SEMANTIC CHANGE

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Semantic change

- 1. bloody, bugger in UK (or USA)?
- 2. Pissed in USA, and in UK?
- Bless (from OE blēdsian)
- Cretin in UK?
- Semantic change deals with change in meaning, understood to be a change in the concepts associated with a word, and has nothing to do with change in the phonetic form of the word.

Semantic change

- Semantic change is very difficult to describe and explain. It is unlikely that scholars will ever be able to predict the directions in which particular words will change their meanings. The development of new material and social conditions may cause words to become unnecessary.

- For example, *wimple* 'a medieval head-covering' is not used any more, because there is no need for it.

- On the other hand, a shift of attitudes may render some words socially unacceptable (e.g. frog, Jap, girlie...), while others become highly fashionable or socially relevant (e.g. *cool, ecology...*). Nonetheless, by looking at a wide range of examples of semantic changes that have happened in the history of the English language, one can begin to develop a certain sense of what kinds of change are likely. Information about the original meaning of the morphemes and the intuition developed from observing various patterns of semantic change will help us make better-informed guesses about the meanings of unfamiliar words that contain familiar morphemes.

Semantic change

- For example, if we see the word *infomercial* for the first time, what can we say about it? Well, the 1st part is *information* and the 2nd part is *commercial*,so we can at least partially understand its meaning. And what is it actually? It is '*a television programme that is an extended advertisement often including a discussion or demonstration*'.

- We shall focus first, on the mechanisms of change- what forces in our society, or what forces in our thinking, typically have brought about semantic change? Then we will turn to a classification of the results of semantic change, or to put it in other words, how do these changes affect the lexicon?

Semantic change

External forces

Technology and current relevance

- When new technology changes the way we conduct our daily life, the words which refer to it change also. Consider, for example, the word *compute* and its derivatives- *computer, computation*. It used to mean 'to count, to reckon, to calculate'. Indeed the word *count* is a direct descendant (through French) of the Latin verb *computare* 'to count'. The computer, however, is no longer a 'counter': it has given its name to a new branch of science, *computer science,* we talk of *computer addiction, computer-aided design, computer ethics, computer literacy, computer viruses*, and even *compusex*. Computers deal with text, graphics, images, symbols, music; the original meaning of 'counting' in computer language has been completely supplanted by the new associations of 'computing'.

Semantic change

- As computers became common, many words changed their meanings because they could conveniently be used to refer to aspects of computing. For example, you can *customize* your *commands*, where customize refers to setting up specialized function keys. The word *custom* already has many meanings outside this range of computers, e.g. characteristic behaviour of a society, special tax on importing goods, and *customer* as one who shops at a store.

Semantic change

- The word *command* in *customizing your commands* is a specialized sense of a word that once meant 'an order given to a person of higher rank to a person of lower rank' – now it means 'to give a signal to the programme by pushing a certain key or clicking the mouse on the right icon'. In defining *command*, we have introduced two new meanings: *mouse* and *icon*. Until the computer age, *icon* most commonly referred to pictorial representations of sacred personages in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The lively *mouse* is an input device, it can be mechanical or optical, it is connected through a mouseport, and it can cause mouse elbow. The computer revolution has given rise to new meanings for ordinary words. You can open two windows on your screen, select computing operations from a menu, use hyphenation tools from your tools menu, select a hyperlink, paste a section from one document into another, look something called a clipboard, which is neither clipped, nor a board, you find the bug in your program, you surf the net, and so on.
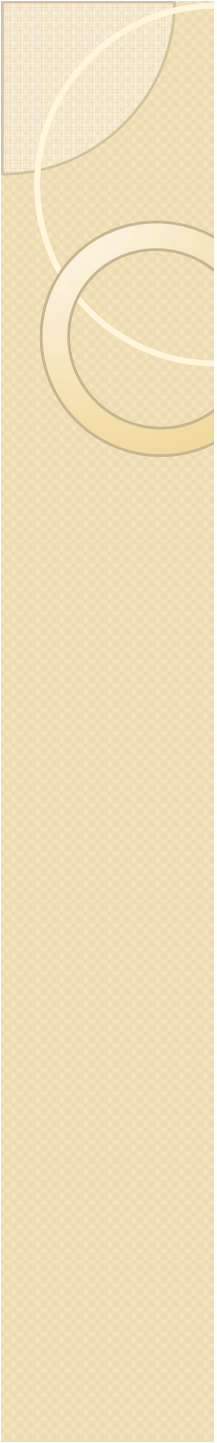
Semantic change

