LEXICAL CHANGES: WHY DOES THE MEANING OF WORDS CHANGE?

Looking for the causes which originate all the changes in the meaning of words, would be a very difficult and an absurd task, since the factors that derive all these changes are so many. Nevertheless, we could point out, as the main causes of change of meaning the following ones:

a) The stylistic tendency in writing as well as in speaking. This tendency affects both colloquial and formal registers.

b) The advances in science and knowledge; which usually force to create new terms, or to give a new designation or meaning to current words, e.g. *Bug*. Sometimes this new meaning takes the place of a former one; and in most cases this ‘displacement’ is partial.

c) Inertia; i.e. maintain the word although the referent has changed or disappeared. For instance, Latin *penna* > English *pen*

d) Emotional feelings and social or moral attitudes. It is the principal cause of change of meaning. These are, for instance, metaphor, personification, euphemism, etc.

Evolution in the change of meaning
The classical rhetoricians, who first distinguished and described the figures of speech, started from the assumption that every word had its true and correct meaning; this true meaning was identified with the meaning of the word’s root. Even today, many people believe that the farther back one can trace the history of a word, the nearer one gets to its true meaning.

There was in Greek thought a conflict of views about the relation between words and their meanings. On the one hand, according to the Stoics, there was a natural bond between them; i.e. meaning was an integral property of the word. On the other, the theory that words have their meaning by convention. In either case, the possibility of a real, permanent change of meaning was not envisaged.

In classical rhetoric a kind of licence was accorded in discourse by means of figures of speech like metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, etc. Deliberate distortions of meaning were allowed in these literary contexts. By the recognition of these tropes, classical rhetoricians acknowledged that words change their meaning ad hoc, in response to the intention of the writer.

In the nineteenth century, we find the emergence of Semasiology, which is the historical study of semantic change. Semasiology promoted the acceptance of the thesis that lexical meaning rests upon a natural bond neither between word and sense, nor even upon a convention or law, but upon something more indeterminate still, i.e. custom. Human customs change inadvertently, without the especial intervention of any individual will.

In this century we also have the systematization of changes; whose classification is the following one:

1. Extension: change which takes place when a word comes to designate a larger class than it did formerly. E.g. picture, which formerly meant ‘painting’, and now it includes any flat visual representation.
2. Restriction: the opposite process of extension. Eg. *meat*, formerly meaning ‘food’ of any kind.

3. Transfer: the sudden leaps of metaphor and metonymy.

In the twentieth century we find the emphasis on the psychological, sociological and linguistic causes of change of meaning. Nowadays, to explain change of meaning we have to take into account more than the speaker’s or writer’s rhetorical purpose.

**Causes of change of meaning**

New scientific discoveries, and the advance of knowledge, generally can lead to change of meaning. As knowledge of the material world advances, definitions are more finely drawn; while we often go on using the old terminology, its meaning changes. E.g. *atom* < from the Greek ἀτόμος (indivisible).

It is possible to find similar modifications of meaning through legislative definition; it is the case of *acre*, which formerly refers to any piece of arable land in Old English.

Another cause is the constant traffic in words between different technical registers and the common core of the vocabulary, through which words lose their significance which they formerly had in specialized contexts, and come to be used in more general senses. E.g. *investigation* (17th c.) Words often come into language as designations for newly acquired objects, skills, or ideas. E.g. *relative* -which was once exclusively of grammar- or *scene* – only heard in the theatrical talk.

It is possible to find the reverse process, where a general word obtains a special meaning in a restricted context. E.g. *glass* –can mean lens, drinking vessel, mirror, and barometer.

Emotional feelings and social or moral attitudes contribute to change meaning. Respecting this we have euphemisms, which refer to the reluctance to use certain words
because of their unpleasant associations, leads to replace them by less highly charged forms of speech. This in itself does not constitute a change of meaning but it frequently happens that the substitute-term becomes more precise in reference to the unpleasant fact as it becomes more familiar in the euphemistic way. E.g. accident, formerly chance occurrence, but now connected with road traffic.

Another cause is the arrival of successive waves of loanwords. From the Italian we have words related to arts, such as cupola or fresco; and from French military words such as bayonet. The motives for the adoption of loanwords have often been feelings of delicacy, or even social superiority.

Finally, change of meaning is frequently brought about by two continuous tendencies: ellipsis and analogical diffusion. In the ellipsis often happens that what was once a phrase unit with a certain idiomatic character becomes reduced to a single word without loss of meaning. Often there is a change of grammatical function as well. There are adjectives which assume the role of nouns which have been suppressed, e.g. gold with the sense of medal. It is possible to find relative adverbs which absorbed a following infinitive complement and become a substantive, e.g. clap- for clap the hands. The analogical diffusion is the impulse or force to extend regular patterns and to reduce irregularity to rule. It accounts, for example, for the assimilation of strong verbs to larger weak verb class, e.g. clomp

Conclusion

We have considered a number of factors which may contribute to change of meaning. Behind every change of meaning there lies a chain of causation which can be analysed at a number of different levels- material, social, psychological, logical- and at each level we should get a different answer to the question ‘Why do words change their meanings?’.

Bibliography:


Ana María Carrillo Sánchez