4. Historical Semantics and Grammaticalization

4.1. Historical Semantics

4.1.1. Introduction

Historical semantics is the study of the change of meanings of expressions through time, in particular the change of meaning of words. The study of the origin and uses of particular words is called **etymology**; this includes observations about previous meanings of a word or its precursors. Information about origin and uses of words is collected in **etymological dictionaries** such as the Oxford English Dictionary, for English.

To a large degree, meaning changes are influenced by rather accidental factors, and it appears to be futile to formulate any generalization over meaning changes.

- For example, it turns out that the words *cream*, *cretin*, *grime* and *Christ* are etymologically related, that is, they all go back to a common root. In this case it's a word for ointment, with an Indo-European root *ghrei-*. *Christ* is the Greek word for 'the anointed one'. *Cretin* originally meant *Christian*, cf. French *chretien*, an euphemism first used in Switzerland for idiots. *Cream* refers to the fatty or oily parts of milk, and *grime* to oily dirt.
- Another example: The word *bead* goes back to a word for prayer (cf. German *Gebet*), via the custom to use chains of beads to count prayers. The term *bikini* for 'a scanty two-piece beach garment worn by women' (OED) is motivated by the Bikini atoll, the site of an atomic test of the USA in 1946, which got considerably reduced in size during the process.

It seems impossible to give general laws that predict developments like that.

We find meaning changes that lead to a generalization of meaning (e.g. *arrive* originates in Latin *arripare* , 'movement that ends at the banks of a river', *bird* derives from Middle English *briddle* 'little bird, chick'. And we find meaning changes that lead to a specialization of meaning. For example, *girl* originally referred to children in general and was later restricted to female children.

But there appear to be at least some general laws of semantic change. The attempts to find such laws that would be similar to the laws of sound changes, culminated with Stern (1931), cf. also Ullmann (1962)).

One powerful source for meaning change is **taboo**. Words that denote things that are feared often are replaced by euphemisms or descriptive terms. For instance, bears were large and dangerous creatures in Northern Europe, and we find that the Indo-European languages replaced the inherited word for bear (which appears in Greek *‡rktos*, Latin *ursus*, Sanskrit *rksas*) by descriptions, like *bear* or *bruin*, which are both related to *brown* ('the brown one'), or Slavic *medved*, which is related to *med* 'honey' ('the honey-eater').

One frequent type of semantic change does not directly concern the denotation of expressions but their connotation or stylistic level. One area that has been investigated in detail is the tendency of certain expressions to acquire a **pejorative** meaning. For example, *silly* used to mean 'innocent', and before that 'blessed' (German *selig* still has this original meaning; it is used, for example, for the minor saints of the Catholic Church). Another example: *mistress* used to be the feminine form of *master* (that is, it denoted the wife of a high-ranking male) and came to denote the female lover of a man that this man is not married to (in addition, it was used for female teachers). Cycles of pejorativizations have been investigated for the terms for 'woman' in German, where we (very roughly) have the following development (I give the corresponding modern German forms):

(1) a. Middle High German: general term *Weib*, woman of nobility *Frau*
     b. Early New High German: general term *Frau*, slightly pejorative form: *Weib*, woman of nobility: *Dame*
     c. Modern German: polite term *Dame*, general term *Frau*, pejorative form *Weib*.

There are other instances of this general semantic drift, e.g. *Dirne*, originally 'unmarried woman', has acquired the meaning 'prostitute', *Frauenzimmer*, originally 'woman's chamber', first was used for ladies and nowadays is a pejorative term for women, etc.

A possible explanation of the development of pejorative meanings in particular social settings is the attempt of speakers to use "better-sounding" expressions for certain persons or objects (which may have a variety of reasons, e.g. courtship or veneration, guilt feelings towards the group of persons, etc.) But the over-use of those better-sounding expressions will gradually make them the normal expressions to refer to the group of persons, thus invoking a new cycle. In the US we can observe this development with the change from *negro* to *black (person)* to *African-American*. Hence the driving force of this movement may be related to (mild) taboos. (Rudi Keller 1990: *Sprachwandel. Von der unsichtbaren Hand der Sprache.*)

But we also find the opposite change, towards **ameriolation**; for example, *queen* goes back to a Germanic word for 'woman' (cf. Swedish *kvinna*).

