Chapter 35. Semantic change

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35.1 Preliminaries

This chapter discusses how linguistic expressions may change their meaning over time. Actually the scope is a bit more limited than that, in the sense that here we will only see examples of how words — e.g. *silly, very* — change their meaning.

The term 'linguistic expressions' includes words, but also larger grammatical constructions. Grammatical constructions — e.g. what in present-day English (PDE) are the *BE going to* + infinitive and *WILL* + infinitive future tense constructions, as in *It's going to/will rain tomorrow* — may also change their meaning. Indeed, these two future tense constructions started out with the verbs *GO* and *WILL* used in their primitive sense. In the case of *GO* this was the motion meaning, which it still often has in PDE. The old sense of *WILL* has almost completely disappeared: it used to mean something like 'want, desire'. One may wonder why the developments that gave rise to these two future tense constructions are seen as semantic changes in constructions, as opposed to meaning changes in the single words *go* and *will*. To see that what is involved is actually a change in grammatical construction, consider that originally both these verbs would not be combined with infinitives, see *I am going to London, I will* ('want') *more silver*). Over time, it became possible to combine them with infinitives. Now in order to account for these grammatical facts it is not sufficient to think of the changes as having affected only the verbs *go* and *will*. (Another reason why we treat these developments as examples of grammatical change is that many linguists consider future tense marking as part of the grammar of a language.) The exact way in which both of these constructions developed into future tense constructions will be discussed in chapter 36, on grammatical change. In other words, while here we are concerned with **lexical semantic change**, one of the topics of the next chapter will be **grammatical semantic change**.

The fact that we discuss these two levels of change in different chapters should not be taken to mean that the causes and mechanisms involved are completely different: there is actually a lot of overlap. We will see, for instance, that the development of *very* (from an adjective meaning 'true' to the intensifying meaning it carries today) and the trajectory that led to (especially certain uses of) *WILL* + infinitive both involve a mechanism called **subjectification** — which will be explained in detail in section 4, below.

The overlap in this case goes even further: just as a lot linguists consider future tense marking to be part of the grammar of a language, so too would many see intensifiers as grammatical items. This means that the development of *very* could have legitimately ended up in the chapter on grammatical change as well (as an example of **grammaticalisation**, see section 4, below, and particularly section 3 of chapter 36). For these reasons, readers may find it useful to treat this chapter and the subsequent one on grammatical change as companions, and to study them together. Indeed, many linguists nowadays argue that it is impossible to say where the lexicon ends, and syntax begins.

35.2 Semantic change and semantic theory

Studying semantic change presupposes a more general understanding of semantics. In order to grasp what it means for a meaning to change, we need to know what meanings are in the first place. What do we mean when we say that a word (or larger construction) means something? Chapter 10 on semantics contains an elaborate discussion of this and related issues.

For our purposes, we may divide the history of the study of semantics in linguistics, as well as in cognate disciplines such as philosophy and psychology, into roughly two stages. Traditionally, linguistic expressions have been said to be meaningful because they are connected to aspects of the real world **in some objective way**. That is to say, the connections in question are either there, or they are not. Let us consider a simple example. If we describe the differences in meaning between the words *man, woman, boy* and *girl* in terms of the properties [+/- male] and [+/- adult], we can take a human being, and use those properties (often called **semantic components**) to decide objectively whether to refer to them as a *man, woman, boy* or *girl*. This is the basis of the so-called **objectivist** or **truth-conditional** theory of semantics (see e.g. Cann 1993) (see also chapter 11, section 3).

Among a multitude of other problems, one of the things that critics of the objectivist view of linguistic meaning have pointed out is that it would fail to explain how we are able to produce and ⸺ quite literally ⸺ **make sense of** examples such as the following:

(1) I agree that maybe Robben is a girl... More suited to ballet than football... (http://www.theflyingshuttle.com/weyosc.html, accessed 25 November 2007)

Football fans will easily recognise the problem that is posed by this (real!) example, but the reader who is less knowledgeable in this area should know that Robben is a male*,* adult football player. We see here that the two semantic components identified above clash with the word used to describe him, i.e. *girl*. What this example shows is that assigning meanings to words may be a much more subjective process than the traditional view suggests. Opponents of traditional, objectivist semantics add that creative examples such as sentence (1) are in no way exceptional but actually extremely common in our everyday use of language. Therefore, we need a theory of meaning that is able to accommodate this kind of subjectivity and flexibility.

