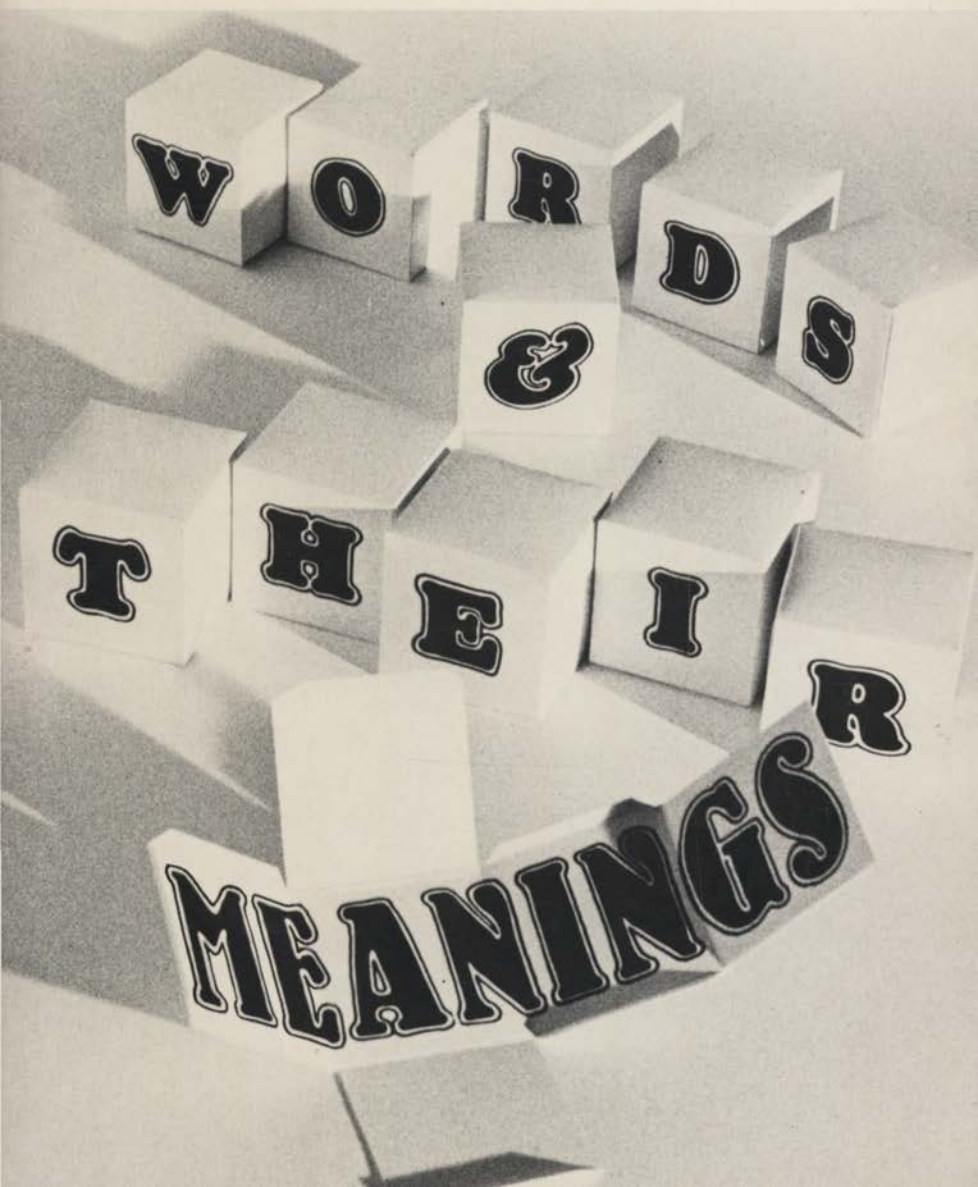


The Australian National University

# UNIVERSITY LECTURES 1974

Stephen Ullmann



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*WORDS AND THEIR MEANINGS*

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PUBLICATION DATE 29.11.74

UNIVERSITY LECTURES 1974

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STEPHEN ULLMANN

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AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY PRESS  
CANBERRA 1974

First published in Australia 1974

Printed in Australia for the Australian National University Press, Canberra

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National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

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Ullmann, Stephen, 1914-

Words and their meanings/[by] Stephen Ullmann. — Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974. — (University lectures 1974).

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 7081 0755 9

1. Semantics. I Title. (Series: Australian National University, Canberra. University lectures 1974).

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*North, South, and Central America:* International Scholarly Book Services, Inc., Portland, Oregon. *Southeast Asia:* Angus & Robertson (S.E. Asia) Pty Ltd, Singapore. *Japan:* United Publishers Services Ltd, Tokyo.

# The nature of meaning

In a well-known passage of *Through the Looking-glass*, Humpty Dumpty tells Alice that there are 364 days for un-birthday presents and only one for birthday presents, and goes on:

‘There’s *glory* for you!’

‘I don’t know what you mean by “glory”’, Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. ‘Of course you don’t – till I tell you. I meant “there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!”’

‘But “glory” doesn’t mean “a nice knock-down argument”’, Alice objected.

‘When *I* use a word’, Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’

‘The question is’, said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is’, said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be Master – that’s all.’

Humpty Dumpty’s theory of meaning would lead to complete anarchy or – as the last few words just quoted seem to indicate – to an Orwellian linguistic dictatorship where peace means war and love means hate. Such an extreme position is of course a *reductio ad absurdum* of a principle whose importance in communication everybody would recognise: the influence of context, including what is called nowadays ‘context of situation’. In a more sophisticated way, Wittgenstein suggested, in a famous formula, that ‘for a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language’.<sup>1</sup> This formula has been accepted by some philosophers and linguists. Others have expressed some reservations, and it would perhaps be more realistic to say that the use of a word, its distribution, the combinations into which

it enters, the contexts in which it occurs, are consequences and manifestations of its meaning but do not actually constitute meaning itself.<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell has summed up the situation in an illuminating image: 'A word has a meaning, more or less vague; but the meaning is only to be discovered by observing its use; the use comes first, and the meaning is distilled out of it.'<sup>3</sup>

I have discussed elsewhere the various ways in which meaning may be defined.<sup>4</sup> Here I shall take the term in its everyday sense and examine briefly some of the basic characteristics of word-meaning, as seen in modern linguistic theory. These features will also provide a starting-point for studying the ways in which meaning can change; this was the central problem explored by traditional historical semantics but it can now be reinterpreted in the light of more recent – descriptive, structural, transformational-generative and other – approaches to language. Eight such features will be considered: four of them concern the meaning of single words whereas the other four are connected with relations between lexical items.

