

LINGUISTIC UNITS IN A PROCESS OF CONTINUOUS SEMANTIC CHANGE

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Limba și vocabularul sunt în permanentă schimbare datorită progresului societății umane în toate domeniile de activitate. În prezenta lucrare, se face o încercare de a analiza unele mijloace de modificare și schimbare semantică în cadrul structurilor semantice ale unităților lexicale în limba engleză.

Language as a social phenomenon is an integral part of culture and life of society. The vocabulary of the language is strongly influenced by extra-linguistic factors. Social linguistics deals with causal relations between the way the language works and develops and the facts of social life [1, p.39-51]. Akhmanova and Marchenco in their work "Основные направления социолингвистики" (The Main Trend in Sociolinguistics) consider that: "There are three main directions of sociolinguistic researches: 1) Sociolinguistics as a discipline, elaborated on various linguistic materials of languages, reflects such factors as social situation, social-class, age, speakers' educational qualification; 2) Sociolinguistics as a science of the "language existence"; 3) Sociolinguistics as a branch of linguistics, dealing with the establishment of the successive correlations between the microlinguistics phenomenon and the features of public life, within a given community" [2, p.39-51]. In the New Encyclopaedia Britannica we find: "Sociolinguistics is the study of the sociological aspects of language, and concerns itself with the language, which maintains the social roles in a community. Sociolinguistics attempts to single out those linguistic features that are used in particular situations and which mark various social relationships among the participants and the significant elements of the situation, influences on the choice of sounds, grammatical elements and vocabulary items and may include such factors as age, sex, education, occupation, race and peer-group identification, among others" [3]. Among the linguistic and extralinguistic means of semantic change we could mention: generalization, specialization, melioration, pejoration or deterioration, metaphorical usage, etc. Let's give some examples:

1. **Pejoration.** Change of a meliorative meaning into a pejorative one. Thus, the word 'silly' originally meant 'happy, blessed, punctual', then it changed to 'deserving pity, helpless' and now it means 'foolish, stupid, absurd, feeble, frail, weak, insignificant, trifling, feeble-minded, imbecile'. The verb *to silly* means: *stupefy, stun, fool about*. The OE *cnafa* (boy: cf. German Knabe) became in ME *knave* (sb. dishonest). It also developed the meaning of *boy-servant*. The synonyms of *knave* at present are *scoundrel, swindler, cheat, jack*. Some additional meanings have been registered: *слуга* (servant), *лакей* (footman, man-servant; lackey, flunkey), *прислужник* (servant; fawner, menial, servitor, underling) The Latin *villanus* (a farm servant) turned into *vilain/vilein* (a semi-independent serf) in the Middle English, then in the MnE *villain* acquired the meaning of *scoundrel* or *criminal*. Now it means *scoundrel, swindler, cheat, jack*.

2. **Amelioration.** Lexemes gradually change their pejorative meanings into meliorative ones. Thus, in the EB we find out that 'nice' goes back to Latin and French Latin: fr.L. 1.nescius – ignorant, fr. nescire – not to know; nescience – LL nescientia, fr.L nescient, nesciens, nescire – not to know; lack of knowledge, ignorance... (Cf. with the Romanian *neștire/necunoaștere*.) In ME 'nice' had the meanings of *foolish, wanton*. Now such meanings like *wanton, dissolute, coy, reticent, showing fastidious or finicky tastes, trivial* are considered to be obsolete. Some other meanings have been developed: exacting in requirements or standards); possessing, marked by, or demanding great or excessive precision and delicacy; pleasing, agreeable (a nice time, a nice person); well-executed (nice shot); appropriate, fitting; socially acceptable (well-bred); virtuous, respectable; polite, kind (that's nice of you to say that) syn. correct [4]. Thus, *nice* had meant "ignorant, foolish, stupid" then later it developed meanings like "loose, extravagant, elegant, rare, effeminate, sly, slender, delicate, unimportant," and starting with the 17-18 century there appeared in usage: *over-refined, precise, careful, intricate, difficult, fastidious, dainty appetizing, refined, cultured, agreeable, pleasant, discriminating, pleasing, agreeable, punctual, good, precise, exact, fine, appropriate, fitting, polite, kind, well-bred, virtuous, respectable, coy, reticent, elegant, refined, tasty, dainty, appetizing, keen, accurate, minute, subtle, slight, small, complex, detailed, attentive, close, particular, punctilious, scrupulous, fastidious, finicky, finical, accurate, sensitive wanton, dissolute, trivial* [5].