Taking their cue from some pioneering research in the 1970s, by cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch and her colleagues (e.g. Rosch 1973, 1978; Rosch et al. 1976), critics of the objectivist approach look to **prototype-theoretical semantics** as the solution to problems caused by examples such as (1) (and many other issues, see

chapter 6, section 7, for an introduction to this theory and application to grammatical word-class, as well as chapter 10, section 3.1 on semantics; also, see for example Croft and Cruse 2004: chapter 4 or Taylor 2003). Very briefly, the prototype-based alternative takes as its starting point the realisation that, for almost every aspect of the real world, it is impossible to devise adequate definitions in terms of a delimited list of semantic components. Instead, we have some idea of what a 'perfect' category member is or would be like (the **prototype**)[1]. On the basis of how similar some other person or object (or whatever) is to that prototype, we may consider them to be anything from a very good member of the category, via a not-so-good member or a marginal member, to not being a member at all.

With reference to the words *man, woman, boy* and *girl* the idea is that we all have some image of a prototypical man, a prototypical woman, and so on. Each time we encounter a putative member of any of these categories, we judge how much they resemble this prototype; the closer the resemblance, the more likely we are to assign them to the category in question, and therefore label them with the corresponding word. Moreover, again based on important research from the 1970s (e.g. Labov 1973), followers of prototype semantics argue that category boundaries may shift depending on the (linguistic/situational) context.

We are now in a position to understand how we make sense of example (1): in the context of football players our category of girls may shift its boundaries a bit, so that it may include adult males if, perhaps, they move in a certain way and so on.

Given the failure of the objectivist approach to semantics to account for examples such as (1), compared to the apparent success of the prototype-based view, it should not be surprising that most historical semanticists favour using the latter over the former (see the Illustration box in section 3, below, and also e.g. Geeraerts 1997 or Györi 2002 for elaborate scholarly discussions and many concrete examples).

35.3 Semantic change: traditional classifications

Semantic change has traditionally been looked at from a variety of angles. Before we discuss the various classifications of **meaning change** corresponding to these angles, it is important to realise two things:

1. The traditional classifications cannot be applied to all changes.
2. The classifications are not mutually exclusive: sometimes we can apply two or even more labels to a single change, depending on which aspect of the change we choose to use as the basis of our classification.

Some of the examples given below will illustrate the second point. Later, we will also see that some examples of meaning changes are not easily accommodated by the traditional types — we have already mentioned one such example: the development of *very* from an adjective meaning 'true/real' into an intensifier. We come back to this in section 4.

The first traditional typology of semantic changes is the division into changes whose result is a more positive meaning — so-called **melioration** — and those which give a more negative meaning — known as **pejoration**. A recent case of melioration in British English is illustrated in the following two lines taken from *Fit but you know it*, a song by The Streets:

(2)   I didn't wanna bowl over all geezer and *rude*,
        Not rude as in good but just rude like uncouth

These lines illustrate that the word *rude*, whose original meaning of 'unmannered' (or indeed 'uncouth') is obviously rather negative, can nowadays be used in a more positive sense. Discussions with my undergraduate students at Lancaster University suggest that the exact meaning is something like 'physically attractive (often in a slightly vulgar way)'. It actually seems to be applied especially to females, as in *She's rude* or — using the currently fashionable intensifier *well* — *She's well rude*.

