Social Motivations of Semantic Change: The Case of the Oxford Word of the Year

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Abstract: *Semantic change, a common phenomenon in all languages, has always been a popular issue among linguists. Among them, "Old Words for New Meanings" is the most closely connected way with the change and development of human society. The word of the year is a summary of the significant social events of the year, reflecting the social ideology, but fewer studies have focused on "Old Words for New Meanings" before. Therefore, this paper provides a detailed and systemic analysis of semantic change in the Word and Shortlist of the Year published by the Oxford Dictionary from 2015--2019 on the basis of conceptual blending theory (CBT) from the perspective of sociocognitive linguistics. The case analysis revealed that approximately 1/3 of the hot words from 2015--2019 were "Old Words for New Meanings". There are five ways to change the meaning of an old word: (1) scope change (broadening/narrowing), (2) status change (amelioration/pejoration), (3) semantic change (figurative meaning), and (4) class shift. The social motivations influencing words' semantic change are as follows: (1) political factors; (2) facial factors; (3) environmental protection; and (4) technological development.*

1. Introduction

As a tool of human communication and expression, language always changes with the progress of human society. In the development of all the constituents of language, pronunciation and grammar evolve relatively slowly, whereas the change in vocabulary is the fastest and most obvious with the progress of society and technology (Wang 1997). The semantic change of old words, also called "Old Words for New Meanings", has been an important way in the process of semantic change in various languages worldwide, especially English words.

Words of the year are generally a summary of the remarkable events and social activities of the year, among which different words embody the different focuses of the public. However, most articles discuss new words of "old words for new meanings" in words of the year, while little attention has been given to them. Thus, this paper aims to investigate the types of semantic change in "old words for new meanings" in English words and their social motivations, taking the case of the Word and Shortlist of the Year published by the Oxford Dictionary from 2015--2019.

The study collects the words of the year and shortlist from 2015--2019 published by the Oxford Dictionary. After an emoji and 14 word groups were removed, 33 words remained. They include 15 new words and 18 "old words for new meanings". Thus, the study and analysis are based on these 18 "old words for new meanings", with the aim of investigating their types of semantic change with the help of CBT in English words and their social motivations.

2. Previous Study on Semantic Changes in English Words

In the past few decades, many linguists and scholars at home and abroad have conducted corresponding research and analyses on the reasons for and motivations for the semantic change in English words. They perform deeper and broader studies from different perspectives and combine them with applied theories in other disciplines. To

date, four general perspectives have been proposed to explain the reasons behind the actuation of semantic change in English words: diachronic linguistics (also called historical linguistics), functional linguistics, cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistics (Adam Jatowt, 2014).

Diachronic linguistics (aka historical linguistics) is an area within modern linguistics that concerns itself with the process of language development over time and, in particular, with questions concerning why and how languages change and in which way these changes spread across the spatiotemporal dimension (J. Aitchison, 2001). It is often compared with synchronic linguistics, which, in contrast, studies the state of the language at a given time, commonly, at present. Both subfields are closely related to each other.

Functional linguistics assumes that language has a natural tendency to "regulate itself' and thus becomes more regulated, symmetrical and simpler over time. One example is the observed avoidance of homonymic clashes—a situation in which two homonyms, words with the same form but different meanings, exist at the same time. On the other hand, cognitive linguistics associates language change with the cognitive processes occurring in the brain of a speaker, which are affected by memory limitations or processing procedures.

Finally, sociolinguistic theory, represented by W. Labov, explains the changes in the meaning of words used by social circumstances and their variations over time. For example, social context and the formality of situations are well known to affect the way in which speakers express their thoughts. It explores the semantic change of words fundamentally with the application of experimental data, making its conclusions more reliable.
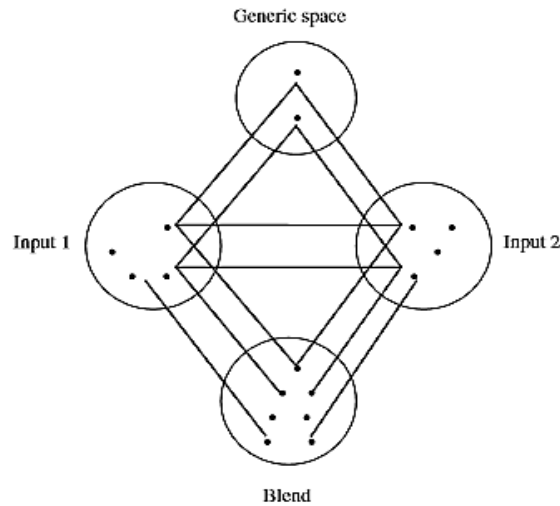
Vocabulary study has a long history of development. Many scholars have realized the importance of applying theories of sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics in this field. Thus, the study also uses a cognitive tool—the CBT—to analyze the linguistic phenomenon of English word semantic change.

