Week 2: Lexical & semantic change

1. Lexical change

- acquisition more conspicuous than loss, cf. e.g. OE geweorc ‘fortress’, gislas ‘hostages’ rice ‘kingdom’, ME whilom ‘formerly’ Covert survival: mid ‘with’ → midwife
- focus here on individual words, though constructions can also be affected (BE like S) → grammaticalisation (weeks 9-10)

1.1 External

1.1.1 A typology of borrowing processes

- language contact normal situation
- also: multilingual not monolingual societies the norm
→ borrowing natural and universal
→ causes?

1. foreign concept, CULTURAL BORROWING (Bloomfield): perestroika <Ru., pyjamas <Hindi., lama <Tibetan, potato <Taino via Sp., atrichoke <Arabic via Sp./It.
- limited knowledge of other societies can result in “mistakes”: Guugu-Yimidhirr gangurra refers to a specific species; En. happy-end > Fr., G., It., Du. happy ending; Fr. nom de guerre > En. nom de plume

2. prestige: En. “borrowed” nom de plume despite the availability of pen name because of the prestige (that used to be?) associated with French since the Norman Conquest (→ huge influx of French words, especially in areas of administration, religion, arts and warfare: prince, duke, baron, judge, attorney, court, chancellor, bailiff, official, army, captain, lieutenant, cf. Smith 1996:134ff.)

- if the borrowing language is (perceived as being) overwhelmed by loan words, this may result in purism → Académie Française has attempted to make terms such as camping and parking conform more closely to the native system (parc/parcage, campement/campisme), but without success

Less straightforward borrowing mechanisms:

- CALQUE / LOAN TRANSLATION: morpheme-by-morpheme translation of foreign word: G. Mit-leid, Du. mede-liden <Lat. com-passio <Gr. sympathy; English resistant to loan translations: in both cases English has just borrowed the terms part and parcel, but super-man <G. Über-mensch, That goes without saying <F. Ça va sans dire
- humour can also play a role, cf. colloq. Du. Dat zuit, Dat schopt kont <En. That sucks, That kicks ass
- COMBINING FORMS: borrow foreign morphemes and use them in compounds in European languages especially common in technical/scientific registers, from Greek/Latin: En. thermo-meter, Sp. termómetro, G. Thermometer, Du. thermo-meter, Welsh thermo-medr, Basque termo-metro, Tu. termo-metre, Ru. termo-meter, Swed. termo-meter
<Gr. thermos ‘heat’ + metron ‘measure’ NB. En., Sp., G., etc. “thermos ‘heat’, “metron ‘measure’

Some words are borrowed more easily than other: basic vocabulary (body parts, weather, universal experiences such as birth and death, natural phenomena like the sun, the moon, rivers and mountains, small numerals, kinship terms, pronouns and other grammatical words) is borrowed very infrequently → chance of a cultural gap is vanishingly small, and the native forms in question are frequent so very well established.

Borrowing these is not entirely impossible, however, cf. e.g. En. they <ON, often taken to suggest considerable mutual cultural integration Scandinavians-Anglo-Saxons (see also Smith 1996:128-34)
1.1.2 Accommodation of loans into the borrowing language

(alluded to by Smith 1996:135)

1.1.2.1. Phonology

Different languages have different phonological systems, which tend to impose constraints on the shape loan words will take, e.g. En. *ski* v. Sp. *esquí* <Norw. *ski*; Sp. *gol(-)average* [golabe’raxe]

\[ \rightarrow \] Two strategies:

- approximate the original pronunciation as closely as possible, cf. En. *genre* <Fr.
- “nativisation”: pronounce the loan word as if it were a native element En. *muesli* <G., Jap. *baakuree* <En. *Berkeley*

Partly predictable:

- command of the donor language
- prestige of the donor language

Although nativisation the most common accommodation strategy, approximation is interesting in that it may change the phonological system of the borrowing language, e.g. in OE [v] was merely an intervocalic allophone of /f/; the phoneme /v/ results from the massive borrowing of French words with initial /v/, e.g. *very*, *vine*, *vinegar*, etc., which was maintained in the pronunciation

A less radical way in which loans may impact phonological systems concerns the phonotactics (as opposed to the phoneme inventory) \( \rightarrow \) loans from Yidd./G. *schmuck*, *schemiel*, *shick*, *schanpps*, *schtzel*, etc. have made it possible to have /ʃ/ word-initially before /t, l, m/

1.1.2.2 Morphology

Different languages again may have radically different systems, consider e.g. nouns \( \rightarrow \) mismatches in nominal morphology (case, number, gender) \( \rightarrow \) uncertainty as to number status of *data*, *phenomena*, *criteria* (etym. Pl.)