In order to understand the development of this more positive meaning, we may need to look to the dancehall and hiphop subcultures. In 1960s Jamaican English, expressions such as *rude boy* or *rude girl* were used to refer to 'cool' members of the dancehall scene. From there it may have spread (due to migration and the popular media) to the U.K.. The sexual connotations of the new use of the word may be related to the fact that, in Jamaican English, *rudeness* was used to mean 'sexual intercourse'. (For some of these points see for instance the interesting discussion at http://www.knkmusic.net/2006/07/rude-boy-mix_20.html [accessed 6 February 2008].) As an example of pejoration, consider that English *sinister* was derived from Latin, where the word did not carry any negative meaning but simply meant 'left'. (It may well be relevant, though, that most of you would refer to your left hand as your 'bad hand'.)

The second traditional classification of changes in meaning is in terms of whether it becomes broader or narrower. *Dog* used to refer not to any old dog, but to some specific large and strong breeds. It is interesting in this connection to compare English to Dutch, where this is still the case: to a Dutchman the word *dog* summons up an image of a Great Dane or perhaps the kind of dog featured in the film Turner and Hooch (Dogue de Bordeaux); to talk about dogs in general he would use the word *hond*. (The English cognate *hound* has gone in the opposite direction: it now describes some particular breeds used in hunting.) The development the English word *dog* has undergone is known as **generalisation**, **widening** or **broadening**. (As is so often the case in linguistics and other sciences, several different terms are around for what is essentially the same thing.) The opposite of generalisation is **specialisation** (also known as **narrowing**). In Middle English any young person could be called a *girl*; the restriction to female young persons is a development that occurred in the early Modern period.

The third dimension on which certain semantic changes may be classified is whether they result from **metaphor** or **metonymy**. In metaphorical meaning changes, speakers perceive some sort of similarity between one concept (the source concept S) and another concept (the target concept T), and press the word for S into service to talk about T. The famous TV-chef Gordon Ramsay regularly calls participants in his cooking contests *doughnuts* if they fail to perform well. This is clearly not intended literally but figuratively. The basis of this metaphor is some sort of similarity between doughnuts and the contestants in question, probably including the fact that they are not very sophisticated or do not display any intelligence. This example demonstrates two characteristics of metaphor. First, the comparison between the source (here: doughnuts) and target (here: the contestants) is only partial: Ramsay is not implying, for instance, that the contestant could be filled with jam then eaten. Second, the source is more 'concrete' than the target. To see that this is the case, consider that all of us can easily point to doughnuts. Sub-par contestants, on the other hand (or people

who display a lack of some skill more generally), are much harder to identify objectively.

Metonymy, like metaphor, involves some sort of connection between concepts, but in this case there is no similarity between them, but they are closely linked in some other way, for example because one is part of, or contains, the other. If we ask someone if they watched *Gordon Ramsay* last night, we actually want to know whether they watched the TV-show that the cook was in. This type of metonymy is sometimes known as **pars pro toto** ('part for whole'). Another example of this would be where we use the phrase *Number 10* to refer to the British Prime Minister (and possibly his government), who lives at 10, Downing Street.

The development of the word *rude*, which we described above, could also be seen as a case of pars pro toto. A rude person used to refer to someone who was bad-mannered or vulgar. By applying the term to persons whose vulgarity is part of their attractiveness, young speakers of British English are using it metonymically. This example, then, shows that semantic changes may sometimes be of more than just one type: in this case melioration and metonymy, specifically pars pro toto.

The reverse, so-called **totum pro parte** ('whole for part') is also possible. When I discuss the expansion plans of *Lancaster University* I do not mean that, for example, the students have taken part in devising this policy: only a relatively small number of university administrators have done that. Likewise, by saying that *Liverpool* should attract José Mourinho as its trainer, one does not refer to the city as a whole, or even the whole Liverpool Football Club, but only the part of that is made up by the people in charge of the club.

Illustration box 1: Another use of the term metonymy

The introductory section to this chapter mentioned that the word *silly* has changed its meaning. This case of semantic change is rather remarkable, having gone from something like 'blissful' or 'blessed' all the way to 'foolish'. The contrast between these two meanings is so pronounced that it is clear that there must have been some intermediate stages.

