Semantic Change

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Abstrac

Semantic change refers to the alteration of the relationship between a given word and the set of referents such a word may denote. Changes in the meaning conveyed by words can affect their lexemes and their morphemes, so we find semantic shifts in both lexical and grammatical notions. Conventionally, semantic change refers to developments in the meaning conveyed by lexemes, while changes in the meaning of morphemes are the concern of historical morphology and morphosyntax.

Although nothing comparable to sound laws in the area of historical phonology and analogy in the field of morphology has been found so far, advances have been made in the study of the causes and types of semantic change produced in individual words and, particularly, in the acquisition of new meanings or in the emergence of new terms. Still, how the change in one word affects other words from the same semantic domain and the language as a whole has hardly been studied. Ancient Greek experienced semantic changes throughout its history, but if we compare it to other languages of the same environment, like Latin, we can see a considerable degree of continuity.

Text

Spoken languages experience continuous changes through time. Semantic changes affect the meaning of words and consist of the alteration of the relationship between a given word and the set of referents such a word may denote. Changes in meaning can affect lexemes and morphemes, so we find them in both lexical and grammatical notions. Conventionally, however, semantic change refers to lexemes of words, while changes in the meaning conveyed by morphemes are the concern of historical

morphology and morphosyntax. Given that semantic change involves linguistic signs, their meaning and their potential referents, different branches of linguistics are concerned with it: etymology, onomasiology, semantics and lexicology. Semantic changes are noticeable by comparison between different stages of the same language or between languages which come from a common root, that is, they are studied within historical and comparative linguistics.

1. Causes of semantic change

The causes of semantic change are complex. At first sight, the fact that we can see in languages constant changes and at the same time elements of stability seems to be paradoxical. From a theoretical viewpoint it would seem unexpected for a language to change: if speakers understand each other when speaking, the expected tendency should be to perpetuate the code system. However, in practice we know that speakers, referents, salient concepts and the system itself change.

Research into the causes of semantic change has focused on the study of changes in the meaning of individual words, but it has not generated instruments to evaluate how far a semantic change in a given word affects others from the same semantic field and the language as a whole. Among the causes which can motivate or facilitate semantic change are the following:

a) The disparity between the countless number of entities that can be referred to and the limited number of the lexical elements of natural languages. The number of linguistic units is limited, but the entities that can be referred to are much more varied and subject to change. Linguistic units are carriers of a nuclear meaning together with other less central meanings which are used in specific contexts. These peripheral meanings make up a field or area of dispersion with respect to the exemplary uses; e.g. 'bird' is used to refer to a sparrow, but less prototypically to an ostrich or a penguin, and it is incorrect for a bat. These variations make the system shift. Thus,   , which originally indicated 'acquaintance with a matter, understanding, skill', e.g. 'skill in warfare' (Thuc. 1.121.4), can also appear in contexts where it means 'knowledge' in general (Soph. *Ant.* 721).

b) The characteristics of the transmission of human language. One important factor of change is due to children's learning, as they are exposed to numerous but accidental grammatical manifestations of the meaning conveyed by the linguistic units, but never to the grammar per se, a circumstance which explains why they make generalizations which are not necessarily identical to those of the adults who teach them their language. Given that linguists have noticed certain parallels between

children's mistakes and social, geographical, historical or dialectal variations in languages, it has been supposed that children's language deviations can remain and cause changes in the uses of language.

c) *Changes at other levels of the language.* Thus, some phonetic changes, such as the loss of the final element of the old 'long' diphthongs [aːi], [ɛːi] and [oːi] (*āi, ēi, ōi*) and the weakening of final –*n,* led to the loss of the distinction between the dative and the accusative and to the later disappearance of the dative with the subsequent widening of the meaning conveyed by the accusative. On the other hand, morphological reasons help to explain the change of the aspectual perfect from tense present to past tense: since some often used aorists (like *éthēka, édōka*) had the same ending as the perfect, this similarity quickly led to using some perfects in -*ka* (*égnōka, heúrēka*) with the tense value of the aorist stem. These overlaps favored the appearance of new forms ending in -*ka* with augment (e.g. *epoíēka*), which came to be used in the Koine as a synonym of the aorist *epoíēsa.* As a result of this change the opposition between aorist and perfect was lost and most of the perfect forms disappeared.

