

Toward 'A Universal Dictionary of Semantic Change'

If you look up the OED definition of the English noun 'human', you will find "A human being, a person; a member of the species *Homo sapiens*." It goes without saying that this definition entails a lot of assumptions: it requires you to know what a *human being* is, what a *person* is, not to mention *Homo sapiens*. Now, if you look up the etymology of 'human', you will find that it stems from the Latin *homo*, with the same meaning, and that it ultimately stems from an Indo-European root meaning 'from the earth'. So, through this single etymology, we know that a group of people in the past decided that our connection to the earth was significant enough to create a self-designation on this basis. We certainly live on earth, as opposed to in the ocean or in the sky. It turns out, if you check Buck's *Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages* (1949), that English and Latin are not the only Indo-European languages in which the connection of humans to the earth was at some point definitional: in Irish, Lithuanian and even Anglo-Saxon, 'earthling' is a common designation for human. What does one make of this? Is mankind's connection to the earth an idiosyncratically Indo-European notion, then? Well, yes and no. Yes, because of the above. No, for several reasons. One, if we look outside the Indo-European family, we see that the same appears, for instance, in Hebrew, a Semitic language, in which 'Adam', 'man', also means from the earth. Moreover, within English itself, there are synonyms of 'human' which at one point in time did not mean 'earthling': the word 'person', for instance, cited by the OED, is ultimately from the Etruscan word for 'mask', which refers to the masks worn by actors, as attested in the cognate *persona*, which thus underpins the influence of theater on Western civilization. This etymology alone, condensing centuries of history and civilizational achievements, shows that *homo sapiens* is capable of crafting tools and devices with his own hands, notably masks, and that there are occasions when humans can pretend to be a certain type of human which they are not in real life. So far, we have found two semantic changes for human: 'earthling' and 'mask'. Each etymology is meaningful because it gives us insights into different aspects of what it is to be human. The more etymologies we are able to collect and collate, the more comprehensive our understanding becomes of what aspect of being human mattered most in different cultures. For instance, the word *man* in English, akin to the German *Mensch* and Sanskrit *manu*, may be related to the words *mind* and *mental*, in which case the original meaning 'thinker' underpins, as it were, the special intelligence that sets *homo sapiens* apart from other species. A fourth etymology for human is 'mortal', as attested in Farsi and other languages: humans do die, *memento mori*. This sobering etymology gives a glimpse into the history of religions, the former opposition of our mortal status to the immortality of the gods. So far, we have looked at only four etymologies for 'human'. Just imagine how much better we could understand the cultural, historical and psychological significance of what it is to be human if there existed an etymological dictionary

in which all of the attested etymologies for any given concept existed, based on the sum total of the etymological dictionaries of the world.

Born in a bilingual family, and having been raised both in the United States and France, I've always had a fascination with words, their origins, and the ability of their meaning to change over time. The more I learned, the more I saw patterns as to how meaning can change. When I was a teenager, I loved the etymological sections of dictionaries and tried to memorize the origins of as many words as possible in English, French and other European languages as well. This is how I ultimately got into Classics, which I now teach.

Without having ever read Bloomfield (1933) or Blank (1999), whose taxonomies of semantic change are widely used, I independently came to the same conclusion, as other fans of etymology may have, that there are a finite number of types of semantic change, though the degree to which they apply to a given word and the precise boundaries of each type of change remain up for debate.

