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PhD Studies in Linguistics

Historical Philological Semantics

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1.1 Historical Philological Semantics

Semantics is a branch of linguistics that studies lexical meaning possessed by words, phrases and sentences. The first stage in the history of lexical semantics runs from roughly 1830 to 1930. Its dominant characteristic is the historical orientation of lexical semantic research; its main concern lies with changes of word meaning. The identification, classification, and explanation of semantic changes. Along these lines of research, a wealth of theoretical proposals and empirical descriptions was produced. Most of this has by now sunk into oblivion, however.

Another factor to be discussed lack of familiarity is that the one discipline has no established terminology. We could talk about 'traditional diachronic semantics', if we want to highlight the main thematic and methodological orientation, or we could say 'prestructuralist semantics' if we want to focus on its chronological position in the history of the discipline, but we will opt for 'historicalphilological semantics'. For two reasons: First, if we think of philology in terms of comparative philology—the study of the genetic relationships between languages and the reconstruction of protolanguages—we will see presently that traditional diachronic semantics originated in the margin of the investigation into the historical links between languages. Second, if we think of philology as the study of the cultural and historical background that is indispensable for an adequate understanding of the crucial texts, literary and others, of a certain era, we will see that traditional diachronic semantics is similarly characterized by an interpretative conception of meaning—a conception that is concerned with discovering the meanings inherent in older language materials.

1.2 The Birth of Lexical Semantics

Lexical semantics as an academic discipline in its own right originated in the early nineteenth century, but that does not mean that matters of word meaning had not been discussed earlier. Three traditions are relevant: the tradition of speculative etymology, the teaching of rhetoric, and the compilation of dictionaries

1.2.1   Speculative Etymology

To understand the tradition of speculative etymology that reigned before the birth of comparative philology in the beginning of the nineteenth century, we have to go back to classical antiquity. In Plato's oldest essay in the philosophy of language **(Cratylus)**. Plato's dialogue stresses that the view of language is not conventional, rather, it is guided by the criterion of appropriateness. According to the naturalist theory defended by Cratylus, the names of things should be 'right' in a very fundamental sense: they express the natural essence of the thing named.

Geeraerts (2010) says that etymological analysis tries to discover the origin of the **meaning** of the form which is thought to be different because of history and time. Thus, despite the fact that Plato's dialogue 'Cratylus' is

inconclusive, speculative etymology accepted it. For example: the etymologies for Latin mors 'death' suggested in antiquity associate the word either with *amarus* 'bitter' or with *Mars,* the god of war 'who inflicts death'.

What is it that distinguishes a speculative etymology from a scientific one? Typically, the speculative etymologies have two specific characteristics:

1- Etymologies are based on comparisons of meanings and the forms involved which are open for free to be explored.

2- The entities that etymologies compare are words occurring within the same language without much restriction on the formal transformations that the words would have to undergo, they try to reduce a given name to other existing words.

So, the tradition of comparative philology with which scientific linguistics came into being in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century straightforwardly rejected the type of thinking about word meaning that was part of the tradition of speculative etymology. But what then would be the place of diachronic lexical semantics in the new comparative paradigm? As an autonomous empirical discipline, linguistics comes into being as a form of historical research, and so, to begin with, the birth of historical linguistic semantics in the nineteenth century is merely one more aspect of the overall diachronic outlook of the first phase in the development of modern linguistics. However, the birth of semantics within that young linguistic science was not just a question of completeness, but also one of necessity.

So, as a first factor in the birth of linguistic semantics, the age-old tradition of speculative etymologizing of word meanings was rejected in favour of an approach that would identify and classify regular mechanisms of semantic change:

1.2.2 The Rhetoric Tradition

Rhetoric—the skill of using language to achieve a certain purpose, in particular, to persuade people—was a traditional part of the school curriculum from classical antiquity through the Middle Ages up to modern times. From a modern point of view, you could compare it to courses in essay writing and public speech.

Rhetoric itself was traditionally divided into five parts: invention (the discovery of ideas for speaking or writing), arrangement (the organization of the text), style (the formulation of the ideas), memorization, and delivery. From the point of view of semantics, it is the stylistic component that is particularly important. The tradition of rhetoric developed a large number of concepts to identify specific figures of speech, or 'rhetorical tropes': ways of formulation that would embellish a text or attract the attention of the audience.