## A. THE MEANING OF SINGLE WORDS

### 1. Arbitrariness

The question whether words are purely arbitrary, conventional symbols or whether there is an intrinsic connection between sound and sense was already actively debated by Greek philosophers. Among modern thinkers, Locke claimed that words signify 'by a perfectly arbitrary imposition', and Shakespeare had expressed the same idea in a poetic form:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet.

The founder of modern structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, regarded 'l'arbitraire du signe' as one of the two fundamental principles of linguistic symbolisation. This principle can be seen at work in series like the following:

English *write*  
French *écrire*  
German *schreiben*  
Russian *pisát'*

## Greek *gráphein*

## Hungarian *írni*

where we have six different forms all denoting the same action in various languages.<sup>5</sup>

The principle of arbitrariness is not, however, all-pervasive. As opposed to arbitrary, opaque words, there are many others which are 'motivated' and therefore transparent: there is some kind of connection, direct or indirect, between sound and sense. Such motivation may work in three ways. Some words are phonetically motivated, such as onomatopoeic formations like *swish*, *swoosh*, *squawk* or *whoop*, where the meaning itself is an acoustic experience imitated by the sounds. Non-acoustic meanings can be imitated in a similar way: when ten French schoolchildren were told that one of the two English words *gleam* and *gloom* referred to light and the other to darkness, they were all able to select the one more appropriate to light.<sup>6</sup> Other terms are motivated by their grammatical structure, as for example the following compounds and derivatives which are all connected with the verb *to sit*: *sitting*, *resit*, *sit-in*, *sitter-in*, *baby-sit*, *bed-sitter*. Yet another large category of words are motivated because they are obviously used in a transferred meaning; here belong such metaphorical expressions as: to *trigger* off, or to *spark* off, a reaction, to *focus* attention, and innumerable others.

## 2. Vagueness

It is common knowledge that many of our words are vague and imprecise, without sharply defined boundaries. Wittgenstein has described such 'concepts with blurred edges' in an illuminating simile: 'Is a blurred concept a concept at all? — Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?'<sup>7</sup>

There are various factors which may lead to vagueness in meaning. Ordinary words, as distinct from proper names, denote class concepts, not individual phenomena. As Voltaire put it, 'one is forced to designate by the general terms *love* and *hatred* a thousand entirely different loves and hatreds; and the same happens with our pains and pleasures'.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, no clear-cut boundaries exist in the phenomena themselves to which the words refer; colours, for example, form a continuous band, and adjectives denoting age have an uncertain area of reference because there are no precise limits separating the different epochs of our lives, no exact point where one ceases to be young and where one becomes an

old man. Lack of familiarity with the things designated by words may be another source of vagueness: how many people, even educated ones, would be able to define what is meant by *existentialism*, *structuralism* or *semiotics*? Yet another factor, whose importance is difficult to assess, is the child's acquisition of language. It is inevitable that some misunderstandings should arise in the course of this apprenticeship, and although most of these are subsequently eliminated, some may become generalised, as will be seen in the next section.

### 3. Overtones

In addition to their purely cognitive, referential meaning, words may also have various connotations and overtones. These are sometimes described as 'emotive' but, as a leading British linguist has pointed out, "'emotive", or "affective", is being used as a catch-all term to refer to a number of quite distinct factors'.<sup>9</sup> There are indeed cases where the overtones of a word are purely emotive, as for example in interjections or in hyperbolic expressions like *awful*, *tremendous*, *deadly*. Rather different, but no less powerful are the overtones of fashionable slogans and key-words which epitomise the attitudes, fears and aspirations of a particular period; such are, at the present time, terms like *confrontation*, *escalation*, *permissive*, *image*, *structural*, *alienation*, *racialist*, *integration*, *apartheid* and many more. Other words owe their overtones to the fact that they are associated with a particular 'register' (slang, technical, social, literary, etc.). It is because of these associations that words which are almost synonymous as far as their objective reference is concerned are not interchangeable in practice: witness such incongruous combinations as 'a *teeny-weeny* parallelogram — an *infinitesimal* kitten'.

It is interesting to note that, in spite of the subjective and volatile nature of many overtones, it is possible to quantify them to some extent: a group of American psycholinguists has constructed an ingenious device for 'measuring meaning' or, more precisely, the way certain concepts are evaluated by a representative cross-section of the population.<sup>10</sup>

### 4. Ambiguity

Many lexical items have more than one meaning only one of which will normally be relevant to a given context or situation. A *bill* may be an account to be settled or a draft law; *note* has different meanings in 'a

five dollar *note* – make a mental *note* – *notes* in a book – a musical *note*’; *play* means ‘exercise, sport’ in some contexts, and ‘drama’ in others, and examples could be multiplied indefinitely. This situation, where one word has two or more different senses, is known in linguistics as ‘polysemy’. This should be distinguished from ‘homonymy’ where we have two or more separate lexical items identical in form, as in ‘the *bark* of a dog’ and ‘the *bark* of a tree’, or in *case* ‘holder’ and ‘the nominative *case*’. Often, however, there is no clear line of demarcation between the two types.

## B. RELATIONS BETWEEN WORDS

Unlike phonology and grammar, the vocabulary consists of a very large number of elements, forming open sets, infinite inventories which are, as a rule, less closely organised. This state of affairs has naturally had an adverse effect on the development of semantic studies. Nevertheless, certain characteristic patterns of lexical structure have been identified, some already half a century ago, others only quite recently. The following are of special relevance to the processes of semantic change which will be examined in the next section.

