

# Language variation and change

*Historical linguistics: Lexical change*

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# Lexical change

- a lexeme consists of a sound component and a meaning component
- as we saw, the sound component is apt to change
- so is the meaning component
- additionally, entire lexemes may be lost or added to a language

# Semantic change

- frequent types of changes in word meaning:
  - **broadening:**
    - grm. *Fahrt* + *-ig* → *fertig*
    - original meaning: prepared for a trip
    - now: prepared, finished, exhausted,...
    - grm. *Sache*: original meaning 'legal issue'
    - engl. *ride*: originally 'riding on horseback'

# Semantic change

- frequent types of changes in word meaning:
  - **split:**
    - engl. *gay*, originally 'cheerful', now additional meaning 'male homosexual'
    - *surfen*

# Semantic change

- frequent types of changes in word meaning:
  - **narrowing:**
    - grm. *fahren*: originally: 'all kinds of human travel'
    - grm. *fällen*: originally 'cause to fall', applicable to all kinds of objects (not just trees)

# Semantic change

- frequent types of changes in word meaning:
  - **meaning shift:**
    - *witzig* : 'smart' → 'funny'
    - *billig*: 'appropriate' → 'inexpensive' → 'low quality'
    - *Frau*: 'noble woman, lady' → 'female adult'; *Weib* 'female adult' → derogatory term
  - these are cases of pejoration; shift may also involve amelioration, cf. *marshall* 'staple boy' → 'highest military rank'
  - other frequent subtypes: metaphor, metonymy, implicature, hyperbole, folk etymology

# Semantic change

- meaning change is much less orderly than sound change → harder to reconstruct
- still, there are certain regularities
  - common unidirectional cline
    - 'cup' → 'head' → 'chief'
  - 'something' → 'nothing'
  - verb of movement → directional preposition
  - verbs of possession or movement → auxiliaries
  - ...

# Lexical change

- semantic change may lead to synonymy
- likewise, conventionalization of morphological processes like compounding may lead to synonymy
- synonymy is often unstable
  - either the two lexemes differentiate their meaning, or
  - one of the two lexemes goes extinct



# Lexical change

- German words that are close to extinction:

*abermals, blümerant, etepetete, frohlocken, garstig, hanebüchen, ingrimm, knorke, Labsal, schurigeln, Vetter, Base, Zierrat, ...*

# Lexical change

- sources of new lexemes:
  - semantic change (sometimes in combination with sound change)
  - morphology and syntax
  - shortening of existing words (to be distinguished from sound change); acronyms
  - **borrowing**

# Loanwords

- most conspicuous effect of **language contact**
- may affect large portions of the lexicon of a language (cf. English, Romanian)
- mostly words for cultural concepts, but basic vocabulary may also be affected

engl. *their* ← onrs. *peir*

fin. *tytär* ← est. *tütar*

# Loanwords

- loanwords undergo same sound shifts as inherited words

lat. *tegula* → ohg. *ziegal* → nhg. *Ziegel*

- after sufficient time, loan words are phonologically indistinguishable from inherited words
- major obstacle for identifying genetic relationships between languages

# Language contact

- language contact affects all aspects of a language, not just its lexicon
- example: “Balkan-Sprachbund”
  - Albanian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbian and Greek share several grammatical features even though they belong to different sub-families of Indo-European
  - for instance: article after the noun, no infinitive constructions, periphrastic future with 'want'
- such **areal** phenomena are probably quite common
- may be hard to distinguish from features that indicate common descent

# Areal features

- Some illustrative examples from WALIS
  - <http://wals.info/feature/1A#2/19.3/152.8>
  - <http://wals.info/feature/4A#2/19.3/152.8>
  - <http://wals.info/feature/11A#2/22.6/152.8>
  - <http://wals.info/feature/13A#2/19.3/152.8>
  - <http://wals.info/feature/81A#2/18.0/152.8>