1 INTRODUCTION

Difficult to formulate a general theory:

• unlike other areas of linguistic change, lexical semantic change is linked to change in culture / society: arbitrary cultural factors can give rise to highly unpredictable semantic changes

• the link between form (signifiant) and meaning (signifié) is arbitrary. Any link is as good as any other, hence unlimited change is possible (but see later)

• there are no physiological restrictions on change as there are for sound change

2 TRADITIONAL CLASSIFICATIONS OF LEXICAL SEMANTIC CHANGE

1. Restriction e.g. starve ‘die’ > ‘die of hunger’ (cf. German sterben)
   meat ‘food’ > ‘animal flesh as food’
   fowl ‘bird’ > ‘edible domestic bird’ (cf. German Vogel)

2. Extension e.g. Fr. panier ‘bread basket’ (cf. pain) > ‘basket’
      arrive ‘come to shore’ > ‘arrive’
      batch ‘quantity of bread baked at once’ > ‘anything handled in a single operation’

3. Pejoration e.g. silly ‘blessed’ > ‘silly’ (cf. German selig)
      villain ‘serf’ > ‘criminal’
      amateur ‘lover of a topic’ > ‘incompetent person’ (F. aimer)

4. Amelioration e.g. knight ‘servant’ > ‘knight’
      sophisticated ‘artificial’ (cf. sophistry) > ‘cultured’
      pretty ‘sly’ > ‘good-looking’

3 MEILLET’S AND ULLMANN’S CAUSES OF SEMANTIC CHANGE (MEILLET 1905; ULLMANN 1957, 1962)

1. Language-internal e.g. French pas ‘step’ > negative marker

2. Historical causes i.e. a change in material culture e.g. car ‘cart’ > ‘automobile’,
   pen ‘quill’ > ‘pen’; fly ‘fly (of bird)’ > ‘fly (of bird or aeroplane etc.).’

3. Social causes i.e. a word changes its social sphere e.g. lure ‘bundle of feathers used in falconry’ > ‘attraction’, harvest ‘autumn’ > ‘agricultural work carried out in autumn’.

4. Psychological causes i.e. spread of metaphors from frequently used areas, or avoidance of taboo words e.g. new words for ‘bear’ in English bear (‘brown’) or Russian medved’ (‘honey-eater”).

4 ROLE OF METAPHOR AND METONYMY

Metaphor = one concept is understood in terms of another / an imagined link is established e.g. foot ‘foot’ > ‘lower part of hill’, pay for ‘give money’ > ‘suffer
Metaphors conventionalise and are no longer regarded as creative:

1. stage when using the metaphoric meaning is an act of creativity
2. a period of imitation: speakers are aware of using a well-known metaphor
3. metaphor is completely conventionalised

Metaphors generally shift from concrete to abstract e.g. *grasp* ‘take hold of’ > ‘understand’ or from specialised to general spheres of usage (as with *pay*).

Cf. grammaticalisation OE *pa hwile pe* ‘at the time that’ > ‘while (temporal)’ > ‘while (consecutive)’

Metonymy = change arising from contiguity (nearness) of meaning i.e. a real rather than imagined link e.g. part-for-whole *tea* ‘drink’ > ‘evening meal’; material for object *glass* ‘material’ > ‘container’; or close association e.g. *cheek* ‘jaw’ > ‘cheek’.

5 TENDENCIES
Some common semantic shifts can be identified:

- hearing > vision e.g. *loud*
- touch > taste e.g. *sharp*
- taste > emotion e.g. *bitter, sweet*
- sensory > personality e.g. *sharp, dull, bright* (or just physical > mental)
- deontic > epistemic e.g. *may* (*You may go to the ball > She may have arrived by now*, see Traugott 1989)
- see > understand e.g. *clear, observe, regard, view*
- diminutives > ordinary e.g. *chicken* ‘young fowl’ > ‘adult fowl’, *pig* (ditto) replacing *swine*
- cheap > negative connotations e.g. Latin *vilis* ‘cheap’ > Fr. *vile* ‘contemptible’.
- intelligent > dishonest e.g. *cunning*

