Semantic shift, homonyms, synonyms and auto-antonyms

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Abstract: One of the important topics in linguistics relates to the words and their meanings. Words of each language have specific meanings, which are originally assigned to them by the builder of that language. However, the truth is that such meanings are not fixed, and may evolve over time. Language is like a living being, which evolves and develops over its lifetime. Therefore, there must be conditions which cause the meaning of the words to change, to disappear over time, or to be signified by new signifiers as the time passes. In some cases, a term may have two or more meanings, which meanings can be different from or even opposite to each other. Also, the semantic field of a word may be expanded, so that it becomes synonymous with more words. This paper tried to discuss the diversity of the meanings of the words.

Key words: *Word; Semantic shift; Homonym; Synonym; Auto-antonym*

1. Introduction

Speaking of the language immediately brings the words and meanings immediately to mind, because they are two essential elements of the language. Evidently, a word is originally coined to refer to one specific meaning, but as the time passes, the meaning of a word changes according to changes occurring in the conditions of life, with such changes including expansion and limitation of the semantic field of a word, replacement of the signifier of a meaning with another signifier, a word assuming different meanings under different circumstances, and meanings of a word becoming obsolete and revived over time. However, such changes occur little by little, yet, such gradual little changes can lead to huge changes in long-run. This paper tried to answer the question how meanings of the words change over time, and how the relationship between the words and their meanings can change. To this end, change of meaning must be discussed.

Text: the Ground of Meaning Generation

The truth is that the text is the true ground of generation of the meaning by the words. No matter how rich a word is in terms of meaning, it may not express it true meaning as long as it is not positioned in its place, that is, in a sentence or a text in which it was first born. The important point in semantic change is that the words are usually used as "antonym, homonym or synonym". Sometimes, some words can have a different meaning from their original meaning when they are used in a different text. The important point to note is that the authorial intent must be considered, because authorial intent can also affect the semantic shift. For example, the expression "I am hungry" is meaning only when they

person who employed had had the intention to express this sentence. When a word is said in absence of intent to convey a meaning, it doesn't signify any meaning, and is meaningless, as are the words uttered by a parrot. As Taftazani said, "The expression said in absence of the speaker's intention to convey a meaning by it is not a meaningful expression; the intention to convey a meaning is a precondition of meaningfulness" (Taftazani, n.d., 33). It is better to first study the relationships between signifier and signified, and various types of signification, so that the knowledge obtained from such study can be used to study the semantic evolution of the words, and the semantic fields of them.

2. Categories of signification

The words are divided into five categories in terms of signification:
1) Improvised Word (Murtajil): This refers to a word used in a sense other than its actual meaning, with the new sense in which it is used having no relationship with the original meaning of the word.
2) Metonym: This refers to a word that is used in sense other than its actual meaning, but it has only one actual meaning and the employment of such a word in other senses in due to the fact that such other senses have a relationship with the original meaning of the word.
3) Homonym: This refers to a word that has several actual meanings.
4) Shifted Word: This refers to a word that has shifted from its original meaning to another meaning, with such other meaning of that word being related to its original meaning.

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5) Particular Word: This refers to a word that has only one meaning. When an audience hears such word, he only perceives one particular meaning.

These categories of signification show the relationship between signifier and signified. However, it is time to discuss which factors can affect the conventional meaning of each word, what reasons are behind the change of the relationship between signifier and signified, and when this question was first raised by linguists.

3. Factors affecting semantic shift

Semantic shift has received serious attention from scholar since early 19th century, when semanticists tried to formulate semantic shifts and study factors affecting, and forms of semantic shift. Semanticists have identified different factors affecting semantic shift, which can be summarized as follows:

3.1. Socio-cultural factors:

Sometimes, social and cultural changes and intellectual development of human community gradually cause the concrete signification of the terms to shift to abstract and non-concrete signification. Concrete signification gradually fades away, and disappears, and sometime remains beside the abstract signification (Mukhtar Umar, 1982). Therefore, semantic field of a term sometimes become narrower, with that word shifting from a broad term to a narrow term. The opposite can also happen, in which case a narrow term shifts to a broad term. For example, ordinary people who usually lack specialty employ terms in their broad sense; for instance, the green color denotes one color for ordinary people, while there is a ten-point scale of green color when it comes to painters (Ekhtiyar, 1969). Sometimes, terminological gaps occur in a language, so that no term is found to refer to a newly emerged signified, in which case linguists sometimes use loanwords to fill such gap, and sometimes resort to metonyms, using the terms in a sense other than their actual meaning.

