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On the Symbiotic and Orwellian Changes of Meaning : Remarks on the Theory of Research on Historical Semantic Changes

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Reflection on the question of meaning in the natural language, deriving from a long and rich tradition in lexicology and semantics, has been reenergized in contemporary linguistics stimulated by its new methodological trends. For instance, as Renata Grzegorzczkova puts it, cognitive grammar aims at redefining the nature of meaning and the relationship between the language and the reality (GRZEGORCZYKOWA, 1992: 37). In the wake of cognitivism and its epistemological “experientialism”, as well as various other schools of thought which themselves may be far from endorsing cognitivist theoretical agenda,¹ a true revolution in the manner of thinking about meaning in language and ways of its description and investigation has taken place.

It consists largely in refuting assumptions according to which language (and semantics in particular) is an autonomous, formal system, and meaning can be defined as a relation between specific linguistic units and extra-linguistic reality. Epistemological objectivism and autonomous analyses of structural semantics have been supplanted by a subjectivist, anthropocentric vision of meaning which makes it relative by linking it to man’s various modes of experiencing and interpreting the world. Hence, meaning reflects both man’s individual process of conceptualization and intricate social and cultural mechanisms. This clearly departs from behaviouristic and formally logical approaches leaning towards placing a reflection on meaning in a wide context of human experience and thinking, where issues of perception, imagination, and physical, cultural, personal, and interpersonal contexts become of crucial significance. Diachronic linguistics also contributes to this critique of the atomistic vision of the language system and its semantics isolated from the holistic context. A methodological perspective which generates the diachronic research unequivocally suggests that the cognitivist – that is, nonstructuralist, point of view determines the epistemological horizon also in historical linguistics. Articles which approach the classical notions of historical semantics, such as the question of semantic changes and a complex problem of their typology, demonstrate the polemical edge directed, on behalf of the “experiential” position, against the axioms of the Saussurean linguistics. Polemically raising the issue of the concept of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign both in synchrony

¹ See a theory of language developed by A. Wierzbicka in her book *The Semantics of Grammar*. H. Kardela approaches the same problem in his article *Gramatyka kognitywna jako globalna teoria języka*. In: „Język a Kultura”, vol. 8, p. 16.

and diachrony and, in consequence, questioning the notion of the contingent character of historical changes occurring in language, scholars call for taking into consideration social factors which will play an important role in a description of semantic changes and help to conceive their typology.

In this context one has to mention Geoffrey Hughes whose work provides us with the invaluable insight into the complex phenomenon of a relationship between the lexical level of language and the way in which man, also formally and institutionally, organizes the world (HUGHES, 1988; 1992: 107–124). Although such a position may be dubbed as “poststructuralist”, we can, in fact, detect its traces already in the works of those nineteenth-century scholars who looked for the regularities among linguistic changes trying to correlate them with the repetitive and inevitable conditions of the external reality. Like Wilhelm Wundt nearly a hundred years ahead of him (BUTTLER, 1978: 7–8), Geoffrey Hughes maintains that historical change of meaning is determined by external factors such as, and here Hughes’s and Wundt’s paths part, clearly identifiable social factors connected with political, economic and civilizational growth of society, as well as various forms of political power and exercising control over the society. It is these processes which, according to Hughes who illustrates them with numerous examples taken from the English language, are responsible for modifications of the meaning of the particular words.

Reading Hughes’s works and trying to put them on a map of historical semantics, it is hard not to notice that they constitute a continuation, or a specific invariant of the sociological theory of semantic changes formulated in the 1920s and 1930s by Antoine Meillet (BUTTLER, 1978: 21). We have to, however, make a proviso that while Meillet and other researchers on semantics concentrated mainly on the modifications of meaning caused by a transition of a word from one social group to another, thus claiming that a change in semantics is a question of internal loans and borrowings, which inevitably must lead to a valorization of dialects and various social variants of a given language, Hughes and other sociology-based theorists suggest an interpretation of the two most common semantic processes: narrowing (words assuming more and more specialized meanings) and widening (or generalization of meaning). The social moment which conditions these processes is endowed, for Hughes, with a historical character. Unlike Meillet, Hughes does not link historical modifications of the meaning of words with a double “migration” of lexemes from dialects to the general language and vice versa – from the general language to various dialects and social groups, but, rather, sees these changes as resulting from the pressure mechanisms that history exerts upon language. It is powerful social transformations, ever new ideologies that energize them, and new civilizational models and patterns that constitute the cause of the changes occurring in the meaning of words. For instance, Hughes argues citing, among many others, a well known case, it is not incidental that in many languages the word for “money” (Latin *pecunia*, English *fee*): a new means of circulation of goods in the new forms of economic life, derives from the word signifying “cattle” (Latin *pecus*, English *feoh* > *fee*).

