METONYMICAL PROCESSES IN SEMANTIC CHANGE

Iraide Ibarreche

Department of Linguistics, University of Edinburgh

40 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LL

ABSTRACT

For a long time, semantic change was considered an irregular, whimsical and random phenomenon. The creation of general rules that could explain how and why these changes took place was thought to be impossible (Hock 1986:308).

Fortunately, in recent years, researches have proven this belief to be wrong: word meaning is not chaotic, but a unified entity with its own structure.

Among different approaches, Sweetser (1990) proposed that semantic change is unidirectional from a concrete source domain to an abstract target domain, and that these domains are linked by means of metaphor.

In this paper, it will be argued that metaphors are not the only processes present in the interrelations among domains, but that before them, metonymical processes take place. From a set of prototypical features that define the concrete source domain, only some are metonymically selected in the extended meanings. Then, these meanings undergo metaphorical processes.

This study is focused on the verbs of the sense of touch. Data from Basque, Spanish and English will be drawn in order to support these claims.

INTRODUCTION

Based on the cognitive semantic idea that our experience and knowledge of the world model how we understand language and thought, how we express ourselves, Eve Sweetser (1990) claims that the paths of semantic change are unidirectional: from the external (sociophysical) domain to our internal (emotional, psychological) domain; that is to say, from a concrete source domain to an abstract target domain. These domains are linked by a systematic metaphorical structuring, which appears to be a cross-linguistic rather than a language specific phenomenon.

In the case of perception verbs, it seems that these metaphorical mappings take place between two domains: the vocabulary of physical perception (concrete source domain) and the vocabulary of internal self and sensations (abstract target domain).

This analysis offers us an explanation of how concrete meanings shift onto abstract metaphorical meanings; however, abstract meanings are not the only extended senses that can be found in the different meanings that these verbs of perception, and in this concrete case: the verbs of touch, can lexicalise. Some of these extended meanings are still physical, but nevertheless, a semantic change has also taken place in these cases. Some other processes, apart from those metaphorical ones proposed by Sweetser, should be present in order to explain these changes. In this paper, it is proposed that those other processes are metonymical: the first prototypical physical meaning is characterised by some features; and from these features only some are passed onto the extended meanings.

THE SENSE OF TOUCH

When we think of the verb *touch*, of the action of touching, what comes first to our mind is the contact that we experience with the thing we touch. Then, for there to be some contact, a closeness should be implied, if we touch something with some part of our body, it is because it is close to us; otherwise, we would not be able to touch it. Another feature is the nature of the touching; usually, it is something superficial, brief touch. When we touch something, we are in a way, invading the space of that thing/person we are touching. Everything, every person has limits, some space which only belongs to them; when two things touch, it is because their spaces are put together, converge; however, neither of them can trespass those limits that the other person/thing has. This is quite complicated to explain. Perhaps, the illustrations below can help to understand it:

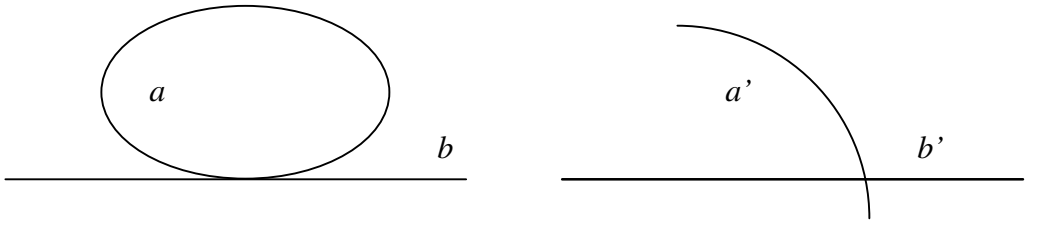


Figure 1: *a* touches *b* Figure 1': *a'* cuts *b'*

In Figure 1, there are an ellipse *a* and a straight line *b*, *a* touches *b* but it does not cut it as in Figure 1'. When *a* meets *b*, *a* finds its end, if *a* would go further, *a* would not touch *b* but cut *b*. As the OED explains in this case: 'to meet (another line or surface) at a point so that when produced it does not (ordinarily) intersect or 'cut' it at that point; to be tangent to'.

Finally, the other thing that we can think of, is the effects that the touching has. It might not cause any effect on the thing touched, or on the contrary, it can change something, affect the person/object that has been touched.

All these characteristics are present in the physical touch. If we accept that semantic changes take place from the concrete/physical domain to an abstract domain, it can be said that these characteristics are the first features that the sense of touch had, before extending its meanings to a wider scope; therefore, I will call these characteristics **prototypical features** as they are the features of the first prototypical meaning of the sense of touch[1].

