

*For my parents*

# The Oxford Guide to Etymology

Philip Durkin

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## Semantic change

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In the last chapter we looked in detail at change in word form, and we saw how a systematic approach to this area gives a very solid basis to etymological research. In the present chapter we will turn our attention to change in meaning. As we explored in the early chapters of this book, words have meaning as well as form, and both can and do change over the course of time. However, change in word meaning is generally much less amenable to systematic analysis than change in word form. Semantic changes are notoriously difficult to classify or systematize, and we have no tool comparable to the historical grammar to help us judge what is or is not likely or plausible. Further, although some semantic changes occur in clusters, with a change in one word triggering a change in another, we do not find anything comparable to a regular sound change, affecting all comparable environments within a single historical period. In this respect semantic changes are more similar to sporadic sound changes, but with the

major difference that they are much more varied, and show the influence of a much wider set of motivating factors. Additionally, semantic change is much more closely connected with change in the external, non-linguistic world, especially with developments in the spheres of culture and technology. In studying semantic change we must therefore cast our net much wider, although when we come to consider change in the remoter past we will be confronted all too often by problems arising from lack of knowledge about the timeframe and the cultural circumstances within which a particular change occurred.

In this chapter we will look at some of the traditional methods of classifying semantic change, as well as at some more recent approaches, particularly from the standpoint of cognitive linguistics. We will also look at some insights from recent work on grammaticalization, where some of the most impressive advances have been made in identifying major trends. In a recent survey of work on semantic change in comparative linguistics, Sheldon Harrison acknowledges the importance of such work, but comments on the general situation as follows:

While it may not be entirely fair to say that comparativists have done nothing to clarify the notion 'similar meanings,' we haven't done much... We are still very much at the data-collection stage in this endeavour, and are informed in it only by vague senses of what are possible metaphors or metonymies. Sadly, we don't really pay much attention to the meaning side of things. In general, unless a particular meaning comparison grossly offends some very general sense of metaphor, it's 'anything goes' with regard to meaning.

(Harrison (2003) 219)

In the final section of this chapter we will look at some cases from both historical and reconstructed periods of linguistic history where lack of certainty about the likely course of semantic development poses considerable difficulties for etymological research.

### 8.1 Meaning change is a common phenomenon

Even the most casual inspection of any historical or etymological dictionary will show that words change in meaning over time. We saw some striking examples in chapter 1 in the histories of *sad*, *deer*, and *treacle*.

Even very basic words can and do show change in meaning. In Old English, as in the earliest stages of other Germanic languages, the word *man*

had the senses 'human being' and 'adult male human being', the two only being distinguished by context. Additionally, the words *wer* and *wāpman* were available with the meaning 'adult male human being', as distinguished from *wif* (modern English *wife*) and *wifmann* (modern English *woman*) in the meaning 'adult female human being'. Neither *wer* nor *wāpman* survives beyond the early Middle English period, and we find that during the course of the Middle English period *man* becomes the usual word in the sense 'adult male human being' (and thus the opposite of *woman*), and becomes much less common in the wider sense 'human being'. It becomes obsolete in this sense in the early modern period (last attested in 1597 in Bishop John King 'The Lord had but one paire of men in Paradise'), except in general, abstract, or indefinite uses, as in e.g. 'All men are born equal'. Even this use is now avoided by many people in the light of modern feminist perspectives: it is perceived as excluding women, either implicitly or explicitly, and hence it is avoided and replaced by other constructions which are less ambiguous. This first illustration brings to the foreground three major concerns in the study of meaning change. We need to pay close attention to:

- (i) the relationships between the various meanings shown by a word
- (ii) the relationships between different words and their meanings
- (iii) the relationships between linguistic meaning and cultural, extralinguistic history

As already noted, a major strand in historical linguistic work over the past several decades has been the study of grammaticalization, the process by which words develop increasingly grammatical meanings and functions over time. *may* has developed from a proto-Germanic verb with the meaning 'to be strong or able, to have power'. From this there developed the (dynamic, or root, modal) sense 'to be able (to do something)', from which in turn developed the (epistemic modal) use describing possibility, e.g. 'it may be the case that', 'this may happen'. We will look at some important generalizations which have been drawn from such processes in section 8.7.2.1; we can state at this point:

- (iv) (a) Grammaticalization typically involves increasing internalization or subjectification of meaning
- (b) Such a pathway is characteristic of many other semantic changes

Words denoting material objects in everyday use have also often shown quite dramatic shifts in meaning. *toilet* was borrowed into English from French in the sixteenth century. It earliest denoted various different items

made of cloth used for specific purposes, including a cloth cover for a dressing table. From this sense (by metonymy) it also came to denote: all of the items used in dressing; the dressing table itself; the act of dressing or, more recently, of washing and grooming.<sup>1</sup> From the early nineteenth century the word is found denoting a dressing room, or (at first euphemistically) the room in which a lavatory is found, and hence the lavatory itself. Once this sense became established in general use, the senses 'dressing', 'washing', or 'grooming' became very much less frequent, in part because of genuine ambiguity, but in part because of polite avoidance of a word with lavatorial connotations. (Collocations which were frequent in earlier use such as 'a fine toilet table', 'a set of toilet brushes', or 'she is presently at her toilet' would today in most contexts be considered either comical or embarrassing or both. Similarly *eau de toilette* is now normally preferred to the loan translation *toilet water*.) Similar developments can be observed in the development also of the word *lavatory*. We can thus add two further general observations:

- (v) The connotations of one meaning of a word can have a dramatic effect on its other uses
- (vi) Meaning development can show an intricate connection with technological developments in the material, extralinguistic world

## 8.2 Polysemy and meaning change

In sections 2.1.4, 3.3, and 3.4 we looked at polysemy, the situation where a single word shows two or more meanings concurrently. The existence of such situations is essential to many of the types of developments in meaning change which we touched on in section 8.1. The interaction between the senses of a word demands the same model for variation in linguistic change which we encountered at various points in our examination of change in word form in chapter 7:

$$A > A \sim B > B$$

That is to say, in the context of change in meaning, a situation where a word has only meaning 'A' is not typically followed by a situation where it has only meaning 'B', but by an intermediate period in which it has both meanings 'A' and 'B'. Investigation of meaning change involves an important corollary

<sup>1</sup> For a slightly different interpretation of the early stages of the meaning history of *toilet* see Traugott and Dasher (2005) 58–9.

to this model, which we already saw in outline in chapter 3: although it is possible for both formal and semantic divergence to give rise to two separate words where historically only a single word existed, a much more typical pattern is for semantic change to result in words becoming polysemous, with a set of senses showing often very complex inter-relationships and interconnections which can change and develop over time.

It is likely that most semantic changes are gradual in the same way as those affecting *man* and *may*, that is to say that they proceed little by little chronologically, even when their effects may appear abrupt. We may hypothesize a (metonymic) change by which a word *x* in period A has the meaning 'nose' (meaning *a*), but in period B it has the meaning 'chin' (meaning *b*). In one sense the process must be abrupt in a case like this, since any given use must have either one sense or the other, even if it may be used punningly or with other allusion to the other sense. However, it is likely that, even if each individual use of the word is categorically either the one sense or the other, there will be a period in which polysemy occurs, and some uses are in sense *a*, others in sense *b*. Thus while our historical records may only give us evidence for period A (when all examples are in sense *a*) and for period B (when all examples are in sense *b*), there is nonetheless likely to have intervened a period X in which both *a* and *b* were found.<sup>2</sup>

A powerful model for examining many changes in meaning is provided by prototype semantics, and especially the 'diachronic prototype semantics' presented by Geeraerts (1997).<sup>3</sup> Many traditional models of meaning have looked for invariable components which must be fulfilled by any use of a word in a particular meaning. The difficulties of this traditional approach emerge if we consider a (much-studied) case: the word *fruit* and the semantic category it denotes. We can fairly easily draw up a list of features which most fruits have in common, but we can just as easily find exceptions: a strawberry is unlike many other fruits in that it does not have seeds which are (a) inedible and (b) located centrally, and it also lacks a thick outer skin; similarly, a banana does not have clearly demarcated seeds which are inedible. Prototype semantics resolves these difficulties: having seeds which are inedible and located centrally, and having a thick outer skin, are among the prototypical qualities of a fruit, but this does not mean that every fruit will show all of these qualities. Thus, strawberries and bananas remain very good examples of fruit, because they have many of the other

<sup>2</sup> For detailed discussion of such processes see Traugott and Dasher (2005).

<sup>3</sup> See also the essays collected in Geeraerts (2006), and for an overview see also Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2007).

qualities typical of the members of this class.<sup>4</sup> The various types of *berry* which we encountered in section 2.6 provide a similar example; see also *petal* in section 5.4. Diachronically, what was peripheral or marginal in one period may become part of the prototypical core of the meaning of a word. If we return to the example of *man*, we could analyse what has happened here diachronically as a case of prototype shift. Formerly, the prototypical meaning was 'human being', with 'adult male human being' as a contextually determined specific meaning. In the Middle English period, the prototype shifted: 'adult male human being' became the prototypical meaning, and generic uses to denote any person irrespective of gender are now understood as showing extended uses of this (and are as such now avoided by many people).

Historical dictionaries normally group together examples on the basis of semantic similarity, but this may mean that a sense has earlier 'outlier' examples, showing uses which were, viewed synchronically, unprototypical, followed by later examples from a period in which this sense has become part of the prototypical use of the word.<sup>5</sup>

A good deal of important recent work on historical meaning change has focused on the relationship between semantics and pragmatics, and on how new word meanings can arise from implicatures which are made when a speaker addresses a hearer, or a writer addresses a reader. Traugott and Dasher (2005) distinguish between: (i) 'utterance-token meanings', i.e. invited inferences which are used innovatively by speakers or writers; (ii) 'utterance-type meanings', i.e. invited inferences or implicatures which have become firmly established in the language (e.g. the causal implicature of *after* in sentences such as *After the trip to Minnesota she felt very tired*); and (iii) 'coded meanings (semantics)', i.e. the conventional meanings of words (Traugott and Dasher (2005) 16–17). In the 'invited inferencing theory of semantic change', new meanings can be seen as developing from 'utterance-token meanings' to 'utterance-type meanings' to 'coded meanings'.<sup>6</sup> It is important to bear in mind the pragmatic contexts of language use whenever considering diachronic semantic change.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of this example see Geeraerts (1997) 12–23.

<sup>5</sup> The identification of senses is a controversial subject, and has been approached from a variety of different perspectives. For two views from the standpoint of synchronic lexicography see Hanks (2000) and Kilgarriff (1997). For an overview of the approach of *OED* and many other historical dictionaries see Silva (2000). On the different approaches often taken by semanticists and lexicographers, and the opportunities for fruitful common ground, see Kay (2000), Geeraerts (2007).

<sup>6</sup> On the processes involved see Traugott and Dasher (2005) 35, 38.

