On Change of Meaning

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Abstract

Change of meaning is a natural phase of linguistic development. A distinction should be made between change of denotative meaning and connotative one. the latter is more liable to shift especially at the level of personal variations. The present paper examines connotative shifts and the reasons behind them. In general, the connotative power of a linguistic unit may shift from positive to negative, negative to positive, connotative to neutral or neutral to connotative. Though connotative shifts are unpredictable, they mostly proceed along familiar paths . In general, such shifts may be attributed to personal state of mind, textual associations, and social factors or translation aspects.

A word, in fact, "is not a crystal, transparent and unchanging; it is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in colour and content according to the circumstances and time in which it is used" (Brooks and Warren, 1949: 286).

Changes of meaning, so to speak, are natural phases of linguistic development. Fourty years ago, Edward Sapir said:

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"Language moves down time in a current of its own making". And that nothing is static since word, every element and every accent is a slowly changing configuration (Ulmann, 1926: 193).

Grice, at the end of his 'Logic and Conversation' states that "it may not be impossible for what starts life, so to speak, as a conversational implicature to become conventionalized" (1989[1975]: 39). This means that pragmatic meaning may become semantic one.

Studies of language behavior and language change are very important to linguistics. Many of the social and cultural phenomena can be accounted for through such studies. Through examining change, better insights could be gained into its manifestation and the motivations behind them.

Generally, there are three approaches that pertain to semantic change:

1. The first approach is connected with cognitive linguistics and focuses on metaphoric processes. Cognitive linguistics highlights conceptual structures and accounts for metaphorical mappings. To understand metaphors, pragmatic inferencing to relevant meanings is needed.

2. Another approach combines certain aspects of sociolinguistics with formal pragmatics and theories of action. This approach is related to Verschuren's works (Pragmatics, 1998). It is mainly

concerned with communication and the contexts in which it takes place. Historical pragmatics studies historical language data by questioning what the specific situation was in which the data was produced, who the writer was and to what audience it was addressed. It studies the development of specific language elements that can only be described by reference to their pragmatic function in specific communicative situations.

The research methodology is aimed mainly at accounting for language in use, and for the effect of language-external factors such as situations, participants and text type.

3. The other approach is the Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change (See e.g. Traugott, 1977). It states that the main motivations for change are associative, metonymic, indexical meanings that arise in the process of speech and writing. It, however, concentrates on ways in which they lead to change in the linguistic system, that is, in the semantics of the lexicon, constructions and grammatical markers.

In this paper, it is suggested that a distinction should be made between changes of denotative meaning and connotative one. The former type of meaning stands for the relationship between linguistic units and non-linguistic entities to which they refer, The latter covers the personal or communal emotional associations which are suggested by or associated with the linguistic unit

(Crystal, 1958). The present paper examines connotative shifts and the reasons behind them. In general, the connotative power of a linguistic unit may shift in one of the following directions:

1.   ***Positive to negative:*** "Negro" was preferable to "Nigger". but "Negro" itself became connotatively negative and many black people in the fifties preferred to be called "Blacks" or "Afro-Americans" (Robertson and Cassidy, 1954: 242).

2.   ***Negative to positive:*** Some religious and political labels like "Tory", "Whig", "Puritan", "Quaker" and "Methodist" were originally used in contempt, but later they gained dignified associations (Ibid.: 243). The word "charm" used to have negative connotations in the Elizabethan era since it was associated with magic. Later, it had positive connotations (Jespersen, 1978: 204-7).

3.   ***Connotative to neutral:*** "Nowadays" was a vulgar word, and in Shakespeare's Hamlet, it is not used except by Button-the gravedigger while at the present time, it is neutral in its connotations (Ibid.).

4.   ***Neutral to connotative:*** "Wag" was free from its present trivial connotations. In Hamlet, it is used neutrally as in "my eyelids will no longer wag".

    Starting with the premise that meanings of words are chosen by society, these meanings are in a flux of change because society

reverses itself in the course of time. Hence, words that were once disapproved may become respectable. In this way, a word may change its meaning more than once in more than one direction.

