



CHANGE OF ENGLISH WORDS MEANING

Gulistan State University
Student of foreign language and literature
Sharipova MOHICHEHRA

Annotation: Word-meaning is liable to change in the course of the historical development of language. Changes of lexical meaning may be illustrated by a diachronic semantic analysis of many commonly used English words. The word *fond* (OE. *fond*) used to mean 'foolish', 'foolishly credulous'; *glad* (OE, *glaed*) had the meaning of 'bright', 'shining' and so on.

Key words: Terminological confusion, restriction, extension, amelioration, deterioration of meaning, semantic change, metaphoric or metonymic transfer, criteria.

Change of meaning has been thoroughly studied and as a matter of fact monopolised the attention of all semanticists whose work up to the early 1930's was centered almost exclusively on the description and classification of various changes of meaning. Abundant language data can be found in almost all the books dealing with semantics. Here we shall confine the discussion to a brief outline of the problem as it is viewed in modern linguistic science.[1,2,6,7,9]

To avoid the ensuing confusion of terms and concepts it is necessary to discriminate between the causes of semantic change, the results and the nature of the process of change of meaning . These are three closely bound up, but essentially different aspects of one and the same problem.

Discussing the causes of semantic change we concentrate on the factors bringing about -this change and attempt to find out why the word changed its



meaning. Analysing the nature of semantic change we seek to clarify the process of this change and describe how various changes of meaning were brought about. Our aim in investigating the results of semantic change is to find out what was changed, i.e. we compare the resultant and the original meanings and describe the difference between them mainly in terms of the changes of the denotational components.

The factors accounting for semantic changes may be roughly subdivided into two groups: a) extra-linguistic and b) linguistic causes.

By extra-linguistic causes we mean various changes in the life of the speech community, changes in economic and social structure, changes in ideas, scientific concepts, way of life and other spheres of human activities as reflected in word meanings. Although objects, institutions, concepts, etc. change in the course of time in many cases the soundform of the words which denote them is retained but the meaning of the words is changed. The word car, e.g., ultimately goes back to Latin carrus which meant 'a four-wheeled wagon' (ME. carre) but now that other means of transport are used it denotes 'a motor-car', 'a railway carriage' (in the USA), 'that portion of an airship, or balloon which is intended to carry personnel, cargo or equipment'.

Some changes of meaning are due to what may be described as purely linguistic causes, i.e. factors acting within the language system. The commonest form which this influence takes is the so-called ellipsis. In a phrase made up of two words one of these is omitted and its meaning is transferred to its partner. The verb to starve, e.g., in Old English (OE. steorfan) had the meaning 'to die' and was habitually used in collocation with the word hunger (ME. sterven of hunger). Already in the 16th century the verb itself acquired the meaning 'to



die of hunger'. Similar semantic changes may be observed in Modern English when the meaning of one word is transferred to another because they habitually occur together in speech.[3,4,5,8]

Another linguistic cause is discrimination of synonyms which can be illustrated by the semantic development of a number of words. The word land, e.g., in Old English (OE. land) meant both 'solid part of earth's surface' and 'the territory of a nation'. When in the Middle English period the word country (OFr. contree) was borrowed as its synonym, the meaning of the word land was somewhat altered and 'the territory of a nation' came to be denoted mainly by the borrowed word country.

Some semantic changes may be accounted for by the influence of a peculiar factor usually referred to as linguistic analogy. It was found out, e.g., that if one of the members of a synonymic set acquires a new meaning other members of this set change their meanings too. It was observed, e.g., that all English adverbs which acquired the meaning 'rapidly' (in a certain period of time — before 1300) always develop the meaning 'immediately', similarly verbs synonymous with catch, e.g. grasp, get, etc., by semantic extension acquired another meaning — 'to understand'.

Generally speaking, a necessary condition of any semantic change, no matter what its cause, is some connection, some association between the old meaning and the new. There are two kinds of association involved as a rule in various semantic changes namely: a) similarity of meanings, and b) contiguity of meanings.