### 8.3 Semantic polygenesis

One consequence of such models of meaning development is that the same meaning may easily arise independently in two different historical periods, a process which Geeraerts calls semantic polygenesis (Geeraerts (1997) 62–8). However, it can be difficult to tell such cases apart from cases where a particular sense was actually in continuous use but there is simply a gap in the historical record. Indeed, even a continuous historical record may conceal a number of separate innovative uses, in the same way that we saw with nonce formation of word forms in sections 2.3 and 3.2.

In assessing such situations we often have to take into account various idiosyncrasies of the historical record of a particular language. For instance, in English there can often be particular problems in deciding whether a sense shows continuity of use when there is a gap in the record between the early modern period and modern regional use, since we know that documentation for most regional varieties of English is almost completely absent between the Middle English period and the nineteenth century. *OED* records *make* in the sense '(of a father) to beget' with a gap between use in 1616 in Shakespeare and 1924 in a work of dialect literature. Similarly it records *mannered* in the sense 'having good manners; well-behaved, polite; refined, gracious, sophisticated' with a gap between 1575 and 1829, after which date the sense is found in regional use. In such cases, has the meaning fallen out of use in other varieties but been retained in regional varieties, or has it been created anew in modern regional use?

In other cases polygenesis of the type posited by Geeraerts seems more likely. For instance, *massy* shows the sense 'dense in texture or consistency; compact, substantial' with a gap between 1580 and 1805. Use is found in a variety of different text types in each period, and there is no particular indication either of restricted regional distribution or of revival from the literary record. Therefore in this case the likeliest explanation seems to be that we have independent development of the same meaning in two different periods, although an accidental failure in the historical record cannot be completely ruled out.

### 8.4 Meaning change in a semantically complex word: *quaint*

In his analysis of the history of the word *quaint*, Samuels (1972: 76) provides a classic account of how the senses of a polysemous word interact with one

another diachronically. The following are the main senses which Samuels distinguishes, drawn from the first edition of the *OED*, but collapsing some minor senses together, plus the dates he gives for first and last attestation for each, drawn again from the *OED* (I have added the dates for the corresponding senses from the new edition of the *OED*, so that we can see to what extent Samuels's detailed arguments are still borne out by revised documentation for the word's history):

- 1 Wise, knowing, skilled, clever: 1250–1728 (now *a*1250–1834)
- 2 Cunning, crafty, given to scheming: 1225–1680 (now *c*1230–1814)
- 3 Cunningly or skilfully made (of things), elaborate: 1290–1631 (now *c*1300–1814)
- 4 Beautiful, pretty, dainty, handsome, fashionable, elegant: 1300–1784 (now *c*1300–1785)
- 5 (Rarer meanings) proud, haughty: 1225–1430 (now *c*1230–1610)  
fastidious, prim: 1483–1678 (now 1483–1849)
- 6 Ingeniously elaborated, refined, smart, full of conceits, affected: 14th cent.–1783 (now *c*1395–1847)
- 7 Strange, unusual, odd, curious: 14th cent.–1808 (now *c*1325 to present day, but only in regional use after 1808)
- 8 Unusual but attractive in an old-fashioned way: 1795 to present day (now 1762 to present day)

Samuels's analysis is worth tracing through in detail. He observes that: 'Senses (1), (2), (3) and (5) were all obsolete or obsolescent by the seventeenth century. (2) had been ousted by the developments of (3), which, when transferred from things to persons, resulted in (4), (6) and (7).' If we look at the first dates of each of these senses, Samuels's observations look at first rather odd, since all of the first seven senses are first attested in very roughly the same period. However, *quaint* is a borrowing from French, and comparison with the senses which appear to have been inherited from (Anglo-)French does point rather more to senses 6 and 7 at least being innovations in English, but probably not 4. The corresponding French senses are (as summarized in *OED3*): 'clever, astute, quick-witted, experienced, expert, crafty, cunning, brave, gracious, elegant, pleasant, smart, fashionable, devious, underhand, arrogant, (of a thing) ingenious'. What stands out most from the chronology of the English senses is that, after a long period of stability, sense 8 appears in the mid eighteenth century as the first major new sense in nearly five hundred years, and then between

the late eighteenth century and the mid nineteenth century all of the other senses of the word disappear. Samuels's analysis is as follows: '(4) and (7) ... combined in (8), and then, *as soon as this had happened*, (4), (6) and (7) vanished'. The revised documentation of the new edition of the *OED* makes Samuels's analysis here even more convincing: the first appearance of sense 8 now antedates rather than postdates the last attestations for senses 4 and 6, thus making it more plausible that the development of sense 8 could have led to the loss of senses 4 and 6.<sup>7</sup> Most important of all is Samuels's analysis of the reason for this development:

Until the late eighteenth century, wide polysemy had been tolerated in this word, but as soon as it was extended to a complex meaning with an individual twist, all the other meanings had to come to an end. The development is pejorative only by comparison with meaning (4), and the reasons for the peculiar twist in sense for this word are probably extralinguistic, e.g. the younger generation might hear the word applied in meaning (4) by their elders to objects, qualities or persons still admired by the older, but not by the younger generation, who would thus come to interpret it in meaning (8).

This explanation surely retains validity, even if the revised dating might make us wonder whether sense 8 might not also have been the immediate cause of the loss of sense 1 as well. So far at least, no explanation has been found as to why this last sense should have arisen in the mid eighteenth century and not before, but once it did it led to a radical adjustment in the range of senses of a word which had shown a high degree of polysemy with relative stability for hundreds of years, with the end result that the word is now practically monosemous, outside certain restricted registers.

### 8.5 Influence from other words

Our examination of *quaint* has exemplified the relationships among the meanings of a semantically complex word. However, as noted in section 8.1,

<sup>7</sup> Senses 2 and 3 both also now have last dates later than the first date for sense 8, although it should be noted that in both cases the later evidence is scarce and clearly archaizing in tone. Samuels does omit one other sense, 'Of an action, scheme, device, etc.: characterized or marked by cleverness, ingenuity, or cunning', for which *OED3* now shows currency from *c*1225 up to the present day. However, *OED3* labels this as 'now rare and arch[aic]', and its post-1800 attestations are all in literary sources, and are also largely in collocations which may to some extent be lexicalized, such as *quaint design* and *quaint device*, suggesting that the assumption remains correct that sense 8 remains the only sense with any genuine currency in everyday language.

the inter-relationships and interaction between the meanings of different words can also be of considerable importance in semantic change. We will consider these in two separate groups: semantic relationships with other words of related meaning, and semantic relationships with other words of similar form.

#### 8.5.1 Relationships with words of related meaning

A good example of how dangerous it can be to try to consider a word's semantic development in isolation from other words in the same semantic field is provided by the word *board*. This is an inherited Germanic word, Old English *bord*, Middle English *bord*. (Old English *bord* originally showed a merger of two distinct words, and the Middle English word probably also showed some semantic influence from (Anglo-)French *bord* and from Old Norse *borð*, but that need not concern us here.)

Middle English *bord* could denote:

a plank or board; an object made of boards (such as a wooden tablet for inscriptions or a wooden tray); a ship; the side of a ship; a shield; a table, including various specific kinds of table for working on or for dining at; hence a meal; (in late Middle English) a board for playing a game on

This summary would be an oversimplification if we wanted to study the meanings of Middle English *bord* in detail, but it suffices to indicate some significant differences from the meanings of modern English *board*. Some specific senses, such as 'a ship' or 'a shield', have become obsolete, and can be regarded as dead offshoots in the word's history: so far as the relationship with other English words is concerned, *board* has simply ceased to be a synonym of *ship* or *shield*. However, the sense 'side of a ship', although itself now obsolete, gave rise to the expressions *on board* and *overboard*, now found in a wide variety of different contexts, including metaphorical uses, e.g. of someone *taking an idea on board* or *throwing something overboard*.

Other changes are rather more complex, and can only be explained adequately when we consider the semantic relationships of *board* with several other English words. (In doing this we adopt an onomasiological approach, as typified by a thesaurus, rather than the semasiological approach typified by a dictionary; although in practice historical dictionaries combine aspects of both approaches.) To take the first of the Middle English meanings listed above, 'a plank or board' would not be a good definition of modern English *board* when it denotes a flat

piece of wood used by a builder, precisely because *board* is now usually distinguished in meaning from *plank*, a Middle English borrowing from (Anglo-)French. In modern English a *board* is something which is typically wider and often also thinner than a *plank*, although a *floorboard* may be much closer to the dimensions of a *plank*. In Middle English the two words had much more semantic overlap, although Middle English *planke* is less likely to denote a particularly wide piece of wood than *bord* is. Both words also showed more semantic overlap with *timber* (another word inherited from Old English) than they do in modern English.

Much more complex differentiation has taken place between *board* and another (Anglo-)French loanword, *table*. The complexity of the semantic differentiation which has occurred between these two words can be seen if we also summarize some of the main senses of Middle English *table*:

a plank or board (or various other sorts of pieces of wood, such as posts, splints, etc.); a slab or tablet of stone, wood, or other material, especially one used for writing or painting on; a board for playing a game on; a cleared piece of land for planting crops on; a plate forming part of an instrument; (in building) a floor; a tabular arrangement of words, symbols, etc.; a table (i.e. a piece of furniture consisting of a board supported on four legs); hence a meal, regular daily meals, supply of food in a household

In modern English there is much less overlap between the two words semantically, and some senses which in Middle English could be expressed by either *table* or *board* are now expressed only by *table*, others only by *board* (or by *plank*, or by other words which we have not considered here such as *tablet*). The piece of furniture is in modern English almost always denoted by *table*, but the provision of meals by *board*, especially in collocations such as *board and lodging* or *full board*.

A further important development in the meaning of *board* from the sense 'table' only occurred slightly after the end of the Middle English period, and is still found today, in spite of the loss of the basic sense 'table':

table > (specifically) council table > meeting of a council (at a council table) > the members of a council collectively > the body of people responsible for the governance or administration of a business, institution, etc.

Thus, in the case of *board*, the senses of the word have become rather fragmented. The sense 'table', which forms the link between the senses 'piece of wood', 'regular meals', and 'governing or administrative body' has been lost, except as a deliberate archaism. Similarly, the sense 'side of a ship' is obscured in the now clearly lexicalized expression *on board*, which now has

the basic sense 'on the ship' rather than 'onto the ship'. We can thus see a process by which the sort of homonymy which we considered in section 3.3 can arise. (For similar examples compare *office* or the adjective *fair*. See von Wartburg (1969) 112–22 for extended discussion of some further examples, chiefly from French.)

### 8.5.2 Relationships with words of similar form

We sometimes find that one word's semantic development is affected by association with another word of the same or similar sound which is historically unrelated. This is the mirror image of the process of contamination which we looked at in section 7.4.4, where semantic association affects word form.

