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Meaning in the Lexicon: Cultural Implications

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Meaning in the Lexicon: Cultural Implications

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Introduction

In this paper, we will put forward an explanation of the processes involved in semantic change and variation using Kronenfeld's theory on semantic extension (1996) and Rundblad's model of markedness (1998). It is also our intention to try to illustrate the impact socio-cultural factors have on language and what instances of semantic change can convey about the culture of a speech community.

Extension

A word's referential meaning is directly linked to a core or focal referent, and the word's application extends out from this referent to a range of potential referents. This explains why and how words can appropriately and correctly apply to new things as new referential meanings are created continuously by means of literal and figurative semantic extensions. Literal extensions are within the focal domain, whereas figurative semantic extensions move the reference outside the focal domain.

Each word has semantic relations of contrast (or opposition) and inclusion. A set of contrasting words is distinguished from one another by sets of semantic distinctive features, the words' meaning relations. These meaning relations map onto the set of focal referents of terms in the contrast set, and can be inferred by learners from those focal referents. A word's meaning is as dependant on what the word may not refer to as it is on what the word may refer to. Figurative extensions are usually grounded in some *similarity* or *contiguity* between the core referent and the new referent¹ within the framework provided by an application of the semantic oppositions of the source domain to the realm or domain of the target referents (Kronenfeld 1996, Ch 10).

The set of contrasting and inclusive meaning relations is embodied in the word's *signified* (that is, the concept signified by the word - distinct from the word's set of actual referents). The signified is linked to a *world schema*, which is a schematic representation of the functional situations that brought about the existence of the word in question, and which is not an intrinsic part of the meaning of a word (Kronenfeld 1996: 189). The world schema, by representing knowledge automatically evoked by the use of a word, helps the signified of that word point out to actual referents (whether new or old, whether literal or figurative) in the extra-linguistic

¹ For a detailed account of various traditional theories on and approaches to similarity/metaphor and contiguity/metonymy and as well as an outline of semantics in general, see Nerlich 1992 and Warren 1992.

world of experience and thought. Language users, when faced with the task of picking out the word most apt in a given communicative situation (for example, the choice between a word with a literal and one with a figurative meaning), consider the world schemas associated with the alternative words.

Variation

Semantic variation (polysemy) is the result when new referents (and hence new meanings/senses) are added to a word; or rather an expanded semantic variation is the result of the adding process, since most words are polysemous - polysemy being the natural state for words as is variation the natural state for most linguistic components (that is, depending on the language/dialect(s), spelling, pronunciation, word order etc.).²

Even though polysemy is natural to language, there is still the question why certain figurative semantic extensions catch on whereas others do not. We will postulate that the continued usage of a metaphor or metonym is governed by how established the original (usually literal) sense of a word is; that is the more the original (literal) meaning is used, the more likely it is that the figurative extension of it will be understood, accepted and established in the same way as morphologically derived words rely on the words they were coined from in order to stay in use. Our claim is based on the fact that we can only rely on people being familiar with the original sense if that sense is commonly used, and thus it is only under such circumstances that we can presume that a figurative extension of that sense can be understood. For example, the use of the verb *surf* as in *surf the net* is a figurative extension of *surf* as in *surf the waves*, and the understanding and usage of it depends very much on people knowing about and using the original sense.³

In her study of lexical and semantic change in the semantic field 'natural watercourse'⁴, Rundblad found that metonyms and de-verbal nouns were far better at surviving from one time period to another (here Old English, Middle English and Modern English) than, for example, de-nominal nouns, de-adjectival nouns and metaphors.⁵ Additionally, the study revealed that the nouns created during the Proto-Germanic period as opposed to those created during the Old English period had higher survival rate⁶; and not surprisingly the Proto-Germanic de-verbal nouns and metonyms were the nouns with not only the highest survival rates, but also the highest frequency rates. The results of the study brought forth the conclusion that, at the initial stage of the introduction of a new word/meaning, the word creation device to a certain degree guaranteed that the word/meaning would be used for the simple reason that, in the case of metonymy and de-verbal nouns, the connection in contiguity or appearance between the new and the old word/meaning was (and, in most cases, still is) very clear and easily reconstructable. Hence, the new word/meaning is reinforced by the old meaning/word.

