'Degrees of lexicalization' in the history of English: antonymy and asymmetry

Kathryn Allan, UCL
kathryn.allan@ucl.ac.uk

It is well-known that, across the history of English, areas of the lexicon show different 'degrees of lexicalization' (Kay et al. 2009: xix), including in the number of partially synonymous words for a given concept at any time. The extent to which these synonyms are established also varies: some survive for many centuries with a relatively stable core meaning, but others recorded in *OED* and period dictionaries are extremely rare or restricted, and some fall out of use very quickly. Some differences in the lexicalization patterns of particular concepts relate to extra-linguistic change in fairly straightforward ways: for example, the number of words for colours increase and show finer distinctions as technology develops to allow the creation of a greater range of dyes, and there are greater numbers of terms related to chemistry as it becomes established as a scientific discipline (Alexander 2018). However, changes in the lexicalization of other semantic areas seems much harder to explain. For example, though *scearp* and several synonyms are found frequently in Old English there appears to be no attested form to express the meaning 'blunt' until much later (Allan 2021); there is very little continuity in the lexis of Speed between Old and Middle English; and there are strikingly few established synonyms for *learn* across the history of English.

This paper uses data from the *Historical Thesaurus of English* to examine antonymous concepts which appear to show asymmetrical lexicalization patterns, and considers what factors might account for the differences these pairs show across the history of English. Some pairs, such as Teach/Learn, seem to be conceptualized differently from one another, and this might explain why one is more highly lexicalized than the other. For example, the process of teaching appears more 'intersubjectively accessible' (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 27) than the process of learning, and therefore might be named using a greater range of synonyms; the same may be true of Tell/Listen. Other imbalances might reflect more general patterns in the lexicon: there are a greater number of adjectives meaning 'stupid' than 'clever' (Allan 2008), and this seems consistent with a general trend towards pejoration and negative evaluative terms, though this trend is not reflected in the early English lexicalization of Ugly and Beautiful. A particularly puzzling pair is Fast/Slow: in PDE *slow* has fewer close synonyms, and this is consistent with the lexicalization of the concepts in Old English and later varieties. The paper explores the issue of asymmetry in the lexicon, and considers whether there are fruitful ways to approach lexicalization patterns through time.

References

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