

On the Problem of Lexical Semantic Change¹

Jerome Baghana ², Yuliya S. Blazhevich ³, Olga N. Prokhorova ³, Elena L. Kuksova³, & Elena S. Yakovleva³

Abstract

The article provides an insight into a problem of lexical semantic change. A short historical outline of the development of semantic studies is given. The authors analyze some of the most important stages in the history of the formation of this field. The existing approaches to dealing with form and meaning, namely semasiological and onomasiological ones are discussed. The authors consider the ambiguous character of the notion “semantic change” and analyze the existing alternative definitions that convey the sense of the semantic processes involved. The reasons of semantic change are touched upon. The traditional classification of semantic changes and its characteristics are also considered. The authors use some examples from African varieties of English and French to illustrate some of the semantic processes considered in the article.

Keywords: Semantics; Meaning; Semantic Change; Semantic Shift; Semasiology; Onomasiology.

1. Introduction

The term “semantics” was coined and first used by the French linguist M. Bréal in his work “L’Essai sémantique” (1897). Therefore, the scholar is commonly considered the founder of the modern semantics. Until 1950s German and Russian linguists traditionally used the term “semasiology” instead of “semantics”.

Till the end of the 19th century semantic changes were mostly studied in relation with etymology which is now a part of historical semantics. Then semantics formed into a separate branch of linguistics studying all changes in the meaning. This happened mostly due to the interest of the researchers in the psychological aspect of language use. In the 1960-70s semantic changes were in the focus of attention of many linguists in the USA. In Russia the semantic theory was formed based on the works of such famous scholars as Potebnya, Shcherba, Smirnitkiy and others.

¹ Please cite this paper as follows:

Baghana, J., Blazhevich, Y. S., Prokhorova, O. N., Kuksova, E.L., & Yakovleva, E. S. (2019). On the problem of lexical semantic change. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 10(SP), 320-326.

² Corresponding author. Belgorod State University, Belgorod, Russia.

³ Belgorod State University, Belgorod, Russia.

In other words, the main theoretical approaches to semantics were prestructuralist historical semantics, structuralist semantics, and cognitive semantics. “These theoretical frameworks differ as to whether they take a system-oriented rather than a usage-oriented approach to word-meaning research but, at the same time, in the historical development of the discipline, they have each contributed significantly to the descriptive and conceptual apparatus of lexical semantics” (Geeraerts, 2017, p. 3; Ajallooeian et al., 2015).

2. Methods

This article is based on the systemic approach to the interdisciplinary analysis. Due to the cognitive cross-disciplinary approach we take into consideration the anthropocentric factor, linguistic and non-linguistic information, intercultural analysis.

3. Results and Discussions

The term “semantic change” is often considered ambiguous and unprecise. It is used to refer to the situations when there is a change in the meaning of a word. Wilkins (1996) argues that it is not “a change in meaning per se, but the addition of a meaning to the semantic system or the loss of a meaning from the semantic system while the form remains constant” (p. 269).

Blank also agrees that in semantic change a new meaning is “added and later lexicalized or an already lexicalized meaning becomes unusual and will cease” (Blank, 2001, p. 71).

Schwickart (2007) believes that if a meaning is understood as “a reciprocal relation” between name and meaning” semantic change occurs “whenever a new name is connected to a meaning and/or a new meaning is connected to an existing name” (pp. 8-9).

In order to overcome this ambiguity in the terminology some alternative terms are used, including “semantic shift”, “semantic innovation”, “semantic progression” and others. Some scientists prefer to distinguish “innovative semantic change” (or “semantic innovation”) and “reductive semantic change” for the addition and the loss of meaning accordingly (Abayeva, 2018; Močinić & Feresin, 2017).

Historically, we distinguish two frameworks of the study of semantic change: semasiological and onomasiological ones. The “point of departure” of the former is by studying what meanings (or senses) a definite word form has, while the latter starts at a definite sense and then goes to forms that convey it.

The semasiological perspective is focused on how a meaning changes, while form remains relatively constant (as it can experience phonological and morphosyntactic changes). Most works on grammaticalization are done using this approach (Traugott, 2017, p. 2). Also, it is widely applied in lexicography.

In the onomasiological framework the focus is in studying sense relations between the items in an inventory and the forms that express a certain concept. Dictionaries of synonyms and thesauri are commonly based on this approach when a user can surf a dictionary by topic. Here the thematic order is preferred to the alphabetical one.

Traditionally semantic change has been considered from a variety of angles which involves various oppositions or contrasts.