However, after the initial stage of introduction, the word's (or meaning's) survival is dependent on how frequently and regularly it has been just during the first

² On the naturalness of (semantic) variation, see Rundblad forthcoming and Mufwene 1996.

³ This dependency obtains, at least, until (if at all) the new expression becomes frequently enough used to support an independent existence of its own--and thus to become a new focal referent.

⁴ For a detailed account of the study, see Rundblad 1998 and forthcoming.

⁵ The survival rates for the metonyms and the de-verbal nouns were 42% and 20% respectively.

⁶ 83% for Proto-Germanic nouns compared to 24% for Old English nouns.

stage; that is, if the word/meaning has been frequently and regularly used it will most likely survive. Based on the results of the study, a model of markedness was constructed.⁷

Markedness

The markedness model is grounded in the presumption that all variation situations can be viewed as markedness situations.⁸ Among other things, the model of markedness to be utilised here emphasizes the interrelation between language and culture. It is our aim to explore this interrelation by trying to establish what impact culture has on language and how this impact can be perceived in language and especially in instances of semantic change.

The model is made up of two “mated” systems, *the linguistic system* and *the extra-linguistic system*, where the first stands for language and the second for culture, and where the former is part of the latter, as seen in Figure 1. We will begin by outlining and exemplifying the structure and functions of the linguistic system.

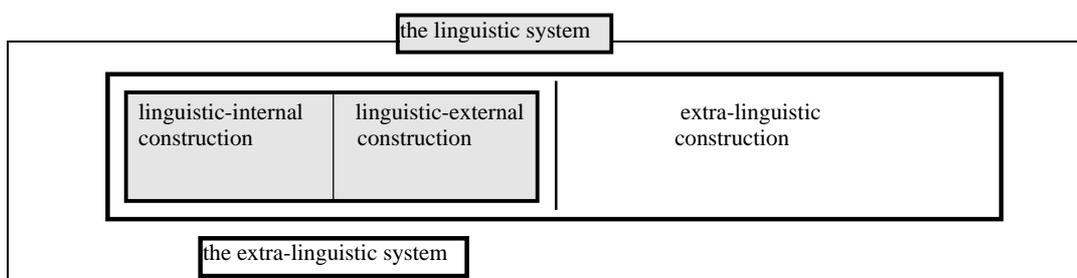


Figure 1. The correlation between the two systems governing a markedness situation (from Rundblad forthcoming).

The linguistic system (language) contains two components: *linguistic-internal constructions* and *linguistic-external constructions*. The first of these constructions (the linguistic-internal construction) comprises, in the case of lexical items, the semantic content and form of the word(s) and, in the case of meanings, the meaning structure (including the actual extension process, for example metonymy).

In dealing with markedness in semantics, many linguists would fall back to the notion of *privative opposition*, which proclaims an opposition between words with a (more) specific meaning and words with a (more) general meaning, where the former is less applicable as the latter. In the competition between the words *dog* and *bitch*, we can accurately state that a bitch is a kind of dog and can hence be called *dog*, whereas a dog not necessarily is a bitch; other examples include *duck – drake*, *river – rivulet* and *bad – worse – worst*. In privative oppositions, the specific word is regarded as the

⁷ The model of markedness is outlined in detail in Rundblad 1998 and Rundblad forthcoming.

⁸ It should be noted that the model put forward here does not subscribe to the over-generalised view on markedness proclaiming that a markedness situation contains one marked variant and one unmarked variant; rather, a markedness situation can embody any number of variants, where one (or possibly more than one) of the variants is experienced as less marked (more unmarked) than the other variants, which are hence seen as more marked.

marked variant and the general word as the unmarked one. Hence, *dog* is unmarked, whereas *bitch*, given its more specific meaning, is marked.

Because of the apparent wider applicability of the unmarked variant, in discussions of usage of marked and unmarked variants, we often find comments to the effect that the marked variant is not used as often as than the unmarked variant (as in Greenberg's discussion on text frequency (1966)). In the case of privative opposition, this is not terribly strange, since usage of words that are more specific relies more heavily on the speakers' and hearers' world knowledge – specificity requires detailed knowledge – than does usage of general words.⁹ Similarly, for markedness pairs, such as, *actor* – *actress*, *many* – *few* and *wide* – *narrow*, we find that the unmarked members, *actor*, *many* and *wide*, are used far more than the marked ones.¹⁰ The usage and the frequency rates of a variant, where an unmarked variant is significantly more frequently used than a marked one, are governed by the variant's linguistic-internal construction and the markedness value subsequently generated by that construction.