d) *Pragmatic factors.* Traugott and Dasher (2002) claim that semantic change is largely due to pragmatic meanings which are conventionalized and re-analyzed as semantic polysemies thanks to communicative and cognitive processes. That is, a unit that expresses a meaning X frequently acquires a value X+Y. This Y notion is conventionalized and ends up being re-analyzed as (part of) the meaning expressed by that unit. So, the perfect in Homeric Greek and up to the end of the 5th c. BCE expressed the present relevance of a past action. Due to the fact that pragmatically recent events tend to be more relevant for the present, the perfect suffered a semantic reanalysis and came to refer to the recent past (against the aorist which was an unmarked form of expressing the past), a notion that was before a mere implication of its previous value. The last step was the disappearance of one of these grammatical forms of expressing the past through redundancy. As a result, only *epoíēka* survived. Traugott and Dasher (2002) call this process "semantic change through invited inference" and, given that these invited inferences appear in various languages with no genetic or geographic relationship, they consider that they constitute a regular change mechanism.

e) *Extra-linguistic forces* can give rise to or contribute to the production of gradual or sudden semantic changes, as in the following cases:

- Changes in the referents: *basileús,* in the Homeric poems denotes the kings; in classical Athens, the second of the nine archons and in the Imperial Period, the emperor.

- Changes in world view: *psukhḗ,* in Homer, is what keeps a person alive, (*Il.* 5.296), but towards the end of the archaic period it is used to refer to the center of emotions, like *thūmós* (Anacr. fr. 360), or to something close to 'character' (Pind. *Isthm.* 4.53). In the classical period, the playwrights use *psukhḗ* as the center of emotions as well as a person's character (Aristoph. *Ach.* 393). This sense made *psukhḗ* appropriate for expressing in a general way the essence of something (Isoc., 7.14) and, as such, it acquires different meanings depending on the philosophical system in which it appears.

- Changes induced by a social or cultural group which highlights a concept. Labov (2001) reconstructed the pattern for the social spread of linguistic change, according to which peculiarities of social leaders tend to be spread among the speakers under their leadership. His study affects mainly phonetics, but it can also be transferred to linguistic change. Thus, Atticism led, in the area of vocabulary, to the restoration of abandoned terms, and to the loss of other lexical items that were alive in common speech. By building bridges with literary Classical Attic, the Atticist movement was an important milestone in the historical continuity that characterizes Greek language and differentiates it from other languages.

- Contacts of Greeks with speakers of other languages are the cause of the borrowings from other languages, as in the work of Hipponax, who attests for Lydian and Phrygian loanwords.

- Interaction between Greek dialects or between local dialects and the conventional diction of literary genres. Thus, Corinna writes in the language of Epic poetry, but she uses features of the Boeotian vernacular as it appears in inscriptions.

- New needs of society to be expressed give rise to, on the one hand, changes in meaning (e.g. *króikos* 'dwelling beside or near', 'neighboring', came to denote (3rd c.) the farmers tied to the land they cultivated), and, on the other hand, the emergence of new terms, both newly-created (*adelphós* 'brother' lacks cognates in other Indoeuropean languages) and borrowed (*elaía*, 'olive-tree', *khrusós* 'gold'). In the area of grammatical notions, throughout the history of Ancient Greek we observe the progressive appearance and spreading of the passive voice, which allowed to present the patient of an action as the primary vantage point of the clause.

The aforementioned causes explain the development of new terms or new meanings which are added to the previous ones or which, less commonly, substitute them, but it is more difficult for them to account for the loss of words, when the referent does not disappear, as happens with *knéphas, dnóphos, zóphos* ('darkness'), all of which went out

of use to the benefit of *skótos.* While certain regularity can be witnessed in the increment in the meanings of linguistic units, the loss is much more unpredictable and has received less attention.

2. Types of semantic change

Nothing similar to the principles of linguistic change like the phonetic laws in historical phonetics, or analogy in the field of morphology has ever been formulated for semantic change.