Example: kill

There is only so much one can learn, however, from subsuming etymologies under a finite number of typological changes. What's missing, to the best of my knowledge, is a universal database whereby one could measure statistically a number of important parameters:

- 1. The probability of meaning X evolving to Y, generally speaking.**
- 2. The rate at which X evolves to Y: is it decades, centuries or millenia?**
- 3. Cultural or geographic correlates for such changes.**
- 4. A map showing the interconnectedness of different meanings, the extent to which they converge, their diachronic stability, and the extent to which different meanings stay away from each other over time.**
- 5. Ultimately, a universal database of semantic change may allow linguists, and lexicographers, to uncover new subtypes of semantic change, which may have hitherto been underappreciated or ill-explored by the scholarly community.**

As I attempt to show, there is strength in numbers: the more semantic pathways we are able to grasp synoptically for a given meaning, the more objective our conclusions can be as to how concepts interrelate, and ultimately how the human brain works. **T**o use an old metaphor from textiles, if etymological dictionaries constitute the innumerable parallel warps of language, a systematic and exhaustive repertory mapping the frequency, convergences and divergences of these changes would provide us with the hitherto elusive weft holding the whole fabric together.

I started my talk with a discussion of the human concept, and how our understanding of what it is to be human is commensurate with the number of etymologies at our disposal: the more we are able to collate, the better we understand human history and culture.

I now wish to turn to another example: the concept of the ‘beautiful’. In their big bang moments of lexical creation, what esthetic criteria mattered most to a given society or culture? What can etymology teach us about the beautiful?

1. from beauty, is from the Latin *bellus*, which meant ‘pretty’, ‘pleasant’ or ‘brave’. *Bellus* is ultimately a diminutive of the Latin *bonus*, ‘good’ (Meillet, de Vaan, Pinault 1987), thus ‘a little good’, perhaps ‘good-ish’. Spanish would reproduce the same change with its creation of the diminutive *bonito*, literally ‘little good’, on the basis of *bueno* ‘good’. This etymology of beautiful is germane to the age-old philosophical debate of the relation between the good and the beautiful. Plato was not the only one to have perceived or argued for the relation between the two concepts: so did the Romans in their early history, and so would the Spaniards, without ever knowing that their Roman predecessors had done the same.
2. Flowers! English flour, variant spelling of flower: flowers are beautiful, hence good → hence the best taken as a superlative, French *la fleur de* “the flower of,” “the best part of.”
3. Another etymological aspect of ‘beautiful’ is shown by the German etymology of *schön*, cognate with *sheen* in English: the notion of light and brightness. Any cursory survey of texts or poems involving beauty will show a high frequency of words denoting or connoting light. On a physiological level, sunlight raises serotonin, one of the feel-good hormones.
4. The poetic ‘sightly’, which depends on light as a conduit, finds parallels in the Greek *eu-eidēs* ‘of good sight’, ‘of good appearance’, speaks to the desirability of the beautiful. Our gaze wants to linger on the beautiful, be it a landscape, a painting, or an individual.
5. Breton *caer* ‘handsome’, akin to Welsh *cadorn*, ‘strong’, meant originally ‘effective in battle’, just as Danish *koen*, ‘beautiful’ is from an older meaning ‘courageous’. Even the Sanskrit cognate of the Greek *kalos* ‘beautiful’ seems to imply physical strength as a connotation of being beautiful. There is thus a utilitarian aspect to beauty, which speaks to the prevalence of intercommunal conflict in ancient societies: if fighting men are good at defending their community in warfare, they are looked upon as handsome, even if objectively their features were deemed to be unattractive out of context, had they never distinguished themselves in war.
6. Latvian *jauks* once meant ‘gentle’, ‘tame’, ultimately “accustomed to,” “habituated.” If that which is unfamiliar or unknown may inspire us with uncertainty, fear or danger, people or things which we are used to and familiar with, may instill in us a sense of peace

and comfort, even if objectively some may find the same people or things not pretty. For instance, some of you, like myself, may experience a sense of joy lying down on your bed in your messy room, because you are used to it, but many would find your cluttered room not very pretty to look at. Habit and the habitual are a force to be reckoned with.

7. Polish *piekny* once meant ‘careful’, from a noun meaning ‘care’, thus referring to what may have once been in part a moral quality:.. like physical strength and courage, a careful, responsible disposition can transform the gaze of the beholder. A careful disposition may also correlate with the proper command of certain skills, which allow the careful individual to craft beautiful items or achieve a respectable career that requires patience and attention to details.

