

## S&P 2012 Lecture 3: Semantic Change

### Today's Menu:

1. **Semantic shift**: various processes of semantic change (widening /narrowing, amelioration/ pejoration) & their causes
2. **Grammaticalization** (both semantic & structural change) and its causes.

Last week, we zoomed in on the 'technical features' of our 'spinning wheel'; we examined the smallest units that make it up (word-meanings), and **grouped them by resemblance** (synonyms/ antonyms; homonymy/ polysemy) **and contiguity** (hyponymy/ hypernymy & meronymy/ holonymy). Thus, we established the nature of 'systemic' lexical relations between word-meanings **because** of resemblance or contiguity between them, as perceived by our minds.

This week, while still focused on the 'technical specifications' of the language tool, we will 'zoom out' a little, and view its smallest units in the 4<sup>th</sup> dimension of all existence – Time. Our task this week is to establish how word-meanings change over time, and to explain why they do so.

### 1. Semantic Change: *How do word-meanings change over time?*

In historical/ diachronic linguistics, **semantic change** refers to a change in denotative, socially shared, word meaning.

**Semantic shift** is the general way of referring to any unspecified semantic change. Major types of semantic change may be viewed as

- **Widening** (generalization) – a shift to a more general meaning: i.e., in Middle English, *bridde* meant a 'small bird'; later, *bird* came to be used in a general sense and the word *fowl*, formerly the more general word, was restricted to the sense of 'farm birds bred especially for consumption';
- **Narrowing** (specification) – a shift towards a more specific concept: the opposite of widening, or expansion. i.e., *fowl* → chicken, *meat* which derives from Middle English *mete* with the general meaning of 'food' and now restricted to processed animal flesh. In turn, the word *flesh* was narrowed in its range to 'human flesh';
- **Amelioration**<sup>1</sup> - a shift towards a more positive quality; an improvement in the meaning of a word: The term *nice* derives from Latin *nescius* 'ignorant' and came at the time of its borrowing from Old French to mean 'silly, simple' then 'foolish, stupid', later developing a more positive meaning as 'pleasing, agreeable';
- **Pejoration** – a shift towards a more negative quality: i.e., Old English *cnafa* (boy: compare German *Knabe*) became Modern English *knave* someone dishonest; Latin *villanus* (a farm servant) became Middle English *vilain/ vilein* (a serf with some rights of independence), then Modern English *villain* (a scoundrel, criminal);
- Or a **combination** of the above (which happens more often than not).

**Pejoration is more usual than amelioration**: i.e., it is more common for words to develop a more negative meaning than a more positive one. For example, *churl* stems from a Germanic root meaning 'man' and came to mean 'a peasant, someone of low birth' and later still 'an ill-bred person'. The root is still to be seen in the adjective **churlish** 'mean, despicable'; **gay**, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Synonyms of *amelioration/ melioration*: improvement; betterment; mending, amendment, emendation

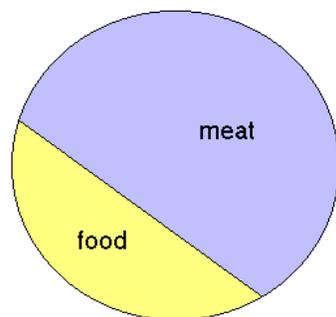
### The concept of 'word field' (semantic field/ domain)

A shift in one word in a group of semantically related words usually has a 'ripple effect' in the whole network, when speakers begin to use other words to fill the semantic 'space' vacated by the shift. The group of words affected by a shift constitutes a **word-field** (i.e., a collection of words with related denotative meanings). Words in a semantic field are not synonymous, but are all used to talk about the same general phenomenon (a hyponymy/ hypernymy sort of relationship):

Related to the concept of hyponymy, but more loosely defined, is the notion of a semantic field or domain. A semantic field denotes a segment of reality symbolized by a set of related words. The words in a semantic field share a common semantic property<sup>2</sup> (Brinton: 2000).

