

Bianca Kossmann
(University of Freiburg i.Brsg.)

Systematic social causes for semantic changes? A corpus-based critique of Hughes (1988, 2000)

Abstract

Recent research on semantic and lexical change has generally pursued two directions in order to identify the systematic causes underlying the complex and apparently disconnected surface phenomena. Cognitive linguists (e.g. Traugott 2002, Sweetser 1990) have proposed important crosslinguistic tendencies grounded in human cognitive preferences (e.g. space → time, perception → cognition), while work such as Hughes (1988, 2000) has sought to establish systematic correlations between socio-cultural developments, such as the spread of a money-based economy, and the development of the English vocabulary. While generally sympathising with the latter approach, I nevertheless think that it could be greatly improved if the focus was not merely on ‘dictionary definitions and lexicographical locations in time’ (Hughes 1988: 26) but also included extensive corpus-based research on collocations and contexts of usage. Such research is now possible, for example on the basis of the quotation base of the computerised OED and other digitised historical corpora of English. My ultimate aim is to find out whether the socio-cultural and cognitive approaches can be integrated.

References:

Hughes, Geoffrey (1988), *Words in Time: a social history of English vocabulary*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Hughes, Geoffrey (2000), *A history of English words*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Sweetser, Eve (1990), *From Etymology to Pragmatics. Metaphorical and cultural aspects of semantic structure*, Cambridge: CUP.

Traugott, Elizabeth Closs & Richard B. Dasher (2002). *Regularity in Semantic change*. Cambridge: CUP.