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A STUDY OF SEMANTIC CHANGE IN ENGLISH

[ΛΕΥΚΗ ΣΕΛΙΔΑ]

The consequence of the living nature of a spoken language is mutation at all levels along a temporal axis. Different linguistic levels are characterized by different degrees of sensitivity to intralinguistic or extralinguistic pressures and the temporal rate depends on intricate internal as well as external inter-relationships such as frequency of use, specific reference and sociolinguistic conditions. In Europe, in particular, semantic considerations have been allowed to influence theoretical modelling concerning the other linguistic levels since European linguists are usually unable to accept any system that excludes the centrality of meaning in linguistic analysis. At some point it was indeed customary to place the structural position of semantic change on the same footing as sound change, e.g. considering analogy as one of the innumerable causes of sound change (Ullmann 1957). The Saussurean (and post-Saussurean) structural semanticists take the view that the meaning of any linguistic unit is determined by the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations which hold between that unit and other linguistic units in a language. Such relations can only be revealed in context, the importance of which cannot be too much emphasized. With the exception of classical examples serving to illustrate a statement, all instances of change of meaning referred to in this paper have been derived from contextualized usage. Bloomfield's much quoted definition of a speech form as a 'relatively permanent object to which meaning is attached as a kind of changeable satellite' (Potter 1950) by-passes the symbolic nature of thought and in the case of English, such permanency may be fairly well represented in morphology but scantily in phonology.

A generative-oriented proposition has defined the task of a semantic theory as the construction of a set of rules in order to represent what native speakers know about the semantic deep structure exclusively. Delimiting semantic competence consists mainly of a. the determination of the number and readings of a deep structure b. indicating semantic anomaly and c. stating paraphrase relations without incorporating a theory of reference and without regard to context or situation. A semantic theory of this type cannot account for the fact that both

readings will be assigned to each of sentences such as the following: *This shop sells alligator shoes/This shop sells horse shoes* or *Shall we take the children to the zoo?/Shall we take the bus to the zoo?* Here, semantic significance will depend on culture, belief, encyclopedic knowledge etc. Let alone the fact that ambiguity may be intentional or a statement can be sarcastic, ironic or wilfully misinforming.

The Trier-Lyons (Lyons 1977) diachronic semantics principle is not one of comparing successive states of the total vocabulary (which would hardly be practicable, even if it were theoretically feasible). What is proposed instead amounts to a comparison of the structure of a lexical field at time t_1 with the structure of a lexical field at time t_2 . They are comparable because although they are different lexical fields, and necessarily so since they belong to different synchronic language systems, they cover the same conceptual field. Each meaning can be defined in terms of a relative field consisting of non-synonymous 'lexemes' as the term is employed in Lyons (1977) where 'mat', for example, is limited by its contrast in sense with 'rug' and 'carpet'. Such lexemes are in constant flux. It must be pointed out however that 'constant flux' should not imply that semantic change, or language change for that, is an imperceptible continuous process. Different periods should be viewed as separate entities on the basis of the doctrine of recreation of a language during the learning stages following individual linguistic hypotheses which need not be and are not the same for all learners.

This paper focuses on one aspect of semantic change. Not sentence meaning as distributed to all levels among all the components throughout substance, form and context but the reciprocal referent-reference relationship as demonstrated in English lexes. This relationship is systematic in the sense that virtually all instances fall neatly into distinct categories. The hypothesis may intuitively be made that the referent-reference relationship in semantic change in English forms a definite pattern that could possibly apply to other languages as well. Such a claim towards a universal semantic component—or 'metatheory for semantics' (Fodor and Katz 1965)—would be based on the physiological/psychological universals which underline the production and perception of language rather than the distribution of meaning itself which is definitely language-specific since a semantic theory of a natural language is part of a linguistic description of that language.

The following categories have been established as a result of selective

reading of literary texts and quotations (Copley 1961) ranging from Old English (OE) to Modern English (ModE):

1. There has been no change in the sense relation, e.g. *eat*, *sleep*, *house*, *child*, *bed*. The change may be morphophonemic, phonemic or morphemic. Cf. OE *etan*, *slēpan*, *hūs*, *cild*, *bedd*.

