Semantic Shifts in the Sphere of Evaluative Units

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to trace some semantic processes occurring in the sphere of evaluative units – lexemes with “good” or “bad” element of meaning. The article is aimed at proving that evaluative units display a semantic shift from more concrete to more abstract meaning. Evaluative lexemes are known to include a denotative (more concrete) seme and an evaluative (abstract) seme. In the process of usage, the denotative seme is suppressed and the lexeme acquires purely evaluative meaning. In the process of “name calling”, “bad” words lose their denotative element and become pure invectives. The denotative seme may not even be known to the speaker. The loss of denotative meaning may occur in the process of word borrowing. Latin “paganus” – a rural dweller – came to mean “pagan” in European languages and the word “поганый” in Russian means just “bad”.

Keywords: evaluative, pejorative, semantic shifts, denotative.

1. Introduction

The article is aimed at tracing semantic tendencies operating in the sphere of pejorative evaluative lexemes – that is lexemes including an evaluative element of meaning. An evaluative lexeme may be purely evaluative – that is, bear no other meaning except evaluation. Such adjectives as English “good” and “bad” or Russian “хороший”, “плохой” may serve as examples. Most evaluative lexemes, however, bear both descriptive and evaluative meaning (Вольф, 28–31).

For example, the adjectives denoting temperature (cold, hot, warm, cool) combine evaluative and descriptive meanings: “warm” and “cool” seem to bear ameliorative meaning, whereas “hot” and “cold” are pejorative.

It has been noted that evaluative meanings are contextually dependent, the same lexeme used as an ameliorative or pejorative nomination (Stojanović 2015; Земскова, 1991).

Semantic change was explored in the aspect of grammaticalization (Traugott, 2017), but not concerning evaluative lexemes.

It is going to be proved that, in the course of semantic evolution, the descriptive component disappears, the lexeme becoming purely evaluative. It is a systemic process of transition from concrete to abstract meaning.

2. Method

The methods employed include linguistic description, lexical, grammatical, contextual and pragmatic analysis of the material. The contextual analysis is especially important. The idea of context, introduced into Russian linguistics as early as the 1960s (Амосова, 1963) helps to © Authors. Terms and conditions of Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) apply. Correspondence: Tatiana Sallier, St. Petersburg State University, Department of Philology, St. Petersburg, 199397 ulitsa Beringa dom 27, korpus 2, kvartira 20, St. Petersburg, RUSSIAN FEDERATION. E-mail: tatiana_sallier@mail.ru.
precisely identify the elements of the external text, reinforcing or suppressing the meaning of an individual lexeme. In the framework of the present study, contextual analysis helps to see how the evaluative component of a lexeme is created and reinforced by the context. Dictionary definitions have also been analyzed. Translation analysis has been used to analyze the meaning as understood by the translator.

- Lexemes containing an evaluative seme undergo a systemic semantic change.
- They initially have neutral meaning, but are sometimes accompanied by an evaluative seme.
- The evaluative meaning becomes dominant and the primary meaning is suppressed.
- The primary denotative element may disappear and is not recognized by language users.
- In political discourse, this change is effected by means of allusion.

3. Results

The research shows that evaluative lexemes gradually lose their descriptive component and become purely evaluative. An originally neutral word acquires pejorative meaning; later, in the process of usage, the denotative component is lost and the word acquires purely evaluative meaning. The connection with the earlier denotative meaning is completely or partially lost. In political discourse, the connection between the primary meaning and its evaluating derivative is usually retained, the pejorative meaning created by means of allusion branding the target character or group by comparing them to a notorious character in the past.

