

LECTURE 6

CHANGE OF WORD- MEANING

- Main gradual semantic changes (specialization and generalization).
- Main momentary conscious semantic changes (metaphor and metonymy).
- Secondary gradual semantic changes (elevation and degradation).
- Secondary momentary conscious semantic changes (hyperbole and litotes).

Causes of meaning development can be

1) historical (extra-linguistic)

e.g. *Carriage* had the meaning 'a vehicle drawn by horses'.

This word was used to indicate 'a railway car' when railways appeared in England. It preserves both meanings now.

2) linguistic

e.g. There was a word *stëorfan* in Old English which meant 'to perish'. Later the word to die was borrowed from the Scandinavian. These synonyms, very close in their meaning, collided. Now the word to starve means 'to die or suffer from hunger'.

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main ways of semantic changes

secondary ways of semantic changes

gradual

momentary

gradual

momentary

specialization

metaphor

elevation

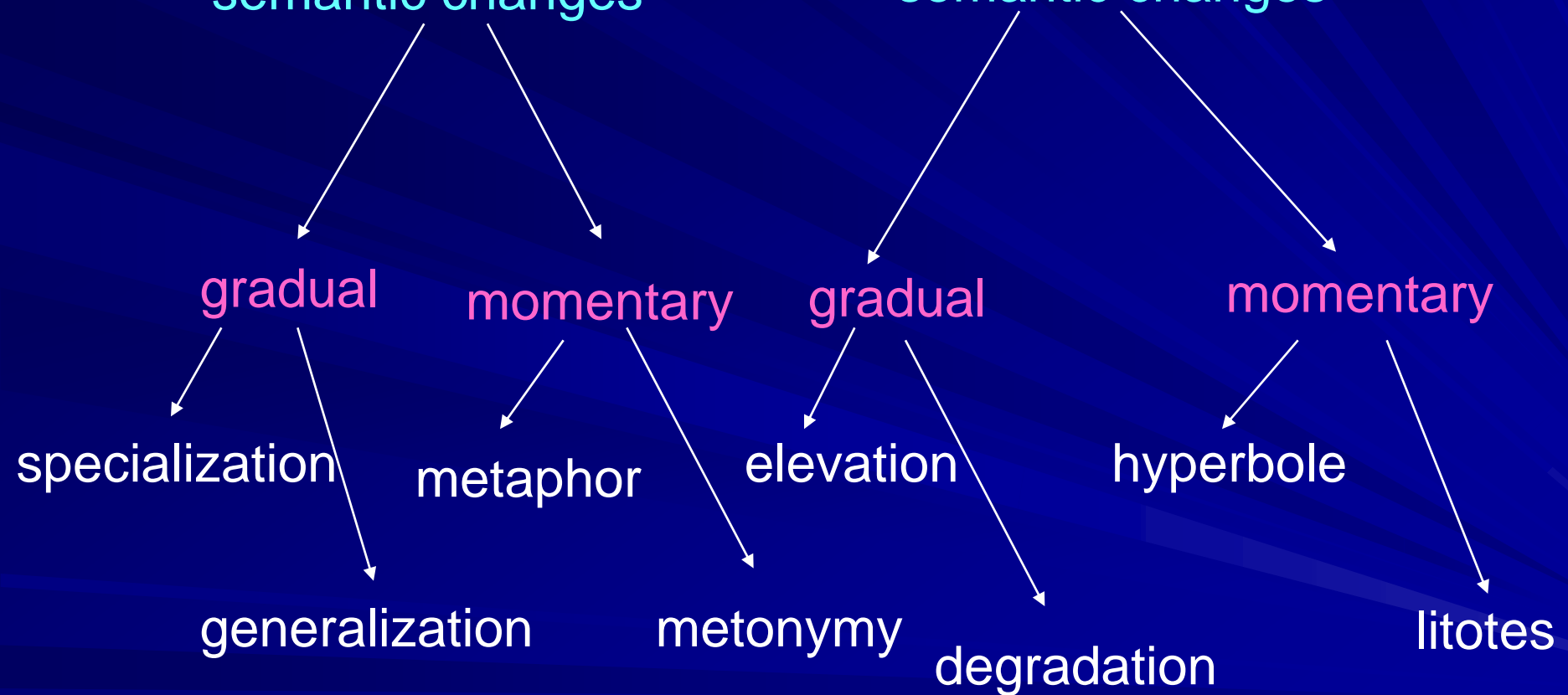
hyperbole

generalization

metonymy

degradation

litotes



SPECIALIZATION OF MEANING

■ from a general sphere to some special sphere of communication

e.g. «case» has a general meaning
'circumstances in which a person or a thing is'

It is specialized in its meaning when used

- in law (a law suit),
- in grammar (a form in the paradigm of a noun),
- in medicine (a patient, an illness).

