



**HAL**  
open science

## Introduction

Chris A. Smith

► **To cite this version:**

Chris A. Smith. Introduction. Lexis. Journal in English Lexicology, 2020, Diachronic Lexical Semantics, 16, [6 p.]. <10.4000/lexis.4898>. <hal-03080024>

**HAL Id: hal-03080024**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03080024v1>**

Submitted on 17 Dec 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - No Derivative Works - International License



**Lexis**  
Journal in English Lexicology  
**16 | 2020**  
**Diachronic Lexical Semantics**

---

## Introduction

Chris A. Smith

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/4898>  
ISSN: 1951-6215

### Publisher

Université Jean Moulin - Lyon 3

### Electronic reference

Chris A. Smith, « Introduction », *Lexis* [Online], 16 | 2020, Online since 17 December 2020, connection on 17 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/4898>

---

This text was automatically generated on 17 December 2020.



Lexis is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

---

# Introduction

Chris A. Smith

---

- 1 This issue of *Lexis* focuses on lexical semantics from a diachronic perspective. This approach allows for the study of all and any lexical change, whether semantic, morphosemantic, lexico-grammatical or pragmatic change. The study of meaning over time holds the additional benefit of considering lexical meaning as being a pattern of behaviour which is subject to change rather than being viewed as conventional and theoretically predetermined. Diachronic linguistics as a field has experienced a considerable development in the past fifteen years in particular, with some major contributions providing an overview of decades of historical approaches, notably the *Oxford Handbook of the History of English* [2012], and *the Cambridge Handbook of English Historical Linguistics* [2016], also see Brinton [2017] for an overview of perspectives and approaches to historical linguistics. This growth can be traced to three contributing and converging factors in the landscape of Historical and Diachronic research:
  - The availability of more extensive data and corpora, of all types and sizes providing opportunities to observe data from all periods and genres (Penn Corpus, the Helsinki Corpus, Early English Books Online)
  - These multiple corpora provide possibilities for investigating change across multiple corpora, and thus perfect methods of empirical research, both quantitative and qualitative
  - Finally, the development of cognitive usage-based experimental and behavioural theories of language has bolstered the study of change, adaptation, variation, evolution.
- 2 There has been extensive development of **theories** of change, methods of exploring trajectories or pathways which have contributed largely to the perception that language is inherently a phenomenon of constant evolution via usage. At the centre of any study of change or “variation”, the preferred term for sociolinguistic study, there is the key concept of identifying a source, a motivation, or rather identifying a pattern of plausible sources and plausible mechanisms that may have led to the development of

a morphosemantic expression. Existing hypotheses of motivation for change are some of the following:

- i. So called natural change, including cognitive processes such as **metaphor** and **metonymy** (see Blank [1999], Traugott et Dasher [2005], Koch [1999], [2012]); generalisation and restriction of sense, towards more technical or less technical;
  - ii. Sporadic, non-systematic change, such as analogical change or phonosymbolic Bolinger, Jespersen, Smith 2016, 2019]. Many questions remain as to how metaphor and metonymy relate to one another (see Koch [1999], [2012], Kovecses & Radden [1998]) and how they in turn relate to analogy;
  - iii. Expressive change or genre-related change (change is fuelled by need for expressivity) or by expressive strategies as X-phemistic communication cues
  - iv. Innovation and change may also be fuelled by onomasiological need, the filling of so-called lexical gaps (see Sylvester et al in this issue). Innovation can also fill a genre or register-specific need (standard versus non-standard, written versus oral, technical versus mainstream);
  - v. Grammaticalization change, whose impact also may be closely linked to natural processes of metonymy and metaphor (Traugott & Dasher [2005]), but also specialization, analogization (see Joseph [1997], Miller [2014]).
- 3 These questions lead to the essential issue of **propagation** of change, the rate of propagation, the regularity or irregularity of patterns of change, the factors of propagation, and specifically methods for quantifying patterns of change, and assessing the importance or regularity of trajectories of change, as with the theory of S-curve propagation (Blythe & Croft [2012]). In this issue, Feltgen offers a statistical model of propagation of the lexicogrammatical structure *way too* in American English focusing on modelling rates of propagation of change.
- 4 Diachronic study can also mean - rather than studying a certain historical period, or studying change over extensive periods (macro) - observing more **recent** change on a micro-level of several months or years. This leads to the questions of predicting and analysing ongoing change, via for instance “lexical emergence”. The issue here is mainly that of the reliability of corpus data over such minute time periods, we know historical corpora pose a problem of homogenous availability of data per period, and tracking emerging behaviours equally requires reliable of data. In this issue, Mahler tackles emergent change using a CMC corpus, Mehl a contemporary press corpus, and Terry a contemporary popular TV series corpus (2000-2005).
- 5 In terms of **methodology**, there are multiple pitfalls or difficulties relating to what evidence is reliable, what conclusions can be drawn, etc. The question is what methodology can uncover reliable patterns, and how those patterns can be interpreted, i.e. what serves as definitive proof? Central to all fields of empirical study, whether macro-diachronic or micro-diachronic, the main issue is one of data structure and data reliability. In terms of **methodology** and **results**, it is important to assess or question how corpus-dependent the results or conclusions reached may be. The selection of the adequate data set for the purpose set out in the paper is arguably paramount, notably taking into account factors like genre, register, text types. Choosing to compare several corpora is a means of questioning the effect of a data set on the results. For example, the rate of semantic change in non-standard English, especially slang, is generally shown to be faster than in standard English. Issues of genre, specialisation of usage, restriction of usage are broached in all the papers in this issue.

- 6 The papers collected for this issue address the question of diachronicity in different ways and from different perspectives (morphosemantic, pragmatic, sociocultural, lexicogrammatical), both looking at either historical development and/or recent emerging development as with lexical emergence and recent changes (**Mahler, Mehl, Terry**). As for the outset of the study, several papers take a semasiological standpoint, exploring the development, or trajectory, of a specific morphosemantic category, such as N to V derivation (**Héois**), *-some* versus *-able* adjective formation (**Smith**), lexical borrowing in ME (**Sylvester, Tiddeman & Ingham**), or that of a lexicogrammatical expression such as *way too* (**Margerie, Feltgen**). The onomasiological approach is also present, with some papers focusing on an onomasiological subset of expressions referring to a notion such as DEATH (**Terry**), on a set of synonyms referring to a sociocultural reality (**Mehl**), or on affixal synonymy competition (**Smith**). The papers are corpus-based usage-based studies tracking the development of a target using established electronic corpora such as COHA, or a selection of diachronic corpora whose relevance is explored, as well as contemporary corpora like COCA and a TV corpus, and a CMC corpus like Reddit (**Mahler**), or a contemporary press corpus (**Mehl**). Several of these studies also rely on diachronic lexicographic material in the *OED* as reference material (**Terry, Heois, Smith**). The questions raised in these eight studies intertwine, but are posed at different levels: in particular raising central issues of methodology, granularity (what to focus on, what to leave out) and of the reliability and usability of a particular data set or corpus.
- 7 The first contribution, “*Am I Way Wrong on this One? On the Multiple Semantic Sources and Paths of Development of the Amplifier Way in American English*”, by **Hélène Margerie**, provides a diachronic construction grammar approach of the high degree intensifier *way too* using the COHA corpus. The study shows there is evidence that *way too* emerges from multiple pathways rather than having a single origin as has been assumed. The author argues that multiple mechanisms of change account for the emergence of the intensifier function, namely the interaction of metaphorization, pragmatic inferencing and analogization based on < *far* ADJ >. Rather than identifying a single motivating source, it is plausible that change arises from the interaction of multiple mechanisms which combine with another to bring about or reinforce a development trajectory.
- 8 **Quentin Feltgen**’s “Diachronic Emergence of Zipf-like Patterns in Construction-Specific Frequency Distributions: A Quantitative Study of the *Way Too* Construction” proposes a quantitative corpus-based study of the propagation of the *way too* construction. The paper proposes an analysis of the relation between measurements of token and type frequencies. It is shown, using data retrieved from both COHA and COCA, that the token frequencies of the types of the *way too* construction follow Zipf’s law, which increases over time. A collocation quantitative analysis shows the usage of *way too* tends to become more specialized over time, thus providing evidence of an ecological niche.
- 9 Relying on the *OED* as a data source this time, **Aurélié Heois**’s “When Proper Names Become Verbs: A Semantic Perspective” proposes to track a morphosemantic class of verbs derived from Proper Names (including Person Names, Place Names and Products & Services names), with a focus on the period from 1575 to 2008. The author observes the behaviour of PN > V derivation in the *OED* based on 225 lexemes. A diachronic trajectory study shows the rise of derivation over time of Proper Names and tends to