3. Narrowing of meaning (or specialization) [6, p.61]. The word "deer" (from *deor*, after *beast* being borrowed from French) has acquired a more specialized meaning than the meaning of "wild animal" that it used to have (cf. German Tier); and "meat," originally meant food in general and now denotes the flesh of an animal treated as food. Thus, *meat* originally referred to "any type of food", but came to mean "the flesh of animals as opposed to the flesh of fish". The original sense of *meat* is still found in terms like *mincemeat*, "chopped apples and spices used as a pie filling"; *sweetmeat*, "candy"; and *nutmeat*, "the edible portion of a nut".

4. Widening of meaning (also extension or generalization) [7, p.62] is the use of a word in a broader meaning semantic structure than it originally possessed, often referring to all items in a class, rather than one specific item [8, p.62]. For instance: *place* (derives from Latin *platea*) "broad street", *the street*, to include "a particular city", "a business office", "an area dedicated to a specific purpose", before broadening even wider to mean "area". A diachronic analysis of the semantic structure of a lexeme demonstrates the fact that, as a rule, it is expanding, constantly developing, growing and changing depending on the tempo of development of the speaking community. The general or central meaning of the lexeme is related to a considerable number of specialized or contextual denotations.

Let's take the lexeme **crack** (having a sound imitation origin) with the initial meaning of the *cracking sound* being preserved. A complex semantic structure with a multitude of sub-meanings has developed, far from being onomatopoeic. Still, in many cases the presence of the sound can still be attested: *There was heard so loud a crack, as if heaven had split asunder. The crack of doom*, (in this case a loud sound is usually followed by an impressing lightning cracking the sky). *The ice cracked as I was walking across the river* (breaking without dividing into separate parts and producing a cracking sound). *He cracked a nut* (to break open or into pieces with a simultaneous specific sound). *You hit him an awful crack! He was cracked on the head with a stick* (he was **hit** and, in the case of a powerful **blow**, there may appear a fissure or a splitting). *I mean to carry you off for a crack at the rabbits* (hunting, shooting – the sound of a rifle). *After the earthquake there were many crack in the walls and even on the roads* (a breaking or splitting – no sound is present, here with the exception of the moment of the quake, when some sounds may be produced). *He spoke in a voice cracking with emotions* (the voice changes in depth, volume, tone, range, etc.). There are many cases when *crack* is used in a figurative or metaphorical meaning: *the crack of dawn* (very early in the morning), *the crack of day*, *The cracks (faults) in the government's economic policy are already beginning to show. Many of them were cracking under the difficult working conditions. Many businesses are cracking because of unfair competition* (no longer able to function normally). *They had questioned him for a long time before he cracked* (tell some secrets, or information). *They worked hard at the project and managed to crack all the problems* (find solution). *They managed to crack all the codes* (decodify). *Scientist managed to create a vaccine in order to crack the bird flu* (to stop the pandemic). *At the birthday party they cracked a bottle of wine and they also cracked some jokes* (open the bottle, drink the wine and tell jokes). *She hopes to have another crack at the world record this year* (attempt). *He's a person who enjoys a drink and a bit of crack* (conversation). In an unabridged dictionary you could find hundreds of meanings, which have drifted far away from the original cracking sound. More than 130 technical terminological units contain the unit "crack" mainly in the meaning of splitting, breaking, narrow space opening. Examples of synonyms of crack: *breach, chink, cleft, crevice, fissure, fracture*. *Crack* may be used in the meaning of: *flaw, deficiency, failing, unsoundness, cracking voice, attempt; drug, cocaine, boaster, liar, braggart, firecracker, crusher, nutcracker, narrow space or opening, a sudden loud noise, a sharp blow that can be heard, expert and highly trained; accurate and excellent at sth* etc. [9] **Crack** is regularly used in idiomatic expressions or phraseological units used both in informal and formal speech: **get cracking** (informal speech) - to begin immediately and work quickly; **to be cracked up** - to be not as good as people say; **crack down (on sb/sth)** - to try harder to prevent an illegal activity, severely with people who are caught doing it; **crack on (with sth)** to work hard at sth to finish, pass or continue quickly; **crack up** - to become ill, either physically or mentally, because of pressure; to start laughing a lot; **crack sb up** - to make sb laugh a lot (crack troops, to be a crack shot).

Compound words like *crackajack* (syn. *remarkable, outstanding*) are used in colloquial speech in a meaning quite distant from the central one. Conversion is also actively used: **Crackdown** (actions to restrict sb's activities) may be used as a verb **to crackdown** (to take measures to restrict sb's activities). Derivation: **cracker** – biscuit; in the word combination it has the meaning of petard (Christmas cracker). Technical terms: clam cracker, mussel crackers, - air-lift catalytic cracker - cat cracker - kitten cracker, airlift catalytic cracker - boulder cracker - cat cracker - kitten cracker - rope cracker.