- The computer-related examples are numerous and striking, but the process they illustrate is neither new nor isolated. The word *shuttle*, whose original meaning is 'a device used in weaving', is more frequently used today in its later, extended figurative meaning of anything that goes back and forth: a shuttle bus, a shuttle flight, the space shuttle, and in politics, shuttle diplomacy. For some less-dramatic examples, think of the nineteenth-century meaning of station-wagon, a 'horse-drawn covered carriage'.

- Another example comes from astrology, and it is the word disaster. Originally, *disaster* meant 'a bad, unfavorable, star or planet'. It came from astrology, in which the future is supposed to be predicted by configurations of stars. Our faith in such predictions was shuttered long ago, but the word maintains its meaning in a changed society.

Semantic change

- *Doctor* meant 'teacher',from Latin *docere* 'to teach', and in that meaning it survives as an occasional title for professors. The medical sense,now the norm, was acquired gradually from the association with higher education that was characteristic of physicians.

- *Elegant* originally meant 'one who selects out', based on Latin *elegans*, from the verb *eligere*, 'to choose'. (ELECTION – ELEGANT, from the same root) Therefore, 'one who picks wisely'. An elegant person, for example, is taken to be elegant because he or she selects clothes ans accessoires wisely.

- *Adore*. It means literally, *to speak to*. At some point in history, the kind of speaking came to be the speech of prayer, *speaking to God*. Eventually the association went even further: looking toward heaven, imploringly, would now be described as adoration. The point is, the root which meant *speak* has come to refer to silent worship, a change brought about by association with prayer.

- The connection between *amble* and *ambulance* is an accident of war: *ambulance* comes from a longer phrase, *hospital ambulant*, a 'moveable hospital', one which could be present on the battlefield to tend to the wounded. It was merely shortened to the second part of the phrase, giving us *ambulance*.

Semantic change

- One thing we have to mention here is metonymy. Metonymy is an association of a particular type, usually accidental association in space or time. The real referent and the transferred referent are associated by virtue of being in the same place, as when we speak of the *White House* and we are in fact referring to the current President of the United States and his staff. This association is of both place and time, because *The White House* can only refer to the present President. Metonymy can be extended to cover changes resulting from other associations such as part and whole – *drink the whole bottle, give me a hand, live by the sword...*

Internal forces

Analogy

- The association covered by the notion of metonymy is due to a more general cause: analogy. Analogy involves the perception of similarity between some concrete object or process and some abstract concept or process. The basic meaning of a word is related to another meaning in such a way that by analogy there can be a transfer or extension of meaning from one to the other. For example, if someone is the *head* of a department, the relationship of the head to the body – the *literal* sense – is being used in an extended or figurative sense, in which there is an analogical ratio set up: *head* is to body as *head* (=leader) *is to department.* It can be seen as an equation.

Semantic change

- Thus if we say that 'The population is mushrooming all over the world', we are comparing the rapid growth of population to the unmanageable fecundity of a mushroom. If we speak of a 'traffic bottleneck', we are comparing some narrowing of traffic flow with the neck of a bottle where the contents flow more slowly.

- Virtually any perceived similarity can be the basis of analogical change and the source of a new meaning. The analogy can be quite remote and even unlikely, but if it catches someone's fancy it may easily stick in the language.