### 1. Associative fields

Every word is surrounded by an ‘associative field’, a network of associations based on form, on meaning or on both. To take a concrete example, the verb *to see* (including its inflected forms: *sees, saw, seen*) is at the focal point of three associative series:

- (a) Formal: *sea, (bishop’s) see, seize, saw* (noun and verb), *scene*.
- (b) Semantic: *look, view, gaze, eye, etc.*
- (c) Formal and semantic: *seer, sight, <sup>11</sup> oversee, foresee, unseen, etc.*

Experiments have shown that purely formal associations between words – what one might call the ‘punning’ type – are rare with normal subjects but become more frequent with people suffering from fatigue, headaches or influenza, and also with mentally retarded children.<sup>12</sup>

### 2. Collocations

British linguists in particular have paid much attention to the tendency

of words to 'collocate', to co-occur with other terms. A collocation has been defined as 'the habitual association of a word in a language with other particular words in sentences'.<sup>13</sup> Thus it has been argued that 'one of the meanings of *night* is its collocability with *dark*, and of *dark*, of course, collocation with *night*'.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps it is not quite correct to describe 'collocability with *dark*' as one of the 'meanings' of *night*, but it is certainly an important and tangible manifestation of its meaning. To quote a well-known text-book: 'The formal criterion of collocation is taken as crucial because it is more objective, accurate and susceptible to observation than the contextual criterion of referential or conceptual similarity.'<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Lexical fields

Certain areas of the vocabulary show a particularly close form of organisation: their elements delimit each other and derive their significance from their place in the structure as a whole. Examples of such 'lexical fields' which have been thoroughly investigated are colour terms, the nomenclature of kinship, words denoting intellectual and aesthetic values, adjectives for 'old' and 'young', and various other spheres; even the language of cooking has been explored on these lines.<sup>16</sup> In these fields, a certain area of experience is divided up and analysed in a specific way which may differ from one language to another or from one period to the next; in this sense, one linguist has spoken of the 'semantic anisomorphism of different languages',<sup>17</sup> the lack of parallelism in the structure of the same field. A striking example is provided by colour terms in English and Welsh:<sup>18</sup>

<i>green</i>	<i>gwyrd</i>
<i>blue</i>	<i>glas</i>
<i>grey</i>	
<i>brown</i>	<i>llwyd</i>

Similarly, there was no single word for 'brown' or 'grey' in Latin, whereas Russian draws a distinction between two kinds of 'blue': *sinij* 'dark blue' and *goluboj* 'azure, sky-blue'. On the other hand, there seem to be some general tendencies underlying this diversity. A book published five years ago on *Basic Color Terms*,<sup>19</sup> in which data from nearly a hundred languages were examined, came to the conclusion that there are eleven fundamental categories in this field: white, black, red, green,

yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and grey. The authors also found that all the languages investigated have terms for black and white; those with three colours also have a word for red; those with four have the first three plus terms for either green or yellow; those with five have both of these; those with six also have one for blue, etc.

Lexical fields have also been studied from the point of view of the social structures which they reflect and, more recently, from that of the logical relations between their members: relations of synonymy, incompatibility, subordination, opposition and others.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. Distinctive features

One of the most interesting developments in semantics in recent years has been the emergence of 'componential analysis': a method which seeks to resolve meaning into its minimal constituents. In the United States, this approach first arose in work on kinship terms in various American Indian languages, and was further elaborated in connection with transformational-generative grammar. In 1963, two of Chomsky's collaborators, J. J. Katz and J. A. Fodor, put forward a theory designed to provide the semantic component of such a grammar.<sup>21</sup> An important aspect of this theory was that they tried to break down every meaning of every word into a series of elementary constituents. These were of two kinds: 'semantic markers' and 'distinguishers'. The former were features which occurred also in other entries in the dictionary, whereas distinguishers were unique, confined to a particular meaning of one lexical item. Markers were arranged in descending order, progressing from the general to the particular. Not every meaning had a distinguisher; where there was one, it always stood at the end of a 'path'.<sup>22</sup> No two meanings of the same word contained exactly the same set of components, so that the device could also be used for the removal of ambiguities. Take for example the two senses of *man* in 'all *men* are mortal' and 'there were two *men* and three women in the room'. In the former, the meaning comprises only two semantic markers: 'animate' and 'human'. In the second case, the series is longer and more specific: 'animate' — 'human' — 'male' — 'adult'. *Woman* would have the same components except that we would have 'female' instead of 'male'; similarly, *boy* would have the same markers as *man* with the exception of the last one where 'adult' would be replaced by 'young'.

The Katz-Fodor theory has a number of weaknesses, some of them fairly obvious, which need not detain us here.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, a

group of European semanticists has tried to analyse meaning on somewhat similar lines, concentrating mainly on minimal distinctive features which they call 'semes'. The best-known example of this method is the analysis of French words for various kinds of seats in terms of five distinctive features.<sup>24</sup>

	to sit upon	with leg(s)	for one person	with a back	with arms
<i>canapé</i> 'sofa'	+	+	-	(+)	(+)
<i>fauteuil</i> 'arm-chair'	+	+	+	+	+
<i>chaise</i> 'chair'	+	+	+	+	-
<i>tabouret</i> 'stool'	+	+	+	-	-

It will be noted that no two words have exactly the same semes. In this sense, semes play the same part in the vocabulary as distinctive sound-features in phonology: /b/ differs from /p/ because it is voiced as opposed to voiceless, from /m/ because it is oral, not nasal, etc. It is also worth pointing out that all four words share the first two semes, and that there is a generic term in French whose meaning consists of these two semes and no others: *siège* 'seat'.<sup>25</sup>

### C. WHY WORDS CHANGE THEIR MEANING

The fact that words are liable to change their meaning, and that these processes may have far-reaching psychological, social and moral implications, was already known in classical antiquity. An early comment on such implications is found in a passage in Thucydides referring to the lowering of ethical standards during the Peloponnesian War:

'The ordinary acceptance of words in their relation to things was changed as men thought fit. Reckless audacity came to be regarded as courageous loyalty to party, prudent hesitation as specious cowardice, moderation as a cloak for unmanly weakness, and to be clever in everything was to do nought in anything' (Book III, lxxxii).

An echo of this passage is found in Sallust's *War with Catiline* where Marcus Porcius Cato is quoted as saying:

'But in very truth we have long since lost the true names for things. It is precisely because squandering the goods of others is called generosity, and recklessness in wrong-doing is called courage, that the republic is reduced to extremities' (ch. lii).

Before looking more closely at some of the specific factors which can lead to changes in meaning, it should be noted that some of the features discussed in the first section are conducive in a general way to mobility and flexibility in this area. Three features are particularly relevant in this respect:

(a) When a word loses its motivation and becomes a purely arbitrary symbol (A1), its meaning can develop freely, unhampered by any etymological associations. Our word *lord* was originally a transparent compound, Old English *hlaford* or *hlāfweard*, 'loaf-ward' (= 'keeper'). Subsequently, the connection with *loaf* was obscured by sound-change, which made it easier for the meaning of the word to develop and to become wider in scope. *Lady*, which was also originally connected with *loaf*, evolved on similar lines.

