

16 Semantic Change

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1. Introduction

Semantics is the science of meaning. This definition goes back to Michel Bréal, who in 1897 published the first comprehensive study on this subject and coined the term 'semantics' itself (French *sémantique*), based on Old Greek *sēmantikós* 'significant' (from the same root as the verb *sēmainō* 'show by a sign, indicate').

In this chapter we thus deal with changes in meaning or, rather, with changes in the way in which meaning(s) and form(s) relate to each other. The Saussurean tradition has emphasized how the relationship between the phonetic shape of a word (*signifiant*) and its meaning (*signifié*) is arbitrary, in the sense that it is only due to a convention between the speakers of a language or a dialect. The arbitrariness or conventionality of this relationship can be easily proved by the fact that the same meaning is expressed by different words in different languages, as shown in (1).

(1) English *cow*, Spanish *vaca*, Italian *mucca*, Sanskrit *gaus*, Hebrew *pārāh*

If there were a necessary connection between meaning and form, we would expect that the same word (or, at least, similar ones) were used across languages.¹ Given that that relationship is conventional, it can change along time.

Semantic change can thus occur because the relation between *signifiant* and *signifié* is arbitrary.

Meaning is at the core of language by its very nature—no language would be possible if its linguistic units did not have a meaning. In spite of its central role, the study of meaning has been somewhat neglected in some approaches to language. It is sometimes considered the less linguistic part of language, in the sense that meaning has a direct connection to natural and social realities, which is not the case with other areas of language—we do not expect that the study of the social structures of the speakers of a language will cast any light on the understanding of the phonology of their language nor that there is a correlation between ergativity or accusativity and hunter-gatherer societies in opposition to agricultural societies, but we do expect a difference of vocabulary and the organization of the meaning of words between societies with a different level of technological development.

From a historical perspective, this means that a change in the sociocultural or environmental conditions of the speakers of a language may have an impact on this area of language—new words may be coined or borrowed or new meanings of words may arise; compare Spanish *ratón* 'mouse' (both animal and computer device, as a calque from English *mouse*; see section 4.3) vs. Italian *mouse* (only the computer device, directly borrowed from English). A whole new terminology related to computers has been introduced in many languages of the world in the past 30 years or so. The development of a new technology has had a direct bearing on lexical and semantic change.

Semantic change can be studied basically from two perspectives—semasiological and onomasiological. In a semasiological approach to semantic change, the focus will be on analyzing the variations in the meaning that a given word (or other linguistic unit) has undergone along time. We will learn how Latin *dēnārius*, a specific type of silver coin, has evolved into Spanish *dinero* meaning 'money' in general or how Latin *argentum* 'silver' has become French *argent* meaning both 'silver' and 'money'—a change paralleled in some American varieties of Spanish in which *plata* 'silver' means 'money,' too. This is probably one of the most popular areas of linguistics. People seem to be fascinated by the changes in the meanings of words and what their original meaning was—their 'etymology' (see Kronasser 1952 and Chapter 17 in this volume).

Instead, from an onomasiological perspective, we will turn our attention to a given meaning or set of related meanings (e.g., verbs related to 'knowledge,' color names, etc.) and analyze how they have been expressed along time—how many words are used, how the meanings of these words differ from each other, etc. This will introduce us in the domain of semantic fields (see section 3.2.2 below). A question usually addressed to someone who knows a foreign language is: how do you say X in that language? People usually feel a bit disappointed when there is no straightforward answer to that question. In popular belief

languages are thought to be isomorphic—concepts are expected to be organized in the same way across languages, so that when speaking another language you would just have to change the label (i.e., the word) you are using. However, the underlying mental structures usually differ from one language to another. For instance, in English or in French the day is divided into four units (*morning, afternoon, evening, and night* or *matin, après-midi, soir, and nuit*), while in Spanish there are only three (*mañana, tarde* and *noche*), so that the limits cannot be at the same point. The organization of a given conceptual domain or semantic field may thus also vary along time for different reasons, so it is important to pay attention to how and why these changes can be brought about.

Although we will focus on diachronic change, a few words on the organization of meaning are in need. The meaning of a word is not as straightforward as we tend to think. Let us use *book* as an example. There will be no difficulty for an English speaker in producing a mental image associated with the word *book*. However, if they are asked how many pages an object must have to be a book, maybe the answer would not be so easy—does an object having just 20 pages fall into the category of ‘book?’ Certainly, it will be more likely considered a book if it is bound and has a hard cover, otherwise it will probably be regarded as a ‘leaflet.’ However, if we are told to take the book on the table and there are only a key-holder and the 20-page object, we would not have any problem in identifying which one the book is.

A word (or any other linguistic unit) has core and peripheral meanings. As in the example, there are objects that we will have no doubt in labeling as ‘books,’ ‘cars,’ ‘tables,’ ‘prayers’ or whatever, while this will not be so clear-cut in other cases. This fuzziness as to the limits of the meaning of a word (or the range of objects or mental representations it may refer to) has important implications for our understanding of semantic change. Words tend to have fuzzy meanings and be polysemous and their meanings frequently overlap—depending on pragmatic factors a five-year old male human being can be a *person*, a *male*, a *boy* or a *child*. No radical difference can be established between encyclopedic and linguistic knowledge, either.² Traditionally, semantic change has focused on the study of the change of meaning of words, but there are also semantic changes of collocations, word formation patterns and syntactic constructions. Great attention has been paid to some of these in past years, for instance, in the field of grammaticalization (see Chapter 15 (section 2) in this volume).

2. Types of Semantic Change

Since the beginnings of semantics, several attempts have been made to produce comprehensive classifications of semantic changes. In spite of those efforts, none of them is wholly satisfactory³—the divisions are not exhaustive and the

various criteria employed frequently overlap. A particular change of meaning can thus be at the same time an instance of specialization and pejoration. However, such classifications are useful in understanding the types of processes involved in semantic change. According to the nature of the change, we make a threefold division into mechanisms of semantic change, changes in the scope of meaning and changes in the connotations of a word.

2.1 Mechanisms of Semantic Change

The types of semantic change that we will be analyzing in this section can be due either to similarity or contiguity, whether these are real or supposed. They can be either semasiological, as in metaphor and metonymy, which are based on the connection between the referents, or onomasiological, as in folk etymology or ellipsis, for which the basis of the semantic change lies in the linguistic connection of the word to other words (Ullmann 1962: 211–227).⁴

2.1.1 Metaphor

Metaphor (from Greek *metaphorá* ‘transference’) involves conceiving or understanding an object, being or experience in terms of another different one. As Claudi and Heine (1986: 299) have stressed, this is usually done by employing conceptually less complex phenomena to visualize more complex ones.

Many different definitions of metaphor have been proposed in linguistic studies, so that our understanding of a given semantic change as due or not to metaphor may depend on the definition that we follow. It may thus be useful to check if a particular semantic change fulfills all the following four conditions (Heine 1997b: 142) to consider it an instance of metaphor. We will exemplify the conditions with the evolution of meaning of *mouse* (an animal and now also a computer device).

