_____

ENGLISH SEMANTICS AND THEIR BACKGROUND WITH REFERENCE TO MIDDLE ENGLISH

_____

M. Jayaranjan,
Asst.Professor, Department Of English,
V.R.Siddhartha Engineering College, Vijayawada. India

_____

Abstract:

The paper intends to brings forth the semantic system and the influence of different other countries on English language. The type of semantic change easiest to find between O E and M E (and during M E) is narrowing of meaning. Upon reflection, we should not find this too surprising: because the language acquired far more new words than it lost old ones, the result had to be either many complete synonyms or a general tendency to narrow meanings. It is hard to see how some of the words just discussed , words like *sand, tree* or *feather*, could acquire meanings that were that either elevated or base. When we do detect pejoration, it is usually through context. For instance, we can be sure that OE *cerol* 'peasant , freeman , layman' has degenerated in its meaning when we read a M E phrase like *the foulcherl* , the swyn ('the foul churl, the swine'). Shift of stylistic level are hard to pinpoint for earlier stages of English because the overwhelming majority of English words are appropriate for any stylistic level and because we are not justified in arguing that, just because a word does not appear in, say, a highly formal text , it was therefore inappropriate stylistically. In most of our examples illustrating semantic change, we have used native English words. Loanwords undergo the same kinds of changes. The French loan *garret* shifted in denotative meaning during M E from its earlier meaning of "turret on the top of a tower" to "watchtower." By the end of M E, it was shifting again towards its PDE meaning of "room on the top floor."

Keywords: Semantics, influence, meaning, text, language, middle English etc

_____

Semantic change is difficult to treat systematically because it is so intimately connected to the highly unsystematic real world.. For many OE words we do not even know the denotative meanings because they occur so infrequently in surviving texts and because there were no English-to-English dictionaries complied in OE times to record meanings of words. Without knowing the denotation of a word, we cannot know its connotations.

The possibility of dialectal differences in meaning at a given time is another complication. We may think we have discovered a semantic shift over time because the meaning of a given word in a text from year X + 200 is clearly different from its meaning in a text from year X. But it may be that we simply lack texts from another dialectal area for year X, an area in which the word had the same meaning in year X as in year X + 200. A contemporary example would be the word *jumper*. To most American speakers, a *jumper* is a sleeveless dress, but to most of British speakers, it is a sweater of the type Americans call a *pullover*. (For that matter, if we asked an American electrician what a jumper was, the response would probably be "a wire used to bypass a circuit ," illustrating an occupational dialect.)

The classifications are valid enough, but, alas, many semantic changes do not fit comfortably into cut-and-dried categories and may partake of several of them at the same time. Furthermore, semantic change is rarely all-or-none; overlapping in meaning can continue for generations, even centuries. The same word, with essentially the same denotation, may even have different connotations, in different contexts. Again, a modern example may take the point clearer. In my dialect at least, the word *tricky* has negative, neutral, and positive connotations, depending on the context . Applied to a person, it is strongly negative *(Tricky Dick)*. Applied to a process, it is neutral *(Hanging wallpaper is tricky)*. Applied to the solution of a problem, it is often positive *(What a tricky way of doing it!)*.

However, as the old proverb says, what can't be cured must be endured. Failing a tidy world with tidy meanings, we must do what we can with a chaotic one. We will continue to use the categories of semantic change introduced in Chapter 5, but with the caveat that they are less than perfect descriptions of the actual semantic change that occurred between O E and M E.

Generalization and Narrowing
The type of semantic change easiest to find between O E and M E (and during M E) is narrowing of meaning. Upon reflection, we should not find this too surprising: because the language

_____

acquired far more new words than it lost old ones, the result had to be either many complete synonyms or a general tendency to narrow meanings. With the Latin loan *palate* and the new word *jaw* from an unknown source, M E gome 'gum' came to refer only to the firm connective tissue that surrounds the teeth. O E *sand* had meant either "sand" or "shore." OE *feSer* had meant "feather" or, in the plural, "wings"; when ME borrowed *wing* from Scandinavian, *feather* narrowed to refer only to the plumage of birds . OE *freo had meant "free" or "noble."* When *noble* was borrowed from French to refer to hereditary **rank**, free gradually lost this aspect of its original meaning. Occasionally, narrowing resulted when one native word replaced another in part of its original meaning. O E *beam* could mean either "tree" or the product of a tree (beam , timber , cross , and so on). O E *treow* replaced *beam* in its meaning of the plant in its living state, and at the same time *treow* lost its own earlier applications to trees that had been cut up.

Generalization was less common than narrowing in M E, but there are still numerous examples . For instance, O E *bridd* had meant "young bird"; the general term for a bird was *fugel 'fowl'* . During M E, bird generalized to include fowl of any age (and *fowl* simultaneously began to narrow in application to refer to larger, edible birds). The OE adjective *ruh 'rough'* meant "coarse (of cloth), hairy ,shaggy." In M E , this meaning was extended metaphorically to refer to seas , weather , actions , language , and sounds.

