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Linguistics 203

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# Lecture 7
## Polysemy and semantic change

A morpheme is fundamentally a unit that associates a **form** with a **meaning**.
But just as a single morpheme can have **multiple forms**,
it can also have **multiple meanings**.
This situation is known as **polysemy**.

Some **simple examples** of polysemy:
*pool*: 'facility constructed for swimming', 'puddle'
*pig*: 'porcine animal', 'disgusting person'
*bright*: 'emitting light', 'intelligent'
Each of these morphemes has two or more **conceptually related** meanings.

What seems like a single meaning may be polysemy on closer examination:
*bank*: 'financial institution', 'building where a financial institution is housed'
Consider the sentence *My money is in the bank*: this has **at least two meanings**:

- 'I have deposited my money in a bank account'
- 'I left my wallet in the bank building'

This is because the two meanings of *bank* refer to different (but related) things—
a financial corporation, or the building where it does business.
The morpheme *bank* has more meanings than these two, of course! Others include:

- 'storage site for something other than money' (*blood bank*, *data bank*)
- 'rely on something' (*We're banking on it.*)

Often we can think of polysemy as a type of **vagueness**:
some morphemes have basic meanings that are slightly vague,
and the details of the meaning are filled in by context.
A **very common** polysemy is between a **physical object** and the **abstract** entity it represents: e.g., *bank* referring to the building or the corporation.
Another example: *book* denotes a physical object in *The book weighs 2 pounds*,
but the story the book represents in *The book is a vivid account of the war.*

In other cases multiple meanings are connected by **metaphorical association**;
this is the case with *bright* and *pig*.
The meanings 'intelligent' and 'disgusting person' are **more remote** from the basic meanings 'emitting light' and 'porcine animal'—
but they still have a conceptual connection.

The examples above are all **free morphemes**,
but **bound morphemes** can be polysemous as well.
Examples of polysemous bound morphemes:
*path-* can mean 'feeling' (*sympathy*) or 'illness' (*pathology*)
*cosm-* can mean 'world' (*cosmos*) or 'makeup' (*cosmetics*)
*err-* can mean 'wander' (*erratic*) or 'mistake' (*error*)

Polysemy is **not the same thing** as **homonymy**—
i.e., when **distinct morphemes** with **unrelated meanings** have the same form.
E.g., *bank* **also** means 'land at the side of a river'; *pool* also means 'billiards game';
but these are **different morphemes** than the meanings of *pool* and *bank* above.

The term ***homophone*** is **sometimes** used with the **same meaning** as *homonym*;
but sometimes *homophone* is reserved for morphemes that are **spelled differently** but pronounced the same.
In this sense, *see* and *sea* are **homophones**, as are *pair* and *pear*.

It's just a **coincidence** that 'body of water' and 'billiards game' are both *pool*;
the two meanings have **separate origins**.

Examples of homonymous **bound** morphemes:
*in-* 'not' (*indecisive*) and *in-* 'in' (*inspect*)
*doc-* 'teach' (*doctor*) and *doc-* 'opinion' (*orthodox*)
*-s* (noun plural suffix: *animals*) and *-s* (verb agreement suffix: *thinks*)
*equ-* 'horse' (*equine*) and *equ-* 'even' (*equal*)

Homonymy and polysemy have **different causes**:
homonyms have **different origins**, and look the same **through coincidence**;
**polysemous** meanings of a morpheme all have a **common origin**.

Homonyms might originate as **loans from different sources**:
*bank* 'riverside' is from Old Norse; *bank* 'financial institution' is from Latin.
They might originate because of a **loan that sounds the same** as a native word:
*pool* 'body of water' is a native word; *pool* 'billiards' is from French.
They might originate because two morphemes that were **originally pronounced differently** come to be pronounced the same **through language change**:
*lie* 'falsehood' and *lie* 'recline' had **different vowels** in Old English.
These are all pairs of **two different and unrelated morphemes**
(and so they naturally have different meanings!).

But the multiple meanings of a **polysemous morpheme** have the **same origin**,
being generated out of earlier meanings through **semantic shift**—
i.e., **change in the meaning** of a morpheme.
A morpheme may start with one meaning, and develop new meanings over time;
and the older meanings **may or may not remain in use** as well.
Thus **multiple meanings for a single morpheme** may coexist side by side.

Cf. the history of *cosm-* 'world, makeup':
- its original meaning in Ancient Greek was 'order';
- 'that which is ordered' produced the related meaning 'universe';
- 'well-ordered' produced the meaning 'having a suitable appearance', which leads to the meaning of *cosmetics*;
- the original meaning 'order' **fell out of use** (or just wasn't borrowed into English)

So the result is that *cosm-* has **two meanings** in English
that stem from a **common origin** in Ancient Greek.

