

Amelioration and pejoration of meaning in English and Romanian

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Words gain or lose negative or positive connotations with or without changes in other semantic features. These are sometimes treated as special phenomena- pejoration (“getting worse”) and amelioration (“getting better”) - but in fact they are merely subcategories of the addition and subtraction of semantic features.

1. Amelioration of meaning

Amelioration occurs when a word loses negative connotations or gains positive ones. It is the reverse of pejoration, implying the process by which a new meaning of a word acquires a higher status in comparison with the initial one. It involves an improvement in assigned value, Old English “*cniht*”, “*boy, attendant, servant*”, clearly has less exalted connotations than its descendant “*knight*” and “*sophisticated*” now means “*worldly-wise, intellectually appealing, cultured*”, rather than “*artificial*”. An example of amelioration of meaning is the word “*democrat*”, which at the time of the American Revolution, the term “*democrat*” had all the negative connotations of the modern usage of the word “*demagogue*” (in English and Romanian). A century, the term had shifted in meaning enough that it was viewed favorably as the name of a national political party. Also an amelioration of meaning has undergone the word “*nice*”. The term “*nice*” derives from Latin “*nescius*” “*ignorant*” and came at the time of its borrowing from Old French to mean “*silly, simple*” then “*foolish, stupid*”, later developing a more positive meaning as “*pleasing, agreeable*”. The Romanian term “*zmeu*” has also undergone an ameliorative meaning, because at the beginning meant “*snake*”, then “*a dragon*”, “*a monster*” and nowadays means a “*comet*”, a paper toy. (Cioranescu, 2001:723).

In what concerns the Romanian words which have undergone the process of amelioration I should describe the examples of the terms “*sugubat*” and “*bazaconie*”. At the beginning, “*sugubat*” meant “*criminal, ucigas*” (“*criminal, murderer*”), like in this extract from Dosoftei, “*Vietile svintilor*”, 1683, “*Acestea vazand acel sugubat si mancator de sange deade raspuns asupra-le sabie*”, or the meaning of “*dangerous*” as in Creanga's work *Harap-Alb*, “*in calatoria ta sa ai trebuinta si de rai si de buni dar sa te feresti de omul ros, iara mai ales de cel span, cat ii putea, sa n-ai de-a face cu dansii, caci sunt foarte sugubeti*”. Under the influence of the verb “*suguesc*”, which meant “*to joke*”, the word came to mean “*funny*”. The other word, “*bazaconie*” has also encountered during years some tendencies of ameliorating its meaning. Therefore, the word, which comes from “*iniquitas, injuria*”, had the exclusive meaning of “*injustice*” like in “*Alexandria*”, 1620, “*Si vazura acolo atata strambatate si razboaie si multe bazaconii si sange varsat*”, and nowadays has the sense of “*funny action, stupidity*”, Jipescu, “*Opincar*”, p.45, “*Aici in oras, alte bazaconii: calestile iti hauiesc capu*”.

2. Pejoration of meaning

The attitude of speakers and hearers to particular words may also change, as the value assigned to the referents to words alters. **Pejoration**, a downward move in evaluative attitude, is frequently due to social prejudice and as a result of “*degradation*” a neutral word becomes deprecating. In the English language, the term “*knave*” meant originally (Old English) “*male servant*” from “*boy*” (German “*Knabe*”) but deteriorated to the meaning of “*base or coarse person*”, having more or less died out and been replaced by “*boy*”. In the Romanian language, The word “*cavaler*” (“*knight*”) first meant “*a title offered by the king to a soldier*”, then “*horseman*”, “*a generous person*” and nowadays means “*bachelor*” as Cioranescu (2001 :161) states in DER (Dictionarul Etimologic al Limbii Romane). Another important example provided

by the same author is the word “*crai*” which meant “*king*” and achieved pejorative meaning such as “*wizard*” > “*chief*” > “*vagrant*” to the meaning of “*donjuan*”. “*Villain*” developed from “*inhabitant of a village*” to “*scoundrel*”. The word “*peasant*” is used now for someone who shows bad behavior as the word “*farmer*” has become the normal term. In official contexts, however, the term “*peasant*” is found for small and/or poor farmers. “*Churl*”, today meaning “*one who is rude in manners*”, initially meant “*a peasant*”; “*a farm-laborer*” or “*a male human being*”(800); then “*a man without rank*”(1000); “*a serf*” (1225); “*a base fellow*”; “*a villain*”(1300). And “*boor*” originally meant “*a farmer*”, gradually came to mean “*an ill-bed fellow*” after the stages “*a husbandman, peasant, countryman*” (1430); “*a rustic with lack of refinement*” (1598).

Both English and Romanian languages are sources of words' meaning change, and some of them have undergone this type of semantic change, which is called pejoration. Now I will try to exemplify some words which have gain negative connotations in English and Romanian. For example, “*facetious*” used to mean “*witty, elegant*” and its meaning has shifted to something which implies a desire to be amusing, often intrusive or ill-timed, characterized by out-of-place efforts of jocularity, the value of this word having gone from approbation to disapproval. Latin “*conspiratio*” (“*a breathing together*”), “*unison*”, “*harmony*”, “*agreement*”, already in Roman times, came to have negative connotations of “*plot, conspiracy*” (in English and Romanian); or the word “*pretend*” used to mean simply “*maintain, represent, claim*”, but now the negative nuance of falsity has been added (in English and Romanian). Another example is the Old English “*dom*”, “*judgment, verdict*”, which gave in Modern English “*doom*” (the neutral cognate “*deem*” and the semantically negligible contribution of the element to the meanings of compounds like “*wisdom*”; “*kingdom*” and even with a semantic shift, the recent coinage “*boredom*” 1867). The word “*fiddle*” (a loan word from Late Latin) once was simply the word for “*violin*”, and is still used pretty freely by professional musicians. It has become informal by comparison to “*violin*” however, and a radio announcer or preacher would be unlikely to use it. In present day English, “*cunning*” has very negative connotations, but in Middle English it meant “*learned, skilfully, expert*” (the word is not attested before the early 14th century, but on various grounds is assumed to be much older).

In what concerns the Romanian language, we can discuss about the word “*misel*”(Latin “*misellus*”, a diminutive from “*miser*”) meant a “*poor man*” (*Psaltirea diaconului Coresi din 1577: “Nu uita chemarea miseilor.”*), but during time acquired a negative connotation, meaning an evil, a mean person (“*Timpul are dinti de otel/ Roade voinic si misel*”-Pann). According to Saineanu (1999:356), the word “*razbunare*” (“*revenge*”) meant “*to improve*” like in the following phrase “*vremea se razbuna*” with the meaning of “*vremea se insenineaza, devine iar buna*” (“*the weather will get better*”), but on the other hand, “*razbunare se aplica la rasplata raului comis, iar sensul cel mai general este acela ca ucigasul platea rudelor ucisului, adica isi rascumpara crima*” . In other words , “*to redeem*” is a synonym of “*revenge*”(Grigore Ureche, Cronicel: “*S-a ridicat Stefan Voda cu toata puterea sa, voind sa-si rascumpere strambatate ce-i facuse ungerii.*”).

To draw a conclusion, semantic change is an important process of enriching language, due to its causes and consequences.

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