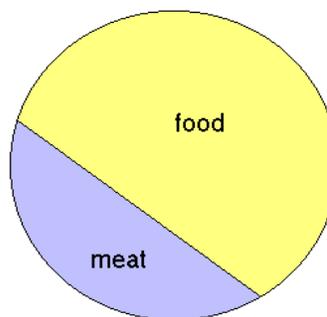
A word meaning is characterized by its relation to other word meanings in the same conceptual area. Traditionally, semantic fields have also been used for comparing the lexical structure of different languages and semantic change in any one language over time. The graphs below show two cases of semantic shift (changes in the word fields) in which the increase in the scope of one word is paralleled by the reduction in scope of a related word:

Word field in Middle English



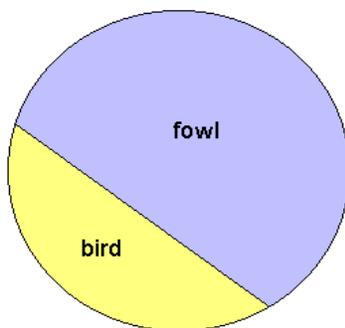
meat = "food in general"  
food = "provisions; item of food"

Word field in Modern English



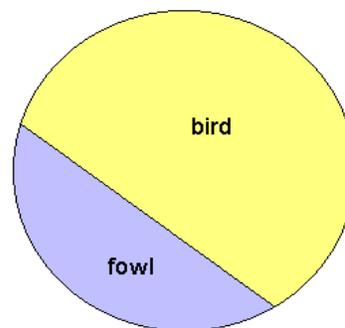
meat = "animal flesh"  
food = "all types of nourishment"

Word field in Old English



fowl = "flying animal"  
bird = "young bird, fledgling"

Word field in Middle/Modern English



fowl = "poultry"  
bird = "flying animal"

[http://www.uni-due.de/SHE/HE\\_Change\\_Semantic.htm#types](http://www.uni-due.de/SHE/HE_Change_Semantic.htm#types)

<sup>2</sup> Traditional semantic analysis breaks denotative word-meanings into their **semantic components** (also called **semantic properties** or **semantic primes**); these are the components of meaning of a word; for example, the component *male* is a semantic property of *boy*, *man*, *grandfather*, *youth*, *bull*, *stallion*, *cock*, etc. (Re: Genesutra: p. 32)

Semantic fields often vary from culture to culture (that is why anthropologists use them to study the belief systems/ reasoning across cultural groups, for generalizations are the products of each unique collective mind, shaped by its own experiences). For instance, a word-field denoting mental abilities in German/ English it would include words like:

**German:** *klug, weise, clever, intelligent, schlau, gewieft, helle, pfiffig, schnell, geschickt, genial, brilliant, aufgeweckt*  
**English:** *clever, wise, cute, smart, sharp, intelligent, bright, cunning, quick, crafty, ingenious, brilliant, cogent*

One of the major difficulties in translation is to determine the position of a word-meaning in its word-field and to find an equivalent in *range* and *connotation* in the corresponding word-field of the target language. Overlapping semantic fields, particularly in the case of polysemous words (with all their connotations) are particularly tricky; that is why such words are usually borrowed, instead of translated (i.e., *chivalry* - literally 'horsemanship'; *taboo*, *weekend*, etc.).

