Historical linguistics
Lexical semantic change

1 INTRODUCTION

Difficult to formulate a general theory:

• unlike other areas of linguistic change, lexical semantic change is linked to change in culture / society: arbitrary cultural factors can give rise to highly unpredictable semantic changes

• the link between form (*signifiant*) and meaning (*signifié*) is arbitrary. Any link is as good as any other, hence unlimited change is possible (but see later)

• there are no physiological restrictions on change as there are for sound change

2 TRADITIONAL CLASSIFICATIONS OF LEXICAL SEMANTIC CHANGE

1. Restriction e.g.   *starve* 'die' > 'die of hunger' (cf. German *sterben*)
                      meat 'food' > 'animal flesh as food'
                      fowl 'bird' > 'edible domestic bird' (cf. German *Vogel*)

2. Extension e.g.   Fr. *panier* 'bread basket' (cf. *pain*) > 'basket'
                      arrive 'come to shore' > 'arrive'
                      batch 'quantity of bread baked at once' > 'anything handled
                            in a single operation'

3. Pejoration e.g.   *silly* 'blessed' > 'silly' (cf. German *selig*)
                      villain 'serf' > 'criminal'
                      amateur 'lover of a topic' > 'incompetent person' (F. *aimer*)

4. Amelioration e.g. *knight* 'servant' > 'knight'
                      sophisticated 'artificial' (cf. *sophistry*) > 'cultured'
                      pretty 'sly' > 'good-looking'

3 MEILLET'S AND ULLMANN'S CAUSES OF SEMANTIC CHANGE (MEILLET 1905; ULLMANN 1957, 1962)

1. Language-internal e.g. French *pas* 'step' > negative marker

2. Historical causes i.e. a change in material culture e.g. *car* 'cart' > 'automobile', *pen* 'quill' > 'pen'; *fly* 'fly (of bird)' > 'fly (of bird or aeroplane etc.)'.

3. Social causes i.e. a word changes its social sphere e.g. *lure* 'bundle of feathers used in falconry' > 'attraction', *harvest* 'autumn' > 'agricultural work carried out in autumn'.

4. Psychological causes i.e. spread of metaphors from frequently used areas, or avoidance of taboo words e.g. new words for 'bear' in English *bear* ('brown') or Russian *medved'* ('honey-eater').

4 ROLE OF METAPHOR AND METONYMY

Metaphor = one concept is understood in terms of another / an imagined link is established e.g. *foot* 'foot' > 'lower part of hill', *pay for* 'give money' > 'suffer

(e.g. for mistakes)'. Metaphors conventionalise and are no longer regarded as creative:

1. stage when using the metaphoric meaning is an act of creativity
2. a period of imitation: speakers are aware of using a well-known metaphor
3. metaphor is completely conventionalised

Metaphors generally shift from concrete to abstract e.g. *grasp* 'take hold of' > 'understand' or from specialised to general spheres of usage (as with *pay*).

Cf. grammaticalisation OE *þa hwile þe* 'at the time that' > 'while (temporal)' > 'while (concessive)'

Metonymy = change arising from contiguity (nearness) of meaning i.e. a real rather than imagined link e.g. part-for-whole *tea* 'drink' > 'evening meal'; material for object *glass* 'material' > 'container'; or close association e.g. *cheek* 'jaw' > 'cheek'.

5 TENDENCIES
Some common semantic shifts can be identified:

• hearing > vision e.g. *loud*
• touch > taste e.g. *sharp*
• taste > emotion e.g. *bitter*, *sweet*
• sensory > personality e.g. *sharp*, *dull*, *bright* (or just physical > mental)
• deontic > epistemic e.g. *may* (*You may go to the ball* > *She may have arrived by now*, see Traugott 1989)
• see > understand e.g. *clear*, *observe*, *regard*, *view*
• diminutives > ordinary e.g. *chicken* 'young fowl' > 'adult fowl', *pig* (ditto) replacing *swine*
• cheap > negative connotations e.g. Latin *vilis* 'cheap' > Fr. *vile* 'contemptible'.
• intelligent > dishonest e.g. *cunning*