The verb *moulder* is a derivative of *mould* 'earth', a word of Germanic descent with cognates of similar meaning in most of the other Germanic languages. Its usual meaning is 'to crumble to dust', but it also shows uses with the meaning 'to rot', as in the following quotation from the *OED*:

1950 T. S. ELIOT *Cocktail Party* II. 129 What have they to go back to? To the stale food mouldering in the larder, the stale thoughts mouldering in their minds.

In such uses it is likely that the word shows semantic association with the etymologically unrelated word *mould* 'woolly or furry growth on food, textiles, etc.'

The meanings of the verb *mean* can be analysed as showing six main branches of development:

to intend, to signify, to mention, to have an opinion, to remember, to go towards

The word is an inherited Germanic verb, and the first four of these sense branches have good parallels among the other Germanic languages. However, 'to remember' and 'to go towards' do not. It is conceivable that they simply show sense developments which happen to have occurred only in English, with no influence from any other word. However, it is also possible that these senses arose through association respectively with the following two words:

- *min* 'to remember' (a borrowing from Norse of a word ultimately related to *mind*)
- *min* 'to intend, to direct one's course, go' (a derivative of Old English *myne* 'mind, intention, remembrance, memory')



These words were not homophones of *mean*, but it is possible that the resemblance in sound led to association or confusion of their meanings. This hypothesis is supported in the case of *min* 'to remember' by the fact that *mean* and *min* with this meaning are often found as variant readings in medieval texts, suggesting that confusion existed between them.

To take another example, Old French *porsuir* (> English *pursue*) is the formal reflex of classical Latin *prōsequī*, which has among its meanings:

to follow, pursue, follow up, continue with, to pursue a claim for, to attend, accompany, to honour or present (someone) with

But the range of meanings shown by Old French *porsuir* is rather wider than would be suggested by the meanings of its Latin etymon:

to follow with intent to overtake and capture, to persecute, to strive for (a circumstance, event, condition, etc.), to besiege, to accompany, escort, to carry on to the end, to accomplish, to pester (someone) in order to obtain something, (of misfortune, etc.) to assail persistently, to follow up (a course of action begun), to seek to obtain (something) through a court of law, (in law) to bring an action against, to proceed along (a path, etc.), to investigate, study

A number of these senses show the likely semantic influence of the formally distinct Old French verb *parsuir* or its etymon classical Latin *persequī*. Among the meanings of *persequī* are:

to seek out, to pursue, to follow with hostility or malignity, to harass, to chase, hunt, to examine, follow up, to go through with or persist in

Among the meanings of Old French *parsuir* are:

to follow with intent to overtake and capture, to search out, to persecute, to complete, to carry out, accomplish, to carry on, continue, to conform to, to comply with

In this instance, the two Latin verbs ultimately show different prefixed forms, in *prō-* and *per-* respectively, of the same verb, *sequī* 'to follow'. In Old French the formal reflex of the one, *porsuir*, appears to have borrowed senses from the other, *parsuir* (which ultimately became obsolete). The situation is thus very similar to a merger in word form (compare section 3.5), but what appears to have happened here is that instead of the two words becoming indistinguishable in form, the one word acquired additional

meanings from the other, which subsequently became obsolete. (The formal association of the two words may have been aided by the fact that in the heavily abbreviated writing typical of many medieval manuscripts the abbreviations for *per-* and *pro-* were very similar. Compare section 7.2.5 on the identical abbreviations used for *per-* and *par-*.)

### 8.6 Some basic types of change

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, one of the main concerns in historical semantics has traditionally been the classification of different types of semantic change. This is obviously of great importance for etymological research: if we want to know whether a particular semantic change is likely to have occurred in one word history, it will be crucially important to know whether similar changes have occurred in other word histories. However, identifying similarity is a far from simple matter. If we compare the situation with sporadic sound changes, it is usually relatively simple to identify cases of metathesis, for example. However, in the case of semantic change it can be much more difficult to identify the exact circumstances of change in any given instance, or to pinpoint when a change has occurred. As we have seen from the examples already considered, a great many different factors can be at play in the semantic development of a word.

In this section we will look at some of the typical processes of semantic change which are most commonly identified in the scholarly literature: broadening, narrowing, pejoration, amelioration, metaphor, and metonymy.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that these are not hard and fast categories. Some scholars identify additional distinct categories, while others would collapse some of those presented here.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, there is often ambiguity as to which category a particular example belongs to.

As a final but important proviso, we should note that these are strictly only the outcomes of semantic change, rather than the mechanisms themselves, which we have already touched on in section 8.2.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the history of scholarship in this area see Traugott and Dasher (2005) 51–104.

<sup>9</sup> For a very useful analysis of some of the key issues see Traugott (2006).

<sup>10</sup> For a slightly different perspective on this question compare also Fortson (2003) 650.

### 8.6.1 Broadening

Broadening is the process by which a word comes to have wider semantic application. We could put this another way, and say that a restriction on the meaning of a word is lost, or that meaning becomes less specific. Sometimes the term generalization is used instead.

French *arriver* (> English *arrive*) has the same basic meaning in modern French as in English. However, when it is first attested in Old French in the eleventh century it has the sense 'to disembark, to reach the river bank, to land'. It is either the reflex of or is formed on the model of post-classical Latin *arripere*, which is found in the same sense from the ninth century, and is formed from classical Latin *ad* 'to, at' and *rīpa* 'river bank'. Subsequently the meaning was broadened to reaching any sort of destination, or to put it another way, the restriction to 'river bank' or to 'travel by water' was lost. (This broader sense is attested in French from the second half of the twelfth century, but the evidence of some of the other Romance languages suggests that it actually developed earlier in Latin.)

German *Limonade* is a seventeenth-century borrowing from French *limonade* 'lemonade'. However, in the nineteenth century the sense became broadened to any kind of soft drink. Thus in modern German one finds compounds such as *Orangenlimonade* 'orange soft drink', and lemonade itself is now often distinguished as *Zitronenlimonade*, a new compound with *Zitrone* 'lemon' as its first element. In this instance the broadening of the meaning of *Limonade* was probably facilitated by the semantic shift of German *Limone*, which is a fourteenth-century borrowing from French *limon* 'lemon', but which now has the sense 'lime' in standard German.

Similarly, in some varieties of modern Scottish English, *ginger*, originally by ellipsis from *ginger beer*, is found in broadened use denoting any fizzy soft drink. (See *Scottish National Dictionary Supplement*, and compare Smith (1996) 117.) In other varieties of Scottish English, *juice* has the broadened sense 'soft drink', with the result that for instance a drink made from the juice of oranges, rather than simply having an orange taste, is typically distinguished as *fresh orange* rather than *orange juice*. (For examples see the SCOTS corpus at <http://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/>.)

Related to broadening is bleaching, where the semantic content of a word becomes reduced as the grammatical content increases, for instance in the development of intensifiers such as *awfully*, *terribly*, *horribly* (e.g. *awfully late*, *awfully big*, *awfully small*) or *pretty* (*pretty good*, *pretty bad*, *pretty*

*small*, etc.), or earlier in the history of English *very*: this originally meant 'truly', and was a conversion during the Middle English period from *verrai* 'true', which was borrowed from (Anglo-)French *verrai* (modern French *vrai*). (Compare also section 8.7.2.1 on *very*.)

### 8.6.2 Narrowing

Conversely, narrowing is the process by which a word comes to have more restricted application. Or we could put this another way, and say that a restriction has been added to the meaning, or that meaning becomes more specific. Sometimes the term specialization is used instead.

We encountered in section 1.3.3 the narrowing of *deer* from 'animal' to 'deer', a particular type of animal. Similarly, *meat* shows a slow process of change in its history within English from 'food in general' to 'flesh of an animal (as food)', replacing *flesh* in general use in this sense. In section 3.1 we saw narrowing in the case of *poke* from 'bag, small sack' to 'small bag or pouch worn on the person' to 'purse, wallet'.

*herb* is an early Middle English borrowing from French. In early use it has two main senses:

- any plant whose stem is not woody or persistent (i.e. anything not a tree or a shrub)
- any plant whose leaves, or stem and leaves, are used for food or medicine, or in some way for their scent or flavour

The first of these has been lost, except for very restricted technical use in botanical registers, and the core meaning today is the narrower second one, which has narrowed further to exclude e.g. green vegetables. In this instance a full investigation of the meaning development would need to look also at the meanings of other terms in the same semantic field, such as *plant*, *wort*, *weed*, or indeed *tree*, *shrub*, as we did in the case of *board* in section 8.5.1.

### 8.6.3 Pejoration and amelioration

Pejoration and amelioration (or sometimes melioration) describe the acquisition respectively of less positive or more positive meanings. The main importance of these processes is the effect that they tend to have on the other senses of a word. This is particularly the case with pejoration.

We saw in section 8.4 how the development of the meaning 'unusual but attractive in an old-fashioned way' had a dramatic effect on the use of *quaint*

in such senses as 'beautiful, pretty, dainty, handsome, fashionable, elegant'. A similar pressure is likely to have occurred in the history of the word *silly* in English, which has developed in meaning as follows:

- happy, blessed, pious
- > innocent, harmless, helpless, weak, deserving of pity
- > feeble-minded, foolish, stupid

We do not know the circumstances of the extensions of meaning which occurred or their motivation, but it is likely that at each stage in this development the establishment of the new senses led to the loss of the older ones. (For the classic account of this word history, and an often reproduced diagram illustrating it, see Samuels (1972) 65–7.)

Pejoration and amelioration are both frequent in words denoting social ranks, positions, etc. The sense development of English *knave* can be summarized as follows:

- boy
- > (with narrowing)
- young male servant
- > (with broadening)
- any (low status) male servant
- > (with pejoration)
- base and crafty rogue

Similarly *churl* shows a development from 'male human being' to 'freeman of the third and lowest rank' to 'serf, bondman' to 'peasant, countryman' to 'impolite and mean-spirited person'. A semantic history such as this one shows the close connection between meaning change and social and cultural history. The development from 'peasant, countryman' to 'impolite and mean-spirited person' reflects the low esteem in which the working people of the countryside have often been held. Similarly the meaning of *villain* has developed from the general meaning 'serf' to denoting someone whose behaviour is criminal or reprehensible.<sup>11</sup>

Amelioration is sometimes found in the names of military ranks. For instance *marshal* originally denoted 'a person in charge of the upkeep of horses' (the first element is cognate with *mare*), gradually coming to be the

<sup>11</sup> Another interesting group of words to investigate are forms of address such as *Mr*, *Mrs*, French *monsieur*, *madame*, German *Herr*, *Frau*.

title of high offices in the royal household and in the army because of the importance of the horse in the medieval state, and particularly of cavalry in medieval warfare. As we saw in section 4.4.3, *major* was originally a clipped form of *sergeant-major*, but *major* now denotes a rather higher ranking officer than it did in early use, while *sergeant-major* denotes a considerably lower ranking one.