1.2 Internal: a typology of word formation processes

- **COMPOUNDING**: combining \( \geq 2 \) existing words to form a new word; very common in English (though more so in OE, see also Smith 1996:139) *girlfriend*, *ginger-bread*, *major-general*, *ice cream*, *forget-me-not*, etc.; also common in G. (Donaudampfschiffahrtsgesellschaftskapitän ‘captain of the Danube Steamship Company’) and Du. (langeterminruimtelijkeordeeningsscenario’s ‘long term spatial planning scenarios’). Romance languages are more resistant to this mechanism, e.g. En. *country house* v. Fr. *maison de campagne*, lit. ‘house of country’ (*campagne-maison*), Sp. *casa de campo* (*campo-casa*)

- **DERIVATION**: creating words by adding affixes to existing words

En. prefixes: *pre-, dis-, re-, anti-, non-, con-, un-*, etc.; En. suffixes *-ness, -ful, -ity, -less, -ly, -al, -ian, -ation* etc. Thus *civil* \( \rightarrow \) *un-civil, civil-ity, civil-ise, civil-isation*. Affixes vary in productivity, compare e.g. En. A>N –th v. -*dom*

- **CONVERSION (ZERO DERIVATION)**: changing a word’s grammatical category — and thereby its meaning — without changing its phonological properties, *have a drink* (V>N), *access a database* (N>V), *a dyslexic* (A>N), *commute* (V>N). Common in English \( \rightarrow \) unsurprising \( \rightarrow \) its severely impoverished morphological system means that across grammatical categories words often have no endings specific to that category; see e.g. En. *drink* V and N v. Du. *drinken* V; Du. Sg. nouns do not normally end in –*en* \( \rightarrow \) *dranken* would need to be changed (cf. *drank*)

- **CLIPPING/ELLIPSIS**: shortening an existing word by dropping part of it, thus *telephone*\( \rightarrow \) *phone*, *influenza*\( \rightarrow \) *flu*, *mobile phone*\( \rightarrow \) *mobile*, *brassière*\( \rightarrow \) *bra*, *public house*\( \rightarrow \) *pub*, *moment*\( \rightarrow \) *mo*, It. *night* ‘nightclub’ *golf* ‘(golf) pullover* colloq. Sp. *tenis* ‘tennis shoes’ (<<*zapatos de tenis*); sometimes the clipped form acquires a suffix, e.g. *nightie* ‘nightgown’, *footy* ‘football’, *ammo* ‘ammunition’, *starkers* ‘stark naked’

- **BLENDING**: combining parts of existing words are to form new ones: *motel, smog, brunch, Oxbridge, heliport, Eurovision, Channel, breathalyser, rockumentary, sex(s)ational, Du. infotainment*. 2/4
BACK-FORMATION: creating a word by removing what is mistakenly perceived to be an affix. Thus edit < editor (<Lat.), burgle < burglar (<Fr.), sculpt < sculptor (<Lat.), on the assumption that [a(i)] was the same suffix as –er in writer, singer, etc. pea < pease (<Lat.), cherry < cherries (<Fr. cherise) → originally non-count nouns like spinach and fruit but final [z] reinterpreted as the regular plural marker (e.g. oranges, apples, etc)

REANALYSIS (in the narrow sense): reanalysing the structure of a word in an etymologically mistaken way, obtaining a new morpheme in the process, which can then be used to create other words, hamburger < Hamburg but fishburger, cheeseburger, etc. show that -burger was reanalysed. Cf. also bikini < the name of a Pacific atoll → monokini shows that bi- was reanalysed as on a par with bi- ‘two’ (<Lat.) in bilateral etc.