Hughes also points at other sources in the English scholarly tradition which represent a similar way of thinking about semantic change. In 1926 Owen Barfield published *History in English Words*, a pioneering work as far as interpretation of the historical changeability of words is concerned. It is precisely this book which, according to Hughes, with its accent

upon the role of social and intellectual transformations, represents a breakthrough in the English approaches towards lexicology and semantics. Hughes also wants to remember the work of Georges Matoré whose 1953 *La Méthode en Lexicologie*, where the French lexicologist distinguishes between *mots témoins* and *mots clés*, has inspired his own research upon mechanisms of semantic change. Matoré differentiates between the two classes of words and a criterion of the distinction is provided by a type of social processes reflected in these two groups: *mots témoins* reflect elements of material development, while ethical changes find their reflection in *mots clés*. Hughes, who finds Matoré's contribution radical and thus interesting for his own research, also directs us towards Barfield's long-term friend C. S. Lewis, who in his 1960 *Studies in Words* connected what he referred to as the "moralization of words' status" with changing social circumstances. For instance, words such as *gentle*, *noble*, *villain*, which originally referred merely to the social position of respective categories, acquired moral, be it positive or negative, valorization under the influence of external factors.

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The focal point of Hughes's theory of semantic change is undoubtedly the typology he suggests for these modifications and the social factor as the main criterion of this classification. Hughes's typology embraces three types of semantic changes: (1) symbiotic changes, (2) mediated changes, and (3) Orwellian changes.

1.

Symbiotic changes demonstrate the most immediate reflection of profound social transformations characteristic of the pre-mass media societies. Here Hughes sees mechanisms which move whole systems and establish new economic and social reality, such as the fall of feudalism, birth of capitalism and free market economy. For instance, reaching for one of the examples provided by C.S. Lewis, the decline of feudalism was accompanied by the "moralization of words' status" – namely, words such as *landed gentry*, *aristocracy*, *free* as opposed to *bound*, which reflected the social hierarchy characteristic of the system. Polish lexical material also allows to justify this thesis. *Słownik staropolski* (URBAŃCZYK, 1981: vol. 8: 570–571), published in 1981, lists the meaning of *szlachetny* (gentle, noble) as a reference to someone who acts in a noble, honest, virtuous manner as number 3, while reserving the first position obviously for the reference describing one's belonging to a specific social class (*szlachta*). Samuel Linde's five-volume dictionary, published between 1807–1815 in Warsaw, organizes the same entry in a different way and still lists the reference to the noble and virtuous action as the principal meaning of the adjective *szlachetny* (LINDE 1951: vol. 5: 593) The meaning of the adjective *mieszczanski* (middle-class) as "narrow-minded, limited, coarse, unrefined" appears only in the 1963 dictionary (*Słownik języka polskiego*) edited by Witold DOROSZEWSKI (1963: vol. 4: 660), which documents it with the twentieth-century quotations. Nascent capitalism, however, lacking words for the new social and economic mechanisms which it established, generated new meanings out of old words. The already

quoted example of the evolution of the Latin *pecunia* and the English *feoh* > *fee* and *cattle* > *chattle* may be a good illustration of the process. Later, capitalism began to introduce new Latin-derived lexical elements, such as *fabryka* (a plant), *komunikacja* (communication/transportation), *prywatyzacja* (privatization), *arbitraż* (arbitration), to satisfy its lexical needs. In Poland, the major political and economic transformations taking place after 1989 opened the door for a very wide and dynamic wave of borrowings from English which were to find the linguistic match for the reintroduction of the capitalist system into Poland. On the one hand, as in early capitalist Europe, words such as *bogactwo* (wealth), *zamożność* (opulence), *zasobność* (being well-off), *luksus* (luxury), and many others made popular by advertising, were considered desirable, due to the obvious reference to social acceptance and prestige from the point of view of the new system of words signifying values. On the other hand, lexemes such as *biedny* (poor), *tani* (cheap), *lichy* (of poor quality) were induced with a scornful and disrespectful meaning. The lexem *demokracja* (democracy) has undergone a particularly interesting evolution. The communist totalitarian system deprived it of its original meaning, then at times of crises it was used as a synonym of chaos and anarchy, and later it featured promptly in the discourse of the underground opposition from where it was unearthed by the authorities, who tried to neutralize it by preceding it with the adjective *socjalistyczna* (socialist), and eventually the word occurs nowadays in the realm of politics, signifying the most common and general value (GŁOWIŃSKI, 1990: 129).

