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‘WÖRTER’ > ‘SACHEN’: ОБ ОДНОМ ОДНОНАПРАВЛЕННОМ СЕМАНТИЧЕСКОМ ПЕРЕХОДЕ

Настоящая статья посвящена типологическому исследованию семантического перехода существительных со значением ‘слово’, ‘речь’ и глаголов, обозначающих речевые акты, в существительные со значением ‘вещь’. Свидетельства этого перехода обнаруживаются в различных индоевропейских и семитских языках, а также в таких языках, как японский, хурритский и чатино. Данный семантический переход является односторонним. Значение ‘вещь (материальный предмет)’ может развиваться из ‘слово’, ‘речь’ или из verba dicendi только через значение ‘предмет (сообщения)’. Обсуждаемое семантическое изменение может иметь ареальную природу. Особенно часто оно на древнем Ближнем Востоке.

Ключевые слова: диахроническая семантика, типология семантических переходов, индоевропейские языки, семитские языки.

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‘Wörter’ > ‘Sachen’: a case study of a unidirectional semantic shift

The present paper provides a typological study of the semantic shift from ‘word’ or ‘speech’ and from speech act verbs to nouns with the meaning ‘thing’. The evidence for such a shift was found in various Indo-European and Semitic languages, as well as in Japanese, Hurrian, and Chatino. This semantic shift is unidirectional. The meaning ‘thing (material object)’ can be developed from ‘word’, ‘speech’ or verba dicendi only through the stage ‘matter’. The semantic change in question can have an areal nature. Ancient Near East is an area where it is especially common.

Keywords: diachronic semantics, typology of semantic shifts, Indo-European, Semitic.

1. Introduction

In Goethe’s tragedy, Faust step by step comes to the understanding of λόγος as ‘deed’ instead of commonly accepted ‘word’ rethinking the translation of the Gospel of John. Observations under the natural languages show that similar semantic developments are not uncommon. Lexemes for ‘word / speech’ or some kind of speech act verbs (I will further collectively refer to
them as to a *speech*-domain) often yield such meanings as ‘affair’, ‘deed’, ‘matter’, and finally ‘thing’. The aim of the present paper is to give a typological overview of this somewhat paradoxical semantic shift and to find a reason why it goes exactly in this direction and almost never in the reverse one.

The traditional approach to the typology of semantic shifts was concentrated on the main kinds of changes such as widening, narrowing, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche etc. (see Urban 2015: 374–377). A new trend in this field is represented by empirical-based studies of tendencies or even universals in the semantic development of lexemes within certain semantic domains. Among the most important early studies of this type must be mentioned Nicholas Evans and David Wilkins’ seminal article (2000) which introduces an explanatory model involving the notion of *bridging contexts*.

The appearance of such databases as CLICS (Rzymski et al. 2019) and DatSemShift (Anna Zalizniak et al. 2012) became another milestone. The data for the present study comes mostly from these databases. In the second step of data collection, the material was verified and extended with synchronic dictionaries and corpus examples if available. Unfortunately, the quality of lexicographic descriptions is not always sufficiently high, so in some cases, our knowledge of semantics is limited to brief glosses. Mapping of the semantic field in question must be conducted before the investigation into its diachronic typology. I follow here Alexandre François’ approach (2008) based on colexification patterns. After the clarification of synchronic semantics, etymological analysis was undertaken. I avoid proposing new etymologies and rely on the existing expert views. The direction of the semantic shifts is not always explicated in etymological dictionaries. In most such cases, it can be set based on the distribution of meaning between languages. Explaining why this semantic change is possible and why it goes exactly in this direction I rely on Evans & Wilkins 2000.