- The source and the target concept are different referents—in this case the source is an animal, while the target is an inanimate object.
- The transfer of meaning involves two different domains of experience—in this case from the domain of animals to that of computers.
- There is no formal expression of the transfer.
- If taken literally, the metaphorical predication is wrong—the ‘mouse of the PC’ is not really a ‘mouse.’

Metaphor is always based on a perceived similarity between the source and the target (or the vehicle and the tenor of the metaphor in more traditional terminology)—they must share one or more traits, which constitute the ground for the metaphor (in this example, the shape of the mouse used with the computer, together with the long cable attached to it in earlier models, made it

similar to the animal). It should be noted that the similarity does not need to be 'objective'; on the contrary, it frequently has a cultural or social basis (Lakoff 1987). One of the now classical examples is the conceptual metaphor 'argument is war,' which is frequently found in Western societies—it would not be possible in a culture in which arguing is never conceived as fighting.

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) showed, metaphor pervades our language and is inherent to an appropriate understanding of our daily lives. It is then no wonder that it plays a central role in semantic change. Instances of semantic change due to metaphor are easy to find in languages:

- English *star* meaning 'famous performer,' a metaphorical meaning from 'brilliant heavenly body.'
- Spanish *sierra* means both 'saw' and 'mountain range,' the latter being a metaphorical extension of meaning based on its indented shape.
- Latin *testa* 'pot' > French *tête* and Italian *testa*, both meaning 'head'; Middle High German *kopf* 'cup' > Modern German 'head.' This metaphorical transfer seems to be related to medieval soldiers' slang, in which battle was conceived as the smashing of pots.

Metaphorical extension of meaning of body-parts is very frequent.

- English *head* meaning 'ruler, leader,' as in *head of the department*;
- English *shoulder* meaning also the 'edge of the road';
- Latin *caput* 'head' > Spanish *cabo* which does not mean 'head' anymore, but it is kept only in figurative meanings, such as 'end, extremity,' 'cape,' or 'corporal.'
- Dyirbal *binda* both 'shoulder' and 'waterfall' (Dixon 1980: Chapter 10).

Another interesting domain in which metaphor has played a significant role is that of scientific and technical vocabulary. Nowadays, in European languages linguistic elements of Greek and Latin provenance are usually employed for coining new technical terms. However, if we go back to the sources of that vocabulary we can see that technical meanings originated by metaphor in many cases. For instance, the terms *case* and *conjugation* ultimately go back to Latin *cāsus* 'falling' and *coniugātiō* 'union' (from *con-* 'together' and a word from the same root as *iugum* 'yoke'). These are, in turn, loan translations (see section 4.3) of Greek *ptōsis* 'falling' (cf. *πίπτω* 'fall') and *suzugía* 'yoke (of animals), union' (cp. *suzeúgnūmi* 'yoke together'). This type of process can be found in other traditions, too. For example, Sanskrit *vyāñjana* 'consonant' is derived from the root *vyāñj-* 'anoint, adorn, decorate'—the underlying metaphor is that consonants 'decorate' vowels, which are the nucleus of the syllable.

In linguistic and literary studies some particular types of metaphor are given special names. In works on semantic change hyperbole or exaggeration and

litotes or understatement are usually mentioned. Hyperbole is frequently seen in the evolution of adverbs like *terribly*, *horribly* or *awfully* when used in expressions such as 'I'm terribly exhausted,' or the grammaticalized German *sehr* 'very,' whose original meaning was 'painfully' (cp. English *sore*). Hyperbole is also found in adjectives such as Spanish *soberbio* 'superb' (lit. 'arrogant') or colloquial Italian *mitico* 'extraordinary' (lit. 'mythic'). As for litotes, it is, in fact, not so frequent in semantic change, but it does occur in some cases, as in *astonish*, from Vulgar Latin **extonāre* 'leave (someone) thunderstruck' or French *meurtre* 'murder,' originally 'bruise' (as in the verb *meurtrir* 'bruise').

We will be dealing with taboo and euphemism below (section 4.2.2), but it should be noted here that metaphors are frequently used to avoid direct mentioning of tabooed objects or beings.

2.1.2 Metonymy

As opposed to metaphor, metonymy is not based on a supposed or real similarity.⁵ Instead, the basis of metonymy (from Greek *metōnymía* 'change of name') lies in contiguity, whether this is physical or not. This contiguity may be of different types—container for the thing contained or vice versa, material for object, the time for what is done at that time, the place for what is usually located there or vice versa, effect for cause, and so on.⁶

Some examples of semantic change due to metonymy are the following:

- Latin *sexta* 'sixth (hour)' > Spanish *siesta* 'nap' (originally done at the sixth hour of the day).
- English *bead*, which originally meant 'prayer' but came to mean 'bead' because when using a rosary beads were used to keep track of the recited prayers.⁷
- Latin *arēna* 'sand' and also 'circus' (for the central sand area where the games took place).
- English *glass*, both the material and an object made of it. Similarly, Warrgamay *barri* 'stone' vs. Dyirbal *barri* 'stone tomahawk' (Dixon 1980: 118).
- Spanish *paella*, a special rice dish, took its name from the pan in which it was usually prepared (from Latin *patella*).

A special type of metonymy is synecdoche, which consists in referring to the whole by a part of it (*pars pro toto*). Some instances of this type of semantic evolution are the following:

- Mycenaean Greek (*h*)*ármo* 'wheel' vs. Homeric Greek *hárma* 'chariot'; the same development must have taken place in Sanskrit *ratha* 'chariot' when compared to its Latin cognate *rota* 'wheel.'

- Spanish *mañana* 'morning' and also 'tomorrow,' paralleled by Middle Japanese *asita* 'tomorrow,' from *ake-sita* 'dawning time' (Traugott and Dasher 2002: 55).
- Latin *vota* 'vows' > Spanish *boda* 'marriage' (as nuptial vows are a fundamental part of the ceremony); similarly, Polish *ślub* 'vow' and 'marriage'

Koch (1999, 2001) has proposed a unified analysis of the various types of metonymy, which, in a cognitive perspective, could be accounted for as the result of a figure/ground effect inside the same frame. A metonymy would thus consist in highlighting one of the members of the whole frame due to its saliency. This figure/ground effect can be triggered either by the hearer or the speaker. Hearer-induced metonymies are those in which the hearer carries out a reanalysis of what figure is highlighted in a frame. In such cases no innovation is intended by the speaker, so the change only begins with the hearer's reanalysis. Koch adduces Spanish *pregón* (from Latin *precō* 'herald') as an instance of this kind of evolution—from 'herald' it came to mean 'announcement' by a contiguity effect between salient members of a frame. Both interpretations were still possible in Old Spanish in contexts such as (2).

- (2) Por Castiella oyendo van los pregones . . . (Poema del Mio Cid 287)
 'Throughout Castile heralds/announcements can be heard . . .'

