

Semantic Change

1. What is semantic change?

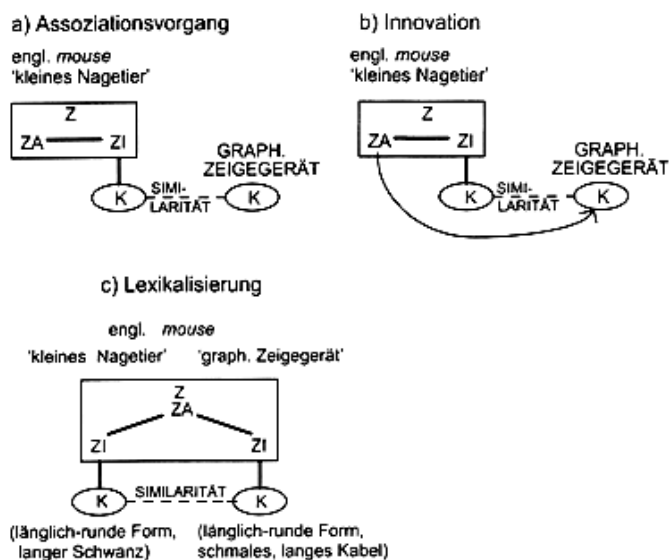
“Semantic change deals with change in meaning, understood to be a change in the concepts associated with a word [...]” (Campbell 1998: 255).

2. What is changing and how?

2.1 The notion of *meaning*

- **Denotation:** what a word refers to
 (1) *gay* ‘merry, light-hearted’ > ‘homosexual’
- **Connotation:** what a word evokes
 (2) OE *ceorl* ‘man’ > MnE *churl* ‘boor, villain, oaf’
- **Register:** the set of contexts in which it is appropriate to use a word
 (3) *thou, thee, thy, thine* > *you, you, your, yours*

2.2 The process of semantic innovation and lexicalisation (Blank 2001: 71-74)



Z = Zeichen
 ZA = Zeichenausdruck (*signifiant*)
 ZI = Zeicheninhalt (*signifié*)
 K = Konzept

Referent and phonic image are of no importance here.

Fig. 1 (Blank 2001: 72)

3. Kinds of semantic change (Campbell 1998: 256-267; Schendl 2001: 30 f.)

3.1 Widening (generalisation, broadening, extension)

THE WORD MEANING BECOMES MORE GENERAL: “[The] range of meanings of a word increases so that the word can be used in more contexts than were appropriate for it before the change” (Campbell 1998: 256).

- (4) *lovely*: ‘worthy to be loved’ > ‘beautiful, attractive’, ‘enjoyable pleasant’
- (5) *cupboard*: ‘a table upon which cups and other vessels were placed, a piece of furniture to display plates, a sideboard’ > ‘small storage cabinet’

3.2 Narrowing (specialisation, restriction)

THE WORD MEANING BECOMES MORE SPECIFIC: “[The] range of meanings of a word is decreased so that the word can be used appropriately in fewer contexts than it could before the change” (Campbell 1998: 257).

- (6) *fowl*: ‘bird’ > ‘a bird kept on a farm’
- (7) *wife*: ‘woman’ > ‘married woman, spouse’

3.3 Metaphor /ˈmetəfə, AM ˈmetəfɔːr/

SIMILARITY: “Metaphor in semantic change involves extensions in the meaning of a word that suggest a semantic similarity or connection between the new sense and the original one” (Campbell 1998: 258).

- (8) *chill*: ‘to cool’ > ‘to relax, calm down’
- (9) *neck*: ‘part of the body’ > ‘something resembling a neck’, eg *bottle neck*

3.4 Metonymy

CONTIGUITY: “Metonymic changes typically involve some contiguity in the real (non-linguistic) world” (Campbell 1998: 259).

- (10) *tea*, in addition to the drink, also means ‘the evening meal’
- (11) *flake* ‘a small, loose flat bit’ also means ‘an irresponsible person’

3.5 Synecdoche /sɪˈnekdəki/

PART-TO-WHOLE RELATIONSHIP: “[A] term with more comprehensive meaning is used to refer to a less comprehensive meaning or vice versa [...]” (Campbell 1998: 259).

- (12) *tongue* ‘language’
- (13) *moon* ‘month’

3.6 Degeneration (pejoration)

NEGATIVE EVALUATION: “[The] sense of a word takes on a less positive, more negative evaluation in the minds of the users of the language [...]” (Campbell 1998: 261).

- (14) *spinster* ‘one who spins’ > ‘unmarried older women’
- (15) *madam* ‘a polite form of address for a woman’ > the female head of a brothel

3.7 Elevation (amelioration)

IMPROVEMENT OF MEANING: “[It] involves shifts in the sense of a word in the direction towards a more positive value in the minds of the users in the language” (Campbell 1998: 263).