What’s the point of all this?
- classes show what changes are likely to occur – but offer no explanation
- even the ‘causes’ do not go much beyond classifying the data
- these tendencies have different sources (so do not form a unified explanation)

Some of these are due to universal patterns of metaphor (e.g. emotion as a taste, comprehension as vision, cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Such tendencies have also been systematised (Traugott 1985, 1989):

**Tendency I**
Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal (evaluative / perceptual / cognitive) described situation e.g. *feel* ‘touch’ > ‘experience’, *grasp* ‘take in one’s hands’ > ‘understand’, *weigh* (up) ‘determine weight’ > ‘evaluate’, *value* ‘monetary value’ > ‘worth’.

**Tendency II**
Meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation e.g. *observe* ‘perceive’ > ‘state’, *while* ‘at the same time that’ > ‘although’
Tendency III

Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker’s subjective belief state / attitude towards the proposition e.g. go ‘walk’ > ‘intend’, may ‘have permission’ > ‘be possible’, difficult ‘hard to do’ > ‘hard to please’.


6 OTHER ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN SEMANTIC CHANGE

6.1 Linguistic causes

• words become too short to be effective carriers of meaning and are replaced by longer versions which take over their meaning
• explains frequent replacement of ordinary forms by diminutive e.g. Fr. abeille ‘bee’ for expected **ap /a/, German Mädchen ‘little girl’ > ‘girl’ replacing Magd.
• fails to explain cases where this does not take place e.g. Fr. eau /o/ ‘water’.

• a word changes its sense to replace a word that became ‘unfit’ through homonymy e.g. Fr. manger, It. mangiare etc. (< Lat. mandicare ‘chew’) replaced the existing word for ‘eat’ because it was sometimes homophonous with forms of esse ‘be’ (see Lüdtke 1999).

• a newly-created or borrowed word pushes an existing word out of place (e.g. sloth ‘slowness’ > ‘laziness’ after the appearance of slowness; deer ‘animal’ > ‘deer’ after borrowing Fr. animal) (cf. structuralist ‘push chains’ in sound change).

• a word is influenced by an unrelated but phonetically similar word: suggests that words are stored / retrieved by their phonetic form as well as their meaning e.g. sap ‘undermine’ > ‘drain’ under influence of sap (of a tree).

• a word’s meaning changes as a result of syntactic change e.g. like ‘give pleasure to’ > ‘derive pleasure from’.

6.2 Polysemy and vagueness

Polysemy and vagueness are central to semantic change:

• a word acquires a second (polysemous) sense e.g. write ‘cut’ > ‘cut, write’; spin ‘draw out (fibre into thread)’ > ‘turn rapidly’

• a word loses a second (polysemous) sense write ‘cut, write’ > ‘write’

• if both happen, the word change its sense entirely

6.3 Acquisition

Children have access only to reference (i.e. use on a particular occasion) never sense, so are liable to make abductive inferences which alter the language. They may:

• interpret a common context in which a word is applied as the only one (e.g. write)
• assume that the fact that a word is not applied in a particular context is an accidental gap in the data (e.g. *dog*)

• construct derivational links where none existed historically and apply regular semantic mappings to those links (e.g. *sap*)

• misinterpret what the intended reference is completely e.g. e.g. *bead* ‘prayer’ > ‘bead’ from phrases such as *counting one’s beads*

6.4 Social and cultural causes
See above. Unpredictable and can be extreme.

6.5 Language use (cf. metaphor)
Attribution of meaning of one part of an utterance to another e.g. in *grow taller* the sense of growth is attributed to the adjective *taller*, hence *grow* comes to mean ‘become’, hence *grow smaller*.

Also the cause of pejoration / amelioration (e.g. via euphemism) e.g. positive associations of OE *hros* ‘steed’ are lost as every owner applies it to their own horse; *crafty* ‘skilled’ is used to avoid saying ‘dishonest’ openly, but the meaning is understood by inference, and becomes attached to the item itself; *cheap*.

FURTHER READING