Instead, speaker-induced metonymies are due either to an 'approximate' use of a lexical item designating a contiguous concept (as in the case of Latin *coxa* 'hip' > Vulgar Latin 'thigh'—French *cuisse* 'thigh') or to a rhetorical trope by which a speaker intentionally wants to add expressivity to his or her utterance.

2.1.3 Folk Etymology

Folk etymology plays an important role in morphological reshaping and in lexical modification, and it must be mentioned here in connection with semantic change—a synchronically unanalyzable word or expression is restructured, so that its form allows for a semantic connection with other lexical items in the same language. This is what has happened in well-known cases as English *asparagus* → *sparrow-grass* or *chaise lounge* (from *chaise longue* 'long chair').

2.1.4 Ellipsis

Ellipsis is the process by which part of a complex expression acquires the meaning of the whole. Some examples:

- English (now only American English) *fall* 'autumn,' from *fall of the leaves*.

- English *car* 'cart' > 'automobile,' from *motorcar*, once this type of cars became the usual ones.
- Spanish *hermano* 'brother,' from *frater germanus* 'brother of the same father'
- Spanish *metro* 'subway,' truncation from *metropolitano* 'metropolitan,' itself an ellipsis for *ferrocarril metropolitano* 'urban railroad.'

An interesting case study is provided by the Spanish word *váter* 'toilet' (from English *water*). It was used as a euphemism replacing previous words such as *retrete*, but it is itself a case of ellipsis, since its meaning originated in the expression *water closet*.

A similar process occurs when one of the members of a compound is given up, as in English *plane* meaning 'airplane.'

2.2 Changes in the Scope of Meaning

Semantic changes can involve a variation in the scope of the meaning of a word. We can best conceptualize these changes as involving a modification of the range of referents that a given word can be applied to, i.e., in the number of objects or mental representations that it can refer to or its extension.

2.2.1 Broadening

Sometimes the meaning of a word broadens along time, i.e., a word comes to have a more general meaning than it used to. Broadening is also known as semantic extension or generalization. From a cognitive perspective, this means that one or more features of the prototypical instances of the word meaning stop being salient, so that the range of objects or mental representations to which the word can be applied becomes wider. In other words, broadening involves that the number of contexts in which a word may be used grows, while the information that it conveys gets smaller since it has lost specificity.

Some instances of this type of semantic change are the following:

- Latin *adripāre* 'reach the shore (of a river)' > French *arriver*, Italian *arrivare* both meaning just 'arrive.'
- Old English *bridd* 'young bird' > Modern English *bird* (replacing in this sense Old English *fugol* > *fowl*, which underwent a process of narrowing; see section 2.2.2).
- Latin *passer* 'sparrow' > Spanish *pájaro* 'bird.'
- Latin *panārium* 'bread basket' > French *panier* 'basket.'

From a pragmatic perspective, it has been suggested (Horn 1984) that broadening is based on the implicatures derived from the R(elation) Principle: 'Make

your contribution necessary. Say no more than you must'. It would thus be speaker-based—a salient exemplar of a wider class is employed to denote that wider class.

2.2.2 Narrowing

Narrowing, also known as semantic restriction, specialization or reduction, is the opposite to broadening—a word comes to have a more restricted meaning than it used to and the core instances of its meaning have to comply with a bigger number of salient traits. Thus, the number of contexts in which the word can be used is reduced, but it conveys more information since it gains specificity.

This can be seen in the following examples:

- Old English *hund* meant 'dog' (cp. German *Hund* 'dog'), while in Modern English *hound* refers only to a particular breed of dogs used in fox-hunting (see section 3.2.2).
- Old English *mete* 'food' > Modern English *meat*; similarly, French *viande* 'food' > 'meat.'
- Old English *steorfan* 'die' > Modern English *starve* 'die of hunger' (cp. German *sterben* 'die')
- Spanish *infante* 'child,' but especially 'king's son.' *Infanta* was created later as the feminine of *infante* in the restricted sense, and thus lacks the general meaning.
- Latin *soror* 'sister' > Spanish *sor* 'nun' (cp. French *soeur* 'sister'), replaced by *hermana* 'sister' (see above section 2.1.4).

Narrowing frequently occurs when a technical sense of a word develops and then the word is given up in its general meaning. This is also the case when a word with a general meaning is borrowed as a technical term into another language, such as German *Angst* 'fear,' vs. English *angst*, only used in psychology to refer to anxiety provoked by certain causes.

Interestingly enough, when new analogical forms are created and the old one is kept in the language, this typically shows a semantic restriction.⁸ Thus, when the new regular comparative *older* was created in English, the older form *elder* lost its general meaning and was kept as an adjective only in the expressions *elder brother/sister* or similar and as a substantive in specific uses in reference to an official position in some Christian churches. Something similar has happened with the former irregular past participles in Spanish—*tinto*, the former participle of *teñir* 'dye,' is now an adjective restricted in its current use to the expression *vino tinto* 'red wine,' while the new analogical form *teñido* is employed in all other occasions. As Hock (1986c: 299) remarks, such processes lead to the isolation of these originally metaphorical expressions and the reinterpretation of their meaning as the basic sense of the word.

A similar process may happen when a word loses its etymological transparency due to phonetic evolution. Middle English *hūswīf* > *hussy* was replaced in its general meaning by the newly coined *housewife*, and it underwent a process of pejoration (see section 2.3.1).

From a pragmatic perspective, narrowing, at least in some cases, could ultimately rely on the Q(antity) Principle (Horn 1984): 'Make your contribution sufficient. Say as much as you can,' and would be hearer-based. Among the narrowing processes, a relevant one is that labeled by Horn 'autohyponymy'—it is basically a semasiological process consisting in the reinterpretation of a superordinate term as a hyponym.

2.3 Changes in Connotational Meaning

Traditionally, when analyzing the meaning of a word, a distinction has been made between its denotational and connotational meanings. Denotation would be the 'objective' meaning of a word, while connotations are the subjective appreciations that the speakers link to the word. These subjective appreciations may become more salient than the denotative meaning, and can result in changes of meaning. Depending whether these are regarded as positive or negative by the community of speakers of a language, a change can be classified as melioration (also referred to as amelioration or elevation) or pejoration (also referred to as degeneration).

Melioration and pejoration can occur sporadically in individual use or in particular of groups and circles of speakers, but when the meanings that they give rise to enter current use, they constitute a valuable source of information in regard to the study of social attitudes and sociolinguistic history.

2.3.1 Pejoration

It seems that—revealingly enough—pejoration is more frequent than melioration in semantic change. Words are 'promoted' less easily than they acquire negative connotations diachronically. Pejoration is usually due to the fact that the word is linked to an unpleasant reality or to a socially undervalued concept or estate. It is thus usually related to taboo.

Some examples of this type of change:

- Old English *læwede* 'non-clerical' > Modern English *lewd* 'coarse, vile' (in this sense, attested from the fourteenth century onwards).
- Spanish *criado* 'servant,' originally the past participle of the verb *criar* 'raise up,' in reference to those people raised up at home but not belonging to the family.

