

Recent Developments in Spanish (and Romance) Historical Semantics

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Diachronic semantics has long been the stepchild of Spanish (and Romance) historical linguistics. Although many studies have examined (often in searching detail) the semantic evolution of individual lexical items, Hispanists have ignored broader patterns of semantic change and the relevant theoretical and methodological issues posed by this phenomenon. Working within the framework of cognitive semantics, an approach which perforce requires a comparative perspective, a team of Romanists at the University of Tübingen headed by Peter Koch has offered over the last ten years new insights into questions of diachronic Spanish (and Romance) semantics, with emphasis on the causes of semantic change (see the essays in Blank & Koch 1999, 2003, Mihatsch & Steinberg 2004).

I wish to survey here some of this recent German work in diachronic Spanish (and Romance) semantics and to discuss the insights provided by cognitive semantics into the nature of semantic change, especially with regard to cross-linguistic instances of metaphorical and metonymic changes in certain semantic categories (e.g., the designation of body parts, spatial and temporal adjectives and adverbials). Cognitive semantics has been concerned with the polysemous nature of lexical items and the cognitive principles that motivate the relations between their different senses. These same mechanisms can also account for diachronic changes in these relationships and in the internal relationships of lexical categories. Diachronic cognitive semantics focuses particularly on universal causes of semantic change brought about by mechanisms related to human cognition and perception. Although workers in diachronic cognitive semantics have also paid considerable attention to the semantic processes involved in grammaticalization (cf. from the Romance perspective Lang & Neumann-Holzschuh 1999), I shall limit this paper to lexical semantics.

Strictly speaking, words do not acquire new meanings or lose older meanings; speakers simply end up using them in different ways. Nerlich and Clarke (1988) make a useful distinction between micro-dynamic or short-term semantic change, related to the actual speech event, and macro-dynamic semantic change with long-term consequences. It is this latter category that historical linguistics studies. Certainly the adage traditionally attributed to Jules Gilliéron, 'Each word has its own history,' originally formulated as a reaction to the Neogrammarian concept of sound-laws, seems applicable to traditional diachronic semantics. In historical Romance linguistics most relevant studies, until recently, have dealt with the specific details of the semantic evolution of individual words, lexical fields or concepts ('Begriffsgeschichte'), without paying attention systematically to broader issues concerning the causes and the nature of semantic change. Such a state of affairs results from the size of the lexicon and its seeming heterogeneity. Whereas phonologists and students of morphology deal at any given moment with a finite and manageable number of phonemes or morphemes, the lexicologist is dealing with a very large and open-ended number of elements. The authors of the great Romance etymological dictionaries, Wilhelm Meyer-Lübke (1935), Walther von Wartburg (1928-), and Juan Corominas (1954-57; also Corominas & Pascual 1980-91), were all products of the period of Neogrammarian dominance. They placed greater emphasis on justifying the formal evolution of a word from its etymon than on its semantic history. A typical dictionary entry may have identified and illustrated the different stages in a word's semantic evolution, but rarely did the reader find discussion of the causes and mechanisms of the relevant meaning shifts. The same is true of more recent etymological ventures, such as Max Pfister's ongoing *Lessico etimologico italiano* (1979-). At best Romance etymological dictionaries have contributed raw data for the study of diachronic semantics. Even such a prolific scholar in the field of diachronic Romance lexicology as Yakov Malkiel, concerned as he was in his

writings with issues of theory and methodology, chose not to treat questions concerning the nature of semantic change in the many etymological studies where he carefully traced the semantic history of the word(s) under study.