Using the *Oxford English Dictionary* or any other dictionary that contains etymological information we may piece together the various steps. Our earliest recorded examples of the word occur around 1200, and in the first 100 years or so the meaning was quite clearly 'blissful' or 'blessed'. The following example (taken from the *OED*) illustrates this: *A Jhesu, blyssede [es] þat abbaye and **cely** es þat religione* (*Abbey of Holy Ghost* in *Hampole's Wks.*) 'Oh Jesus, blessed is that abbey and silly [i.e. blessed] is that religion'. (This example is actually from the first half of the fourteenth century but is convenient as it does not require a lot of context to make the meaning of the word *silly* clear.)

The next stage is the rise, towards the end of the thirteenth century, of the meaning 'innocent' or 'harmless'. Consider for instance: *'Alas', he seide, 'þis seli best: þat no-þing ne doth a-mis!'* (*S. Eng. Leg.*) '"Alas", he said, "this silly [i.e. harmless] animal, that does not do anything amiss!"'. The following step is the development, soon thereafter, of the meaning 'deserving of pity or sympathy', as in *Sely Scotland, that of helpe has gret neide* (Henry, *Wallace* ii) 'Silly [i.e. pitiable] Scotland, which is in great need of help'.

The next meaning is 'weak/feeble', first in relation to physical strength or fitness (e.g. *Here we see that a smal sillie Bird knoweth how to match with so great a Beast* (J. Maplet, *Gr. Forest*)), then also of intellectual capacities, i.e. 'ignorant' (e.g. *The silly herdman all astonnied stands* (Surrey, *Æneid* ii)).

Finally, in the sixteenth century we arrive at the meaning of 'foolish', as in *In pride wee speake it, or at least inwardlie thinke it, wee are not as those seely Idiotes are* (Babington, *Commandm.*).

Having worked out the different stages of this development we are now in a much better position to understand how the word *silly* could have developed from 'blessed' or 'blissful', which were very positive (especially in the Middle Ages), into something as negative as its present-day meaning of 'foolish'. The key is to realise that while the development as a whole is very drastic, the individual steps are not. Thus, 'blissful/blessed' is not that far removed from 'innocent/harmless'. More precisely, blissful or blessed people and things are often also innocent and harmless, and (again particularly in a medieval mindset) vice versa. As there was thus some overlap between the categories of blessed/blissful people and things and innocent/harmless people and things, speakers may have re-interpreted utterances about, for example, a blessed religion as statements about a harmless religion. The same re-interpretation may have driven the next step: innocent/harmless people/things often deserve our pity/sympathy. Moving on, we can say that if people/things are deserving of our pity/sympathy this will often be because they are too weak to stand up or maintain themselves, either physically or through the use of their intellectual abilities. And people who are ignorant may of course display behaviour that others consider foolish.

What we have here, then, is a chain of semantic developments where a word starts out by referring to one category of things, then moves on to an adjacent, partly overlapping, category, then to another, and so on, as in Figure 35.1, below. Note,

incidentally, that in terms of the semantic theories discussed in section 2 of this chapter (and also in chapter 10 on semantics) the prototype-based approach does, but the objectivist theory does not, offer the kind of flexibility we would need to account for this gradual change.
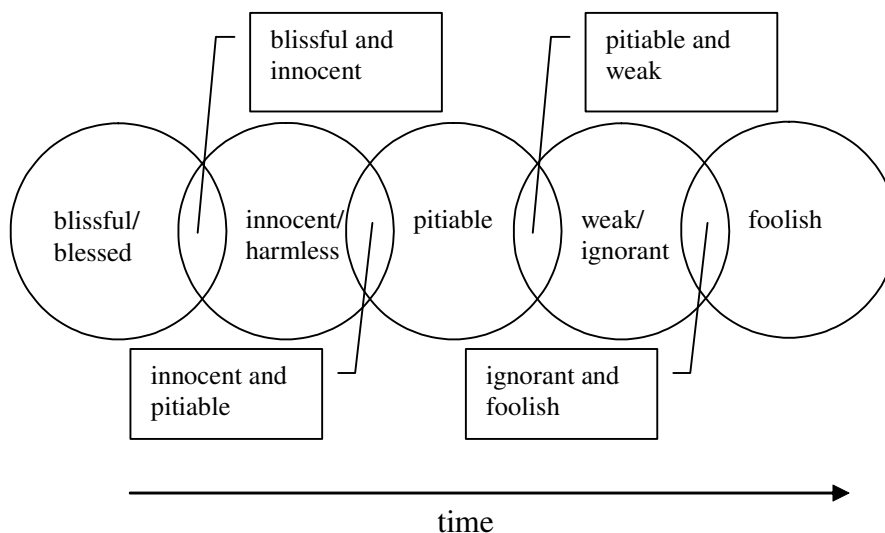