The ever growing impact of science and technology has resulted in either the semantic expansion or a metaphoric use of many lexemes which had previously had a more strictly specialized meaning (BAJEROWA, 1980). For instance, *wiedza* (knowledge, originally referring to sciences) evolved to any branch or discipline of knowledge; *motor* (engine), which originally was a purely technical term, has become a synonym of any source of energy. At the same time, scholarly or scientific terms pertaining to specific disciplines have spilled over to cover many other areas. Suffice it to mention the linguistic and social career of Jungian and Freudian concepts such as *neuroza* (neurosis), *histeria* (hysteria), *mania* (mania) which today, due to the process of generalization, have become terms referring to a whole gamut of social, artistic, and intellectual phenomena. Also the journalistic use of phrases such as *zapaść* (collapse), *patologia społeczna* (social pathology), *przerosty w administracji* (overgrowth of administration) demonstrate, as metaphors, a high position of such branches of medicine as cardiology and oncology.

2.

Mediated changes have, according to Hughes, accompanied the development of printing, which technology also helped to disseminate. As Martin Luther's case amply testifies, such changes occur frequently under the impact of political decisions, influence of particular lobbies, workings of propaganda or censorship. Luther's doctrine, spread by means of print, abounded in terms which critically referred to the pope and Catholicism (see words such as "papist", "popish", "popery", "papistical", "papistical", "papism", "popestant" "popeling") and, in consequence, already in the sixteenth century was the source of a negative meaning acquired by these concepts. We shall find the same process in the Polish lexis in which the

principal meaning of words *papista* (papist), *papieźnik* (popeling) or *papieżeniec* (popestant) in the sixteenth century, in non-Catholic texts, is also tinted with a pejorative sense (MAYENOWA, 1995: vol. 23: 241). Today we are witnessing a similar process when words such as *faszyzm* (fascism), *faszystowski* (fascist), *komunistyczny* (communist), *rasistowski* (rasist) also undergo a process of semantic degradation.

The adjective *burżuazyjny* (bourgeois) supplies us with a particularly interesting case of modifications. Originally a semantically neutral word, which in the original French denotes a petty shopkeeper, in 1848 was used by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* as a rhetorical device referring to any one whom we may suspect of exploiting working class or proletariat. Then, the reluctance, if not open disgust, with which the modernist writers (e.g. Flaubert) and painters (e.g. Cezanne) used the word also markedly contributed, at least in the French language, to semantic changes of this adjective.² Spectacular examples of mediated changes are also results of activities of various groups of economic interests. Business circles and major corporations try to find new names, or adapt the already existing ones for the products they manufacture and market. Erosion of the political system which generated names embedded in the centralist, planned economy, such as *pedety*, *cedet*, *konsumy robotnicze* (all names of department stores or chains of shops) is responsible for – firstly, a negative meaning which hovered above these words, and then, eventually, for their ultimate disappearance from language (PRZYBYLSKA, 1992: 138–150).

Among mediated changes one would also have to enumerate those which are a result of the feminist movements in the US or in Germany. Governmental policies on the equal opportunity and equality of sexes have either considerably modified some of the traditional meanings of many words or generated new ones such as “chairperson” (rather than “chairman”), “waitperson” (rather than “waitress”), “womyn” (rather than “women”) (JURASZ, 1994: 201–209; BARON, 1986: 162–189).

3.

A vision of the totalitarian state and language used by the authorities to control the population, which George Orwell introduced in his memorable book, supplied Hughes with the name for a third type of semantic change which he decided to name after the author of 1984. These are mediated changes resulting from the language manipulation conducted by the totalitarian power.³ George Orwell himself refers to them as the examples of the semantic engineering. The discourses of any totalitarian system, such as the propagandist language of the Third Reich, Newspeak used in the countries of Central and Eastern

² Czesław Miłosz writes on the artistic bohemia and its hatred against the *bourgeoisie* and values characteristic of this social class in his essay *Życie na wyspach*. In: GUMKOWSKI M. (ed.): *Literatura i demokracja. Bezpieczne i niebezpieczne związki*. Warszawa 1995, pp. 19–20.

³ It is good to remember that the mechanisms of the totalitarian discourse have provided scholars with the basis for the term “Orwellian linguistics” which was used for the first time in the book by: HODGE B., FOWLER R., KRESS R.G., TREW T. (eds.): *Language and Control*. London 1979.