The notion of semantic shift (= semantic change) is understood in the present paper in the traditional way, i.e. as a diachronic event. Such understanding was dismissed in the influential Anna Zaliznyak’s database of semantic shifts, where the term *shift* is used for synchronic polysemy, i.e. Zaliznyak treats synchronic polysemy as a particular case of a diachronic change. It seems reasonable to rethink her “types of realization of semantic shifts” (see Zalizniak et al.
2012: 634–635) in the following way. Synchronic polysemy is actually one of the ways the result of changes in meaning can be observed. In rare cases, it can be observed in written sources, sometimes the shift is assumed based on the meaning of cognate words in related languages. The change in semantics can occur by itself or can be accompanied by derivation. If the connection between a primary stem and a derivative disappears one can speak about purely etymological relatedness.

2. Mapping of the semantic field thing

The English word thing is problematic since it covers several semantic slots which can be filled by different lexemes in other languages. The most plausibly distinguishable separate slot is ‘personal things, property, possessions’. For example, Kazym Khanty purməs is used exactly in this meaning whereas ut refers to some unspecified material or abstract objects. Purməs is a common everyday word, not a special legal term. A similar situation is observed in Turkish, where the slot ‘property’ is occupied by eşya, whereas ‘an unspecified material object’ is denoted with nesne. Nesne tends to be limited to material objects. For the reference to abstract notions and situations, the lexeme şey is used (applicable for material objects as well). The meaning ‘situation, deed, (state of) affair’ is clearly different from the meaning ‘an unspecified abstract notion’ (such as love, truth, faith etc.). Probably most languages have some specific words for the former meaning. However, these semantic slots can be distinguished in the scope of more abstract lexemes from thing-domain as well, cf. the following Russian examples, where the use of the word predmet is limited to ‘abstract objects’:

(1) a. ljubov’ èto složnaja vešč’ / složnyj predmet…

    love it complicated thing / complicated thing

    ‘Love is a complicated thing…’

b. tam proizošli strašnyje vešči / *predmety

    there happen terrible things / things

    ‘The terrible things have happened there’

Turkish provides a reason to distinguish one more slot in the thing-domain which can be labeled as ‘matter’, i.e. discussed things
(Turkish *konu*). Summing up, one can subdivide the semantic field *thing* into five slots as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic slot</th>
<th>Typical context</th>
<th>Kazym Khanty</th>
<th>Turkish</th>
<th>Russian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘property’</td>
<td><em>I haven’t touched your things.</em></td>
<td>purmas</td>
<td>eşya</td>
<td>vešč’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘material object’</td>
<td><em>I don’t understand what this thing is used for.</em></td>
<td>ut</td>
<td>nesne şey</td>
<td>vešč’ predmet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘abstract notion’</td>
<td><em>Love is a complicated thing.</em></td>
<td>ut</td>
<td>şey</td>
<td>vešč’ predmet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘(state of) affair’</td>
<td><em>I didn’t know that such a thing had happened.</em></td>
<td>ut</td>
<td>şey</td>
<td>vešč’ predmet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘matter’</td>
<td><em>I don’t want to discuss this thing with you.</em></td>
<td>ut</td>
<td>konu</td>
<td>vešč’ predmet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These slots can be combined into two groups. One of them refers to some substances (‘property’ and ‘material object’) and another one to non-substances (‘abstract notion’, ‘(state of) affair’, ‘matter’). The distinction of the particular meanings inside these groups often is not so clear-cut.