(b) Vague meanings with hazy contours (A2) are particularly prone to vary according to the contexts and the situations in which the words occur, and these contextual shifts, if frequently repeated, may give rise to permanent changes.

(c) Polysemy (A4) is an important source of flexibility in this field. A word may acquire a new meaning by simply adding it to the one, or the ones, it already had. In this way, a term may come to possess a multiplicity of meanings without any risk of misunderstanding, as long as no two of them can make sense in the same context.

At an even more general level, the fact that the vocabulary is, on the whole, a loose conglomeration of a very large number of elements and lacks the close organisation found in phonology and grammar, is bound to make it unstable and exposed to all kinds of changes. As Horace already knew:

Multi renascentur quae iam cecidere, cadentque  
Quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus,  
Quem penes arbitrium est et ius et norma loquendi

('Many a term which has fallen from use shall have a second birth, and those shall fall that are now in high honour, if so Usage shall will it, in whose hands is the arbitrament, the right and rule of speech'),<sup>26</sup> and this

is true not only of the rise and fall of words but also of the emergence and disappearance of meanings.

Semantic changes have been classified from various points of view. One of the best-known schemes is based on the main causes which can bring about these changes. Six of these causes will be briefly discussed here, and I shall try to show how the actual factors which lead to changes in meaning interact with the basic semantic features discussed earlier.<sup>27</sup> The six causes are as follows:

- (1) Psychological attitudes
- (2) The structure of society
- (3) Metaphor and other figures
- (4) Naming of new inventions and discoveries
- (5) Historical and cultural changes
- (6) Linguistic processes

## 1. Psychological attitudes

Many semantic changes are due to emotive and other overtones (A3) which colour the meaning of words. Two types in particular have received much attention in the literature on the subject: taboo and pejorative developments.

*Taboo* *Taboo* is a word of Tongan origin which Captain Cook introduced into English. According to Captain Cook himself, the term 'has a very comprehensive meaning; but, in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden'.<sup>28</sup> In his book *Totem and Taboo*, Freud suggested that 'our combination of "holy dread" would often express the meaning of taboo'.<sup>29</sup> When a word is struck by a taboo ban, it often disappears and is replaced by a euphemism. This may lead to permanent adjustments in the meaning of the euphemistic substitute, and in this way taboo may become an indirect but significant cause of semantic changes.

The emotive overtones surrounding taboo may be of three main kinds: those due to fear – Freud's 'holy dread' – those produced by a feeling of delicacy, and those springing from a sense of decency and propriety.

(a) Taboos of *fear* can be connected with the name of God, the devil, evil spirits, the dead, parts of the body, and also with a surprisingly wide range of animals: no less than twenty-four, covering a broad spectrum from bees and ants to bears and lions, are listed in a Brazilian monograph on the subject.<sup>30</sup> The taboo ban on the name of the weasel has inspired a wide variety of euphemisms in different languages: French

*belette*, a diminutive of *belle*, which literally means 'beautiful little woman'; Italian *donnola* 'little woman'; Spanish *comadreja* 'gossip', and many others.

(b) Taboos of *delicacy* are due to the desire to avoid direct references to unpleasant subjects. *Imbecile*, for example, comes from Latin *imbecillus*, or *imbecillis*, 'weak, feeble'. Corneille could still use the phrase 'le sexe *imbécille*' when speaking of the 'gentle sex', but what was originally an obvious case of euphemism became so thoroughly associated with the defect it was meant merely to adumbrate that Voltaire misunderstood Corneille's phrase and described it as a 'coarse and misplaced affront'.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, French *crétin* is a regional form of *chrétien* 'Christian', which was taken over in the eighteenth century from a Swiss French dialect.<sup>32</sup>

It is possible that some of these euphemisms owe their present meaning to the fact that they were misinterpreted by children (A2). What was used by adults as a euphemistic circumlocution was taken by children at its face value, as a direct name for the unpleasant experience which was merely to be hinted at. Thus it has been suggested that French *soûl* (or *saoul*), which originally meant 'filled with food, drink etc.', acquired its present sense, 'drunk, tipsy', in this way: adults would ironically describe a drunk person as 'replete' and children, missing the irony, would assume that the adjective meant 'drunk'.<sup>33</sup>

(c) Taboo bans prompted by a feeling of *propriety* are — or were in the past, before the advent of the permissive society — particularly evident in three spheres: sex, swearing, and certain parts and functions of the human body. Indeed, the word *body* itself tended to be avoided by hypersensitive American ladies in the last century, who would say *waist* instead; they also spoke of the *limbs* of a piano and of their own *benders* rather than utter the word *leg*.<sup>34</sup> In a more permanent way, French *fille* was used so frequently as a euphemism for 'prostitute' that in most contexts one now has to say *jeune fille* when referring to a girl.

*Pejorative developments* A further group of changes connected with emotive and other overtones (A3) are those which result in a deterioration of meaning. As some of the examples just cited — *imbecile*, *crétin*, *soûl*, *fille* — clearly show, the interplay of taboo and euphemism will often lead to such deterioration: by being constantly used as a euphemism, a word is apt to become tainted and will thus be unfit to be employed in more neutral contexts. *Poison*, which is historically the same word as *potion*, and *undertaker* no doubt owe their unpleasant meaning to such associations. But pejorative sense-change can also arise from various forms of human prejudice. The meaning of foreign words

has sometimes been distorted by xenophobia; Spanish *hablar* 'to speak', for example, has given in French *hâbler* 'to boast, to brag, to talk big', and English *palaver* comes from Portuguese *palavra* 'word, speech'. Social prejudice is another potent factor, as seen in English *villain* which is derived from Low Latin *villanus* 'inhabitant of a farm (*villa*)'; modern French *vilain* 'ugly, nasty' has developed in a different but equally pejorative direction.

There are also examples of 'ameliorative' sense-development. *To blame* is etymologically the same word as *to blaspheme* but the unfavourable meaning has been considerably weakened. It can even happen that a word with an initially negative sense eventually becomes positive: from /-evaluative/ it changes to /+evaluative/, as some linguists would say. Our adjective *nice*, for example, goes back, through a series of changes, to Latin *nescius* 'ignorant'.

