

Mechanisms of Semantic Shift

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Abstract

This paper tackles some of the important models of semantic shift (and hence lexical change) in the current cognitive and pragmatic literature. It aims to demonstrate that the meaning is unstable. It is due to the interaction between words, mind and language use that the shift of meaning is mostly a mechanism which focuses on the kinds of cognitive and communicative processes speakers and hearers bring to the task of learning and using a language.

Key words: meaning shift – prototype theory – metaphor – subjectification

ملخص

تستعرض هذه الورقة بعض أهم المناويل الخاصة بانتقال المعنى (وبالتالي التغير المعجمي) في الأدبيات الإدراكية والتداولية الحديثة، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى أن المعنى غير ثابت، إنه بسبب التفاعل الحاصل بين الكلمات والذهن والاستعمال اللغوي الذي يجعل في الغالب لانتقال المعنى آلية تركز على أنواع العمليات الإدراكية والتواصلية للمتخاطبين أن يستحضروا تعلم واستعمال اللغة،

الكلمات المفتاحية: انتقال المعنى – نظرية الطراز – الاستعارة – الذاتية

1- Introduction

Maintaining stability of meaning is very difficult, if not impossible, and thus the change of semantic meaning, including lexical meaning is an ultimate certainty. In recent years, there has been extensive discussion of the possible semantic changes, the reasons and the aspects of these changes. Accordingly, different traditional categories have arisen as such labeled: specialization, generalization, ameliorization and pejorization. This semasiological phenomenon has its effects on the other linguistic approaches as it was proved in previous works in diachronic linguistics. The coinage of the term "construction" was initiated in the literature on morphosyntactic change to refer to these phenomena such as: grammaticalization and lexicalization.

Because metaphor and metonymy are the principles behind much synchronic semantics, most semasiologists claim that metaphORIZATION and metonymization are two major factors in semantic change (but not the only ones). Others include two levels of change and are studied under two distinct fields in linguistics: cognition and pragmatics. On the basis of the first level (cognitive semantics more precisely), two tendencies have been proposed and further developed: the Relevance Prototype Theory developed by Geeraerts (1997), subjectification by Traugott and Dasher (2004), and a third tendency which did not get much interest: Mind-as-Body metaphor by Sweetser (1990). Whereas the second level insists so much on conventionalization of implicature which focuses on the IITSC: the Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change initiated by Traugott and Dasher (2004).

2- The Relevance Prototype Theory

From a conceptual point of view, three levels represent the vertical axis of categories which are: superordinate

categories (giving less detail), basic-level categories (the level of inclusiveness) and subordinate categories (more details); and it is the basic level which constitutes much of what members of a community share, the level at which humans are best able to list a cluster of common attributes for a category (Rosch, 1977).

According to Geeraerts (2010), the prototype theory highlights the fact that changes in the referential range of one specific word meaning may take the form of modulations on the core cases within that referential range i.e. if we want to understand the meaning of one word, we need to make a distinction between the semantic level (senses) and the referential level (category members towards maximal abstraction). It is due to this abstraction that the speakers are too prudent in using lexical items whether they exist in the centre or peripheral of a category. Thus, languages seem to have a kind of inbuilt stability, a core of meanings the speakers can rely on. At the same time languages seem to be flexible enough to permit substantial lexical change. (Ungerer, F. and Hans-Jörg S., 2006: 313).

Four main features for the description of synchronic categories are needed in the prototype structure: prototypical categories exhibit degrees of typicality, exhibit a family resemblance structure, are blurred at the edges and cannot be defined by means of a single set of criterial (necessary and sufficient) attributes (Geeraerts et al, 2010).

So the prototype theory highlights incidental changes of word meaning, and thus a new notion has been presented by Geeraerts into the literature of cognitive semantics "Semantic polygenesis" which is the phenomenon of one and the same reading of a particular lexical item that may come into existence more than once in the history of a word, each

time on an independent basis i.e. central (basic referential meaning) vs. marginal (accidental meaning which does not leave traces to be stored). A clear case is the study of the clothing term *legging* in Dutch over the years 1988 to 1991 (Geeraerts, 2010).

To round off the overview, we can conclude that the prototype theory is one important aspect (but not the only one) that encompasses the semantic or lexical change and thus the prototype shift from a purely cognitive viewpoint.