### 3. Evidence for the shift from *speech-domain to thing-domain*

**3.1. Slavic *vektь* and Germanic *wehti-*

Slavic and Germanic demonstrate nominal formations from PIE *wekʷ-* ‘say’ (LIV²: 673). PIE *wekʷ-t-i-* > PGerm. *wehti-* > Goth. waihts ‘thing, entity, matter’, ON vétr ‘being, thing’, OE wiht ‘being, demon, thing’, OSax. wiht ‘something’, OHG wiht ‘being, demon, thing’ (Kroonen 2013: 578); PSlav. *vektь* > Czech věc, Sloven vec, USorb. vječ, Bulg. веčь, OCS veštь (Machek 1968: 680; Georgiev et al. 1971: 140). Russian vešč’ must be treated as a Bulgarian loan due to the šč instead of č < *kt expected in East Slavic (Vasmer 1953: 196). In most of the ancient Germanic languages, the reflex of *wehti-* became a place-holder (frequently used with negation) filling all the slots in the *thing-domain*. Its semantics differs in minor details among the Germanic languages. The Slavic lexemes cover the whole *thing-domain* as well.
Guus Kroonen (2013: 578) suggests PIE *wekʷ-t-i- and devoicing of the palatal guttural in Slavic. Such a solution meets both formal and semantic problems. Firstly, the expected reflex of PIE *kʷ is PSlav. *s. Although some “centum reflexes” are known in Slavic, I see no reason to postulate one more formation with such an irregular development. If the root *wekʷ- suggested by Kroonen had been the same item that the stem *wekʷ- ‘munter, lebhaft, kräftig’ (LIV²: 660-661), it would be difficult to explain the semantic development. The reconstruction *wekʷ-t-i- is unproblematic from the phonological point of view, since PGerm. *ht is a regular reflex of the PIE cluster *kʷt, cf. PIE *nokʷ-t- > PGerm. *naht-_. The semantic shift from a speech act verb to ‘thing’ is quite common as will be seen from further consideration.

3.2. Classical Armenian ban

PIE *bʰeh₂-n-i- > Classical Armenian ban ‘speech, word; Logos; thing; precept, commandment, etc.’. Overview of the contexts in the Biblical corpus shows that it covers predominantly the slot ‘matter’ in the thing-domain. It is also attested with the meaning ‘work, business; thing; subject’ in the modern dialects. The PIE *bʰeh₂- is a well-known root reconstructed based on Gr. φημὶ ‘speak, say’, ORus. bajati ‘talk’, Ved. bhánati ‘speak, sound’ (LIV²: 69). Other notable reflexes of this stem are the Classical Armenian verb bam ‘speak, say’ and dialectal banel ‘to work’ (Martirosyan 2009: 166).

3.3. Tocharian B wántare

PIE *wnd-rwo- > Toch. B wántare ‘thing, affair, happening, object, matter’ (Adams 2013: 643). The lexeme covers all slots in the thing-domain, except for ‘property’. This formation has the following Indo-Iranian comparanda: Skt. vandāru- ‘praising, praise’, Av. duž-uuandru- ‘blaspheming’ (Mayrhofer 1996: 502-503). It should go back further to the PIE *wend- ‘speak (solemnly)’ (LIV²: 681). The connection with Toch. A, B weñ- ‘speak, say, state, tell’ is doubtful as well as the etymology of this verb. This verb can originate either from *wend- (LIV²: 681), or *wekʷ- (LIV²: 673), or *h₂wed(H)- (LIV²: 286), see Adams 2013: 659–660 and Malzahn 2010: 910 for discussion.
3.4. Hittite uttar, Hittite memiya(n)-

These two words are distributed chronologically; uttar is more archaic. As noted in Güterbock et al. 1980: 274, memiya(n)- appears instead of uttar in some younger copies of older texts. Both lexemes refer to non-substances. An indefinite pronoun is typically used for reference to unspecified material objects; the meaning ‘property’ is expressed with aššu-.

PIE *weth₂-r- / *uth₂-en- > Hitt. uttar / uddan- ‘word, speech; thing, case; story; reason’. Here I accept Kloekhorst’s etymology (2008: 933), who assumes this word contains the PIE root *weth₂- ‘say’ (LIV²: 694). It must be noted that alternative solutions suggest the connection with verbs denoting speech acts as well. Eichner (1980: 146 footnote 69) connects this stem with *h₂wedH- (LIV²: 286); Rieken (1999: 301) proposes a relation to an ad hoc reconstructed root *h₁ew- ‘speak’. The cognate word utar ‘word; spell’ is attested in Cuneiform Luvian (Melchert 1993: 247).