A very interesting example is provided by comparison of English *knight* with German *Knecht*. The two words are cognate, and both earliest have the meaning 'boy'. However, the semantic development shown in each language in the course of the medieval period is radically different:

#### German *Knecht*

- boy, lad
- > boy or lad employed as a servant or attendant
- > servant, farm labourer, menial

#### English *knight*

- boy, lad
- > boy or lad employed as a servant or attendant
- > high-ranking (originally military) attendant or follower of the monarch or of another person of very high status

Examples like this one show the severe limits on predictability in semantic change. In each case the semantic development is easily understood in terms of the social and cultural history of the Middle Ages, but in the two languages the outcomes are radically different, even though the two societies concerned were identical in all of the respects which are relevant here, and English *knight* could have developed the meaning 'servant, farm labourer, menial' just as German *Knecht* could have developed the meaning 'high-ranking attendant or follower'. See further section 8.7.1 on this topic. (In fact in modern German the word for a knight is *Ritter*, showing semantic specialization, at first in Low German or Dutch, of a word which originally had the broader meaning 'rider'.)

A word often develops a pejorated sense through generalization of the connotative meaning of a collocation in which it frequently occurs. In section 7.2.5 we encountered *arrant* 'notorious, downright', which originated as a variant of *errant* 'wandering'. This pejorated narrowed sense developed from the connotative meaning of the frequent collocation *errant rogue* or *arrant rogue*, originally 'an outlawed roving robber', hence 'a common or out-and-out thief'. As a result of reanalysis the word came to be used

analogously in other collocations with a depreciative sense, e.g. *arrant traitor*, *arrant knave*, *arrant ass*.

#### 8.6.4 Metaphor and metonymy

The terms 'metaphor' and 'metonymy' both date back to antiquity as terms of rhetorical analysis, the names of traditional 'figures of speech'. In this tradition, a metaphor is an implicit comparison, as contrasted with a simile or explicit comparison. In a metaphor one thing, sometimes called the 'tenor', is referred to by the name of another, sometimes called the 'vehicle'. A metonymy shows the extended use of a term to denote something which is conceptually contiguous with the thing which it normally denotes.

In linguistics, the same terms are used to denote two typical processes of semantic change. (For examples see the following two sections.) The same definitions as given in the last paragraph remain valid, but the conception of the processes is rather different. Crucially, they are not perceived, as in the rhetorical tradition, as conscious stylistic devices belonging to heightened language, but as largely unconscious processes in meaning development, just like narrowing, broadening, pejoration, or amelioration.

In the cognitive linguistics tradition which emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century, metaphor and metonymy have a very important role. In this tradition, the metaphors and metonymies seen in actual linguistic usage are regarded as reflections of more fundamental mappings in the mind, i.e. as reflections of the ways in which people conceptualize the world and process abstract thought. In the very influential conceptual metaphor theory associated with George Lakoff and advanced especially in Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 2nd edn. 2003), the particular metaphorical expressions which we can trace in language are grouped and analysed as reflections of deeper conceptual metaphors. For instance, the conceptual metaphor 'THE MIND IS A CONTAINER' gives rise to expressions such as 'why can't you get that into your head?' In a good deal of more recent work in cognitive linguistics, the focus has shifted to metonymy as an even more basic linguistic process, and some have sought to analyse metaphor in terms of underlying metonymical processes.<sup>12</sup> However, whichever theoretical position is adopted, the crucial point is that it is assumed that the metaphorical and metonymical meaning developments found in the histories of particular

words are not accidental, one-off affairs, but instead reflect characteristic patterns of thought. This is potentially of very great importance for work in etymology, because identification of such typical patterns would in theory provide a means of assessing the plausibility of the meaning development assumed in a particular word history. However, it should be stressed that such work is still in its infancy.

8.6.4.1 *Metaphor* Some examples will show how the three approaches sketched in the preceding section can in practice overlap.

In classical Latin *quadrivium* meant a crossroads, a place where four roads meet, and *trivium* meant a place where three roads meet. In the early Middle Ages, we find metaphorical use of these two words to denote the two great divisions of the Seven Liberal Arts in the field of education: the advanced *quadrivium*, consisting of four subjects, and the more elementary *trivium*, consisting of three subjects. We can see how this metaphor can easily be analysed in terms of the traditional rhetorical figure of metaphor: a term is taken from one sphere, usually a more concrete one, and applied in a new one, usually a more abstract one; hearers recognize that this is a novel usage but also understand its meaning relatively easily. *quadrivium* in this use is first found in the works of the philosopher Boethius in the early sixth century, and may even have been coined by him. However, if we look at this metaphor from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, it is tempting to see motivation for it in the widespread conceptual metaphor 'KNOWLEDGE IS A JOURNEY'. From such a perspective, these metaphorical uses of *quadrivium* and *trivium* readily arise and are readily understood precisely because they are motivated by an underlying conceptual metaphor.

Many other metaphors express much more fundamental meaning relations. For instance, the expression *I see what you mean* depends upon the association between the physical sense of sight and mental cognition which is reflected also in the traditional saying *seeing is believing*. Investigation of the etymologies of verbs meaning 'to know' or 'to understand' shows this same association repeated over and over again, in different languages and in different cultures. (See further section 8.7.2.2 below.)

What were originally metaphorical uses often come to be apprehended as primary meanings of words, so that their metaphorical origin can only be recovered through etymological research. We looked at cases such as *crane* 'type of bird' and *crane* 'type of machine' in section 3.4, and also cases where there is a formal split, as between *flower* and *flour* in section 3.6. The names

<sup>12</sup> For discussion and references see Traugott and Dasher (2005) 27–9.

of many abstract concepts are metaphorical in origin, and concrete to abstract is a very common pathway for metaphorical change: for instance, *line* 'long straight mark or band' is originally a metaphorical development of *line* 'piece of cord or string'.

8.6.4.2 *Metonymy* Meaning change through contiguity, whether physical or conceptual, is extremely common. Classical Latin *trivium* 'place where three roads meet' also has the meaning 'public square or meeting place': a public square is typically located at the meeting place of several roads, and hence is physically contiguous; unlike the metaphorical meaning development examined in the preceding section, both concepts belong to the same semantic field. If we now take a less obvious example, the adjective formed from classical Latin *trivium* is *triviālis* 'of the cross-roads, of the public square or meeting place' hence 'everyday, commonplace, vulgar, trivial' (> English *trivial*). We could see this meaning development also as metonymic, since there is contiguity in the conception of the public square as a place where one encounters the commonplace, and also the vulgar (from certain social standpoints). Alternatively, we could interpret the change shown by this word as broadening: 'met with in the public square and hence commonplace' broadening to 'commonplace (in any context)'.

In some cases of metonymic change a part or an attribute can refer to the whole, for instance *bigwig* 'important person', or the idiom *he hadn't a stitch on* 'he was naked'. Such changes are sometimes classified as showing a distinct category, synecdoche. French *bureau* shows two such changes in its historical sense development:

type of baize cloth > desk > office

Another classic example of this type of change is provided by Japanese *mikado* 'emperor', a metonymic use of a word literally meaning 'exalted gate', hence specifically the gate of the imperial palace. This has a striking parallel in Ottoman Turkish *bāb-i 'ālī*, literally 'high or exalted gate', applied specifically to the residence of the Grand Vizier and hence metonymically to the Grand Vizier's government. (A loan translation in French gave rise to similar use of *porte* 'gate' or more fully *la Sublime Porte* to refer to the court of the Ottoman sultanate, and hence *the Sublime Porte* also in English.) A slightly less close parallel is provided by ancient Egyptian *pr-'o* 'pharaoh', literally 'great house'.

In another frequent type an activity or product is named metonymically from a tool or instrument. For instance, *tongue* 'language' has many parallels cross-linguistically.<sup>13</sup> Another typical pattern is use of the name of a container for its typical contents, as in the development from 'purse, wallet' to 'roll of banknotes, money' in the case of *poke* (see section 3.1).

Metonymic changes, like other meaning changes, are often most usefully examined in relation to other changes affecting a group of words. A classic example is provided by names for the hip, thigh, and lower leg in Latin and the western Romance languages. Latin *crus* 'lower leg' was replaced in the various Romance languages by forms developed from two different words which both originally denoted parts of the legs of animals: compare on the one hand French *jambe* and Italian *gamba* (both from post-classical Latin *gamba* or *camba* 'pastern of a horse') and on the other Spanish *pierna* and Portuguese *perna* (both from Latin *perna* 'leg of mutton, ham'); we could perhaps analyse this as either metonymic change or broadening. Latin *femur* 'thigh' was replaced by the reflexes of Latin *coxa* 'hip' giving French *cuisse*, Italian *coscia*, Portuguese *coxa*, all 'thigh'; this is thus a clear example of metonymic change (unless we assume an unattested intermediate stage where the word meant both 'hip' and 'thigh', in which case we would have broadening followed by narrowing). This change may perhaps have been motivated by embarrassing homonymy between the reflexes of *femur* and the reflexes of *finus* 'dung' (compare section 3.8). (Latin *coxa* 'hip' was in turn replaced in this meaning by a borrowing from a West Germanic form \**hanka* giving French *hanche*, Italian *anca*, Spanish *anca*, Portuguese *anca*.)<sup>14</sup>

## 8.7 Is semantic change predictable?

### 8.7.1 Semantic divergence in different languages

Two words with the same origin often develop semantically in different ways in different languages. In section 8.6.3 we contrasted the amelioration of English *knight* with the pejoration of its German cognate *Knecht*.

The English adjective *rank* is cognate with Middle Dutch *ranc* and Middle Low German *rank*, and is probably ultimately from a variant of the same Indo-European base as *right*, with a basic sense 'upright' in

<sup>13</sup> Compare Ullmann (1962) 226 and further references there.

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion of this group of examples see von Wartburg (1969) 118.

proto-Germanic. Dutch and Low German both show the basic sense 'slim, slender', with the additional connotative meaning 'lank, weedy' in Dutch and the technical meaning '(of a ship) heeling, listing' in Low German. In English the word has shown radically different semantic development, showing a group of senses (now mostly obsolete) developed from the meaning 'strong, vigorous', such as 'proud', 'showy', 'impetuous', 'brave', and other senses which refer to full or large size, such as 'vigorous or luxuriant in growth', 'copious', 'excessively large', 'gross', 'luxuriant', 'of coarse quality'.

We also find many cases where a borrowed word and its donor develop in very different ways. English *qualify* is borrowed from French *qualifier* and its etymon post-classical Latin *qualificare* (compare section 6.5). In English the word has two main branches of semantic development:

- to invest with a quality or qualities (hence to become eligible for something etc.)
- to modify or moderate in some respect (hence to mitigate etc.)

French lacks anything similar to the second branch, and in Latin the sense 'to modify' appears to be restricted to British sources. From the available evidence, it appears that one of the major components of the word's meaning in English, 'to modify or moderate', can be traced back to Latin as used in Britain, but has no parallel outside Britain.