4. Discussion

4.1 The process of semantic evolution

To illustrate the way semantic shifts occur, let’s consider the following examples:

1. He put a hand on Bran’s shoulder, and Bran looked over at his bastard brother (Martin).
2. Yes, said Monks, scowling at the trembling boy; the beating of whose heart he might have heard. ‘That is the bastard child’. ‘The term you use’, said Mr. Brownlow, sternly, ‘is a reproach to those long since passed beyond the feeble censure of the world. It reflects disgrace on no one living, except you who use it. Let that pass. He was born in this town’ (Dickens: 295).
3. Some of these managers are Bullies: Controlling, picky and petty. Some are Backstabbers: Taking credit for your work and undermining you at every turn. And others are just plain Bastards: Mean, vindictive, conniving. (Survivor’s guide)
4. I seem to remember hitting that bastard Carleyon. Sorry, Lou, I apologize (Kaye: 571).

In (1) the word bastard has a neutral meaning “illegitimate son”. In (2), however, the denotative nomination is accompanied by a pejorative element the existence of which is proved by the words “reproach” and “sternly” in Mr. Brownlow’s answer. In (3) and (4) the word bears no reference to illegitimacy. In (3) the pejorative meaning is reinforced by the words “Mean, vindictive, conniving”, bearing a distinct negative evaluative meaning. In (4) the denotative seme “illegitimate” would be impossible, Carleyon being a scion of an aristocratic family. The word in (4) needs no contextual reinforcement and its abusive meaning is obvious from the apology in the next sentence.
A similar process can be seen in the semantic evolution of the Russian word “ублюдок”, which initially meant a hybrid animal (Dal’s dictionary), and a human illegitimate son, and now is an obscene word with a purely abusive meaning, as is seen in (5):

5. Вы ублюдки и засранцы. You are bastards and assholes.

Such was a comment by a football fan to a team that lost a game. The pejorative meaning of the word is reinforced by the word засранец (asshole in the Google translation), which initially meant a person unable to control bowel movements, but is now an obscene word with purely abusive meaning.

Another Russian word which has lost its denotative meaning is “стерва” (originally meaning “carrion”, but now just meaning “bad female” (applied mostly to women). The loss of the descriptive component can be proved by a fact of translation. In Solzhenitsin’s novel In the first circle there is a phrase:

6. Вот стервы, “Дукатом” душат. Буду министру жаловаться, клянусь. (Солженицын)

is translated as

7. “The bastards – choking us with Dukats\(^1\). I’m going to complain to the minister, I swear I am”. (Solzhenitsyn 1)

The use of the word “bastards” shows that the lexemes used in the original and in the translation have lost their descriptive meaning and are pure invectives. In another translation of the novel, however, a different word is used:

8. 'The swine, those Ducats are poison. I’ll complain to the Minister, that’s what I’ll do. (Solzhenitsyn 2)

The word “swine” used by the translator shows that only the pejorative element is preserved in the translation the descriptive seme having been lost or neglected. It will be analyzed in more detail below.

The Russian material yields a number of lexemes displaying similar evolution. One of them is “гад” – originally an amphibian or a reptile, (Даль) which now just means “a repulsive male” (“гадина” for both genders).

The loss of the descriptive seme may be demonstrated by the facts of translation. Consider the recommended translations offered by the Internet translation “Reverso” site:

9. Эти гады в курсе, что мы детективы. Those bastards know that we’re detectives.

10. Эти гады тут всё охраняют! These sons of bitches are guarding the place!

The translations offered (“bastards” in (9) and “sons of bitches” in (10) show that the word “гад” has completely lost its descriptive element and is purely pejorative.

It’s interesting to note that in the Russian language there is another pejorative expression associated with reptiles: Russian “змея подколодная” (literally – an under log snake) means a treacherous woman, whereas the word “змея” is used in its zoological meaning “reptile”. This parallel shows that the semantic evolution is of systemic nature, sometimes going all the way, with the loss of the descriptive meaning (cf. “гад”), sometimes part of the way (cf. “змея”).

