

Directionality in semantic change from Latin to Romance Languages

Urban's semantic associations applied to Latin

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Introduction

My survey starts from the results of a recent study by Matthias Urban (2011) on the directionality of semantic change in inter-linguistic perspective. On the basis of observable regularities in a synchronic sample of 149 languages the author identifies 47 semantic couples in which one element acts as a base (unmarked element) for the lexicalization of the second (marked element) in a process that he names overt marking. To demonstrate how the directionality observed synchronously in overt marking applies also to the diachronic process of semantic change, Urban tests the 47 trends in a work of etymological reconstruction limited to the Indo-Aryan languages. My work consists in the application of the survey method adopted by Urban on the group of Romance languages and is concerned with verifying the existence and the consistency of the semantic changes identified by the scholar, in the transition from Latin to the Romance languages.

Materials and methods

I've tested the directions mapped out by Urban starting from the research of all the Latin lexemes expressing the basic semantic element of the pair. I've then proceeded to search the forms originated in Romance languages from each of these lexemes. Almost all data in the survey were gathered from Mayer-Lübke (REW, *Romanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, ed. 1992); for some entries, not reported by the REW, it was necessary to cross-check with other monolingual etymological and non-etymological dictionaries.

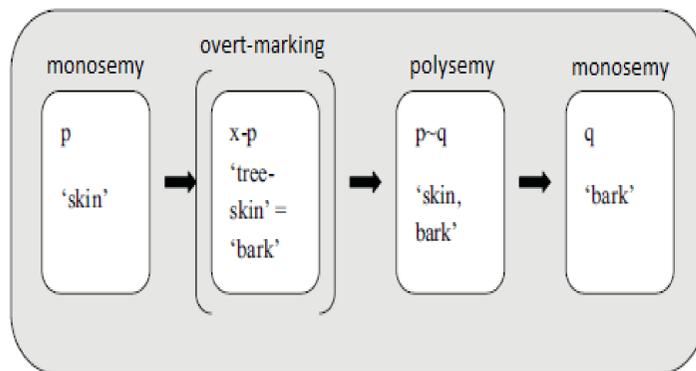
Results

I have identified **8 cases** in which the semantic changes from Latin to Romance languages **coincide perfectly with the direction proposed by Urban**, and other **7 cases of partial overlap** (in which the derived Romance lexeme approaches considerably to the expected target-meaning) or **incomplete overlap** (in which the semantic change has stopped at the stage of overt marking; cfr.: Bearnaise (Gascon spoken in the area of Béarn, Aquitaine): *hidye blā* literally 'white liver' = 'lung'). Almost all of these changes is also found by Urban in his etymological research the Indo-Aryan group; only 4 Romance cases are not comprised in its reconstruction: 3 of them belong to the list with perfect overlap; they are: n°31 belly/stomach > navel (see the catalog of Urban, 2011), n°42 egg > testicle and n°46 bird > airplane; the fourth is liver > lungs for which the Gascon stops at overt marking. To these data must be added other 7 cases of original polysemy, in which Latin already allowed both meanings of the couple or, more often, had already accomplished a semantic evolution. The results collected from Urban are much more consistent: in 24 cases at least one modern Indo-European language has taken on one of the target-meanings of the semantic pairs.

Conclusions

Although the evidences found in the research are inferior to those obtained by Urban, the work can be regarded as a confirmation of validity for the etymological reconstruction method developed by Urban. To explain the minor feedback should be taken into account that the survey was conducted by making use of a single multilingual etymological dictionary dedicated to the entire Romance group: the REW (consulted in the edition of 1992) was completed several times over the course of its editions, proves to be extremely accurate in the citation of even very circumscribed dialects, but little comprehensive in accounting for more recent formations. On the other hand Urban uses a cross comparison between three of the major etymological dictionaries for Indo-Aryan languages (Turner (1966, 1965); Mayrhofer (1986, 1996); Monier-Williams (1899)).

In conclusion, it could be useful to remind the remarks rightly made by Urban himself: the directionality he identified are only trends, based on a statistical survey but not necessary and always valid. Therefore the strategies of lexicalization and semantic change adopted by any language are often idiosyncratic and culturally determined, and it's also quite common to observe two or more closely related languages which have taken completely different directions in the construction of equivalent lexemes.



Semantic change process according to Urban

Semantic association	Number of languages with polysemy	Number of languages with overt marking
'skin' ~ 'bark'	45 Ancash Quechua <i>qara</i>	26 Yuki <i>ʔol šil</i> 'tree skin'

An example from Urban's synchronic sample

Semantic Development	Parent Form	Daughter Form
skin' > 'bark'	Vedic <i>cárman-</i> 'hide, skin'	Ashkun <i>čam</i> 'skin, bark', Bengali <i>cām</i> 'skin, leather, bark'

An example from Urban's diachronic etymologies

Results	Semantic change EXAMPLES	Parent form	Daughter form	References
PERFECT OVERLAP (8 cases)	belly/stomach > navel	<i>větrícūlus</i> 'ventricle, stomach, belly'	Umbrian <i>ventrikkyo</i> 'navel'	REW 9202
PARTIAL OVERLAP (7 cases)	house > nest	<i>casa</i> 'hut' later 'house'	Mallorquí (Catalan) <i>kasera</i> 'beehive'	REW 1728
ORIGINAL LATIN POLYSEMY (7 cases)	mouth > cheek	<i>bucca</i> 'cheek' later 'mouth'	Romanian <i>bucă</i> , Corsican <i>buččedḡa</i> 'cheek'. The other Romance languages developed the latter meaning: <i>bucca</i> > 'mouth'	REW 1357, 2

Three typologies of results from my survey

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