FIGURE 35.1 METONYMIC SHIFTS UNDERGONE BY *SILLY*

This kind of development is also known as metonymy, though it is clearly not the same as *pars pro toto* or *totum pro parte*. It would of course be useful if we had a separate term for it, but we do not, unless we said that this third type of metonymy is 'metonymy in the narrow sense', metonymy in the broader sense being the label that subsumes all three subtypes.

The fourth way in which semantic changes have traditionally been classified depends on whether they are driven by factors within the language itself, or by language-external factors. The main language-internal factor that is relevant to meaning changes is other changes in the lexicon, and in the meanings of lexical items. Consider the word *gay*, a classic example. Until a number of decades ago, this was commonly used to mean 'cheerful'. Nowadays, however, the term *gay* conjures up a homosexual person; the older meaning has virtually disappeared.

There are many cases where older meanings happily coexist with newer ones. While the word *screen*, for example, nowadays often means 'television or computer screen' its older meaning of a large wooden panel, used to shield off for example one part of a room from the rest, has by no means disappeared. In order to understand what has happened to the word *gay* we must realise that its new meaning is a socially loaded concept, and speakers will thus be inclined to try and avoid confusion between the new meaning and 'cheerful'.

This example, then, shows that a distinction between language-internal and language-external factors in semantic change is often hard to draw. Language external factors are broadly cultural-social. The development of the word *screen*, sketched above, is a suitable example: with the development in our society of television and computer technology we needed a new term to refer to that part of the technologies

that we now call screens. Above, we saw that the semantic change undergone by *rude* is melioration and metonymy (*pars pro toto*) at the same time. We may wish to add that it is partly caused by social-cultural factors. Proper social-cultural history is best left to social and cultural historians, but on the basis of, for example, women in classical paintings from masters such as Rembrandt or Rubens, or in the work by the pre-Raphaelite Rossetti, it seems clear that our ideas of beauty and attractiveness have not always been the same as they are today. It is tempting to speculate that to many, an element of vulgarity is becoming a more acceptable and desirable part of attractiveness. To the extent that this is correct, it would help us understand why *rude* has developed an alternative meaning of 'attractive'.

Yet many other semantic changes that are related to social factors can be found in taboo areas. It is easy enough to think of examples of euphemistic expressions that came to be used to refer to sexual acts, excrement, and so on, but here let us consider an area that is, at least to us, a bit less immediately obvious, namely dangerous animals. The English word *bear* originally meant 'the brown one'. Rather than referring to these dangerous animals directly, speakers apparently preferred a euphemistic term. If this strikes you as odd, consider that it is actually a common process across languages. The Russian word for bear, *medvedev*, originally meant honey-eater. Nowadays, in western countries, the threat of dangerous animals has of course decreased considerably, but it is still possible to find euphemisms. Following the release of the film *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were Rabbit* in 2005, the newspaper *The Times* reported that on Portland, an island in the county of Dorset in the south of England, local authorities strongly objected to posters being put up with the official film title. The island's stone quarry industry has experienced many problems caused by rabbits' burrowing habits; a land slip even led to the death of a worker around a century ago. As a result of all this, rabbits are considered bad luck, and the animals are usually referred to euphemistically as *underground muttons* or *furry things*. (The film's production company decided to heed the locals' warnings, and instead of using the full title put up alternative posters bearing the tagline *Something bunny is going on.*)

35.4 Recent developments: regularities in semantic change

We have seen that the traditional ways of classifying meaning changes involves various oppositions or contrasts, and that the meaning of linguistic items may develop in either direction. Meanings may become more positive or negative, broader or narrower, may involve metaphor or (different kinds of) metonymy, and may be caused by factors within or outside language.