Hitt. memiya(n)- is a synchronic derivative from mēma-, the basic verb ‘say’ in New Hittite, cf. Puhvel’s gloss (Puhvel 2004: 126–140): ‘speak, speak of, say, tell, utter, pronounce, mention, declare, report, read aloud, recite; bespeak, promise’, see also Güterbock et al. 1980: 254–263.

3.5. Old High German redina

OHG redina is a synchronic derivative from the verb redinôn ‘say, tell’, cf. also the verb rediôn ‘tell, say, report’ and the noun reda ‘message, story’. These words go back to PGerm. *raþjon-, cf. Goth. raþjo ‘counting, account, explanation, number’, OFris. rethia ‘talk, account’, OSax. rethia ‘talk, account’. The survey of available corpus examples shows that the word is used for ‘matter’ and hardly occurs with the meaning ‘(state of) affair’ outside the context of narration.

3.6. Polish rzecz, Slovene reč

The etymology of Polish rzecz ‘thing’ and Slovene reč ‘thing’ clearly points to the innovative nature of this meaning. The Polish and Slovene words cover the whole thing-domain; in Slovene, it competes with stvar. The nouns represent the lengthened grade of the PSlov. verb *rekći ‘say, speak’ (see LIV²: 506), cf. also the meanings of the Slavic cognates: Czech řeč ‘speech’, Slovak reč ‘speech’, USorb. and LSorb. rěč ‘speech, language’, Ukr. rič
‘thing’, Bel. reč ‘thing’, ORus., OCS rěčь as an equivalent for Gr. ῥῆμα, λόγος, διάνοια, Bulg. reč ‘word’, SCB riječ ‘word’, Slovene reč ‘thing’. Belarusian and Ukrainian forms show the results of the Polish influence. The semantic development in Polish and Slovene must be independent of each other.

3.7. Akkadian amatu

Akkadian amatu is glossed in the following way in (CAD 1968: 29): ‘spoken word, utterance, formula; news, report, message, rumor, secret, interpretation, plan thought; wording, text, content, terms of an agreement’ ‘command, order, decision; legal case, case in court, legal transaction; matter, affair, thing’. Albrecht Goetze (1947: 245) connects this noun to the verb amû and compares it with Ugaritic hwt ‘word’.

3.8. Old Hebrew dāḥār

Old Hebrew dāḥār is a synchronic derivative from the root dbr ‘speak’. The noun demonstrates synchronic polysemy ‘word / matter / thing’ (HALOT: 211). Studied contexts show that it covers predominantly the slots ‘matter’ and ‘(state of) affair’. The polysemy can be nicely illustrated with the example from Gn. 15:1:

(2) ʔahar ha-ddāḥārim ha-ʔelleh hāyāh dāḥār Yahweh
after det-thing det-this come word Yahweh
ʔel-ʔabram ba-mmahzeh
to-Abram in-vision

‘After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision’ (King James’ Bible translation)

3.9. Ge‘ez nagar

Ge‘ez noun nagar is a synchronic derivative from the verb nagara ‘say, tell, speak, talk, relate, recite, proclaim, declare, report, announce, indicate, inform’. The noun is glossed by Wolf Leslau (1987: 392) in the following way: ‘speech, talk, word, language, saying, pronouncement, discourse, statement, thing, affair, subject, account, matter, situation’. He connects the root to Akk. nagāru ‘notify’ and Ug. ngr ‘herald’. Modern Ethiosemitic languages preserve the polysemy ‘word / matter’.
3.10. Ge'ez qāl

Another Ge'ez noun demonstrating synchronic polysemy is qāl ‘voice, word, saying, speech, statement, discourse, command, order, sound, noise, expression, maxim, thing’ (Leslau 1987: 426). Survey of the Biblical corpus shows that this word occupies the slots ‘matter’ and ‘(state of) affair’ but clearly not ‘material object’ and ‘property’. Such cognates as Arab. qāla ‘say’, Heb. qōl ‘voice’ clearly indicate the original meaning belonging to the speech-domain. Among the modern Ethiosemitic languages, Gurage preserves polysemy ‘voice, thing’; cognates in Tigre, Tigrinya, and Amharic mean ‘word’.

