Lecture III

Semantic Changes

I. The Causes of Semantic Changes

The meaning of a word can change in the course of time. Transfer of the

meaning is called lexico-semantic word-building. In such cases the outer aspect of a word does not change.

The causes of semantic changes can be extra-linguistic and linguistic: the change of the lexical meaning of the noun pen was due to extra-longuistic causes.

Primarily pen comes back to the latin word penna (a feather of a bird). As people wrote with goose pens the name was transferred to steel pens which were later on used for writing. Still later any instrument for writing was called a pen.

On the other hand, causes may be linguistic, e.g. the conflict of synonyms when a perfect synonym of a native word is borrowed from some other language one of them may specialize in its meaning. The noun tide in Old English was polysemantic and denoted time, season, hour. When the French words time, season, hour were borrowed into English they ousted the word tide in these meanings. It was specialized and now means regular rise and fall of the sea caused by attraction of the moon. The meaning of a word can also change due to ellipsis:

the word-group a train of carriages had the meaning of a row of carriages, later on of carriages was dropped and the noun train changed its meaning, it is used now in the function and with the meaning of the whole word-group.

Semantic changes have been classified by different scientists. The most

complete classification was suggested by a German scientist Herman Paul. It is based on the logical principle. He distinguishes two main ways where the semantic change is gradual (specialization and generalization), two momentary conscious semantic changes (metaphor and metonymy) and secondary ways: gradual (elevation and degradation), momentary (hyperbole and litotes).

II. Specialization

It is a gradual process when a word passes from a general sphere to some special sphere of communication, e.g. case has a general meaning circumstances in which a person or a zhing is. It is soecialized in its meaning when used in law (a lawsuit), in grammar (a form in the paradigm of a noun), in medicine (a patient, an illness). The difference between these meanings is revealed in the context.

The meaning of a word can specialize when it remains in general usage. The English verb starve was specialized in its meaning after the Scandinavian word die was borrowed into English. Die became the general verb with this meaning. Starve got the meaning to die of hunger.

The third way of specialization is the formation of proper names from

common nouns. It is often used in toponymics: the City – the business part of

London.

The fourth way of specialization is ellipsis. in such cases primarily we have a word-group of the type attribute + noun, which is used constsntly in a definite situation, e.g. the meaning of the word room was specialized because it was often used in the combinations: dining room, sleeping room which meant space for dining, space for sleeping.

III. Generalization

It is the transfer from a concrete meaning to an abstract one, e.g. journey was borrowed from French with the meaning one day trip, now it means a trip of any duration (jour means a day in French).

All auxiliary verbs are cases of generalization of their lexical meaning because they developed a grammatical: have, be, do, shall, will when used as auxiliary verbs are devoid of their lexical meaning which they have when used as notional verbs or modal verbs, c.f. I have several books by Austin and I have read some books by Austin.

IV. Metaphor

It is a transfer of the meaning on the basis of comparison. Metaphor can be based on different types of similarity:

a) similarity of shape: head (of a cabbage), bottleneck, teeth (of a saw, a comb);

b) similarity of position: foot (of a page, of a mountain), head (of

procession);

c) similarity of function, behaviour: a whip (an official in the British Parliament whose duty is to see that members were present at the

voting), a bookworm (a person who is fond of books);

d) similarity of colour: orange, hazel, chestnut.

A special type of metaphor is when proper names become common nouns,

e.g. philistine – a mercenary person, vandals – destructive people.

V. Metonymy

It is a transfer of the meaning on the basis of contiguity. There are different types of metonymy:

a) the material of which an object is made may become the name of the

object: a glass, boards;

b) the name of the place may become the name of the people or of an object placed there: the House – members of Parliement, the White House – the

Administration of the USA;

c) names of musical instruments may become names of musicians when

they are united in an orchestra: the violin, the saxophone;

d) the name of some person may become a common noun, e.g. boycott was

originally the name of an Irish family who were so much disliked by their neighbours that they did not mix with them.

e) names of inventors very often become terms to denote things they

invented, e.g. watt, om, roentgen;

f) some geographical names can also become common nouns through

metonymy, e.g. holland (linen fabrics), Brussels (a special kind of

carpets), china (porcelain).

VI. Secondary Ways of Semantic Changes

There are the following secondary ways of semantic changes:

1. Elevation. It is a transfer of the meaning when it becomes better in the course of time: knight originally meant a boy, then a young servant, then a military servant, then a noble man. Now it is a title of nobility given to outstanding people.

2. Degradation. It is a transfer of the meaning when it becomes worse in the

course of time, e.g. villain originally meant working on a villa, now it means a scoundrel.

3. Hyperbole. It is a transfer of the meaning when the speaker uses exaggeration, e.g. to hate (doing something), not to see somebody for ages. hyperbole is often used to form phraseological units, e.g. to split hairs.

4. Litotes. It is a transfer of the meaning when the speaker expresses the

affirmative with the negative or vice versa, e.g. not bad (it is good), no coward, not half as important.