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1. **OBJECTIVES OF THIS PAPER**

Linguistics is a form of self-knowledge: when man, *animal loquens*, learns something about his language, he learns something about himself – as an individual, about the language community to which he belongs, and possibly also about his species. The study of language change can contribute significantly to this form of self-knowledge. I would like to demonstrate this with a specific type of language change: semantic change.

Why do we study language change? There are various possible motives. We might be interested in how an earlier state of the language – or a certain part of it – looked at a certain time, for example. This is the primary interest of language historians. But we might also want to find out something about the current state of the language and about the principles of human communication. This more systematic and theoretical interest is the basis of my considerations on the following pages. In a few words, my goal is to understand how a present state became what it is – to learn something about the principles and regularities of semantic change, and consequently about some of the principles of how we communicate. The process of language change is an example of cultural evolution, the products of which are analogous to the products of animate nature, in the sense that the current state of a system is a function of the complex variations and selection processes of the past. But there is one big difference: in animate nature, ecological conditions alone decide the »biological fitness« of a certain variant; the variants themselves are random results. But in the evolution of language, it is the communicating individuals, who choose or consciously create linguistic variants, or linguemes,¹ as they are called – anticipating the process of selection in the service of their own »social fitness«. In animate nature, it is exclusively causal mechanisms that determine the interplay of variation and selection, while in language change, intentional processes also come to bear (cf. Keller 2003: 141 ff.).

This essay consists of three parts. First, I will describe the general structure of the process of language change. In the second part, I would like to explain the sense in which the term »meaning« should be understood when talking about semantic change. Finally, in the third part, I will detail the essential paths of semantic change with a few representative examples.

2. **HOW DOES LANGUAGE CHANGE FUNCTION?**

Language change is basically a so-called invisible-hand phenomenon. I have set out this thesis in numerous publications (Keller 2005, Keller 2003, Keller 1997, Keller 1991). What does this mean? Invisible-hand phenomena are, first and foremost, group phenomena in whose genesis collectives are

¹ According to Croft 2000, p. 28, this term was coined by Martin Haspelmath.
involved. This is also true, for example, of the Cologne Cathedral. But it is not just the number of people involved in the genesis of the Cologne Cathedral – presumably tens of thousands of people – that makes it different than the German language, whose genesis up to its present state involved millions of speakers over hundreds of generations.\(^2\) The truly distinguishing feature is the architect's blueprint! Cologne Cathedral was drafted and then (more or less) built according to plan. It is thus the result of human actions and the aim of human design. But it is much different with what we call a natural language. The contemporaries of Walter von der Vogelweide never said, »Let's talk in a way that turns our Middle High German into New High German!« But in fact, this is what they did. And in fact, we also talk in such a way that our New High German will become Late High German. A natural language is the result of human actions, but not the aim of human design.

This thesis has prompted the objection that there are cases in which language change is planned, as well as policies intended to influence language. My response to this is that yes, both exist. But this does not change the fact that language change is an invisible-hand phenomenon. For one thing, changes to a language that are the result of planned linguistic intervention are extremely few. For another, it is not clear what effects language – policy initiatives ultimately have. This is clear, for example, in eighteenth century's attempts at Germanization, which were motivated by the idea of linguistic purity: most of recommended Germanizations were not accepted by the language community; a small fraction of them led to linguistic doubles such as »Autor – Schriftsteller«; and an even smaller fraction produced the desired linguistic result, namely the substitution of the loanword with an autochthonous counterproposal (cf. Daniels 1959). Language policy is like economic policy in a free market: the measures taken are only one of numerous influencing factors on the actions of speakers or market participants. A linguistic policymaker is not to the language community like an architect is to the construction crew, but more like the president of the European Central Bank to the financial community, such as when he attempts to influence the exchange rate of the Euro relative to the Dollar by adjusting interest rates. In any case, the result is still an invisible-hand phenomenon. The present state of our language is a fleeting episode in a potentially endless process.