Traditional misogyny has a reflection in semantic change by pejoration in cases as English *spinster* 'one who spins' > 'unmarried woman' or Old High German *diornalthiorna* 'young girl' > Modern High German *Dirne* 'prostitute.' A similar development is found in Spanish *querida*, the feminine form of the adjective meaning 'dear' and also 'lover, mistress.'

A parallel semantic change leads in various languages from 'innocent' or 'good' to 'silly.' Middle English *selig* originally meant 'blessed, blissful' (cp. German *selig* with that meaning) and by extension came to mean 'innocent, helpless,' too. This meaning was reanalyzed as 'unconscious, unwary' and then 'stupid.' Classical Greek *agathós* used to mean 'good, noble' in reference to the character of a person, but Modern Greek *agathós* plainly means 'silly.' A similar evolution is found in French *crétin* 'stupid,' from Latin *christianus* 'Christian.'

2.3.2 Melioration

This type of change is found in instances like the following:

- English *nice* 'foolish' was borrowed from French *nice* 'silly, foolish' (ultimately from Latin *nescius* 'ignorant') in the thirteenth century and then evolved into 'fastidious' in the fourteenth century. It acquired positive connotations in the sixteenth century, when it meant 'precise, careful' and from the eighteenth century onwards, 'agreeable.'
- English *dude* used to mean 'fastidious man' in its first occurrences at the end of the nineteenth century and then just 'man.'

In past societies, melioration frequently has to do with offices held in the royal house, the state administration or in the army. A well-known instance is Old High German *marheskalk* 'servant (in charge) of mares' (from *marhe* 'mare' and *skalk* 'servant'), borrowed into French as *maresc(h)al(c)* > *maréchal* 'marshall.'

There are some interesting cases, like Old English *cniht*, meaning 'boy, youth,' but also 'servant,' like its German cognate *Knecht* 'servant' (cf. Spanish *chacha* 'female servant,' from *muchacha* 'girl')—the word thus underwent first a change by pejoration and then by melioration to become *knight* 'member of the lower nobility' when it was used to refer to military servants or followers of the king or a nobleman. Similarly, Old English *cwene*, which meant 'wife' and 'queen,' but also 'female servant' and 'prostitute,' and in the twentieth century also a 'male homosexual' (specially a feminine and showing-off one).

3. Semantic Change beyond the Word

Interesting though the change of meaning of individual words may be, it has to be borne in mind that words are not isolated in language, but related to

other words. The nature of such relationships is varied. Since Saussure it is customary to differentiate between paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships. Syntagmatic relationships are those established between linguistic units that appear together in a context. Paradigmatic relationships are those linking linguistic units that are mutually exclusive in the same context—if singular third person *runs* appear in a sentence, then *run* cannot. Or in a language with nominal gender, such as Spanish, if masculine *bonito* 'beautiful' appears with a noun because it has masculine gender, then the feminine form *bonita* is automatically excluded. This division is useful for the classification of semantic changes due to relationship with other words.

3.1 Syntagmatic Changes

Standard treatments of semantic change rarely deal with syntagmatic changes that depend on the contexts in which a word is used. At most, ellipsis is mentioned (see section 2.1.4).

However, other processes of syntagmatic semantic change do occur. One of them is 'contagion,' by which the meaning of a word is transferred to another because they appear together frequently or in many contexts (Bréal 1897: chapter 21, Ullmann 1962). An outstanding instance of this type of change, as Ullmann remarked, is the history of negation in French—a certain number of words have acquired a negative meaning because they were usually employed with the negation, as seen in (3).

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| (3) Latin <i>passus</i> 'step' | <i>ne . . . pas</i> 'not' |
| Latin <i>rem</i> (Accusative of <i>res</i> 'thing') | <i>ne . . . rien</i> 'nothing' |
| Latin <i>personam</i> (Accusative of <i>persona</i> 'person') | <i>ne . . . personne</i> 'nobody' |

In colloquial French, in fact, *ne* is frequently omitted and it is just *pas* that conveys the negative value of a sentence. And in standard French *rien* and *personne* have negative meaning even if *ne* does not appear in the sentence, as in (4).

- (4) Qui est arrivé? Personne.
'Who's come? Nobody.'

3.2 Paradigmatic Changes

When studying this kind of changes, it is also useful to differentiate between changes due to similarity and contiguity (see section 2.1 for this difference in the mechanisms of semantic change).

3.2.1 Similarity in Form

Languages frequently show a tendency towards avoiding clashing homonyms, i.e., words having the same form but different meanings.⁹ An example usually mentioned when discussing these processes is that of Latin *cattus* 'cat' and *gallus* 'rooster,' which merged in Gascon French *gat*. The ambiguity resulting from this homonymy was highly inconvenient, especially in a farming context, so the meaning 'rooster' was given up in favor of other words: [azā] (originally 'pheasant'), [begey] (originally 'vicar') and [put] (originally 'chick'). Thus, two related semantic changes took place: (a) the word *gat* stopped meaning 'rooster'; (b) the other words acquired this meaning by various processes—[put] underwent a semantic extension, [begey] a change by metaphor and [azā] a shift through a previous stage of polysemy or split.

A similar case is attested in the history of English—both Old English *lætan* 'permit' and *lettan* 'stop, hinder' evolved into Middle English *let*. This posed again an uncomfortable homonymy, given that the same word could have two opposite meanings. The meaning 'stop, hinder' was thus given up and other words were favored in this meaning.¹⁰

In some cases, a word comes to be homophone with another tabooed one (see section 4.2.2 below), and due to this formal identity it stops being used. For instance, in eighteenth-century English the word *ass* 'donkey' began to be avoided given its homophony with *arselass*, so that *donkey* has become the usual word for the animal, at least in American English.

In other cases, a kind of homonymic clash arises by a metaphorical extension—the new meaning is subject to taboo, with the final outcome that the word is avoided in all its senses. This is the case with *cock*, which by a common metaphorical transfer came to refer to the male sexual organ (cp. Spanish *polla* 'hen' and then 'penis'), replaced in American English by *rooster* in reference to the animal. Something similar has happened with Spanish *huevos* 'eggs,' which is avoided in some areas of America since by metaphor it became a name for 'testicles'; *blanquillos* 'little white (things)' is used instead. The verb *coger* 'take' is also not used in some areas because it has undergone a specialization of meaning and it is primarily employed in the sense of 'having sexual intercourse,' so that other synonyms like *tomar* 'take, have' or *agarrar* 'catch' are favored.

3.2.2 Similarity and Contiguity in Meaning

In the same way that we find 'homonymophobia' in language, there is a well-known tendency to avoid true synonymy—the 'Avoid Synonymy' principle (Kiparsky 1983, Clark 1993).¹¹ It is thus not difficult to find cases in which semantic change is triggered by this tendency. When synonymous lexemes appear in a language, either by internal evolution or by borrowing, they tend to be pragmatically differentiated and this can eventually induce semantic change.