This impression that, at first blush, in semantic change 'anything goes' was a problem for the status of the study of this level of language change as a serious scientific endeavour. After all, in science we are interested in finding patterns that, if not strictly predictable (as in for instance physics) are at least to some extent regular. Scientists, in other words, are not primarily interested in just cataloguing every phenomenon that is possible, but in constraints on those phenomena. Now in a field where anything and everything is possible we can really only offer descriptions of individual cases of historical semantic change, which are more like mere anecdotes as opposed to rigorous scientific analyses of what constrains what is possible, what isn't, and why that should be so. These anecdotes may be interesting and entertaining

enough to read, but they are not conducive to a general understanding of the phenomena in question.

Indeed, a review of conferences and publications in historical linguistics in the previous century reveals that for a considerable period of time semantic change was not seen as worthy of many historical linguists' attention. Fortunately some scholars, such as Elizabeth Traugott, persisted in the study of the phenomenon, and since about the 1980s some regularities have come to light. These regularities mainly fall under the umbrella term **subjectification**. Although many questions still remain in connection with subjectification, the discovery of this pattern (or **set** of patterns, see e.g. Traugott's pioneering 1989 paper) has meant that linguists now take semantic change as an area that does merit serious scholarly attention.

In order to understand what we mean by subjectification it is important to note that the term is not connected to what in grammatical analysis we call the subject of a clause. Instead it is related to the notion of subjective judgments (as opposed to objective statements): subjectification is the change from relatively objective meanings into increasingly subjective ones.

The development of *very* is a clear case of this. When the word was borrowed from French, following the Normal Conquest, its meaning of 'true' or 'real' was borrowed along with it. (The French adjective *vrai* still means precisely that, and if you suspect a historical connection with the English words *verify, veracity*, and *veritable* — all of which have an element of 'truth' in their meanings — you're absolutely right.) Thus, when a speaker of Middle English described a man as a *very knight* they meant that he was a true or real knight. Whether or not someone was or not could be established objectively: one would have been born as one or have been knighted by another knight. Nowadays if we say that language change is *a very interesting area*, we use the word *very* in a much more subjective sense: someone else may well disagree with our personal evaluation.

The interesting thing about subjectification, from a scientific point of view, is that it is claimed to be unidirectional. That is to say, over time meanings may gradually become more subjective, but they do not become more objective. This is therefore a clear constraint on what is possible and what is not. Whether or not this **unidirectionality** is truly without exception is controversial: there are some debates over certain cases. The word *gay* could be a possible exception. Deciding whether or not someone is cheerful would, if anything, appear to be more subjective than saying whether or not they prefer partners of the same sex. But exceptions such as these do not detract much from the value of the notion of subjectification: the overwhelming evidence from English and other languages is that there are many more changes that go in the expected direction than in the opposite one.

Coming back to our example of *very*, this is by no means the only case of an intensifier developing out of an adjective meaning 'true' or 'real'. There are many other languages where we observe this, and in fact English itself provides other examples of this development as well. *Right* and *really* (and increasingly *real*, especially in American English) were not always used as an intensifier almost synonymous with *very*.[2] The fact that we see word meanings travelling down this historical path again and again, and in languages that we do not consider to be related, is clear evidence that we have discovered something about the human mind, whose architecture and mechanisms are after all what language users around the globe have in common.

Advances box 1: Subjectification and egocentricity in cognition and language

Important though the discovery of subjectification is, a great deal of what goes on in semantic change still seems rather haphazard. Whilst we are now in a position to say something about the development of *very*, *real* and many other expressions in English and other languages, some of the changes we mentioned above do not fit our notion of subjectification.