## 2. The structure of society

In the early years of the century, a French linguist noticed that there are two contradictory tendencies in sense-change, both of them connected with social factors.<sup>35</sup> When a word passes from general usage into a more restricted environment, into the language of a professional or occupational group, its meaning tends to be correspondingly narrowed. When, however, a term moves from a group language into common usage, it will often acquire a wider meaning. The former process is sometimes referred to as 'specialisation', the latter as 'generalisation'.

Specialisation can lead not only to polysemy (A4) but even to more drastic restriction of meaning. Two words from the terminology of farming in French provide good examples of this tendency: Latin *ponere* 'to place' has given in French *pondre* 'to lay eggs', and Latin *trahere* 'to draw' has developed into *traire* 'to milk'. As will be seen later, this latter change had a more complicated motivation, but this does not alter the fact that we have here an example of specialisation in a restricted social group.

Generalisation may be illustrated by the word *lure* which passed from falconry into common usage. In *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, the original sense of *lure* is defined as 'an apparatus used by falconers to recall their hawks, being a bunch of feathers attached to a cord, within which, during its training, the hawk finds its food'. All these specific features disappeared when the word extended its range and acquired its present meaning.

Specialisation and generalisation can easily be described in terms of componential analysis (B4). When a word becomes more specialised in meaning, one or more distinctive features are added to its previous sense; as a logician would put it, it gains in 'intension' and loses in 'extension': it will be applicable to fewer things but will give more information about them. In the examples just quoted, *pondre* and *traire*, the distinctive features 'eggs' and 'milk' were added to the general meaning of the verbs. In the case of *lure*, the process worked in the opposite direction: several highly technical distinctive features were dropped, the 'intension' of the word was reduced and its 'extension', its sphere of application, greatly increased.

Social factors can intervene in semantic change in a number of other ways. As has been seen, for example, taboo and pejorative sense-development often have an important social dimension.

### 3. Metaphor and other figures

One of the most significant advances in semantics and stylistics in recent years has been the work done by Roman Jakobson on metaphor and metonymy.<sup>36</sup> He emphasised — or rather re-emphasised — that there are two fundamental relations in language: those based on similarity and those involving contiguity. Similarity gives rise to metaphor, contiguity to metonymy (including synecdoche: part for the whole or whole for the part). Jakobson also showed the relevance of this distinction to phenomena as diverse as aphasia and literary style, arguing, not always quite convincingly, that there is an intimate connection between metaphor and poetry and between metonymy and prose, and that metaphor is prevalent in romanticism and symbolism whereas metonymy is prominent in realistic writings.

*Metaphor* Metaphorical transfers are so common that they hardly need any illustration. Four types are particularly widespread: anthropomorphic metaphors, where names of parts of our body are applied to inanimate objects (*foot* of a hill); 'zoomorphic' metaphors, where human beings, for example, are assimilated to animals (a stupid person described as an *ass*); passages from concrete to abstract (*bitter* feelings); lastly, 'synaesthetic' metaphors, where one sense is transcribed in terms of another (*sharp* sound).

If one looks at metaphor in the light of the basic semantic features discussed in the first section, it is immediately noticeable that a number of these features are directly relevant. Thus there is an obvious connec-

tion between metaphor and associative fields (B1): when we speak of a 'head office' or a 'head waiter', we do so because of the association which exists between this part of the body and persons or institutions in a similarly pre-eminent position. Distinctive features (B4) are equally relevant: when we say that someone has a great deal of personal *magnetism*, we concentrate on the one characteristic, the power to attract, which such a personality and a magnet in physics have in common, and disregard all the differences.<sup>37</sup> Many metaphors are based on similarity of emotive overtones (A3): a 'chilly reception' resembles cold temperature in that both experiences are disagreeable. Motivation (A1) and polysemy (A4) are both in evidence in the metaphorical use of many words; when, for example, we employ *saddle* in the sense of 'depression in a hill', this usage is motivated by the similarity between the two objects and gives rise to a state of polysemy since the transferred sense is added to the literal one and does not supersede it. In many cases, on the other hand, the original meaning has been lost, motivation has disappeared and there is no polysemy: the word *muscle*, for example, is derived from a diminutive of Latin *mus* 'mouse', but the ordinary speaker is quite unaware of this background. Even here, the link with the initial sense can be restored by an etymologically sophisticated writer by placing the word in an unusual collocation (B2). Thus, few people would connect *scruple* with the literal meaning of Latin *scrupulus*, 'small sharp or pointed stone', but Valéry was able to rejuvenate the image by inventing the combination: 'le ruisseau *scrupleux*' 'the *scrupulous* brook'.<sup>38</sup>

It should be clear from these few examples that current ideas on the nature of meaning can deepen our understanding of metaphorical processes which play such a vitally important part both in ordinary language and in literary expression; as Proust once said, 'I believe that metaphor alone can give a kind of eternity to style'.<sup>39</sup>

*Metonymy* Although metonymy arises from the contiguity of two phenomena, not from their similarity, most of the factors we have seen at work in metaphor will also be relevant here. Associative fields (B1) again play a significant part. This can be illustrated by the development of Latin *coxa* 'hip' which has given *cuisse* 'thigh' in French. This seemingly simple shift had a complicated background which has been fully investigated;<sup>40</sup> the fact remains, however, that it could never have taken place if the hip and the thigh were not contiguous in our body and thus closely associated with each other. Like metaphor, metonymy can be analysed in terms of distinctive features (B4), though there is an important difference: whereas in metaphor we concentrate on a charac-

teristic which two disparate phenomena have in common, in metonymy we focus our attention on one feature of a single phenomenon, to the exclusion of all others. When, for instance, we call a man a *mortal*, this particular characteristic of the human condition assumes such importance that it gives its name to the whole species.<sup>41</sup>

As in the case of metaphor, many metonymic transfers are motivated (A1) and result in a state of polysemy (A4). When we use *tongue* in the sense of 'language', this is motivated by the connection between the idea of language and the primary meaning of *tongue* 'organ of speech', and the original and transferred senses continue to live side by side. Elsewhere, the initial meaning has disappeared, as for instance in the word *style* which comes from the Latin *stilus*, the name of a pointed instrument for writing. Here again, the etymological link can be restored by an imaginative writer; Flaubert, for example, revived the old metonymy underlying *style*, and transmuted it into a memorable metaphor, when he spoke of a style which would penetrate like a *stiletto* into the idea to be expressed.<sup>42</sup>

For a long time, metaphor — and its more explicit form, simile — virtually monopolised the attention of students of imagery. Latterly, however, there has been a remarkable revival of interest in rhetoric, and other figures, in particular metonymy and synecdoche, now occupy a prominent position in these studies.