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\(^{1}\) Belomor Dukat is a brand of Russian papirosy cigarettes.
In English, a similar transformation of meaning is seen in the word “swine”, which originally meant “pig”, but now means “an extremely unpleasant or cruel man” (Macmillan English Dictionary). In the examples offered by the Cambridge English dictionary:

11. You **filthy** swine!
12. Her **ex-husband sounds** like an **absolute** swine.

The word “swine” referring to a human has obviously lost its “animal” seme in the context. The zoological meaning is suppressed by the evaluative element and, being archaic, may be said to have been lost. The use of the word in translation analyzed above (cf. example 8) confirms the point.

The Russian “свинья” (pig) on the other hand retains its zoological meaning; it is also used pejoratively, so the connection between the initial and pejorative meaning is obvious.

Sometimes there is a separation of meanings between synonyms, one acquiring a purely evaluative meaning, the other remaining descriptive. The Russian words “говно” and “навоз” may serve as an example. Both words mean cow dung, but “говно” has a purely pejorative meaning “bad”, whereas “навоз” is neutral, meaning “fertilizer”. A similar separation of meanings may be seen in the English words “shit” and “manure”, the first word being strongly evaluative, the second neutral.

It can be seen that pejorative nominations undergo a following transformation: their initial meaning is neutral, then an evaluative seme is added, which later supersedes the descriptive element making the lexeme purely evaluative.

### 4.2 The origin of pejorative nominations

Neutral lexemes underlying pejorative nominations of people may be:

a) Geographical, denoting a place the person came from. Russian “шпана” – (hooligans) initially meant “coming from Spain”; Russian “жлоб” (a stupid and greedy person) comes from a Byelorussian town of Zhlobin (Жлобин); Latin “Brutus” (uncouth, stupid) is derived from Bruttium – a region in southern Italy. An illustrative example of the process of attaching a pejorative meaning to a geographical name is the following:

13. “Them goddamn **Okies** got no sense and no feeling. They ain’t human. A human being wouldn’t live like they do. A human being couldn’t stand it to be so dirty and miserable. They ain’t a hell of a lot better than gorillas” [Steinbeck: 156].

The pejorative meaning of “Okies” is obvious from the context. Okies are residents of the state of Oklahoma, who, during the Great Depression, moved en masse to California, depriving the local residents of their jobs.

In the Uzbek language, one of the most abusive words is “самара”. Samara is a city on the river Volga. The word is believed to have appeared in 1921-22, when, during the famine in the Volga region, crowds of starving refugees flooded Central Asia. To the local residents they seemed like a pest, hence the appearance of the invective. “Georgaphic” pejoratives are xenonyms, branding the target as an alien (Березович, 2006)

b) The derogatory meaning may originate on the basis of the type of settlement. Latin “paganus” (village dweller) became English “pagan” and Russian and

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2 The author heard about this word from her grandmother who was born and lived in Central Asia.
Ukrainian “поганый” (bad). In Russian the derogatory meaning appeared via the sense of “foreignness”, the word being a xenonym in the medieval Russian. Other lexemes associating pejorative meaning with the idea of a village are English “villain”, “boor”, Russian “деревенщина”. Village dwellers are often spoken about derogatively, whereas “town” gives rise to ameliorative nominations (urbane, polite).

c) Pejorative nominations may have historical origins. Such words as “barbarian”, “barbarism”, and “vandal”, “vandalism” (Russian “варвар”, “варварский”,” вандал”), in everyday speech have lost their historical meanings of a “non Roman” and “a member of a Germanic tribe”; the first word means “cruel and uncivilized behavior”, the second – “a person who intentionally damages property”. It is worth noting, that some dictionaries don’t include the historical meanings in their definitions.

d) Social status. The Russian “подлый” (mean) originally meant a tax-paying peasant; English “tyrant” and “despot” like Russian “тиран” and “деспот”, referred to ancient rulers.

e) Pejorative names may also be based on the names of animals. The evolution of the word “гад” and the usage of “змея” was analyzed above.

This list of sources is far from exhaustive, but the tendency of a neutral nomination becoming evaluative and losing (partially or completely) its descriptive meaning is more or less clear.