Another important source is that words are applied to entities that appear similar to those they are originally applied to. For example, *lion*, originally used for an animal occurring in Africa and parts of Asia, was applied to a different cat in America (the mountain lion).

4.1.2. General Directions of Semantic Change

A more recent approach to semantic change is one that tries to motivate certain types of changes by **cognitive constraints** (e.g., Geeraerts (1985), Traugott (1985)). In this section we will discuss some of the findings.

One important type of semantic change is that expressions denoting **spatial notions** are extended to cover other types of phenomena (cf. Traugott (1985)).

For example, space expressions are often generalized to temporal. Examples are *three years ahead*, *five years back*, or *until* (used to mean 'up to'). The spatial terms generalized to temporal relationships are typically related to the front-back axis, or the top-down axis, but not to the left-right axis. Another frequent development is that the verbs *go* and *come* are used to denote future tense, as e.g. in *she is going to succeed*. We hardly ever find that a temporal expression is generalized to a spatial expression. This might point out that the experience of space has precedence over the experience of time.

Spatial expressions are the source of other types of expressions as well. Certain grammatical relations are expressed by terms that originate in spatial terms, e.g. the marker of indirect objects or benefactives in English by *to*, originally a preposition indicating movement towards a goal (e.g. *give the book to Bill*). Certain connectives go back to spatial terms, like English *but*, related to OE *butan* 'on the outside', *besides*, *aside*. Mental verbs often go back to spatial terms, e.g. *deduce* (Lat. *ducere* 'lead'), *intend* (Lat. *tendere* 'stretch'), *suppose* (Lat. *supponere* 'put under'). Certain speech act verbs have an etymology pointing to

spatial expressions, e.g. *assert* (Lat. *asserere* 'join oneself to', cf. *series*), *figure* (Lat. *figura* 'form, shape'), *insist* (Lat. *in* + *stare* 'stand upon'), *suggest* (Lat. *sub* + *genere* 'under' + 'carry').

We find, in general, that concrete expressions acquire a rather abstract meaning. In the cases discussed last, thoughts and utterances, which are relatively "abstract", are conceived of as objects in space that can be put in a row, that can be stood on, that have a shape that can be recognized, that can be *grasped*, and so on. This is a general instance of a frequent development from **concrete** terms to **abstract** terms that we find in meaning change (as suggested by Bloomfield 1933: 429). The idea that we understand a whole field of phenomena (intellectual entities like thoughs and utterances) analogically to another field (spatial entities) has been investigated by Lakoff (1980).

Another area that has been investigated are **modal expressions** (cf. e.g. Bybee & Pagliuca (1985)). They divide modal expressions in two groups: (a) agent-oriented modalities expressing ability, obligation, permission, desire, intention and (b) epistemic modalities expressing the notions of possibility, probability, and prediction. In English, as in many other languages, modal elements can occur in both (a) and (b), e.g.

(2)   a. The students may check books out of the library. [permission]
      b. The storm may clear by tomorrow. [possibility]

(3)   a. Carol can read cuneiform. [ability]
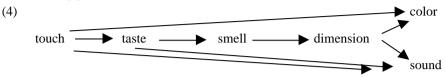   b. I think there's a place where I can get a cheap kettle. [possibility]

Bybee & Pagliucca investigate the development of modal markers in several languages and compare it synchronically with a sample of 28 languages. They find that, in general, agent-oriented modals develop into epistemic modalities and not vice versa. E.g., English *must* was used as expressing obligation early on, but is used in its epistemic meaning only since the 17th century. More recent agent-oriented modalities, e.g. *have to* and *have got to*, very rarely are used as epistemic modalities. Agent-oriented modals referring to physical or mental ability typically develop into expressions denoting possibility (e.g. *may/might*, *can/could*). Expressions denoting desire develop into prediction and future markers (e.g. *will*). Bybee & Pagliucca argue that these processes show a development from a more specific, concrete meaning (modal notions related to a particular person) to a more general, abstract meaning (modal notions related just to a proposition)

Stern (1931) documented a general pattern of change from terms expressing **movement** to terms expressing **temporal relationships**. In particular, words expressing rapid movement often changed to words expressing the concept 'immediately'. This happened with more than 10 worlds, e.g. *swift*, *quickly*, *tite* and others. But it can be shown only for the time before 1400; afterwards, this type of meaning change stopped.