The Quintilian dictionary defines metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy. Metaphor is defined as similarity, alliteration, the repetition of the same sound in the beginning of several successive words, euphemism, the substitution of an inoffensive or less offensive word for one that might be unpleasant, and Synecdoche is adapted to give variety to language by letting us understand the plural from the singular, the whole from a part, a genus from the species, something following from something preceding, and vice versa.

1.2.3 Lexicography

Where does lexical semantics find its materials?

One source of examples is philological research into older texts, specifically, classical and biblical philology. Because the interpretation of the Greek, Latin, and Hebrew texts is often not immediately obvious, classical scholars naturally came across many intriguing instances of polysemy and semantic change. many of the earliest writers on semantic change were classical philologists. Karl Reisig's (1839) work is considered the oldest work in historical-philological tradition as well as others like Haase, Heedge and others.

Another source of raw materials came from lexicography. While the earliest printed dictionaries were bilingual or multilingual dictionaries for translation, there gradually emerged an interest in dictionaries focusing on a single language. Such reference dictionaries would provide the lexical semantician of the nineteenth century with a wealth of examples of polysemous lexical items— items with numerous meanings whose internal relationship can be described in terms of metaphor, metonymy, and the like. But the relationship between lexicography and lexical semantics would grow even stronger. Dictionaries even though they contained actual usage data in the form of literary quotations, usually carried some degree of legislative, prescriptive intention: they were aimed at safeguarding the purity of the language, or at least describing normatively accepted usage.

Other dictionaries that are more descriptive of the setting have also been found. These dictionaries, like James Murray's (1884–1928) The Oxford English Dictionary, tried to chart the evolution of language from its earliest stages to the present. Such a dictionary was created specifically to track how language evolved in both form and meaning.

To summarize, when lexical semantics originates as a linguistic discipline, speculative etymology serves as a negative role model; lexicography and textual philology provide an empirical basis of descriptive lexicological data, and the tradition of rhetoric offers an initial set of terms and concepts for the classification of lexical semantic phenomena.

1.3 The Nature of Meaning

Max Hecht sums up the disciplinary position of historical-philological semantics as a linguistically valuable to the extent that it chronologically classifies meanings in the interest of lexicography, and writes down the laws of semantic change in the interest of etymology. To the extent, however, that it derives these laws from the nature of the mind and that it writes a history of ideas—meanings are ideas—it falls within the realm of empirical psychology.

This quotation incidentally, turn out to be quite important when we describe the transition from historical-philological to structuralist semantics nicely ties in with the background sketched in the previous section: diachronic semantics is concerned with the classification of mechanisms of semantic change, an activity that links up with lexicography on the one hand and historical linguistics on the other. At the same time, Hecht's quotation introduces an additional aspect of historical-philological semantics: it is an approach that assumes a psychological conception of meaning, one in which the linguistic phenomena under study are seen as revealing characteristics of the human mind.

DIFFERENT OPINIONS OR PERSPECTIVES THAT EXIST WITHIN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ORIENTATION OF HISTORICAL-PHILOLOGICAL SEMANTICS.

1- Bréal (Meaning and Mind)

The most significant figure in historical semantics was Bréal. His views on semantics are representative of the current semantics' methodological viewpoint. Following is a summary of his contributions to the study of semantic change:

First, it can hardly come as a surprise, after what we saw in the previous section, that semantics is defined as a historical discipline. The diachronic orientation of semantics is indicated as an intuitively obvious matter of fact. An understanding of words in their contemporary meaning requires a thorough knowledge of their semantic history and don't just their sound changes

Second, Bréal highlights the psychological orientation of the study of meaning. There are actually two aspects to this: linguistic meaning in general is defined as a psychological phenomenon, and, more specifically, change of meaning is the result of psychological processes. With regard to the first feature, meanings are considered to be psychological entities, i.e. (Language makes thought objective). The mental status of lexical meanings links up directly with the overall function of thinking, i.e. with the function of cognition as a reflection and reconstruction of experience. Language, one could say, has to do with categorization: it stores cognitive categories with which human beings make sense of the world.

