



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 16

3-28-1980

Metonymy in the Evolution of Meaning

John Durham Peters

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Peters, John Durham (1980) "Metonymy in the Evolution of Meaning," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol6/iss1/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

METONYMY IN THE EVOLUTION OF MEANING

John Durham Peters
Kidder, Peabody & Co.

T. S. Eliot said, "Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still."¹ He might have just as correctly written that meanings slip and slide, because without any outside reference, an utterance is no more than gibberish and the written word no more than a hieroglyph. It is precisely this relationship between a word and its referent which makes meaning and communication possible. However, the relationship between word and referent, or, in any semiotic system, the relationship between the signifier and the signified, is ever changing. A word may denote a certain object or concept, only to find as time passes that the original meaning has drifted away and been replaced with another meaning associated in some way with the first. For instance, the etymological meaning of the germane word of Greek origin, symposium, is drinking together.² One can imagine a gathering of friends and colleagues, of which the most salient aspect is the drinking; one can also see that the drinking is accompanied by other on-goings, such as discussion and sharing of points of view, which is of course the direction in which the meaning of this word has flowed. Symposium stood for a complex event in reality; the shift is generated by changing accentuation of contextual aspects. Another example of the tendency of words to shift from one meaning to another associated meaning can be seen in the abundance of words in the Germanic family of languages which mean either to throw or to stroke, to spread, and appear to have once had both meanings, as in the Modern English strike and its Dutch cognate strijken, which means to smooth or flatten out.³ Jan de Vries, an eminent Dutch Germanicist, suggests that these now apparently distinct meanings were once unified in the almost universal practice of home-construction by the Germanic tribes: wet loam was used to seal the thatched walls and roof, it being applied by first hurling it forcibly against the thatch, and then by smoothing it out, so as to make an even surface.⁴ The proto-Germanic strikan evidently applied to the entire situation; the context of its usage could not make the distinction between the aspects of throwing and spreading which have since come to dominate its reflexes.

Fluidity is thus the hallmark of the relationship of words and their meanings. A word may mark a particular aspect or primary meaning of the reality for which it stands, but it simply cannot help meaning the entire piece of reality, with all its other aspectual and possible secondary and tertiary meanings. On an even larger scale, a word cannot represent any independent part of reality, but draws in all related experiential and conceptual contexts and functions in which that part may act. Words represent not only the landscape of reality, but the intricate network of ecological relationships between all things. The complexity and mutability of a word's meaning makes possible the evolution of meaning, which can be as various and wondrous as the varieties of animal life, from giraffes to kangaroos. At times, linguistic change can appear whimsical, as in Mario Pei's point that the same root which gives us chin in English shows up as cheek in Latin, jaw in Sanskrit, and mouth in Breton,⁵ or in the evidence

that both bleach⁶ and black have a common root, along with blond, blush, blaze, and blue.

However amazing such developments may be, there is still lawfulness to the metamorphoses of language. Perhaps one of the most important formulations of the pattern of semantic change is Jerzy Kurylowicz's fourth law of analogy, from his study of the effects of analogy on linguistic evolution. The essence of this law is that whenever a new linguistic form is accepted into a language, be it a variation on an existing word, borrowed from foreign or specialized sources, or freshly created, it will assume the primary meaning of the old form it is replacing, leaving the old form with a secondary meaning of its former primary meaning. For example, when the Old English word bread became prominent it usurped the primary meaning of hlaf, leaving hlaf with the meaning still active in its Modern English reflex loaf. The concept of loaf is clearly one which is secondarily related to the idea of bread. Kurylowicz's law can readily be found in the influence of Norman French on Old English, for instance, as in the case of scieppan, once meaning all that create now does, which was pushed by that entering French word to the secondary meaning which it now has in shape, that is, forming or causing to take form in a concrete and tangible manner.