- E.g. *culminate* – reach the top of the hill → to reach a decisive point, after struggling as if climbing.

- *dependent* – hanging from something → supported by virtue of someone else's money or power.

- *educate* – to lead forth, to bring up → to make competent, to raise to a higher social or cultural level

- *progress* – to step forward → to improve, to move toward a better existence

- *provoke* – to call forth → to incite with anger or desire, to irritate

- *understand* – be located beneath → to grasp concept

Analogy is the most frequent and most important source of semantic enrichment of the language.

Loss of specificity

- This process could equally be called *over-generalization*, but loss of specificity has the slight advantage of reflecting a common human failing. All of us are prone to generalizing, prone to failures of specificity. On of the techniques we study when we are learning to write acceptable texts is how to be more specific, how to provide details and examples, how to find the right word for the meaning we have in mind. In everyday speech and casual writing, we often choose the more general meaning. This tendency shows up historically when words acquire broader and more general meanings.

- For example, *Guy Fawkes'* infamous first name lost its specificity with the proliferation of November 5th effigies of the criminal; then *guys* began to be used of males of strange appearence, then it was broadened to refer to to any males, and now it is generalized (especially in the plural) to any group of people, including groups of females.

The results of semantic change

- We turn now from the mechanisms of change to the consequences of change.
- What is the status of a word. Has its reference gone up, or down in its social status and content? One classic example of a word that has risen in status is *knight*, which used to mean, quite simply *boy, manservant.* Pretty came from OE *þraettig* "crafty, sly".
- Rising in status is called *amelioration* / elevation (from Latin *melior* – better). A development of the meaning in the opposite direction, which is perhaps more frequent, is called *þejoration* (from Latin *þejor* 'worse').

- Another type of status is *semantic bleaching*, where the original meaning of the word has been eroded away and generalized by heavy usage, as in words like *very* (originally *true*), *terrible* (able to cause terror).

Narrowing or specialization

- Beside amelioration and pejoration we can mention two other changes. Firstly, there is *narrowing or specialization*, where a lexeme becomes more specialized in meaning. For example, *actor* originally meant someone who does something, but it has changed its meaning into 'one who has a role in a dramatic production'.

- *Ammunition* originally considered to be military supplies of all kinds, but now it refers to bullets, rockets, that is military supplies that explode.

- *Meat* originally meant "food" in general an later narrowed its meaning to "food of flesh".

- *Deer* originally referred to "an animal"(OE dēor- animal).

- *Girl* originally meant a child or a young person of either sex" in ME period, but in Modern English it narrowed its meaning to a female child.

- *Starve* originally meant to die (OE steorfan-to die), but today it means *to suffer or perish from hunger*.

Widening or generalisation

- And secondly, there is also *extension* or *generalization*, where a lexeme widens its meaning. For example, *office* originally meant 'a service', but today it refers also to a place where someone works. *Novice* originally meant 'a person admitted to a probationery membership in a religious community', but today it refers generally to 'a beginner'.

- *Dog* originally appeared with the more specific meaning of 'a specific powerful breed of dog', which generalised to include all breeds or races of dogs.

- *Salary* from Latin *salarium* was a soldier's allotment of salt (Latin sal=salt), which then came to mean a soldier's wages in general, and then finally, wages in general, not just soldier's pay.

Some final remarks

- 1. Semantically related words often undergo parallel semantic shifts. For example, various words which meant *rapidly* in Old English and Middle English shifted their meaning to *immediately*.

- 2. Spatial/locative words may develop temporal senses: *before, after, behind*. Also, spatial terms often develop from body-part terms, as in *ahead of, in the back of, at the foot of.*

- 3. Word having to do with the sense of touch may typically develop meanings involving the sense of taste: *sharp, crisp.*

- 4. Words involving the sense of taste may develop extended senses involving emotions in general: *bitter, sour, sweet.*

- 5. see > *understand, know*.

- 6. hear > *understand, obey*.

- 7. body > *person...*