demonstrate predictable morphosemantic patterns consistent with Noun to verb derivation in general. The observation is that PN > V derivation essentially reflects the impact of socio-cultural factors on this type of word formation, but establishing a predictive model requires more extensive corpus research beyond the scope of the *OED*.

- 10 Relying on the *OED* data followed by testing in historical corpora is the selected methodology in “A Case Study of *-some* and *-able* Derivatives in the *OED3*: Examining the Diachronic Output and Productivity of Two Competing Adjectival Suffixes” by **Chris Smith**. The author focuses on another morphosemantic class, *Vsome* and *Vable* adjectives. The purpose is to track their diachronic trajectories with a view to comparing a native adjectival suffix with a borrowed adjectival suffix. The starting point is a comparison between *Vsome* and *Vable* adjectives, using the *OED* data to track diachronic trajectories. A corpus study using multiple corpora (EHBO, COHA, Project Gutenberg, OEC, COCA), as well as the *OED* data, both suggest that *-some* adjectives have a low token frequency over all periods, which likely slowed propagation and therefore contributed to the decline in availability of the pattern. The hypothesis that *-some* may have declined due to direct pressure from *-able* is hard to determine especially given the low productivity of *-some* and the likely many interlacing trajectories of other adjectival suffixes. Nevertheless, *-some* seems to have a niche usage, with a creative expressive and affective charge that distinguishes *-some* adjectives from *-able* adjectives.
- 11 **Louise Sylvester, Megan Tiddeman & Richard Ingham** in their paper “An Analysis of French Borrowings at the Hypernymic and Hyponymic Levels of Middle English” focus on lexical integration of loan words rather than affixal competition. The authors study the mechanism of lexical accommodation of French loans into Middle English (ME) vocabulary, using the ME dictionary and the Historical Thesaurus. The study aims to provide an analysis of the onomasiological structure of the ME lexicon, using hypernymy and hyponymy to determine the position occupied by loan words in the lexical structure. The conclusions contradict the general assumption that loan words fill a lexical gap since the French loans tend to correspond to hyponymic, i.e. more specialised levels of meaning.
- 12 Staying within the topic of synonymy, from a more contemporary perspective, **Seth Mehl**’s “*Appropriation, Gentrification, Colonisation: Newly Synonymous?*” studies three conceptual nouns shown to form a synonym set in a contemporary press corpus: *appropriation*, *gentrification*, and *colonisation*. The semantic development of these three lexemes has led their usage to follow a similar pattern, creating a near-synonym set. A corpus study in recent mainstream online news texts provides evidence of this emerging semantic change, which can be accounted for a combination of metaphorisation and generalisation.
- 13 From a continued onomasiological standpoint, and focusing on a contemporary usage, **Adeline Terry**’s “*Metaphonymies We Die by: the Influence of the Interactions between Metaphor and Metonymy on Semantic Change in X-phemistic Conceptualisations of Death*” offers a corpus study of DEATH metaphors/metaphonymies. The corpus under analysis, a contemporary TV corpus (2002-2010) of the early seasons of 3 long-running US television series (*House*, *Greys Anatomy* and *6 Feet Under*), is viewed as representative of natural oral language and therefore significant. The assumption is that the euphemism treadmill is a mechanism of lexical change which leads existing euphemism to lose their X-phemistic potential. The *OED* is used as a reference for the diachronic

aspect of the data to identify the attestation dates of the metaphorical senses. Using 122 metaphorical occurrences identified in the corpus, it is shown that the semantic development of euphemisms relating to death appears to be slower, meaning that DEATH metaphors tend to be more stable, i.e. remain euphemistic, than other taboo domains.