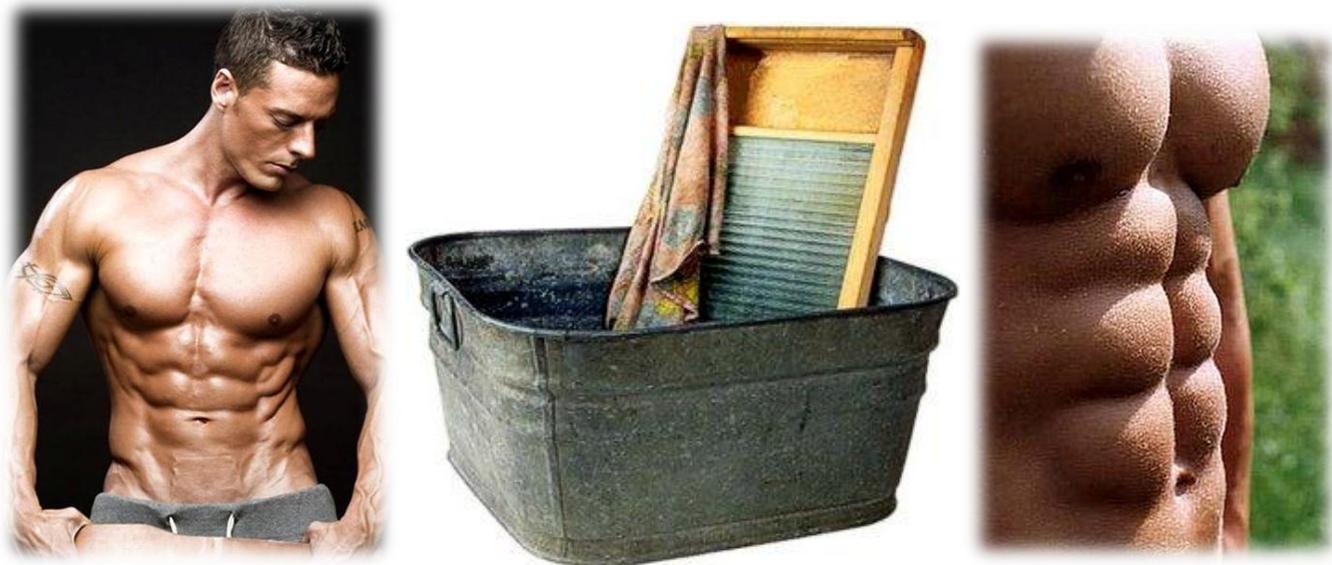
### Metaphor & Metonymy – the 'drivers' of Linguistic Change

In semantics, association by resemblance is called **metaphor** and association by contiguity in space/time is called **metonymy**.

**Metaphors** express one concept in terms of another, based on some similarity between the two, as in the sentence:

*I'm 6 foot 5 and **washboard** abs. Black belt in karate and drive a Maserati.*

[Urban Dictionary, June 22, 2012]



Often, metaphors express a relatively abstract concept in terms of a more concrete one. Metaphors often apply to entire domains of experience, and affect entire discourses, not just isolated words, i.e.:

- ❖ **Happy / good = up; sad / bad = down:** i.e., I was feeling down, but now I'm feeling up again. My spirits rose, but then they sank. What can I do to lift your fallen spirits?
- ❖ **Time = money / value:** You're wasting my time. How do you spend your time? Is it really worth your time? You need to budget your time better. I'm living on borrowed time. This will save you a lot of time.
- ❖ **Mind = machine:** My math skills are a little rusty. He's trying to grind out a solution to the problem. My mind just isn't working properly.
- ❖ **Love = madness/ sickness:** I'm crazy about him. He drives me out of my mind. He raves about her all the time because he's mad about her. Our relationship is very healthy, but theirs is sick. We thought their marriage was dead, but now it's on the mend.

- ❖ **Seeing = touching:** His eyes are glued to the television. He can't take his eyes off of her. Their eyes made contact.

This type of metaphoric extension is a powerful tool for creating 'high-density' meaning. That is why both metaphor and metonymy are taught in writing classes as *figures of speech*/ literary devices for effective expression. Calling somebody 'honey,' 'tiger' or 'pig' automatically means that the speaker sees some similarity between the two. People have been aware of the power of metaphor (and metonymy) for thousands of years – the Sophists of Ancient Greece stressed the value of 'figures of speech' in rhetoric, and used it effectively in their writing.

### Why is *Gorgias'* description of language so memorable?

The power of speech has the same relation to the order of the soul as drugs have to the nature of bodies. For as different drugs expel different humors from the body, and some put an end to sickness, and others – to life, so some words cause grief, others joy, some fear, others render their hearers bold, and still others drug and bewitch the soul through an evil persuasion ...