I cannot offer here a thorough and detailed critical review of research in the field of diachronic Romance lexical semantics carried out prior to the last decade of the twentieth century (see Baldinger 1991, Blank 2003, Stefenelli 1996). Until recently, most work in historical Romance semantics tended to employ a philological or sociohistorical approach based largely on the writings of Stephen Ullmann, especially as reflected in Chapter 4, ‘Historical Semantics,’ of his influential book *The Principles of Semantics* (1957). In addition to changes brought about by external factors, Ullmann operated with several essentially binary taxonomies of processes of semantic change: generalization or broadening of meaning vs. specialization or narrowing of meaning; pejoration or development of a negative meaning vs. amelioration or development of a positive meaning; change resulting from metaphor vs. change resulting from metonymy. Over the last decade specialists have called into question various facets of Ullmann’s conclusions (Blank 1997a, Geeraerts 1997, Traugott & Dasher 2002). These critics rightly observe that Ullmann’s classifications of semantic change are in reality classifications of mechanisms and results or consequences, not of causes. Metaphor, metonymy, generalization, specialization, amelioration, and pejoration, indicate what happened in the semantics of a particular word, but do not explain the motivation for the change, a topic to which Blank returns later (Blank 1999:70; 2001:95-9; see also Lebsanft & Glessgen 2004b). The same criticism applies to diachronic structural semantics as outlined (with copious Latin and Romance exemplification) in Eugenio Coseriu’s (1964) seminal paper ‘Pour une sémantique structurale diachronique.’ This approach involved positing the loss or addition of semantic features to a given word’s semantic structure and the possible consequences of such shifts on the semantic features of other members of the lexical field at issue. Diachronic structural semantics enjoyed a certain vogue in Spain where Gregorio Salvador directed a number of doctoral dissertations which described and compared the lexical composition and structure of selected semantic fields (e.g., ‘dimension,’ ‘age,’ ‘women,’ ‘to speak,’ ‘to seize’) at given moments in the history of Spanish, including its Latin prelude (for bibliographic details, see Salvador 1988). The contributions of Coseriu to diachronic semantics have been critically assessed recently by Blank (1996) and Lebsanft and Glessgen (2004a).

Over the last two decades fruitful new insights into the nature of semantic change have come from linguists operating within the framework of cognitive semantics. Many areas of human activity and life are understood metaphorically, i.e., language and cognition very often operate metaphorically (Sweetser 1990:17). Recently some specialists in historical linguistics (Sweetster 1990, Traugott 1985) have sought to identify over-arching and predictable cross-linguistic (potentially universal) regularities in semantic change, and have highlighted the extent to which meaning-change, as well as meaning itself, is structured by cognition. Thus in its search for generalizations, diachronic cognitive semantics is necessarily comparative and ideally should draw on data from diverse language families. Linguists have long known that very often the abstract senses of a word derive from earlier concrete meanings (rather than the other way round). Various workers have argued for the essential unidirectionality of many types of semantic change across languages. Recent work has shown that in certain semantic domains there is a “deep cognitive predisposition” (Sweetser 1990:18) to turn to specific concrete domains to derive vocabulary for specific abstract domains. Metaphor seems to be one of the most important connections between such domains. By using the idea of systematic metaphorical structuring of one semantic domain in terms of another, cognitive semantics purports to be able to throw light on the motivation for and processes of meaning change. Some linguists have spoken of the quest for “cognitive principles that guide lexical change like an invisible hand” (Koch 1999:333; see also Blank 2005, Koch 2005), applying to semantic change the notion of the “invisible hand” introduced into historical linguistics from the realm of economics by Rudi Keller (1994 [1990]). Baldinger (2005) calls into question the explanatory powers of this notion with regard to semantic change.

Although linguists have identified numerous cross-linguistic metaphorical and metonymic patterns observable in semantic change, one cannot predict whether a given word will actually undergo a specific semantic shift. The repertory of diachronic semantic processes exploited by speakers is finite

and universal. I offer here an oft-cited example: In many languages the verb meaning ‘seize, grasp’ has metaphorically evolved the sense ‘understand’ (e.g., Lat. CAPERE ‘grasp, seize’ > It. *capire* ‘understand’; It. *afferrare* ‘grasp’ > ‘understand,’ Lat. COMPRAEHENDERE ‘take firmly, seize’ > Fr. *comprendre*, Sp. *comprender* ‘understand,’ Sp. *coger* ‘grasp, seize (an idea).’ In contemporary colloquial Spanish *pillar* ‘to seize, grasp’ is undergoing the same evolution; cf. the similar use in English of ‘seize, grasp’ and the history of G. *begreifen* ‘to understand,’ from a root meaning ‘grip’ (cf. G. *Griff*). However it cannot be predicted with absolute certainty that all verbs meaning ‘seize, grasp’ will at some point in their history necessarily undergo this development. Such changes tend to be unidirectional: ‘grasp, seize’ > ‘understand,’ but never ‘understand’ > ‘grasp, seize.’ In like fashion other words for the notion ‘to understand’ originally denoted other types of physical action: e.g., Fr. *entendre*, Sp. *entender* < Lat. TENDERE ‘to stretch,’ as well as the metaphor underlying E. *to understand*, G. *verstehen*.