Though connotative shifts are unpredictable, they mostly proceed along familiar paths. In general, such shifts can be attributed to the following reasons:

1. *Personal state of mind*

Words carry with them our social reactions and every person shares some common connotations with his society. Apart from this, and due to unique experiences, every person may also have private connotations that are attributed to psychological variations. The word "fights" is apprehended differently by a pugnacious and a peaceable man. Al-Amiriyya shelter was no more than an ordinary shelter in Baghdad; after the American aggression on Iraq in 1991, it became a tragic scene and is associated with pain, fire and innocent people burning. Shunnaq mentions that the word "grave" has negative overtones for most people. However, for a gravedigger who earns his living from grave digging, this word may have positive connotations (1993:39). This does not mean that the positive connotations, which he associates with the word, are stable; the death of an intimate person to him might be such a bitter experience that may reverse the positive connotations into

extremely negative ones. However, this might be no more than a temporal change or it might last for a long time.

Such connotative shifts are attributed to psychological variations since they have their roots in the speaker's state of mind or in some more permanent features of his mental ability. Nida and Taber (1974:92) believe that "most such individualistic connotations are quickly lost". Hence, "lexical meaning is inappropriate for application to psychological processes in individual human being" (Szalay and Deese, 1978:2).

2. *Political circumstances*

Among the factors that lead to a rapid change of the connotative power of words are the political situation and the political stand towards a certain issue or event. Besides its role as a means of communication, language is a means of expressing emotions. Hence, under certain circumstances, some words are loaded with new connotative meanings.

Slogan raising and name-calling usually accompany political circumstances. Ullmann mentions that the common characteristic of these nominations is that the speaker selects terms to make the intended impression on the listener (1962:284). This implies that a speaker employs language for his purpose that is mostly to influence the hearer's mental state. In fact, these names and slogans which in certain circumstances acquire emotive aspects and have a great

associative power, might one day become a sort of cliche and lose the power they once gained. "Corn laws", "home rule", "women's suffrage" are terms that have all of them at some time been charged with emotional import for many English speakers; at present, they are less expressive (ibid.:55). In fact, connotations of such expressions might be less powerful for the younger generation though they might be very powerful for the older one.

3. *Textual associations*

Some words take their connotative overtones from the contexts in which they regularly occur. Examples are middle terms like "luck" as in "good luck" or "bad luck". In other examples, connotations that are associated with words might become part of their meanings. "Dove", for instance, got its positive connotations from contexts such as: "The dove of peace", "harmless as dove", "the moon of doves in immemorial elms". Pigeon, however, took some unfavorable connotations from contexts such as: "a clay pigeon", "a pigeon for swindlers" and "pigeon droppings on the street" (Pyle and Algeo, 1972:200). The word "home" has a strong emotive charge derived from contexts such as: "Home, sweet home", "For England, home and beauty" and "Home is the sailor's home from the sea". Thus, "home" is associated with privacy, intimacy and coziness. This is the reason why estate agents prefer

using "home" instead of "house" in their social advertisements (Abrams, 1988:35).

4. Social factors

A particularly important reason of connotative shift is the social needs. People usually tend to avoid a word that directly refers to an unpleasant reality by using another neutral or pleasant connotative substitute. These are described as taboos and euphemisms respectively.

In fact, such taboos have an eminent effect on vocabulary and semantic change since a word is usually associated with its referent. "Cultural factors", Anderson says, "are partially responsible for the semantic change in the form of taboos (1974:179). Thus a word which was current and neutrally used might at a certain time become a taboo with unfavorable connotations. Hence, adopting more euphemistic terms makes attempts of refinement.

Birth as well as death are often subjects of euphemistic substitutions. "To be born" is substituted by "to see the light of day", "come into the world" and so forth. Also, too often a pregnant woman is still referred to as "being in the family way" or as "expecting" (Robertson and Casey, 1954:250).

