A Brief Review on Semantic Meaning’s Developing and Evolution

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Abstract. Language develops along with the social evolution. Vocabulary is the condition of pronunciation and the meaning of text, as well as evolving. The situation of Chinese word meaning evolution can be divided into six major types.

Introduction

Language develops along with the social evolution. Chinese are also constantly changing with the surging of China’s long history. Vocabulary is the most active part of the changes. From the ancient Chinese dominant monosyllables to the rise of dissyllables later, up to now the frequent emergences of three syllables, four syllables, etc, even reflecting the development and changes of vocabulary. The development and evolution of semantic meaning basically have the following several main expressions.

Expand or Narrow Range of the Meaning of Words

Expand the Range of the Meaning of words. This is mainly manifested from two aspects: new words’ meaning, senses of a dictionary entry on inherent words.

The meaning of new words. With the social development, the original words are difficult to satisfy the actual needs, as a result, new words produce gradually. Of course, new meanings associated with the generation of new words arise at the historic moment. This new words’ meaning mainly has four characteristics.

The appearance of the acronym make the contact of the morpheme meaning more closely. The acronym composed of the reduced method, on account of it’s reduced by phrases, so the contact of the acronym and morpheme meaning becoming more closely, lexical meanings are often assembly simply by the morpheme meaning. Such as "shi bo hui—shi jie bo lan hui (World Exhibition or Exposition)" "jiao jing—jiao tong jing cha (Traffic police)" "gong ce—gong gong ce suo (Public toilet)", etc.

The structure of acronym is simple and convenient; moreover the connotation is rich, the capacity is large. Coupled with its close relationship with the acronym and morpheme meaning—the intuition is strong, transparency is high. It’s increasingly favored by society and expected to have a great development.

The absorption of foreign words and dialect words brought exotic atmosphere and bright colors of Chinese lexical meaning. Along with the reform and opening-up policy, the wave of study abroad and a series of social changes, a large number of loanwords, dialect words become familiarly. New words on daily use, such as "leng mian (Cold Noodle)" "ka wa yi (kawaii)" "tuo kou xiu (talk show)" "ipad" "GRE" "CET-4", etc. The lexical meanings of some dialect words spoken with distinct image color and oral color, at the same time also greatly enriched the modern Chinese lexical meaning system. While the meaning of loanwords brought strong foreign culture color.
Growing industry words, scientific languages making the single feature of lexical meaning’s framework become more outstanding, which has become the impetus of lexical meaning’s derivation. With the constant improvement of the level of industry and the increasingly fine of the division of labor, the number of industry words and scientific languages are also constantly swelling. This kind of words which has not entered in the national communication vocabulary is monosemous; once the words become the national words, the meaning will be gradually generalized. The generalization originally only referred to a real phenomenon, later translate into generally referring to the other similar real phenomenon, such as "ma sai ke (Mosaic)", building professional term for "jin zhuang (Mosaic)", divided into ceramic Mosaic and glass Mosaic, also refers to an image (video) processing method that used comprehensively at present. The other example is "gui ma (Ghost horse)", anciently referred to the legacy of horse belong to the original owner or the paper horse in the funeral procession ceremonial, later generally refers to the meaning of clever and eccentric, funny and mysterious.

New lexical meaning more shows the humanistic care and the concept of civilization. Such as "da ling niqing nian (old young women)"—"sheng nü (leftover lady)" "can guan (restaurant)"—"fan dian (victualing house)" "xi zao tang (bath house)"—"yu chi (common bathing pool)". This kind of lexical meaning also reflects the moral and cultural level of different social groups.

New senses of a dictionary entry on inherent words. New senses of a dictionary entry on inherent words accord with the language ceremony principle, there is not increase any new language symbols, but meet the need of communication. For example, "lao zong (chief)" was an old call for regular soldiers and police in the past. Then increased some senses of a dictionary entry such as "honorific terms of senior leader of the Chinese people’s liberation army (using it mostly attached to the surname)" or "honorific terms of the people like the chief engineer, general manager, chief editor or other titles." "qun xing (stars)" which originally referred to "the numerous stars", as well as usually refers to "many famous figures" at present.

Narrow the Range of the Meaning of Words. For example, "wa (tile)" originally refers to the "generic terms of the earthenware has burned", at present specially refers to the "building materials to pave roof". As another example, "jin (gold)", originally the common name was all kinds of metal. With the development of metallurgical industry, many metals have distinguished name, such as "tong (copper)", "tie (iron)", etc. The meaning of "jin (gold)" gradually narrowed and specially points to the "gold" in the metal.

The Change of Emotional Color of the Lexical Meaning

The lexical meaning from commendatory to derogatory. For example, "lao ye (milord)" originally is positive. In the old society, "lao ye (milord)" was called the officials and powerful people, or the appellation for host by servants of the bureaucrats and landlord family. But later it specially points to the governor that breaks away from people and oppressed people, including the meaning of irony. It was gradually becoming a derogatory term.