3- Subjectification

The approach of 'subjectification' is first introduced as a major process or mechanism and it is seen as a dominant tendency in semantic change though to some other linguists is just a process because it relies so much on result (Heiko, 2012). So subjectivity is the tendency or the main mechanism to become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition (Traugott, 1989), or it is the process through which words acquire more subjective senses (Traugott, 1999: 179). Thus for Traugott, subjectivity is both a process and a mechanism. As for Geeraerts, the background notion of the theory of subjectification is the recognition that some linguistic forms involve the subjective perspective of the speaking subject more than others (Geeraerts, 2010: 235). Ameliorization and pejoration are the best examples of this theory since they reflect the positive or the negative perspective towards a certain meaning. The shift of *boor* from the meaning of 'farmer' to 'crude person' demonstrates the speaker/writer's opinion being imported into the meaning of the word. Synchronically, the speaker/writer not only selects the content, but also the expression of that content (Traugott and

Dasher, 2004: 20) i.e. the meaning used is intentionally assessed, conceptualized and formulated to fulfill the speaker/writer's perspective.

According to Traugott, we can trace back the semantic change of meanings by looking at the seeds of this change in the speaker/writer's minds not the addressee/hearer's i.e. understanding a meaning of any construction is not equally done by both of them since they do not have the same socio-cultural background of that used meaning (of course this does not exclude the mutual understanding of communication but sometimes it keeps some gaps (interpretations) in any conversation). Thus we refer by subjectification to the observation that in diachronic language change, linguistic forms often show a strong tendency to evolve from meanings pertaining to the description of the 'objective world' (in a broad sense) towards meanings that pertain to the expression of the speaker's personal position vis-a-vis the 'objective world' (Nuyts, 2014:64).

An interesting example of subjectification is the use of the word 'locomotive' "*katira*" in Arabic. Speakers and writers nowadays widely refer by this word to the leading camel in the front part of a caravan and polysemously to that leading part of a train. An Arabic newspaper writer who wanted to publish an accident about a train falling in the Nile (Egypt) creatively involved the conceptualization of one element of a conceptual structure Ca (here the "*katira*" of camels) in terms of an element of another conceptual structure Cb (the first leading part of a train), because the two domains operates between each other. In such contexts as Nerlich and Clarké have argued "[t]he trick of being innovative and at the same time understandable is to use words in a novel way the meaning of which is self-evident" (a semasiological claim) ... using words for the look-alikes (resemblars) of what you

mean (metaphor)" (1992: 137). Similarly, the 'new' meaning of "*katira*" 'locomotive' is being variously used interchangeably by speakers and writers of the Arabic communities as in examples (1) and (2):

(1) "*arraees howa al katira alati takoudo al oma*"

'The president is the locomotive who leads the nation'.

(2) "*misr hya katirato al alam al arabi*"

'Egypt is the locomotive of the Arab world'.

In (1), "*arraees*" 'the president' (the institution of presidency) is referred to as a locomotive, while in (2) "*misr*" 'Egypt' (historically and culturally speaking, the country of leadership) is a locomotive of the Arab world. This meaning ("*katira*") is effectively motivated by the process of metaphorization which are conceptualized primarily in terms of comparison and of "sources" and "targets" in different (and discontinuous) conceptual domains, though 'constrained by paradigmatic relationships of sameness and differences (Traugott and Dasher, 2004: 28). The use of the word "*katira*", or any construction in this sense, 'is grounded in the socio-physical world of reference, it is likely that over time, speakers will develop polysemies grounded in the speakers' world, whether reasoning, belief, or meta-textual attitudes to the discourse' in the words of Traugott (1999: 179). So, subjectification signals the explicit realization of conjoining the pair of form-meaning in its semasiological development.

One of the standard examples of subjectification is the development of epistemic sense (modality) manifested in *must*. For instance, the example (3) presented by Riemer (2010:381):

(3) Alfred *must* be guilty.

The sentence in (3) concludes that Alfred is certainly guilty (no suspicion or doubt), because it is the belief or subjective viewpoint of the speaker that such a proposition is true. So, in the deontic reading of this sentence, *must* expresses obligation as in (4) (Geeraerts, 2010: 235):

(4) Mary *must* be home.

In example (4), the speaker definitely assures that Mary is home (conclusion); reaching her destination is a fact (speaker's conviction).

The change of the epistemic modal of '*must*' by '*may*' will lead to other meanings: in (3) the evidence is suspected, and in (4) the final destination of home is uncertain. A minute analysis of Traugott and Dasher (2004: 120) of the history of *must* showed clear evidence of epistemic meanings in Old English and Middle English examples.

