

A Comparative Study of the Semantic Transfer by Kurdish Learners of English Language

Alaa Younis Mohammad

Salahaddin University/ Erbil
alaa.mohammad@su.edu.krd

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Abstract

Semantic transfer, or sometimes semantic change, occurs when a word drops its old meaning and comes to refer to something different. This results in a change in a word's meaning. The changes in meaning are usually gradual. Many words in both languages, English and Kurdish, have gone through semantic transfer, whether the change is an extension or narrowing of the original meaning of them. This paper compares a set of words in the two languages in terms of their semantically transferred sense of the original meaning they used to convey. Those words are sometimes used interchangeably by the Kurdish students as a result of language interference between their first language which is Kurdish, and English which is the target language of their learning.

Keywords: Second Language Learning, Semantic change, Semantic transfer.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word semantics denotes the study of meaning. It has two types: logical and lexical. Logical semantics is the study of reference (the symbolic relationship between language and real-world objects) and implication (the relationship between two sentences). Lexical semantics is the investigation of the meaning of a word (StudySmarter.de, n.d.). Language is continuously changing. Words change their meaning over time and this process is known as semantic change. This study is done to show the similarities and differences between the two languages, English and Kurdish, Concerning the Semantic Transfer (ST) or the semantic change. It also aims at helping us as teachers of English language, advance our understanding of L2 vocabulary acquisition in many ways. Furthermore, there is a general agreement today that vocabulary acquisition is at least as important as syntax acquisition in studying L2 acquisition. It is important that the learners of English become aware of the different meaning a word has and had in the past and compare

them to those in their mother tongue to avoid some kinds of errors related to language interference.

This paper gives the readers an idea regarding how much the language users know about the multiple meanings of the same word. Another aspect of the study is to find out whether semantic change affects the comprehension of literature containing the words which went through semantic change. This study could be beneficial especially to teachers of English who teach non-native speakers of English to help them understand the odd usage of some words and structures that might have originated from the ST in the students' mother language which is Kurdish.

The present study hypothesises that semantic change occurs similarly, in both languages, in terms of the way the meanings and senses of words have been developed over time, whether the change is an extension, narrowing, metaphor, or any other type of ST, to give similarly new senses of the original meanings of them. It also hypothesizes that the similarities between the ST in the two languages are more than the differences.

2. METHODOLOGY:

1. Presenting a review of the relevant literature.
2. Discussing some theoretical issues related to the study.
3. Presenting some of the English words that have gone through semantic transfer over time, depending on the literature available on the subject matter.
4. Presenting some of the Kurdish words that have gone through semantic transfer over time, and it is important to note that probably this is the first paper to deal with the semantic transfer in Kurdish language and so, all the examples given in the paper on semantic change in Kurdish language are from the researcher's diligence since this language, (Kurdish, and more specifically, the Badini Dialect), is her mother tongue, due to the lack of references that deal with this field of study in this language.
5. Adopting a qualitative approach in gaining the data.
6. Comparing the semantic transfer of words and expressions in English and Kurdish.
7. Concluding the main points related to the study.

3. THEORIES OF SEMANTIC TRANSFER:

In this paper, light is shed upon the theories of three scholars who were interested in semantic transfer the first one of them is Antoine Meillet (1906), particular attention on three scholars whose interest was semantic change: Antoine Meillet (1906), Gustaf Stern who made a study of semantic change in 1931, and the last one is Stephen Ullmann (1951) who is the latest one among the three to investigate in the area matters. Those three are considered to be the leading modern researchers of language change.

3.1 THE MEILLET MODEL

Meillet divided the causes of sense change into three main ones. He emphasized that within each of these areas, there were multi-directional forces working together and against each other resulting in sense change. He makes clear the difficulty of the problem when he states:

“...often - and perhaps most often - it is impossible to determine the causes of a particular change in meaning ...” (Meillet 1905-6:5 as cited in (Riddell, 1979)), Yet he says that it is possible to isolate general causes of sense-change and presents his three groups in the following order:

1. Primarily linguistic causes. (Semantic content has shifted)
2. Changes in the form of the referent during a period of years (he suggests that a large number of vocabulary is affected by sense relation but the affect can only be noticed when some unusual relations of ideas are made).
3. The contact between different social layers and the lexical borrowing which results.