2. The reference is changed while the referent remains the same. For example, *flat* for 'apartment'.

3. The referent is factually changed while the reference remains the same, e.g. *pen*, *ship*. The internal structure of the conceptual field is changed. It may however be argued that there is no linguistic change involved in such cases since the function is identical.

4. Where a word has more than one meaning, abandonment of one meaning. *Addition* is no longer used in the sense of 'title, style of address'. *Innocent* is often used from Chaucerian times to the seventeenth century in the sense of 'fool' or 'half-witted' as well.

5. Change in the internal structure of the conceptual field through change in our knowledge of the referent. For example, *atom*. *Element* means one of the four constituents of matter 'earth, water, air, fire' even when the older theory of matter had been abandoned. *Humour* is defined in Ben Jonson's Introduction to *Every Man out of his Humor* (1599) '...So in euery humane body The choller, melancholy, flegme, and bloud, By reason that they flow continually In some one part, and are not continent, Receiue the name of Humors...'. In the sense of 'fluid' the word is used from the fourteenth century to the end of the eighteenth. *Influence* means 'power that flows from the stars and effects the fate of men' from the fourteenth century onwards and *virtue* means 'superhuman power' from the fourteenth century to the eighteenth.

6. Overlapping semantic fields may lead to overlapping of references. In early Modern English (eModE) *overlook* meant 'to look with an evil eye upon' from which there developed the sense 'deceive' (1596). Fifty years later *oversee*, a synonym of *overlook*, is employed in the sense of 'deceive' (Ullmann 1957).

7. Extended usage of a semantic denotation based on analogy is referred to as radiation, polysemia—which is misleading since the semantic function is the same—or multiplication. A word like *dress*, for example, can be used with complements such as 'a wound, a salad, a shop-window, one's hair' etc.

8. Extended usage of a conjunctive nature, within the same semantic field, may be catalogued as expansion or generalization and abstrac-

tion. *Bird*, *pigeon* and *pig* have started out as 'young birdling, young dove and young swine'.

9. Change of meaning as a result of phonetic similarity between the two references. Such instances are influenced by analogy and popular etymology and meet the requirements set by structural semanticists, that the relations between semantics and other linguistic levels must be exhibited. Examples: *sam-* 'half' from West Germanic **sāmi-* in *samblind* (OE) assimilated to *sandblind*. OE *scam-faest* 'confirmed in shame' to *shame-fast* to *shame-faced*. ME *berfrey*, either from Greek *pyrgos phorētos* 'movable war-tower' or from Old French *berfrei* -from Frankish **bergfridh-* from **bergan* 'protect' and **frithuz* 'peace'- changed by association with *bell* to ModE *belfry*. Confusion between Latin *saltus* 'leap'—cf. Old French *saut* 'sexual heat'—and *salt* as in ModE from OE *sealt* led to *salt* 'lecherous' from the end of the sixteenth century to Restoration times.

10. Loss of emotive undertones leads to semantic deterioration. *Affection* 'strong emotion' very often meaning 'passion' in the fifteenth century has changed to ModE 'kindly feeling'. *Silly*, from OE *sāelig* 'blessed', through 'innocent, simple' to 'foolish'. *Decent* 'comely' from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth to a 'commonplace adjective of mild approbation' (Copley 1961). *Cunning* 'knowledge' in the fourteenth century from OE *cunnan* 'know' to its present day unpleasant connotations. *Knave*, from OE *cnafa* 'boy, servant' to a rogue. *Dismay* 'terror' from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth to its present mild sense. *Lovely* 'affectionate' from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth, to its present colourless sense. *Noise* 'harmonious sound' from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth is no longer associated with harmony. *Uncouth* from OE *cunnan* (see above) means 'unknown' until the middle of the seventeenth century.

Overuse destroys the effectiveness of a word. A notorious example is *nice*. From 'foolish' to 'simple' to 'shy' to 'modest' to 'discriminating' to 'agreeable', it has lost most of its significance. Words such as *horrible* and *monstrous* can now be used in colloquial antithesis to *nice*.