#### 4. Naming of new inventions and discoveries

When a name has to be found for a new invention or discovery, we can do one of four things. We can — though we seldom do — coin a word from scratch. We can put together words or other elements already in the language and form a compound, a derivative, or some other, less orthodox combination. We can borrow a term from some foreign language or other source. Lastly, we can change the meaning of an existing word.

Semantic changes due to this factor, which has become particularly influential as a result of rapid progress in science, technology and other fields, are mainly based on metaphorical and metonymic transfers, and are therefore governed by the same principles as the processes discussed under (3). The history of warfare provides a number of examples of both types. *Torpedo*, for instance, was derived by metaphor from the Latin name of a flat fish which emits electric discharges. *Shrapnel*, on the other hand, was formed by metonymy from the name of General

Henry Shrapnel who invented this shell during the Peninsular War. In other cases, the connection is more remote. Thus, the link between the two senses of *tank*, 'receptacle for storing liquids and gases' and 'armoured vehicle', is so tenuous that the latter almost looks like a purely arbitrary designation; this was indeed the intention when the name was adopted in December 1915 for the purpose of ensuring secrecy during manufacture. In a rather unusual example, phonetic erosion has contributed to obscuring the metonymic connection: French *chandail* 'sweater' is a mutilated form of *marchand d'ail* 'garlic seller', this garment having been popular among vegetable dealers in the Halles, the Paris Central Market.

Some words have, in the course of their history, provided several metaphorical names for new discoveries and inventions. The Latin *satelles*, *satellit*, 'attendant, life-guard', was used by Kepler to denote the secondary planets revolving round Jupiter; in its modern form it also became a technical term in anatomy, zoology and town planning, and in 1915 F. Naumann gave it its well-known political sense in his book *Mitteleuropa*.<sup>43</sup> More recently, the use of the word to denote new types of earth-satellites has given further proof of the vitality of the metaphor.

## 5. Historical and cultural changes

It frequently happens that the development of material objects, institutions or concepts does not necessitate a change in their name: the label is retained, but the meaning is modified by adding, dropping or adjusting one or more distinctive features (B4). It will be sufficient to give one example from each of the three main categories:

*Objects* French *plume* originally meant 'feather' and more specifically the goose-quill employed in writing. Then metal nibs were introduced in the early eighteenth century and became widely used in the first quarter of the nineteenth, but the new object continued to be known as *plume*. It is interesting to note that French *plume* and German *Feder* combine the two senses (A4) which are distinguished in English as *feather* and *pen*.

*Institutions* English *parliament* comes from an Old French word which meant 'speaking' and was derived from the verb *parler* 'to speak'. It then came to mean a 'judicial court', and in England it was applied to the great councils of the early Plantagenet kings. As parliamentary institutions developed, the word continued to change its meaning, and

will no doubt go on acquiring new distinctive features in future as well; the retention of the name, however, is an important factor in the continuity of the constitutional process.

*Concepts* The recent history of the word *atom* shows how language can lag behind the development of scientific ideas. In Classical Greek, *átomos* meant 'indivisible'. This was an appropriate description of a particle regarded as the smallest constituent of matter. When, however, the atom was split, the distinctive feature of indivisibility ceased to be applicable; nevertheless, the term was retained even though it had come to belie its own etymology.

How conservative our linguistic habits are in this respect can be seen from the survival of expressions like *sunset* and *sunrise* which are obviously rooted in pre-Copernican notions of astronomy.

To these historically and culturally conditioned changes and those discussed under (4), the study of lexical fields (B3) has added a new and very important category. Here we have to do, not with the sense-development of single words as in the examples cited so far, but with the restructuring of a whole sector of the vocabulary as a result of changes in the non-linguistic world. By comparing the structure of the same field at two different points in time, significant discrepancies may come to light. The history of German intellectual terminology in the Middle Ages provides an example of this.<sup>44</sup> Around 1200, there were three key-terms: *wisheit*, *kunst* and *list*. In present-day German, these mean respectively 'wisdom', 'art' and 'cunning, craft, trick'. In Middle High German, their meanings were different and they formed a coherent sub-system based on two principles, feudalism and universality. Feudalism was responsible for the distinction between *kunst* and *list*: *kunst* was the term used for courtly and chivalric attainments, *list* for skills outside that sphere. Universality was expressed through *wisheit* which could act as an alternative for the other two words and also as a generic term embracing all the various aspects of human wisdom, theological as well as mundane.

If we now look at German mystical vocabulary a century later, we are faced with a very different picture. *List* has dropped out of the intellectual sphere because of its pejorative connotations, and the substantivised infinitive *wizzen* – Modern German *wissen* 'to know' – has been added to the other two key-terms. What is far more significant, however, is that the two principles on which the previous structure had been based have disappeared. The feudal distinction between courtly and non-courtly, chivalric and non-chivalric accomplishments has been abandoned, and *wisheit* has lost its universality: it is now confined to

religious and mystical experiences. It is not simply a question of changes in the meaning of particular words: the whole structure has been radically altered and reflects a different scale of values and philosophy of life.

## 6. Linguistic processes

A number of semantic changes are attributable to purely linguistic factors. These fall into two groups: those operating within one language and those which involve the influence of one idiom upon another.

*Within one language* The meaning of some words has been permanently affected by the habitual collocations into which they enter (B2). The commonest form of this process is ellipsis: when two words occur side by side in many contexts, one of them may be dropped and its meaning absorbed by its partner. This happened in cases like *private* for *private soldier*, *daily* for *daily paper* and various others where there has also been a change in word-class: the adjective has taken over not only the meaning but the syntactic function of the noun it originally qualified. Elsewhere there has been no change in word-class, as for instance in *head* used as an ellipsis for *headmaster*, or in *porter* for *porter ale* or *porter's ale*. In French, several nouns — *pas* 'step', *point*, *personne*, *rien* (from the Latin *rem*, accusative of *res* 'thing') — have acquired a negative sense because they were frequently used to reinforce the negative particle *ne*.