The prototypical features that we have defined so far are:

- CONTACT → CLOSENESS (as an entailment of CONTACT)
- LIGHTNESS/BRIEFNESS
- LIMITS
- EFFECTS

These prototypical features are present in all the meanings that the verbs of touch lexicalise. However, not all of them are present at the same time.

Table 1 is a summary of the main meanings that the sense of touch has in the three languages of the sample, together with their features:

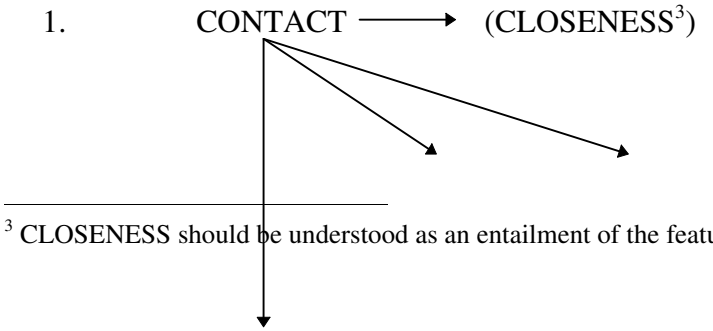
Meanings	Basque	Spanish	English	Feature
1. Physical contact	+	+	+	PROTOTYPE
2. Be adjacent	+	+	+	CONTACT[2] CLOSENESS LIMITS
3. Partake eat or drink	+	+	+	CONTACT

[1] All these ideas about prototypicality are based on Eleanor Rosch's (1978) work on categorisation and prototypes.
[2] CONTACT is not always required in this case.

				CLOSENESS BRIEFNESS
4. Refer	+	+	+	CONTACT CLOSENESS
5. Affect	+	+	+	CONTACT CLOSENESS EFFECT
6. Deal with (superficially)	+	+	+	CONTACT CLOSENESS BRIEFNESS
7. Know by experience	+	+		CONTACT CLOSENESS
8. Correspond,concern	+	+	+	CONTACT CLOSENESS
9. Reach	+	+	+	CONTACT CLOSENESS LIMITS
10. Estimulate, persuade		+		CONTACT CLOSENESS EFFECT
11. Get involved	+	+	+	CONTACT CLOSENESS

Table 1: Feature characterisation of the main meanings of the sense of touch

As it can be seen in Table 1, the four prototypical features defined above are not present at the same time in any of the meanings, except in the first prototypical meaning: 'physical contact'. These features are not equally important either and therefore, they can be hierarchically organised as in Figure 2:



[3] CLOSENESS should be understood as an entailment of the feature CONTACT.

2. EFFECTS LIMITS

3. BRIEFNESS

Figure 2: Hierarchical organisation of prototypical features in touch.

METONYMICAL AND METAPHORICAL PROCESSES

The fact that not all prototypical features are present at all times seems to indicate that in the extension of meaning, metonymical processes have taken place: some parts of the original meaning are present, whereas others are not.

If this metonymical explanation is accepted then, we can explain the extension of meaning in Table 1, from 1. 'physical contact' to 2. 'be adjacent' as in (1).

(1) The two buildings almost *touch*.

This change of meaning does not only occur in English. Similar examples can be found in the other two languages of the sample, Basque (2) and Spanish (3):

(2) Mahaiak horma *ukitzen* du
table.ERG wall touch TRANS:3SG.PRES
'The table touches the wall'

(3) La mesa está *tocando* la pared
the table is touching the wall
'The table touches the wall'

It has been said before that semantic change takes place between the concrete domain and the abstract domain. However, in meaning 2., although a semantic shift has taken place, it has not been between these two domains, but within the physical domain. The only way this extension can be explained is through metonymy as in Figure 3:

Prototypical physical meanings	→	Metonymical physical meaning
• CONTACT →(CLOSENESS)		• CONTACT →(CLOSENESS)

- EFFECTS
- LIMITS
- BRIEFNESS

- LIMITS

Metonymy

Figure 3: Metonymical processes in ‘be adjacent’.

Now, what happens in the other cognitive meanings, where the change is indeed from concrete to abstract?

Sweetser (1990) claims that the link between these two domains is metaphor. I agree on this point, but before metaphor comes into action, there have been metonymical processes.

My hypothesis is that from the original prototypical meaning (i.e. the four prototypical features), through metonymy, there is a selection of features, and then, through metaphor, these selected features acquired their abstract status.

For example, in the case of the meaning 5. ‘affect’.

(4) Blackfly *touched* the flowers

(5) He *touched* me very deeply

In (4), what it is said is that this insect actually touched the flowers and as this insect is bad for them, the flowers were affected. The prototypical features in (4) are CONTACT (hence, CLOSENESS) and EFFECT. The blackfly had physical contact with the flowers and had a (negative) effect on them.

On the other hand, in (5), these same prototypical features: CONTACT, CLOSENESS and EFFECT are implied, but there is a difference. There is CONTACT but it is not physical. Nobody can physically touch anyone very deeply. In (5), another step has been taken: metaphor.