FOLK ETYMOLOGY: modifying the phonological properties of an opaque word so as to render it seemingly (at least partly) transparent, e.g. En. cold-slaw < cole-slaw (<Du. koolsla < koolsalade ‘cabbage salad’), sparrow grass < asparagus (<Lat. -Gr.), Du. rontonde < rotonde (<F.) — rond means ‘round’

INITIALISMS and ACRONYMS: reducing a long phrase to a few letters; BBC, FBI initialisms v. NATO, UNSCOM, RAM, WYSIWYG acronyms. Motivation behind the mechanism: economy of effort; esp. popular with the military / IT.

inventing words, more or less out of the blue, e.g. blurb, nylon (although -on was suggested by rayon, cotton); very uncommon

2. Semantic changes

2.1 A typology of semantic changes

GENERALISATION/BROADENING/WIDENING, e.g. En. arrive < Fr. arriver (<Lat. ad ‘to’ + ripa ‘shore’) ‘come to shore’ > ‘come (to a place); dog, orig. a particular type of canine, now the generic term (compare e.g. Du. dog, which it still only has a more specific meaning, e.g. Deense Dog, Bordeaux Dog, etc.)

SPECIALISATION/NARROWING (somehow less frequent than generalisation), girl ME ‘young person’ > eMode ‘young female person’, Fr. trauere ‘milk a cow’ (<Lat. trahere ‘pull’, Fr. pondre (<Lat. ponere ‘put’)

Change in words’ social value:

MELIORATION, e.g. Lat. casa ‘hovel’ > Sp. casa ‘house’, knight OE ‘boy’ > ME ‘gentleman’ (compare cognate Du. knecht ‘servant’)

PEJORATION, e.g. En. sinister < Lat. sinister ‘left’, Fr. putain, Sp. puta (<Lat. putta ‘girl’)

Semantic shift:

METAPHOR: using a particular linguistic item to denote something in another semantic domain, on the basis of some perceived similarity between the source and the target, e.g. shake-up

METONYMY: using a particular item to denote some other entity within the same domain, the White House, the crown, anorak ‘nerd’, hands in all hands on deck, cf. also rude, fit ‘attractive’ (sometimes a distinction is made between metonymy, in the narrower sense of attribute-for-entity and “synecdoche” part-for-whole, whole-for-part, e.g. England are winning 2-1.)

2.2 Motivation

expressivity, e.g. intensifiers very (<Fr. vrai), jolly (<Fr. joli), awfully, terribly, wickedly, right, well

taboo: subjects which it is not socially acceptable to talk about openly often see a continuous and rapid replacement in the associated terminology: sex, using the toilet but also e.g. wild beasts such as bears: Russian medvedev lit. ‘honey-eater’.

shifts in related words: in French casa developed into chez ‘at the house’, a new word was clearly needed: maison
2.3 General principles: subjectification (Traugott, Sweetser)

SUBJECTIFICATION is the overall tendency for meanings to become more subjective with the passage of time: propositional > textual > interpersonal (expressive) (cf. Halliday & Hasan’s (1976) distinction between these 3 functional domains of language)
The key concept here is “subjective”, i.e. based inside the speaker; there is no intended connection with subject in the grammatical sense.

Semantic-pragmatic tendency 1:
Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal (evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) situation.
- spatial > temporal, e.g. going to future
- object > space, e.g. body-part metaphors such as head, back, foot, face

Semantic-pragmatic tendency 2:
Meanings based in the described external or internal situation > meanings based in the textual situation, cf. e.g. the emergence of connectives such as since

Semantic-pragmatic tendency 3:
Meanings tend to become increasingly situated in the speaker’s subjective belief-state/attitude towards the situation:
- development of epistemic modality, e.g. may (ability > permission > possibility)

3. Conclusions

- changes in lexicon (external vs internal) and in meaning can be classified systematically
- both lexical change and semantic change are not entirely predictable, but we nonetheless understand more and more about the causal factors and regularities
- NB the mechanisms should not be seen as isolated from each other; in real change we often see several mechanisms occurring hand in hand

References