Amelioration and peroration

Examples of amelioration and pejoration are harder to pinpoint, partly because we cannot always be sure how pejorative or nonpejorative a word was, partly because much of the vocabulary of a language is not especially susceptible to the process. It is hard to see how some of the words just discussed , words like *sand, tree* or *feather*, could acquire meanings that were that either elevated or base. When we do detect pejoration, it is usually through context. For instance, we can be sure that OE *cerol* 'peasant , freeman , layman' has degenerated in its meaning when we read a M E phrase like *the foulcherl ,* the swyn ('the foul churl, the swine'). Similarly, when we read in Chaucer about someone who is crafty and so sly, we can be sure that *crafty* has degenerated from its O E meaning of "strong , skillful, clever."A possible example of amelioration during M E might be-depending on one's viewpoint –the word *dizzy*. In O E it meant "foolish, " a meaning that still survives marginally in such expressions as a *dizzy blonde;* but by M E its primary meaning was "suffering from vertigo."

Strengthening and Weakening

Like amelioration and pejoration , the process of strengthening and weakening are limited to the kinds of the words amenable to such change . In general, strengthening is rarer in language than weakening –evidence that people are more prone to exaggeration (which tends to weaken meanings) than to understatement (which tends to strengthen meanings). One example of weakening during M E is that of the word awe. Its etymons, O E *ege* and ON agi , had meant "terror , dread" in general. In M E, it came to refer especially to attitudes toward God , or "reverential fear and respect ." The weakened meaning suggests that fears of unworldly or future things are not as strong as immediate , worldly fears.

Shift in stylistic Level

Shift of stylistic level are hard to pinpoint for earlier stages of English because the overwhelming majority of English words are appropriate for any stylistic level and because we are not justified in arguing that, just because a word does not appear in, say, a highly formal text , it was therefore inappropriate stylistically . Normally , the only time we can detect a change in stylistic level is when we spot a word in an earlier text that would be totally out of place in similar text today. The example of the word *shove* was mentioned in Chapter 5. Another is the verb *smear* . O E *smierwan* meant "anoint , salve , smear." With the advent of the French loan *anoint, smear* came to have connotations of crudeness and even contempt. Certainly today we could speak seriously of a bishop's *smearing* someone's head with oil.

Shift in Denotation

Shift in denotation tend to occur when what was once a subsidiary or extended meaning of a word becomes the central meaning. Examples from M E are numerous. The basic meaning of O E *tid* had been "time"(as in *Christmastide*). O E also had the words *hwil 'time'* and *tima*, which referred primarily to an extent or a period of time. The tides are of course related to time by being periodic. Because of this relationship and because the language already had other words that could take over the "time" meanings of *tide ,* the core of meaning of *tide* itself could shift. Similarly, when ME acquired the word boy, the word *boy,* the word *knight* (OE *cniht)* could shift from its earlier meaning of "boy, male youth" to the narrower meaning of "youthful gentleman-solider."

Analogous shifts in denotation include that of *warp* from "throw" to "twist out of shape," of quick from "alive" to "rapid," of swing from "strike, whip, rush" to "oscillate," and of spell

from "discourse, tale" to "incantational formula." Note that all these changes in referent also involve a narrowing of meaning. The shift in denotation of *wan* is slightly different in principle. In OE, *wann* gad meant "dark, dusky," but during M E, it came to mean "pale," seemingly a complete reversal of meaning. However, the common thread of the two meanings is *lack* of color (hue).

Many semantic changes are hard to classify because several kinds of changes have occurred simultaneously. The fate of the word *grin* provides a good illustration. OE *grennian* meant "to grimace (either in pain or anger or in pleasure), to gnash the teeth, to draw back the lips and display teeth"-close to what we mean by "make a face" today, but the involvement of the teeth seems to have been important. By late M E, *grin* had added the meaning of "to smile in a forced, unnatural manner" without losing completely the earlier meanings. By PDE, the core meaning has shifted still further to mean a broad smile. Since OE times, then , the meaning has narrowed to eliminate the meaning of "snarl" and "grimace in pain of anger." It has also broadened to include the idea of smiling. There has been a shift in basic denotative focus from the teeth to lips. (I can grin without showing my teeth, but not without curling my lips upward.) And there certainly has been a deterioration in stylistic level- we would not say "My hostess grinned politely as I complimented her on the dinner."

In most of our examples illustrating semantic change, we have used native English words. Loanwords undergo the same kinds of changes. The French loan *garret* shifted in denotative meaning during M E from its earlier meaning of "turret on the top of a tower" to "watchtower." By the end of M E, it was shifting again towards its PDE meaning of "room on the top floor." When first introduced into English, the French loan *fairy* meant "fairyland," "fairy people collectively ," or "magic." In late M E, the meaning of "an individual supernatural being" was added, and all the other previous meanings were declining (though they were not to be totally lost until E M n E). A dramatic example of semantic amelioration is that of the French loan *nice*. In its earlier uses in English, it meant "foolish, stupid, wanton ." During the fifteenth century, it began to improve its status by acquiring the additional meanings of "flamboyant, elegant, rare, modest," but also acquired the pejorative meanings of "slothful, unmanly." We must, however, wait until later periods for its present vague meaning of "pleasant" to develop.

References:

- An Introduction to Old English By G. L. Brook Manchester University Press, 1955
- Essentials of Early English By Jeremy J. Smith Routledge, 1999
- Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer By Henry Sweet; Norman Davis Clarendon Press, 1980 (9th edition)
- Case Marking and Reanalysis: Grammatical Relations from Old to Early Modern English By Cynthia L. Allen Oxford University Press, 1999