

Losing one's senses: causes of obsolescence in lexical semantics

Hilke Ceuppens & Hendrik De Smet (KU Leuven)

While the general mechanisms of semantic extension are relatively well-understood (e.g. Geeraerts 1997; Traugott & Dasher 2005), the reverse side of the process – semantic loss – has been theorized less thoroughly. The present paper proposes one recurrent pattern of change that gives rise to obsolescence in lexical semantics.

Theoretical background: The proposed mechanism hinges on two assumptions. First, it is hypothesized that polysemy can be sustained as long as senses can be distinguished in usage. Typically, distinguishability is safeguarded by contextual clues: as long as different senses occupy different contextual niches (e.g. specific genres, specific collocational schemas, etc.) they do not give rise to ambiguity, so that polysemy at word-level is sustainable. This predicts that contextual overlap between senses is what gives rise to obsolescence. Contextual overlap is particularly likely to arise when semantic extension is caused by contextually-driven inferences as opposed to, for instance, metaphor. Second, the different senses of a word are linked into radial networks, organized around one or more core senses, from which peripheral senses are derived (e.g. Evans 2005). It can therefore be predicted that the loss of a core sense will affect any peripheral senses derived from (and synchronically motivated by) it. In combination, then, the emergence of a new sense through contextual implicatures is likely to threaten the source sense of the change, which in turn is likely to threaten any other senses derived from the core sense. This results in a cascade of obsolescing senses.

Empirical evidence: The proposed mechanism is supported here through a number of case studies on English evaluative adjectives. For these, radial networks are first proposed based on the relevant entries in the Oxford English Dictionary. Next, the diachronic predictions of the above model – particularly, the predicted sequence of semantic extensions and losses – is tested against diachronic corpus evidence, drawing on data from Early English Books Online.

By way of example, the adjective *strange* initially had a core sense 'foreign' (1) that motivated various derived senses, including 'unfamiliar' (2), 'unfriendly, uncomplying' (3). However, through pragmatic implicature the sense 'unfamiliar' gave rise to new extensions 'exceptional, abnormal' (4). Contextual overlap with the original core sense 'foreign' caused loss of the latter, which was accompanied by the loss of other extensions from it, particularly the sense 'unfriendly, uncomplying'.

- (1) your excellent renome shyneth as well in *strange* regions as with in the royaume of england (1472, EEBO) ['foreign']
- (2) than was no cocko / betwene the eest and west to laye wronge egges / within a *straunge* nest
['unfamiliar']
- (3) ffor i trowe i was neuer *straunge* to doo for you / that laye in my power (1481, EEBO)
['unfriendly, uncomplying']
- (4) to whom did hadde maruailous and *strange* aduentures (1532, EEBO) ['exceptional, abnormal']

The mechanism proposed and documented here offers one recurrent and internally driven scenario for semantic obsolescence and explains, at least in part, why some polysemies are sustained over long periods, while others are diachronically unstable.

References

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Geeraerts, D. 1997. *Diachronic prototype semantics: A contribution to historical lexicology*.
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