*magazine* is a borrowing ultimately from Arabic *maḳzan*, *maḳzin* 'storehouse'; the word entered English directly from French *magasin*, and it probably came to French from Italian *magazzino*, thus:

Arabic *maḳzan*, *maḳzin* > Italian *magazzino* > French *magasin* > English *magazine*

The word shows numerous sense developments in both English and French. In each language there is one major strand of semantic development which is not shared by the other language. In French the word shows the semantic development:

storehouse > place where merchandise is sold > shop

In English it shows the development:

storehouse

- > book providing information on a specified subject or for a specified group of people

- > periodical publication containing articles by various writers; especially one with stories, articles on general subjects, etc., and illustrated with pictures, or a similar publication prepared for a special-interest readership

This latter sense was borrowed back into French, usually distinguished in form as *magazine*, while the French sense 'shop' is not found in English.

Semantic divergence of this sort can thus be observed even in etymologically related groups of words, in very similar societies, even when there is frequent and intimate contact between the societies concerned. (Compare section 6.6 on the frequent continuing semantic influence of French words on the development of English words long after an initial borrowing.) This is of course in many ways similar to the situation with sound change and other changes in word form, which can lead to radical divergence in form between related words in different languages, or indeed in different varieties of a single language. However, the greater unpredictability of semantic change can result in much greater challenges for etymological research. The case is well put by Trask in a discussion of the very different semantic histories of the cognate words English *clean* and German *klein*:

English and German are fairly closely related, and, by the usual correspondences, these words ought to be cognate – and yet the German word means 'small'. Is it really possible that two such dissimilar meanings could arise from a single source? Could we just be looking at two unrelated words whose resemblance is the result of chance? As it happens, we have abundant textual evidence for earlier German, and the earliest attested sense of the German word is 'bright, shining'. With some assistance from the texts, therefore, scholars have concluded that the German word has undergone an extraordinary sequence of semantic shifts, roughly 'shining' > 'clean' > 'fine' > 'delicate' > 'small'. Everyone is therefore satisfied that the words really are cognate – but, if there had been no textual evidence to consult, possibly very few linguists would have been happy to accept such a seemingly bizarre shift in meaning, and we would remain uncertain whether the two words were actually cognate at all.

(Trask (1996) 229; reprinted Millar (2007) 281)

### 8.7.2 Some regular patterns

The situation presented so far in this chapter poses some serious challenges for etymological research. As we have seen, two words which are of identical etymology can develop in different ways in different languages, even when cultural and historical circumstances are very similar. Extralinguistic

historical and cultural factors can have an enormous impact on the semantic development of words. Within the linguistic system, semantic development is affected by the relationships between the senses of an individual word, and also by the relationships between the meanings of different words. Semantic development may even be affected by association with other words of similar form.

In our classification of different types of semantic change, we have looked at six different categories, but we have noted that it is sometimes difficult to assign a particular change to one category or another. Also, four of the typical types of change, narrowing and broadening, and pejoration and amelioration, are essentially opposites, preventing any simple generalizations about the typical direction of change.

More fundamentally, when we attempt to evaluate whether a particular etymology is semantically plausible, we need to establish the likely pathway of semantic change. For this purpose, these categories are too broad to serve as useful tools.

More promising are some of the ideas from conceptual metaphor theory which we touched on in section 8.6.4. If some examples of metaphorical change, from different periods and in different languages, can plausibly be grouped together as showing manifestations of a more widespread underlying conceptual metaphor, then this may help us to make hypotheses about other semantic changes which may have occurred in less well-documented cases. We will look at an extended example in section 8.7.2.2. First, though, we will look at some perspectives which have developed in recent decades from another major field of linguistic research: grammaticalization studies.

8.7.2.1 *Increasing subjectification of meaning* In important work originally grounded in the study of meaning development in grammaticalization, Elizabeth Traugott has drawn attention to some important tendencies in semantic change which are of much wider application. The following is the formulation set out in Traugott (1989):

Tendency I: Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal (evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) described situation.

This subsumes most of the familiar meaning changes known as pejoration and amelioration...

Tendency II: Meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation.

By 'textual situation' I mean the situation of text-construction. Examples include the development of lexical and morphological forms into connectives coding cohesion,

as in the shift from *þa hwile þe* 'the time that' (coding an external described situation) > 'during' (coding the textual situation). By 'metalinguistic situation' I mean the situation of performing a linguistic act. Examples include the shift from a mental-state to a speech-act verb meaning; for instance, in the early 1500's *observe* had the mental-verb meaning 'perceive (that)' (coding an internal described situation), and by 1605 it had come to be used as a speech-act verb in the sense 'state that' (coding the metalinguistic situation).

Tendency III: Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition.

This tendency subsumes the shift of temporal to concessive *while* and a large number of other changes. Among them is the development of scalar particles such as *very*: borrowed in Middle English from Old French *verai* 'true' (a cognitive evaluation), in Early Modern English it became a scalar particle as in *the very height of her career* (a subjective evaluation)

(Traugott (1989) 34-5)

Traugott identifies what these three tendencies have in common as the increasing 'subjectification' of meaning, a process in which speakers or writers 'come over time to develop meanings for L[exemes] that encode or externalize their perspectives and attitudes as constrained by the communicative world of the speech event, rather than by the so-called "real-world" characteristics of the event or situation referred to' (Traugott and Dasher (2005) 30). We saw an example in section 8.1 in the meaning development shown by the modal verb *may*:

'to be strong or able, to have power'

> the (dynamic, or root, modal) meaning 'to be able (to do something)'

> the (epistemic modal) meaning 'it may be the case that', 'this may happen'

Compare also the development of *must* from (deontic modal) 'you must do this' to (epistemic modal) 'this must surely happen soon'.

An example of the usefulness of this sort of framework in etymological research is provided by the etymology of English *merry*. This is an inherited Germanic word. The same proto-Germanic base gives rise to Middle Dutch *mergelijc* 'pleasant, agreeable', and also the English derivative noun *mirth* which similarly has a parallel in Middle Dutch *merchte*, *merechte* 'joy, pleasure'. A good formal match is provided by Old High German *murg* 'short', and Gothic *gamaurgjan* 'to shorten', which have Indo-European cognates with similar meanings, including Sanskrit *muhur* 'suddenly', Avestan *marəzu-* 'short', Sogdian *mwrzk* 'short', and ancient Greek *brachús*

'short'. The problem is how to connect the English and Dutch words with the others semantically. A hypothetical semantic development from 'short' to 'that shortens or whiles away time' to 'entertaining, pleasant' is made much more convincing by an extensive set of parallels in English and in other Germanic languages: English *pastime*; use of English *short* 'to shorten' in the sense 'to make to appear short, to beguile (the time, the way) with sport or stories' (and similar uses of the related *shorten* and obsolete *shurt*); Middle High German *kurzwile* (from *kurz* short and *wile* period) 'short while, whiling away of time, pastime, pleasure'; Old Icelandic *skemta* 'to amuse, entertain' (from *skammur* 'short'). We can also see that this works well in terms of the subjectification of meaning: all of these meaning changes show a shift from 'objectively short in duration' to 'apparently short, in a way which is pleasant for the speaker'.

However, this sort of framework rather conspicuously excludes a good many of those semantic changes which depend upon extralinguistic factors, as Traugott and Dasher acknowledge:

Irregular meaning changes seem to occur primarily in the nominal domain, which is particularly susceptible to extralinguistic factors such as change in the nature or the social construction of the referent. For example, the referents of towns, armor, rockets, vehicles, pens, communication devices, etc., have changed considerably over time, as have concepts of disease, hence the meanings attached to the words referring to them have changed in ways not subject to linguistic generalization.

(Traugott and Dasher (2005) 3–4)

Scientific and technological advances of the kind exemplified here have an enormous impact on the semantic development of many words, especially nouns (numerically by far the largest class in the lexicon of any language). As we have already seen, this is by no means the only area where cultural and historical factors are crucial to explaining semantic change.

Additionally, problems arise for etymological research from just how broadly applicable the process of subjectification is. If it is indeed common to many instances of semantic change this is a major insight in linguistic research. However, this is less of a virtue for the particular requirements of etymological research. Where we find respectively less and more subjective meanings, Traugott's research helps us to see the likelihood that the more subjective meaning has developed from the less subjective one. However, many of the most perplexing problems can arise in trying to identify the specific pathway by which such change has occurred.

An example of this is provided by the word *pagan*. It has not been seriously doubted that post-classical Latin *paganus* 'pagan' (> English *pagan*) ultimately shows a semantic development of classical Latin *pāgānus* 'of or belonging to a country community, civilian', also (as noun) 'inhabitant of a country community, civilian (opposed to *mīlēs* soldier)'. This probably occurred in the fourth century AD. The meaning development was almost certainly from less to more evaluative: 'of or belonging to a country community' is a relatively neutral term in comparison with 'pagan', the defining characteristic of the non-Christian other from the perspective of the early Christian Church. However, the precise path of the semantic change is much less certain. *OED* summarizes three main possibilities (I omit supporting examples for the first and third theories from the ancient historian Orosius in the early fifth century):

- (i) The older sense of classical Latin *pāgānus* is 'of the country, rustic' (also as noun). It has been argued that the transferred use reflects the fact that the ancient idolatry lingered on in the rural villages and hamlets after Christianity had been generally accepted in the towns and cities of the Roman Empire.
- (ii) The more common meaning of classical Latin *pāgānus* is 'civilian, non-militant' (adjective and noun). Christians called themselves *mīlitēs* 'enrolled soldiers' of Christ, members of his militant church, and applied to non-Christians the term applied by soldiers to all who were 'not enrolled in the army'.
- (iii) The sense 'heathen' arose from an interpretation of *pāgānus* as denoting a person who was outside a particular group or community, hence 'not of the city' or 'rural'.

(*OED3* at *pagan* n. and adj., etymology section)

Here the main problem is a gap in our evidence: we simply do not have the crucial early examples of the use of the word in its new sense that would enable us to see the exact circumstances of its development. We have a good knowledge of what the word meant in classical Latin, and we have some knowledge of the cultural circumstances of the period, but this is not sufficient to categorically confirm or deny any of these three possibilities. Further close study of the documentary evidence concerning 'Christian culture in this period could perhaps help to resolve the issue, but as the question was already debated by the time of Orosius in the early fifth century it is perhaps unlikely that we will ever reach any definitive answer.



8.7.2.2 *Metaphor in cognitive linguistics* In a now classic study in a chapter of her 1990 book *From Etymology to Pragmatics*, Eve Sweetser examines 'English perception-verbs in an Indo-European context' (Sweetser (1990) 23–48). This study is grounded in the assumption from cognitive linguistics (common to much other linguistic work as well) that the way the human mind structures perceptions of the external world is reflected to some extent in linguistic structures:

Linguistic categorization depends not just on our naming of distinctions that exist in the world, but also on our metaphorical and metonymic structuring of our perceptions of the world.