The second type of construction in the linguistic system, the linguistic-external construction, relate to how much and how often (the actual usage) a word/meaning is used. The markedness model asserts that, in the eyes of the speakers (and presumably the hearers), the variant most frequently used is unmarked, whereas the variant least frequently used come to stand out, hence being regarded as marked. Nevertheless, we just stated that the unmarked word is used more frequently than the marked one just because it is unmarked, and thus the present claim does sound a bit circular. It is indeed the linguistic-internal construction that initially gives rise to a certain usage and a certain frequency. After some time, however, people will no longer base their perception of, for example, a word on what the precisely received or derived meaning of the word is, but rather on how the word is used by others and themselves. The frequency rate of the word is an immensely significant part of the usage - and speakers will construct new rules of usage based on the present usage, rules that will guide the future usage of the word in question.

We can illustrate this by means of a comparison of the two synonyms, *streamlet* and *rivulet*. Both words are de-nominal nouns (created by means of the suffix *-let*), the meaning for both words is 'a small stream' and they were both created sometime during the 16th century. Thus, apart from the difference in form, the linguistic-internal constructions of the two synonyms are more or less identical. Basically, the only thing that does differ between them (apart from the form and etymology of the words) is their present-day usage; *rivulet* is used far more than *streamlet*, which is then to be recognised as the more marked variant of the two. However, there is absolutely nothing in their present-day linguistic-internal construction that could possibly result in one being marked rather than the other. This would then clearly support our view that it is the present usage and frequency rates of the two competing variants that regulate the present-day markedness situation and any future usage.¹¹

⁹ Naturally, the degree of difficulty involved in specificity vary depending on the variants and referents involved; it is (usually) easy telling a man and a woman apart, and grown cows and bulls offer few problems whereas younger ones might be harder to distinguish, but few non-zoologist people can distinguish between a duck and a drake.

¹⁰ *Actor* 2,039 - *actress* 1,115; *many* 90,283 - *few* 45,015; *wide* 12,131 - *narrow* 5,024 (BNC).

¹¹ It should be noted that it is possible that *river* (which is the most frequently used word for 'watercourse' (cf. Rundblad unpublished 1996) in being used more frequently than *stream* (9,418 – 2,573 in the BNC) might direct the choice between *rivulet* and *streamlet* in favour of the former; even so, the markedness situation would still have to be treated as primarily governed by the linguistic-external constructions, the frequency rates, rather than the semantic content, word form, etymology etc.

The asserted importance of frequency and regularity for markedness follows from some cognitive consequences of frequency. Unmarked variants, by being used more often and subsequently by being experienced earlier, are learnt earlier than marked variants by the newer generations (and by non-native speakers). Therefore, the unmarked variants will become part of the speakers' vocabularies earlier than the marked variants, which in one way or another and at various degrees will be learnt in contrast to the unmarked variants. That is, the unmarked variants will become the reference points for the marked variants and will become part of the apprehension of the marked variants' constructions. For example, the word *brook* is more frequently used than *rill*, even though they have the same meaning, 'a little stream'. However, whereas *brook* is a Proto-Germanic word that has not only been in use in English since the Old English period but also has been one of the most frequently used watercourse nouns ever, *rill* is German (or possibly Dutch or Frisian) loan word borrowed sometime during the 16th century (Rundblad 1998, unpublished 1996; OED). When *rill* was borrowed into English, its linguistic-internal construction cannot have been more marked than that of *brook*'s, but the linguistic-external construction that it went on to acquire must have been ruled by the unmarked linguistic-external construction of *brook*. That *rill* would become (and still is) linguistically-externally marked was from the very beginning apparent and unavoidable. Today, when *rill* is learnt, it is still learnt after *brook* (and *stream*), it is still learnt in contrast to *brook* (and *stream*) and it is still learnt as the marked variant.

As mentioned earlier, the markedness model proclaims two systems, the second of which, that is, the extra-linguistic system, we will now turn to. The extra-linguistic system focuses on the interrelation between language and culture and consists of two parts, the previously discussed linguistic system (which is here seen as one joint item) and *the extra-linguistic construction*, which, to put it briefly, consists of the socio-cultural contexts in which the variants occur. The extra-linguistic construction and its importance in a variation and markedness situation are best illustrated by means of an example.