- (16) OE *cniht* (*knight*) ‘boy, servant’ > ‘servant’ > ‘military servant’ > ‘mounted warrior in service of the king, lesser nobility (below baronet)’
- (17) OE *prættig* (*pretty*) ‘crafty, cunning’ > ‘clever’ > ‘skillfully made’ > ‘fine’ > ‘beautiful’
- (18) *pest* ‘plague’ > ‘destructive animal’ > ‘annoying person’

3.8 Taboo and euphemism

AVOID STIGMATISED CONCEPTS: “[Speakers tend] to avoid direct reference to unpleasant or socially stigmatized concepts [and] resort to the strategy of using euphemisms, i.e. neutral words for referring to stigmatized concepts” (Schendl 2001: 32).

- (19) *die*: *be no more, expire, de cease, demise, pass on, depart, leave the world, be pushing up the daisies, rest in peace* etc.
- (20) *toilet* (> F *toilettes* ‘small towels’): *lavatory, bathroom, restroom, commode, loo, john* etc.
- (21) *cock* ‘adult male chicken’: *rooster (cock ‘penis’)*
- (22) *ass* ‘long-eared animal related to horse’: AE *donkey, burro* (ass ‘derriere, arse’)

3.9 Hyperbole /haɪˈpɜː(r)b(ə)li/

EXAGGERATION BY OVERSTATEMENT (cf Campbell 1998: 265).

- (23) ‘very’: *terribly, horribly, awfully* (cf *terror, horror, awe*)
- (24) *lame* ‘crippled, having an impaired limb’ > ‘stupid, awkward, socially inept, weak’
- (25) *amazing* ‘overwhelm with wonder’ > ‘surprising, excellent’
- (26) *starve* ‘die of hunger’ > ‘be very hungry’
- (27) *adore* ‘worship’ > ‘like’

3.10 Litotes /laɪˈtəʊtɪz, AM laɪtəˈtɪz/

EXAGGERATION BY UNDERSTATEMENT (cf Campbell 1998: 265)

- (28) *inhale* ‘breathe in, draw in by breathing’ > ‘eat something fast’
- (29) *kill* ‘strike, beat, hit, knock’ > ‘cause to die’

4. Why do word meanings change? – Attempts to explain semantic change (Campbell 1998: 267-273; Schendl 2001: 32 ff)

4.1 Extralinguistic factors

- 4.1.1 SOCIOCULTURAL AND HISTORICAL: Changes in society, technology, politics, religion and basically in all spheres of human life lead to semantic change. The invention of new things creates a need of new words to name these inventions. Instead of borrowing or coining new words, humans tend to use existing words whose meanings are metaphorically or metonymically extended (cf 3.3, 3.4).
- 4.1.2 PSYCHOLOGICAL: People have a general tendency to constantly emphasise and exaggerate. This wears off the meaning of a word (cf 3.9). Another tendency is to avoid expressions that have been stigmatised within a society and to use euphemisms instead (taboos; cf 3.8).

4.2 Linguistic factors

Semantic change goes through a stage of polysemy, where a word has more than one meaning. “A word starts out with an original meaning, then acquires additional, multiple meanings, and then the original sense is lost, leaving only the newer meaning.” (Campbell 1998: 268)

4.2.1 BORROWING (Schendl 2001: 33)

The borrowing of a word for which a synonymous native word exists leads to the disappearance of one word or the semantic differentiation.

- (30) Germanic **tem-ram* ‘building’ > English *timber* ‘building and material for building’ > *timber* ‘material for building’
- (31) *write*: Germanic ‘to cut, score’ > OE *writan* ‘to cut, scratch and to write’ > *write* ‘to write’

4.2.2 CHANGE OF A SEMANTICALLY RELATED WORD (Schendl 2001: 33)

Language is structured into semantic (lexical) fields. The change of meaning of one member of the field affects the meanings of the other members as well.

- (32) *Bird* and *fowl* changed their positions as superordinate and subordinate terms;
fowl 'bird (in general)' > *fowl* 'fowl, i.e. specific kind of bird', *bird* is now 'any kind of bird'

4.3 Broad explanatory tendencies (Traugott in Campbell 1998: 270 ff.).

4.3.1 MEANINGS BASED ON EXTERNAL SITUATION > MEANINGS BASED ON THE INTERNAL SITUATION (EVALUATIVE/PERCEPTUAL/COGNITIVE)

- (33) degeneration, elevation (cf 3.6, 3.7)

- (34) 'see' > 'know, understand'

- (35) 'hear' > 'understand', 'obey'

physical-action verbs > mental-verbs:

- (36) 'grasp', 'capture', 'get' > 'understand'

- (37) *feel* 'touch, feel with hands' > 'feel, think, have sympathy or pity for'

4.3.2 MEANINGS BASED ON EXTERNAL OR INTERNAL SITUATION > MEANINGS BASED ON TEXTUAL OR (META)LINGUISTIC SITUATIONS

propositional > textual:

