lexical) to procedural (grammatical) meaning. In most languages, auxiliary verbs derive from lexical sources. Examples in English are *must, shall, can, will, may, be going to, have to*, etc. With the exception of *will* and *be going to*, the sources have obsolesced in Standard English. Another cross-linguistic generalization is that the equivalent of English prepositions for the front, back, top, and bottom regions often derive from terms for body parts, as in English *back, behind*. In many languages, the verb for FINISH comes to be used as a marker of completion, compare to Chinese *-le* ‘completive’ < *liao* ‘finish.’ Heine and Kuteva is a major source of information on grammatical concepts and their sources. Because some of the languages cited do not have written histories until recently, we can only make hypotheses about their history. Therefore in some cases, sources are reconstructed based on polysemies in present-day languages. The category of semantic changes. The categorization of semantic change – that is in this case the ways in which words can change their meanings – used to be the major field of interest in historical linguistics for a long time. Therefore, there is a wide variety of literature available on this topic. But still, the different types of semantic change can be divided into basic types. All of them have in common that they only generate semantic change when the use of a word in a certain way becomes widespread among a speech community. As the most important or productive manner of semantic change there is a metaphor, which is “the transfer of a literal meaning to a figurative area”. A good example of this is the word *head*, which originally only referred to the top part of a living

creature's body. This distinct feature of the head could then be used metaphorically and transferred to other areas of life, as when using expressions like “head of the department”; thereby, the word *head* has extended its meaning capacity from only referring to a body part to also referring to people on high levels of professional life.

Another important way to change meanings is through metonymy, which is “the substitution of a word referring to an attribute for the thing that is meant”. An example is the use of the word *crown* for a monarch, relying on the common knowledge of speakers and listeners that it is normally only monarchs who wear crowns. The third major way in which words can change their meanings is by means of euphemisms. Speakers use euphemisms whenever they are in need of an inoffensive expression for an otherwise offensive utterance. For example, it is highly inappropriate in Western cultures to speak of bodily functions in polite conversations. Therefore, speakers use euphemisms – and teach them to their children – in order to be able to speak politely, e.g. the child can speak of “number one” or “number two” in order to express its need to go to the bathroom. Furthermore, speakers can use the stylistic device of irony to alter the meaning of a word; ironical use of words occurs when they are used in a way contradicting their normal use. An example is the use of intensifiers, such as *awfully* or *terribly*, which normally refer to something dreadful, to express that something is particularly good or nice, as in “he’s awfully handsome”.

Classifications of semantic change. Classifications of semantic change are the main empirical output of historical philological semantics, and an in-depth study of the historical-philological era (which is not what we are aiming for here) would primarily take the form of a classification of such classifications. Rather than give intricate overviews of how many different classifications of semantic change the historical-philological tradition produced and how they are related to each other, conceptually and genealogically, we will present the classificatory efforts in three steps, each time adding a level of complexity. In the first paragraph of the section, we present a panorama of some of the most common elements that may be found in such classifications: what are the phenomena that historical-philological semantics predominantly tend to have a look at? The second paragraph adds one degree of nuance, illustrating that historical-philological semantics does not stop at the level where we find phenomena like metaphor and metonymy, but also search for lower-level patterns of semantic development. The third paragraph zooms in on the more elaborate schemas that appeared in the final stage of the development of historical-philological semantics. To get an idea of these culminating achievements, we will

conclude the section with the classification suggested by Albert Carnoy (1927) and, contrasting it with Carnoy's, at the classification proposed by Gustaf Stern (1931). These sophisticated and detailed catalogs mark the end of a period, and they do so in a particularly symbolical way: Carnoy's *La science du mot* is exactly contemporaneous with Leo Weisgerber's vigorous attack against the tradition of historical semantics (Weisgerber 1927), an attack that marks the beginning of the structuralist era in lexical semantics. And the year of publication of Stern's *Meaning and the Change of Meaning* is the same year in which Jost Trier published his monograph *Der Deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbereich des Verstandes* – the first major descriptive work in the new structuralist paradigm.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, it is concluded that every single word has a general lexical meaning which itself is a linguistic category due to the concept which is a logical category. This general meaning is almost similar to the language function but again not equal to it. As it is closely related to different language functions, it is absolutely distinguishable as a linguistic unit from other main units of the language. It is also concluded that not only the main units of language have meaning but also the other classes of semantic-word formation or are responsible for the changes of meaning. In the end, we have some specific meanings that distinguish the language units from each – other. If the words are distinguished from their general meaning, they will not be called word; and if they will be distinguished from their grammatical meaning or lexical – grammatical; at the same time they are distinguished also from their specific meaning that every single word contains sand which makes them different from each – other. The meaning shift is part of an onomasiological process, no matter if they are intentional or not. In both cases, these changes in meaning happen as a consequence of internal and external linguistic factors. In general, these changes have been classified based on a contrasting relation; widening and narrowing, metaphor–metonymy not allowing in this way another direction of meaning development.

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