One of the major types of subjectification is 'evaluative meanings' (Geeraerts, 2010: 235) when a word is measured and understood by its positive or negative speaker/writer's perspective i.e. admitting the amelioration or degeneration of a word's meaning is basically depending on a self evaluation of a certain meaning because 'the mechanisms of semantic change are all psychological in nature' (Wundt 1900: 570 cited in Heiko, 2012: 71). The use of "*nice*" in Middle English, is 'simple, foolish, silly, ignorant'; the basic modern sense, 'agreeable, pleasant, satisfactory, attractive' is not attested until the eighteenth century (Riemer, 2010:375). The mechanism of this change can well be tested in (5):

(5) John is a *nice* man

The meaning of *nice* is connected to the speaker/writer's view to John though 'simple, foolish, silly' he "may" be, but for others it is uncertain that the speakers/writers do have the

"same" meaning measures (physical or moral) of John. Ultimately, the degree of meaning "sharpness" is diachronically lessened to the new meaning which won an evaluative power of "positiveness". As for degeneration, it is well tested by the word *blue*. When it is linked to the word "film" it becomes the compound form "*blue film*" which means porn movie which has a negative meaning. This pejoration is evaluative in the domain of film making so that the word *blue* no longer refers to the colour but the speaker/writer's perspective of a negative value.

Like English, Arabic too has many words which are psychologically and socially unaccepted and are expressed by lessening the "sharpness" of their meaning.

4- Mind-as-Body Metaphor

Another cognitive method leading to semantic change is the theory introduced by Eve Sweetser (1990) which is named Mind-as-Body metaphor.

This theory concentrates so much on verbs though multi-domain usages can be included too such as: causal conjunctions like "because". Its basic idea is "*motivated by correlations between our external experience and our internal emotional and cognitive states... bodily experience is a source of vocabulary for our psychological states, but not the other way around*" (Sweetser, 1990: 30). In other words, the world in its physical nature affects and is reflected by our mental states, i.e. the concrete physical experience serves as an analogical model for talking about abstract mental phenomena like knowing and understanding (Reimer, 2010: 383).

The best examples given to illustrate this idea are the verbs of perception and cognition: see, hear, seize... For Sweetser, 'see'

can be extended to mean 'know/understand', 'hear' can be extended to mean 'obey', 'seize' can be extended to mean 'grasp/understand' and 'taste' can be extended to mean 'choose/decide/express personal preferences (1990: 32ff). Those words of physical perception show systematic metaphorical connections with the vocabulary of internal self and internal sensations.

Similarly, Arabic has a number of verbs of perception and cognition like "qaddara" which is polysemous for 'measure' and 'think'; the link between the two meanings is done between the parallel or analogous areas of physical and internal sensation; for measuring things in the external world and measuring these things in the abstract inner self (thinking).

Historical semantic change is not random but is influenced by Mind-as-Body metaphor which is one type of cognitive structuring and is seen to derive lexical change in a motivated way, and provides a key to understanding the creation of polysemy and the phenomenon of semantic shift (Saeed, 2003: 352). Consequently, the theory of Mind-as-Body metaphor is not widespread for all polysemies of this kind but it can be considered as another good source that can help in understanding semantic change.

5- Conventionalization of implicature

Basically, much of the modern work today is based on the semantic change which stresses the notion of the **conventionalization of implicature**. This process of change is an explicit reference to pragmatics in the IITSC i.e. it is a usage-based model of change. New meanings may arise due to the discourses between the speaker/hearer and interpreting meanings in different contexts. According to Heiko, this mechanism assumes that variant interpretations of 'what is being meant', and subsequently to change, are 'implicatures'. If implicatures lead to a novel semantic interpretation of a

linguistic expression, a semantic reanalysis occurs. The reanalysis is supported by, and spreads through, analogy to extant patterns (2012: 71), i.e. conventional meanings of inferences are interpreted because two concepts are pragmatically close to each other.

The presence of intention is a key element in creating new meanings in a particular context; it is the speaker/writer who uses expressions that may leave rooms for interpretations that can be received by the hearer/reader. In (6), Geeraerts clarifies the idea of intentions that bring new inferences into account.

(6) Don't forget to fill up the car.

It is in the speaker/writer's intention that the car does not need to be filled with fuel and such expressions are explicitly done.

Another good example is the transfer of spatial to temporal meanings. Bybee, Pagliucca and Perkins argue that the change of space to time as a metaphor is misleading: the transfer of 'go' and 'come' meanings to temporal uses is not an analogy or resemblance because the function of expressing intention comes into play and that *"the intention is part of the meaning from the beginning, and the only change necessary is the generalization to contexts in which an intention is expressed, but the subject is not moving spatially to fulfill that intention."*

(Bybee, Perkins and Pagliucca 1994: 268).

So it is extremely important to put pragmatic considerations at the heart of understanding why meanings change i.e. only by looking at the different circumstances of what is being said that we can limit the room of interpretations.

Recent works of Traugott and Dasher which were introduced by Levinson (1995) strengthens the idea of conventionalization; it suggests that as a first step, a