**Gorgias** (~ 485-380 BC): *Praise of Helen*

**Metonymy** always involves an association between two things that **is based on something other than resemblance**. Any type of relationship 'based simply on a close connection in everyday experience'<sup>3</sup> is metonymic. For example, we often say things like, 'He drank a whole bottle of wine.' Of course, what we really mean is that he drank *the wine*, not the bottle. But the bottle and the wine were *close together in space and time*. This close association leads to a natural metonymic shift from one concept to the other. Compare also: *bottle shop*, to *go/be on the bottle*, to *drown one's sorrows in the bottle*, etc.

'Close connections in everyday experience' may include associations between

- **Organization and its management:** *Datec* employed new people recently. Or: *The University* will not agree to that.
- **Controller and controlled:** I accidentally hit a tree when driving home yesterday – lucky it was not a pedestrian! Or: A truck hit John in the right front fender.
- **Producer and product:** *Chomsky*<sup>4</sup> is on the top shelf. Or: We have an old *Ford* (*Mitsubishi*, etc.).
- **Part-Whole relationships:** We need more *boots* on the ground in Afghanistan (= troops). She's just another pretty *face* (= person). We need a *hand* here (= person who can help)

## 2. Grammaticalization

Metaphoric /metonymic extensions (i.e., the 'connections' our minds make by resemblance and contiguity) drive not only semantic change, but also **grammaticalization**, which involves changes in all aspects of language structure (phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic). Grammaticalization is the process of 'reanalysis'; as a result of such qualitatively new generalizations in social consciousness, concrete 'content' words acquire more abstract grammatical meanings and become part of grammatical rules/ structures, serving as 'function' words (such as articles, auxiliary or modal verbs, prepositions, etc.) or derivational/ inflectional morphemes (suffixes, prefixes, infixes, endings, etc.). For example,

**Tok Pisin adjective-forming suffix –pla** (originally, fellow), as in *gutpla*, *tripla*, etc.

**Tok Pisin transitive verb ending '-im'** stems from 'him': *lukim*, *rausim*, *harim*, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Yule, G. *The Study of Language* (1996), p.122

<sup>4</sup> Chomsky is a famous American linguist

The essence of all categorization (generalization) is our ability to connect ideas based on resemblance, contiguity, and cause/effect; these associations form the mechanism of how human minds think. We all make sense of things in our own heads – individually and collectively. Thinkers attach meaning to meaningless things we see; look, for example at this polar bear scratching his head:



The French caption reads, 'Oh! NO... Today is Monday!'

### Causes of Semantic Change

**Traditionally, semantics has viewed the bond between word and meaning as an association between a fixed signifier and an object of thought.** Signs call to mind their meaning, as any item, belonging to a friend, reminds us of that friend. Semantics concedes that the “association between word and meaning may grow stronger or weaker, be enriched by linkage with other objects of a similar kind, spread over a wider field, or become more limited, i.e., it may undergo quantitative and external changes, but it cannot change its psychological nature. To do that, it would have to cease being an association” (Vygotsky: 1934).

From this point of view, any development in word meanings, any change in the way reality is **generalized** in the word, is inconceivable: “having committed itself to the association theory, semantics persisted in treating word meaning as an association between a word’s sound and its content. All words, from the most concrete to the most abstract, appeared to be formed in the same manner in regard to meaning, and to contain nothing peculiar to speech as such; a word made us think of its meaning just as any object might remind us of another. It is hardly surprising that semantics did not even pose the larger question of the *development* of word meanings. Development was reduced to changes in the associative connections between single words and single objects: A word might denote at first one object and then become associated with another, just as an overcoat, having changed owners, might remind us first of one person and later of another” (Ibid.).

Dialectical semantic analysis views denotative word meanings as **social thought**, as products of unique collective minds. Because societies live and think in Time and Space, their experiences of the world, and generalizations about it, differ from place to place and time to time.

**Human ‘webs of significance’ are the product of the living minds that use the social ‘spinning wheel’ (language) to create complex/ compound meanings.**

### Exercises

#### 1. What type(s) of semantic change have occurred in the examples below?

**Example** of semantic shift that has taken place in English over time: the word **man** used to mean ‘human being’ exclusively, while today it predominantly means ‘adult male’ (even though its semantic field still extends in some uses to the generic sense ‘human’). This shift in the semantic field could be characterized as *narrowing*.