All of my examples are drawn from Indo-European languages, because they are what I specialize in. But as we observed with the non-Indo-European Hebrew *adam*, similar principles apply to languages worldwide, irrespective of their linguistic affiliation. By participating in this conference, I’m hoping to find potential long-term collaborators and sponsors who might be willing to work with me toward this grand project of a universal dictionary of semantic change. I’m looking for specialists in other linguistic groups, aboriginal Australian, Sino-Tibetan, Bantu, Austrolesian, you name it. It would take, in my estimation a decade or so, to compile such a universal dictionary of semantic change. It would be written in alphabetical order in English, as the *lingua franca* of the modern era. **Under letter ‘b’**, you would find the lemma ‘beautiful’, with the 6 Ur-meanings discussed above, and many more. **Under letter ‘h’**, you would find ‘human’, with the four origins mentioned above, and many more.

What are the limitations of this project? I’m not an expert in languages that use pictograms like Chinese, so there may be special hurdles in reconstructing the origin of words. At the same time, I understand that even pictographic systems are not entirely pictographic, so there may be various ways to trace the semantic evolution of certain roots. There are also languages that may have been discovered so recently, like perhaps a few languages in Papua New Guinea, that no older layers of the language are attested, thus impairing etymological research. But even here, evidence of polysemy or periphrasis in a recently discovered language can be considered to be a variety of etymology, ‘synchronic etymology’ one might say, and thus incorporated into this universal dictionary.

Another limitation to this project would be the existence of words in concepts that do not exist in English, but only in other languages. To deal with this problem, we could either create subheadings under similar related concepts in English. We could also have separate entries in the language of origin, as always in alphabetical order.

I wanted to end with a special feature of this dictionary project, which would include quotes by poets. I have observed that the principles underlying the creativity of languages is also operative

in the creativity of individual poets. The novel way in which poets use words and language replicates, often unbeknownst to them, processes that are already operative in the history of languages. For instance, when Percy Bysshe Shelley apostrophizes the West Wind as “thou breath of Autumn’s being,” his comparison of the wind to breath is embedded in the polysemy of the Greek *pneuma*, either ‘wind’ or ‘breath’, or the kinship between the Greek *anemos* ‘wind’ and Latin *anima*, ‘breath’ or ‘soul’. Thus, under the entry for ‘breath’, I could include this quote from Shelley.

Ode to the West Wind

BY PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

I

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
 Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Or when the French poet Arthur Rimbaud describes in his poem *Le Dormeur du Val* “The Sleeper in the Valley” the idyllic scene of a soldier *sound asleep* in a lush green valley,

<https://www.poesie-francaise.fr/arthur-rimbaud/poeme-le-dormeur-du-val.php>

It is only at the end of the poem that the reader realizes that sleep is a euphemism for death: the soldier is actually dead. Thus, in Homer, sleep and death are brothers; Jesus says that Lazarus is asleep, when in fact he’s dead, but brings him back to life. In English, one can put an animal to sleep.

In his famous poem, Lord Byron describes the eye of a beautiful woman he just met as if it were the light of the moon:

She walks in beauty, like the night

Of cloudless climes and starry skies;

And all that’s best of dark and bright

Meet in her aspect and her eyes:

Thus mellow'd to that tender light

Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

Poets may be inclined to compare the shape and glow of beautiful eyes to the light of the moon or the sun. But language too shows the same process: the modern Irish word for eye *suill* is from the old Irish word for the sun, related to solar. And Socrates stated, in Plato's Republic, that the eye is the most solar of all organs. Thus, in such a universal dictionary of semantic change, the entry for 'eye' would include quotes by the likes of Lord Byron or Socrates. I have quoted thus far mostly Western poets and authors because of my academic training, but in this universal dictionary, one of our objectives would be to include relevant quotes from poets and authors from around the world.

That's it. Thank you.

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