



Semantic Shifts

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

Plenary Talk 2

Minor lexical categories as sources and targets of semantic change

Ekkehard Koenig (FU Berlin & University of Freiburg)

The first studies on semantics (e.g. Paul, ⁴1920, 1980; Bréal, 1897) were exclusively concerned with etymology and semantic change. It was not until a few decades later that the distinction between diachronic semantics and synchronic semantics became established, even if historical perspectives were still dominant (cf. Ullmann, ³1967). While the synchronic studies on meaning were largely formulated in terms of lexical fields (cf. Trier, 1931) and structural relations (cf. Lyons, 1963), the semantic changes observable for members of major lexical categories (N, V, Adj, Adv) were essentially couched in terms of types of change going from a basic meaning into opposite directions: narrowing vs. widening, amelioration vs. pejoration, accretion vs. loss of meaning, etc., under almost complete neglect of analyzing sources and targets of change in more precise terms.

My talk takes this neglect of semantic analysis and the frequent simplicity in describing change as a starting point. Taking one example from the domain of temporal prepositions as objects of analysis, the first part of the talk examines the potential of different approaches to semantic analysis (structural semantics, formal semantics, cognitive semantics, de-composition) for a characterization of semantic change. This is followed by an attempt to characterize types and results of semantic changes with the help of improved synchronic analyses.

The third part of the paper returns to and further elaborates topics discussed by the speaker and Elizabeth Traugott (1988; 1991) a long time ago, viz. semantic changes starting out from temporal prepositions of anteriority, simultaneity, as well as posteriority and the incorporation of aspects of the typical contexts of use into their conventional meaning. More specifically, it will be shown that markers of anteriority typically acquire the meaning of 'preference' (Fr. *plutôt*, Engl. *sooner than*), that markers of posteriority may develop into causal connectives (e.g. Fr. *puisque*, Engl. *since*) and that markers of simultaneity typically develop into markers of concessivity (Fr. *cependant*, Engl. *while*), thus illustrating general paths of semantic change leading from 'space' via 'time' to 'rhetorical (adverbial) relations'. The changes mentioned are very wide-spread ones and thus fit the typological perspectives of the summer school. A detailed characterization of different dimensions (content vs. metalinguistic) of those changes and a brief discussion of regularity and generality of semantic changes conclude the paper.

References

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