4.3 Pejorative nominations in confrontational political discourse

4.3.1 Real precedent names

In political discourse, the pejorative meaning is created via the mechanism of allusion. Allusion is understood as a statement that refers to something in an indirect way. Political allusion is employed to denigrate a political opponent by referring to a notorious character or a notorious situation in the past. As the epitome of evil in the current political world is the German Nazism (fascism), allusions to fascism are frequent in political conflict. During the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia, the Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili was referred to as “fuhrer” in the Russian media.

14. Может быть, ...жители Тбилиси наконец-то задумаются о том, к какой «победе» ведет их бесноватый фюрер Saakashvili. Perhaps ... the Tbilisi residents will become aware as to what sort of victory their frenzied fuhrer is preparing for them. (Source: http://cominf.org/en/node/1166475909)

The phrase “бесноватый фюрер” (mad fuhrer) alludes directly to Adolf Hitler, and thereby denigrates the Georgian president.

The same allusion is used to refer to President Putin by his political opponents:


Neither Mr. Saakashvili, nor President Putin are guilty of the crimes committed by Adolf Hitler’s regime, but the allusion insults them by hinting at their allegedly undemocratic and aggressive policy.
Precedent names used in allusions sometimes undergo semantic evolution similar to that described in (4.1.). They lose part of their lexical meaning, strengthening the pejorative component:

18. Майдан и Майданек — случайно ли сходство названий. Majdan and Majdanek – is the similarity of names accidental? (Source: http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/2851019/post313871559/page1)
19. Любая попытка повторить майданный шабаш в Москве получит гражданский отпор! (A rally resolution, March 15 2014). Any attempt to repeat a majdan riot in Moscow will be repelled. Source: https://eot.su/tags/spetsistoriya?page=3

The noun “майдан” (originally the central square in Ukrainian towns) came into Russian political discourse early in 2014, with civil protests in Ukraine, which were staged on Kiev central square (Majdan nezalezhnosti).

In (16) the adjective “Майданный” refers to the events which occurred on the majdan; the meaning is direct, but the pejorative seme is created by the word “геноцид” (genocide); in (17) the adjective hints at the illegitimacy of the Ukrainian prime minister; in (18) a direct allusion to fascism can be seen: Majdanek is a notorious concentration and extermination camp built and operated by the Nazis in occupied Poland.

In (19), “майданный шабаш” (maidan coven) has lost its geographical connection and just means a riotous protest. So the loss of the primary lexical meaning is obvious.

Another lexeme which has lost its original meaning is the word “гетто”. Originally, ghetto was an island in Venice where the Jewish community lived. Later, this was the name of Jewish quarters in Eastern Europe. During the Holocaust, “гетто” came to mean a town quarter in Eastern Europe where Jews were forcibly confined prior to extermination, the word acquiring a strong negative connotation.

In modern Russian, however, the historical association (at least with the island in Venice) is lost and the word means – “a neighborhood with poor infrastructure conditions”.

20. Это уже не просто “асфальтовые джунгли”. Такие массивы даже стали называть гетто. These are not just “asphalt jungle”. Such neighborhoods came to be called ghetto. (Source: Гетто XXI века – Факультет финансов и банковского дела РАНХиГС https://ffb.ranepa.ru/o-fakultete/blog-ekspertov/getto-xxi-veka)
21. Огромные микрорайоны… растут вокруг города как плесень, разрушая городскую инфраструктуру. Уже сейчас ясно, что это будущие гетто. Huge developments… are growing around the city like mildew, destroying the urban infrastructure. It is clear that they are future ghettos.


The examples show that the word “гетто” bears no reference to the island in Venice, nor does it refer to the Holocaust reality. The word just means a bad neighborhood with no parks, few schools and kindergartens and inadequate transportation system. It should be noted that people move to these new districts voluntarily, attracted by spacious and relatively cheap flats. Judging by the usage in (20) and (21), the authors don’t seem to know much about the conditions in real Nazi-operated ghettos.
In English, the word “ghetto” came to mean a neighborhood where ethnic minorities live. It may or may not contain a pejorative element.