During the Old English and Middle English periods a markedness shift occurred among the words used to denote 'natural watercourse', a shift from Old English *burna*/Middle English *burne* to Old English *bröc*/Middle English *brooke* (Rundblad 1998, Ch 15.1). The original sense of Old English *burna* was 'a bubbling or running watercourse' and that of Old English *bröc* was 'muddy, deep-cut, opaque watercourse with clayey riverbed' (Rundblad 1998: 54-57). Despite the fact that both words had highly specific meanings and, following the previously discussed notion of privative opposition, ought to be marked, both words came during different periods to be the default/unmarked word for 'natural watercourse' being the most frequently used nouns, far more frequent than any of the general words or other specific words. The reasons for this can be found in the words' extra-linguistic constructions, in the colonisation patterns for the two periods in question.

Cole (1991) has shown that the areas that were first colonised in England were areas where the river water was clear and the riverbed was sandy or gravelly (cf. Rundblad 1998, Ch 15.1). This would then mean that during this colonisation period the watercourses people came into contact with most and referred to most had an appearance that best corresponded to the meaning of *burna*. We can say that the *burna* watercourse was the default type of watercourse, which would then mean that within the extra-linguistic system, the word *burna* must have been the culturally unmarked variant. Based on its unmarkedness, *burna* was the most frequently used

noun, thus, becoming the linguistic-externally unmarked variant as well. All in all, *burna* was the unmarked variant during this period - despite its specific meaning.

The second colonisation occurred in areas that contained watercourses of the *bröc* kind, that is, muddy streams; hence, during this period, the extra-linguistically unmarked and neutral word must have been *bröc*, whereas *burna* slowly became more and more marked. This change in colonisation patterns caused *bröc* to be more and more used and *burna* less and less, until *bröc* finally became the linguistic-externally unmarked variant. Hence, despite its original unmarkedness and high frequency rates, *burna* was replaced by *bröc*, both with regard to markedness and frequency.

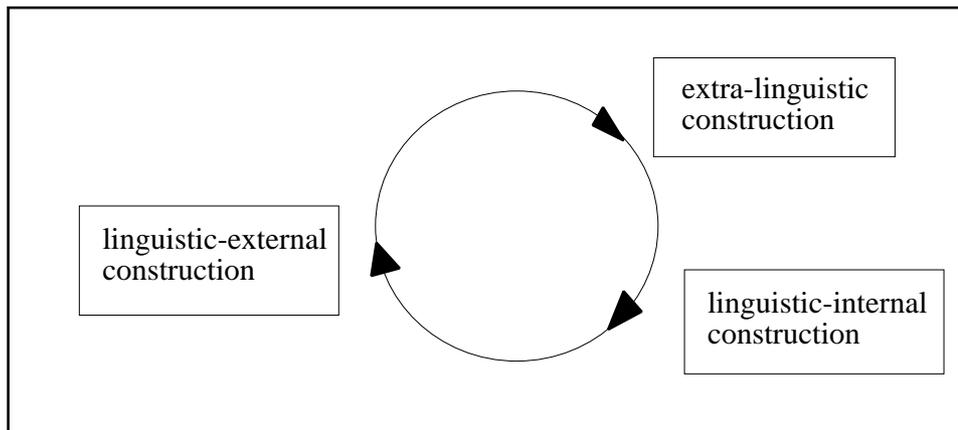


Figure 2. The markedness loop (from Rundblad forthcoming).

Markedness can be pictured as a loop where the linguistic-internal construction influences the linguistic-external construction, which influences the extra-linguistic construction, which influences the linguistic-internal construction and so on. The three constructions and the markedness value of each separate construction are constantly at play, so that each operates, iteratively, again and again and again. However, at any one point in time, the markedness situation is governed by only one of the three construction types, but the influence of each construction upon the overall markedness situation is brought into play because of the iterations of the markedness loop. This way the markedness values of the variants in question are constantly kept open to alteration enabling marked words to become unmarked and unmarked words to become marked.

Due to the lexical nature of the study from which the markedness model originates, our examples have so far been examples of lexical variation and lexical change. However, the model is as applicable to semantic variation and semantic change.