3.2 STERN'S EMPIRICAL SYSTEM

Stern described an essential difference between change and fluctuation. He paid attention mainly to the psychological processes involved in semantic change. He mentions an example of how the word “Kodak” and how differently it is comprehended by two persons: camera expert and the ordinary home photographer the first one would have the image of a machine which has an complicated series of processes and mechanisms crossing his mind, while to the second person it is just an instrument for recording a visual scene (Riddell, 1979). Hence Stern does not consider this as a sense change, but only a fluctuation. He says that fluctuations in the apprehension of the referent, in occasional specialization and in the factual variations of the referent, and stresses that these must be distinguished from genuine changes of meaning.

Stern understands meaning as being a three-sided notion with each angle of it being a necessary factor for completing the meaning. Meaning depends on its relation to the referent, the subject (speaker or hearer) and the word itself, these relationships being called the referential, subjective and verbal relations respectively. If one of the relations changes, then there is a matching difference in the other two relations.

Stern mentions an example to change in semantic content of the word, which is “bead”. He says that the word originally meant "prayer" in an expression such as "she is counting her beads on the rosary". As people were praying, they counted off one of the little balls on the rosary, and so that the sense of "bead" meaning "prayer" is lost. Although the change has happened to the sense of the word "bead", the expression "to count one's beads" still sufficiently signifies the concept of counting the rosary.

3.3 ULLMANN'S FUNCTIONAL CLASSIFICATION

The third theory is presented by Stephen Ullmann (1951), which is planned as a much more complete system than the Meillet model. He presented the following basic system of the Functional Classification.

- A. Semantic changes due to linguistic conservatism;
- B. Semantic changes due to linguistic innovation;
 - I. Transfers of names:
 - a) Through similarity between the senses
 - b) Through contiguity between the senses
 - II. Transfers of senses:
 - a) Through similarity between the names
 - b) Through contiguity between the names
 - III. Composite changes.

4. DISCUSSION

The following section is the comparison between the types of semantic transfer in English and in Kurdish, and examples are given to each type of them in both languages.

TYPES OF SEMANTIC TRANSFER/ CHANGE IN ENGLISH

In this paper, five types of semantic transfer are presented that are the most common and obvious ones among the other types that are less happening over time.

BROADENING, WIDENING OR GENERALIZATION

Broadening occurs when the meaning of a word changes to become more generalized over time. For example Nowadays word: cupboard originally meant a table upon which cups or vessels were placed, a piece of furniture to display plates became over time a 'closet or cabin with shelves for the keeping cups and dishes', presently means a small storage cabinet.

NARROWING

Narrowing is a semantic process in which a word starts to give a more specified meaning than it used to in the earlier times of its usage. For example:

The word: girl was in Middle English 'child or young person of either sex', now has become 'female child, young woman'

ELEVATION /AMELIORATION

Are the shifts in the sense of a word that makes the word feel or have a more positive value in the minds of the users. Such as:

Nowadays word: knight 'mounted warrior serving a king' 'lesser nobility' was in Old English cniht 'boy, servant', 'servant', or 'military servant'

DEGENERATION / PEJORATION

The sense of a word becomes a less positive, more negative in the minds of the users such as:

Nowadays word: silly 'foolish, stupid' in Middle English: sely 'happy, innocent. Old English sælig "blessed, blissful'.

Nowadays word: rude, according to undergraduate students at Lancaster University, they suggest that the exact meaning is something like 'physically attractive (often in a slightly vulgar way)'. It actually seems to be applied especially to females, as in *She's rude* or — using the currently fashionable intensifier *well* — *She's well rude* (Hollmann, 2007).

METAPHOR

This type of semantic transfer includes relationship of apparent likeness such as:

The word root (of plant): root of plant, can refer also to the root of word, root in algebra, source, etc.

TYPES OF SEMANTIC TRANSFER/ CHANGE IN KURDISH

BROADENING, WIDENING OR GENERALIZATION

Some of the Kurdish words after the arrival of technology have gone through widening in meaning. They now give other meanings used in software language. The first would also refer to the asterisk sign on the dialing pad in phones, while the second started to refer to the windows being opened and closed in computer system much similarly as the case in English language regarding the latter one.

NARROWING

The most obvious word in Kurdish language that has been narrowed is probably the word *كراس*, which was used generally in the past to refer to feminine gown as well as the shirt put on by men. Nowadays *كراس*, can no longer refer to a masculine outfit, or at least is very rarely used by the older people. It now refers to the traditional Kurdish feminine dress that is specific and doesn't include other types or options for the sense of the word.