3. Conceptual blending theory

Conceptual blending theory (CBT) is a theory of cognition developed by the cognitive scientists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner. It is also known as Conceptual Integration Theory (CIT) or the Conceptual Integration Network (CIN). This theory was first proposed in 1993 and was later presented in Fauconnier and Turner's 2002 book The Way We Think. It is based on two traditions within cognitive semantics: mental space theory and conceptual metaphor theory. CBT compensates for the inadequacies of the above two theories and thus can account for phenomena that they cannot.

The crucial insight of CBT is that meaning construction typically involves the integration of a structure that gives rise to more than the sum of its parts. Blending theorists argue that this process of conceptual integration or blending is a general and basic cognitive operation that is central to the way we think. The core of conceptual blending theory is the introduction of logical connectors to connect mental objects, which means the sum of what has been perceived, discovered, or learned by an individual. In CBT, mental objects specifically refer to the meaning items that occur in discourse. (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998). The online, dynamic network model is shown in the following figure.

The integration starts when any partial counterpart connection occurs between the input spaces (here, the Input1 space and the Input2 space). Then, the common concepts that the two spaces share form a generic space. In addition, the two input spaces generate a third space called the blend space. This new space maintains a partial structure from the two input spaces and adds an emergent structure of its own.
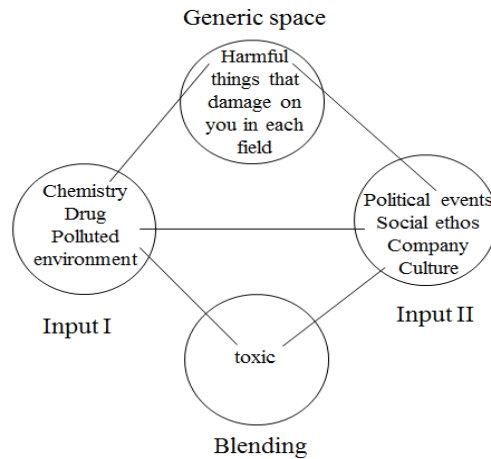
Figure 1: Conceptual integration networks (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998)

4. Types of Semantic Changes in Oxford Word by Year

"Traditionally, the results of semantic change are described and classified in terms of two properties: Scope and Status." (Stockwell et al, 2007:156) Through the semantic analysis of these 18 "old words for new meanings", four types of semantic change are found and then interpreted with CBT: scope change, status change, semantic shift and class shift.

4.1 Scope Change: Broadening/Narrrowing

The first type is scope change, which answers the question of how broad the range that the meaning of a word covers is—how much does it include. It has two directions to change: broadening and narrowing. First, broadening is also called extension of meaning or generalization. It is a process by which a word that originally had a specialized meaning has now become generalized. There are four kinds of broadening: 1) from specific to general, 2) from proper nouns to common nouns, 3) from concrete to abstract, and 4) from technical terms to general words. (Wang, 2002)

Figure 2: Conceptual blending network of toxins

For instance, the Word of the Year 2018 has been chosen — toxic. Defining the word as "poisonous", the word was most associated with the word "chemical", appearing most frequently in discussions about the environment, including "toxic substance", "toxic gas", "toxic waste" and "toxic air". The term first appeared in English in the mid-17th century, from the medieval Latin toxicus, but now "toxic" has also been used to describe workplaces, schools, relationships, cultures and stress over that year.

The #Me Too movement "put the spotlight on toxic masculinity", whereas in politics, the word has been applied to the "rhetoric, policies, agendas and legacies of leaders and governments around the globe". The debate fostered