5. Semantic change of words can also lead to their **metaphoric use**. A *metaphor* is a transfer of name based on the association of similarity and thus is actually a hidden comparison. It presents a method of description that likens one thing to another by referring to it as if it were some other one [10, p.133-136]. A cunning person for instance is referred to as a *fox*. A woman may be called a *peach*, a *lemon*, a *cat*, a *goose*, a *bitch*, a *lioness*, etc. The *poetic metaphor* is the fruit of the author's creative imagination, as for example when Shakespeare (in King Richard II) calls England *this precious stone set in the river sea*. Metaphors, may be based upon very different types of similarity, for instance, the similarity of shape: *head of cabbage*, *the teeth of a saw*. This similarity of shape may be supported by a similarity of function. The transferred meaning is easily recognized from the context: *The head of the school*, *the key to a mystery*. The similarity may be supported by position: *foot of a page*, *foot of a mountain*, or behavior and function: *bookworm*, *wirepuller*. The word *whip* "a lash used to urge horses on" is metaphorically transferred to an official in the British Parliament appointed by a political party to see that members are present to debates, especially when a vote is taken, to check the voting and also to advise the members on the policy of the respective party.

6. Metonymic use of words. *Metonymy* is a figure of speech where one word is substituted for a related word; the relationship might be that of cause and effect, container and contained, part and whole [11, p.137-140]. Thus, a figure of speech which designates something by the name of something associated with it: the *Crown* substituting for monarchy, the *stage* for the theatre, the *bottle* for alcoholic drink, *No. 10 Downing Street* for the British Prime Minister, the *White House* for the US President or the Government of the USA. Sometimes word will shift so far from its original meaning that its meaning will nearly reverse. Thus, the word *manufacture* originally meant "to make by hand", a *bureau* was once a (camel wool) *woolen covering* used to cover a desk, then it meant *the desk itself and then the office that used the desks*.

7. Back-Formation – change of both meaning and form. The creation of one word from another by removing rather than adding an element: [12, p.77] *laze* from *lazy*, *lase* from *LASER*, *to beg* from *beggar*.

8. Eponyms – names formed from personal names: *mackintosh*, *to boycott*, *America*, etc.

9. Euphemism – speaking well of something or someone, the use of a mild, comforting, or evasive expression that takes the place of one that is taboo, negative, offensive, [13, p.164]: *to join the great majority* – *to die*, *is gone* – *dead*: *you are misinformed* – *you are lying*, *disadvantaged people* – *poor people*.

10. Radiation -: a multiplication in the senses of a lexical unit, within one language or across a number of languages. For example, The word "*starve*" once meant "to die" (cf. Old English *steorfan*, German *sterben* (to die), (ME. *sterven* of hunger)', in most dialects of English, now it has a more restricted meaning "*to die of hunger*" though in the north of England "*He was starving*" can also mean "*He was very cold*" (i.e., "dying" of cold, rather than hunger). If we analyze the semantic structure of the verb *sterben* in German we discover that its direct meaning in most of the combinations is "to die": *умира́ть; сконча́ться; jung sterben* – *to die young*; *eines natürlichen Todes sterben* – *to die of natural death*; *an einer Krankheit sterben* – *to die of a disease*; *aus Gram sterben* – *to die of sorrow*; *durch Hand sterben* – *killed by sb.*; *er ist in Ausübung seines Berufs gestorben* – *he died in discharge of duty*; *über der Arbeit sterben* – *he died at his work*; *wir sind vor Lange(r)weile fast gestorben* – *we were bored to death*; ***Hungers [vor Hunger] sterben* – die of hunger**; *er stirbt nicht an Herzdrücken* – *he is not afraid of telling the truth*; *für seine Heimat sterben* – *to die for his Motherland*; *für sein Volk sterben* – *to die for one's people*; *für eine Idee sterben* – *to die for an idea*; *er war bereit, für seine Heimat zu sterben* – *he was ready to die for his Motherland*; *als sie zurückkamen, waren sie müde und starben vor Hunger* – ***when they were coming back, they were tired and they were dying of hunger***; *er stirbt vor Durst, gib ihm zu trinken* – *he is dying of thirst, give him to drink*; *sie wollte vor Angst fast sterben* – *she nearly died of fear*. As we see from the examples given above in the most cases *sterben* corresponds to the English *die* in its direct meaning. *Die of hunger* is in its direct meaning (*Hungers [vor Hunger] sterben* – *die of hunger*) and in the second case the meaning is completely changed and it is used to intensify the fact of *being very hungry*. The same intensification is observed in the examples *dying of thirst*, *dying of fear*. In both languages we can observe a gradual change of meaning from the initial one.