The described typology is extremely varied and can refer to different aspects of languages. Thus, the change can affect one or all the registers of a language; e.g. between the Classical Age and the Hellenistic there is a profound change with the introduction of the Koine as the unmarked form for written prose, but it is possible that the spoken register did not change at the same speed, since dialects were preserved for some uses until the start of the CE. Besides, the changes can be spontaneous or provoked, e.g. *psukhḗ* acquires with Aristotle one sense (412b5) which is undoubtedly provoked. The majority of changes are progressive and gradual, but they can also be sudden.

Research in the area of typology has traditionally focused on the search for regularities in meaning changes of particular lexical items and the result is the description of a series of recurrent mechanisms, such as restriction (semantic narrowing), when the scope or context in which the word can be used is reduced, e.g. Gk.   < IE *bhrāthēr* 'brother' > 'member of a *phratría*'; extension (generalization), when the scope of a new notion becomes wider than that of the original one, e.g. *sîtos* 'grain' > 'food made from grain, bread', 'food'; metaphor, when a word extends its meaning as a result of the association based on some analogy between two objects, concepts, entities, etc., e.g. *léōn* 'lion' > 'brave man'; metonymy, when a word includes additional senses based on associations of contiguity or nearness in space or time, e.g. *árktos* 'brown bear' > 'the constellation Ursa Major' > 'the north'; synecdoche, when a term extends its meanings based on a whole-to-part relationship, e.g.   'the city of Athens' > *Attikḗ* 'Attica'; litotes or change from weaker to stronger meaning, e.g. *básanos* 'touchstone' > 'inquiry by torture' > 'torture'; hyperbole, that involves shifts from stronger to weaker meaning, e.g.   'lord', 'master' > 'guardian (of a woman)', 'trustee'; amelioration (elevation), when a word acquires a positive association in the minds of the speakers, e.g. *xénos* 'stranger, foreigner' > 'guest'; pejoration (degeneration), when a word develops a negative association, e.g. *paîs* 'child (boy or girl)' > 'slave, servant (man or maid of all ages)'; or euphemism, when a word which is

rough, unpleasant or taboo, is replaced by another of milder or vague connotation, e.g. *tà aidoîa* 'privy parts', 'pudenda' for genitalia.

As can be seen, some of these categories overlap and intersect. Recent research considerably reduces them and considers that extension and reduction, or metaphor and metonymy are the main mechanisms in the acquisition of new meanings.

3. Unidirectionality and prediction of semantic changes

The study of semantic change has also been concerned with the direction observed in some of its types, focusing on the possibility of predicting their occurrence. Unfortunately, it is not possible to make reliable predictions in this area, but it has been demonstrated that semantic changes are not bi-directional as was traditionally maintained (narrowing and broadening) but unidirectional. The main lines around which these unidirectional changes are organized are the following:

- Meanings based on an external situation change to meanings based on an internal situation: *lambánō* 'take' becomes 'apprehend' through the senses or with the mind ('understand'). Many of the amelioration and pejoration procedures follow this direction.

- Meanings based on external or internal situations become meanings based on textual and metalinguistic situations: e.g. demonstratives become phoric.

- A very active tendency is that which involves 'self-orientation' and 'subjectification': linguistic units tend to become semiologically enriched with acceptances based on the subjective vision of the speaker or which are related to their attitude or evaluation of the referenced world. Thus, *glukús* 'sweet to the taste or smell' becomes 'pleasant, delightful', and with reference to people 'sweet, dear'; *ophthalmós* 'eye' becomes 'the dearest, the best'. Many of the metaphor and metonymy procedures respond to this tendency.

- A case of unidirectional phenomenon also related with semantic change is grammaticalization. This term refers to those changes by which a lexical element acquires a grammatical meaning in certain linguistic contexts (Meillet 1912:132), or when a unit changes from a lesser grammatical status to a greater one. Thus, it is thought probable that the modal particle *án* was originally an optional modal adverb (like it seems to be in the Homeric dialect), which over time became a grammatical marker for declarative sentences representing non-factual events. Grammaticalization always involves a re-interpretation and, sometimes, implies a phonological reduction and a development from an independent word to a clitic or

affix. Thus, the verb *thélō,* 'to want' in Ancient Greek became the grammatical marker of the future in Modern Greek (*theli hina> tha).*

Even having experienced dramatic semantic changes throughout its history, Greek language displays a considerable degree of continuity if we compare it to other languages of the same environment, like Latin.

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