by the Brexit vote has also been described as a toxic environment, whereas social media platforms "have come under fire for the toxic impact they have on our mental health".
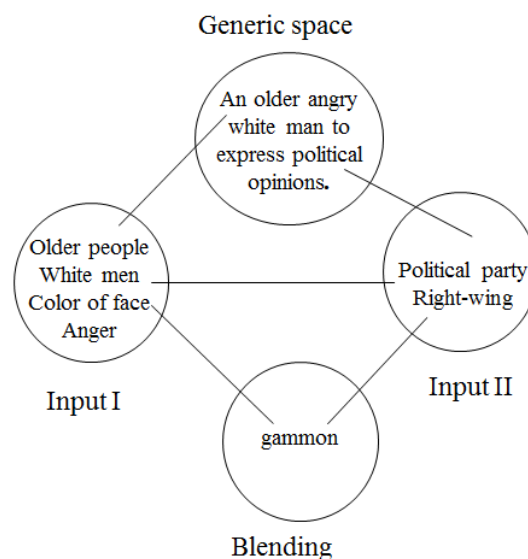
In contrast to broadening, "narrowing (also called specialization or restriction) is a process by which a word of wide meaning acquires a narrow or specialized sense. In other words, a word which used to have a more general sense becomes restricted in its application and conveys a special concept in present-day English." (Zhang, 2015:160)

Some material nouns are used to refer to objects made of them and thus have a more specific sense. From common words to proper words is a useful approach to narrowing word meanings.

4.2 Status Change: Amelioration/Pejoration

The second type is status change, which answers the question of whether the word has gone up, or down, in its social status and content. (Stockwell et al., 2007:156) There are two directions for change: amelioration and pejoration. Words often rise from a humble beginning to a position of greater importance. This change is called elevation of meaning. Some words early in their history signify something quite low or humble but change to designate something agreeable or pleasant.

In contrast to amelioration, pejoration is a process by which words with an appreciator or neutral affective meaning fall into an ill reputation or are used in a derogatory sense, also called degradation (Hu, 2006). There are four kinds of pejoration words. 1) A word falls into disrepute because of social prejudice. 2) A word becomes less respectable because of euphemism. 3) Middle terms, which are neutral in meaning and take on favorable or unfavorable meanings according to context. 4) Sometimes, a word shows deterioration in some of its uses but maintains itself in others, such as from the Oxford Word Shortlist of 2017.
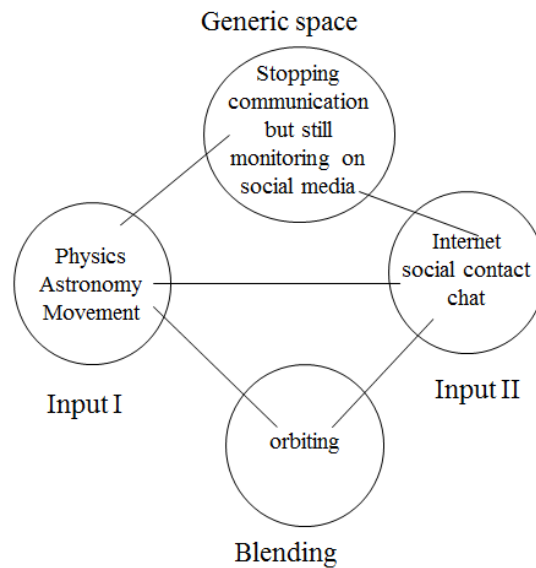

Figure 3: Conceptual *blending network of gammones*

The word gammon originally signifies the bottom piece of a side of bacon, including a hind leg. However, it is typically used in the UK as a derogatory term for an older middle-class white man whose face becomes flushed owing to anger when expressing political (typically right-wing) opinions. Gammon, the traditional British pub grub, experienced a renaissance in 2017. Owing to parallels drawn between the fleshy, pink meat and the visages of older, white men flushed in anger, gammon has become a derogatory term in political circles.

4.3 Semantic Shift

In both the change in word meaning scope and the word meaning status, the literal usage of words is changed; that is, the categories of the things referred to by words have not changed. However, from "literal meaning" to "figurative meaning", the category of things referred to is completely different, and the meaning of words has shifted (semantic shift), which is also an important way of meaning evolution. It mainly includes metaphor, metonymy, transferred epithet, synecdoche, synesthesia, and onomatopoeia, such as *orbiting*.

Generic space

Stopping communication but still monitoring on social media

Physics Astronomy Movement

Internet social contact chat

Input I

orbiting

Input II

Blending

Figure 4: Conceptual blending network for *orbiting*

Orbiting in its first place refers to something such as a satellite orbiting a planet, moon, or sun, which moves around it in a continuous, curved path. However, it demonstrates the action of abruptly withdrawing from direct communication with someone while still monitoring, and sometimes responding to, their activity on social media. The naming of the practice that year has opened up debate as to whether orbiting can be considered a consciously manipulative power play or is merely symptomatic of the fast-paced, public-facing, keep-your-options-open world of modern dating.

