Semantic loss in the lexicon of English: the role of contextual differentiation

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Semantic change is generally acknowledged to follow an A > A/B (>B) trajectory (Traugott & Dasher 2002). When an older A sense extends, the newer B sense comes to exist alongside the older sense in a stage of polysemy. In some cases, the source sense is later lost. The first step, A > A/B or semantic extension, is well-understood. The one-sided focus on this part of the process, however, has left the possible second part, A/B (>B) or loss, under-studied. Although some factors such as bleaching (Bybee 2003) and competition (e.g. Hilpert 2021; Nuyts & Byloo 2015) have been proposed, the question remains which principles account for the fact that A often survives, yet sometimes becomes obsolete.

This talk explores a different account of loss (versus polysemy sustenance) based on extension mechanism and contextual differentiation. When the extension from A to B is metaphorical (e.g. *low* 'measuring a small distance from top to bottom' > 'unhappy'), usage contexts for the older and newer sense are radically different, meaning there is no contextual overlap between the two uses. Conversely, inference-driven metonymic extensions (e.g. *shy* 'easily frightened' > 'timid') result in a high degree of overlap, and contexts fail to help distinguish between senses. It is therefore hypothesized that a high degree of overlap between the contexts of the source sense A and the extension B is likely to lead to the loss of the former. It follows that inference-driven metonymic extension would to pose a graver threat to the source sense than metaphorical extension.

The hypothesis is first tested on a large scale, using a sample of 100 adjectives of emotion. Items are sorted based on (i) the occurrence of loss and (ii) the extension mechanism giving rise to the emotion/character trait sense. Loss is established by consulting the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *MacMillan English Dictionary* entries. Metaphor and inference-driven metonymy are distinguished based on two different criteria, namely domain shift (Croft 1993) and presence of bridging contexts (Evans & Wilkins 2000). Metaphors are characterized by a shift in domain, whereas metonymy involves a domain-internal shift based on inferencing from bridging contexts.

Next, the idea of contextual differentiation is explored in depth by means of three case studies. The first one examines *bright* and *dumb*, which both have Present-Day English meanings related to intelligence, but only the latter loses its source sense. The second study looks at English *narrow* versus Dutch *eng*, which have similar source senses but different extensions, and different outcomes with regard to loss. The last case study, on the adjective *strange*, looks at the timing of loss.

Results show loss is indeed more likely following inference-driven extensions. This finding contributes to a better understanding of loss, which is crucial to grasp the full picture of semantic change and its different outcomes.

References

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