What's the point of all this?
• classes show what changes are likely to occur – but offer no explanation
• even the 'causes' do not go much beyond classifying the data
• these tendencies have different sources (so do not form a unified explanation)

Some of these are due to universal patterns of metaphor (e.g. emotion as a taste, comprehension as vision, cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Such tendencies have also been systematised (Traugott 1985, 1989):

Tendency I

Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal (evaluative / perceptual / cognitive) described situation e.g. *feel* 'touch' > 'experience', *grasp* 'take in one's hands' > 'understand', *weigh* (*up*) 'determine weight' > 'evaluate', *value* 'monetary value' > 'worth'.

Tendency II

Meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation e.g. *observe* 'perceive' > 'state', *while* 'at the same time that' > 'although'

Tendency III

Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state / attitude towards the proposition e.g. *go* 'walk' > 'intend', *may* 'have permission' > 'be possible', *difficult* 'hard to do' > 'hard to please'.

On the spread of metaphor see Ogura and Wang (1995).

6 OTHER ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN SEMANTIC CHANGE

6.1 Linguistic causes

• words become too short to be effective carriers of meaning and are replaced by longer versions which take over their meaning
• explains frequent replacement of ordinary forms by diminutive e.g. Fr. *abeille* 'bee' for expected **ap /a/, German *Mädchen* 'little girl' > 'girl' replacing *Magd*.
• fails to explain cases where this does not take place e.g. Fr. *eau* /o/ 'water'.

• a word changes its sense to replace a word that became 'unfit' through homonymy e.g. Fr. *manger*, It. *mangiare* etc. (< Lat. *mandicare* 'chew') replaced the existing word for 'eat' because it was sometimes homophonous with forms of *esse* 'be' (see Lüdtke 1999).

• a newly-created or borrowed word pushes an existing word out of place (e.g. *sloth* 'slowness' > 'laziness' after the appearance of *slowness*; *deer* 'animal' > 'deer' after borrowing Fr. *animal*) (cf. structuralist 'push chains' in sound change).

• a word is influenced by an unrelated but phonetically similar word: suggests that words are stored / retrieved by their phonetic form as well as their meaning e.g. *sap* 'undermine' > 'drain' under influence of *sap* (of a tree).

• a word's meaning changes as a result of syntactic change e.g. *like* 'give pleasure to' > 'derive pleasure from'.

6.2 Polysemy and vagueness

Polysemy and vagueness are central to semantic change:

• a word acquires a second (polysemous) sense
    e.g. *write* 'cut' > 'cut, write'; *spin* 'draw out (fibre into thread)' > 'turn rapidly'

• a word loses a second (polysemous) sense *write* 'cut, write' > 'write'

• if both happen, the word change its sense entirely

6.3 Acquisition

Children have access only to reference (i.e. use on a particular occasion) never sense, so are liable to make abductive inferences which alter the language. They may:

• interpret a common context in which a word is applied as the only one (e.g. *write*)

• assume that the fact that a word is not applied in a particular context is an accidental gap in the data (e.g. *dog*)

• construct derivational links where none existed historically and apply regular semantic mappings to those links (e.g. *sap*)

• misinterpret what the intended reference is completely e.g. e.g. *bead* 'prayer' > 'bead' from phrases such as *counting one's beads*

6.4 Social and cultural causes

See above. Unpredictable and can be extreme.

6.5 Language use (cf. metaphor)

Attribution of meaning of one part of an utterance to another e.g. in *grow taller* the sense of growth is attributed to the adjective *taller*, hence *grow* comes to mean 'become', hence *grow smaller*.

Also the cause of pejoration / ameloriation (e.g. via euphemism) e.g. positive associations of OE *hros* 'steed' are lost as every owner applies it to their own horse; *crafty* 'skilled' is used to avoid saying 'dishonest' openly, but the meaning is understood by inference, and becomes attached to the item itself; *cheap*.

FURTHER READING

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