In America, ladies of the 19th century would not say "breast" or "leg" even when referring to a chicken and they used the expression "white meat" and "dark meat" respectively as substitutes

or euphemistic expressions. Also, instead of saying, "to go to bed", "to retire" was used because of the sexual connotations of the former.

In the process of euphemistic substitution, people might resort to innovation of new words and expressions or exploitation of old ones. Different words have successively been used to refer to toilet such as "W.C", "Lavatory", "Loo", and "Powder room", etc. (Gairns and Redman, 1986:261).

This process with its impact on semantic change is endless; euphemistic forms eventually lose their gentile character and connotations. Instead of indirectly referring to the taboo, they become directly associated with it. Thus, they become no longer euphemistic forms.

5. *Translation shifts*

Each language has its own way of segmenting its experience by means of words. Hence, variations occur in the process of translation.

The equivalent of "bitch" in Arabic is " كلبة " "and "son of a bitch" is abusively used to mean something like (son of a prostitute) Connotative variation can clearly be seen when a translator renders this expression into "ابن الكلب" which on the other hand lacks the connotations of the English expression.

Consider the following piece of verse and its translation:

65

> The dew of the morning
> Sunk chill on my brow-
> It fell like the warning
> Of what I feel now.
> and light is they fame:
> I hear your name spoken,
> And share in its shame.
> (Byron, When We Two Parted, 1788-1824)

ندى الصباح سقط
قريرا على جبيني،
نذيرا بما أحّسه الآن
عهودك كلها محطمة،
وسمعتك سيئة:
اني اسمع اسمك أمامي،
فاحسني اسمع جرس جنازة.

(Razuq, 1978:30)

From the English version above, we notice that the word "chill" implies negative connotations. This word denotes coldness and has negative connotations, especially when used in relation to body or feelings as in this extract. its negative connotations can clearly be noticed in expressions like: "Failure chilled his hopes", "chilling murder" or "they had a chill meeting". On the other hand, the word "قرير" denotes coldness but it has positive connotations. We can refer to someone as "قرير العين" when he retrieves good news or achieves success. Such variation might be attributed to

environmental differences. In Arabic, and due to hot weather, this expression and others like "خبـر يـثلج الصـدور" has positive connotations too in Arabic in contrast to "news that chill" which means bad news.

Conclusion

Connotative meaning is more liable to shift than denotative meaning, especially at the level of personal motivations; the latter is more resistant to such changes. Connotations may shift in more than one direction and this is attributed to different personal, social, textual or cultural reasons. Still, the main cause of change might be that purposes behind the use of speech are constantly setting new tasks to speakers obliging them to adopt speech to the new tasks.

The problem arising from connotative shift is that dictionaries usually depend on the notional content of a word and trace its history with regard to this aspect of meaning. A dictionary, thus, is a good documentation of denotative meaning and denotative changes according to which they can be compared neglecting connotative aspects.

Therefore, connotative shifts should be considered psychologically and historically a separate class. Attempts should be made to further investigate and document this kind of change. Such attempts might not be justifiable from the empirical point of view, but they might be fruitful in the long run.

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ملخص

تغيّر المعنى

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إن التغير الدلالي هو مرحلة طبيعية في التطور اللغوي. ومن الضرورة أن نميز بين تغير المعنى الإشاري والمعنى الأيحائي. والنوع الثاني اكثر عرضة للتغير خصوصا فيما يتعلق بالتغييرات على المستوى الفردي. وهذا البحث محاولة لدراسة التغيرات الإيحائية ومسبباتها. بشكل عام قد تتغير القوة الإيحائية للوحدة اللغوية من إيجابية إلى سلبية، سلبية إلى إيجابية، إيحائية إلى محايدة أو محايدة إلى إيحائية. وبالرغم من أن التغيرات الإيحائية لا يمكن التنبؤ بها، ألا إنها يمكن أن تعزى إلى الحالة الفكرية الفردية، مصاحبات سياقية، عوامل اجتماعية أو عوامل ترجمية.

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