22. American ghettos ... are communities and neighborhoods where government has not only concentrated a minority but established barriers to its exit. (Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Ghettos](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Ghettos))

It can be seen that the evolution of the word “ghetto” in English and “гетто” in Russian is similar.

Another example of a precedent situation is the Tartar invasion into Rus in the 13th century. Batu Khan’s armies (called hordes) invaded and occupied Kievan Rus and threatened Europe. In the modern discourse, the Russian word “орда” (horde) is a symbol of uncivilized aggression:

23. Гитлеровские орды рвались к Москве, имея задание стереть ее с лица земли. Hitler’s hordes were striving to reach Moscow; they were ordered to raze it to the ground. (Борис Полевой)

In Nazi propaganda, we see “slavische Horden” as a symbol of barbarism:

24. Die Russen galten in der Kriegspropaganda als Untermenschen und Slawische Horden. In military propaganda, the Russians were described as subhuman and “Slavic hordes”. (Source: Petra Burghardt Mehr Geschichten von drüben) (Source: [https://books.google.ru/books?id=QbEcAQAAQBAJ&pg=PA79&dq=slawische+horden&hl=ru&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwifsMig-rPiAhV65KbIKhYv01IQ6UA6MQ6AEISzAF#v=onepage&q=slawische%20Horden&f=false])

There are other precedent words in modern discourse, referring to recent or well remembered historical events: “blitzkrieg”, the Final Solution (Nazi Germany); the “1937” referring to Stalin purges in the Soviet Union; “witch hunt”, referring to witch trials held in Salem, and meaning persecutions of dissidents.

4.3.2 Fictional precedent phenomena

Precedent phenomena in modern allusions can be fictional as well as real. Well known books of fiction, folklore or poetry may precedent texts for allusions.

When George Orwell’s 1984 appeared in 1948, it became a precedent text for numerous allusions as a symbol of a totalitarian society. See the examples:

26. The Orwellian state of Sudan. (Source: The Economist (US), 24.06. 1995)
27. The Big Brothers of the 1940s saw children as tools of moral blackmail and social control (Source: Frank Furedi Turning children into Orwellian eco-spies EWR Online, 18 Dec 2009)

Such phrases as “Big Brother”, “the ministry of truth”, “newspeak” and the adjective “Orwellian” have become political labels for totalitarian societies.

There is a book by a Swiss author Christian Kracht, The Ministry of Truth, describing North Korea.

The frequency of “Orwellian” allusions in discourse is illustrated by the fact that the word “Orwellian” yielded 4,210,000 answers in the Google search, the phrase “the Ministry of Truth” yielding 3,610,000 answers.
It should be noted that if in general speech the source of a pejorative nomination may be forgotten, for a political allusion to be effective, the precedent name must be known to the speech community.

5. Conclusion
The research described above makes it possible to draw the following conclusions:

a) The semantic evolution evaluative lexemes undergo is a systemic diachronic process.

b) Evaluative units appear in the language as neutral lexemes. Once an evaluative component is attached to them, the process of semantic evolution begins, the evaluative seme superseding the denotative meaning.

c) Initially, the evaluative element is contextually dependent, appearing along with other evaluative indicators in the context.

d) In the process of usage, the evaluative meaning suppresses the initial denotative element, the lexeme becoming purely evaluative. The evaluative element, initially pragmatic and context-dependent, becomes contextually independent.

e) The process of the evaluative meaning suppressing the descriptive meaning may go through several languages by means of lexical borrowing. Cf. Latin “paganus” and Russian “поганый”.

f) In political discourse, the change of meaning is effected via the mechanism of allusion – pejorative nomination is created by comparing a person or a political move to a notorious character or a situation in the past.

g) In ordinary speech, the initial descriptive meaning may be forgotten, and the word functions as an evaluative unit. In political speech, however, the precedent of the allusion must be remembered by the audience, otherwise the allusion does not work.

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