Europe, as well as religious and political propaganda practiced in some Islamist states⁴ provide abundant material for analysis. Orwellian changes are obtained by the strategies of manipulation well-described in scholarly literature: first of all, by the use of semantically fuzzy words, ambiguous or antinomic terms (PUZYŃNINA 1981: 58). A classic illustration of these strategies is a mechanism of semantic modification which allowed to call crimes committed by the Nazi Germany “acts of heroism”, or “acts of courage” (KLEMPERER 1983). Similarly, “loyalty” in the world of totalitarian power does not refer to the sphere of ethics and values presided by free will and choice, but, contrariwise, it names only the imposed and politically desirable general idea which is to be obeyed and followed by everyone; hence popular Communist slogans: *Wierność Partii* (“Loyalty to the Party”), *Wiernie służymy Partii* (“We loyally serve the Party”), or *Wierny syn Partii* (“A loyal son of the Party”). In South Africa a similar strategy was used with the word *wit* which, due to its graphic closeness to the term “white”, has been replaced by the Dutch word of the French origin *blanke* with its desirable connotations of purity, transparency, and lucidity.

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Only a rudimentary outline of a theory which wants to account for the rise and modifications of meaning by considering broadly understood social factor has been presented in this paper. Since social and political transformations of systematic changes are a complex process, we were merely able to present a sketch of Hughes’s proposition which, we believe, may be a worthy contribution to the already extant research on semantic change. Therefore, it would certainly be worthwhile to look at semantic modifications from the perspective of the specificities and consequences of such major events as French and Soviet revolutions,⁵ the rise of fascism in Italy, the birth and decline of the German People’s Republic. Undoubtedly, also any discussion of the contemporary Polish and its semantic changes, in which we can see the impact of the Communist era, Solidarity decades as well as the labyrinthine contortions of the transformation period, will be fragmentary unless we take into consideration the social context as a powerful change enforcing factor. Ideologization of language, censorship, and manipulative use of discourse on the one hand, and a decline of the totalitarian system as well as the rise of cultural and political pluralism in Eastern and Central Europe on the other, supply us with a rich repository of cases for an in-depth study of the impact of political and social factors upon language. Hence, one shall find numerous examples of such research in contemporary linguistic literature. For instance, Lóránt Bencze investigated euphemisms as a rule dominating semantic changes in the Hungarian political discourse (BENCZE 1992: part 5); Irena Bajerowa (BAJEROWA 1981: 82), Jadwiga Puzyńska (PUZYŃNINA 1992: 179), and Antonina Gryboszowa (GRYBOSZOWA 1995:

⁴ The reader will find pertinent materials in *Nowomowa. Materiały z sesji naukowej poświęconej problemom współczesnego języka polskiego odbytej na Uniwersytecie Jagiellońskim w dniach 16 i 17 stycznia 1981*. London 1981.

⁵ A good example of such an approach can be found in DESMET P., ROORYCK J. and SWIGGERS P.: *What Are Words Worth? Language and Ideology in French Dictionaries of the Revolutionary Period*. In: JOSEPH J.E., TAYLOR T.J. (eds.): *Ideologies of Language*. London–New York 1990, pp. 162–188.

149–153) have considered semantic modifications which took place in contemporary Polish as a result of the violent secularization of religious values under Communism.

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O tzw. symbiotycznych i orwellowskich zmianach znaczeniowych
(Z teorii badań nad historyczną zmiennością wyrazów)

Streszczenie

Autorka rozważa zagadnienie zmian znaczeniowych wyrazów – klasyczny problem historycznej semantyki leksykalnej – z punktu widzenia językoznawstwa postrukturalistycznego. W tym celu przedstawia zarys koncepcji Geoffreya Hughesa, w świetle której powstawanie i modyfikacja znaczeń wyrazów następuje w wyniku działania czynników zewnętrznych, w tym zwłaszcza czynnika społecznego: wielkich procesów cywilizacyjnych (wynalazek druku, rozwój kapitalizmu) i kulturowych (reformacja i kontrreformacja, rewolucja francuska i rosyjska, rozwój ideologii komunistycznej, narodziny faszyzmu). Artykuł omawia także typologię zmian semantycznych Hughesa: 1) zmiany „symbiotyczne”; 2) zmiany „zapośredniczone”, 3) zmiany orwellowskie – ilustrując poszczególne typy zmian przykładami z języka polskiego.

Słowa klucze: znaczenie w języku naturalnym, leksykologia, semantyka, historyczne zmiany znaczeniowe