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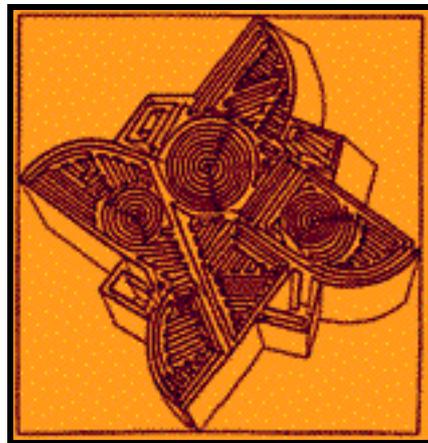
# Universität Konstanz

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## Introduction

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In February 1999, a workshop "Meaning Change - Meaning Variation" took place, as part of the 25th annual meeting of the DGfS (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sprachwissenschaft), at the university of Konstanz. The present volume, and a second one to follow, collect the papers that were presented at that occasion. First of all, we want to thank all contributors for their interest and committed engagement in the workshop. The quality of their contributions, and their willingness to share ideas, often beyond their "home" paradigm or theoretical framework, turned the workshop into a lifely and inspiring event. By agreeing to put their contributions into writing, they moreover gave us the opportunity to present the workshop topics to a wider audience.

We also want to thank the DGfS, and more specifically the local organizers at Konstanz, for offering the opportunity and the excellent frame for the workshop, and the DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for financial support. Finally, warm thanks are due to Hannelore Turcus who, patiently and efficiently, prepared the final layout.

Meaning change has many facets, and the contributions to the workshop were selected such as to shed light on as many aspects as possible. In preparation for the event to come, we tried to draw a little map of the landscape of topics to be touched, and highlight links between various perspectives. For the sake of brevity, we used "meaning change" to cover all the cases of meaning variability, polysemy, shift and innovation which were under discussion. After some late night sessions which cost us several liters of beer and two entire pencils, not to speak of the paper, we finally came up with the following

## Seven Questions about Meaning Change

(1) What are "meanings"?

In order to study movement, one needs the idea of a spatial location. Much in the same way, the study of meaning change requires some idea of static meanings-at-a-time.
There are many different ways to say that "meanings" are basically black boxes: There is the word on one side, and the referents, truth conditions, contextual acceptability conditions, pragmatic effects, undertones, etc. on the other side. What it is that brings it about to evoke the correct reactions in the hearer is left unexplored. One can be formally elaborate in stating that meanings are "functions" that bring about all these things, as is exemplified in truth value semantics and its pragmatic-conversational extensions. One can, however, also represent this view in simple and perspicuous box-and-arrow figures. The latter view allows one to be more lavish in adding further meaning-connected aspects (like undertone, pragmatic implications etc.) which attestedly play a major role in meaning change. Consequently, it is an excellent starting point to make generalizations for large ranges of data. Formal accounts, on the other hand, score better in meaning composition; this aspect makes the paradigm attractive for

cases of meaning change through reanalysis (like in semantic analogy, or "folk compositional semantics").

Cognitive semantics attempts to provide a contentful alternative to the "black box" view of meaning. One tries to peek inside speakers' heads and get an idea of the architecture of basic mental concepts. These seem to be a good cantidate to "be" subjective meanings (in contrast to merely representing them). More interestingly, the setup of the mental "hardware" also could explain why certain meanings are close to each other (such that a word having one of them also catches up the second, like a cold) while others are fairly unrelated. The prize to pay for these insights is that one has to leave the realm of pure philology and enter into the strange world of psycho-biology. One might find that troublesome both from a practical and a philosophical viewpoint.

Intermediate stages between all positions are, of course, possible. What comes as a "coercion function" in the black box approach might find its justification in cognitive linguistics. Even formal purists have to acknowledge more and more that the mere knowledge of extensions is not very interesting in the end. And the search for concepts in brain would perhaps stagnate at the level common to all mammals, say, without the inspiration drawn from extensive studies of language in classical frameworks.


(2) How does the referent participate in "meaning"?


A sentence like "there's a fly in my soup" not only make an existential statement about the world (or, my soup) but also refer to a special object in the world. In the first place, this referent has to conform to the predicate used to introduce it in the sentence (that is, the thing must really be a fly). But, is the referent really a passive object to be predicated over, or has it some influence on predicates in return?

Truth-value semantics represents meanings of predicates as sets of possible referents, but these referents are rather passive. Nothing hinges on whether some object is refered to often, never, only in certain contexts, etc: All flies have the same status with respect to the predicate "fly".

Prototype based semantics has the aim to develop a more differentiated view of natural categories. Categories have an internal structure; we can distinguish core exemplares around which the more and more marginal cases are crowded. Not all referents are created equal! While this result can no longer be ignored in the study of meaning, it does not necessarily give the referent a stronger position than it had in logical semantics. Certain quite powerful versions of prototype structure can be integrated with truth value based semantics without problems.

