Module I. Lecture 4

Word meaning and Motivation

Plan
1. Morphological motivation
2. Phonetic motivation
3. Semantic motivation

1. Morphological motivation

The direct connection between the morphemic structure of the word and its meaning is termed *morphological motivation*. It implies a direct connection between the lexical meaning of the constituent morphemes, the pattern of their arrangement and the meaning of the word. Hence, by his definition all one-morpheme words, such as **man, bad, go** are non-motivated, because the connection between the structure of these words and their meaning is completely arbitrary, conventional.

Morphological motivation is present in derived and compound words. For example, the word **reader** is motivated by its immediate and, here, ultimate constituents the morphemes **read-** and **–er,** which, in their turn, are not motivated. As to compounds, their motivation is morphological if the meaning of the whole is based on the literal meaning of the components, and semantic if the combination of components is used figuratively. For example, the word **eyewash** is motivated morphologically in its literal meaning 'a lotion for the eyes'; but it is motivated semantically in its figurative meaning 'deception'.

Morphological motivation is relative/ It means that the degree of morphological motivation may be different. Between the extremes of complete motivation, as in the word **reader**, and lack of motivation, as in the word **man**, there exist various grades of partial motivation, as in the case of **cranberry**, where the morpheme **cran-** has no lexical meaning, at least synchronously.
From the historical point of view motivation changes in the course of time. Words that are no-motivated at present may have lost their motivation due to changes in the vocabulary. Their motivation is said to be faded. For example, the word **lady** is not motivated at present, but historical analysis shows that it is derived from the 'loaf-kneader'.

2. Phonetic motivation

Motivation is usually thought of as proceeding from form or structure to meaning. Morphological motivation as discussed above implies a direct connection between the morphological structure of the word and its meaning. Some linguists, however, argue that words can be motivated in more than one way and suggest another type of motivation which may be described as a direct connection between the phonetic structure of the word and its meaning. It is argued that speech sounds may suggest spatial and visual dimensions, shape, size, etc.

Experiments carried out by a group of linguists showed that back open vowels are suggestive of big size, heavy weight, dark color, etc. The experiments were repeated many times and the results were always the same. Native speakers of English were asked to listen to pairs of antonyms from an unfamiliar (or non-existent) language unrelated to English, e.g. **ching — chung** and then to try to find the English equivalents, e.g. **light — heavy, (big — small,** etc.), which foreign word translates which English word. About 90 per cent of English speakers felt that **ching** is the equivalent of the English **light** (small) and **chung** of its antonym **heavy** (large).

It is also pointed out that this type of phonetic motivation may be observed in the phonemic structure of some newly coined words. For example, the small transmitter that specializes in high frequencies is called 'a tweeter', the transmitter for low frequencies 'a woofer'.

Another type of phonetic motivation is represented by such words as **swish, sizzle, boom, splash,** etc. These words may be defined as phonetically motivated because the soundclusters [swiʃ, sizl, bum, splæʃ] are a direct imitation of the sounds these words denote. It is also suggested that sounds themselves may be emotionally expressive which accounts for the phonetic motivation in certain words. Initial [f] and [p], e.g., are felt as expressing scorn, contempt, disapproval or disgust which can be illustrated by the words **pooh! fie! fiddle-sticks, flim-flam** and the like. The sound-cluster [iŋ] is imitative of sound or swift movement as can be seen in words **ring,** sing, **swing, fling,** etc. Thus, phonetically such words may be considered motivated.

This hypothesis seems to require verification. This of course is not to deny that there are some words which involve phonetic symbolism: these are the onomatopoeic, imitative or echoic words such as the English **cuckoo, splash** and **whisper:** And even these are not completely motivated but seem to be conventional to quite a large extent (cf. *кукареку* and **cock-a-doodle-doo). In** any case words like these constitute only a small and untypical minority in the language. As to symbolic value of certain sounds, this too is disproved by the fact that identical sounds and sound-clusters may be found in words of widely different meaning, e.g. initial [p] and [f], are found in words expressing contempt and disapproval **(fie, pooh)** and also in such words as **ploughs fine,** and others. The sound-cluster [in] which is supposed to be imitative of sound or swift movement **(ring, swing)** is also observed in semantically different words, e.g. **thing, king,** and others.

3. Semantic motivation

Semantic motivation is based on the co-existence of direct and figurative meaning, that is the connection of the old sense and the new one within the same synchronous system. For example, the word **foot** denotes 'a limb of the human body', but it can also mean 'the *foot* of a table or a mountain'. In its direct meaning the word **foot** is not motivated. In the figurative meaning it may be explained as a metaphorical extension of the central meaning based on the similarity of different classes of referents denoted by the word.

The vocabulary is the most flexible part of the language and it is precisely its semantic aspect that responds most rapidly to every change in the human activity. Word-meaning is liable to change in the course of the historical development of the language. Changes of lexical meaning may be illustrated by a diachronic semantic analysis of common English words. For example, the word **glad** in *OE* **Zlæd** had the meaning of 'bright', 'shining'.

The term ***change of meaning*** or ***semantic change*** may be applied to two kinds of change: (1) the semantic change which results in the *disappearance* of the old meaning which is replaced by the new one, and (2) a change in the *number* and *arrangement* of word-meanings in the semantic structure of a word without a single meaning disappearing. Here we confine ourselves only to the first kind of semantic change.

There are three closely bound up but essentially different aspects of the problem of semantic change. Here its necessary to discriminate between the ***causes*** of semantic change, the ***nature*** of the process of the change of meaning and the ***results*** of semantic change.

Discussing the ***cause*** of semantic change we concentrate on the *factors* bringing about this change and attempt to find out *why* the word changed its meaning. Analyzing the ***nature*** of semantic change we seek to clarify the *process* of this change and describe *how* various changes of meaning were brought about. Our ***aim*** in investigating the ***results*** of semantic change is to find out *what* was changed; that is we compare the resultant and the original meanings and describe the *difference* between them mainly in terms of the changes in the denotational and connotational components of lexical meaning. By the analysis of the nature and the results of semantic change we can reveal the ***types*** of semantic change.

Questions for discussion

1. Define morphemic structure of the word
2. The role of morphological motivation in word building
3. What does the term phonetic motivation mean? Give examples
4. What is "a tweeter"? Give examples
5. What is the relation between semantic and phonetic motivations?

References

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