Lexicon and language change

- Diachronic vs. synchronic linguistics
- Language change
- Comparative method
- Internal reconstruction
- Focus on the lexicon/lexical items → lexical resemblances
- Sound laws

Language change

Outset → Intermediate → Outcome

Creativity → Imitation → Difference

Innovation → Diffusion → Result

The Indo-European language family

Indo-European

1. Centum
2. Satem

Germanic

Celtic

Italic

West

East

North

Latin

Sanskrit

English

German

French

Causes of language change

- Language is 'handed down' from one generation to the next
- All children use the same physiological and cognitive endowment in learning language
- Therefore, the same patterns of change are repeatedly manifested in all languages
- Also: language contact
- Also: 'Cultural' changes (student's presentation)
Lexical change

- addition or loss of words
- often caused by cultural and technological changes that introduce novel objects and notions and eliminate outmoded ones
- filling of lexical gaps
- new words are added through word formation or through borrowing

Examples

- loss of lexical items:
  - Þeox: OE 'hunting spear'
  - lost through cultural change
- addition of lexical items:
  - government, royal...
  - loanwords from French

Semantic change

- word meanings rarely change suddenly
- usually words develop new meanings which are related to previous ones
- these changes take place continually

Types of semantic change

- Change in denotation:
  - generalisation
  - specialisation
- Change in connotation:
  - amelioration
  - pejoration

  • metonymy
  • metaphor
  • grammaticalisation

Semantic broadening

- also referred to as: generalisation, extension
- the meaning of a word becomes more general or more inclusive than its historically earlier form
  - bird: 'small fowl' > 'any feathered vertebrate with a beak'
  - aunt: 'father’s sister’ > father or mother’s sister

Semantic narrowing

- also referred to as: specialisation
- the meaning of a word becomes less general or less inclusive than its historically earlier form
  - hound: 'any dog' > 'a hunting breed'
  - meat: 'any type of food' > 'flesh of an animal'
  - fowl: 'any bird' > 'a domesticated bird'
Amelioration
- also referred to as: ameliorisation
- the meaning of a word becomes more positive or favourable
  - pretty: tricky, sly, cunning > attractive
  - knight: boy > a man of honourable military rank

Pejoration
- also referred to as: deterioration
- the meaning of a word becomes more negative or less favourable
  - silly: happy, prosperous > foolish
  - wench: girl > wanton woman, prostitute

Weakening
- also referred to as: distortion (verbicide)
- the meaning of a word becomes less forceful
  - caused by exaggeration
    - crucify: to kill by nailing to a cross > to cause pain
    - tremendous, monstrous...

Semantic shift
- sometimes total shift of meaning; shift to opposite
- usually: a word loses some aspect of its former meaning, taking on a partially new, but related meaning
  - bead: prayer > prayer bead > bead
  - immoral: not customary > unethical

Metaphor
- figure of speech based on a perceived similarity between distinct objects or actions
- one of the most striking and most important mechanisms of semantic change
- usually involves a word with a concrete meaning taking on a more abstract sense
- the meaning of many English words have been extended through metaphor

Semantic shift
- sometimes a series of semantic shifts occurs over an extended period of time, resulting in a meaning which is (seemingly) completely unrelated to the original sense of the word
Examples: metaphoric extension of meaning

- **grasp**: 'to understand'
- **high**: 'on drugs'
- **down**: 'depressed'
- **sharp**: 'clever, smart'