

Meaning drift in a changing world: literal and metaphorical meanings through time

Gill Philip (g.philip.polidoro@gmail.com), *University of Macerata*

Despite the attention which has been devoted to the development of metaphorical meaning over time, it is interesting to note how little data has actually been examined: etymology reigns, and accounts of the evolution of meanings from literal to metaphorical are primarily theoretical in nature. Such studies, while addressing metaphorical meaning in a synchronic perspective, are unable to explain the processes which cause a word or phrase to become detached from its literal meaning and take on a figurative one.

Corpora, both written and spoken, are now a well-established source of data in metaphor studies, but diachronic corpora – a relative novelty – open up offer tantalising possibilities for the study of meaning change over time. This study analyses a series of metaphors and idioms which originate in the agricultural world, including "grist to the mill", "an axe to grind", and "hotbed", using data from the Corpus of Historical American English. This corpus makes it possible to chart language evolution from as far back as 1810 to the present day. In the case of agriculturally-motivated figurative language, this time-span is particularly significant because it allows us to observe semantic changes which have come about as society has shifted from being primarily rural and agricultural, to being primarily urban and industrial.

Although each expression follows its own semantic path, some general trends can be observed. Perhaps the most significant is the observation that literal meanings do not convert immediately to figurative ones: they typically pass through a "deliteral" (Geeraerts, 2007) phase in which the literal meaning is "stretched". Another important aspect is that literal and figurative meanings can coexist, although one of the two will be dominant and the other marginalised, in accordance with Hoey's (2005) theory of lexical priming.

Diachronic corpora clearly have a role to play in metaphor studies.