(Sweetser (1990) 9)

Very interestingly for our purposes, Sweetser looks at both bidirectional and unidirectional relationships. For instance, two common semantic sources for vision verbs are identified as:

- (a) metaphors of physical touching or manipulation, such as English *to catch sight of* or Latin *percipere* (> English *to perceive*), which is formed < *per-* 'thoroughly' and *capere* 'to take, seize, lay hold of'
- (b) metaphors of control; e.g. English *wake*, *watch*, and (via French and Latin) *surveillance* and *vigil* are all derived from an Indo-European root with the probable sense 'to be strong, to be lively', as shown for example by Latin *vegēre* 'to rouse, excite, to be lively or active', *vigēre* 'to be vigorous' (see Sweetser (1990) 32–3)

Of these, source (a) appears to be unidirectional, words for physical touching or manipulation giving rise to vision verbs but not vice versa, whereas the relationship in (b) appears to be bidirectional, as shown e.g. by English *to keep an eye on someone* which shows development from 'sight' to 'oversight, control'.

Similarly, words for physical sight give rise to words for knowledge or intellection, arising from the role of vision as a primary source of data, hence *I see what you mean* or again *perceive*. However, the reverse does not appear to be the case, and so this relationship may be seen to be (as a general rule) unidirectional. A rare exception is perhaps shown by English *recognize*, which shows the development:

'to acknowledge'

> 'to identify (something which has been known before)'

> 'to identify (a person from their physical appearance)'

In the case of meaning developments from 'to hear' to 'to listen to, to heed' (and thence to 'to obey'), there is a rather stronger counterexample in French *entendre* 'to hear', a development from the earlier sense 'to take heed of, to understand', ultimately from Latin *intendere* 'to stretch out, to direct one's attention to' (see Sweetser (1990) 34–5).

Traditionally minded etymologists may find much that is reassuringly familiar in Sweetser's approach. Clearly a fundamental factor is the collecting and classifying of examples, in order to establish which changes in meaning are common and thus likely to be found also in other, less well-evidenced, cases. Many of her observations are based on the analysis of changes occurring during the documented histories of words (as with French *entendre*) or which can be inferred reasonably confidently from the composition of complex words (as with Latin *percipere*, formed from *per-* and *capere*). In such cases the analysis is generally uncontroversial, and the desiderata for further research seem clear:

- (i) analysis of meaning developments which cross other semantic fields (or domains, as the underlying relationships between meanings are normally called in the cognitive linguistics tradition)
- (ii) analysis of further cross-linguistic data, in the areas studied by Sweetser (since the set of data on which her observations are based is relatively small)

In the almost two decades since the publication of Sweetser's 1990 study, there has been relatively little work in this direction, either inside or outside the cognitive linguistics tradition.<sup>15</sup> This is regrettable, since the identification of pathways of semantic change which occur frequently cross-linguistically would provide a powerful aid to further etymological research.

Much of Sweetser's work focuses on meaning change in the reconstructed past, often at the level of reconstructed Indo-European roots. This is rather more controversial, and we will consider this in the following section.

8.7.2.3 *Reconstructing meanings and changes in meaning* In etymological reconstruction at the level of proto-languages, it is customary to reconstruct roots, which are assigned glosses, reflecting what is taken to be the common meaning shown by the words derived from this root. Thus in

<sup>15</sup> For a recent contribution see Allan (2008).

Pokorny (1959–69), which remains the standard comparative dictionary of Indo-European etymology, a reconstructed root with a gloss stands at the head of each entry.<sup>16</sup> The same is found in smaller comparative dictionaries such as Watkins (2000). It is worth looking in a little detail at what sorts of entities these roots are and what the glosses assigned to them are intended to convey. Hence for a moment we will turn aside from semantics and take up some topics in morphology which we touched on in chapter 4.

In some cases, a complete word has parallels in several branches of Indo-European, and can be reconstructed with some confidence for the parent language. This is the case with the kinship terms *mother*, *father*, *brother* which we looked at in section 1.2.4. Each word has cognates in a number of other branches of Indo-European, and we can reconstruct the proto-Indo-European words \**mātēr*, \**pətēr*, \**bhrātēr*. We can recognize *-tēr-* as a termination common to all of these words, although we cannot establish any further etymology for the roots to which it is attached with any confidence.

In the majority of cases, the situation is rather different, and what we find reflected among the ‘cognates’ are in fact the scattered remains of a morphological family, showing various different suffixes and various different modifications of the root; that is, the words that survive are cognates only at one or more removes. The typical morphology of a word in proto-Indo-European can be represented as follows:

- a root, with a certain ablaut grade;
- perhaps + an extension (which did not usually alter meaning);
- usually + a suffix (which conveyed information about word class and often also about meaning, and which could also show ablaut variation);
- + inflectional endings

The root is common to all words in the same morphological family, but various differences of meaning and/or grammatical function are conveyed by differences of ablaut grade and suffixation. The words belonging to any such family which survive in the various documented Indo-European languages will typically reflect only a small fragment of the original family. Often we will find that one derivative formation survives in one language, a second in another language, a third in another language, and so on. In each case there will probably also have been subsequent morphological and semantic

<sup>16</sup> Compare note 18 below on the urgent need for revision of this dictionary.

change, between the proto-Indo-European stage and the stage reflected by our documented words. By comparative analysis of the morphological and phonological histories of many other words, we may be able to establish that this set of words can plausibly be referred to the same Indo-European root, showing suffixes whose function we may or may not be able to reconstruct with some confidence. However, this is not necessarily the same thing as being certain of exactly what the historical sequence of derivational relationships was in a group of related words, nor exactly how their meaning development unfolded.<sup>17</sup> As we saw in chapter 4, study of the recorded history of languages shows that there are many possible permutations for the relationships among a group of morphologically related words. The ‘meaning’ that can be reconstructed for a proto-Indo-European root is typically no more than the semantic common denominator for a set of words which we can plausibly refer to a single root. The case is well put by Watkins:

A word of caution should be entered about the semantics of the roots. It is perhaps more hazardous to attempt to reconstruct meaning than to reconstruct linguistic form, and the meaning of a root can only be extrapolated from the meanings of its descendants. Often these diverge sharply from one another, and the scholar is reduced in practice to inferring only what seems a reasonable, or even merely possible, semantic common denominator. The result is that reconstructed words, and particularly roots, are often assigned hazy, vague, or unspecific meanings. This is doubtless quite illusory; a portmanteau meaning for a root should not be confused with the specific meaning of a derivative of that root at a particular time and place. The apparent haziness in meaning of a given Indo-European root often simply reflects the fact that with the passage of several thousand years the different words derived from this root in divergent languages have undergone semantic changes that are no longer recoverable in detail.

(Watkins (2000) xxi)

It is in this context that work such as Sweetser’s (see section 8.7.2.2) can encounter some difficulties, if cognitive motivations are sought for meaning changes reconstructed for the remote linguistic past. At the very least, we must exercise caution if much of the support for thinking that a particular meaning change is natural or is frequent cross-linguistically depends upon reconstructed stages of linguistic history.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For a useful discussion of this topic see Clackson (2007) 190–1.

<sup>18</sup> Sweetser (1990) is very critical of the semantic side of much work in Indo-European etymology, and exemplifies this by commenting on material taken from Pokorny (1959–69). However, it should be noted that those entries from Pokorny on which she comments

## 8.8 Some practical examples

Just as we looked in section 7.7 at practical examples of etymological arguments based on word form, we will look in this section at some practical examples of arguments based on word meaning.

### 8.8.1 Parallel semantic developments lending support to an etymology

We have already noted that an important step in establishing support for a particular etymology can be finding another word history which appears to show a similar semantic development.

Italian *marrone* 'a chestnut' (from which French *marron* was borrowed, and thence ultimately the English colour term *maroon*) is of uncertain etymology. One suggestion is that it comes from a common Romance base with the meaning 'stone, rock', and this can perhaps be supported by a semantic comparison with the Spanish dialect word *berrueca* 'a large kind of chestnut' which is related to Spanish *berrueco* 'rocky reef'.

Modern English has numerous words meaning 'drunk, intoxicated with alcohol' which result from metaphorical uses of past participles of verbs referring to various types of physical harm, such as *smashed*, *stoned* (now more commonly used with reference to drugs), *wrecked*, etc. These parallels lend weight to the hypothesis that recent British slang *mullered* 'intoxicated' (recorded from 1995) is derived from *muller* 'to ruin, wreck, or destroy' (recorded from 1990, and very probably of Romani origin, from a verb ultimately related to Sanskrit *mṛ-* 'to die').

The Caribbean English word *mesple*, denoting the sapodilla, a type of evergreen tropical American tree with edible fruit, probably ultimately shows a borrowing of Dutch *mispel* denoting the medlar, a small bushy tree related to the rose which bears apple-like fruits. This supposition is supported by the fact that Caribbean English also has the name *naseberry* for the sapodilla (as already touched on in sections 2.6 and 7.4.5), showing a borrowing of Spanish *néspera* and Portuguese *nêspera* 'medlar' with

critically (Sweetser (1990) 24–5), '1. *ken-* and *kwelp-*, involve etymologies which are accepted by very few other researchers, partly on the basis of semantic implausibility. On this difficult area of research compare also the useful discussion in Fox (1995) 201–6. On Pokorny's dictionary compare Ringe (2006) 65: 'Pokorny 1959 is badly out of date; moreover, it errs extravagantly on the side of inclusion, listing every word known to the author that might conceivably reflect a PIE [proto-Indo-European] lexeme if one's etymological standards are not too strict.'

remodelling of the ending of the word as a result of association with words ending in *-berry*. In this instance, *mesple* and *naseberry* both arose in the same geographical area, but in different historical periods, *naseberry* being first found in 1679, while *mesple* is not found until 1979, and probably entered English through Dutch Creole. It is therefore likely that the two cases are genuine parallels, rather than that the one has provided a model for the other.

### 8.8.2 Formal similarity, but no plausible semantic connection

English *nick* 'to make a notch or cut in (something)' corresponds exactly in form to Middle Dutch *nicken* 'to bow, to bend', Middle Low German *nicken* 'to bend over, sink down', Middle High German *nicken* 'to bend, press down', but no convincing semantic connection can be made.

*prank* 'a malicious trick; a wicked deed; a deception or scheme intended to harm, a hoax; a magical trick or feat, a conjuring trick, a practical joke, a lark, a capriciously foolish act' is of unknown origin. The obvious etymology on a formal basis would be to attempt to connect the word with the verb *prank* 'to dress or deck in a smart, bright, or ostentatious manner, to decorate, to dress up, to give a particular (misleading) appearance to, to embellish, to make an ostentatious display (with), to show off, to behave ostentatiously', but it is hard to establish any semantic connection, unless it is perhaps via the meanings 'deception' and 'to dress up, to give a particular (misleading) appearance to'.