This law governs the distribution of linguistic units to the available conceptual territories, constantly maintaining an equilibrium by pushing existing forms to secondary meanings, leaving the primary meanings open to the encroaching forms. Thus in a volatile language situation, words can move from meaning to meaning, following a chain of connected significations, each succeeding link being a secondary or contingent derivation of the former. An instance of this historical leapfrog can be observed in the evolution of our verb spill. In Old English, it apparently stood for destruction, and then evolved into one specific kind of destruction, namely, killing. From there, it adopted the meaning of shedding blood, an aspect of killing inextricably connected with it in those times of untidy weaponry. Later, it arrived at its more or less contemporary meaning, to cause liquid to run or flow wastefully.⁸ In such evolution, each adjoining link is related to the links which flank it, yet the distance between killing and spilling one's milk disguises the fact of kindredness.

Kurylowicz's suggestion that words evolve from primary to secondary meanings corresponds remarkably to the Russian-born linguist Roman Jakobson's celebrated description of metonymy. Jakobson contends that there are two basic modes of operation which can be functioning in any symbolic system, namely the metaphoric and metonymic modes. Metaphor, he argues, is the process of equation on grounds of similarity or identity, while metonymy uses proximity or contiguity as its governing principle.⁹ For example, in rhetoric, from which these terms are of course derived, a figure of speech such as the Old English mere-hengest, or horse of the sea, is metaphoric when applied to a ship,¹⁰ since a ship and a horse can have alike functions, the term sails in this context is metonymic, since sails and ships are complementary to each other, but not bound by similarity. (A specific subset of metonymy can be seen working here, namely synechdoche, which involves the substitution of a part for the whole. Synechdoche is often confused, with metonymy, but must be held in prespective.) The distinc-

tion between the metaphoric and metonymic poles is very valuable in examining any semiotic system; for instance, multiplication, division, music, poetry and basketball seem to me to be basically metaphoric, while addition, subtraction, every-day sound, prose and football seem to be metonymical in orientation, but such awaits further investigation.

Metonymy prescribes the evolution of meaning in that the relationship between primary and secondary meanings is one of contiguity, not likeness. For instance, the aforementioned opposites black and bleach share their origin in the following fashion: a primary derivative of the Indo-European *bhel, meaning to be bright or shining, showed up in the idea of burning, or blazing. The Germanic root *blakaz, meaning burnt, generated the Old English blaec, the progenitor of our word black.¹¹ Blazing and blackness are not alike; they are related only by their cause and effect, or contiguous relationship. Many other instances show a relationship between primary and secondary meanings which is far less extreme. The word green is probably an offshoot stemming from the same root as growth.¹² In the world view of an agricultural society, greenness is contiguous to growth, though our modern wonder-bread point of view might more readily attribute a concept such as nutrition to growth. Or the relationship between the links on the chain may also bespeak ideological contiguities which prevail at a given point in time. Silly, for instance, once meant blessed,¹³ then moved to innocent, then to naive, then to silly in its present use. Innocence is a contingent meaning of blessedness in the theology of the Middle Ages, just as naivete is contingent to a feeling of scorn in the modern age of experience. The examples could stretch on endlessly, for metonymy has many patterns, and since each word has its own history, there are as many kinds of metonymy as there are words. But in the formation of every word, there will be a metonymical slide of meaning at a given moment. It is inevitable.

The metonymic character of linguistic evolution may have implications which stretch far beyond the realm of historical linguistics. First, it suggests that no package is separate from the wrapping it comes in, that is, that no piece of reality is or can be independently abstracted over time, and that no single aspect can claim to be dominant or self-sufficient. Secondly, the metonymical pattern of evolution suggest that language is sufficient only to deal with aspects and parts of the whole; that all possible definitions and temporary meanings will never reach the all-encompassing invariant Meaning. Each definition of a word circulates about an abstract center of gravity which is the sum of all the orbiting definitions. This central point is not describable by single definitions, but is an abstraction, renderable only by approximation. We all have a sense of what the invariant meaning of the idea money is, for instance, yet we see that the rendering of that concept in language accentuates merely certain features. The French argent emphasizes that it can be silver, as the Germans do with Geld, a derivative of gold. Latin pecus (endowing Modern English with pecuniary) originally meant cattle, and is cognate with English fee and Dutch vee, meaning cattle.¹⁴ The Japanese yen means circle, suggesting that money is to circulate, while American slang green points out the color.¹⁵ Each of the above instances shows an approximation of some common aspect of money, each of which is ultimately only contingent.¹⁶