Old English **fæger** ‘fit, suitable’, Modern English **fair** came to mean ‘pleasant, enjoyable’ then ‘beautiful’ and ‘pleasant in conduct’, from which the second modern meaning ‘just, impartial’ derives. The first meaning continued to develop in the sense of ‘of light complexion’ and a third one arose from ‘pleasant’ in a somewhat pejorative sense, meaning ‘average, mediocre’, e.g. He only got a fair result in his exam.

**Gentle** was borrowed in Middle English in the sense of 'born of a good-family, with a higher social standing'. Later the sense 'courteous' and then 'kind, mild in manners' developed because these qualities were regarded as qualities of the upper classes.

**Lewd** (Old English *læwede*) originally meant 'non-ecclesiastical, lay', then came to mean 'uneducated, unlearned' from which it developed into 'vulgar, lower-class' and then through 'bad-mannered, ignorant', to 'sexually insinuating'.

**Sophisticated** meant 'unnatural, contaminated' but now has the sense of 'urbane, discriminating'. The word sophistry (from Old French *sophistrie*) still has its original meaning of 'specious, fallacious reasoning'.

**Artificial** originally meant 'man-made, artful, skillfully constructed', compare artifice 'man-made construction'. But by comparison with 'natural' the word came to acquire a negative meaning because everything which is natural is regarded positively.

**Nice** (Latin *nescius* 'not knowing') is recorded from the 13th century in the sense of 'foolish', then it shifted to 'coy, shy' and by the 16th century had the meaning 'fastidious, dainty, subtle' from which by the 18th century the sense 'agreeable, delightful' developed.

**Silly** (Old English *sēlig* 'happy, fortuitous') had by the 15th century the sense of 'deserving of pity' and then developed to 'ignorant, feeble-minded' and later 'foolish'.

**Fast** (OE *fæste* 'firm') later developed the meaning 'quick'. The original sense is still seen in steadfast 'firm in position'.

**Villain** developed from 'inhabitant of a village' to 'scoundrel'. The word peasant is used now for someone who shows bad behavior as the word farmer has become the normal term. In official contexts, however, the term 'peasant' is found for small and/or poor farmers.

## 2. What kinds of associations produced these *neologisms*? 😊

**Mittconception** - A fundamental belief of Mitt Romney's, based on mistaken understanding of an issue (one of many).

*"Romney wants to eliminate President Obama's Affordable Care Act, and stated that doing so will IMPROVE racial inequities in healthcare?! What a Mittconception - actually said that at the NAACP Annual Convention too!!"*

*"Mitt Romney says he's unemployed? Dude, that's another Mittconception. He has no idea what it's like to depend on a weekly paycheck."*

**Going Screensaver** - when you notice a coworker spacing out, or dozing off in a meeting, i.e.:

*'Check it out, look at Joe. He's going screensaver.'*

**No Collar** – the new, exponentially emerging class rising up in America, consisting of often over-qualified but unemployed persons.

*"Hey dude, don't you work for Ernst & Young?"*

*"Aw hell no, I'm a no collar, just like you."*

**Googlical Proportions** – when a private matter becomes so well-known to the public, it can be looked up on the internet.

*'When the Dean's wife was caught in the act with an undergraduate, they tried to keep it under wraps but word got out, and the story soon reached googlical proportions.'*

**Manolescent** – n. A man of any age that shirks adult responsibilities:

"Yeah, you're awesome. Anyone would be a fool to not be with you. I really want to be free though. Can we keep this fairly low key even though we are in our late 20s?" : manolescent

"Yeah, I lived in Whistler for 10 years. That was the best time of my life. Let's talk about my partying during this whole first date. ... Oh right, I have three kids with my ex.": manolescent

**Intoxication** – euphoria at getting a tax refund, which lasts until you realize it was your money to start with.

I love feeling intoxicated!

**Umbrella** – an umbrella turned inside out by forceful wind.

It won't keep you dry but, if you want to, you can stand under my umbrella.

Urban Dictionary: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/>