The change in meaning of *dog*, from a particular breed of dogs to dogs in general, for instance, is not a move towards a more subjective meaning (though, significantly, it is not a development in the opposite direction either). Nor could we say such a thing about *girl* changing its meaning from 'young person' to 'young female person', or about the semantics of *silly* going from 'blessed/blissful' to 'foolish'.

Although subjectification admittedly seems a pretty robust concept, another question that remains as yet unanswered is why meanings develop in the direction stipulated, and not (or hardly ever) the other way around. In fact, not only is this question unanswered, it has generally been simply avoided in studies on subjectification.

We may start finding the answer by drawing a parallel with certain aspects of the grammar of the world's languages. It is a well-known fact that in terms of making grammatical distinctions in and around nouns and pronouns, most distinctions are usually available for first and second person personal pronouns, followed by third person pronouns, human or at any rate animate nouns, and finally inanimate and abstract nouns. Consider for example that in English we have a subject form *I* that is separate from an object form *me*, and a possessive form *my*. For the second person we only have two forms: *you* (subject and object) and *your* (possessive). The third person has three distinctions again, at least in the masculine (*he, him* and *his*) and is, in this respect, a notorious oddity in the eyes of language typologists. (Standard English has quite a few more oddities like this that lead typologists to warn students of language against relying on it too much if they want to find out what is universal to human language. The reason why the language is so deviant should be sought, at least partly, in its unnaturally high degree of standardisation and codification.) The feminine forms are better behaved (*she, her*), and for human/animate nouns we have two forms as well, e.g. *man* for subject/object vs. possessive *man's*. However, for many inanimate and abstract nouns in most contexts we feel uncomfortable using a separate morphological form if we want to indicate 'possession', preferring the **of**-construction instead, e.g. *the thrill of a live concert* rather than ??*a live concert's thrill*. The **of**-construction does not count as a separate form of the noun as it clearly involves other elements and the noun itself remains the same, so we only have a single form (here: *concert*). Croft (2003:137) suggests that the reason why the hierarchy from first and second person personal pronouns to inanimate/abstract nouns is ordered the way it is, is that the more similar persons and things are to ourselves, the more distinctions we are likely to recognise.

Moving on now to subjectification, as a very tentative suggestion, one wonders whether a similar egocentric tendency may underlie this phenomenon as well. Perhaps we are inclined to reinterpret situations, and linguistic expressions describing those situations, in our own subjective terms.[3] Györi's interesting (2002) study (which is not restricted to changes which we would normally classify as displaying subjectification) discusses this possibility, but there is still plenty of scope for further research in this area.

35.5 Semantic change: diachronic or synchronic?

Some of the examples of semantic change discussed in this chapter happened quite a while ago (such as the change involving the word *girl*) and/or correspond to considerable intervals in the history of English (e.g. the change in meaning of *silly*, which we have seen spans several centuries). They are therefore all clear cases of DIACHRONIC change: changes that happen through time.

A few other changes, on the other hand, are happening as we speak. *Rude* has only acquired its meaning of 'attractive' very recently. While my undergraduate students readily accept and report using it, colleagues in their thirties and forties would generally not use it, and sometimes do not even recognise the newly acquired meaning. As such, this change has not been adopted by the whole British English speech community. Likewise, not all native speakers will use or perhaps even recognise *doughnut* as a term for 'inadequate person'. The question arises as to when we can legitimately speak of a semantic change (or a language more generally): when the whole speech community has implemented it, when a number of language users have, or perhaps when only a single speaker has created a new usage? The latter situation is sometimes dismissed as a case of language change, but consider that a semantic or other type of change always start in some speaker's here and now. The phenomenon is, in that sense, **synchronic**.

In addressing this issue, we follow Croft (2000) in distinguishing between two stages in a given change: the **innovation** (first new usage) and the **propagation** (spread to other members of the speech community). Thus, we see semantic change and language change in general as both synchronic and diachronic. It is important to point out that the propagation/spread of a new variant in many cases does not go all the way to completion — indeed, in many cases it does not. In relation to *rude,* for example, one could hazard the reasonable guess that it will never be adopted by all speakers of (British) English. Words for 'attractive' replace each other fairly rapidly, and it is therefore likely that the next generation will not copy the present teenagers and twenty-somethings, but recruit a different word to convey the meaning in question. In fact new usages may never spread beyond their innovators. Historical linguists terms these unique usages **nonce-formations**.

