

Analysis of Semantic Change from a Lexical Perspective

Keyu Chen

English Department, Shenzhen Campus, Jinan University, Shenzhen, China

Abstract: Semantic change is a universal phenomenon in human language. This article analyzes the trends of semantic change and the possible reasons behind them from a lexical perspective. By illustrating the five different types of changes that happen on the lexicon, the study finds that factors like language contacts, cultural trends and social norms significantly impact semantic changes. Besides, people's cognitive mode and their concept of collocations also contribute to the changes in the lexicon.

Keywords: Lexical Change; Lexicon; Semantics; Language Contacts.

1. Introduction

Word is the core of vocabulary. According to Saussure, every word is a microcosm of linguistics, a microcosm of literature and culture. Vocabulary is the most essential communication medium for people to carry cultural inheritance.

During language development, old words die out, new ones are added, and existing ones change their meanings. Several linguists have devoted themselves to finding the rules of semantic change and the causes behind them. Semantic change is defined as the innovations that merely change the lexical meaning [1]. It is pointed out that lexical meaning change is termed semantic change, which helps determine the characteristic entities of semantic structures [2]. As for the formations of semantic change, there are studies about the changing meaning of words from their social circumstances [3]. It is stated that semantic change has some rules, such as shifts in markedness, generalization, etc [4].

In recent years, more and more researchers have analysed semantic change in specific domains. Jacob (2014) discussed the diffusion of semantic change under social media [5]. Vejdemo (2018) discusses semantic change and lexical replacement processes in the colour domain. Moreover, it is pointed out that change in the colour and other semantic domains often begins and ends in conceptual peripheries [6]. Pettersson (2022) analysed the semantic change of some adjectives from the olfactory domain. The finding illustrated that semantic change is motivated by the social and technological transformations experienced by American society [7].

The change and development of lexical semantics record the development process of human society to a certain extent. The fundamental cause of lexical semantic change and development is the transformation of social life and the progress of science and technology [8]. Based on a lexical perspective, this paper seeks to investigate the trend and causes of semantic change.

2. Semantic Change Arising from Lexical Change

2.1. Extension of Meaning

Extending meaning refers to transforming words with a particular meaning into words with a broader meaning, in short, from specific to general. In modern English, most

words have transformed meaning enlargement. For example, the word "bird" used to mean little bird. Moreover, now it refers to the bird of all kinds. The word "journal" is used to mean daily newspaper. Now, it stands for all the magazines and periodicals.

Another kind of extension is noted to be a metaphorical extension. This occurs when a word is used metaphorically to refer to something beyond its literal meaning. This meaning extension involves transferring a word's original sense to a related or analogous concept. It involves a word's figurative or non-literal use to convey meanings beyond its concrete or physical referent [9]. This type of semantic change allows words to be used creatively to express complex ideas or emotions. For instance, "bright" may be metaphorically extended to describe intelligence or a positive outlook.

Apart from metaphorical extension, elevation is an extension in which a word acquires a more positive, prestigious, or elevated connotation over time. This process involves the word taking on a higher status or value than its original meaning, often due to cultural, social, or historical factors. This transformation can occur through shifts in societal values, cultural perceptions, or historical developments. Common examples of elevation in semantic change include words like "knight," which initially referred to a medieval warrior but has been elevated to symbolize honour, chivalry, and nobility. Similarly, the word "queen" has an elevated connotation associated with royalty, power, and regal authority.

2.2. Narrowing of Meaning

Narrowing of meaning occurs when a word's usage becomes more specific, focusing on a particular subset of its original referents. This semantic change often leads to a word acquiring a narrower and more precise meaning. For example, liquor used to mean all kinds of liquid. Now, it means alcoholic drinks. The word "girl" originally referred to a boy or a girl, and its meaning was reduced to a girl only. "Wife" used to mean "all women." Now, we think of "wife" as a married woman.

During the process of narrowing, a word's meaning is restricted to exclude some of its broader senses. The narrowing down of meaning may result from shifts in language use, changes in cultural contexts, or the development of specialized terminology [10]. Contractions are also common in proper nouns, such as "city," when used as a proper noun to refer specifically to "the business centre of London." Another word, "weasel," originally referred to a

specific type of mammal but has been semantically restricted to denote someone deceitful or untrustworthy.