Most classifications include:

- semantic widening, broadening or generalization also called extension or expansion of meaning. The meaning of a word becomes broader and more inclusive or a sub-notion turns into an umbrella notion;

For example, In Cameroonian English the word “applicant” is also used to refer to a “jobless/unemployed person”. It is common to read in the space for occupation on the ID Cards of Cameroonians who are unemployed the indication “applicant” which means that the bearer doesn’t have a job (Bobda, 1994, p.252).

If a word’s meaning “becomes so vague that” it doesn’t have any specific meaning (like the word “thing”), we can speak of its *bleaching*. In extreme cases of broadening a word can lose its “status as a full-content lexeme” and can become “either a function word or an affix”. This process is called *grammaticalization* (Fortson, 2003, p.649).

- semantic narrowing or specialization, which is an opposition to broadening, when a meaning is more restricted or an umbrella notion turns into a sub-notion;

For example, in Cameroonian French the noun, pl. “virements” initially meaning “wire transfer or bank transfer” is now used only to refer to “salaries of public employees” (ellipsis of “virements des salaires des fonctionnaires de l’Etat” meaning “transfer of the salaries of public employees”);

- metaphor or metonymy: metaphor is a transfer of a name based on the associations of similarity or a hidden comparison; metonymy is based on connection between concepts, not by means of similarity, but usually one is part of, or contains, the other.

For example, in some French-speaking African countries “long crayon” literary meaning “a long pencil” means “a person who has studied a lot or continues his studies” (metaphor).

In West African English “Suzuki” means “motorbike” (from the Japanese company Suzuki, which produces motorcycles) and the commercial name “Flit” (for an insecticidal spray) becomes the verb “to flit”, meaning “to spray” (Anchimbe, 2006, p.52).

- melioration or pejoration, also called degradation or elevation when a word gets a more positive or a more negative meaning.

For example, in Cameroon the French noun “conjuncture” meaning “a combination of things happening at the same time” is now only used to refer to “a negative conjuncture at the market” (pejoration).

Mmusi (1993) analyzed a layer of lexical units of so-called “ethnic labels” in South Africa. Her study shows that melioration or pejoration of meaning can be greatly influenced by positive or negative historical and political connotation. “Some of the terms, like “native”, acquired their derogatory status due to political changes, while others, like “Black”, changed from derogatory to acceptable (melioration), due to the Black Consciousness movement in the 1970s. Some ethnic labels like “white” and “Asian/Asiatic” were redefined to accommodate and facilitate the country’s racial policies, while others like “plural” were rejected outright”. Other terms that got more positive meanings are “Bushman” and “Coloured” and pejoration of meanings is recorded for the words “native”, “Bantu” and “Dutchman” (Mmusi, , pp.47, 57).

Hollmann (2009) points out that the traditional typology of semantic changes cannot be applied to all changes and some classifications are not mutually exclusive as a meaning can develop in either direction: it “may become more positive or negative, broader or narrower, may involve metaphor or (different kinds of) metonymy, and may be caused by factors within or outside language” (pp. 527-529).

Anchimbe gives an example which represents two overlapping processes: metonymy and specialization of meaning. In West African English “belly” means “pregnant”. In a lesson on parts of the body the teacher who didn’t know this, used the word “belly”. The children started jittering and making faces. The teacher who wanted to resolve something he did not understand said ‘All of us have a belly’. “The result was a total explosion of laughter and denial. The boys were laughing at his ignorance and the girls were vehemently denying they were pregnant – because a belly refers to pregnancy in Pidgin English, and indeed has at times been understood in the same way in English at large” (Anchimbe, 2006, p. 55).

When we speak about semantic change, we often come across the term, “semantic shift”. This type of lexical innovation often occurs in regional variants of languages if a word in a regional variant acquires a meaning completely different from that in a standard language.

For example, in Cameroon English a “trouble-shooter” means the opposite (=trouble-maker). e.g. All the trouble-shooters of the class will be punished;

“date line” is used as a “deadline”

e.g. the date line for submission of applications is March 12, 1993 (Bobda, 1994, p.253).

In trying to find the reasons of semantic change scholars use various approaches. Schwickart distinguishes three main ways of reasoning:

- macro-perspective approach when the semantic change is separated from the individual speaker of the language;
- micro-perspective – based on the individual speaker perspective;
- a “phenomenon of the 3rd kind”: some scholars believe that semantic change cannot be explained in any of the 2 categories but instead as “phenomenon of the 3rd kind” (Schwickart, 2007, pp. 8-9).