Therefore, in (4) there is only metonymy, whereas in (5), there is metonymy and metaphor. These processes are represented in Figure 4:

Prototypical physical meaning	→	Metonymical physical meaning	→	Metonymical, metaphorical abstract meaning
• CONTACT →(CLOSENESS)		• CONTACT →(CLOSENESS)		• CONTACT →(CLOSENESS)

- BRIEFNESS
- LIMITS
- EFFECTS

- EFFECTS

- EFFECTS

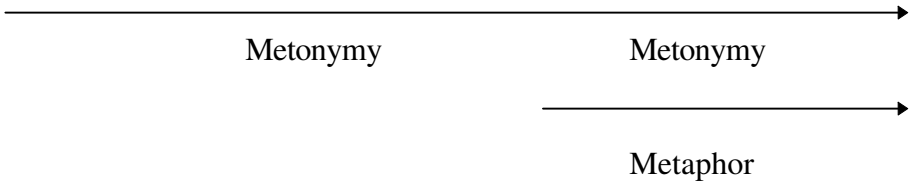


Figure 4: Metonymical and metaphorical processes in 'affect'

As we have seen in the previous case with the meaning 'be adjacent', this same procedure is also present in the other two languages of the data. For instance, in Basque:

(6) Nork ukitu nau, nork *ukitu* ditu nire soinekoak?
who.ERG touch TRANS:SUBJ.3SG:DO.1SGPRES who.ERG touch TRANS:3SG.PRES my dresses
'Who touched me, who touched my dresses?'

In this first example (6), we have the meaning 'affect', but in its physical sense, where only metonymical processes are involved (cf. English (4)). In this case, the verb *ukitu* is used twice. In the former, its meaning is the actual physical touching, we are asking about the person who has touched us. The latter is the one that interests us. The meaning of *ukitu* here is not that somebody has touched the dresses but that somebody has changed the position of those dresses, and hence that somebody has affected the state of the dresses.

(7) Hitz hoiek sakon *ukitu* naute
word those.ERG deep touch TRANS:SUBJ.3PL:DO.1SG:PRES
'Those words touched me very deeply'

In (7), there are metonymical as well as metaphorical processes involved, as 'affect' now is a metaphorical, hence abstract, extended meaning (cf. English (5)).

The same statements can be made about Spanish:

(8) ¿Quién ha *tocado* mis vestidos?
who has touched my dresses
'Who touched my dresses?'

This is the same case as (4) and (6) above: a physical contact which affects the object of the sentence.

(9) Sus palabras me *tocaron* profundamente
his words me touched deeply
'His words touched me very deeply'

Again, (9) is the metaphorical extended meaning (cf. (5) and (7)).

This further supports the idea that both these processes, metonymical and metaphorical, are cross-linguistic phenomena.

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the results, it can be concluded that:

- Metonymical processes occur prior to metaphorical ones
- Metonymical processes are necessary for:
  - The explanation of extended physical meanings.
  - A hierarchical organisation of features, which would facilitate the comparison of meanings among different senses and within the extended meanings of each sense.
- Metonymical processes, as well as metaphorical processes were, are a cross-linguistic phenomenon.

REFERENCES

AULESTIA, G. eta L. WHITE. (1992) *Euskara Ingelesa-Ingelesa Euskara Hiztegia*. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press.

AZKUE, R.M. (1905) *Diccionario Vasco-Español-Francés I-II*. Bilbao

Collins Spanish-English. English-Spanish Dictionary. Unabridged (1996) Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers. (4th)

Diccionario Retana de Autoridades del Euskera. Biblioteca de la Gran Enciclopedia Vasca. (1976) Bilbao

Diccionario 3000 Hiztegia. Adorez 7 (1996) Bilbo: Bostak Bat.

Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española (2 vols.) (1984) Madrid: RAE

Elhuyar euskara-gaztelania/castellano-vasco hiztegia (1996) Usurbil: Elhuyar Kultur Elkartea.

HOCK, H. H. (1986) *Principles of Historical Linguistics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

MICHELENA, L. (1987-) *Diccionario General Vasco. Orotariko Euskal Hiztegia*. Bilbao: Euskaltzaindia.

Oxford English Dictionary (1986) Oxford: Oxford University Press. (OED)

ROSCH, E. (1978) 'Principles of categorization'. In E. Rosch and B. B. Lloyd (eds.) *Cognition and categorization*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, pp. 1-49.

SARASOLA, IBON (1984-95) *Hauta-lanerako Euskal Hiztegia*. Zarauz: Itxaropena.

SWEETSER, E. (1990) From Etymology to Pragmatics. Cambridge:CUP

The American Heritage Dictionary (1992) Houghton Mifflin Company. 3rd Edition