Similarity of meanings or metaphor may be described as a semantic process of associating two referents, one of which in some way resembles the



other. The word hand, e.g., acquired in the 16th century the meaning of ‘a pointer of a clock of a watch’ because of the similarity of one of the functions performed by the hand (to point at something) and the function of the clockpointer. Since metaphor is based on the perception of similarities it is only natural that when an analogy is obvious, it should give rise to a metaphoric meaning. This can be observed in the wide currency of metaphoric meanings of words denoting parts of the human body in various languages (cf. ‘the leg of the table’, ‘the foot of the hill’, etc.). Sometimes it is similarity of form, outline, etc. that underlies the metaphor. The words warm and cold began to denote certain qualities of human voices because of some kind of similarity between these qualities and warm and cold temperature. It is also usual to perceive similarity between colours and emotions.[1,2,3,4,9]

It has also been observed that in many speech communities colour terms, e.g. the words black and white, have metaphoric meanings in addition to the literal denotation of colours.

Contiguity of meanings or metonymy may be described as the semantic process of associating two referents one of which makes part of the other or is closely connected with it.

This can be perhaps best illustrated by the use of the word tongue — ‘the organ of speech’ in the meaning of ‘language’ (as in mother tongue; cf. also L. *lingua*, Russ. *язык*). The word bench acquired the meaning ‘judges, magistrates’ because it was on the bench that the judges used to sit in law courts, similarly the House acquired the meaning of ‘members of the House’ (Parliament).

It is generally held that metaphor plays a more important role in the change of meaning than metonymy. A more detailed analysis would show that



there are some semantic changes that fit into more than the two groups discussed above. A change of meaning, e.g., may be brought about by the association between the sound-forms of two words. The word boon, e.g.”, originally meant ‘prayer, petition’, ‘request’, but then came to denote ‘a thing prayed or asked for’. Its current meaning is ‘a blessing, an advantage, a thing to be thanked for.’ The change of meaning was probably due to the similarity to the sound-form of the adjective boon (an Anglicised form of French bon denoting ‘good, nice’).

Within metaphoric and metonymic changes we can single out various subgroups. Here, however, we shall confine ourselves to a very general outline of the main types of semantic association as discussed above. A more detailed analysis of the changes of meaning and the nature of such changes belongs in the diachronic or historical lexicology and lies outside the scope of the present methodical complex.[1,2,6,9]

Results of semantic change can be generally observed in the changes of the denotational meaning of the word (restriction and extension of meaning) or in the alteration of its connotational component (amelioration and deterioration of meaning).

Changes in the denotational meaning may result in the restriction of the types or range of referents denoted by the word. This may be illustrated by the semantic development of the word hound (OE. hund) which used to denote ‘a dog of any breed’ but now denotes only ‘a dog used in the chase’. This is also the case with the word fowl (OE. fuzol, fuzel) which in old English denoted ‘any bird’, but in Modern English denotes ‘a domestic hen or cock’. This is generally described as “restriction of meaning” and if the word with the new meaning



comes to be used in the specialised vocabulary of some limited group within the speech community it is usual to speak of specialisation of meaning. For example, we can observe restriction and specialisation of meaning in the case of the verb to glide (OE. *glidan*) which had the meaning 'to move gently and smoothly' and has now acquired a restricted and specialised meaning 'to fly with no engine' (cf. a glider).

Changes in the denotational meaning may also result in the application of the word to a wider variety of referents. This is commonly described as extension of meaning and may be illustrated by the word *target* which originally meant 'a small round shield' (a diminutive of *targe*, cf. ON. *targa*) but now means 'anything that is fired at' and also figuratively 'any result aimed at'.