"If meaning as such consists of cognitive categories—a psychological type of entity—then meaning changes must be the result of psychological processes. That is to say, the general mechanisms of semantic change that can be derived from the classificatory study of the history of words constitute patterns of thought of the human mind. Bréal calls these (the conceptual laws of language), but he hastens to add that 'law' means something different here than in the natural sciences: a law of semantic change is not a strict rule without exceptions, but it represents a tendency of the human cognitive apparatus to function in a particular way. In a passage that opposes restricting linguistics to the study of the formal aspects of language, he remarks"

The psychological orientation of semantics has methodological consequences (this is the third major feature of the historical-philological approach). In the following quotation, Bréal does not simply repeat the point that semantics is a historical science, but he also has something to say about the way in which that scientific project is put into practice . "If one admits that there is a distinction between the historical and the natural sciences, that is, if one considers man as being the subject matter of a separate chapter of our study of the universe, language (which is the product of man), cannot stay on the other side, and linguistics will inevitably be a branch of the historical sciences".

2- Paul (Context and Usage)

The discussion is set out by two questions: is language is indeed something more than a purely individual phenomenon? How does innovative individual behavior relate to language as a shared institution? Hermann Paul's specification of a psychological conception of semantics, to which we now turn, provides an answer to precisely that problem.

 The first pillar of Paul's approach involves the distinction between the 'usual' and the 'occasional' meaning of an expression. The usual meaning which is the established meaning as shared by the members of a language community. The occasional meaning which involves the modulations that the usual meaning can undergo in actual speech.

"By 'usual meaning', we understand the total representational content that is associated with a word for any member of a speech community. By 'occasional meaning', we understand the representational content that an interlocutor associates with a word when he uses it, and which he expects the hearer to associate with the word as well."

The second pillar of Paul's conception of semantics is the insight that context is all-important to understand the shift from usual to occasional meaning. We can easily appreciate this point if we look at a number of different types of occasional meaning, and the way in which they derive from the usual meaning. To begin with, let us note

that there can be various usual meanings to a word: if a word is polysemous, the usual meaning involves a set of related meanings, a cluster of different well-established senses. The occasional meaning, on the other hand, is always a single reading. In many cases, then, realizing the occasional meaning amounts to selecting the appropriate reading from among the multiple established senses of a word. Paul highlights the importance of context in this process.

Finally, Contextualized meaning may not cover all the features of the usual meaning. The metaphor in the phrase "the fire of passion," which combines "fire" and "passion," denotes a meaning that is different from what would be understood literally. This literal meaning cannot be considered as the original of such metaphorical expressions. Conversely, if occasional meaning is used frequently, it develops into usual meaning, which means that occasional meaning has the potential to gain independence and develop into a lexeme with autonomous characteristics. As a result, meaning might alter. In linguistic or extralinguistic contexts, the notion of (wheat) will be conventionalized and decontextualized if the term (corn) invokes (wheat) without special rules.

1.3.1 Variants Voices

The psychological conception of meaning so clearly expressed by Bréal and Paul is the mainstream view of historical-philological semantics. But it is not the only view, and it did not gain prominence immediately. Moreover, the overall psychological orientation leaves room for a number of variants. Let us therefore try to summarize the main differences of opinion. We will have a look at four different lines of research.

Logical Classificatory

To begin with, the psychological orientation did not emerge immediately. In the first half of the nineteenth century, up to the 1860s, the focus lay on the mere identification of regular patterns of semantic development and the classification of those pathways of change, rather than on the cognitive background of such phenomena. This approach, which is often called 'logicalclassificatory' or 'logical-rhetorical' in contrast to 'psychological-explanatory'. The essential distinction between the two approaches is the role of causality in semantics. One of the main reasons why scholars like Bréal and Paul opt for a psychological perspective is that it may provide an explanation for semantic change; as we saw in the quote from Bréal, words may change their meaning because language users are trying to express something new: individual speakers of the language change the language to adapt it to their needs. By contrast, the logical-classificatory approach either devotes less attention to explanatory questions, restricting its endeavors to the identification and classification of changes, or naively attributes the changes to 'the life of the language' rather than to the activity of the language user.