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, chretin, 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’. Chretian 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 semantic 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 ἄρος, Latin ursus, Sanskrit raksas) 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-raking 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. Middle High German: general term Weib, woman of nobility Frau
2. Early New High German: general term Frau, slightly pejorative form: Weib, woman of nobility: Dame
3. 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 inverting 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 + generere ‘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 thoughts 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 & Pagliuca 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 modalities 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 modalities 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 & Pagliuca 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 words, 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. eidos ‘see’). See Sweetser (1950), 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:

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’, acidicus), 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 zugrundeliegenden taktile Bedeutung (z.B. scharf oder sanft) und klassifizieren Sie die Verwendungsweisen. Sie können eine Web-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:


The change was presumably 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 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 $\alpha$ 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 $\alpha$ as meaning $A'$. The old meaning and the new meaning may exist side by side as meanings of $\alpha$, 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, e.g. the collection Traugott & Heine (1991) and Bybee e.a. (1994).

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(7) a. Original construction: $[\text{be} \text{progressive} \ [\text{going} \ \text{directional verb} \ [\text{to visit} \ \text{Bill} \ \text{purpose clause}]]$
    b. Derived construction: $[\text{be} \ \text{going to} \ \text{cause} \ [\text{visit} \ \text{Bill} \ \text{active VP}]$
    c. Phonological simplification: $[\text{gonna} \ \text{visit} \ \text{Bill}]$

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 loses 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.
