

## Semantic Changes – the Factors and Consequences of the Word Meaning Process

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### Abstract

*This paper covers the linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena of semantic changes. This paper aims to deal with the main factors, the nature and the consequences which bring to this semantic change of the word meaning. Using all the time a comparative approach, we have tried to address to four main factors and consequences of this change: internal linguistic factors, historical factors or cultural changes, social factors, psychological factors which can help us to understand the actual meaning of a word, illustrating them with relevant examples from both English and Albanian language.*

**Keywords:** linguistic, non-linguistic, semantic change, word meaning, internal linguistic factors, denotative meaning, non-denotative meaning

### I. Introduction

Enhancing the marking of the word and therefore new meanings enrichment lies at the heart of the principle of linguistic economy. The reasons of semantic changes are diverse and different. They may be linguistic or non-linguistic ones. The development of society and the changes that it undergoes, language follows on the same path, changing its semantic structure in order to reflect all social, cultural, historical or economic movements.

Regarding trends and laws defining phenomena of the word semantic change, linguists have provided some thoughts. Thus, Breal was the first to think that the science of semantics must try to put laws governing semantic changes. However, he adds that can only classify phenomena in categories<sup>1</sup>. While Sosey associated with changes of the meaning in French word "poutre" wrote that the change "has occurred for special reasons and does not depend on other changes that may have occurred at the same time, this is a coincidence among all the changes recorded in history of a language<sup>2</sup>.

### II. The factors of semantic changes

Antoine Meillet (1905)<sup>3</sup> and Ullmann (1962)<sup>4</sup> make a classification on the factors of semantic changes, through grouping them in :

#### 1. Internal linguistic factors

We can have a further classification here, mentioning ellipsis. In compound words with two components, when one of them get out of use, the other one which has its own meaning takes also the sense of the first one which is not used anymore in

<sup>1</sup> Breal, M. (1991), *The Beginnings of Semantics: Essays, Lectures and Reviews*, Ed. and trans. By George Wolf. Stanford University Press

<sup>2</sup> Traugott, C. E. and Dasher, B. R. (2002), *Regularity in Semantic Change*, Cambridge University Press, pg 52 - 65

<sup>3</sup> Traugott, C. E. and Dasher, B. R. (2002), *Regularity in Semantic Change*, Cambridge University Press, pg 52 - 65

<sup>4</sup> Ullmann, S. (1962), *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell

the phrase, *sale (ulje cmimesh)- cut price sale; starve (vdes urie)- starve of hunger; private (ushtar)- private soldier*, in Albanian language we also have *cung- cung hardhie; vesh- vesh rrushi; laj- laj borxhin, detyren; vese- vese shi*.

Secondly, when a word is borrowed intentionally, it makes the other existing word to get out of use, for example *sloth-slowness- laziness*, after the use of the new word *slowness*. Using an existing word with another new analogical sense with the same meaning as it is in the language it is borrowed from. For example *bear- ari*; *The Great and Lesser Bear- Arusha e Madhe dhe Arusha e Vogel* borrowed from ancient Greek.

Thirdly, the discrimination of synonyms may cause the semantic qualification. For example, the word *hound- "dog"*. After the word "*dog*" was borrowed by Scandinavian languages the first word *hound* became a more specific word *hound- a dog used in hunting- "qen gjahu"*.

Fourthly, the change of a linguistic unit used to avoid the conflict of homonyms. In Albanian language the word *zamer* or *zemer* that means "*afternoon*" (pasdrekja) in some tosk dialects is the same as word *heart*, "the part of the body". This might have caused it to get out of use in this language. While in geg dialect, *zamer (afternoon)*, so it is clear that we have to do with two different words<sup>1</sup>. Referring to English language we can mention *let*, which meant *prohibit*. Its origin is the Old English word *lett* and that were not anymore in use when the other old English word *lætan – 'lejo'* was changed into *let*.

Another semantic factor might be the case when two words that sound the same influence in each other sense for example : *Sap- limfa e bimes* if we take it away its structure get weakened. According to this meaning there was created the new homonymy meaning of it *hap nje llogore and minoj dicka nga themelet*. In Albanian language we can find as a homonym the word *ëndëz- 'pëlhure e merimanges'* (the spider web).