If the word with the extended meaning passes from the specialised vocabulary into common use, we describe the result of the semantic change as the generalisation of meaning. The word *camp*, e.g., which originally was used only as a military term and meant 'the place where troops are lodged in tents' (cf. L. *campus* — 'exercising ground for the army') extended and generalised its meaning and now denotes 'temporary quarters' (of travellers, nomads, etc.).[3,4,5,8]

As can be seen from the examples discussed above it is mainly the denotational component of the lexical meaning that is affected while the connotational component remains unaltered. There are other cases, however, when the changes in the connotational meaning come to the fore. These changes, as a rule accompanied by a change in the denotational' component, may be subdivided into two main groups: a) pejorative development or the acquisition by the word of some derogatory emotive charge, and b)



ameliorative development or the improvement of the connotational component of meaning. The semantic change in the word boor may serve to illustrate the first group. This word was originally used to denote 'a villager, a peasant' (cf. OE. zebur 'dweller') and then acquired a derogatory, contemptuous connotational meaning and came to denote 'a clumsy or ill-bred fellow'. The ameliorative development of the connotational meaning may be observed in the change of the semantic structure of the word minister which in one of its meanings originally denoted 'a servant, an attendant', but now — 'a civil servant of higher rank, a person administering a department of state or accredited by one state to another'.

It is of interest to note that in derivational clusters a change in the connotational meaning of one member does not necessarily affect the others. This peculiarity can be observed in the words accident and accidental. The lexical meaning of the noun accident has undergone pejorative development and denotes not only 'something that happens by chance', but usually 'something unfortunate'. The derived adjective accidental does not possess in its semantic structure this negative connotational meaning (cf. also fortune: bad fortune, good fortune and fortunate).[1,2,5,6,8,9]

As can be inferred from the analysis of various changes of word-meanings they can be classified according to the social causes that bring about change of meaning (socio-linguistic classification), the nature of these changes (psychological classification) and the results of semantic changes (logical classification). Here it is suggested that causes, nature and results of semantic changes should be viewed as three essentially different but inseparable aspects



of one and the same linguistic phenomenon as a change of meaning may be investigated from the point of view of its cause, nature and its consequences.

Essentially the same causes may bring about different results, e.g. the semantic development in the word knight (OE. *cniht*) from 'a boy servant' to 'a young warrior' and eventually to the meaning it possesses in Modern English is due to extra-linguistic causes just as the semantic change in the word boor, but the results are different. In the case of book we observe pejorative development whereas in the case of knight we observe amelioration of the connotational component. And conversely, different causes may lead to the same result. Restriction of meaning, for example, may be the result of the influence of extra-linguistic factors as in the case of glide (progress of science and technique) and also of purely linguistic causes (discrimination of synonyms) as is the case with the word fowl. Changes of essentially identical nature, e. g. similarity of referent as the basis of association, may bring about different results, e.g. extension of meaning as in target and also restriction of meaning as in the word fowl.[5,6,7,8,9]

To avoid terminological confusion it is suggested that the terms restriction and extension or amelioration and deterioration of meaning should be used to describe only the results of semantic change irrespective of its nature or causes. When we discuss metaphoric or metonymic transfer of meaning we imply the nature of the semantic change whatever its results may be. It also follows that a change of meaning should be described so as to satisfy all the three criteria.

In the discussion of semantic changes we confined ourselves only to the type of change which results in the disappearance of the old meaning which is



replaced by the new one. The term change of meaning however is also used to describe a change in the number (as a rule an increase) and arrangement of word-meanings without a single meaning disappearing from its semantic structure.

RESOURCES

1. Shread Dr.A. The words we use. Andre Deutch. L, 1981
2. E. Kruisinga. A handbook of Present Day English. - London , 1969, part 2
3. П.М. Корашук. Словообразование английского языка. –Москва: Высшая школа, 1977ю
4. А.Г.Дмитриева. Структура словообразовательных гнезд общегерманских существительных в современном английском языке. –Москва, 1971.
5. H.Marchand. The categories and Types of Present day English Wordformation. –Wiesbaden, 1960.
6. A.G.Kennedy/ Current English/- USA. 1995
7. E.M.Mednikova. Seminars in English Lexicology. –Москва. 1978
8. А.Хожиев, А.Ахмедов тахрири остида Ўзбек тили лексикологияси.. – Тошкент. 1974.
9. <http://www.britishcouncil.org>