- 14 Finally, on the topic of emerging change, **Hannah Mahler**'s "Lexical Emergence on Reddit: An Analysis of Lexical Change on the 'Front Page of the Internet'" aims to track emerging lexemes in a CMC-like corpus, Reddit. The study is based on the assumption that lexical change can be observed at a microlevel (yearly, monthly, or even weekly and daily basis). The study aims to test a methodology for identifying lexical innovation in a CMC corpus provided in Grieve *et al.* [2017] based on a Twitter corpus, and to compare the results obtained in terms of identification of patterns of change, and type of change. The methodology identifies 8 emerging lexemes: of these eight six correspond to new words for either new concepts or new words for new concepts: *iv*, *mod*, *mods*, *bot (lane)*, *split (push)*, *bronze*. The remaining two lexemes are cases of an existing word form undergoing semantic shift (via metonymisation and metaphorization): *flair* and *supports*. The results tend to be consistent with assumptions, although the interpretation of data is shown to be corpus-dependent. The patterns of change in Reddit are found to be more irregular, compared to Twitter, potentially due to monthly versus daily structure, indicating that makeup of the corpus is essential to clarifying the validity of any general conclusions.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALLAN Kathryn & ROBINSON Justinya (Eds.), 2012, *Current Methods in Historical Semantics*, Berlin / Boston: de Gruyter.

BLANK Andreas & KOCH Peter (Eds.), 1999, *Historical semantics and cognition*, Berlin / Boston: de Gruyter.

BRINTON Laurel, 2017, *English Historical Linguistics, Approaches and Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

BLYPHE Richard A. & Croft William, 2012, "S-curves and the propagation of language change", *Language*, vol 88: 2, 269-304.

CROFT William, 2000, *Explaining language change: an Evolutionary approach*, Berlin/ Boston: de Gruyter.

DURKIN Philip, 2014, *Borrowed words: a History of Loanwords in English*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

GEERAERTS Dirk, 2009, *Theories of Lexical Semantics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

JOSEPH Brian D., 1997, "On the Linguistics of Marginality: The Centrality of the Periphery", in SINGER Kora, EGGERT Randall & ANDERSON Gregory (Eds.), *Papers from the 33<sup>rd</sup> Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society, 197-213.

JOSEPH Brian D. & JANDA Richard D. (Eds.), 2003, *The Handbook of Historical linguistics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

KOCH Peter, 1999, "Frame and Contiguity: On the cognitive bases of metonymy and certain types of word formation", in RADDEN Günther & PANTHER Klaus-Uwe (Eds.), *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 139-169.

KOCH Peter, 2012, "The Pervasiveness of Contiguity and Metonymy in Language Change", in ALLAN Kathryn & ROBINSON Justyna A. (Eds.), *Current Methods in Historical Semantics*, Berlin / Boston: de Gruyter, 259-312.

KYTÖ Merja & PAHTA Päi, 2016, *The Cambridge Handbook of English Historical Linguistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

KOVECSES Zoltan & RADDEN Günther, 1998, "Metonymy, Developing a Cognitive Linguistic View", *Cognitive Linguistics* (includes Cognitive Linguistic Bibliography), Volume 9, Issue 1, 37-78.

MILLER Gary D., 2014, *Lexicogenesis*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SMITH Chris A., 2016, "Tracking semantic change in *fl*- monomorphemes in *the Oxford English Dictionary*", *Journal of Historical Linguistics*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 165-200.

SMITH Chris A., 2018, "Where do new words like *boobage*, *flamage*, *ownage* come from? Tracking the history of *-age* words from 1100 to 2000 in the *OED3*", *Lexis* [Online], 12 | 2018, Online since 14 December 2018: <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/2167>.

TRAUGOTT Elisabeth & DASHER Richard, 2005, *Regularity in Semantic change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## AUTHOR

**CHRIS A. SMITH**

Université de Caen Normandie – CRISCO EA4255

[chris.smith@unicaen.fr](mailto:chris.smith@unicaen.fr)