Words meaning can change as a result of syntax structure change. For example, *give pleasure to- I jep kënaqësi dikujt* is different from *derive pleasure from- marr kënaqësi nga diçka/dikush*.

## 2. Historical factors or cultural changes

Historical factors or cultural changes is the second factor. For example *car 'cart' " qerre"*, is used with the new meaning "*automobile*" in Albanian language; the word *brisk* derives from word *bri*, and this is why nowadays we also find *dele briske- dele me brirë*. This happens because years ago pocket razor were made by *horns*.

## 3. Social factors

Social factors are when the word changes its area of use. *Harvest- vjeshtë*, has a specific definition in agriculture: "*te korrurat*". In this case we have to do with the transition of one word from a broad area to a more specific area of use or vice versa. A similar example in Albanian is that of the word *fyell* which is a musical instrument but this word also has a more general meaning which is "*gyp, zgavër, si fyell n'mjalti*, meaning "huall, hoje mjalti". Cultural and social changes are unpredictable; they are related with the way how the language works and how it is transmitted from one generation to another one. For example, the word *bead- lutje* in English now is used with a new meaning: *top I vogël i rrumbullakët, sferë (sphere)*. This is influenced by the use of the expression *counting one's beads- thua j lujtet: ( during beads there were used an rozario and the number of units meant the number of prayers)*.

## 4. Psychological factors.

This is when we avoid the use of those tabu words. Thus, for example *crafty* meaning *skilled- I aftë, i zotë*, is often used as a euphemism of the word *dishonest- ipandershëm*, but the meaning comes from the inference and relates to this lexical unit : *e bukura për buklën (beauty), përdhesi për gjarpin ( snake) or reform - per pushimet nga puna ( firing from work)*

However, the psychological factors are not simple. Referring to the so repeated discussion on meaning category, not just as a linguistic but also as a cognitive one, we define semantic changes as a consequence of psychological processes. The

<sup>1</sup> Cabej, E. (1976), Studime Gjuhesore II, Rilindja, Prishtine, pg. 139

fundamental fact, that moves on psychological elements of semantic shift, is the necessity to speak the language. The language changes because people tend to express their thoughts correctly and much better. This explains the formation of some metaphors and idioms which pass through a personal use to a wide area of use, for example *make's one mouth water- me lëshon goja lëng; to hit the headlines- del në të gjitha lajmet; to sell one's soul- ja fal shpirtin djallit*, etc...

Referring to this fact, the differences between external factors and vital linguistic changes are connected with the idea that in some cases the semantic changes come as a consequence of changes in real objects which we refer to. Thus, for example, with the development of science it was also changed the concept people had about *electricity* and *atoms*.

According to internal linguistic factors, expect analogical linguistic changes (mutual semantic influence of words which are connected formally), we have intentionally and unintentionally changes, more spontaneous. Unintentional linguistic changes are more regular and they happen more gradually and collectively than those individual and immediate changes such as intentional changes. Those last ones happen as a result of an individual act trying to find a more expressive word that shows ideas and thoughts of the speaker better than a common word. Even though the distinction of these changes is not so evident, according to classifications of Carnoy and Stern<sup>1</sup>, the unintentional linguistic changes include also fundamental semantic change such as generality, semantic specialization and metonymy. Meanwhile, the intentional changes often have to do with semantic substitutions to achieve a special effect. We can mention hyperbole, euphemism, dis-euphemism and metaphors. However, the main factors of semantic changes are the differences between semasiological and onomasiological mechanisms. Semasiological elements are related with the creation of the new lexemes within the existing lexical unit. In contrast with this, the onomasiological elements or the 'lexicogenetic' include changes related just with a concept. Despite the fact that if it is early used or not, it is expressed with a new lexical unit. So, semasiological innovations complete the concepts with new words which are not part of the vocabulary of an language. Changes are really important, not just because they cause automatic semasiologic changes but also because they create an onomasiological necessity, a necessity to create a new lexical category or adjust it with the existing one<sup>2</sup>.

