

Semantic Change

In order to understand semantic change, we need to identify a framework: characteristic entities of semantic structures and the characteristic relationships among such entities needs to be determined.

Traditionally, the study of semantic change was restricted to individual changes.
For example: Latin *avunculus* ‘maternal uncle’ < *avus* ‘maternal grandfather

avunculus ‘little grandfather’

Fr. *oncle* < Latin

NE *uncle* < French

The external development is clear, but no explanation could be given for the semantic development, i.e., little grandfather > uncle

Question: Are there regular semantic changes, with recurring types; or must we accept that “every word has its own history”?

Recent studies on Omaha kinship system: grandfather is associated with the mother’s brother -- thus a *grandfather* > *uncle* development is not unique!

This expectation is parallel to the one observed in syntax (e.g., postpositions in a language with OV order).

Changes in the kinship system lead to changes in kinship terms. French *oncle* is not restricted to maternal uncle.

A possible procedure for dealing with semantic change:

- determine coherent sets of terms corresponding to conceptual sets
- we then examine the position of individual items (e.g., *avunculus*)

Difference between phonological or syntactic changes on the one hand and semantic change on the other: relevance of change in social structures to semantic changes!

e.g., Latin *penna* ‘feather’

Sapir’s example; p. 256

The relationship between semantic change and cultural change adds a complexity to the study of change in meaning that is not found in the study of change in phonological, morphological and syntactic systems.

In dealing with the complexities of semantic change, three terms are used: (p.256)

1. *word*, or linguistic symbol

2. the *referent* denoted by a word (e.g., *pen*)

3. the reference or notion symbolized

Changes may happen to each of these:

e.g., the word OE *ēam* ‘uncle’ may be lost;

the referent such as *feather* may be replaced by a plastic cylinder with a point;

the reference, such as *bear*, may change to mean *dread*

Three conditions for semantic change:

1. Words are typically polysemic: each has various meanings or covers a whole range of shades of meaning -- this is necessary, for words are used in a wide variety of context.

e.g., *get*, *do*, *thing*, *bad*, *nice* etc.

Bloomfield: each word has one central meaning and various occasional marginal meanings. Semantic change occurs when speakers stop using the central meaning and reinterpret a marginal meaning as a central one.

e.g. *sloth* was related to *slow* as *truth* to *true*; today, *slowness* ousted earlier *sloth* (the name of the animal popularly thought to embody this characteristic).

2. Language is transmitted discontinuously: children do not receive a fully formed grammar from their parents, but create one for themselves from incoming data. This may have contributed to semantic changes such as

OE (*gē*)*bed* ‘prayer’ > ME *bead*

(If an adult using the rosary explains to the child that s/he is counting beads, we have an ambiguous context: the child sees the accompanying concrete action – original *bead* ‘prayer’ consequently alters its sense).

3. Arbitrariness allows us to regard to signifier and the signified as independent, thus either might change in time.

e.g., the word *hierarchy* in English first was used for the medieval classification of angels (cherubim, seraphim etc.). In the 17th century, hierarchy was extended to the ranking of clergymen, and thereafter to any system of grading. 1976: “Soviet Communist Hierarchy” (Daily Telegraph)

(Onomatopoeic forms tend to resist both sound change and semantic change).

Semantic change resulting from borrowing

The most important effect on the semantic component of language is brought about by the influence of other languages or dialects, a process termed *borrowing*.

It is common for one language to take words from another language – *loanwords*!

What are loanwords?

Loanwords are lexical items which have been “borrowed” from another language; it was not part of the vocabulary of the recipient language. For example: OE did not have a word for pork; it was borrowed from French *porc* ‘pig, pork’ in the ME period.

Additional examples: See the Handout!

Why do languages borrow from one another?

Languages borrow words from other languages primarily because of *need* and *prestige*.

New concepts, items – there is a need for a word.

Often a foreign name is borrowed along with the new concept; this explains, for example, why so many languages have similar words for ‘automobil’ – Russian *avtomobilʹ*, Finnish *auto* Swedish *bil* etc.

Prestige: the foreign term for some reason is highly esteemed – *luxury* loans!

E.g., *pork* < French *porc*

Finnish *äiti* ‘mother’ < Germanic, e.g. Gothic *aipei*

tytär ‘daughter’ < Baltic, e.g. *dukters* (Gen.)

Some loans are involved a much rarer and less important reason □ negative prestige: the borrowing of a foreign word for derogatory reasons.

French *hâbler* ‘to brag’ < Spanish *hablar* ‘to speak’

Finnish *koni* ‘nag’ (old horse) < Russian *konʹ* ‘horse’ (a neutral term)

Korean *hɔstis* (negative connotation) < English *hostess*

How do words get borrowed?

Borrowed words are remodelled to fit the phonological and morphological structure of the borrowing language.

Examples:

Finnish *kaasu* ‘gas’ < Germanic (e.g. English *gas*)

pihvi ‘beef’ < English *beef*

Chol (Mayan) *rus* ‘cross’ Spanish *cruz*

Swahili *kiplefiti* ‘roundabout’ < English *keep left*

(Note: in Swahili nouns with *ki-* denote Sg., the Pl. of this word is *viplefiti* ‘roundabouts’)