I now wish to turn to the research into the motivations and mechanisms of semantic change carried out by Peter Koch and his student, the late Andreas Blank, whose massive *Habilitationsschrift* (Blank 1997a), described by Hilty (2001:252) as the most important work published in lexical semantics in the previous ten years, has become an obligatory reference point for much current work in Romance diachronic semantics (as can be seen in the essays in Lebsanft & Glessgen 2004a).

Traditional historical Romance semantics has stressed the semasiological side of meaning change, i.e., how a given lexical item acquires a new meaning, as does one facet of cognitive semantics (see Blank 2000, a paper which contains some important revisions of the thinking in Blank 1997a with regard to types of semantic change). Koch advocates stressing, within the cognitive framework, the onomasiological side, i.e., how a given concept acquires new signifiers, or how speakers find a new expression for a given concept. Koch (2002a, 2002b) asks whether there are cognitive universals sufficiently powerful to guide speakers’ innovations in designation and thereby even to guide changes in designation. In line with Coseriu’s dictum that speakers do not set out deliberately to change their language, Koch argues that they strive to designate concepts in an efficient, expressive, way, and so initiate processes of onomasiological change to carry out these goals. However, how do we define expressivity, and how do we judge what is more expressive? The semasiological and onomasiological sides to meaning change are not mutually exclusive, as the need for finding expressive signifiers for existing concepts can lead to the introduction of a new sense in a word’s semantic range. Koch wishes to stress the onomasiological level as the motivator for what seems to be on the surface semasiological change, i.e., a word’s acquisition of a new meaning may reflect the result of pressures to find a new signifier for the concept in question. He argues for the existence of cross-linguistic universals, by which new designations for a given concept go back to conceptually-similar sources. Within the Romance domain can the analyst observe recurrent patterns of onomasiological change? If such patterns do exist across the Romance languages, do they have their origins in Spoken Latin, or do they arise independently in the daughter languages, in accord with cross-linguistic cognitive principles that guide or direct lexical change?

However, as Koch points out, change of meaning is not the only way speakers can bring about a change of designation. Creation of neologisms through word formation can also carry out this purpose (e.g., to use Koch’s own examples, the coining through derivation in French of the noun *voleur* ‘thief’ from the verb *voler* ‘to steal,’ as replacement for the inherited OFr. *lerre* ‘thief’ (< LATRO), or of OFr. *maschoire* to replace OFr. *maschiele* ‘jaw’) as can inter-language borrowing (including borrowings from written languages such as Classical Latin). The relationship between word formation and lexical borrowing on one hand and semantic change on the other has been the subject of recent studies, e.g., Mutz (2004), Thibault (2004).

Koch and his colleagues have been conducting diachronic semantic studies within the conceptual domain of the human body, its parts, functions, and qualities. With regard to the Romance languages this study will culminate in the *Dictionnaire étymologique et cognitif des langues romanes* (to be made available on the Internet and in CD-ROM format), a work that combines the findings of traditional etymology and cognitive linguistics. It seeks to identify and analyze recurring patterns in the genesis of the designations for parts of the human body in 14 different varieties of Romance (see Blank et al.

2000, also Gévaudan et al. 2003). This semantic domain is universal with regard to its extralinguistic reality, and is central, given its crucial role as a locus and point of orientation for human cognition and the perception of spatial and physical realities. It often becomes the basis for metaphorical evolutions. Semanticists have long recognized that the human body has been the focal point for man's anthropocentric world view, and that cross-linguistically, the relevant lexical items may show parallel and predictable semantic evolutions. Koch is also directing a parallel project in Tübingen ("Lexical Change – Polygenesis – Cognitive Constants: The Human Body") which is studying the genesis of the designation for the parts of the human body in a sample of fifty languages from different families (See Koch and Steinkrüger 2001 and many of the papers in Mihatsch and Steinberg 2004).