It is useful to contrast the situation in both of these cases with the sorts of arguments on the basis of word form that we encountered in chapter 7. If there were a formal difficulty, there would at least be a clear procedure for identifying the difficulty, and for trying to resolve it. We would look for possible explanations from what is known about the phonological history of other words in the same period, or from formal developments which are typologically common. Even if this did not lead to a solution, it would allow us to clarify the difficulty, e.g. 'perhaps related, but the difference in the stem vowel is difficult to explain'. Our present state of knowledge about what is and is not likely in semantic change seldom allows us even to formulate the difficulties as precisely as this.

In section 2.4 we looked at words which originated as lexicalized compounds, although this fact may be entirely opaque from the modern form and meaning of the word. In some instances we may suspect such a history, but be unable to provide any semantic explanation for the compound. *prial*

'three of a kind (especially in cards)' occurs earliest in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the following forms:

*parriall, paire royall, paroyal, paroyall, parreiall, par-royall, perryal, perryall, pair royal*

Comparison with the recorded form history of *pair* and *royal* points strongly to the word being a lexicalized compound of these two words, but if so the semantic motivation is unclear. There seems no reason why a 'royal pair' should number three; perhaps we might speculate that it is because 'royal' is good, and three cards are better than a pair, but this seems tenuous, and is unsupported by other similar uses of *royal*. Perhaps it could be connected with the fact that there are three court cards, i.e. king, queen, and jack, in each suit (compare much later terms such as *royal flush*), but this does not really explain why three of a kind should be called a royal pair. (The term *royal pontoon* occurs in the card game pontoon, denoting a hand of three sevens which beats all pairs totalling twenty-one which would otherwise win the game, but is first recorded very much later.) The postposition of the adjective, i.e. the fact that the compound appears to be *pair royal*, not \**royal pair*, would perhaps suggest that it is modelled on a compound or phrase in a language in which adjectives normally follow the nouns they modify (perhaps French, given the date and cultural context), but no such model has been identified. Of course, it is always possible that there may be no historical connection with *pair* and *royal* at all, and this form may simply show a folk-etymological alteration.

We can also encounter similar difficulties with apparent derivative formations. *potty* appears to be a derivative of the noun *pot* 'vessel (of earthenware, etc.)' in the adjective-forming suffix *-y*, and this readily explains the word in its (rare) sense 'of tea: that tastes of the pot; strong, stewed' (recorded in 1901 in an isolated example). However, the semantic connection is harder to trace in the case of two groups of depreciative senses shown by *potty*:

- (a) feeble, indifferent; petty, insignificant, unimpressive; easy to manage, accomplish, or deal with; easy, simple. (Recorded from the mid nineteenth century; now rare.)
- (b) crazy, mad; out of one's mind; eccentric; madly in love; madly enthusiastic (about), madly keen (on). (Recorded from the early twentieth century.)

Group (a) senses, which are recorded from the mid nineteenth century onwards, were perhaps suggested by *tin-pot* in its metaphorical sense 'of

little worth' (recorded from the early nineteenth century), although there is perhaps also some semantic association with *petty* on the basis of similarity of word form (compare section 8.5.2): crucially, though, there is little to help us decide the likelihood of this, other than the researcher's own intuitions about what is or is not plausible, and that is not a very satisfactory basis for etymological decision making. *potty* in these meanings could conceivably be a different word of different origin, perhaps a variant of *petty*, maybe as a result of some association with *pot* or (as seems more likely on semantic grounds) *tin-pot*.

Group (b) senses, recorded from the early twentieth century onwards, were perhaps suggested by earlier metaphorical formations such as *cracked-pot* or *crack-pot*, and by proverbial expressions which similarly conceptualize the head of a foolish person as a cracked pot. Here we may perhaps feel on rather more promising ground in assuming that these senses of *potty* do show a derivative of the word *pot*, since not only do we have a group of potential models, but we can also make a link with the broader conceptual metaphor 'THE MIND IS A CONTAINER' which has been suggested in research on conceptual metaphor theory.

### 8.8.3 One word or two?

In some cases a historical or etymological dictionary may group material together as probably showing a single word history, but at the same time flag uncertainty about whether this is in fact the case. The verb *pink* shows various senses which the *OED* groups under the heading 'senses related to cutting or piercing', plus a further sense 'to adorn, beautify; to deck, trick (out)' (earliest recorded in 1558) which it is difficult to relate to the other uses. It is possible that it may show a development from the earliest recorded sense of the word, 'to ornament (cloth or leather) by cutting or punching eyelet holes, slits, etc., especially to display a contrasting lining or undergarment; to perforate' (earliest recorded in 1486; compare the use of modern *pinkish shears* partly for decoration and partly to prevent material from fraying). Alternatively it is quite possible that it may show an independent and unrelated word.

Similarly, *pickle* meaning (in baseball) 'to hit (the ball) very hard' seems to be a specific sense of *pickle* 'to preserve in pickle', but if so the semantic motivation is rather unclear. Cases like these really differ from *prank* or *nick* in section 8.8.2 only in the respect that lexicographers have felt the balance

of probabilities more in favour of a common origin, but a completely satisfactory explanation remains elusive.

English *as thin as a rake* (earliest recorded in late Middle English in Chaucer) is usually assumed to show a metaphorical application of the tool name *rake*, the spokes or teeth at the end of the long handle presumably suggesting a skeletal appearance. However, this interpretation has been challenged by (among others) Lockwood, who suggests that the metaphor is unlikely:

Perhaps it was on a summer's day as we were raking together the cuttings on the lawn, or perhaps we were just watching some one else perform this laudable service, when quite suddenly the familiar phrase 'thin as a rake' crossed our minds. How often has one heard that expression! How naturally it comes! But, on this particular occasion, why we cannot say, we paused to wonder what on earth was thin about a rake. True, it has a long slender handle, but one doesn't associate even the most slender handle with thinness. Furthermore other implements, such as a hoe, have similar handles, but nobody says 'thin as a hoe'. The really distinctive things about a rake are its teeth. It is on these that attention is concentrated. They may be strong, sharp, they may be worn, bent or broken, but are they ever thin? However one looks at it, thinness is definitely not a property of a rake.

(Lockwood (1995) 169)

Lockwood (1973, also 1995) instead suggests that *as thin as a rake* reflects a borrowing from a Scandinavian language of a word related to Norwegian (Nynorsk) *rak* 'skeleton, dead body, emaciated animal' and probably also to Old Icelandic *hrak-*, recorded in the derivatives *hrakligr* 'wretched' and *hrakmagr* 'wretchedly thin' (see summary in Lockwood (1995) 169–71); this is probably ultimately related to Old Icelandic *hrekja* 'to worry, vex'. A similar borrowing could perhaps be reflected by English regional *rackling*, *reckling*, or *rickling* 'small or weak animal, runt', with *i*-mutation caused by the suffix. If this etymology is adopted, a formal problem remains, since such a borrowing would show a short vowel, but *rake* in *as thin as a rake* shows a long one. Lockwood explains the long vowel as resulting from folk-etymological association with *rake* (the tool); this is plausible, since as we have seen in section 7.4.5 folk-etymological associations often show little or no semantic component, and substitution of *rake* for *\*rak* may have been motivated simply by the fact that *\*rak* did not survive outside this expression in English and hence the expression was opaque. However, the fundamental difficulty is in deciding whether the metaphor *as thin as a rake* (i.e. as the tool) is in fact inherently implausible: some researchers have found it plausible, others not. There are no very exact semantic parallels:

perhaps compare *as thin as a rail/toothpick/lath*, although these objects are obviously all thin for their whole length. Study of medieval images of rakes shows that they typically were more similar to a modern soil rake than to a modern lawn rake, i.e. they generally had a straight cross-beam at the end with stout teeth attached, rather than the fan-shaped pattern of slender spokes shown by a modern lawn rake. They were typically used by peasants who could not afford the larger and heavier harrow which was pulled by a beast of burden. Lightness and slenderness of construction would have been essential, so that the tool could be conveniently drawn across the earth. (We will look further at this sort of approach based on study of the material culture of the past in section 8.10.) The *Middle English Dictionary* also includes 'hoe' among the meanings it records for Middle English *rake*. We might note that a hoe is characteristically thin for its whole length, having only a small blade at one end. However, we have already seen that Lockwood comments (correctly) 'nobody says "thin as a hoe"'. Unless convincing parallels can be found, it is hard to see what evidence can convince the doubters that the metaphor is plausible after all. It is even harder to see what could convince those who find the metaphor plausible that Lockwood is correct and an alternative etymology should be sought.

### 8.9 Arguments based on form and meaning contrasted

As we have seen from the practical examples in section 8.8, semantic change often presents problems for etymological research of a quite different nature from those presented by change in word form. Work in semantics lacks any tool comparable to the historical grammar, enabling us to assess any hypothesized change against the background of the known phonological and morphological history of a particular language. This is largely because semantic change does not affect groups of words simultaneously or within a defined historical period. Instead it affects words individually. In this respect it is more like sporadic sound changes, such as metathesis in English. However, it is unlike these in its complexity, and in the extent to which semantic change in one word may be shaped by the meaning relationships with a large group of other words. In this respect probably every instance of semantic change is unique, even though we may be able to identify general tendencies, and also find specific parallels in other periods or in other languages which at least show a reasonable degree of similarity. A diagram can be useful in

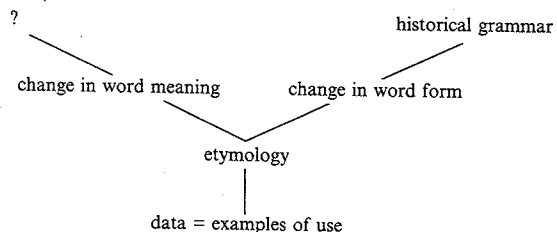


Fig 8.1 A framework for etymological research

summarizing the basic differences between change in word form and change in word meaning as they affect etymological research – see figure 8.1.

We employ etymological reasoning as a tool in interpreting data of actual linguistic usage, in order to establish a coherent word history. This will necessarily involve analysis of both change in word form and change in word meaning. So far as change in word form is concerned, this analysis will involve interaction with historical grammar. The term historical grammar has two related meanings: it is the name of a methodology, and it is also the name of an artefact of linguistic historiography, whether that exists in the form of a single book, or more realistically in the form of many separate books, plus contributions to the literature in articles etc. Etymological hypotheses can be assessed against the existing body of data in the historical grammar (in this second sense), employing the methodology of historical grammar (in the first sense); new discoveries or reassessments can then be incorporated in the body of knowledge in the historical grammar (in the second sense). If we turn now to meaning change, the methodology of historical semantics exists, and has been the main topic of this chapter, but there is no corresponding artefact of linguistic historiography to which we can refer. There is no ‘historical semantics’ of English or any other language analogous to the historical grammar. We can look for cases of parallel developments in the scholarly literature or in historical dictionaries. Here tools such as the *Historical Thesaurus of English* now available for the English language are an invaluable aid, in allowing us to explore how similar meanings have developed in other word histories at different times. However, there is no systematic classification of changes to which we can refer, for the simple reason that no theoretical approach has been found which makes this possible, and the number of variables at play in any semantic change makes it very unlikely that such an approach could ever succeed.