The lexical meaning by derogatory to commendatory. For example, "ai (love)", in remote ages commonly be used in the meaning of "grudge" as the derogatory sense, now refers to "be fond of" as the commendatory sense.

Changing from without emotional color into commendatory. For example, "xiang (auspicious)", the ancient meaning was "warning, symptom", so good or ill luck both may be referred to this word. But later "xiang (auspicious)" was only used to express the "auspicious" as commendatory sense.

Changing from without emotional color into derogatory. For example, "di (enemy) ", in ancient times has a meaning of "kind", they were all belonged to "yang (sheep)" such as "mei (beautiful)" "shan (kind)", etc. Nowadays, "yang (sheep)" has without any emotional color.

Changing from without emotional color into derogatory. For example, "di (enemy) ", the original meaning was "equal", without any emotional color, but nowadays it has the meaning of "opponent" as a derogatory sense.
Changing from derogatory into without emotional color. For example, "jia (plus)", the original meaning account to the "wu (accusation)" at present, was a derogatory sense, later extended to whatever put something on all called "plus", without emotional color.

The Figurative Extension of Lexical Meaning

The extension changing from concrete to abstract means that a word changing from specific things with some characters to many things with a common or an abstract character. For example, "ku (bitter)", original meaning was a kind of herbs which tasted very bitter, later was used to show one of the five flavors, the lexical meaning became a little abstract, and then extending from "the bitter flavor" to "very hard work". The meaning was become more abstract.

The extension changing from abstract to concrete. For example, the original meaning of "kuai (fast)" was "happiness", then extended to "rapid", the extending changing from the behavior to the mood, it was from abstract to concrete.

Changes of Lexical Meaning Degree

The degree changing from light to heavy, from shallow to deep. For example, "hei (hate)", the earlier meaning was "regret", had a slight degree. Afterwards collocated "blame" with "hate", and then extended the meaning of "enmity", the degree became deepen.

The degree changing from heavy to light, from deep to shallow. For example, "bing (disease)", "Shuowenjiezi", "Disease come soon". Later, "serious disease" "a light attack of illness" all said "bing (disease)", the degree became lighten.

The Lexical Meaning Transfer from the Center of Gravity

The change of the lexical meaning elements’ position, means that "the lexical meaning transfer from the center of gravity".

The Transfer of Lexical Meaning According to Motivation. At the front and back of the lexical meaning’s extending, the senses of dictionary entry A and B have a logical infectious relationship. According to the different logical relationships of them, that can be divided into the following several main conditions.

The transfer of cause and effect. Means that lexical meaning developing from the senses of dictionary entry A to B although the center of gravity of lexical meaning has shifted, both of two have a causal relationship. For example, the meaning of "shao (slightly)" from "gradualness" (time adverbs) to "small" "less" (degree adverbs), both of them have causal relationship, every things "fade" (speed) is "small" "less" (results). In contrast, the lexical meaning of development can be pushed to reasons by the results. For example, "yang (sun)", originally referred to the good place, "yang (sun)" means that "the south of mountain, the north of river". While the reason "yang (sun)" is bright, because of the sunshine. So the meaning of "yang (sun)" was extending referred to the "sun", changing from "results" to "reasons".

Transferring from refers to "things" to "people". For example, the meaning of "bing (soldier)" transfer from "weapons" to "the people held weapons", means that transfer from refers to "things" to "people". In addition, there are some types that transfer from positive to negative, from static to movement, etc.

The Transfer of Lexical Meaning According to Distinction. Means that under certain conditions, one secondary feature of the original meaning of a word become the main meaning. For example "xiang (toward)", the original meaning was "the window that facing north". "Window" was the main meaning, "facing north" was a minor feature. While in the evolution of lexical meaning, "facing north" had become the main status of this word and extended the meaning of "direction", there had have been a transfer on meaning center.
Conclusion

We have talked about five kinds of situations of the lexical meaning’s evolution above. In fact, in the concrete processes of lexical meaning’s evolution, situations were not isolated but were often crisscrossed together. For example, "qin (parent)", the original meaning was "reach", extended as "love earnestly". It is "the transfer of lexical meaning according to distinction". And then extended specially point to "parents", from abstract to concrete, this is "the figurative extension of lexical meaning".

There are three main kinds of circumstances about the result of tossing extension of lexical meaning: The first one is chain link type’s extension. Namely, lexical meanings are continuously extended from one direction and forming the multiplicity of extension; the second one is the radial extension. Namely, lexical meanings are extended from different directions at the same time and forming the pleiotropy of extension. The third one is the comprehensive extension; namely, the cross of two types of evolution above.

What is said above, the evolution of Chinese lexical meaning is summarized into six major types. But its specific content is rich, colorful and various. In the speech event of people, words may produce new meanings at any time because of a sort of relationship between the two phenomena. Once the new meanings be established and recognized by society, that can forming the lexical meaning’s developing and evolution.

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