

Implications between semantic and derivational patterns in etymology

I propose the idea that a semantic change reconstruction should be based not only on the semantic universals, i. e. the attested patterns of how lexical semantics can possibly change in the history of known languages, but also (when possible) on finding implications between the pattern of the semantic change (the semantic model) and the derivational model of the word.

In spite of the fact that phonology has been the core of the comparative method and etymology, phonological change can also be elusive and difficult to identify. When recurring phonological correspondences do not match, linguists tend to discard genetic affinity even in the case of semantic identity of the words (cf. Lat. *deus* – Greek θεός, Lat. *habēre* – German *haben*) or interpret one of the compared words as a borrowing from a third language (cf. Lat. *lupus* – Greek λύκος, Lat. *bos* – Greek βοῦς) (Cf. Walde I, 112, 345, 631). However, some comparisons appear to be true even if phonological correspondencies are not impeccable. There are some rare cases in which phonology fails but semantic reconstruction turns to be so convincing that it plays the pivotal role in the etymological explanation. When it comes to the challenge of choosing between two alternative etymological hypotheses, it happens that semantic argumentation can become crucial. A good illustration of this are two etymologies of the word for bride in some Slavic languages: Old Church Slavic *неврѣста*, Polish. *niewiasta* ‘woman’, Serb. невеста etc. (Otkupshikov 2001, 133-139) I suppose that the etymology based on the compositum **newo-wedh-t-ā* ‘a new (woman) led (to the house)’ is more probable than the etymology based on the compositum **ne-woid-t-ā* ‘not known (woman)’ because in Indo-European languages there are many derivatives of the Indo-European root **wedh-* ‘to lead’ building a system of marriage terminology, and it is logical to consider the name for bride to be a natural part of this derivational system. The strongest argument for this etymology, however, is the attestation within the Indo-European languages of similarly built composita with the same root elements and the same meaning, such as Lith. *nauvedà* ‘bride’, Sanskrit *navavadhū* ‘a daughter-in-law’ because the coexistence of the similar composita in the compared languages cannot be accidental and suggests an implication between the usage of this root in the area of marriage and structural similarity of the composita.

Another example of such an implication is the explanation of the Lith. *ragana* ‘witch’ as a denominative noun from *ragas* ‘horn’ (not from the verb *regėti* ‘see’) because in Lithuanian there are no attested deverbative nouns in *-ana* (Otkupshikov 2001, 234-329).

Sometimes an implication between the semantic and the derivational patterns can exclude a borrowing and prove the original character of a word. Thus, the juxtaposition of the Old Church Slavic words *лоуна* ‘moon’, Russian dialectal *лунь* ‘dim light; a bird with white feathers’, a grey-haired old man’, Ukr. *луно* ‘glow’ which belong to different stems and have big differences in their senses makes impossible any idea of borrowing for the Slavic *лоуна* ‘moon’ from the Latin *luna*. (Vasmer II, 69)

In sum, etymological comparison of the words which may be of the same origin must include a search for some kind of implication between their semantic and derivational (and possibly phonological) structures. The three aspects (phonological, derivational and semantic) must not be treated in isolation or with whole prioritizing phonology. The secret of the art of etymology (making the art into science) lies in finding ways to describe the right configuration of the three dimensions of each word using implications in their interplay.

References

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