### 8.10 Etymology and extralinguistic factors

As we noted in section 8.7.2.1 and at various other points in the course of this book, one of the most significant factors influencing many instances of meaning change, and reducing the extent to which we can identify regular patterns of change, is interaction with external, non-linguistic cultural and material history.

An important trend in etymological research in the early twentieth century was what is known by the German name *Wörter und Sachen*, ‘words and things’. This was the name of a journal founded in 1909. The scholarly tradition associated with this journal stressed the importance of looking at connections between word histories and the history of material culture, and also of looking at what linguistic history can reveal about the material (and intellectual) culture of the past.<sup>19</sup> We saw in section 8.1 how the semantic development of the word *toilet* is closely correlated with the development of dressing and bathing habits in Western culture, and subsequently with the development of sanitary arrangements. If we were trying to trace the history of the word *toilet* from scratch, we would have to piece together all of this information about cultural history in order to be able to trace the semantic history of the word in its proper cultural context. In investigating *as thin as a rake* in section 8.8.3 we touched on how an examination of medieval tool shapes and functions can be helpful in examining a difficult etymology. However, when we are studying earlier or less well-documented stages in linguistic history, we often find that difficulties in specifying precisely when and where a particular linguistic development occurred make it very difficult to correlate linguistic and material culture in the way that we would ideally like to do.

English *plough* provides a good illustration. It is helpful to look in a little detail at some of the documentation offered in *OED3* for this etymology. Late Old English *plōh, plōg* is related to words in other Germanic languages, summarized in *OED* as follows:

Old Frisian *plōch, plōg* (West Frisian *ploege, ploech*, North Frisian *pluwge*), Middle Dutch *ploech* (Dutch *ploeg*), Middle Low German *plōch, plūch*, Old High German *phluog* (8th cent.; Middle High German *phluoc*, German *Pflug*), Old Icelandic *plógr* (in the poem *Rígsþula*, which was perhaps composed in the 10th cent., but shows probable reworking, perhaps in England, in the 11th cent.; also in Skaldic poetry of

<sup>19</sup> On the history of this movement from the perspective of etymological research see especially Malkiel (1993).

the mid 11th cent.), Norn (Shetland) *plug*, Old Swedish *plogher* (Swedish *plog*), Old Danish *plogh* (Danish *plov*), all in sense 'plough'.

*OED* goes on to comment on possible further relationships:

The Germanic words are apparently related also to post-classical Latin *plovum* (mid 7th cent.), Italian regional (northern) *piò*, and perhaps also to classical Latin *plau-morati* (in an isolated attestation in Pliny, where it is apparently a loanword, and refers to a new type of plough with two wheels in use in Gaul; the word is sometimes regarded as plural (or genitive singular) and a (nominative) singular *plau-moratum* constructed, but the context is unclear).

In the surviving Old English records the word is not found at all denoting the implement, although currency in this sense may be implied by the (rare and only late Old English) compounds *plōgesland*, *plōgaland* 'ploughland' and *plōgagang* 'plough-gang'. The word is found (again rarely and only in late Old English) in the senses 'name given to a unit of land capable of being tilled by a team of oxen in a year' and 'team of horses or oxen used for ploughing'. The usual Old English word for a plough is *sulh*, which survived in western and south-western English dialects as *sullow*. These were the geographical areas generally least influenced by Norse settlers, and this, combined with the late date of attestation, and the fact that apparently secondary senses occur earlier than the apparently basic sense denoting the implement, has led to a frequent supposition that the English word is a borrowing from Norse. However, early evidence for the word in the Scandinavian languages is also scarce, hence the philological details about the early occurrences of the word given in the *OED* listing of forms quoted above, although the situation is complicated by the general scarcity of very early documentation for these languages. The *OED* comments as follows:

The word also does not appear to be early in the Scandinavian languages, where the earlier name appears to have been *arðr* ... which survives in Norwegian as *ar* a small plough (... hence perhaps originally denoting an earlier and simpler implement than the *plōgr*), and it has been suggested by some scholars that the early Scandinavian word was in fact a borrowing from Old English. The word is also not found in Gothic, which has *hoha*. It is perhaps most likely that the word occurred earliest in continental West Germanic (but not English, and not originally in either East Germanic or North Germanic), and was borrowed thence, either directly or indirectly, into both Old English and early Scandinavian. However, even this much is far from certain.

The connections between the Germanic words, post-classical Latin *plovum*, and classical Latin *plau-morati* are also much disputed, as are the possible

connections between these and various words in Slavonic languages and Albanian which *OED* summarizes as follows:

Compare Old Russian *plug*' (Russian *plug*), Polish *plug*, Czech *pluh*, Lithuanian *plūgas*, *plūgas* (probably all < German or other Germanic languages, although some have argued that these show an inherited Slavonic word ultimately of Indo-European origin); compare also Albanian *plug* plough. Perhaps compare also Albanian *plor*, Albanian regional (Tosk) *pluar*, (Gheg) *pluer* ploughshare, tip of a wooden plough, of uncertain origin.

On the possibilities of establishing a secure further etymology *OED* comments:

As regards the further etymology, attempts have been made (in spite of the difficulties posed by the initial *p* and by the restricted distribution among Germanic languages) to regard the word as an inherited item in Germanic, and hence to link it with either of two different Indo-European bases, or alternatively with the Germanic base of German *pflegen* ...; alternatively, it has been explained as a loan either from another Indo-European language (perhaps Gaulish in view of Pliny's *plau-morati*) or from a non-Indo-European language. It seems unlikely that a consensus view will be reached.

(On the problems posed by Germanic words with initial *p* - compare section 6.8.)

If we now consider the possibilities for a *Wörter und Sachen* approach, we can see that assumptions about changes in ploughing technology, or about naming of different types of ploughs, occur at various points in this etymology. Pliny identifies *plau-morati* as the name of a particular type of plough which is new and is used in Gaul. Old English and Old Norse both appear to have had earlier names for the plough, and it is tempting to imagine that the borrowing of a new word reflects a technological distinction, although as we have seen from examples in chapters 5 and 6 this is not necessarily the case. The absence of the word in Gothic as well suggests that the word may well have been a borrowing into continental West Germanic, probably after the date when English was already established in England, and this in turn could reflect a technological distinction of some sort. It is possible that collaboration with archaeologists or ancient or medieval historians might provide further leads in this case, but this is perhaps unlikely, since at each of the important junctures in the history of this word we are looking at really rather broad historical periods, and there are also basic uncertainties about the chain of events and their causation. At each of these junctures, borrowing may or may not have occurred; if it did, it may or may not have been because of a difference in technology, or because the word was useful in

marking an existing technological distinction, and it could have happened at any point in a period of several centuries or more.

Such uncertainties plague attempts to apply a *Wörter und Sachen* approach at a considerable time depth, especially when one is dealing with early history or pre-history, although they do not mean that the endeavour is not worthwhile. Celebrated achievements have been made in the study of Indo-European kinship terms, for instance, and in the exploration of the wider vocabulary of social relations within the household. It is no coincidence that (as noted in section 8.7.2.3) this is a semantic field where we are able to reconstruct a number of Indo-European word forms (rather than simply root forms) and their associated meanings with reasonable confidence. For recent summaries and further references to work on reconstructing Indo-European culture and society through linguistic reconstruction see Mallory and Adams (2006), or Fortson (2004) 16–47. Particular problems arise when one tries to assess the significance of the absence of a reconstructable word with a particular meaning, as noted by Ringe:

The most difficult problem is assessing the gaps that we inevitably find. For instance, it comes as no surprise that there was no PIE [proto-Indo-European] word for 'iron', since there are numerous indications that PIE was spoken before the Iron Age. But what about the fact that there is also no reconstructable word for 'finger'? Obviously speakers of the language had fingers, and they must have had a word for them; the fact that we cannot reconstruct it can only be the result of its loss in all the major subgroups (or all but one). The hard fact is that linguistic evidence relentlessly degrades and self-destructs over time, and that imposes an inexorable limit on what can be reconstructed.

(Ringe (2006) 65–6)

An area of etymological research where the consideration of external, non-linguistic factors is unavoidable is the study of the etymology of names. These in turn are often inter-related with the etymologies of other words. A good example of this interaction is found in the etymology of the English word *penguin*, which is first attested in 1577 denoting a penguin, and in 1578 denoting the great auk, a now-extinct bird of the northern hemisphere which in its appearance and habits closely resembled penguins (which are found only in the southern hemisphere). The word is found in several other European languages within a few decades of its first appearance in English, but in all of these it probably shows a borrowing from English, either directly or indirectly. Welsh *pengwin* 'great auk' is probably also from English, although in fact the likeliest etymon of the English word

is Welsh *pen gwyn* 'white head'. In spite of the chronology of the earliest attestations, it is likely that the English word earliest denoted the great auk, and was subsequently transferred to the penguin. However, this explanation encounters a difficulty, since the great auk did not have a white head. A possible solution to this problem lies in a place name, *Penguin Island* in Newfoundland. This is first recorded in 1589 (as *Island of Penguin*), although in a reported narrative of events which took place fifty years earlier. The immediate assumption seems simply to be that the place was so called because many great auks were encountered there. Thus if the place name did date from the early sixteenth century that might help us to antedate the word *penguin* and demonstrate that its earliest meaning was indeed 'great auk' and not 'penguin', but it would not help solve the etymological difficulty. However, another meaning of Welsh *pen* is 'headland', and it is thus possible that *Penguin Island* may reflect a Welsh name meaning 'white headland', a supposition which is supported by a 1584 reference (in an account of a mythical medieval voyage) to 'the white rocke of Pengwyn'. Welsh speakers were certainly present in the European voyages of exploration to this area, as also were Breton speakers in large numbers. In Breton a place name 'white headland' would have differed from the Welsh only in spelling; hence the place may plausibly have been given either a Welsh or a Breton name, which was subsequently adopted in English as well.<sup>20</sup> *penguin* 'great auk' would therefore derive from the place name, rather than vice versa. This etymology illustrates some fundamental points about name etymologies: *Penguin Island* refers to an entity, in this instance a particular place in North America; when the name was originally given, it was probably a descriptive name of some sort, but we cannot infer from the name's subsequent use what the original basis for the name may have been, nor even which language the name was originally given in.

In the next chapter we will look in more detail at the etymologies of names, and in particular at the connections they often entail between intralinguistic and extralinguistic factors.

<sup>20</sup> For all of the documentation drawn upon here see *OED3* at *penguin* n., and for further discussion of the underlying research see Thier (2007). For other recent studies very much in the *Wörter und Sachen* tradition by the same author see (on *paddle*) Thier (2005) and (on *sail* and related issues) Thier (2003a, 2003b).