3.2. Psychological factors

Sometimes, a number of words in a language are not psychologically found to be favorable by people, and for this reason, such terms gradually become obsolete, and replaced with other words that suit the taste of speakers of that language.

3.3 Factor of requirement

Emergence of new instruments, discoveries and inventions requires coining new terms. Such requirement causes academies to coin new words. The point that must be considered in coining new words is that one must refer to old terms and use similarities between the referents of the old terms and the newly emerged concepts to coin the new terms. Such evolution of the relationship between the signifier and the signified manifests itself in three fields of "homonym, antonym and synonym", which will be discussed briefly in the following.

4. Categories of semantic shift

4.1. Homonym (Homonymy)

The earliest definition of such word was provided by "Sibawayh" in "al-Kitab" (Sibawayh, 1991). A single word which has different meanings is called homonym (Ibn Faris, 1910). The same definition has been provided by the contemporary scholars (al-Mubarak, 1980: 130). So, homonym refers to a single word that has more than one meaning. Early scholars usually considered a word as homonym only if it had several meanings, without stipulating any further conditions for homonymy (Ibn Faris, 1910). Homonymy is among phenomena that have received attention from scholars both in the past and at present. However, scholars are divided on whether or not to accept such phenomenon, and on what factors and issues are involved in homonymy (Munjid, 1999).

As is the case with other topics, homonymy has had opponents and proponents in the history. And, despite its existence has been proved by some linguistics, homonymy has had opponents as well. The opponents believe that homonymy results in corruption, and that it is not permissible to use homonymy. They believe that homonymy confuses the audience as to identifying the meaning of terms. However, those who accept this phenomenon – who are the majority – believe that homonymy can exist, because there is no problem with one term being used by a group to refer to a thing, and by another group to refer to another thing. Therefore, a group of scholars consider this phenomenon as being unavoidable, because there are an infinite number of meanings while there are a finite number of words (Suyuti, n.d).

Although grammarians have provided various examples to demonstrate existence of homonym, some early grammarians have denied this phenomenon, stating that such examples have accidentally formed, and that they seems to be homonym just because of the failure to see the semantic shift occurred though metonymy to this examples (Subhi Salih, 2004).

5. Origin of homonymy according to early and contemporary linguists

Among the most important origins of homonymy is difference between different dialects. Some of the figurative meanings provided for a word are found to be among the actual meanings of that in some dialect, because it is improbable for a term in a semantic field to be used in many senses. For example, ordinary people use a term to refer to

"wolf", while people of a tribe use the same term to refer to "lion" (Suyuti, n.d). So, as a result of interaction and fusion of different ethnic dialects, and use by one ethnicity of the terminology of another ethnicity, the terms appeared that had the same spelling or pronunciation, but had different meanings. However, it should be noted that differences between languages might also have caused this phenomenon. For example, a language may borrow a word from a foreign language, which is spelled or pronounced similarly in the recipient language, thus resulting in homonymy.

Also, if the meaning of term changes while its pronunciation or spelling remains unchanged, a homonym will be formed. Sometimes, a term that has one meaning is a dialect assumes another meaning in another dialect, while maintaining its meaning its original meaning, thus creating homonym. Or sometimes, two words that have different pronunciation and spelling assume identical pronunciation or spelling as they change over time, in which two different signifiers with different meanings turn into one signifier with two different meanings, creating homonym (Hilal, 1986).