Similarly, cultural meaning may also be renderable only by elements

coniguously related, whether by tradition, fashion or habit, to the basic meaning of an experience. Culture may simply be that which metonymically blends elements in order to create an identity. For example, what is Christmas but the smell of pine, the warmth of wassail, and the mixture of nutmeg and eggnog? What is success, but a position of rank, or a purchased house? Both cultural and linguistic abstract identities are to be given only in terms of encompassing expressions and elements which are at that point in time simultaneous and synonymous with the meaning to be given.

That identity is formed by orbiting and contingent difinitions and manifestations elucidates the relationship between metonymy and its correlative opposite, metaphor, suggesting as it does that metaphor is a subset of metonymy, in that identity is a creation of contiguity. This evidence implies that metaphor is the marked pair of the polarity, in that the marked member is subsumed by the unmarked, just as life subsumes death and day subsumes night. Metaphor is most obviously active in atemporal and thus unchangeable contexts such as art, where permanent identity is suggested by a tenacious adherence to form and context. For instance, one seemingly facetious differentiation of poetry and prose is that poetry prescribes where the lines end, while prose does not. Actually, such form draws boundaries which preserve and restrict entrance of any new elements, which according to Kurylowicz's fourth law of analogy would engender metonymical evolution. One could argue that metaphor is no more than synchronic metonymy, that identity is no more than frozen contiguity.

Though metaphor creates meanings which seem permanent, which are basically synchronic, paradigmatic, and vertical in orientation, yet the most basic and prevalent style of human functioning is metonymic, being temporal, diachronic, syntagmatic, and horizontal in nature. Metonymy thrives in an environment where the only constant is change, and specifies the evolution and signification of all mutable things.

¹T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in Four Quartets, lines 149-153.

²American Heritage Dictionary (Boston: American Heritage, 1969) p. 1304.

³Jan de Vries, Etymologisch Woordenboek (Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1979) p. 167. As examples he gives Middle Dutch smitan and Old Frisian smita which have the meaning of throwing, as opposed to Old English smitan, Old High German smizan, and Gothic -smeitan which share the meanings of spreading or stroking.

⁴Ibid., p. 18.

⁵Mario Pei, The Story of Language (New York: New American Library, 1965) p. 154.

⁶American Heritage Dictionary, p. 1508.

⁷Anthony Arlotta, Introduction to Historical Linguistics (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972) pp. 135-142. Page 140 contains the discussion of Kurylowicz's fourth law. His laws have profound implications for the study of change, in all realms which touch thereon--genetics, biology, history, sociology.

⁸Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), Vol. X, pp. 599-600.

⁹Roman Jakobson, "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles," in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971) p. 1113.

¹⁰F. G. Cassidy & Richard N. Ringler, Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971) p. 268.

¹¹American Heritage Dictionary, p. 1508.

¹²de Vries, p. 83.

¹³Stephen A. Barney, Word-Hoard, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979) p. 8. Modern German selig--blessed, happy and Modern Dutch zalig--saved (in a religious sense), wonderful, are cognates of silly.

¹⁴de Vries, p. 75. In ancient times, cattle apparently functioned as a means of exchange, as practiced by some African and Oceanic peoples, as in the somewhat familiar tale, "Johnny Lingo."

¹⁵Pei, p. 248. The whole chapter, "Language and Economic Relations," is quite illuminating on this instance of linguistic behavior.

¹⁶Pei points out that the root of Modern English money comes from Latin moneo, which means to warn. In Roman times, a main mint was situated in the temple of Juno Moneta.