■ when it remains in the general usage

e.g. the native word «meat» had the meaning «food», this meaning is preserved in the compound «sweetmeats».

The meaning «edible flesh» was formed when the word «food», its absolute synonym, won in the conflict of absolute synonyms (both words are native).

■ the formation of Proper names from common nouns

e.g. the City – the business part of London,
Oxford – university town in England,
the Tower – originally a fortress and
palace, later – a prison, now – a museum.

■ ellipsis

e.g. «room» originally meant «space», this meaning is retained in the adjective «roomy» and word combinations: «no room for», «to take room», «to take no room».

The meaning of the word *room* was specialized because it was often used in the combinations: «dining room», «sleeping room» which meant «space for dining», «space for sleeping».

GENERALIZATION OF MEANING

It is a process contrary to specialization, in such cases the meaning of a word becomes more general in the course of time.

e.g. «ready» (a derivative from the verb «ridan» - «ride») meant «prepared for a ride», now its meaning is «prepared for anything».

«Journey» was borrowed from French with the meaning «one day trip», now it means «a trip of any duration».

METAPHOR

It is a transfer of the meaning on the basis of comparison.

different types of similarity:

- **similarity of shape**, e.g. *head* (of a cabbage), *bottleneck*, *teeth* (of a saw, a comb);
- **similarity of position**, e.g. *foot* (of a page, of a mountain), *head* (of a procession);
- **similarity of function**, behaviour e.g. *a whip* (an official in the British Parliament whose duty is to see that members were present at the voting);

- In some cases we have a **complex similarity**, e.g. *the leg of a table* has a similarity to a human leg in its shape, position and function.
- Many metaphors are based on **parts of a human body**, e.g. *an eye of a needle, arms and mouth of a river, head of an army*.
- A special type of metaphor is when **Proper names become common nouns**, e.g. *vandals* - destructive people, *a Don Juan* – a lover of many women etc.

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METONYMY

It is a transfer of the meaning on the basis of contiguity.

Different types of metonymy:

- the material of which an object is made may become the name of the object , e.g. *a glass, boards, iron* etc;
- the name of the place may become the name of the people or of an object placed there, e.g. *the House* – members of Parliament, *Fleet Street* – bourgeois press, *the White House* – the Administration of the USA etc;
- names of musical instruments may become names of musicians, e.g. *the violin, the saxophone*;

■ the name of some person may become a common noun

e.g. *boycott* was originally the name of an Irish family, *sandwich* was named after Lord Sandwich who was a gambler.

■ names of inventors very often become terms to denote things they invented

e.g. *watt*, *ohm*, *roentgen* etc

■ some geographical names can also become common nouns through metonymy

e.g. *holland* (linen fabrics), *Brussels* (a special kind of carpets), *china* (porcelain), *astrachan* (a sheep fur) etc.

ELEVATION OF MEANING

It is a transfer of the meaning when it becomes better in the course of time

e.g. *knight* originally meant ‘a boy’ → ‘a young servant’, → ‘a military servant’, → ‘a noble man’.
Now → a title of nobility given to outstanding people;

marshal originally meant ‘a horse man’ now → the highest military rank etc.

DEGRADATION OF MEANING

It is a transfer of the meaning when it becomes worse in the course of time.

It is usually connected with nouns denoting common people

e.g. '*villain*' originally meant 'working on a villa' now it means 'a scoundrel'.

HYPERBOLE

It is a transfer of the meaning when the speaker uses exaggeration.

e.g. to hate (doing something), (not to see somebody) *for ages*.

Hyperbole is often used to form phraseological units

e.g. to make a mountain out of a molehill, to split hairs etc.

LITOTES

It is a transfer of the meaning when the speaker expresses affirmative with the negative or vice versa.

e.g. *not bad, no coward* etc.

Suggested literature:

- Antrushina G. B. et al. English Lexicology. M., 1999. – Pp. 147-166.
- Arbekova T. I. English Lexicology. M., 1977. – Pp. 71-80.