



Semantic Shifts

Fréjus - Destremau
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Semantic Shifts: From lexicon to grammar. Diachronic and typological perspectives

Semantic Course 1

Body part terms in lexicon and grammar

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One of the central topics in lexical typology is the cross-linguistic variation in the categorization of body parts: while all languages have a way of referring to parts of human body, the meaning of specific body part terms varies widely across languages. Analysis of discourse data reveals that speakers of different languages also vary in how often they refer to body parts and in what contexts. At the grammatical level, body part terms are associated with a range of characteristic morphosyntactic phenomena, including peculiar patterns of number marking, special possessive constructions and patterns of incorporation. Finally, across languages expressions with body parts are involved in similar kinds of semantic shift, manifested in polysemy patterns and in diachronic change. For instance, while body part terms often appear in conventionalised descriptions of emotions, mental states and personal traits, languages differ significantly in which body parts can be seats for which emotions and mental states. They are often the source of spatial relators, numerals, reflexive pronouns, possessive markers, classifiers, and aspectual markers.

All these properties make body part terms particularly well-fitted for illustrating major current approaches to lexical typology with a special focus on semantic shifts. In this course we will discuss special lexical and grammatical properties of expressions involving body part terms, and the way these properties are reflected in synchronic usage and diachronic change. Among the issues we will focus on are:

- cross-linguistic differences in categorization within the body part domain,
- special morphosyntactic properties of body part terms,
- asymmetries in the grammatical behavior of different body part terms,
- semantic shifts and polysemy patterns involving body part terms,
- grammaticalization processes involving expressions with body part terms.

To illustrate the diversity of methodological approaches to lexical semantics, we will discuss studies based on typological surveys, etymological data, experiments, elicitation, analysis of corpus data. Students will be given short assignments encouraging them to collect and analyze their own data.