Language variation and change

Historical linguistics: Lexical change

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Lexical change

- a lexeme consists of a sound component and a meaning component
- as we saw, the sound component is apt to change
- so is the meaning component
- additionally, entire lexemes may be lost or added to a language
Semantic change

• frequent types of changes in word meaning:
  • broadening:
    - grm. *Fahrt* + *-ig* → *fertig*
    - original meaning: prepared for a trip
    - now: prepared, finished, exhausted,...
    - grm. *Sache*: original meaning 'legal issue'
    - engl. *ride*: originally 'riding on horseback'
Semantic change

• frequent types of changes in word meaning:
  • split:
    – engl. *gay*, originally 'cheerful', now additional meaning 'male homosexual'
    – *surfen*
Semantic change

- frequent types of changes in word meaning:
  - narrowing:
    - grm. *fahren*: originally: 'all kinds of human travel'
    - grm. *fällen*: originally 'cause to fall', applicable to all kinds of objects (not just trees)
Semantic change

- frequent types of changes in word meaning:
  - meaning shift:
    - *witzig*: 'smart' → 'funny'
    - *billig*: 'appropriate' → 'inexpensive' → 'low quality'
    - *Frau*: 'noble woman, lady' → 'female adult'; *Weib* 'female adult' → derogatory term
  - these are cases of pejoration; shift may also involve amelioration, cf. *marshall* 'staple boy' → 'highest military rank'
  - other frequent subtypes: metaphor, metonymy, implicature, hyperbole, folk etymology
Semantic change

- meaning change is much less orderly than sound change → harder to reconstruct
- still, there are certain regularities
  - common unidirectional cline
    - 'cup' → 'head' → 'chief'
  - 'something' → 'nothing'
  - verb of movement → directional preposition
  - verbs of possession or movement → auxiliaries
- ...
Lexical change

• semantic change may lead to synonymy
• likewise, conventionalization of morphological processes like compounding may lead to synonymy
• synonymy is often unstable
  • either the two lexemes differentiate their meaning, or
  • one of the two lexemes goes extinct
Lexical change

• German words that are close to extinction:

  abermals, blümerant, etepetete, frohlocken, garstig, hanebüchen, ingrimm, knorke, Labsal, schurigeln, Vetter, Base, Zierrat, ...
Lexical change

• sources of new lexemes:
  • semantic change (sometimes in combination with sound change)
  • morphology and syntax
  • shortening of existing words (to be distinguished from sound change); acronyms
  • borrowing
Loanwords

- most conspicuous effect of **language contact**
- may affect large portions of the lexicon of a language (cf. English, Romanian)
- mostly words for cultural concepts, but basic vocabulary may also be affected

**english** *their* ← **onrs. peir**
**finnish** *tytär* ← **est. tütar**
Loanwords

• loanwords undergo same sound shifts as inherited words

  lat. *tegula* → ohg. *ziegal* → nhg. *Ziegel*

• after sufficient time, loan words are phonologically indistinguishable from inherited words

• major obstacle for identifying genetic relationships between languages
Language contact

• language contact affects all aspects of a language, not just its lexicon

• example: “Balkan-Sprachbund”
  • Albanian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbian and Greek share several grammatical features even though they belong to different sub-families of Indo-European
  • for instance: article after the noun, no infinitive constructions, periphrastic future with 'want'

• such areal phenomena a probably quite common

• may be hard to distinguish from features that indicate common descent
Areal features

- Some illustrative examples from WALS
  - http://wals.info/feature/1A#2/19.3/152.8
  - http://wals.info/feature/4A#2/19.3/152.8
  - http://wals.info/feature/11A#2/22.6/152.8
  - http://wals.info/feature/13A#2/19.3/152.8
  - http://wals.info/feature/81A#2/18.0/152.8