In fact, some of the changes mentioned above (section 2.2.2) as instances of narrowing can be better understood if we widen our focus to cover more than individual words. For instance, when *dog* was borrowed into English from Norse, it was a synonym of *hound*; in the long run, however, the two words acquired differentiated meanings. Something similar has happened with *food* and *meat*.¹²

However, as Traugott (2004: 543) has remarked, the principle of synonymy-avoidance and the kind of realignment in meanings that it brings about is usually only part of a larger picture. It is the whole set of semantically related words that must be analyzed to achieve an appropriate understating of the changes involved. In this regard, she mentions Roberts' (2001) contribution, which surveys how the introduction in Middle English around 1200 of the Latinate forms in *rob-* (from Latin *robaria* 'robbery') provoked a semantic realignment of the predecessors of Modern English *steal*, *thief* and others in the following 300 years.

Although many handbooks and general introductions to semantic change do not deal with this question, to gain appropriate insight into the nature of semantic change the concept of 'semantic field' (or 'lexical field') is a key one. The pioneer work in this area was done by Trier (1931) on the field of intellect in Middle High German. Trier's analyses were historically based and his explanations attempted mainly to relate the changes in the organization of vocabulary with changes in society, in this case the end of feudalism.

We do not need to go into detailed criticism of Trier's work, because for current work on semantic change studies aiming at discovering general tendencies of change inside a semantic field have had more impact and have ultimately been the basis for proposals of generalization (see section 5.1). For instance, working from an anthropological perspective, Berlin and Kay (1969) surveyed color terms across languages. They reached the conclusion that the 'basic' color terms constitute a set of eleven perceptual foci for which there is a particular order of acquisition by children and in semantic development, as shown in Figure 16.1.

Similar approaches have also been made to the evolution of verbs of perception, as shown in Figure 16.2.

4. Causes of Semantic Change

In the previous sections we have analyzed how meanings change, but an important question to ask is why meanings change. Causes of language change in general are problematic (see Chapter 20 in this volume), but focusing now on semantic change, they can be classified into various groups (Meillet 1906, Ullmann 1962), linguistic and non-linguistic.

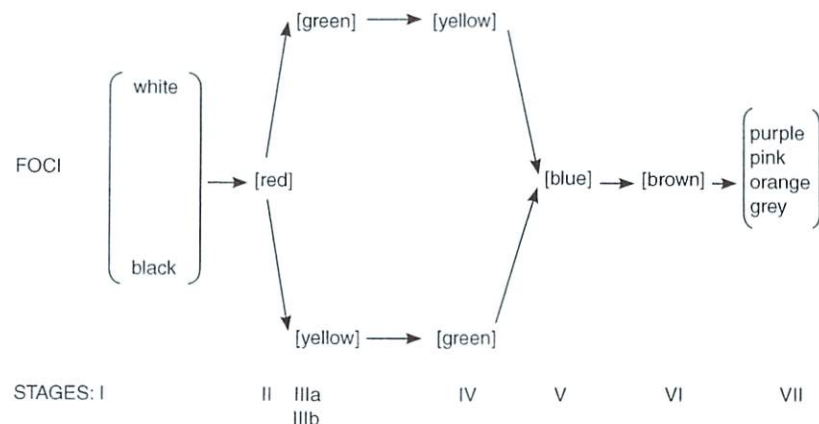


Figure 16.1 Development of color terms (Kay 1975: 257)

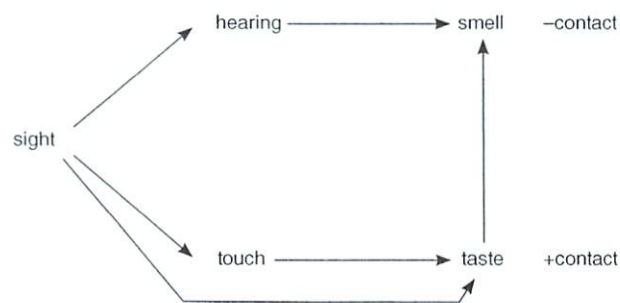


Figure 16.2 Extension of verbs of perception (Viberg 1985: 147)

Before going into briefly reviewing those causes, it will be convenient to deal with an interesting related question: how semantic change comes about. It is often assumed that processes of language transmission and language learning by children play a central role in grammatical change. It could thus be the case that they were crucial for semantic change, too—in the same way that children have to produce their own grammars through exposition to a limited number of actual utterances, they also have to re-create the link between phonetic words and meanings. This would lead to instances of semantic reanalysis, by which the referent intended by the speaker and that perceived by the hearer would be different.

This kind of processes cannot be neglected when trying to understand semantic change and scholars like Fortson (2003) are right in emphasizing children’s role in semantic change. Fortson also remarks that it is usually taken for granted that the old and the new meanings of a word must be related, when semantic change due to reanalysis in children’s learning would imply that the old meaning is just given up in favor of the new one, without any necessary period of polysemy.

However, this view is too reductionist and holding to it would amount to attributing all instances of semantic change to the process of language learning and considering all of them hearer-induced, while this is plainly not the case. In fact, semantic change can occur at an adult age and speakers of any language are bound to have experienced shifts of meaning of some words during their lifetime. Otherwise, they could not adapt to new realities. Furthermore, semantic change may arise from a conscious use. We analyzed above (section 2.1.2) hearer-based vs. speaker-based metonyms—if *all* semantic change were due to reanalysis, speaker-based metonyms or metaphors would not be possible. Reanalysis thus plays a role in semantic change, but it is not its only cause.¹³

4.1 Linguistic Causes

As we saw in previous paragraphs (sections 2.1.4 and 3.1), sometimes semantic change is language-induced. Ullman (1962) treated under this heading the phenomenon of contagion, to which ellipsis should also be added. In these cases, there does not seem to be any external motivation for semantic change—it is just linguistic mechanisms at work that provoke a reassignment of the meanings of words.

4.2 Non-linguistic Causes

Very frequently, causes of linguistic change are nonlinguistic. These causes can be broadly classified into three groups: historical, social and psychological causes.

4.2.1 Historical Causes

Semantic change can be brought about by a change in the referents of a word themselves. Words tend to be conservative in the sense that they usually remain in a language even if the reality that they refer to undergoes variations. A king in a contemporary democratic society has not the same functions as in earlier societies nor do institutions such as parliaments or courts; however, the same words are used for them. This also applies to objects or concepts and ideas—the

word *pen* (or Spanish *pluma* 'pen') has been kept even if bird pens have not been used for writing for a long time. So has *humor*, even if the physiological theory of the four humors was given up centuries ago.

4.2.2 Social and Psychological Causes

In a certain sense, every semantic change has a social base—individual innovations are being produced constantly, but they need to spread throughout the community if they are to stay in the language.

However, from a more specific perspective, words can acquire new or different meaning in specific social groups. Slang or technical languages are good examples of this type of processes. Those innovations can remain inside the original group of speakers or else expand to the whole community of speakers. French farming language provides a good instance of such processes, as shown by the semantic changes in (5).