### III. The nature and the consequences of semantic changes

Within semantic shift we notice the creations of new meanings which conserve a relation with original meanings. Here, are included some semantic subdivisions such as semantic contraction, semantic expansion and semantic resolution. These changes in meaning which include denotative meaning are divided in analogical and not analogical changes, if the new meaning is created in analogy with the old one or not. Considering this we can classify four big groups:

#### 1. Semantic changes of denotative meaning

Semantic changes of denotative meaning, that aren't based on analogy, include metonymy, metaphor, the contractions and the expansions of the meaning. These semantic changes are the most important in all classification of semantic shift. The contractions and expansions, known respectively as the specialization and the generalization of meaning, are two types of semantic and lexical changes, where one of the new lexical unit develop a new meaning and this last one has a interdependence relationship (in meaning specialization) or superiority (meaning generalization) on the older sense. So, the contraction of sense means that the usage sphere of the new sense is a subdivision of the older usage sphere of the old meaning. While in the expansion of meaning, the new sphere includes the older one, too. There are some examples of meaning contraction in English, as: *Queen*- firstly used as "wife" but now it is more specific because it is just used for "the wife of the king", "sovrán woman" or in old English *deor- animal (kafshë)*, from this general meaning came the more specific one which is used as *deer- drieri*. Another example is that of the word *case* which means differently for a doctor (illness, patient), lawyer (padi, charge), linguist (rasa e emrit). *Gas- gaz* has also different meanings, for a chemist, for a housewife, a mechanic, a miner etc. Thus, we don't have to do with a contraction of the meaning or of the notion but the sphere of use get contracted.

<sup>1</sup> Albert Carnoy, 1927, *La science du mot* and Gustaf Stern, 1931, *Meaning and the Change of Meaning* te Dirk Geeraerts, 2010, *Theories of Lexical Semantics*, Oxford University Press, pg. 26

<sup>2</sup> Geeraerts, D. (2010), *Theories of Lexical Semantics*, oxford University Press, pg.41

Based on meaning expansion we have the example of word *moon*- firstly a satellite of the earth and later satellite of the planets. *Orarrive*- firstly a borrowed word from French meaning 'arrive in bank or river banks' but now its meaning is wider, just arrive. The same thing occurs in the word *tregoj*, which comes from a more specific sphere of use: "tregtoj me sende te vogla, hollesira" this word expanded its sense and now we use it as "dëftoj", in the same way, *kallëzoj* comes from agriculture sphere and nowadays it is used as "tregtoj, rrëfej, dëftej", and it also has a more specialized meaning in legal language: "kallëzim penal" or "kallëzoj nje krim" meaning "denounce". In all the cases we can have semantic components that are present in the new meanings or that can definitely lose from the semantic structure of the word.

Metonymy and metaphor are two other types of semantic shift. In the case of metonymy, the semantic match between two meanings of semantic unit is based on the cognation of phrase references. When we say *e piva të tërë shishen*, we mean that we drank what is inside the bottle. When we talk about a cognation relation, this concept includes all possible associations related with time, place or purpose cognation.

There are a lot of metonymic shifts in Albanian and English language. One of the factors is that the objects are quite complex and when we conjure an object, we don't always have in mind this features complexity or distinctive features, but just one or some of them. Consequently, we can mention different examples like: *the whole village/ I gjithë fshati doli në shesh*; *father of science/babai i shkencës*; *champagne-/shampanjë*; *ate three dishes/ hëngri tri pjata*; *the White House/Shtëpia e Bardhë*; *the Pentago-/ Pentagoni ect...*

On the other hand, metaphor analysis is based on a similarity relationship. Referring to metaphor, we have the transition of one object label as a label of another object, according to a common feature. Firstly, the label of the first object which is the same for the other object matches both of them closely. When we mention their label, we bring in memory both of them. When the images of these objects get separated and get away, the mentioning of one of them doesn't bring in our mind the next one<sup>1</sup>. Thus, we have the transition from a literature element into a lingual element. There is no other label for these two objects so it is created a new lingual meaning.