- (38) OE *þa hwīle þe* 'at the time that' (propositional) > *while* (1) 'period of time' (propositional, a specific temporal situation), (2) 'during the time that', (3) 'although' (textual)

mental-state verbs > speech-act verbs:

- (39) *observe* 'perceive, witness' > 'state, remark'

(also physical-action verbs > mental-verbs; cf 4.3.1)

4.3.3 MEANINGS TEND TO BECOME INCREASINGLY BASED ON SPEAKERS' SUBJECTIVE BELIEFS/STATES/ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE PROPOSITION

- (40) *sharp*, *bitter*, *sour*, *sweet*

obligation > possibility/probability:

- (41) *may* 'physical ability' > 'social permission' > 'epistemic, logical possibility'

Jane may come 'Jane is able to come' > 'Jane is allowed to come' > 'it is perhaps the case that Jane will come'

5. Gerles, girls, grrrlz – the semantic changes of *girl* (Lenker 1999)

In her research, Ursula Lenker investigated the change of meaning of the lexeme *girl* from 'young person of either sex' to 'female child, young female human being' in the Early Modern English period and ongoing changes within the lexeme *girl* in our times. With this particular example she points out how changes in society can lead to meaning changes.

5.1 The semantic history of *girl*

The etymology of *girl* is not clear; and apart from different theories (Robinson 1967, Luick 1898 and Diensberg 1967), linguists do not know where the word comes from. *Girl* is first recorded in 1290 in the sense of 'a child or young person of either sex, often a boy'. At about 1500, it specialises its meaning to 'young female human being', but is only used in colloquial style with the connotations 'youth', 'vitality', 'vivacity', 'frivolity', 'sexual availability', 'unchastity' and does not belong to the core vocabulary of English.

In the seventeenth century it again changes its meaning to ‘female child’ with the connotations ‘immaturity’, ‘weakness’, ‘dependence’, is used in all registers and styles and becomes part of the core vocabulary of Standard English. This profound change of meaning can be explained by a deep change within Western society at that time. Until then, ideas like ‘childhood’ and ‘adolescence’ did not exist. Children were regarded as miniature adults.

From the seventeenth century onwards, the child begins to become the central part of the family. Society now regarded them as weak and innocent. This new situation initiates the change of meaning within the lexeme *girl* which now expresses the new concept of the female child that is becoming increasingly central to the family. Together with *boy*, *girl* now is the central item of the semantic field ‘young person of either sex’. The derivatives *boyhood* and *girlhood* emerge.

5.2 *Girl and boy in the twentieth century: the structuralist approach*

[± HUMAN], [± MALE], [± ADULT]: fuzziness of category boundaries

Girl “has never been fully symmetrical to its supposed counterpart *boy*, since it could also be employed in reference to adult women” (Lenker 1999: 20).

5.3 *Girl and boy in the twentieth century: the feminist approach*

Linguistic asymmetries are to be avoided. The use of *girl* (notions of childishness, dependency, conformity, non-aggression, obedience, non-competitiveness) in reference to adult women is considered severely offensive by many a woman (cf Mills in Lenker 1999: 14).

5.4 The impact of women’s liberations, feminist linguistics and political correctness

5.4.1 Semantic restriction of *girl*

“During the decade [ca. 1980-90] of the two studies, English has changed from a language where, for example, adult females were habitually referred to ... as *girls* ... to one where 15 and 16 year olds are called *women*” (Bebout in Lenker 1999: 15).

“This change in response to the issues of Women’s Liberation and feminist linguistics is triggered by conscious avoidance of non-prestige forms. *Girl* in this context has undergone a restriction of meaning and therefore a change in its denotation. Since fewer language users are likely to envision *girl* as including adults, *girl* and *boy* are employed symmetrically for ‘male/female child (young) adolescent’ or ‘son/daughter’” (Bebout in Lenker 1999: 16).

5.4.2 *Girl power and the connotations of girl*

Roots in popular culture: the *Spice Girls* with their motto and brand *Girl Power*

The *Spice Girls*’ lyrics and slogans such as *I’m a girl, I can do it* show confidence, aggression and power.

New connotations to the word *girl* in the register of pop culture: ‘independence, strength, assertiveness, aggressiveness, power, self-sufficiency’ and also ‘frivolity’

Girls refers to adolescent girls and young women, most often peers

Too early to test the changing connotations in other registers, but the words *girl power* and *power girl* have definitely caught on

5.4.3 *Grrrl*

Coined to denote ‘female hard rock musicians’, ‘computer nerds’, now also applied more generally to ‘young females’

Sound-symbolic variation of *girl* that imitates the “growl of a tiger” (Algeo & Algeo in Lenker 1999: 19).

Derivations and compounds (cf *cybergrrrl*, *grrrlculture*, *riot grrl*)

Listed in the *Oxford Dictionary of New Words*

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