ELEVATION / AMELIORATION

The Kurdish word *ئیس*, which means bad, dirty, or filthy, has started to give a more positive and favorable meaning amongst the younger generation in the Badini dialect. In the expressions: *زورا ئیسه*, *زوری ئیسه*, mean something like: he is so/ she is so (respectively) funny, humorous, or even spontaneous person who says everything that crosses their mind even if it is an embarrassing thing to say. So a pure negative word in the past has gained a more positive sense.

DEGENERATION / PEJORATION

The example in Kurdish language to this type of semantic transfer is probably considered that it is more an opinion than a change in the meaning. Nevertheless, it still used to belittle a person that may not be very well educated and cultivated, which is *طوندي*, it may also refer to a lifestyle that is too primitive or old fashioned.

METAPHOR

The metaphors are used widely amongst the Kurdish language users. Perhaps the most famous one is *خاك*, originally means 'soil' is used to refer to ones homeland or country.

5. RESULTS

This study has reached the following conclusions:

1. Although these two languages, English and Kurdish, seem to have many differences in terms of semantic change, yet they share many similarities concerning the way words change over the passage of time.
2. In both languages, there are words that have gone through semantic transfer/ change including all the types of the change. Although the same corresponding words in the two languages may not undergo the same type of the change during a similar period of time, yet they still are considered to be more similar than different.
3. The Kurdish language, unfortunately, has less recorded examples of semantic change in the references related to this field of study.
4. Finally, the study shows that there are semantically transferred words in English that don't have equal Kurdish correspondents. On the other hand, the Kurdish language also contains some words and expressions that don't seem to have equal English correspondents.

The above conclusions and findings prove the study's hypotheses which have been put by the researcher.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The study has come out with recommendations below which might be useful to academics and scholars in the field of lexical semantics:

1. Words and expressions in English carry more than the meaning that are found in the traditional literary texts, books, or dictionaries; and so, students need to be very careful when using them.
2. Translators and interpreters should be careful when translating terms and expressions since they give different meanings according to different cultures and dialects to avoid misunderstanding and embarrassing situations when communicating with native speakers, so they need to keep their target language updated by learning through up-to-date resources and learning channels.

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ئوختە

طۇراني و اتاسازي روودەتات كاتيك كە وشەيتيك و اتايەكي نوي دەتات كە جياوازة لەو و اتايەي كە لە بنەرەنتتدا كوزارشتي ليوودەكرد. كە ئەمەش دەببەتە ئەطەري طۇريني و اتاي وشەكە. طۇراني و اتاسازي لەقناكاو روونادات, بەلكو بەهياوشي روودەتات بەتتەشەربووني ضەتدين سال. هەردوو زمانى ئينكليزي و كوردي ضەتدەها وشە لەخو دەطرنەتو كە طۇراني و اتاسازيان بەسەرەتووە, جا طۇرانەكە زياتر طشتطيربوون بێت لە و اتاي وشەكە يان تەسك و تايەتتوون. ئەم تويدينەتووە كۆمەلەك حالىتەي طۇراني و اتاسازي لە هەردوو زماندا بەراورد دەكات بۆ كۆمەلەك وشەكە طۇراني و اتايان بەسەر هاتووە. ئەم وشانە هەندىك جار بە شيوەتەكي نالوطورتيكراو بەكاردين لەلايەن فيرخوازة كورەكانى زمانى ئينكليزي كەبە هوي نيكەلكيشبووني هەردوو زمانى كوردي, كەزمانى داىكە, و زمانى ئينطليزي كە تارطيتي فيربوونيانە.

الملخص

يحدث التحول الدلالي ، أو أحياناً التغيير الدلالي ، عندما تتخلى المفردة عن دلالتها أو معناها القديم وتستخدم للإشارة إلى معنى مختلف. ينتج عن هذا تغيير في معنى المفردة. عادة ما تكون التغييرات الدلالية تدريجية. العديد من المفردات في اللغتين الإنكليزية والكردية مرت بعملية النقل الدلالي ، سواء كان التغيير تعميماً (توسعا) أو تضييقاً (تخصيصاً) للمعنى الأصلي لها. هذا البحث يقارن مجموعة من الكلمات باللغتين الإنكليزية والكردية من حيث التغيير الدلالي و التحول عن المعنى الاساسي للمفردات. يتم استخدام هذه الكلمات أحياناً بشكل متبادل من قبل الطلاب الكورد نتيجة التداخل اللغوي بين لغتهم الأولى وهي اللغة الكردية واللغة الإنكليزية التي هي اللغة التي يدرسونها.