Semantic change in grammatical terminology

Philomen Probert, University of Oxford

(Keywords: grammatical terminology; lexical semantics; semantic change; ancient Greek; Latin)

When a language changes, grammatical terms may remain in use while acquiring a different value. For example, the distinctive contrast between long and short vowels found in Classical Greek was lost at some point after the Classical period, yet grammarians continued to call some vowels 'long' and others 'short', and continued to put this distinction to work in their descriptions of the language as a whole. In effect, 'length' became an abstract feature: a technical device invoked as part of the overall description of the language.

Grammatical terminology may also be borrowed from the description of one language into that of another, or adopted as loan translations. Once again the value of a term may change in the process. For example, the ancient Greek term *euktikón* 'optative' denotes a category of verb forms to which certain functions attach. In the Latin grammatical tradition the loan translation *optativus* denotes a semantic category with no distinct set of forms: what we would today call the Latin 'subjunctive' is labelled the *optativus* when it is used in a wish.

A common response to such practices is to dismiss them as misguided and unhelpful:

> 'Often a grammarian would take over and work within a traditional frame of reference, assuming that it was satisfactory for his purposes...a more conscious awareness of linguistic principles would have shown that it was not...the best example...[is]...the attempt to describe modern languages as if they were variants of Latin' (Crystal 1971: 69; for this and further examples see Walmsley 2004: 457; 2006: 249).

A different and less judgemental approach is to think of grammatical terms not as being misapplied but as undergoing changes of meaning. Opting for this second approach, this talk will ask whether grammatical words change their meanings via the same mechanisms as other words. Or are there mechanisms of change which are specific to grammatical words?

There is arguably one overriding mechanism (as opposed to path) by which words normally change their meanings: reanalysis of a word's meaning on the basis of potentially ambiguous instances of its use (see among others Fortson 2003: 650–1). The potential for reanalysis may arise in various ways, however. Meillet (1904–5) already distinguished, in essence, between (I) internally-prompted reanalysis, in which cultural factors play no obvious role, and (II) reanalysis brought out by some change in the cultural context in which a word finds itself used. Within the latter category, he distinguished between (IIa) reanalysis brought out by cultural changes affecting a word's denotatum and (IIb) reanalysis brought out by borrowing (or loan-translation) of a word from one group of people to the different cultural context of another group. This classification provides a useful starting point for considering semantic changes affecting items of grammatical terminology. However, because grammatical words denote linguistic categories, changes affecting a linguistic word's denotatum are themselves likely to be linguistic changes. Similarly, if a grammatical word finds itself used by a new group of people whose circumstances are different in relevant ways, those relevant differences are also likely to be linguistic. Care will therefore be needed to distinguish reanalyis that properly comes under type I from reanalysis coming under IIa or IIb.

Via case studies drawn from the Graeco-Roman grammatical tradition, the talk will show firstly that grammatical terms can and do change their meanings in rather ordinary ways fitting into this classification. For instance, it will be argued that ancient Greek *anastrophḗ* 'reversal in word order' undergoes a change of type I to 'shift of accent'; ancient Greek words for 'long' undergo changes of type IIa after the loss of distinctive vowel quantity; ancient Greek *euktikón* 'optative' undergoes changes of type IIb when loan-translated into Latin as *optativus*. But the talk will conclude with a more interesting case, that of ancient Greek *perispōménē* 'circumflex' and its Latin loan-translations such as *circumflexus*. In essence, Latin grammarians came up with something slightly mad that the concept 'circumflex' could mean when applied to Latin (see Probert 2019: 187–244). It will be argued that they did this via a process of linguistic reanalysis with no clear analogue outside grammatical terminology.

References

Crystal, D. 1971. *Linguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Fortson, B. W., IV. 2003. ‘An approach to semantic change’. In B. D. Joseph and R. D. Janda (eds), *The Handbook of Historical Linguistics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 648–66.

Meillet, A. 1904–5. ‘Comment les mots changent de sens’. *L’Année Sociologique* 9: 1–38.

Probert, P. 2019. *Latin grammarians on the Latin accent: the transformation of Greek grammatical thought.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Walmsley, J. 2004. ‘Latein als Objektsprache, English als Metasprache in spätmittelalterlichen grammatischen Texten’. In G. Haßler and G. Volkmann (eds), *History of linguistics in texts and concepts - Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft in Texten und Konzepten*, ii. Münster: Nodus, 455–67.

Walmsley, J. 2006. ‘How the leopard got its spots: English grammatical categories, Latin terms’. In J. Walmsley (ed.), *Inside Old English: Essays in Honour of Bruce Mitchell.* Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 248–67.