Even though the analysis of a similarity relationship, which may include similarity in function, form, material, colour or shift from the abstract to the concrete etc, may sound easy, it isn't. Consequently, we can say that metaphor include in itself a figurative similarity<sup>2</sup>. Metaphor is one of the most productive mechanisms in forming of new meanings in a language. For example, *warm/cold/sweet voice- zë i ngrohtë/ i ftohtë/ i ëmbël*; *long speech- fjalim i gjatë*; *short time- kohë e shkurtër*; *mouth of the river- gryka e lumit*; *head of household- koka e shtëpisë*; *teeth of a saw- dhëmbëzat e sharrës*; *leg of the table- këmba e tavolinës etc.* The order of these examples in English and Albanian was not unintentional. Through them we can argue that the facts of this linguistic mechanism existence are interlingua. Referring the fact that the meaning plays an important role through conceptual and lingual field, these concepts we just mentioned are universal and just their expressive material part in specific languages changes. Consequently, analyzing conceptual and semantic fields that linguistic phases share with each other, we can also talk about some tendencies of semantic nature of meaning development. Some of these tendencies are based on universal models of metaphors, for example, shifts from one sense perception to another one. The taste sense is used as a metaphor for emotions or for the semantic transposition from visual sense in the cognitive processes. Thus, we can find the semantic transposition below:

Hearing senses----sight sensesex. *Loud- high volume (me zë të lartë)--- having offensively bright*

*colours( ngjyra të ndezura që bien në sy për keq), a loud necktie; in aloud manner (sjellje e keqe)*

Touch senses---- taste sensesex. *sharp (e mprehtë)---- having an acrid taste (me shije të athët, i thartë), a sharp cheese (djathë i thartë)*

Taste sense--- emotionex. *Bitter, sweet memories- kujtime të hidhura, të embla*

Physical appearance ---- personalityex. *sharp, thick---- I mprehtë, i trashë*

Sight senses--- perceptual skillsex. *clear, see---- e qartë, shikoj*

<sup>1</sup> Thomaji, J. (2006), *Leksikologjia e Gjuhes Shqipe*, Botimet Toena, Tirane, pg. 94

<sup>2</sup> Geeraerts, D. (2010), *Theories of Lexical Semantics*, Oxford University Press, pg.28

Per nga vlera monetare dicka e lire-- negative connotationsex.to feel cheap--- (ndjehet i ulët, i turpëruar)

Skilled --- dishonestex.cunning as a fox--- dinak si dhëlpër

These shift tendencies can be concluded in three main categories according to their influence on speaker himself, so it may be defined as a high level of subjectivism.

**The first tendency** - meanings based on external situations--- meanings based on internal situations (evaluations/perceptions) of an individual; *prek- përjetoj, vlerë monetare- vlerësoj nje situatë*. This tendency includes many shifts from a concrete meaning --- in an abstract meaning.

**Second tendency** - meanings based on internal and external situations--- meanings based on actual text or meta linguistic situation. According to this tendency of semantic shift, we can explain the verb meaning ... *I promise, ... e deklaroj të hapur, shpall të pafajshëm*.

**Third tendency** - meanings always have the tendency to be based on state, thoughts and subjective attitude of the speaker for a certain statement. Here we have to do with a pragmatic function, where speakers express their attitudes for the text and for the selected strategy.

## 2. Semantic changes that are not part of denotative meaning

Semantic changes that are not part of denotative meaning can include every kind of change that is not related directly with the referent, because this semantic shift includes every change of emotional aspect of the meaning. Two main types of these changes usually include:

a) a semantic displacement to the most negative aspect of emotional meaning, so we have to do with a degradation of this negative meaning, ex. dumb- *silent, unable to speak* ( *nuk flet dot, memec*) now it is used with a new meaning *budalla, nuk ka gjykim të shëndoshe*, the word *artificial*- firstly was used for "punuar me dorë, ndërtuar me mjeshtëri", but in comparison with word *natural- naturale*, it gained a negative meaning, because everything natural was considered positive.

b) A meaning displacement to a positive aspect of the meaning, improvement of the meaningex. *knight*- it was used for *djalë (boy), shërbëtor* while now it is used for a honor title *kalorës (knight), pretty*- from *tinezar* now it has a new meaning, *simpatike*.

However, we should know that degradations and improvements of the semantic meanings are not always accompanied with denotative changes and the original meaning may be saved or not. For example, in English, word *boor*, used for *fermer, fshatar një njeri pa edukatë* is a denotative and emotional change in the same time.

