

Contrast maintenance in semantic change: chain shifts and renewal

Paul Kiparsky
Stanford University

Functional factors are known to impact sound change in two main ways: contrast preservation through chain shifts, and the re-establishment of symmetry in phonemic systems after they become skewed by mergers. A third proposed functional constraint on sound change would restrict mergers to contrasts which have a low functional load, or to the contexts in which they have a low functional load. It is empirically less well supported and some would reject it entirely. In short, language appears to prefer therapy to prophylaxis (Kiparsky 1974, Lightfoot 1979:149).

In spite of their differences, semantic changes and sound changes share significant formal properties. For example, antonyms often shift their meanings in lockstep, just like minimally differing sounds often undergo parallel phonetic changes. This naturally raises the question whether semantic changes obey the same functional imperatives as sound changes. This talk makes a case that they do. I review the existing evidence for semantic chain shifts, and present new instances of chain shifts in highly structured lexical fields (dimensional adjectives, color terms, and cardinal directions). I summarize the ways in which distinctions that are neutralized by changes in word meanings get renewed by lexical or morphological innovations. I suggest that the third functional constraint does not seem to play a major role on the semantic side either. The upshot is that once we set aside the regularity of sound change, and allow for differences in scale and complexity between the phonological system and the lexicon, these domains have much in common, synchronically and diachronically.