Only when things and words enter into a two-way interaction, meanings will become referent-dependent in a substantial way. How should referents shape meanings? It is natural to assume that categories (or at least some of them) cluster around core exemplars which are distinct not so much because they are the core of a natural class, but because they are the guys we meet most frequently. Although there is certainly a lot more to be said about the process of human categorization, it is clear that each referent which is agreed upon to fall under the concept denoted by word "X" stabilizes and centers the concept — a process which can be observed most clearly in language acquisition. Consequently, language acquisition is also one of the main fields of exploration for cognitive semantics.

Diachronically, the feedback between referents and words can help to explain the secret shrinks, increases and slight shifts of extensions, due to different core cases of interest and application. Surprisingly enough, the seed for this interaction is also laid in

the most pale and formal approaches to meaning if one is willing to read them that way...


(3) How does world knowledge enter into meaning?


Knowing the meaning of the word "fly" means, at least: to be able to tell flies from non-flies. (In spite of (2), we ignore borderline cases for the moment.) It seems that we can teach someone this ability by giving her a minute description of what flies look like. Having the full encyclopaedic entry for "fly" in her brain, this person will then pass the turing test for "knowing what the word "fly" means". Does this mean that full encyclopaedic descriptions are, or are part of, the meaning of a word?

Lexical semantics has to keep the difficult balance between allowing for too much encyclopaedic knowledge and being too parsimonious. Rich meanings allow for subtle meaning shifts, but this causes a synchronic problem: How can two speakers ever communicate? Certainly, no two speakers ever have equal knowledge about any topic. Lean meanings, on the other hand, are not very useful when it comes to the investigation of generative lexical processes, or in distinguishing plausible from implausible meaning shifts. How much knowledge of the world do we need as part of meaning?

Another way to use world knowledge is chosen in underspecification approaches. Here, meanings are taken to be rather unspecific, and the context of use, and the predication made, will have to fill in the missing bits on the basis of common sense reasoning: "The school wore blue uniforms" - Hm, must mean, the pupils of the school". While the aspect of meaning change is not explicitly adressed here, such accounts can model a good portion of synchronic meaning variability.

World knowledge is used implicitly in cognitive semantics, as all category formation takes place against a certain experiental background. But, world knowledge in the sense of knowledge about the social practice of language use and the set up of utterance situations (including issues like appropriateness or relevance of an utterance) is also of evident influence on meaning.

No semantic paradigm can separate the things that people know about the world from the things that people know about words of their language. The investigation of meaning change can give further hints on the best choreography of all factors in play. Matters start looking puzzlingly recursive, once one takes into account that folk linguistic reasoning (like the correct semantic decomposition of sentences, complex words, words, inflexions, etc.) might also be part of world knowledge. A closer look will be taken in (6).


(4) What are Metaphors?


Metaphors are, first of all, a rich source to create new meanings for old words. Looking at the data, it is easy to recognize that metaphor is one of the corner stones of lexical creativity. Although the concept is fairly stable on intuitive grounds, it turns out to be not so very easy to make it explicit why we feel that something is a metaphorical use of a word.

In order for "metaphor" to start working, some things have to be similar to some other things. However, as even quite non-metaphorical classification works on the basis of things being similar to other things (see (2)), there should be something special about metaphorical cases. The things which are metaphorically called by some name are

somewhat less similar to the old core cases than the things which belong to the same category proper.

The mathematical concept of an "isomorphism" might be helpful here. Constating an isomorphism between two domains, one has to explicate the structural properties with respect to which the domains have to be viewed. (Are bulls and cows "isomorphic"? Looking at their shape: certainly. But if we also take into account their sex - no.) Metaphor seems to require that we look at old things but focus on new structural properties of them. This allows us to see that other things, which are rather different according to the normal way of seeing objects, nevertheless can be likened to the old things in a certain sense. In cognitive terms, we change the frame of conceptualization, or transport structure from one cognitive space into another one.

Another very simple answer to the above question is implicit in other traditions of semantic research: Metaphors are something one should leave one's fingers away from. Such sanitary considerations confirm the impression that issues are quite intricate.


(5) What are Metonymies?

Another term in the literature of meaning change which is as useful as it is poorly understood is metonymy. Basically, it looks as if words which refer to objects A can acquire a new meaning, where they denote new objects B, provided that A's and B's occur close to each other.

In this abstract form, the characterization reads as if almost any word could mean anything. (Looking at the typical restaurant table, would not one predict that "salt" should come to mean "pepper"?) However, an impressive range of actual cases of meaning shifts is indeed described, if not explained, in terms of contiguities.