Let's compare the words in Russian and Romanian going back to the same source: in Romanian – *stârv* – *hoit, mortăciune* (corpse); in Russian: *стервенеть* – *a turba de furie/mânie, a-și ieși din fire* (to get extremely furious, etc.): *стерва* – *stârv/târfă*, *ticălos, nemernic, târfă* (damned wretch, stinker, shit); *стервец* – *ticălos, nemernic*; *стервоза* – *ticăloasă, nemernică*: *стервятинa* – *hoit* (corpse); *стервятник* – *hoitar* (zool. Egyptian vulture; carrion-crow), *авиоane de bombardament* – *bombers* (*стервятники бомбили...*); *остервенелый* – *înverșunat, furios, остервенеть* – *a se înverșuna, a deveni furios, остервенение* – *înverșunare, furie, с остервенением* – *cu înverșunare, cu furie*. In Romanian and Russian the etymological equiva-

lent is not so restricted. Here you can find verbs, nouns adjectives and even adverbs (especially in Russian) going back to the same origin as *sterben*, like in the word combinations: *a sterge* de pe fața pământului – *стереть* с лица земли, translated as *to raze to the ground, to wipe smb. off the face of the earth*. *Стереть* кого-л. в порошок – *to grind smb. into dust, to grind smb. down, to make mincemeat of smb* [14]. Lat. extergere. "A *știrbi*, a *strivi*(sl. *sutryvati*)" Here we conclude that the multitude of various equivalents in the three languages go back to a common source unit in the Indo-European Language. [15]

11. Subreption - a process of semantic change in which a shift in a word's reference takes it away from its strict etymological and structural meaning: for example, the use of September and October, November, December (in Latin correspondingly the seventh, the eighth, the ninth, the tenth months of the year).

12. Change from Abstract to Concrete and Vice-Versa: *to crack nuts – the crack of the dawn, the gate of the house – stargate*. All the different meanings of a given lexical unit is usually decoded by means of macro- and micro-contexts. Lexical units in different variants of the same language, dialects, or of the same origin in different languages, both related and unrelated, usually develop different meanings, sometimes even antonymous denotations. Thus, the following words have different meanings in the American and British variants: corn (maize-wheat), subway (underground – pedestrian underpass), pavement (roadway - sidewalk). Examples of complete change of the denotation could be found in Romanian as well: *obraznic* (*impudent, insolent, impertinent, barefaced; cheeky*) is of Slavonic origin, coming from "образный", which had the meaning of "beautiful". The same in the case of the Romanian word "vrednic" with the meaning of "worth-while, worthy, diligent", while the Russian *вредный* means "mischievous, noxious, malefic, maleficent".

13. Loss of semantic link with the initial meaning. The initial sense of the word may become larger or narrower and/or sometimes can be forever forgotten. In the process of the semantic change the word changes its sense in order to express another meaning. Actually there appears a new word which loses the link with the old lexeme. At the beginning of the 12th century, the word *bureau* (mentioned above), in French meant "a material from camel's hair" (bure - camel). After that *bureau* denoted a table covered with the same material. In the 16th century the word meant a group of people who were sitting at the round-table even the table was not covered with the same material. Penetrating in other languages including Romanian "*birou*" took another meaning denoting "the whole room" - "*birou de dactilografiat* or even an institution - "*birou de presă*". In Romanian the noun "*birou*" has the same semantic values: masa de scris, camera de lucru, organ executiv al unei organizatii. Another example: the verb "*a darima*" which means "*a da jos, a doborî la pământ (un zid, o clădire)*". For instance in Creanga's "Amintiri": "*izbind cu picioarele în sobă, o și dărâma la pamânt*". Originally, the verb *a dărâma* came from Latin *de-ramare* (*deramare - succidere "a cădea la pământ"*). The noun *ramus* means "*ramură, frunziș*", in Latin, *tempora ramis cingere - "a incinge fruntea cu frunziș"*. At the beginning the verb "*a dărâma*" did not have the present meaning (*a doborî la pământ*), but (*a tăia ramura copacului*). We can see the meaning of this word in Gr. Ureche's work concerning the drought of 1588 where he wrote: "*dobitoacele neavând ce paște, le-au fost daramate frunze*". In the present article we have analyzed a number of means of semantic change of lexical units in English, with occasional examples taken from other languages in order to prove the fact that the general linguistic phenomenon of semantic change is common not only to English, but it is a general linguistic phenomenon common to most languages.

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