3.11. Soqotri bil’e

Soqotri bil’e ‘thing’ (Naumkin & Kogan 2018: 431) represents the result of the semantic shift ‘thing’ < ‘word’. The original semantics can be reconstructed based on the cognates from closely related Modern South Arabian languages: Mehri bəhlīt/bəhēl ‘word’, Jibbali behlēt/bēhol ‘word’ (Johnstone 2006: 45; Johnstone 1981: 24). Antiquity of the Mehri and Jibbali meaning is proven with the data from the other more distantly related Semitic languages: Ge‘ez bəhla ‘say, speak, call, announce, command’; Arab. bahala ‘pronounce a curse’, Akk. ba‘ālu, bâlu ‘beseech, pray’ (Leslau 1987: 89).

3.12. Hurrian tiwe


3.13. Japanese

Japanese koto fills the slots ‘matter’ and ‘(state of) affair’. It can have the meaning ‘word; remark; statement’ as well. Polysemy apparently must be reconstructed onto the Proto-Japonic level. However, the range of derivatives (kotobo ‘word’, kotobuki

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1 I am grateful to George Starostin for pointing me to this example.
(‘congratulations’, kotodate ‘announcement, pronouncement’, kotodomori ‘stammering’) could speak for the antiquity of the meaning in the speech-domain. This lexeme is opposed to mono denoting ‘material object’ or ‘property’.

3.14. Other examples

Four further examples of the synchronic polysemy ‘word / thing’ were found. However, semantic and etymological details remain unknown due to the scarcity of existing sources:

Chatino (Otomanquean) cha’ ‘word; sentence, speech; reason; thing’ (Pride & Pride 2010: 7–8);
Konyak (Brahmaputran < Sino-Tibetan) ngao ‘word; thing’;
Lushai (Kuki-Chin-Naga < Sino-Tibetan): thu ‘noun: word, saying, news, description, account, statement, narrative, history, information, order, command, authority, will, wish, pleasure, affair, business, concern, thing, things, cause, case; preposition: about, regarding, concerning, of’ (Lorrain 1975: 485);
Sangtam (Kuki-Chin-Naga < Sino-Tibetan): yu ‘word; thing’.

4. Explaining the semantic shift

A lot of words that preserve a synchronic connection to the speech-domain do not occupy the whole thing-domain, but only the slots implying reference to non-substances. The lexemes referring to both substances and non-substances preserve only etymological relation to words from the speech-domain. One can speculate that the latter group of lexemes represents a more advanced stage, and assume the following scenario. A word from the speech-domain first develops the meaning ‘matter’ and then it extends to ‘material object’ while losing its original meaning or transparent derivational structure.

The proximity of the meaning ‘matter’ to speech-domain can easily be proven with bridging contexts. I understand here the bridging context as a case of a contextual polysemy following Evans & Wilkins 2000: 550. The starting point for the studied semantic shifts is such contexts where the lexeme can denote simultaneously a discourse in its linguistic form (words, speeches) and a discussed matter (situation), so it is a metonymic shift. Such sentences are relatively frequent in the written sources, cf., e.g., the Old High German and Hittite examples:
Otfrid II.9.1

\[ \text{thisu selba rédina the ih zálta} \]

this same thing that I tell

‘All the things/words I told (about)’

HKM 32 Mšt. 75/117 cited after Hoffner 2009: 158

\[ \text{uddār}=\text{mu} \quad \text{kue ĥatrāeš} \quad \text{nu}=\text{at} \quad \text{AŠME} \]

word=1sg.dat that write and=acc.pl.n I.hear

‘I have heard the words that you wrote to me’ ~ ‘I have heard about the matter that you wrote to me’

The development ‘matter’ > ‘thing’ is attested also without special connection to the speech-domain. The Germanic languages give the most obvious examples: PGerm. *þinga- > OE þing ‘meeting, case, thing’ > E thing; OHG ding ‘meeting, court, thing, affair’ > G Ding ‘thing’ (Kroonen 2013: 542). Somewhat similar development from a kind of legal term can be illustrated with another German example and Romance ones: PGerm. *sakō- > OHG sahha ‘case, guilt’, G Sache ‘affair, matter, thing’; Latin causa ‘judicial process, lawsuit, case’ > Fr. chose ‘thing’, Sp. cosa ‘thing’.