- (5) Latin *cubāre* 'lie' > French *couver* 'sit on eggs'
 Latin *pōnere* 'put' > French *pondre* 'lay eggs'
 Latin *trahere* 'pull' > French *traire* 'milk'

One of the most important motivations for lexical and semantic change is taboo. Although Ullmann (1962) analyzed it among the psychological causes of semantic change, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider it from a social perspective. Even if taboo may have a psychological basis, it cannot be properly understood without paying attention to the social context. What is considered taboo varies across cultures, but there are some areas in which taboo appears to be more frequent, like physiological functions, sex and religion. It is interesting to note how the taboo is transferred from the object or activity to the words or expressions referring to them, so that these tend to be avoided.¹⁴

A good example is provided by the history of French. *Baiser* 'kiss' (from Latin *bāsiāre* 'kiss,' cf. Spanish *besar* and Italian *baciare* 'kiss') used to be a euphemism for having sexual intercourse; however, along time it came to be primarily used for this latter meaning, and was thus subject to taboo itself. As a result of that, *embrasser* 'embrace' has come to be used for 'kiss,' because *baiser* is avoided in all contexts. We saw similar examples of interference above (section 3.2.1).

Crowley (1992: 154) provides another quite interesting instance. In Bislama (the Melanesian Creole language of Vanuatu) English *milk* was borrowed and adapted as *melek*. However, it was also used with the meaning 'semen,' so that younger speakers of the language tend to avoid it, and when referring to plain milk they use the English word *milk* itself.

From the point of view of semantic change, it should be remarked that the tabooed word undergoes a process of pejoration (see section 2.3.1) the final outcome of which may be the loss of the word, but it usually does not change

its referent(s). It is the euphemism that usually does change its meaning, so that it comes to convey the meaning of the tabooed word, at least until the former euphemism is in turn subject to taboo and the process begins again.

Psychological and social factors also play a role in the development of figurative senses that eventually lead to changes by metaphor or metonymy (section 2.1). Speaker-induced processes originally have a psychological basis which allows for perceiving the similarity between objects and thus transferring the meaning. However, if those similarities are not perceived by the community of speakers they will be no more than sporadic individual uses without any further consequences.

4.3 Language Contact

Language contact is also a frequent cause of semantic change, in which both linguistic and nonlinguistic factors are involved. The degree to which a language can influence another varies depending on multiple factors, especially intensity of contact and the social status or prestige of the languages and their speakers (see Chapter 18 in this volume).

Borrowing is a source of lexical innovation and loanwords may provoke a restructuring of a semantic field (see section 3.2.2). Focusing now on change of meaning in words, we should differentiate again processes due to similarity in meaning from those due to similarity in form.

Through 'calque' or 'loan translation' a new meaning can be transferred to a word in a language because it shared a former meaning with a word from the other language. We saw an instance of this at the beginning of the chapter (section 1)—Spanish *ratón* has come to denote a computer device because English *mouse* had that meaning. This process is basically the equivalent at the lexico-semantic level of proportional analogy, as shown in (6).

$$(6) \begin{array}{l} \textit{mouse} = \textit{animal} \\ \textit{mouse} = \textit{computer device} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{l} \textit{ratón} = \textit{animal} \\ ? \end{array} \left. \vphantom{\begin{array}{l} \textit{mouse} = \textit{animal} \\ \textit{mouse} = \textit{computer device} \end{array}} \right\} \longrightarrow \textit{ratón} = \textit{computer device}$$

Processes of calque also include the creation of new words or phrases in a language as a direct translation from another, as Spanish *rascacielos* (from *rascar* 'scrape' and *cielo* 'sky'), based on English *skyscraper*.

In contrast to calques proper, other changes are due just to a phonetic similarity between words of two languages. When learning a foreign language we are warned to pay attention to so-called 'false friends,' i.e., words that look alike but have different meanings. Typical examples include English *constipate* vs. Spanish *constiparse* 'get a cold.' In contact situations, false friends may be the cause of interferences and give raise to new meanings of a word. For instance,

Spanish *carpeta* means 'folder, file' and it thus only superficially resembles English *carpet*. However, in United States Spanish *carpeta* is frequently used with the meaning 'carpet.'

5. Towards a Deeper Understanding of Semantic Change

As opposed to phonetic change, which is usually thought of as being regular in essence, semantic change has been considered basically chaotic and fuzzy. However, the work done on semantic change in the past thirty years or so, basically connected with grammaticalization (see Chapter 15 in this volume), has provided interesting insights into the nature of semantic change.

5.1 Regularity and Directionality

By analyzing semantic change in languages of various families, we can discover some general tendencies. We already saw above (section 3.2.2) some proposals concerning the patterns of change inside certain semantic fields. Relying on the body of research on semantic change numerous other patterns could be enumerated, for instance (Campbell 2004: 269–272, Heine and Kuteva 2002):

- 'alone' > 'only,' as in English *alone*, German *allein*, Bulgarian *samó* or Spanish *solo*;
- animal names > inanimate objects, as in Spanish *gato* 'cat' > 'jack (for raising cars)' or English *crane* (both animal and machine).
- 'arrive' > 'succeed,' as in Mandarin Chinese *dào* 'arrive' (verb of motion) > *-dào* 'manage to, succeed' (ability marker) or Lahu *gà* 'reach, arrive at' > 'manage to do' (after a main verb);
- deontic modality > epistemic modality. This evolution is shown by English auxiliaries *must*, *should*, *will*, etc., which were used for deontic modality (as in *We must finish our work*) before being employed also for epistemic modality (as in *Anne is not here. She must be outside*).
- 'know' > ability. The evolution is shown by English *know* vs. *know how to*, Motu *diba* 'know' > 'can, be able,' Sango *linga* 'know' (verb) > 'can' (ability marker), etc.
- spatial meaning > temporal meanings. This type of change is well documented in languages all over the world, as in Chinese *HOU* 'behind' > 'after,' Romanian *de* 'from' > 'since,' Maltese *minn* 'from' > 'since,' Albanian *për* 'to' (directional preposition) > 'in, within' (temporal preposition), Tamil *-il* 'on, at' (locative suffix) > 'in, at' (temporal suffix), and so on.

Furthermore, many of these tendencies can be subsumed under more general principles. For instance, it has been shown how semasiological change has a strong tendency towards more expressiveness, i.e., increase of subjectivity. Thus, Traugott (1982: 257) proposed that meaning change in grammaticalization processes is unidirectional and follows this path:

propositional > (textual >) expressive

Later Traugott (1989: 34–35; see also Traugott and Dasher 2002: 94–96) revised this hypothesis and reformulated it as a set of three related tendencies that may overlap:

- Tendency I: Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal (evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) described situation. Examples: Old English *felan* 'touch' > 'experience mentally' or Old Greek *phobóimai* 'be put to flight' > Modern Greek 'fear.'
- Tendency II: Meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation. Examples: Old English *hwile* 'time' in the adverbial phrase *þa hwile þe* 'the time that' > temporal and concessive connective, or Old Japanese *sunawati* '(just at) the time (when . . .)' (temporal nominal phrase) > Early Modern Japanese 'immediately after, precisely, surely' > Late Modern Japanese 'namely' (discourse connective).
- Tendency III: Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief/state/attitude toward the proposition. The above-mentioned examples of development of epistemic modality would fit here.