*Cosm-* is an **extreme example**:
Usually the meanings of a polysemous morpheme have a closer relationship than that, and often the older basic meaning remains in use.

**Why** does semantic change happen?
There are a variety of causes.

**Changes in the world** can lead to changes in the meanings of words:
e.g., instead of creating a **new word** to refer to some new phenomenon, an old word can be used **creatively** and given a **new meaning**.
For instance, *computer* originally meant a **person** who does computations; when electric computers were invented the word was applied to them too, and the original meaning has since fallen out of use.
*Mouse* was recruited as the name for the device used to control computers, based on a slight similarity in appearance to the animal; the original meaning continues to exist side-by-side with the new one.

Meanings can shift because people **use language in creative and playful ways**—
people use irony, exaggeration, understatement, metaphor, and many other ways of using words **other** than their **literal meanings**.
If a creative or playful usage of a word becomes **established** and **frequent**, it might become a new **conventional meaning** of the word.
E.g., the original meaning of *terrific* was 'terrifying'; it came to be used **exaggeratedly** to describe anything of extreme quality; and eventually its **primary** meaning became 'extremely good'.

Semantic change can be caused by **the way people learn language**:
In general, people **don't** learn the meanings of words from dictionaries (although certainly some words are learned that way!).
You learn words through **interacting with other speakers** of the language, hearing words used, and **deducing** their meanings from **context**.
In these circumstances, there is **always room for ambiguity**; it's possible to interpret a word as meaning something **other than what the speaker intends**, but that also makes sense in context.
If enough people make the **same mistake** in learning what a word means, it can end up becoming a **new meaning** for the word.

E.g., consider the verb *fix*.
- Its original meaning is 'attach securely', as in *rotating around a fixed point*.
- In contexts like *fix the loose plank*, it can be **reinterpreted** as meaning 'repair'.
- The **new meaning** 'repair' might appear in phrases like *fix the jammed wheel*.

Thus *fix* ends up gaining a **new meaning** through being **reinterpreted** in contexts where its meaning was ambiguous.

Sometimes meanings that are **implied** become a new **core meaning** for a word:
- *Since* originally only meant 'after'.
- But describing a **sequence** of events is often taken to **imply** a **causal** relation:
  *I've been happier **since** I met you*: saying so **suggests** it's **because** I met you.
- Thus *since* came to have 'because' as an **additional** meaning alongside 'after'.

Words can undergo **drastic** changes of meaning over long periods of time:
*nice* originally meant 'foolish'; *silly* originally meant 'happy'.

## Common **pathways** of semantic shift

Shift usually involves some **association** between the old and new meanings—
either via **metaphor** or via **metonymy**.
Understanding how semantic shift takes place allows us to understand the
**relationships between** the multiple meanings of a single morpheme.

**Metaphorical** shift is based on **resemblance** between old and new meanings—
a word gains a meaning that is somehow **similar to** the original meaning.
The similarity can manifest in various ways:

- literal **physical** similarity: *leaf* 'part of a tree' → 'page of a book'
- a similar **relation** to its context: *foot* 'bottom of the leg' → 'bottom of the stairs'
- a more **abstract** relationship:
  - *grasp* 'hold in the hand' → 'understand'
    To *grasp* an idea allows you to feel like you can examine and possess it, much like *grasping* an object.
  - *bitter* 'unpleasant-tasting' → 'miserable and angry'
    Being in a *bitter* mood is an unpleasant sensation, reminiscent of the taste of *bitter* food.

Metaphorical shift **often** (not always!) involves a shift from a **concrete, physical**
meaning to a more **abstract** or **conceptual** meaning, like *grasp* and *bitter*—
like trying to **explain** something abstract in terms of more concrete ideas.
**Spatial** metaphors are very common—
describing a concept or idea in terms of physical **directions** or **relationships**.
E.g., *before* originally meant 'in front of', in terms of **physical position**;
its **metaphorical** meaning is 'earlier', as if you're **facing** the future.
E.g., *over* means both 'physically above' and 'more than' (and other meanings).
These spatial metaphors occur in many of the **Latin prefixes**:
e.g., *pre-* has the same polysemy as *before* does:
a *pre-sid-ent* is someone who 'sits **in front**' of a group or meeting;
*pre-histor-ic* means '**earlier than** recorded history'
e.g., *de-* means literally 'down' in *de-scend* 'climb down'
but it means 'lower quality' in *de-tract* (*trac* = 'pull')
and 'reverse' in *de-struct-ion* (*struc* = 'build').

**Metonymy** is based on some kind of **connection** between two entities—
using a word to refer to something that is **related to** the original meaning,
not because of **resemblance** but because of some other association.
E.g., a businessman or professional may be called a *suit*—
the article of clothing makes you think of the person who wears it.
Many types of relationships can be sources of metonymy:

- *tongue* also means 'language' because it's what is **used for** speech.
- *cheek* originally meant 'jawbone'; now it means what's **next to** the jawbone.
- *mail* originally meant 'bag'; now it means what's **carried in** a bag.