11. The opposite process, a semantic improvement, can be documented as a parallel course. Typical examples taken from ME texts reveal that *shrewd* means 'evil, malicious'—with the ModE meaning appearing in the sixteenth century—*fond* from *fonnen* 'be silly' means 'foolish' and *imagination* 'mental hysteria'. *Pretty* from OE *praettig* 'deceitful, sly' to 'brave, gallant' (person) and 'fine' (thing) in the fifteenth century.

Finally social change can be reflected in the attitude towards a referent as in *women's suffrage*.

12. The process of specialization or narrowing of the semantic field is the commonest in English diachronic semantics and is conceivably accompanied by an increase in precision. *Accident* 'anything that happens' in the fourteenth century is changed to 'unfortunate happening' in the nineteenth. *Science* 'science in general' in the fourteenth century is narrowed by being divided into *arts* and *sciences* in the nineteenth. OE *clyppan* 'embrace', ME *clippen*, ModE *clip*—a particularly limited field. *Closet* 'private room' to *water-closet* in the late nineteenth century. *Desert* 'any uncultivated uninhabited region' in ME, to 'a barren sandy waste' in the beginning of the nineteenth century. OE *lust* 'pleasure in general' until the end of the seventeenth century to 'sexual desire'. *Naughty* 'worthless, wicked', from the sixteenth century to the seventeenth, is subsequently restricted to the mischievous behaviour of children. *Success* 'outcome' from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth, to a 'happy outcome'. OE *mete* 'food' to ModE *meat*. *Undertaker* 'he who undertakes something' until the beginning of the eighteenth century, to the present restricted meaning. *Virtuoso* 'learned man, a scientist' from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth is restricted to 'a skilled musical performer'. *Worm* 'serpent, dragon' from OE to the sixteenth century. Literally scores of examples can be added to this particular category. Restricted meanings may additionally sometimes be accompanied by deterioration as in the foregoing examples: *accident*, *clip*, *closet*, *lust*, *undertaker* and occasionally by amelioration as in *success*. A different type of narrowing occurs in *amiable* which, until the end of the eighteenth century, could modify +aminate* as well as —aminate nouns before its present limitation to +aminate. The opposite limitation to —aminate occurs in *clear* which can no longer modify a +aminate head as in *clear woman* meaning 'pure, innocent, noble'.

Referents involved in expansive, semantically impoverished, and restrictive change can be conceptualized as linked through the relationship 'kind of' e.g. OE *brid* and *deer* mean 'young bird' and 'beast'

* According to Fodor and Katz (1965) such entries are recommended in a semantic theory since the use of definitions as in dictionary entries is considered to be inadequate. It must be pointed out however that such entries are characterized by a limited range of delicacy.



respectively. The expansive relationship 'part of' operates through synecdoche in Modern Greek where *χέρι* may include 'arm and hand' and also operates in Balto-Slavic languages (Brown 1979). Such relationships may be interpreted through a notion of conjunctivity, i.e. the conceptualization of two entities as bearing an immediate transitive relationship to one another. An additional example is OE *cēase* 'jaw' which has changed to ModE *cheek*. A 'part of' relationship is present -*cheek* is part of *chin* and *cheek*- and restriction of reference is entailed.

Institutionalized lexical meanings often diverge from the 'theoretical' meanings in a process known as 'petrification' (Leech 1974). The solidification of such meanings is accompanied by a shrinkage of denotation as in Leech's *trouser-suit* which means 'suit with trousers for women' and not 'suit with trousers'.

Two outstanding cases of narrowing are represented by *doctrine* 'lesson', from the fourteenth century to the end of the seventeenth, and *enlarge* 'set at large', from the fifteenth century until comparatively recently. The former has been narrowed to 'religious dogma' and the latter is limited to photography.