All these changes (and the more concrete ones just mentioned) must be envisaged as unidirectional, i.e., even if they are based on a semantic similarity or contiguity, semantic change appears to run only in one direction. In Sweetser's (1990: 19) words, 'viewing X as Y is not the same as, and does not imply, viewing Y as X.'

For instance, Traugott and Dasher (1987) have shown that physical domain verbs frequently evolve into speech-act or mental-state verbs. This is the case, e.g. with *grasp* 'seize' > 'understand' or *defend* (both physically and with arguments). This is explained by Sweetser (1990: 19–20) as the overlapping of two different systems of metaphors—both speech acts and mental states are conceived of in terms of travel through space, but speech acts are treated as an exchange or transfer of objects from one interlocutor to the other (conduit metaphor). The evolution thus is not reversible and cannot go in the other direction.

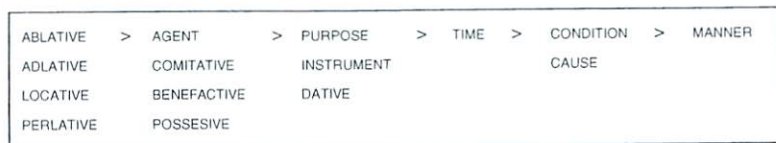


Figure 16.3 Abstraction scale according to Heine et al. (1991: 159)

The same happens with perception verbs—vision is knowledge (Sweetser 1990: chapter 2), but not the other way round.

Most of these changes are explained as going from more concrete to more abstract meanings and general abstraction scales have been proposed to explain directionality of semantic processes associated to grammaticalization (Figure 16.3).

5.2 Polysemy and Semantic Change

The contributions referred to in the previous section have been crucial for the understanding of the processes associated with semantic change. However, as Sweetser remarks:

What we would like to know is more about the connections between concrete and abstract domains (what makes space a good source for time vocabulary, for example?). The central point is thus knowing what is related to what in human meaning-structures and understanding the motivations for form-function mappings. (Sweetser 1990: 18)

In this regard, it is important to mention the development of the semantic map methodology in past years. Haspelmath has defined semantic maps in this way:

A semantic map is a geometrical representation of functions in ‘conceptual/semantic space’ that are linked by connecting lines and thus constitute a network. (Haspelmath 2003: 213)

One of the main advantages of semantic maps is that they allow for dealing with the problem of multifunctionality of grammatical morphemes without having to decide between monosemic and polysemic analyses (Haspelmath 2003: 211–213). Adding diachronic information to semantic maps provides the expected patterns of diachronic change, as exemplified in Figure 16.4.

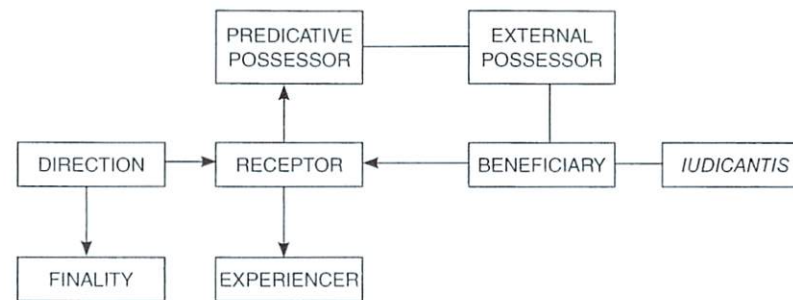


Figure 16.4 Semantic Map of ‘Dative’ (Haspelmath 1999)

Semantic maps allow for dealing simultaneously with language-specific multifunctionality and universal patterns, as reflected in Croft’s (2001: 96) ‘Semantic Map Connectivity Hypothesis’: ‘Any relevant language-specific and/or construction-specific category should map onto a *connected region* in conceptual space.’

According to Croft, the pattern of links in a map represents how grammatical categories are mapped onto conceptual space. The same reasoning should be valid for lexical categories mapped onto a conceptual space.

As reflected in Haspelmath’s definition above and on Croft’s remarks, semantic maps have been used mainly for the analysis of the multifunctionality of grammatical morphemes. However, they can also be applied to the analysis of the polysemy of lexical units and their diachronic evolution, since lexical items seem to behave in the same way (Haspelmath 2003: 237–238, Geeraerts 1997), as shown in some of the papers contributed to the collection edited by Cysouw et al. (forthcoming). For instance, Perrin (forthcoming) provides evidence of the recurring polysemy in adjectives expressing quality—the same word is employed both for ‘young’ and ‘little,’ ‘hard’ and ‘solid’ and so on.

It is generally assumed that a key process associated with grammaticalization is semantic bleaching or desemantization, i.e., loss of meaning in favor of grammatical function. However, Croft (2003: 262) remarks that the semantic change typical of grammaticalization processes can be best described, at least in its earlier stages, as a case of polysemy, which he defines as ‘a chain of related meaning or uses.’ Polysemy would thus make semantic change possible.

This seems to be true, but it should not be forgotten that polysemy itself basically arises by the mechanisms of semantic change that we saw above, metaphor and metonymy (section 2.1). Explaining semantic change through polysemy would in the end only take the problem to an earlier stage—how did that

synchronic polysemy arise? An integrated synchronic and diachronic perspective seems to be in order to overcome these problems. Approaches to change in semantic fields like Berlin and Kay's on color or Viberg's on verbs of perception (section 3.2.2) can be easily reformulated in this way.

Semantic maps, as Haspelmath (2003: 232–233) remarks, embody a series of implicational universals, which emerge as a side effect of the elaboration of a map. In fact, they show interesting similarities to linguistic hierarchies. Both kinds of structures are based on implicative universals, but implicative hierarchies (such as the animacy hierarchy or the hierarchy of grammatical relations) do not rely on multifunctionality while semantic maps do. Semantic maps, however, have less force of prediction than hierarchies given that in a hierarchy a prediction concerns all its members above or below a certain one, while the bundle of semantic functions that a given morpheme can have must follow the lines of the semantic map, but limits cannot be predicted so neatly. Hierarchies thus allow for a lesser number of types of languages than semantic maps.

5.3 Pragmatics

Finally, the work on historical pragmatics in the past two decades or so has provided interesting insights into semantic change, too.¹⁵ Especially significant are the contributions from the perspective of 'diachronic pragmatics,' whose focus is on the interface between linguistic structure and use. Pragmatics can be regarded in this sense as 'non-literal meaning that arises in language use' (Traugott 2004: 539). This can be done both from a semasiological and onomasiological perspective. As formulated by Traugott, the two questions posed would be:

What are the constraints on ways in which a meaning can change while form remains constant (*modulo* independent phonological changes)? [...] What constraints are there on recruitment of extant terms to express a semantic category? (Traugott 2004: 539)

As opposed to traditional approaches to semantic change, in which data were considered in isolation concerning specific linguistic units such as words or collocations, this new perspective involves paying attention to discourse pragmatic bases and motivation for semantic change.