2.3. Sublimation of Meaning

Sublimation of meaning often reflects cultural values, beliefs, or ideals that assign symbolic or metaphorical significance to certain words. Words that undergo sublimation may acquire connotations related to morality, spirituality, aesthetics, or intellectual pursuits. The sublimation of word meaning is mainly related to emotions. Some words with neutral or derogatory meanings in the past have been sublimated into positive or neutral words. For example, “success,” which used to mean only a result, now means success. The words “passion,” which originally referred to suffering, have been sublimated to signify intense emotions or desires. Similarly, “virtue” has been sublimated to connote moral excellence and ethical values. In addition, the rise of Chinese meaning is widespread in positions.

Sublimation of meaning enriches language by adding layers of depth, nuance, and cultural significance to words [10]. This semantic change allows words to evolve beyond their basic definitions to express profound, abstract, or symbolic meanings.

2.4. Degradation of Meaning

The opposite of the sublimation of meaning is the degradation of meaning. That is, the neutral or commendatory words in the past become words with derogatory colours. This process involves a word acquiring negative, pejorative, or less prestigious meanings compared to its earlier, more positive or neutral sense. Here are some key points to provide detailed information on the degradation of meaning in semantic change. For example, a “busybody,” which used to mean a very busy person, now means someone fond of meddling. The word “notorious” is sometimes a synonym for “disrepute”. However, it used to have the meaning of “being well-known.” Similarly, a term used for a position, such as “mistress,” which used to mean “a woman who rules over another person,” is now used with a distinctly derogatory connotation.

Degradation of meaning is a natural part of language evolution, reflecting shifts in cultural values, societal norms, and linguistic practices. Words may undergo degradation as they adapt to changing contexts or acquire new connotations over time.

2.5. Transfer of Meaning

The transfer of meaning is when a word that originally meant one thing is used to mean another. The transfer of word meaning can be divided into three types: 1. Transfer of the original and metaphorical meaning; 2. transfer of abstract meaning and concrete meaning; 3. transfer of subjective meaning and objective meaning. The first kind of word meaning change is similar to the extension of meanings, but the difference is that the word meaning enlargement is caused by association shift. For example, “bright” originally referred to the quality of light but has been transferred to signify intelligence or positivity.

As for the transfer of abstract meaning and concrete meaning, the typical word “room” initially meant “space,” which was an abstract noun, and later, it could also mean “room,” which was given a new concrete meaning. Moreover, like the word “stage,” it can mean both the concrete and abstract meaning of stage. “Hope” originally meant “hope” in an abstract sense, but later acquired a concrete meaning: “a

person (or thing) in which hope is placed.”

Subjective meaning refers to oneself, while objective meaning refers to others. Words like “home” or “freedom” can undergo a transfer of subjective meaning as individuals may imbue these terms with personal emotions, memories, or values that go beyond their literal definitions. The subjective meanings of these words can vary depending on individual perspectives and experiences. Regarding the transfer of objective meaning, two typical words related to computers could exemplify this trend: “Mouse,” initially referring to a small rodent, is now objectively referring to a computer input device. Similarly, “browser” has shifted from denoting someone who navigates the internet to a software application used to access websites.

3. Causes of Semantic Change

3.1. External Factors

De One of the main external factors is the language contact. Language contact is a phenomenon that occurs when speakers of different languages interact with one another, leading to the exchange of linguistic features, borrowings, and influences between the languages involved [11]. Language contact can result in borrowing words, phrases, grammatical structures, or sounds from one language to another. Borrowed words may fill lexical gaps, introduce new concepts, or reflect cultural exchanges between linguistic communities. Meanwhile, borrowed words may also undergo semantic shifts or changes in meaning over time. The meanings of those words may be extended, narrowed, or modified to align with the cultural and linguistic context of the borrowing language.

Another important factor is cultural trends. Cultural trends driven by technological advancements often introduce new concepts, products, or phenomena that require the creation of new vocabulary. Words may be borrowed, coined, or repurposed to describe technological innovations and advancements. Besides, cultural trends in popular culture, entertainment, and media can introduce slang terms, neologisms, and expressions that reflect contemporary social dynamics. Slang terms may enter mainstream language use and undergo semantic shifts over time.

Social norms and values also contribute to semantic change. They shape the vocabulary used to address societal issues. Political events, movements, or ideologies can influence language use and introduce political terminology or rhetoric into the lexicon. Political discourse reflects societal values and drives lexical change. Social movements, advocacy campaigns, or changing attitudes toward social issues can lead to adopting new terms, expressions, or inclusive language practices.