4.4 Class Shift

"Class shift" is a term that means that a word changes its word class for various reasons, possibly from a noun to a verb, etc. For example, the Word Shortlist of the Year *Adulating* in 2016. It refers to the practice of behaving in a way characteristic of a responsible adult, especially the accomplishment of mundane but necessary tasks. In this example, adult is a noun word but here is used as a verb, so it can be added to the inflectional suffix *–ing*. The word adulting is then used as a noun to signify deeds such as adults did.

5. Social Motivations for the Semantic Changes in Oxford Word over the Year

The language is in a constant flux of change. One reason driving the change is the continuous process of increasing the efficiency of expressions according to the least-effort principle proposed by George Kingsley Zipf. On the other hand, many existing words are subject to semantic change to let speakers refer to new or changed concepts in the surrounding world. It is being adapted to the changing real world, which it is supposed to describe. In this paper, we are interested in the latter type of linguistic evolution and will probe the social motivations of semantic change of "old words for new meanings" from the Oxford Word of the Year.

5.1 Politics

A previous analysis revealed that politics is an important factor affecting semantic change in the word of the year. The emergence of many political accidents evokes changes in the meanings of these words, such as toxic, gammon, antifa and kompromat. For toxins, Oxford said it had become a "deor for the year's most talked about topics". The dictionary pointed to a 45% rise in the number of times the word has looked up on its website and said it best captured "the ethos, mood, or preoccupations" of 2018. It began in March that year, Sergei skripal, a former Russian spy, and his daughter Yulia skripal were attacked by toxic chemicals in the UK, which attracted the continuous attention of the international community. Then, Britain, Russia and the USA were caught in dispute for a long period of time, resulting in diplomatic tension to some extent.

5.2 Racism

The relationships between different races affect the status of English words, and unpleasant and tense ethnic

emotions lead to the degradation of English word meaning (Wang, 1997). The word woke comes from a woke-washing event. On the American political review website Roots, Cyrée Jarelle Johnson accused a white Brooklyn woman of calling the police for a black woman sheltering from the rain outside her home, after which the white woman defended her actions as autism. According to Johnson, woke, "use the words of social justice to make excuses for unforgivable behavior, and allow biased people to hide in irrelevant marginality when causing actual harm to a variety of marginalized people."

5.3 Environmental Protection

The living environment is the basis of human survival and the eternal topic of human concern. However, with the rapid increase in population, unreasonable life habits have caused great damage to the Earth's environment, sometimes even resulting in environmental disasters. In recent years, people have begun to pay increasing attention to global environmental governance issues, reduce the environmental load, save environmental resources, and advocate a green lifestyle.

For example, the word net-zero signifies a target of completely negating the amount of greenhouse gases produced by human activity to be achieved by reducing emissions and implementing methods of absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. In June 2019, the UK became the first major economy to pass a net-zero law, and more than 60 countries have since pledged to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. However, as initial analysis indicates that urgent action is required to meet this target, the debate as to what action should be taken has contributed to a 992% increase in usage for the term in 2019.

5.4 Science Technology

The meaning of words is not only closely related to the objective world and social practice but also related to society and people's understanding. With the progress of human society, the rapid development of science and technology is changing people's lifestyles. Things, concepts and thoughts in human society are constantly changing. Therefore, the meaning of words reflecting objective things or phenomena often changes. For example, the word orbiting originally referred to concepts in physical and space fields but now modifies people's behavior on the internet or other social media.

6. Conclusion

Words of the year are generally a summary of the remarkable events and social activities of the year, among which different words embody the different focuses of the public. However, most articles discuss new words of "old words for new meanings" in words of the year, while little attention has been given to them. Thus, this paper aims to investigate the types of semantic change in "old words for new meanings" in English words and their social motivations, taking the case of the Word and Shortlist of the Year published by the Oxford Dictionary from 2015--2019.

Through case analysis, the paper revealed that approximately 1/3 of the hot words from 2015--2019 were "Old Words for New Meanings". There are five ways to change the meaning of an old word: (1) scope change (broadening/narrowing), (2) status change (amelioration/pejoration), (3) semantic change (figurative meaning), and (4) class shift. The social motivations influencing semantic change are as follows: (1) political factors; (2) facial factors; (3) environmental protection; and (4) technological development.

The paper applies CBT to analyze Oxford Word and Shortlist of the Year from the perspective of sociocognitive linguistics. It summarizes the types of their semantic change, interprets their processes with integration networks and probes their social motivations deeply. Academic explorations of semantic change in English words based on the CBT are of great significance both theoretically and practically.

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