Contemporary linguists distinguish several terms in this regard. The first that is commonly used in this regard is polysemy, which refers to a word or expression having two or more related meanings. According to linguistics, such multiple meanings of a word must be related. Polysemy is thus the opposite of monosemy. Another category of same words with different meanings are those formed as a result of changes in spelling or pronunciation; in this case, two words have become similar in appearance as a result of change of their spelling or pronunciation, and so, their formation is not the result of coining the same word for two or more different things (Mahmud Fahmi al-Hejazi, 1998). Palmer also used two traditional methods to distinguish between polysemy and homonymy. First method is etymological study of the terms in question. In this method, if words with the same spellings or pronunciation are found to have had different origins, they are categorized as polysemic, but if such words with the same spellings or pronunciation are found to have had the same origin, they are categorized as homonymy even if they have different meanings, and thus, such words are provided under the same entry in dictionaries. Palmer rejected this method, as he believed that the current condition of a language doesn't always reflect its history, and that the linguists also have no knowledge of such history. The second method is to consider the core meaning. Accordingly to Palmer, it is not possible to identify such core meaning for all polysemic terms (Palmer, 1971).

Synonymy refers to one or more words having the same meaning. In al-Kitab, Sibwayah defined synonyms as "different words with the same meaning" (Sibwayah, 1991).

Among early scholars, such scholars as Sibwayah, Ibn Jini, and Fakhr Razi accepted existence of synonyms. However, the earliest book titled synonym is written by Ali Ibn Isa al-Ramani (died 994).

Study of synonymy started when a group of the earliest philologists started to collect old terms. A group of them tried to gather the synonymous words in a separate book, and it was perhaps this attempt that later lead to widespread use of synonyms. Excessive stress and focus of this group on synonymy resulted in another group to be formed to oppose them by completely denying the phenomenon of synonymy.

However, the contemporary scholars are basically against the complete synonymy, as they believe that any difference in spelling and pronunciation cause difference in meaning of a term. The terms used as synonym often have both semantic similarities and differences, unless such two terms are the same in all semantic aspects.

Palmer said about such relationship, "There is no such a thing a true synonymy between the words, and two words are never exactly synonymous. It seems unlikely for two words with the same meaning to be able survive in the one language (Palmer, 2010). Few linguists admitted that synonymy may exist provided that it is defined a little loosely, or the range of synonymous words is limited, or certain conditions are met. Ullman said, "Although total synonymy in languages is not impossible, it is rarely found. Such words are like precious objects that cannot be easily given away by the language, and even when such words realize, they are usually survive for a short and limited period of time.

Scholars like John Lyons and Ibrahim Anis also provided conditions for synonymy.

Lyons said, "Evidently, total synonymy is very rare as long as it is considered as a relationship between the words of a natural language. However, it is commonly found as the relationship between phrases that are lexicographically compound.

Two or more phrases are totally synonymous, if they meet the following conditions:
1) If they have the same meanings.
2) If the identity of the meanings is maintained no matter how they are read.
3) If they are equivalent semantically, that is, if they have the same meaning in all semantic aspects, whether descriptive or non-descriptive (Lyons, n.d).

And Ibrahim Anis provided the following conditions:

Contemporaneousness: He believed that when studying synonyms, they must be considered in certain periods of time.

Unity of Context: This means that two terms must belong to the same dialect or a coherent body of dialects, and that synonym must not be sought among the terms from different dialects.

Full Semantic Unity between Meanings of Two Words: This means the two synonymous words must have semantic unity at least in the mind of the most people speaking a language in an environment.

Different Spelling: This means two synonymous words must be spelled differently, with neither of them being the product of evolution of spelling of the other (Hamid Hilal, 1986; Naderi, 2005; Mokhtar Umar, 1982).

Finally, it should be noted that synonymy is undeniable as a linguistic phenomenon, while it cannot be said that synonymous words have completely the same meaning in all aspects and states. However, if by synonymy, we mean consistence between two words in terms of their core meanings (rather than all of their meanings), and if synonymous words are considered interchangeable in certain cases only, then, synonymy can be possible.

6. Auto-antonym

Auto-antonym refers to a word that has two opposite meanings. Phenomenon of auto-antonym has a strong relationship with homonymy. In homonymy, a term has two meanings, but these two meanings are different and not opposite. Auto-antonyms are sometimes product of semantic shift, and sometimes product of evolution of spelling (Ibn Anbari, 1987).