Meaning shifts and change

When a word (still with its core sense) is used in a certain way and/or in a certain linguistic and/or cultural context, the word easily becomes more and more associated with a referent specific for that special usage, a peripheral referent, rather than with the core referent. In some cases, the new referents become important or common enough or the old ones become unimportant or uncommon enough that the new (previously peripheral) referents come to replace the old core referents. The change

of core referent naturally causes a change of core sense. Thus, the possibility for changes of focal referents and changes in meaning to occur is ensured by the markedness loop where the various constructions are constantly re-evaluated and the slightest change in form/meaning, usage and/or cultural context may trigger subsequent changes in form/meaning, usage and/or cultural context.

Cultural implications

As mentioned earlier, one of the prerequisites for a new, figurative sense to succeed in becoming used is the usage of the original (here, literal) sense; a speaker wanting to use the figurative extension of a word can only rely on the hearer understanding the metaphor if the literal sense is known and in use. However, in some cases, the new figurative extension has taken over by becoming the core sense and the original core sense has become peripheral (for example, *launder*) and in some cases, the original core sense has died out completely (as in *bedroom*) and the figurative sense is the only remaining sense.

The word *launder* is today commonly associated with money laundering and similar activities; this sense was derived through a figurative extension from its original core sense, 'to wash clothes and linen', which took place during the Watergate inquiry in 1973-1974 (OED).

A New York lawyer carrying \$200,000 in his camera case to be 'laundered' in Switzerland. (*Publishers Weekly* 1973, OED)

The extension was very successful and caught on rapidly; it was so successful that it has continued into present-day English.

The measure was designed to make it more difficult for crime syndicates to launder illegally acquired funds. (BNC)

The extension of *launder* was grounded on the similarities perceived between the illegal money transfers (that is, transferring illegally acquired funds between various accounts having it resurface as legitimate at its final destination, which usually is a legal account or business) and the cleaning procedure involved in laundering clothes. In a capitalist society, money and everything it is associated with is highly significant**, culturally as well as linguistically, as can be seen from expressions, such as *blood money*, *danger money*, *even money*, *new money* and *soft money*. The extension of *launder* is dependent on and grounded on the old saying "dirty money"; we can say that *dirty money* both paved the way for the extension as well as triggered it. The similarities between dirty (that is, illegal) money and dirty clothes and the extension of *launder* reveal the cultural connotations that we associate with money and especially money obtained through illegal trade.

To overstate the attendance is both a good public relations exercise - making it look as if a team is better-supported than it is - and a possible outlet for laundering 'dirty money'. (BNC)

Exactly how successful the metaphor has been is evidenced by the fact that the use of *launder* has spread to neighbouring areas and can today be found contexts of various types of goods and merchandise as well as data, facts and information. Therefore, we can assert that the figurative meaning of *launder* has become generalised 'to make some material of illegal or dubious origin seem legitimate by (ab)using legitimate

sources’.

What guarantees do we have that some of that imported coal is not part of the German coal laundered in Rotterdam with coal from other countries? (BNC)

At least, it was so by those who were to write up family notes at a later date: the year of birth would be coyly laundered to read ‘1847’, thus ensuring that a rather harmless skeleton stayed in its cupboard for a while. (BNC)

In fact, the success of the metaphor has been so great that the original sense of *launder* is more and more avoided, since the word has become too strongly associated with illegal money transfers and its usage might prove confusing. The need to avoid *launder* in the context of washing clothes can easily be accomplished as there is the synonymous *wash*. *Wash* has the same possibilities and can be used interchangeably, and it is, even more importantly, less ambiguous. Today, people prefer speaking of *washing clothes*, *the washings*, *washing baskets*, *washing bags*, *washing machines*, *washers* and *washeterias* rather than *laundering clothes*, *the laundry*, *laundry baskets*, *laundry bags*, *laundromats*, *laundrettes* and *laundries*. Possibly, the decrease for use of *launder* was not only facilitated by *wash*, but it was also further speeded up by it.