In the past years Traugott (1999) and Traugott and Dasher (2002) have developed the 'invited inference theory' of semantic change. As Traugott explains:

The [Invited Inference Theory of Semantic Change] focuses on schemas that represent types of semasiological reanalysis that language-specific lexemes

may (but do not have to) undergo, constrained by larger cross-linguistic and onomasiological conceptual categories such as casual, conditional, future epistemic, animate, etc. It also focuses on the way in which stereotypes emerge [...]. (Traugott 2004: 552).

The path of evolution is thus the following:

Invited Inference → Generalized Invited Inference → Semantic Meaning

If we begin by an invited inference, this means by definition that it is not yet stereotypical. However, as the invited inference becomes more and more salient in the community of speakers and comes to be a generalized invited inference the stereotype is being created for the item with which it is associated.

This can be exemplified with the evolution of the expression *so/as long as* (Traugott and Dasher 2002: 36–38). In Old and Middle English it showed both the spatial and the temporal meaning 'for the same length of time as.' Only in certain contexts there was an invited inference of conditional 'provided that.' However, in Early Modern English the conditional invited inference was generalized to contexts in which the conditional was more salient, showing thus that it had become a generalized invited inference. In the nineteenth century it began to appear in contexts where the conditional was the only possible reading.

Notes

1. As it is well known, exceptions to this principle are words based on onomatopoeia or imitation by means of language of some sensory characteristic of the referent, as in English *cuckoo* or *gobble*. Ideophones, phonetic symbolism and the iconic value of reduplication as a means of expressing intensity or repetition would also fit here as exceptions to the principle of arbitrariness.
2. According to Geeraerts (1997: 25), '[i]n semantic change, the "encyclopedic" information is potentially just as important as the purely semantic "senses" (to the extent, i.e., that the distinction is to be maintained at all).' A competing view is favored by Wierzbicka (1995: 311), who states: 'Exploring the lexicon in a systematic and methodical way we can discover how "ordinary people" (in contrast to experts and scientists) conceptualize the world; and we can learn to discern the line which separates language-related everyday-knowledge from the language-independent specialist's knowledge.'
3. An insightful critique of these traditional classifications can be found in McMahon (1994: 184–186).
4. See Koch (1999: 142–144) for a critical review of the development of this traditional distinction in four types of semantic changes, which arises from the intersection between two axes (contiguity/similarity and ideas/words) and the contributions made by Léonce Roudet and Roman Jakobson.
5. However, both metaphor and metonymy can be grouped together as producing new 'figurative senses' of a word. The difficulties of dealing with figurative meanings

become explicit when dealing with them in diachronic dictionaries—among various other problems (see Lara 1999), it is not easy to differentiate between purely contextual uses and new senses. These figurative meanings typically arise as peripheral senses and, unless they become stereotypical (see the invited inference approach in section 5.3 below), they are not stable in the language. Such figurative meanings are an instance of the ‘incidental, transient changes of word meaning’ that Geeraerts (1997: 23–25) explains as a result of the intersection between the extensional level of meaning and the nondiscreteness property of the phenomenon. This accounts for the phenomenon of ‘semantic polygenesis,’ i.e., the fact that the same meaning may arise independently in several occasions in the history of a word (Geeraerts 1997: 62–68), which is frequent with figurative senses.

6. Exhaustive lists of metonymic relations have been attempted in linguistic and literary studies, but none seems to have reached its goal—see Koch (2001) for a thorough revision of the concept of metonymy and its reformulation from a cognitive approach as based on a figure-ground effect in relation to prototypical frames and contiguity relations. Interesting papers on this subject can be found in the volume edited by Panther and Radden (1999). Instances of semantic change associated to the various types of metonymy can be found in Sihler (2000: 115–122).
7. The analysis of the semantic change that *bead* has undergone is a good case of how different analyses of the same phenomenon are possible—thus Hock (1986: 296) gives it as an instance of semantic reinterpretation, while Campbell (2004: 256) considers it an example of metaphor (while metonymy is dealt with in another section).
8. This tendency is known as Kurylowicz’s fourth law of analogy.
9. Synchronically it is not always easy to distinguish two homonyms from two different meanings of the same word (polysemy). From a diachronic perspective, homonyms were originally two different words that have come to have the same form, while polysemy arises in one word by semantic extension.
10. The tendency to avoid homonymic clashes is just the manifestation at the lexical level of the semiotic principle of ‘Morphological Transparency,’ according to which it is preferred that one form has just one meaning.
11. As with the tendency to avoid homonymy (see previous note), this is the particular manifestation at the lexical level of the semiotic principle of ‘Uniform Codification,’ according to which a meaning is uniform if it is conveyed only by one morpheme.
12. From a pragmatic perspective, Horn (1984) has provided interesting insights into cases of narrowing like these. It is usually the case that synchronically there is a ‘briefer and/or more lexicalized’ item and a ‘linguistically complex or more prolix’ expression. The former has an unmarked meaning and is used in stereotypical situations, while the latter is typically restricted to non-stereotypical situations, in which the use of the unmarked expression would not fit (Horn 1996: 314).
13. Traugott and Dasher (2002: 51–52) summarize the discussion of the role of children and adults in semantic change. From a pragmatic perspective, they stress that the type of changes that they are dealing with, those originating in invited reference (see section 5.3), cannot be initiated by children, ‘because of the complex inferences involved and the discourse functions in structuring text.’
14. A recent general treatment of taboo in language can be found in Allan and Burridge (2006).
15. A thorough review of historical pragmatics is out of the scope of this chapter. For a recent overview see Traugott (2004), on which the following paragraphs are based.

17 Etymology¹

Thomas Krisch

Chapter Overview

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1. Introduction

Due to limitations in space, this chapter can only give a very short introduction to the very complex and extremely interesting field of the study of etymology. I had to choose between a very cursory theoretical survey with a listing of all the things one has to take into consideration when making an etymology and a ‘practical approach,’ i.e. presenting etymology by ‘doing’ it. I chose a way in between, but this chapter is much nearer to the ‘practical’ approach.

2. Etymology in Past and Present

This section mainly deals with Plato’s dialogue *Kratylos* and tries to contrast Plato’s method with today’s approach. The main focus of our presentation lies on methodology.

Etymology deals with the origins of words. The English term ‘etymology’ is a learned loan from ancient Greek *etymologia* ‘etymology’ and can be analyzed as Greek *etym-o-* ‘the true sense of a word’ + *-logia*, quasi-suffix denoting ‘science.’²

The origin of words has fascinated mankind ever since. In antiquity, Plato’s dialogue ‘*Kratylos*’ addresses this problem. In this dialogue, Socrates builds up some etymologies, mainly etymologies of names of gods and words which, as

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