Koch, Blank and their collaborators have begun with work on the parts of the body associated with the head. The semantic evolution of body-part terminology must be examined from two distinct perspectives: changes undergone by the (Latin) signifier in the transition to the Romance languages and further metaphoric and metonymic semantic developments undergone by the Romance terms at issue and the creation within Romance of new designations for body parts. Over time certain metaphorical and metonymic changes repeat themselves. It is well known that Fr. *tête*, It. *testa*, OSp. *tiesta* reflect a metaphoric transfer that affected TESTA 'pot' in Spoken Latin; cf. also Sard. *konka* < Lt. CONCHA 'shell.' Parallel metaphoric evolutions occur later in the history of the Romance languages: witness such Fr. slang terms for 'head' as *carafe*, *carafon*, *terrine*; also Sp. *casco*. Argentine Sp. *mate*, Peruvian Sp. *tutuma* (of indigenous origin). These examples all show the evolution 'CONTAINER > HEAD,' a semantic path which repeats itself in many different language families. A different path is followed by the semantic development of CAPITIUM 'head covering, part of the tunic through which the head passes,' ultimately the source of Sp. *cabeza*, Ptg. *cabeça*. In many Romance languages the terms for 'cheek, mouth, eyebrow, eyelash, jaw, chin' result from metonymic transfers due to physical contiguity; e.g., BUCCA 'puffed-out cheek' > Fr. *bouche*, Sp. Ptg. *boca*, It. *bocca* 'mouth,' GULA 'throat' > Ro. *gură* 'mouth' (In some Slavic languages the words for mouth go back to roots signifying 'beak, lips' or 'to kiss'). Fr. *cil* 'eyelash,' Sp. *ceja* 'eyebrow' continue Lat. CILIUM 'eyelid,' Sp., Ptg., Ct., Oc. *barba* 'chin' go back to Lt. BARBA 'beard,' whereas It. *mento*, Fr. *menton* (historically an augmentative) continue Lt. MENTUM 'chin.' The distinct terms for 'cheek' in medieval Spanish all go back to terms which originally designated other parts of the face or head: OSp. *mexiella* < MAXILLA 'jawbone,' OSp. *tiénlla* < TEMPORA 'temples'; OSp. *carriello* originally meant 'jaw.' Other Italian dialectal designations for 'cheek,' as well as the Rumanian and Sardinian terms go back to bases originally designating the 'jaw.' Indeed the Romance languages all show a wide variety of semantic transfers and borrowings in the designations for 'cheek'; Lt. GENA survives only in some varieties of Romanian, Calabrian and Provençal; Fr. *joue*, Oc. *gauta*, Ct. *galta* go back to a Celtic base, whereas It. *guancia* continues a Germanic base which meant 'curved surface' (for details see Dworkin 1982:579-83; Krefeld 1999:263; Wright 1994:74-94). As the eyes, nose, mouth, ears, skull seem to be the most salient parts of the head, these terms often come to form the basis of metaphors; Fr. *nez d'un avion* 'nose of an airplane' (cf. Sp. *morro de un avión*), *œil d'une aiguille* 'eye of a needle,' Sp. *boca del metro* 'subway entrance.'

Space does not permit me to elaborate here, but it would be worth examining closely the metaphorical evolution of words for body parts that carry negative connotations or taboo associations. Such words seem to give rise to pejorative derivations or semantic extensions, as can be seen in the derivatives in Spanish and French of *coño* and *con*; e.g., *coñazo*, *connerie*. In like fashion, it would be worthwhile to study across the Romance languages (and other families) the semantic history of internal organs such as the stomach, liver, lungs, heart, and brain. The names of internal organs seem less prone to (though not exempt from) further metaphoric or metonymic semantic evolution. To a large extent further semantic evolution of these terms reflects (culturally-conditioned?) associations of behavioral attributes or emotions with the organ in question (cf. Matisoff 1978 for an enlightening discussion of the semantic evolution of internal body parts in Tibeto-Burman languages).

Specialists in cognitively-slanted diachronic semantics have not limited their purview to body-part terminology. Crosslinguistic studies have shown that temporal terms often derive from spatial terms. This metaphorical evolution, 'spatial > temporal,' seems to be universally unidirectional (Haspelmath

1997). Andreas Blank (1997b) examines selected Romance examples of this cross-linguistic metaphor and notes that almost all temporal adjectives historically go back to spatial terms. Blank claims that the metaphorical schema ‘space > time’ represents a fundamental relationship in our cognition, a habitual linking of two distinct conceptual fields.

