Forms and Reasons of Word Meaning Degeneration

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Abstract. Just as the colorful and constant changes in every field happening in this world, word meaning change, especially word meaning degeneration, is going on every day. This paper illustrates the four forms of word meaning degeneration, including complete meaning degeneration, partial meaning degeneration, and degeneration caused by euphemism and meaning narrowing. Also, it explains the reasons of word meaning degeneration respectively from psychological, social, historical, cultural and linguistic perspectives. It also predicts that more and more words may become derogatory in sense in the future.

Introduction

Language, as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols, is the most significant means of communication. “Any change in social life, including the subtlest, will be reflected in language, mainly in vocabulary [1].” As a mirror of social life, language changes along with the development of society. Among all the development of linguistics, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics, the most obvious one is the development of semantics, to be exact, the change of word meaning which consists of four forms: restriction, extension, elevation, and degeneration. In China, most of the researchers focus on word meaning widening, narrowing, and elevation, but pay little attention to degeneration. Even when they pose this question, they simply mention the inevitable tendency of it, but rarely discuss the reasons of it. This paper aims to illustrate the forms and reasons of word meaning degeneration from different and specific perspectives.

Definition, Forms and Reasons of Word Meaning Degeneration

Definition

“Word meaning degeneration refers to the phenomenon that word with an approving or neutral meaning becomes one with a less respectable meaning or with a derogatory sense [2].” Henry Alexander once said that word meaning degeneration is a reflection of human nature [3].

Four Forms of Word Meaning Degeneration

Total Degeneration of Word Meaning. Total degeneration of word meaning means the whole meaning of the word becomes less respectable, and after the degeneration, the word is only used as the one with its pejorative meaning, while its approving meaning will never be used again. Let’s take the word hussy for example. Hussy, whose original meaning before the 16th century was housewife, was degraded to mean bold cheeky girl at the 16th century, while now, it means sexually immoral woman or prostitute. Today, when we want to praise some married female who is good at home tidying, we never say “She is an excellent hussy,” we say “She is a good home maker” instead. Some other examples of total meaning degeneration are clown, undertaker, etc.

Word Meaning Degeneration Caused by Some Uses of the Word. Word meaning degeneration caused by some uses of the word refers to the phenomenon that “sometimes a word just shows degradation in some of its uses, but maintains itself in others [2].” This can be seen in the word execute, which has a central meaning “to carry out a plan, an order, or a piece of work, etc. [4].” However, in the book “The Society and Culture of Major English-Speaking Countries,” there are following sentences:
“Charles the First’s attempt to overrule parliament in the 1640s led to a civil war in which parliamentary forces were victorious, and the king was executed.”

Obviously, execute here means “to kill someone as a lawful punishment.” Both of the above meanings are used today. There are some other examples: governess, radioactivity, wench, to name just a few.

**Word Meaning Degeneration Caused by Euphemism.** Some words which have something to do with religion, sex or reproduction organs are forbidden to use in a certain society. Thus, people have to make use of other positive or neutral words to substitute these words. These positive or neutral words are called euphemism.

During the Second World War, in Nazi concentration camps, the verb to organize was used as a euphemism for procuring by “illicit means,” that is, for “stealing.”

There are also a number of euphemisms connected with illness and death. Nowadays, these words have lost their euphemistic value and increased their unpleasantness. Words like disease can illustrate this. Disease, whose original meaning was “discomfort,” no longer refers to an illness.

**Word Meaning Degeneration Caused by Meaning Narrowing.** In linguistics, there is a term called hyponymy, which refers to the sense relation between a more general, more inclusive word and a more specific word. The word which is more general in meaning is called superordinate, and the more specific words are called its hyponyms. When the superordinate contains the meaning both complimentary and derogatory, the derogatory sense will exclude the complimentary sense of the superordinate [5], even gradually become the core meaning of the superordinate. For example, the Chinese word “xiu (臭),” which means smell. Originally, it refers to smell in general, no matter it is fragrant scent or stink odor. However, at the end of the War Period, the word was frequently used to refer to bad smell, which is still used today.

**Reasons of Word Meaning Degeneration**

Word meaning degeneration is not only a simple linguistic phenomenon, but also a complex social phenomenon. The reasons of it can be explored from the following perspectives.

**Psychological Causes.** “Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication [6].” Human beings have both physical and psychological developments. Sometimes, their activities, or even their subjective minds can affect the degeneration of word meaning.

Firstly, word meaning degenerates by virtue of people’s relevant imagination of somebody or something. The word silly is a perfect example. The original meaning of silly was “happy,” even “blessed.” Usually, most of the blessed people are innocent, thus, silly was degraded to “innocent” during the 17th century. And in the 18th century, the word silly was further deteriorated to “easy or simple-minded,” because in common sense, the innocent people usually live a simple life. Moreover, because it is easy for people to connect “simple-minded” with “not intelligent.” Silly, nowadays, is used to mean “stupid.”

Secondly, the prejudice against some class or occupation also causes word meaning degeneration. The Great Britain is a powerful country famous for her strict social hierarchy. In the feudal society, feudal lords usually took it for granted that the peasants and workers had an inferior position to them, so they looked down upon them and regarded them as a group of immoral guys. Thus, there appeared a lot of words to degrade the lower class, such as the word boor. Boor was originally used to refer to peasants, but now, it means “rough, rude or insensitive man.” Other examples include clown and villain, etc.