More often researchers group the reasons of semantic changes into linguistic and extralinguistic. The linguistic changes can occur, for example, to avoid ambiguity of various synonyms. A so-called “conflict of synonyms” leads to the borrowing of a synonym from another language, which then undergoes specialization of its meaning. Sometimes an ellipsis can be a linguistic reason of semantic change when a part of a word-group is dropped. This happened to “cut-price sale” which turned into “sale”.

As for extralinguistic reasons, they are quite numerous and can fall into social, political, economic, cultural, technological and others. Semantic changes in this case often serve to fill in the “white spots” in the semantic system caused by emergence of new cultural or technological phenomena or developments (contact with new culture, inventions, etc.) (Jabbari et al., 2019; Nakhaee & Nasrabadi, 2019).

4. Conclusion

The principle theoretical approaches to semantics were prestructuralist historical semantics, structuralist semantics, and cognitive semantics. Each of the theoretical approaches to semantics, (either system-oriented or usage-oriented) made a considerable contribution to the historical development of the conceptual and descriptive apparatus of lexical semantics.

The term “semantic change” is considered ambiguous and unprecise as the change doesn’t occur in the meaning per se. An additional meaning emerges or one of the meanings disappears in the semantic system. Some alternative terms are used to overcome this ambiguity in the terminology, including “semantic shift”, “semantic innovation”, “semantic progression” and others. The terms “innovative semantic change” and “reductive semantic change” are also used for the addition and the loss of meaning accordingly.

There are two main approaches to the study of semantic change: semasiological and onomasiological ones. The “point of departure” of the former is by studying what meanings a definite word form has, while the latter starts at a definite sense and then goes to forms that convey it.

Most classifications of semantic change are based on oppositions which are not mutually exclusive because the semantics of a word can change quantitatively and qualitatively, and several overlapping processes can take place at the same time.

The reasons of semantic changes can fall into two groups: linguistic and extralinguistic. The linguistic changes can be syntagmatic (ellipsis) and paradigmatic (discrimination of synonyms).

Most extralinguistic reasons fall into social, political, economic, cultural, technological and others. Semantic changes are needed to fill in the “white spots” in the semantic system caused by emergence of new cultural or technological phenomena or developments.

References

- Abayeva, G. (2018). Modern teacher role for increasing the students’ competence in pedagogical specialty. *Opción*, 34 (85-2), 415-440.
- Ajalloeian, E., Gorji, Y., & Niknejadi, F. (2015). Evaluate the effectiveness of social skills training through group therapy play on reducing rational aggression boy elementary school student in Esfahan city. *UCT Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*, 3(1), 1-4.
- Anchimbe, E. (2006). Local meaning in the English of West Africa. *English Today*, 22(2), 50-54.
- Bobda, A. S. (1994). Lexical innovation processes in Cameroon English. *World Englishes*, 13(2), 245-260.
- Bréal, M. (1897). *L’Essai semantique (science des significations)*. Paris, Librairie Hachette, available at : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k50474n/f2.image>

- Fortson, B.W. (2003). An Approach to Semantic Change. In B. D. Joseph and R. D. Janda (eds.). *The handbook of historical linguistics*. (pp. 648-666). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Geeraerts, D. (2017). Lexical Semantics. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of linguistics*. Available at: <https://oxfordre.com/linguistics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.001.0001/acrefore-9780199384655-e-29?rskey=tL3moi&result=1> DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.013.2
- Hollmann, W. B. (2009). Semantic change. In J. Culpeper, F. Katamba, P. Kerswill, and T. McEnery (Eds.) *English language: Description, variation and context*, (pp. 525–537).
- Jabbari, E., Charbaghi, Z., & Dana, A. (2019). Investigating the effects of educational and motivational education at different levels on the performance and application of dart throwing. *Journal of Humanities Insights*, 3(2), 37-44.
- Mmusi, S. O. (1993). Ethnic labels in south African English. *World Englishes*, 12(1), 47-58.
- Močinić, S., & Feresin, C. (2017). The role of the school space in preschoolers' learning processes. *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews*, 5(2), 98-108. <https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2017.525>
- Nakhaee, J., & Nasrabadi, M. A. (2019). Strategies for research-centered education of architectural designing by examining the research-centered activities of the top universities. *Journal of Humanities Insights*, 3(2), 50-6.
- Schwickart, J. (2007). *Reasons for semantic change in the English language*. GRIN Verlag.
- Traugott, E. C. (2017). Semantic change. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of linguistics*.
- Wilkins, D. P. (1996). Natural Tendencies of Semantic Change and the Search for Cognates. In M. Durie and M. Ross (eds.), *The Comparative method reviewed. Regularity and irregularity in language change* (pp. 264-304), New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.