Patterns of semantic change that have their origin in human cognition can repeat themselves in language history. In the transition from Latin to the Romance languages, it can often be difficult (if not impossible) to determine whether the semantic makeup of a given Romance word reflects internal evolution or whether it reflects a semantic structure inherited from Latin. One example: Lt. *LONGUS* and *BREVIS* denoted both spatial and temporal length, whereas *CURTUS*, whose original meaning was ‘shortened, truncated; castrated, circumcised,’ seems to refer only to the physical dimension. However in many Romance languages the reflexes of these adjectives (Fr. *long*, OSp. *luengo*, Ptg. *longo*, It. *lungo*; Fr. *court*, Sp. *corto*, Ptg. *curto*, It. *corto*, Fr. *brief*, It. Sp. Ptg. *breve*), denote both space and time. It seems reasonable to claim that the descendants of *LONGUS* inherited both meanings from their Latin ancestor and that *CURTUS* had acquired the temporal meaning within the Spoken Latin of the Roman Empire. Alternatively, one would have to posit that all the adjectives underwent the evolution ‘spatial length’ > ‘temporal length’ independently in each Romance language. In late medieval Spanish, *luengo* gave way to *largo* (originally ‘wide, ample, generous’), which quickly came to be used to refer to temporal duration, a usage that it could not have inherited from Latin (see Dworkin 1997). I also wish to point out that in many languages (including the Romance languages) there occurs a similar unidirectional metaphorical evolution ‘rapid, quick’ (physical speed, i.e., motion through space) > ‘rapid, quick’ (the passage of time); witness the development of OFr. *viste* (mod. *vite*), OSp. *aina*. and in late Medieval Romance of the Latinate reflexes of *RAPIDUS* (Dworkin 2002).

Not all German Romanists who study the evolution of the lexicon have embraced the tenets and methods of diachronic cognitive semantics. There are still many students of diachronic lexicology who prefer to study in painstaking detail the formal and semantic history of individual lexical items, as documented in the textual tradition of the various Romance languages. Some of these scholars have criticized the practice of specialists in diachronic cognitive semantics who take their examples principally from standard manuals and reference works, such as the various etymological dictionaries of the Romance languages, without critically assessing their accuracy and validity. Ernst (2004) and Pfister (2004) question the value of diachronic cognitive semantics in the preparation of etymological dictionaries and lexical/philological studies of older texts. Their stance illustrates one of the problems facing historical Romance linguistics today, namely the tension between scholars who concentrate on individual details versus those who wish to stress more general issues pertaining to the nature of language change (see the essays in Dworkin, 2003, In press-a).

Cognitive semantics may have one important role to play in the resolution of etymological cruxes. Etymologists no longer engage in the sterile debate that raged at the beginning of the twentieth century whether phonological/formal or semantic criteria ought to carry greater weight in determining the validity of a proposed base. Diachronic cognitive semantics has stressed that many (abstract) concepts cross-linguistically may go back to the same or similar underlying conceptual bases. Such information garnered from accepted etymologies may help to cast some light on the semantic side of controversial etymologies (cf. Gsell 2004). Etymology seems not to be in vogue today, as many specialists seem to feel that, barring new data, currently unresolved etymologies will continue to remain so. Perhaps a cognitive cross-linguistic approach to long-standing etymological cruxes may help to revive this once venerable branch of Romance historical linguistics.

To conclude, obviously cognitive semantics is not the “magic bullet” which will solve all questions on the evolution of word meanings. It may throw light on the processes of semantic innovation, but it does not explain how the innovation spreads through the speech community. To test the extent of its applicability, linguists will have to study other semantic areas beyond the fields examined so far in the Romance domain (body parts, verbs of intellectual perception, and adjectival/adverbial indicators of spatial and temporal extension). The analyst must seek to distinguish and strike a balance between cognitive conditioning of a semantic change and the role of cultural factors, both of which may come into play, as I have attempted to demonstrate in a preliminary study

on the semantic evolution of primary color terms in Spanish and Romance (Dworkin In press-b; see also Oesterreicher 2004).

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