Subclasses of such examples turn out to be more homogenous in nature: Event descriptions can also cover the "nearby" product of the event, terms for institutions also cover the "nearby" people constituting these, or the location where the institution resides. Such classes of examples also suggest that the notion of "nearby" is more than mere local closeness, although the leading idea, of course, is that contiguities are different from the conceptual neighbourhoods which lead to metaphor.

Sortal subdivisions of the underlying ontology provide the basis for the claim that many words can have very unspecific meanings, with an appropriate spellout in each ontological subdomain. Perception-based approaches, on the other hand, offer an explanation of the notion "nearby" in situational terms.

All in all, it seems that the gap between concise analyses of few cases and more open-boundary characterizations of many cases has still to be bridged.


(6) What is the role of semantic composition in meaning change?

If a hearer parses and understands an utterance in a given context, she will have received a complete lump of information in the end. Yet, it is part of the nature of language that such lumps of information are composed from smaller lumps and bits in a systematic fashion. The ideal speaker/hearer is in possession of both the smallest of these bits, and the rules how to compose them. In addition, she can take advantage of certain contextual factors, understand conversational implicatures and the like — but such lumps of information are usually beyond the command of words themselves, i.e. not part of the "literal meaning".

In reality, things are not so simple. Sometimes we understand lumps of information in part due to nonlinguistic contextual factors (someone with a mouthful of nails uttering a helpless "hmhmmm" might be clearly understood as asking for a hammer), and sometimes there might be redundancies. We seem to be animals extremely well disposed to "make sense of" something.

This is also the basis for our ability to learn a language at all. Starting from situations where the intended lump of information is quite clear, we can form hypotheses about how the linguistic parts of the message uttered contribute to the overall lump, and can thus go down to the smallest words, inflections and derivations. Importantly, this process of systematic guessing does not end once we master our mother language.

Some of the most interesting case studies in meaning change seem to work on the basis of re-estimating the division of labour between parts of the sentence, the pragmatic context, the speech act, etc. Auxiliaries are tentatively filled with or emptied of meaning. Optional deictic markers become compulsory definites once there is a gricean implicature that "if the speaker had meant it to be definite, he would have used that deictic thing". Cases of classical grammaticalization look as if words simply are bleached until they remain as pale tense or aspect markers. Yet, there are also tendencies of words and constructions to become semantically richer or more precise, when other (mostly analytic) constructions take over part of the former range of application of the construction.

While many case studies exemplify how contextual implicatures become meaning, theories which use underspecified meanings follow an opposite direction. As contexts will provide much of the overall lump of information, why pack that burden into word meaning? Again, the correct middle position between lexical minimalism and expliciteness remains to be found.

All in all, every speaker seems to be a little generative linguist on her own, continuously taking into question her version of language and willing to replace it with a more refined version. Structural semantics seems to be a framework fit to start investigations of such processes.


(7) How does meaning change?

The choices made in (1) to (6) will shape the possible answers to this final question. In order to get some overview over meaning developments and systematic paths of meaning change, it is a good start to visualize them as formal routes language can take. No meaning shift ever occurs with necessity, tough, and a collection of "can" paths with no further explications of what "will likely be", or what factors might promote or inhibit changes, remains a bit unsatisfactory. One crucial factor will always be the changing world, as well as our changing experiences of this world. These changes will have to be tied up with changes in meaning.

A changed world will offer new ways to categorize things — maybe because more things are known in the first place, maybe because old things are met with different frequencies than before, maybe because we know more about old things and look at them differently. Many of the concepts in flux will be tied to words which, consequently, will change meanings.

A changed world will also offer new ways to make underspecified concepts precise. Looking at things in different ways will give rise to more metaphors and metonymies, while others will be forgotten. New things will call out for names, and if

these new names are coined in a mnemotechnically efficient way, chances are good that the coinage is based on metaphors or metonymies.

The process of speakers looking at and interpreting their language as a structural system can be less systematically related to external events in the world. Close contact to another language might be an initiating factor — a currently ongoing example is offered by the exotic generalizations of German speakers of English genetive – 's.

Meaning change, and language change in general, is moreover only possible due to the fact that natural languages, in contrast to programming languages, are rather robust tools of communication, which are fairly error tolerant in use. If language is viewed as a system of conventions of social verbal interaction, this robustness may be no surprise. A more formal description of language must capture this robustness by making the claim that speakers do not only master one single language, but a whole family of languages which all can serve as a means to convey and receive lumps of information. Such a claim may be plausible when it comes to the description of various registers and group idiolects we master. However, it is less "natural" when used to explain the fact that speakers of English can understand both "John has gone home" and "John is home gone" as conveying roughly the same information (although they'd probably prefer the first version). This robustness of language makes it one of the most democratic tools used in human communities.