Another set of instances that can be seen as falling under the change from more concrete to more abstract terms are expressions that originally denote visual or auditory sensations and become intellectual terms of understanding. Examples are *I see* (with the interpretation 'I understand'), *I hear you* ('I understand what you are saying'), but also *wit*, *witness* (related to Lat. *videre* 'see'), *inspect* (Lat. 'in' + 'look'), *idea* (Gk. *eidon* 'see'). See Sweetser (1990), ch. 2. Sweetser also points out that verbs of other types of sensory experience typically do not acquire this type of meaning (with few exceptions; e.g. French *savoir* 'know' from Latin *sapere* 'be wise, taste').

Williams (1976), based on previous work by Ullmann, has investigated semantic changes of adjectives related to sensory experiences that are based on **synaesthetic effects**, that is,

intuitive similarities between sensations of different types. For example, we talk of *loud colors*, *brilliant sounds*, *sharp taste*, *sour music*, but not of **loud heights*, **bright taste*, **sweet blades*, etc. The basic finding is the following: If a lexeme metaphorically transfers from its earliest sensory meaning to another sensory modality, it will transfer according to the following pattern:

(4)

For instance, touch words may transfer to tastes (*sharp taste*), to color (*dull color*), to sounds (*soft sounds*), but not to visual dimensions (one exception: *sharp angle*) or directly to smell. But taste words do not transfer back to touch words; they transfer to smell (e.g., *sour smell*) and sounds (e.g., *sweet music*). There may be a few exceptions, but they are rare. The data basis of the investigation includes a survey of dictionary entries. Williams also shows that these developmental paths were relevant in the development of Indo-European languages (e.g. IE. **akri* 'sharp' > Lat. *acer* 'biting', *acidic*), and he found that similar transfer patterns hold for Japanese. (He refrains from any explanation, e.g. explanation based on the primacy of sensory experiences.)

Aufgabe: Untersuchen Sie 50 Vorkommen eines allgemeinen Adjektivs mit einer zugrundliegenden taktilen Bedeutung (z.B. *scharf* oder *sanft*) und klassifizieren Sie die Verwendungsweisen. Sie können eineWeb-Suchmaschine oder am besten das Korpus des Instituts für Deutsche Sprache in Mannheim benutzen (http://corpora.ids-mannheim.de/~cosmas/).

We have discussed the idea, going back to Jost Trier, that semantic changes should not be investigated for single words, but that they affect words in the lexical field (cf. also Lehrer (1985)) Sometimes we find **chain** effects: The change in one slot of a semantic field exerts pressure on the words in other slots. One example of such a chain is the development of movement verbs in many Alemannian dialects of German:

(5)   Standard German: *gehen* 'go, walk', *laufen* 'run', *springen* 'jump', *hüpfen* 'hop'
      Alemannian dialects: *gehen* 'go', *laufen* 'walk', *springen* 'run', *hüpfen* 'jump'

The change presumably was motivated by the generalization of the basic verb *gehen* to a general movement verb, which increased the need to have a term for the most typical way of moving on one's feet (English *walk*). The basic principle is that homophony and polysemy should be avoided within a semantic field (it is relatively benign across semantic fields). A similar reaction is attested for an area in Southwestern France; when the Latin forms *gallus* 'rooster' and *cattus* 'cat' threatened to merge into one form, *gat*, other words acquired the meaning 'rooster', in some regions *azan* (originally *faisan* 'pheasant', in others *bigey* (related to *vicaire* 'vicar').