Semantic nonce-formations and changes that do spread to some or all members of the speech community all start out the same: a speaker makes some sort of creative association or connection between some idea s/he wants to express and (the meaning of) some existing word or expression. The mechanisms by which these connections are made are clearly **psychological** in nature. They were touched upon above — see for example the Advances box on subjectification.

One may wonder why nonce-formations do not spread to other speakers, why some changes only spread to a few speakers, and others, to most or all of them. Croft explains the different outcomes of innovations in **social** terms. Roughly speaking, if a new usage has prestige — i.e. is used by a speaker whom other speakers would like to be associated with; see the work by Labov (e.g. 1972) and his followers — then the innovation is likely to catch on and spread. If we recall the development of *rude*, it is possible that British English ascribed some form of prestige to certain members of music-related subcultures, and that this led them to adopt novel expressions such as *rude boy/girl*. More information about the role of social factors in language change is given in various parts of chapter 13 and 31, and also 33, section 2.

35.6 Conclusions

Let us wrap up this whistle-stop tour of the study of semantic change offered by this chapter by offering a few conclusions.

Semantic change does not only concern words. Grammatical constructions also have meanings. These do not remain constant over time and the ways in which they change often overlap with certain types of lexical semantic change, see especially subjectification — more about this in chapter 36.

Traditional, objectivist or truth-conditional semantic theory has a hard time accounting for the minutiae of meaning change; we saw that the more recent prototype-based view of meaning allows more flexibility and as such is a more convincing candidate.

Moving on to ways of classifying semantic change, traditional typologies give us terms that we can use to describe many different kinds. Unfortunately, these classifications give the impression that semantic change is far from predictable in that several opposite directions are possible. However, recent research, especially on subjectification, shows that there **is** some regularity — and this regularity may be related to what we may call certain egocentric tendencies of human cognition.

Finally, we saw that meaning change always starts in some creative speaker's here and now and is, in that sense, a synchronic phenomenon. From there it may or may not spread to other speakers. This process of propagation inevitably takes time, and meaning change is therefore also manifested diachronically. While the innovation is a cognitive process and as such requires a psychological explanation, propagation depends on social factors, and must therefore be explained in terms of sociolinguistic theory.

While semantic change was, due to its apparently complete unpredictability, for a long time the black sheep of the family of areas of language change, as a result of recent developments it is now very well respected, and as such is likely to attract a lot more research in the future.

Recommended readings

Historical descriptions of English (e.g. Smith 1996; Crystal 2004) traditionally include some examples of meaning changes, but generally do not offer very much in the way of systematic explanation. As we have seen above, explaining semantic change has become a serious enterprise only since the discovery and subsequent study of subjectification, especially by Elizabeth Traugott. For more information on this you will have to consult some relatively advanced work, e.g. Traugott's milestone (1989) paper. For her more up-to-date ideas see e.g. the relevant sections in Hopper & Traugott (2003), or (even more advanced but also more complete) Traugott and Dasher (2001). In relation to the notion of egocentricity in language change, Györi's (2002) article offers the most comprehensive discussion. For the important distinction between innovation and propagation in language change (including semantic change) the best reference is Croft (2000). His thought-provoking evolutionary approach to linguistic change also includes a useful summary of the importance of social factors.

[1] Note that the term 'prototype' as used here is not the same as in examples like *Motorola has built a working prototype of a new colour display that uses tiny filaments called carbon nanotubes* (adapted from an article on cnet.co.uk), where it means something like 'an exploratory model'.

[2] Intensifiers such as *dead* and *bloody* also arose in a process of subjectification, though the source meaning is obviously different here than in the case of *very, right* and *real(ly)*.

[3] This line of reasoning fits in with the suggestion, made above, that *sinister* developed its negative meaning because, from the point of view of most of us, our left hand is our 'bad hand'.