

Lexical Semantics: the Early Years

<http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~gawron/semantics>

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- 1 Classical
- 2 Classifying meaning changes

1 Classical

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Plato's Cratylus

“Cratylus, whom you see here, Socrates, believes that everything has a right name of its own, which comes by nature, and that a name is **not** whatever people call a thing by agreement . . . but that there is a kind of inherent correctness in names, which is the same for all men, Greeks and Barbarians . . .”

Being in possession of a true name gives power: Once Isis knew the true name of the Egyptian sun god Ra, he gained complete power over Ra . . . (for the Cyber Age version of this belief, see True Names by Vernor Vinge)

Quintillian: Rhetorical tropes of interest

- 1 Metaphor: 'He is a lion' (a replacement of one thing for another); *Fassen* G. 'to take hold of' also means 'understand'; 'the king's right hand' = his chief counselor; time as something moving through space ('the hour comes')
- 2 Metonymy (reference by association): 'the crown' = the king; 'the thunder woke the whole house' ('the house' = the people in it), 'I read all of Austen' ('Austen' = her works), 'china' = the dishes, crockery made there
- 3 Synecdoche (whole-part): 'suits' = business people; 'glasses' for spectacles; 'glass' = the drinking implement for its substance

chief > chief (O Fr. 'leader') > capum (Vul. L. 'head') > caput (L. 'head')

Laws of Semantic Change: I

Words for 'beech' systematically related to words for 'book'. Wooden tablets were used for writing.

	'beech'	'book'
OHG	bouhha	buoh
O. Sax.	boka	bok

Metonymic relation: name for substance, name for things made out of substance (We will see this come up again when we come to classifiers)

Laws of Semantic Change II

- ① In the service of etymology
- ② Which in turn was in the service of establishing correspondences between part of the linguistic system at different times
- ③ Tells us something about **the human mind**: What idea are associated, what ideas naturally succeed others (Breal)

Diachronic study of meaning

- 1 Psychological orientation: Meanings are ideas
- 2 Linked to cognitive capacities through which we understand the world (a touch of Sapir-Whorf)
- 3 The general mechanism of semantic change constitute laws of the human mind
- 4 Linguistics is a human science: We seek to *interpret* the forms of expression of people

- 1 Wundt (*Völkerpsychologie*, *Volkgeist*): language is a collective entity expressing the mind/character of a people
- 2 Wilhelm von Humboldt: *innere Sprachform* (*semantics*), *äußere Sprachform* (*phonetics*). The *innere Sprachform* embodies the character/worldview of a speech community (related to Wundt, and to Alexander von Humboldt's pre-Darwinian ideas about inner forms in the natural world)
- 3 Such inner form theories can't **explain** language change: "maturation"

Words

Words in general are signs for fairly unspecific complexes of mental representations that come together more or less loosely [...] The boundaries of word meanings are vague, unclear, indeterminate.

- 1 To explain semantic change we must be able to work our way through a relatively loose network of semantic connections (associations, connotations)
- 2 The full set of associations: linguistics has a hard time getting away from the encyclopedia

Onomasiology v. Semasiology

Semasiology	From word to designated concepts (polysemy)
Onomasiology	From concept to related words (semantic fields), borrowing, folk etymology
Semasiology	From word to designated concepts (polysemy)
Onomasiology	Zauner (1903) on body part terms

Onomasiology may also look at polysemy, but from a different perspective, since a new concept may end up finding expression by becoming a new meaning for an old word.

Outline

1 Classical

2 Classifying meaning changes

Specialization	<i>corn</i> (once meant all types of grain, specialized by modifier, <i>barley corn</i>)
Generalization	<i>arriver</i> , etymologically 'come to a river bank'
Metonymy	'drink a whole bottle': meaning extension based on contiguity
Metaphor	Meaning extension based on similarity

Non-Denotative meaning change

pejoration		<i>cripple</i> is now offensive, displaced by euphemism
amelioration		<i>silly</i> (meant 'deserving sympathy, simple')

- 1 Dentotative and non-denotative change frequently mixed: *boor* (> 'peasant farmer'), *bastard*
- 2 Pejoration and amelioration sometimes have a dynamic interaction: the constant importation of new terms for minority groups.

Onomasiology: Lexical Generation

borrowing		'beef' borrowed from French
clipping		pro, am, psych, the commish
blending		brunch