The word *launder* is today more commonly associated with money and illegal goods than clothes and washings, and *wash* is getting more and more commonly used as the only option for discussing the cleaning of clothes. Using the BNC, a comparison of the usage of the original literal sense as opposed to the figurative sense shows that in present-day English *launder* is figuratively used more frequently than literally.

	clothes, washings	illegal material
<i>launder</i>	11	18
<i>launders</i>	0	0
<i>laundered</i>	41	25
<i>laundering</i>	19	123

The result of the metaphorical extension of *launder* is (or will be) in a shift of focality, as the original core sense has been overtaken by the new metaphorical sense which now is the core sense, the sense regulating all the other senses, the sense to which all the other senses must conform. A brief summary of the events would be that the linguistic-internal construction of *launder* (the two senses) has undergone a markedness shift that was instigated by socio-cultural factors, such as the cultural significance of money and the cultural connotations of money stating that money is “bad”. Due to the shift, the word’s pattern of usage has changed and with it the linguistic-external construction values that ultimately has lead (or will lead) to a markedness shift here as well, since the use of the washing sense will decrease leaving the illegality sense the default sense. It is these markedness shifts that triggered the on-going (soon to be completed) shift in default term for ‘washing clothes’ from *launder* to *wash*.

We will now move on to those changes where the original core sense for a word not only is superseded by a new peripheral one, but where the original core sense does not survive at all. One example of this type of change is *bedroom*. Most native speakers do not know that the original sense of *bedroom* in fact was ‘sleeping room or space in a bed’.

Then by your side, no bedroome me deny. (Shakespeare 1590, OED)

It was a figurative extension of *bedroom* that resulted in the present-day meaning, ‘a room containing a bed or beds; a sleeping apartment’, an extension so successful that the original sense has gone out of use completely.

His room, a regular human bedroom, only rather too small, lay quiet between the four familiar walls. (BNC)

As in our previous example, the meaning shift of *bedroom* cannot be properly discussed without taking the word *bedchamber* into consideration. The word was at the time of the meaning shift of *bedroom* the default word for ‘a bedroom’, and had been ever since *chamber* was borrowed from French. Even though the two words had different (though related) meanings, they ought to have been more or less in complementary distribution, since, at the time of the introduction of *bedchamber*, people of the lower classes could not afford houses equipped with separate rooms for sleeping in, only the nobility, the clergy and the merchants could; the lower classes were forced to sleep wherever there might be room to spare, which nicely fits the original meaning ‘bed-space’ for *bedroom*. Hence, *bedroom* was used for the sleeping arrangements of the (English) lower classes, and *bedchamber* for the (French or French influenced) upper and middle classes.

Possibly due to the complementary distribution (complementary primarily with regard to social class) of the words, *bedroom* must have been more or less deliberately reinterpreted from meaning ‘room in bed’ to ‘room with bed’. The reinterpretation, naturally, lead to an increased competition between *bedroom* and *bedchamber*. This competition was clearly regulated by socio-cultural factors, since in a society where bedchambers were associated mainly with the upper classes and the types of rooms (spacious and well- decorated) and beds (huge four-poster beds with bed curtains) and where the number of lower class families having bedrooms (modest rooms with modest beds) must have been on the increase, the use of *bedchamber* must have been seen as inappropriate and that of *bedroom* more befitting; a bedchamber is a kind of bedroom, but a bedroom is usually not a bedchamber. Following this, the use of *bedchamber* decreased, whereas that of *bedroom* increased. Eventually, *bedroom* succeeded in common use to replace *bedchamber*, and today *bedroom* is overwhelmingly more frequently used than *bedchamber*.

	BNC	WWW
<i>bedroom</i>	4,352	1,639,160
<i>bedchamber</i>	63	3,160

In present-day English, *bedchamber* is almost exclusively confined to the contexts of royalty and history, as well as to romance and fiction where the bedchamber usually contains a four-poster bed.

He soon remarried and it appears that his second wife had no qualms about sharing the bedchamber with her predecessor. (Julian Litten *The English way of death - the common funeral since 1450*, BNC)

Once again, we can see how cultural factors have first triggered an extension of meaning (*bedroom*) which, after or during a shift of core sense caused by a shift in the linguistic-internal markedness values, has triggered a shift in default (from *bedchamber* to *bedroom*) The latter shift once again was caused by a markedness shift, a markedness shift in the linguistic-external construction of the words.

Conclusion

We have showed how markedness values and shifts in these values within the various linguistic and extra-linguistic constructions of words and meanings regulate shifts in focality for both core senses and default words. Our discussions of individual instances of semantic change have also exposed the significance of socio-cultural factors, as the extension of *launder* and the reinterpretation of *bedroom* as well as the subsequent replacements of *launder* ('wash clothes') and *bedchamber* must have been triggered by and completed due to cultural rather than linguistic factors.

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