5. Areal distribution

Patterns of colexification frequently spread within some linguistic areas and appear in genetically unrelated (or not closely related) languages. See the following recent works on the areal nature of colexification: Koptjevskaja-Tamm & Liljegren 2017; Zhivlov 2019; Segerer & Vanhove 2021; Georgakopoulos et al. 2021. Concerning the data discussed above, one can speak about Ancient Near East as an area characterized by the semantic shift in question. It is manifested in Akkadian, Hittite, Hurrian, and Old Hebrew. All these languages demonstrate some other outcomes of language contact, namely Akkadian borrowings, Hurrian borrowings in Hittite, a number of shared Wanderwörter. Cultural contacts between the speakers of these ancient languages are well documented. These are perfect conditions for the spread of a colexification pattern.

Biblical translations probably played some role in the spreading of the polysemy ‘word / thing’ or at least ‘word / matter’. Notable is the use of Ge‘ez nagar and Classical Armenian ban (primary
meanings of both lexemes clearly belong to speech-domain) in place of Old Hebrew ḏāḇār and Greek ῥῆμα:

(5) a. Old Hebrew

    hā-yippāle    Yahweh    ḏāḇār
    qst-be.too.hard    Yahweh    thing

b. Greek

    μὴ ἀδύνατεῖ    παρὰ    τὸ    θεῖο    ῥῆμα
    is impossible to the God thing

c. Ge‘ez

    bonu    nagar    za-yəsaʔnu    l-ʔegziʔahher
    is.there thing that.be.impossible for-God

d. Classical Armenian

    mit‘ē    tkaranayc‘ē    aṙ    i    ɣAstucoy    ban
    is.it.possible weaken by to God thing

‘Is any thing too hard for the Lord?’ (Gn. 18:14, King James’ Bible translation)

Although the translations of the Bible were crucial for the earlier stages of Armenian and Ethiopian, one can only speculate whether it was the source for the development of semantic shift ‘word’ > ‘matter / thing’.

6. Conclusions

The results of the semantic shift from speech- to thing-domain are found in the number of Indo-European, Semitic, Sino-Tibetan languages as well as in Japanese, Chatino, and Hurrian. Ancient Near East can be posited as an area the shift in question was typical for. The transitional phase of the shift is represented with bridging contexts allowing both interpretations ‘speech / words’ and ‘matter (of the speech)’. The meaning ‘material objects’ can be developed only through the stage of the meaning ‘matter’.

Abbreviations

Languages

Akk. — Akkadian; Arab. — Arabic; Av. — Avestan; Bel. — Belarusian; Bulg. — Bulgarian; E. — English; Fr. — French, G. — German; Goth. — Gothic; Gr. — Greek, Hitt. — Hittite; LSorb. — Lower Sorbian, OCS. — Old Church Slavonic; OE. — Old English; OFris. — Old Frisian; OHG — Old High German; ON — Old Norse; ORus. — Old Russian; OSax. — Old Saxon; PGerm. — Proto-Germanic; PIE — Proto-Indo-European; PSlav. — Proto-Slavic; SCB — Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian; Skt. — Sanskrit; Sp. — Spanish; Toch. A — Tocharian A; Toch. B — Tocharian B; Ug. — Ugaritic; Ukr. — Ukrainian; USorb. — Upper Sorbian; Ved. — Vedic Sanscrit.
Sources

CAD — Civil et al. 1968.
LIV² — Rix et al. 2001.

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