Scholars have been divided on this phenomenon as well. A group denies it, while others believe that it exists. As for history of the discussion of auto-antonyms, it can be said that many linguists have written about auto-antonyms, with the title of the work often being "contranyms" (Ibn Nadim, 1997; Suyuti, n.d). However, the opponents of such phenomenon are rare; the most prominent of who was Ibn Darastuyah (died 943). He wrote a book in refutation of contranyms (Ibn Nadim, 1997). He wrote, "Use of one term to refer to two opposite meanings will result in ambiguity". The group that denies this phenomenon believes that in such case, the audience will be confused, and ambiguity will be caused. Thus, according to this group, contranyms defeat the purpose of the language" (Munjid, 1989).

However, opposite to this group is the group who believes auto-antonyms exist, and it doesn't make any difference if they have one or more than one origin. They believe every term that is coined to refer to a meaning, which meaning is called conventional meaning, and then, it additionally assumes the second meaning for the purpose of semantic development, with both meanings having the same origin.

"Ibn Duraid" set conditions for auto-antonyms, stating that, "If the words have the same origin, then, auto-antonym can exist, therefore, auto-antonyms are possible when they are the words of one single language. Such word is used in two different semantic fields in one language. Thus, the condition to be met by an auto-antonym is that the opposite meanings of the auto-antonym must be originated in the same language" (Suyuti, n.d; Qaddur, 1999; Umar, 1982). However, contemporary linguists distinguish between auto-antonym and antonyms. It seems, however, that contemporary linguists attach less importance to auto-antonyms, compared with early linguists (Mukhtar Umar, 1982).

Palmer said, "According to contemporary linguists, antonym refers to two words with different spelling and opposite meaning, such as young/old, big/small, *etc.* (Palmer, 1971). However, this definition is not considered in this research. The definition provided by early scholars is different from this definition, because they focused on auto-antonyms, which are words with the same spelling and opposite meanings. Subhi Salih believed that auto-antonyms must not be denied, but only a few number of what are said to be auto-antonym can be accepted as auto-antonym (Subhi Salih 2004). Such limitation of the range of auto-antonyms is frequently seen, to the extent that when reviewing examples of auto-antonym, one sees many of them have been excluded. Thus, one of the opposite meanings becomes more popular over time, with another being forgotten. It is seen that modern linguists have not much focused on auto-antonyms, although auto-antonyms are found in all languages (Ahmad Mukhtar Umar, 1982).

6.1. Origins of auto-antonyms

a) One of the most important cases in which such phenomenon appears is where one group assigns a meaning to a word, while another group has assigned a different meaning to it (Ibn al-Anbari, 1987).

b) Social Factors: Words borrowed from neighbor nations caused contranyms to be formed if they assumed a different meaning in the recipient language. The fact that no framework was specified for the scope of meaning of a term, it could be used to refer to two different meanings by two groups, with each focusing on some aspects of its meaning.

c) Psychological Factors: The effect of such factors is most discussed, because most contranyms are product of such factors, such as irony, and exaggeration of emotions.

For example, an instance of contranym is when an ignorant person is ironically called wise (Ibn al-Anbari, 1987), or when a blind person is called insightful. Also, the term "master" is used to refer to "slave" ironically.

Finally, it should be said that phenomenon of auto-antonym or contranym is originated in the language despite the opponents, as evidenced by single words having opposite meanings. Words borrowed from neighboring tribes caused contranyms to appear in the recipient language. Also, ambiguity in the actual meaning of term and failure to specify a framework for the scope of meaning of a term resulted in one group using a term to refer to a meaning, while another using it to refer to another meaning, which resulted in appearance of auto-antonyms.

7. Conclusion

People who speak the same language and have the same speak imagine that meanings of the words used in a sentence are evident because they can speak to each other easily. The fact that words are fixed and remain unchanged doesn't mean that their meaning is also fixed, because fixed words can assume different meanings in different periods of time as humans and their opinions change. Thus, in order to understand the language of a nation, one must learn about their views and opinions. The truth is that the words can fall within different categories of signification. Thus, use of homonyms, synonyms and antonyms can result in semantic shift.

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