**Social Causes.** As language is a social term, word meaning degeneration also has something to do with society, including social class, national relationship, racial discrimination, sexism, social value and social environment. Some of these aspects will be illustrated as some of them are quite similar with the reasons having been talked above.

Seen from the Genesis in the Holy Bible, God created Adam on the eighth day. To prevent Adam from being lonely, God got a rib from Adam and created a partner for him. Adam said: “Eve is my bone in the bone, and meat in the meat, and she can be called ‘woman’, as she is got from the body.
of man.” Thus, woman is a derivative of man and she is put in a sub-position in society from the ancient time. This is called sexism or sexist. In the past, women suffered from much more serious sexism. They were treated badly and even insulted by men and the ruling class. They were often evaluated by others from physical perspective. As a result, many words connecting with female have become derogatory. Take the word *wench* for instance. *Wench*, in archaic English, it means a mature girl or a young woman. After being degraded, it was used to refer to “flirtatious female,” and at last, it became “female prostitute.”

The relationship between nations also affects the degradation of word meaning. As an imperial power in the world, the Great Britain has engaged in a lot of wars against other nations. It is not only a winner in battle field, but also a winner in linguistics field. English has been used as an official or second language in many of her colonies. Besides, as a winner, most of the British take it for granted that almost all the bad deeds are done by other nations, and if the British committed such bad deeds, it is just because they follow in others’ steps. Let’s take the most discriminated one of all the defeated countries by Great Britain—Netherlands, for an example. Her symbolic word *Dutch* becomes pejorative in most of its uses. “*Dutch courage*” means courage that comes from drinking alcohol; “in *Dutch*” means in difficulty; even curse has something to do with Dutch. For instance, “I am a *Dutchman* if…” and “…or I am a *Dutchman*” are the most serious oaths in English. In Table 1, there are some other examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>The Meaning of the Phrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dutch act</td>
<td>Committing suicide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch bargain</td>
<td>Unfair deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch auction</td>
<td>Sale in which the price is gradually reduced until a buy is found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French letter</td>
<td>Condom; Contraceptive sheath</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Word meaning degeneration can also be caused by the change of social environment. Due to the great development of science and technology, new things are coming into being one after another. Undoubtedly, the existing words are not enough to deal with this changeable world. In order to name the new creatures, people have to create new words or add new meaning to the existing words, or mix-use general words with specific words. During this process, there exists some word meaning degeneration, including: firstly, when specific words are used as general words, with the word *exposure* a good example; secondly, when general words are used as specific words, with the word *carrier* a perfect example.

**Historical Causes.** From the view of history, linguistics can be divided into diachronic linguistics and synchronic linguistics. Language is a historical term, and sometimes word meaning degenerates because of historical occurrence. Different ruling classes have different governing policies, which greatly affect people’s life and development, including linguistic development. *Radioactivity*, with the original meaning “the capability to send out radiation which can penetrate opaque bodies,” degenerates to a disastrous ghost threatening the safety of human beings, as the United States throwing two atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki has brought people with deep horror.

**Cultural Causes.** National culture consists of religion, belief, literature, language and art in its own country or area. In religious perspective, many names of the magisterial religious men have been deteriorated as they have done bad acts which are disdained by others. Besides, people’s belief also affects word meaning degeneration. For example, the word *Chauvinism* degrades from “person who is crazed with his motherland” to “person who has aggressive and irrational belief that one’s own country is better than all the others” or “the insensitive, conceited man” as the hero Nicolas Chauvin over-respected Napoleon and devoted himself to supporting Napoleon’s aggressive policy of expansionism.

**Linguistic Causes.** As the study of language is the main objective of linguistics, the change of linguistic structure not only affects the relationship between linguistic components, but also changes the word meaning, which includes degeneration. On the one hand, word meaning degrades due to
the similarity of its word structure with other word. The best example is the word *demean*, which degenerates from “way of behaving, or conduct” to “ungenerous, selfish, or of people or their behavior unworthy, unkind.” It is really easy for people to misunderstand *demean* as *mean*. Consequently, the word *demean* degrades to mean “lower oneself in dignity; or deprive oneself of others’ respect [4].” On the other hand, the ellipsis of collocating words in phrases sometimes causes word meaning degeneration. Phrases containing “adjective + noun” or “noun + noun” may be shortened and one word is retained to represent the meaning of the phrases. A typical example is the word *undertaker*. Besides, both the weakening and strengthening of word meaning sometimes results in word meaning degeneration. In English, there are many powerful words, especially adjectives, to modify other words. However, due to the high-frequency of usage of these words, to some extent, many words are degenerated. For instance, the word *lovely*, which originally referred to “unbelievable beauty” Now, it has no specific meaning, and it almost can be used to collocate with any noun referring to objects, such as lovely girl/day/weather, etc.

Conclusion

Language, “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication [6],” is a term connecting with the development of human beings. As a branch of language, word meaning degeneration also has a close connection with the psychological development of human beings, with the society, history, and culture. Nowadays, the world is full of fierce competition and all kinds of changes. People living in this age are suffering great pressure. It is predictable that more and more words may become derogatory in sense due to the great pressure as well as the psychological change caused by it.

References