A further linguistic factor which can affect the meaning of words is formal similarity to, or identity with, another lexical item. This, it will be remembered, is one of the three basic relationships underlying associative fields (B1). It is in this way that the French adjective *fruste* 'worn, defaced' acquired the sense of 'rough, unpolished' in the nineteenth century. The new meaning did not develop spontaneously out of the old but was due to the influence of the phonetically similar *rustre* 'boorish, loutish, clownish'. Such changes, which are really a special form of popular etymology, have been aptly described as 'pseudo-semantic developments'<sup>45</sup> since they are the result of formal similarity and not of any intrinsic connection between two senses.

Formal associations between words can also lead to semantic changes in a more roundabout way. Linguistic geographers have shown that when two homonymous terms can occur in the same contexts, a conflict, a 'homonymic clash' may develop between them, and this may result in the disappearance of one of the two words. This in turn will

create a gap in the vocabulary, which can be filled by changing the meaning of another lexical item. One of the examples discussed under (2) owes its ultimate motivation to such a homonymic clash. As we have seen, Latin *trahere* 'to draw' has given *traire* 'to milk' in French — a clear case of specialisation in a group language, a restricted social environment. But this apparently straightforward change was in reality connected with a homonymic conflict between *moudre* 'to milk', from Latin *mulgere*, and *moudre* 'to grind', from Latin *molere*. Since the two verbs belonged to the same sphere, there was a danger of confusion, and one of them had to go. In the event, it was *moudre* 'to milk' which fell into disuse and was replaced by *traire*.

*Between languages* When there is close contact between two idioms, it sometimes happens that the meaning of a word in Language A is influenced by that of a corresponding term in Language B. A notorious example of such a 'semantic borrowing' is the recent history of French *réaliser*. For a long time, this verb meant 'to carry into effect, to carry out', as it still does. Its use in the sense of 'to understand' is an Anglicism which is already found in Baudelaire, and which gave rise to a public discussion in the 1920s, in which Gide and other well-known personalities took part. In this case, then, English influence has resulted in the polysemy (A4) of a French word, and this polysemy can lead to awkward ambiguity, as in the following sentence: 'L'Etat-Major français a pleinement *réalisé* les intentions ennemies', which means in 'correct' French: 'The French General Staff has fully *carried out* the enemy's intentions'.<sup>46</sup>

One further aspect of semantic change may be briefly mentioned here since it links up with one of the principal preoccupations of contemporary linguistics. A great deal of thought has been given in recent years to the existence of 'universals' in language and to the precise nature of these alleged universals.<sup>47</sup> Change of meaning is an area where some of these theories could be tested fairly easily. We no longer speak these days of 'semantic laws', as did the pioneers of modern semantics, but there can be no doubt that there exist certain general tendencies of sense-development. These are of course no more than tendencies, and it would be wrong to claim universal validity for them. Here belong certain series of parallel metaphors found in languages and civilisations so distant from each other that the possibility of influence, of 'semantic borrowing', can be excluded. The English expression *eye of a needle*, for example, has exact parallels in Eskimo and in Chuvash, a Turkish language spoken in Russia.<sup>48</sup> Even more striking is the widespread use of the metaphor which we find in English *pupil* 'apple of the eye',

which is the same word as the other *pupil*. The Latin *pupilla* 'orphan girl, ward, minor' could also refer to the apple of the eye, because of some vague resemblance between a small girl and the minute figure reflected in the pupil. An Italian linguist has discovered that in more than thirty languages belonging to different groups, the apple of the eye is called metaphorically 'little girl' or sometimes 'little boy'.<sup>49</sup> There are also, it would seem, some general tendencies with a wider scope: synaesthetic transfers from one sense to another appear, for example, to be governed by certain 'rules' which have been found operative in different periods and languages.<sup>50</sup>

Having considered some of the main types of semantic change in the light of modern linguistic theory, the question now arises whether these processes help or hinder the smooth functioning of language. As in most situations, there are advantages and disadvantages. Semantic change can lead to vagueness (A2) and ambiguity (A4); on the other hand, it undoubtedly makes language a more flexible medium for naming new objects, institutions or ideas or for replacing existing terms by more emotive or expressive ones (A3). Metaphor, above all, is an inexhaustible source of creativeness, an aspect of language strongly emphasised by Chomsky and his followers. Semantic change, both the absolute type and the variety which leads to polysemy, thus plays a crucial part in the unending process which T. S. Eliot described in one of his *Four Quartets*<sup>51</sup> as

a raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,

and more tersely as the 'intolerable wrestle with words and meanings'.

# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, 1953, p.20.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. L. Antal, *Content, Meaning, and Understanding*, The Hague, 1964, p.37, and H. E. Brekle, *Semantik*, Munich, 1972, p.62.
- <sup>3</sup> Quoted from *Logic and Knowledge* by A. Schaff, *Introduction to Semantics*, English translation, Oxford etc., 1962, p.255.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. my books, *Language and Style*, Oxford, 1964, ch.2, and *Meaning and Style*, Oxford, 1973, ch.1. See also quite recently G. Leech, *Semantics*, Pelican Books, Harmondsworth, 1974, ch.1
- <sup>5</sup> The fact that there is a historical connection between the French and the German word is of course irrelevant to a purely descriptive analysis.
- <sup>6</sup> M. Chastaing, 'La brillance des voyelles', *Archivum Linguisticum*, XIV (1962), pp.1-131;p.5.
- <sup>7</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, p.34.
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted by K. Nyrop, *Grammaire historique de la langue française, IV: Sémantique*, Copenhagen etc., 1913, p.444.
- <sup>9</sup> J. Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, Cambridge, 1968, p.449.
- <sup>10</sup> See C. E. Osgood, G. J. Suci and P. H. Tannenbaum, *The Measurement of Meaning*, Urbana, 1957.
- <sup>11</sup> Although *sight* is not derived from *to see* by any of the normal processes of word-formation in Modern English, the identity of the initial consonant plus the close semantic links may be regarded as sufficient grounds for placing it in category (c) rather than (b). Historical relations between the two words are of course once again irrelevant (cf. above, n.5).
- <sup>12</sup> A. R. Luria and O. S. Vinogradova, 'An Objective Investigation of the Dynamics of Semantic Systems', *British Journal of Psychology*, L (1959), pp.89-105.
- <sup>13</sup> R. H. Robins, *General Linguistics. An Introductory Survey*, London, 1964, p.67.
- <sup>14</sup> J. R. Firth, quoted by Robins, *ibid.*, p.68.
- <sup>15</sup> M. A. K. Halliday, A. McIntosh and P. Strevens, *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching*, London, 1964, p.34.
- <sup>16</sup> A. Lehrer, 'Semantic Cuisine', *Journal of Linguistics*, V (1969), pp.39-55; for further references, see my *Meaning and Style*, p.32, n.4. A detailed and