13. Literal interpretation of morphemes occurring in a word marks the initial stage in semantic development. For example: words like *awful*, *careful* and *frightful* meaning 'awe-inspiring' 'full of cares' 'frightened' and *artificial* 'skilfully achieved' meet in the phrase used by King James II when he observed the new St. Paul's Cathedral: 'amusing, awful and artificial'. *Amuse*, from Old French *amuser* 'bemuse', had already undergone a change to 'occupy the attention of' to 'beguile' to 'divert'. *Convince* 'overcome' from the middle of the sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth. *Disease* 'lack of ease' from the fourteenth century to the end of the seventeenth. *Curious* 'skilfully made' from the fourteenth century to the end of the eighteenth and *discover* 'reveal' during the same period. *Vulgar* 'common' from the fourteenth century to the eighteenth. *Determine* 'put an end to' from the end of the fourteenth century to the end of the eighteenth. *Depend* 'be suspended' in the sixteenth century. *Grateful* 'pleasing' from the Elizabethan times to the nineteenth century. *Secure* 'free from care' quite common in Shakespeare. *Translate* 'convey to heaven' in the fourteenth century and *urchin* 'hedgehog' from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century.

Such 'theoretical' meanings are normally changed at a subsequent stage and the result is a transfer of context where the former meanings may still be prominent and the latter meanings can be classified as

metaphors, accompanied in most cases by semantic narrowing or expansion. It has recently been proposed (Brown 1979) that metaphor and metonymy should be unified in a rigorously defined concept of conjunctivity (see category 12). A more abstract type of conjunctivity is present in a transfer of features as in *err* and *lucid* which are originally characterized as -abstract, *offend* as +physical and OE *cwic(u)* 'alive' which survived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as, for example, in Shakespeare's 'tis for the dead, not for the quicke' (Hamlet 5:1).

Transfer of referents through similarity or contiguity between the senses and transfer of reference through similarity or contiguity between the referents (Ullmann 1957) accord with the notion of conjunctivity. Ullmann distinguishes such change from 'changes due to linguistic conservatism', defined as 'the maintenance of a term while the object or idea it designates changes' (category 3). Since such change involves functional equivalency, linguistic conservatism appears to fit the conjunctivity framework as well. Composite grammatical transfer occurs through similarity of reference and referent. For example, the adjective *hard* by 1200 means 'not easy' but the adverb acquired the same meaning three centuries later, probably by analogy, and then developed the new sense 'not quite'.

It appears that specification or narrowing leads in semantic change in English and this type of change can be shown to be representative of the development of the English language at other levels as well. A relatively high redundancy is typical of the formative years. A certain balance of equilibrium is reached in 1700 through such forces as frequency of use, specific reference, the need to be distinct and the writing of prestigious writers, particularly through the eighteenth century. Personal habit and printing facility determine spelling form less and less and one-to-one correspondences between form and reference become increasingly common. Cf. for example, Chaucer's *by* meaning 'with, of, by' and Shakespeare's *of* meaning 'from, on, by, for, as'. In addition external social factors must be given due credit. In Elizabethan English *ordinary* may mean 'a public meal served in an inn', *generous* and *free* 'high born, noble' and *precise* 'puritanical'.

Research of a descriptive nature into the semantic structure of a language leads to the revelation of facts which may, in turn, form a basis for the formulation of a semantic theory of a natural language, a dictionary and possibly a system of lexical rules and rules including

meaning transfer. Such a theory according to Fodor and Katz (1965) 'should accommodate such facts in the most revealing way'. Facts, however, are often accompanied by question marks related to their positions. For example, historical relations are not always psychologically related, e.g. *crane* 'machine for lifting' derived presumably by a visual metaphor from *crane* 'type of bird' and psychological relations are not necessarily historically related, e.g. *ear* 'organ of hearing' from OE *ēare* and *ear* 'head of corn' from OE *ēar*. Fundamental tripartitions where the new sense is narrower than the old, e.g. *undertaker*, wider than the old, e.g. *basket* or cases of transfer as in *the eye of the needle* are neither conclusive enough nor explanatorily adequate. Ullmann (1957) in admitting this position asks for an account of the process of the change together with the origin, the spread and the possible obsolescence of rival senses. The obvious sources for such data are a properly diachronic lexicon compiled on the basis of examples taken from actual use of a term in context.

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