Emotional nuances give to the word the ability of expressing speaker's opinions about what it is said and how he evaluates it. In these cases, we can notice a contrast between neutral words and those of emotional nuances; for example, *buf*- "shpend grabitqar i natës" despite of this meaning it is also has a negative emotional element in it, used for a person that is "i plogët, i trashë nga mendja, matuf, torollak, i përgjumur".

Starting from above analysis, the emotional element of a word (that is the new derivative meaning) changes from degradation and improvement mechanisms of meaning because there we have to do with a meaning displacement from a neutral denotative to a new meaning, positive or negative. In Albanian language we can mention *zot* or *zotëri* (sir); as a consequence of ideo-political attitudes, there was a negative connotation of its meaning; the explanation is: *perdoret per t'iu drejtuar ne menyre zyrtare a me nderim burrave qe jane shtetas te nje vendi josocialist e qe nuk jane komunist*<sup>1</sup>. This meaning can't be found in Fjalorin e Shqipes se Sotme 2002, after social and political changes in our country.

<sup>1</sup> Fjalor i Gjuhes se Sotme Shqipe 1980, fq. 2249

### 3. A word copies the semantic structure of another word

The group of analogical changes includes those semantic changes where one word copies the semantic structure of another word. We can mention borrowed words. An example of this is the Greek word *angelos*, that before it was just used for *mesazherit*, but later on, following this word structure in Hebraic, it took a new meaning (it is also used for *engjëll*)

In the same language, analogical changes based on semantic associations, can be obtained even when lexical field units widen their semantic structure, copying the other structure way of expansion for the same structure. (for example, expressions *para të zeza*, *tregu i zi*, formed an analogy for the other colours, too. For example, *ngjyra gri-* used for activities that are not totally legal and avoid existing rules)

### 4. A new concept equivalent with a lexical unit.

We should stress that semasiological changes are part of a more broadened category, such as onomasiological change. When a new concept has come, he should be present with a lexical unit.

Through most important lexicological- genetic mechanism we can firstly mention word-formation based on morphological rules which causes the formation of new words, for example *zbukuroj*, *nguros*, *shfletos*, *ecejake*, etc., Secondly, new words-formation by phonetics changes, for example, abbreviation *pro* for *professional*, or word creation for example *brunch-* as a formation of *breakfast* and *lunch*. Thirdly, new words can be borrowed from other languages. Fourthly, new words can be formed from the basis of the nature sounds, such as *sounds imitations: cicërij*, *gumëzhij*, *mjaullis*, *gëk-mëk*, etc, or different company names as Kodak. Fifthly, new expression can be semantic expansion of existing expressions.

However, we have to stress that all analyzed processes mentioned above can't be found separated in specific words; they can be combined within semantic changes of a single word. It is shown interest in the case of word *toilet-* whose original meaning has been "një coë rrobe për të mbështjellë robat, shami koke", and later we have e broaden meaning; this word was used for different types of clothes and mostly meaning "clothes sew", "qepja e rrobeve", it was used also for i, *e veshur mire*. In this meaning we have metonymy and euphemism for "tualet".

## IV. CONCLUSION

In this study, it is concluded that every single word has a general lexical meaning which itself is a linguistic category due to the concept which is a logical category. This general meaning is almost similar with the language function but again not equal with it. As it is closely related to different language functions, it is absolutely distinguishable as a linguistic unit from other main units of the language.

It is also concluded that not only the main units of language have meaning but also the other classes of semantic- word formation or are responsible for the changes of meaning. In the end, we have some specific meanings that distinguish the language units from each – other. If the words are distinguished from their general meaning, they will not be called word; and if they will be distinguished from their grammatical meaning or lexical – grammatical; at the same time they are distinguished also from their specific meaning that each single word contains and which makes them different from each – other.

The meaning shift are part of an onomasiologic process, no matter if they are intentionally or not. In both cases, these changes in meaning happen as a consequence of internal and external linguistic factors. In general, these changes have been classified based on a contrasting relation; widening and narrowing, metaphor – metonymy not allowing in this way another direction of meaning development.

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