A common type of metonymy is known as **synecdoche**—
using a **part** of something to refer to the **whole**, or vice versa,
or the **material** to refer to something that's **made of** it:

- *head* is used to refer to the whole animal in phrases like *50 head of cattle*;
- *drink* can mean specifically 'drink alcohol' in addition to 'drink any fluid'.
- *glass* can refer to a drinking vessel that's made of glass.

An interesting case is *hand*, meaning 'laborer' (as in *hired hand* or *ship's hand*)—
this meaning could represent either metaphor **or** metonymy!
It could be referring to **people** by the name for a **part** of them—the hand.
In this case, it's an example of metonymy (specifically, synecdoche).
But it could be referring to them **metaphorically**, by the **similarity** to literal hands, which are the organs that perform work.

Metonymy or metaphor **may depend on cultural context**—
what people **at a given place and time** thought made sense as a resemblance or association between two meanings may not make sense today.
The association may be harder to see without knowing the historical context.

E.g., the root *hyster-* appears in both *hysterectomy* and *hysterical*—
in one, it means 'uterus'; in the other, 'emotionally disturbed'.
What's the relationship between these two meanings?
Just that, in the 19th century, it was **thought** that emotional disturbances were caused by uterine problems.
This association **was not correct** and is **no longer believed**,
but the **polysemy** of *hyster-* remained.

Thus, once a word **develops** polysemy through metonymy, metaphor, etc.,
the different meanings **can** continue to exist alongside each other
even if the situation that **created** the polysemy no longer obtains.
From a **synchronic** standpoint, this could be thought of as a case of what was **originally** a single polysemous morpheme **becoming** two **homonyms**;
but in this class we take the **etymological** perspective and define polysemy and homonymy in terms of the **origins** of the morphemes and their meanings.

Metaphor and metonymy aren't the **only** ways words can change meaning,
though they are some of the most common ways.

Words can **lose** meanings without any special change affecting them—
all that needs to happen is for some senses to **fall out of use**.
A meaning may become **obsolete**, if people **don't need** to refer to it anymore,
or if another meaning of the same word becomes much more prominent;
one or both of these is the case for the old meaning of *computer*.
Or a **different word** may take over a meaning, instead of the original word:
*Deer* used to mean 'animal' in general; when the loanwords *beast* and *animal* took over the general meaning, *deer* **narrowed** to meaning a **specific** animal.

## **Results** of semantic shift

Cases of semantic shift are often categorized based on **what effect** they have on the meanings of morphemes—**how** the new meanings relate to the old ones. Many possibilities exist! Some have specific names:

**Narrowing**: a word is **specialized** to refer to a **subset** of what it originally meant:
- *deer* originally meant 'animal'; now it refers to a **specific type** of animal.
- *meat* originally meant 'food' in general; now it means 'flesh as food'.

**Widening**: a word is **generalized** to refer to a **broader** class than it used to:
- *bird* originally meant 'young bird'; now it includes birds of any age.
- *plant* originally meant 'sapling' or 'seedling'; now it includes all plants.

Widening seems to be **less common** than narrowing, at least in English.

**Weakening**: a word's meaning **loses force** or intensity:
- *soon* originally meant 'immediately'; now it means 'in a short time'.
- *astonish* originally meant 'knock unconscious'; now it means 'surprise'.

**Strengthening**:
- *kill* originally meant 'strike'; now it means 'slay'.
- *jeopardy* originally meant 'uncertainty'; now it means 'danger'.

Strengthening seems **less common** than weakening—perhaps because weakening depends on **exaggeration**, a common figure of speech.

**Amelioration**: a word takes on a **more positive connotation**:
- *nice* originally meant 'foolish'; now it means 'pleasant'.
- *fond* also meant 'foolish'; now it means 'liking'.

(Compare the similar metaphorical shift implied in the phrase *crazy about you*!)

**Pejoration**: a word takes on a **more negative** connotation:
- *silly* originally meant 'blissful, happy'; now it means 'foolish'.
- *villain* originally mean 'peasant'; now it means 'scoundrel'.

**More than one** of these may be involved in any particular semantic shift:
*dude* originally meant 'a ridiculous fop'; now it just means 'a guy'.
This involves **both** widening and amelioration.

The meaning of *car* underwent widening **and then** narrowing:
'horse-drawn wagon' → 'wheeled vehicle' → 'automobile'.

**Not all** semantic shifts involve these particular dimensions; these one just are relatively simple to identify and name.
Some just involve a miscellaneous metonymy or metaphor, such as *tongue* meaning 'language'.