3.2. Internal Factors

In reality, individuals seek to allocate minimal energy towards accomplishing maximal tasks. In language use, individuals similarly aspire to convey copious information through succinct language. This phenomenon is designated as the linguistic principle of economy within linguistics. The discourse of economy being deliberated here pertains to the lexical usage level of the economy [12]. Specifically, if one word suffices to articulate the intended message, then employing two words is categorically unwarranted; likewise, if the meaning can be conveyed through a phrase, then utilizing a clause is unequivocally redundant. Consequently, many protracted and intricate words or noun phrases are

gradually simplified and extensively employed. For instance, “information” is streamlined to “info”; “refrigerator” metamorphoses into “fridge”; “helicopter airport” transmutes into “helipol”; “international police” transmogrifies into “Interpol.”

The concept of collocations also plays an integral part in shaping the lexical change. It refers to the combinations of words in English that come together to form relatively complete or fixed word groups, thereby conveying specific meanings. This close association cannot be elucidated through conventional grammar rules nor by connecting the individual meanings of the words to derive the overall meaning. The emergence of such collocational pairings has profound historical and cultural roots, namely habitual usage and cultural differences. Therefore, language learners can only accurately comprehend and convey the underlying message of the original text by carefully pondering the speaker’s intentions and tone through context, becoming familiar with and understanding the ethnic culture behind these combinations [13].

As another contributing factor of lexical change, cognitive mode refers to the mental processes involved in language processing, perception, and conceptualization. The cognitive aspects of language use can influence lexical change by shaping how speakers perceive, categorize, and represent words in their mental lexicon. Cognitive mode involves conceptual metaphors to map abstract concepts onto concrete domains. Metaphorical mappings shape speakers’ conceptualizations and express ideas, emotions, or relationships through language. Changes in cognitive mode can introduce new metaphors, analogies, or conceptual frameworks that influence the meaning and usage of words [14]. Meanwhile, cognitive mode may affect the speed and efficiency of lexical access during language production and comprehension. Speakers rely on cognitive processes such as activation, retrieval, and inhibition to access words in their mental lexicon. Changes in cognitive mode can influence the accessibility of words, leading to variations in word choice and usage.

4. Conclusion

As society changes constantly, the evolution of English words also undergoes continuous alteration. Lexicon is the building material of language and the primary medium for people to express ideas, transmit information and communicate. The complexity of semantics makes it increasingly essential to have a holistic idea about the causes and processes of the change.

The development of semantic change significantly impacts all aspects of language. This paper explains five different

processes of linguistic change and presents some representative examples of each process. With the rapid development of life and technology, more and more linguistic changes are emerging. Thus, there is always time to analyze and study the causes and trends of semantic changes in the lexicon to grasp the semantics.

References

- [1] Bloomfield, L, Language. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston,1933.
- [2] Lehmann, W. P, Historical Linguistics: An Introduction. London: Routledge,1922.
- [3] Sommerfelt, A, Diachronic and synchronic aspects of language: selected articles. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton,1971.
- [4] Trask. R. J, Historical Linguistics. London: Edward Arnold,1996.
- [5] Jacob Eisenstein, Brendan O’Connor, Noah A Smith and Eric P Xing, Diffusion of lexical change in social media. Public Library of Science,9th ed., vol.11, pp.113-114,2014.
- [6] Vejdemo, S, Lexical change often begins and ends in semantic peripheries. Pragmatics & Cognition, 1st ed., vol.25, pp.50-85,2018.
- [7] Daniela Pettersson-Traba, Ongoing semantic change in a modernizing society: a look at some adjectives from the olfactory domain in the Corpus of Historical American English. Corpora,3rd ed., vol.17, pp.389-421,2022.
- [8] Lu Yan, The influence of computer technology on the development of English vocabulary. Science & Technology Information,16th ed., vol.20, pp.245-248,2022.
- [9] Li Ming, Metaphor as an important means of change in lexical meaning. Shandong Foreign Language Teaching, 5th ed., vol.25, pp.43-46,2004.
- [10] Traugott, E.C, Semantic change: bleaching, strengthening, narrowing, extension. Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics (Second Edition),2006.
- [11] Thomason, Sarah, Social and linguistic factors as predictors of contact-induced change. Journal of Language Contact, vol.2, pp.42-56,2008.
- [12] Li Xia, The effect of the principle of least effort on the formation of new words. Journal of Huaihai Institute of Technology (Humanities & Social Sciences Edition),1st ed., vol.12, pp.57-59,2014.
- [13] Chen Lili, Using context to infer the meaning of unknown words in college English reading. Journal of Fuyang Normal University: Social Science Edition, vol.1, pp.59-63,2018.
- [14] Li Huan and Yang Feng, Enlightenment of cognitive linguistics theory on English vocabulary teaching. Education Modernization, vol.1, pp.136-138,2019.