- lucid account of the field theory will be found in H. Geckeler, *Zur Wortfeld-diskussion. Untersuchungen zur Gliederung des Wortfeldes 'alt - jung - neu' im heutigen Französisch*, Munich, 1971.
- 17 Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, p.457.
- 18 This example is taken from L. Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, English translation, revised edition, Madison, 1963, p.53. I am grateful to my colleague, Professor I. Ll. Foster, Jesus Professor of Celtic in the University of Oxford, for explaining the Welsh system to me.
- 19 B. Berlin and P. Kay, *Basic Color Terms. Their Universality and Evolution*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1969, pp.2-3 and 104.
- 20 On the sociological approach, see especially G. Matoré, *La Méthode en lexicologie*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1973. On logical relations between members of a lexical field, see J. Lyons, *Structural Semantics. An Analysis of Part of the Vocabulary of Plato*, Oxford, 1963, and the last two chapters of his *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*.
- 21 J. J. Katz and J. A. Fodor, 'The Structure of a Semantic Theory', *Language*, XXXIX (1963), pp.170-210. There have been several revised versions of this scheme; see now J. J. Katz, *Semantic Theory*, New York, 1972.
- 22 The concept of distinguisher has varied in the course of the development of the Katz-Fodor model; cf. now Katz, *Semantic Theory*, pp.87-8.
- 23 Cf. my *Meaning and Style*, pp.35-6, where further references will be found.
- 24 See B. Pottier, 'La définition sémantique dans les dictionnaires', *Travaux de Linguistique et de Littérature publiés par le Centre de Philologie et de Littératures Romanes de l'Université de Strasbourg*, III, 1 (1965), pp.33-9, p.34. On 'semes', see in particular A. J. Greimas, *Sémantique structurale*, Paris, 1966.
- 25 In Pottier's original scheme, there were five words – the four mentioned above and *pouf* – and six distinctive features; cf. Geckeler, *Zur Wortfeld-diskussion*, p.428 and *Strukturelle Semantik des Französischen*, Tübingen, 1973, pp.30 ff.
- 26 Quoted from *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 2nd impression, revised, 1942, p.541.
- 27 Three of the six categories (nos.2, 5 and 6) appear already, in an embryonic form, in one of the early classics of semantics: A. Meillet, 'Comment les mots changent de sens', reproduced in his *Linguistique historique et linguistique générale*, 2 volumes, Paris, reprinted 1948-52: volume 1, pp.230-71. On semantic change in general, cf. my *Semantics. An Introduction to the Science of Meaning*, Oxford, 1962, ch.8, and R. A. Waldron, *Sense and Sense Development*, London, 1967, Part II. For an interesting attempt to reinterpret semantic change in transformational-generative terms, see J. B. Voyles, 'Accounting for Semantic Change', *Lingua*, XXXI (1973), pp.95-124.
- 28 Quoted by R. F. Mansur Guérios, *Tabus lingüísticos*, Rio de Janeiro, 1956, p.8.
- 29 S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, Pelican Books, London, reprinted 1940, p.37.
- 30 Mansur Guérios, *Tabus lingüísticos*, ch.18.
- 31 Nyrop, *Sémantique*, p.22.
- 32 Most of the historical and etymological details given in these lectures are based on *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, and on O. Bloch and W. von Wartburg, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française*, 5th ed., Paris, 1968. Various other dictionaries have also been consulted.

- 33 This example is taken from Meillet's article referred to in n.27 above.
- 34 See O. Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, 6th ed., Leipzig, 1930, p.226.
- 35 Meillet, loc.cit.
- 36 See R. Jakobson and M. Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*, The Hague, 1956, Part II. Cf. also quite recently A. Henry, *Métonymie et métaphore*, Paris, 1971, and M. Le Guern, *Sémantique de la métaphore et de la métonymie*, Paris, 1973.
- 37 Cf. Henry, op.cit., pp.66 and 71, and Le Guern, op.cit., p.18.
- 38 Quoted by M. Wandruszka, 'Etymologie und Philosophie', in *Etymologica. W. von Wartburg zum 70.Geburtstag*, Tübingen, 1958, pp.857-71; p.865. On revitalised metaphors, see now Henry, op.cit., pp.143ff.
- 39 'Je crois que la métaphore seule peut donner une sorte d'éternité au style', in the article, 'A propos du "style" de Flaubert', *Nouvelle Revue Française*, XIV, 1 (1920), pp.72-90.
- 40 First by W. von Wartburg, and more recently by K. Baldinger, 'L'étymologie hier et aujourd'hui', *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises*, XI (1959), pp.233-64; pp.242-3.
- 41 Cf. Henry, op.cit., pp.23ff.
- 42 'Je conçois un style qui nous entrerait dans l'idée comme un coup de stylet.' French *stylet* comes from the Italian *stiletto* which is ultimately derived from the Latin *stilus*.
- 43 Cf. B. Migliorini, *The Contribution of the Individual to Language*, Oxford, 1952, pp.9-10.
- 44 This is a famous example given by the founder of the field theory, the late J. Trier, in his article, 'Das sprachliche Feld. Eine Auseinandersetzung', *Neue Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft und Jugendbildung*, X (1934), pp.428-49; pp.432ff.
- 45 J. Orr, *Words and Sounds in English and French*, Oxford, 1953, ch.15.
- 46 Quoted in K. Nyrop, 'Réaliser', *Mélanges de philologie et d'histoire offerts à M. A. Thomas*, Paris, 1927, pp.319-22.
- 47 See especially J. H. Greenberg (ed.), *Universals of Language*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1966, and E. Bach and R. T. Harms (eds.), *Universals in Linguistic Theory*, New York etc., 1968.
- 48 See A. Sauvageot, 'A propos des changements sémantiques', *Journal de Psychologie*, XLVI (1953), pp.465-72; pp.466-7.
- 49 C. Tagliavini, 'Di alcune denominazioni della "pupilla"', *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, N.S., III (1949), pp.341-78; pp.363ff.
- 50 For details, see my *Principles of Semantics*, Oxford, 1963 impression, pp.277ff.
- 51 'East Coker', *Collected Poems 1909 - 1962*, Faber and Faber, London and Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, Inc., New York. Cf. R. Quirk, *The Use of English*, London, 1962, pp.231-2.

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