4.2. Grammaticalization

4.2.1. Introduction

While etymology is the study of meaning change of particular words and the principles behind such changes, **grammaticalization** is the phenomenon, and the study of, a particular type of change, namely the change from full lexical items to expressions that denote specific grammatical relationships and often are reduced to clitics or morphemes. The rules behind this type of meaning change are relatively well studied; see the textbook Hopper & Traugott (1993) and Heine, Claudi, & Hünnemeyer (1991).

Grammaticalization can affect single words, but often is sensitive to particular syntactic constructions in which such words occur. Example: The verb *let* (governing a bare infinitive) can be used to express permission, as in (a). As such it can occur in imperatives, as in (b). But there is a grammaticalized construction, (c), expressing an imperative towards the group that the speaker belongs to (so-called "adhortative" or "jussive"):

(6) a. She let us go.
     b. Please, let us go.
     c. Let's go.

The use of *let* in (c) is transparently related to the use illustrated in (a) and (b), but it clearly has a distinct meaning. For example, while in (a) and (b) there is a thematic role referring to some authority who can grant a wish (the referent of *she* or the addressee), there is no such authority in (c); it is rather meant as a suggestion to the speaker's group. Notice that this cannot be seen as a general new meaning of the verb *let*; rather, it only occurs in the particular construction *let's...*

The study of grammaticalization has a long history. The first clear formulation is in von der Gabelentz (1891), who observes that semantic distinctions are first expressed by regular words which become particles, affixes, morphemes and finally vanish. During this process, their meanings become more and more general, or "bleached", and they are replaced by new forms. The term itself goes back to an article by Meillet (1912). Currently there is intensive research on grammaticalization, see e.g. the collection Traugott & Heine (1991) and Bybee e.a. (1994).

1.1.1. Mechanisms of Grammaticalization

A fundamental mechanism of grammaticalization, as with meaning change in general, is **reanalysis**. The phenomenon can be described schematically as follows: An expression with meaning A often is used to invoke a situational meaning A , at least in certain syntactic contexts. Speakers (especially, children that acquire the language) reanalyze   as meaning A . The old meaning and the new meaning may exist side by side as meanings of   , at least for a while, but often changes occur: Either   falls into disuse with the meaning A, or   with the meaning A changes to   . We speak of grammaticalization if A expresses a more "general" meaning, which typically is accompanied by   becoming a more "grammatical" form, e.g. a particle, a clitic, or an affix.

The reanalysis in grammaticalization often involves a syntactic reanalysis. Consider the development of the English near future *be going to*, which is still quite transparent. It must have started out with a construction like (a), in which *be* + gerund was interpreted as a regular progressive, *go* was interpreted as a directional verb, and the infinitive construction was [*to* ...] was subordinated, with the function of expressing a purpose. A sentence like *Mary was going to visit Bill* then meant: Mary was in the process of moving to some place, with the purpose of visiting Bill (a). The derived construction has lead to a syntactic reordering; now *be going to* is to be considered an expression with a unique meaning expressing future that embeds a VP (b). This reconstruction is particularly obvious because of the **phonologicial simplification** we find now, another hallmark of grammaticalization (c).

(7) a. Original construction:[*be*Progressive [*going*directional verb [*to visit Bill*]Purpose clause]]
     b. Derived construction: [*be going to*]Tense [*visit Bill*]active VP
     c. Phonological simplification: [*gonna*] [*visit Bill*]

Another mechanism of grammaticalization is that the **meaning** of the expressions involved become more "**general**", or change to a more "grammatical" meaning. For example, the movement verb *go* acquires the meaning 'future'. Also, in the course of grammaticalization the subcategorization restrictions become more general. Whereas *go*, in the original construction, required a purpose clause as complement and an agentive NP as subject, it looses these restrictions: The complement can now be any activity verb, and even a verb not expressing any activity at all, and the subject NP need not be agentive:

(8) a. Mary is going to like Bill.
     b. The roof is going to collapse soon.

As a consequence, grammaticalized forms typically become more **frequent**, as they express recurrent grammatical features, such as tense.

Such extensions can be seen as **analogical**: A purpose clause denotes a special type of activity, and this was extended to activities in general; being involved in an activity can be seen as a property, and this was extended to properties in general.

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