Languages are highly structured and highly functional. How can it be that a group of (currently) about one hundred million speakers of German can generate something that is not only well-structured but highly functional (and that later generations may call »Late High German«) – with no plan whatsoever? To describe this process, and if possible, to explain it, is the goal of the invisible-hand theory. To be precise, the art of explanation consists in showing how coordinated behavior comes about without a coordinator: coordination with no coordinator. When people cross a lawn in

\(^2\) This number is arbitrary, of course, for where should the process of genesis be seen as beginning?
all directions, like soccer players on a soccer field, nothing interesting results. But if they all cross the lawn in the same place, a beaten path results! Beaten paths emerge because people act in a basically coordinated way, even though there is no coordinator. In this particular case, it is easy to demonstrate where the more or less coordinating impulse comes from. In certain circumstances, people’s attempts to conserve energy of movement motivates them to choose the shortest path, of which the causal result, under certain conditions, is the death of the grass on the path and the prevention of the growth of new grass. People act more or less in coordination when they make similar choices based on similar behavioral maxims (in this case, »Save energy!«). When they do this, a phenomenon can emerge that those who contributed to its emergence did not want and may not even notice. While some such phenomena are disastrous – consider the formation of plains in parts of the Sahel due to the overgrazing that resulted from the deep wells drilled by well – meaning aid workers – others are fortuitous. Examples are social institutions such as morals, money, markets, law, and language.

One mechanism that leads to more or less coordinated behavior was recognized early on: someone has a great idea and uses innovative language, and the others follow suit. We could formulate the corresponding maxim as »Imitate another’s choice of language when you see that the choice was successful.« As early as 1958, EUGENIO COSERIU attributed language change to the interplay of innovación and adopción, and a half a century later, WILLIAM CROFT saw in the two components innovation and propagation necessary components of language change (Croft 2000: 4-6). But this view is overly simplistic and overgeneralizing. It is possible, of course, that some young person somewhere hit upon the idea of using the German adjective »geil« to describe his snazzy new motorcycle (today, »geil« can mean »really cool« as well as »horny«), and that this resulted in an epidemic chain reaction of imitation that turned a taboo word into an evaluative adjective used to express excitement. But it is impossible that an addressee in the early nineteenth century began to interpret the adjective »billig«, which at the time still meant »appropriate«, in the sense of »low« (as in prices), and that others imitated this interpretation. Even if it is not impossible, it would be highly implausible to assume, for example, that a Roman colonial officer in Hispania sloppily pronounced the Latin »habent« as »han«, and that others found this so attractive that they pronounced it in the same way. In other words, in some cases imitation plays an important role, and in many others none at all.

Furthermore, imitative behavior or the adoption of an innovation is not really the factor that explains change. When speakers tend systematically to adopt some choices of language, but not others, this is exactly what requires explanation. Adopting a choice of language is in itself not one of the speakers’ motives. The motives that lead a speaker to deviate from an as yet orthodox use of

3 »Es decir que, en último análisis, todo cambio es originariamente un adopción.« Coseriu 1958, p. 45 (italics original).
language (and thus possibly to follow a role model) can be highly diverse: to save energy, to be courteous, to attempt to impress, and many more. These motives can be formulated as neo-Gricean maxims, such as »Speak in such a way as to save energy in articulation« or »Speak in such a way is to offend no one.« Naturally, it is not assumed that speakers are conscious of their own motives. The formulation of maxims is nothing more than a descriptive trick, a method of describing behaviors: one describes a behavior $B$ by formulating an imperative that is fulfilled by doing $B$. Part of the art of explaining a particular case of language change consists in formulating maxims that can plausibly be assumed for the communicating people in the given communicative framework. The idea is to find the bridge from the behavior of the communicating individuals to the linguistic phenomenon whose genesis is to be explained. For instance, the formation of a metaphor is itself not a case of language change. Only when a certain metaphor is formed frequently and by many does it become lexicalized, and only then do we have a case of language change (cf. Coseriu 2005: 119). Every explanation is comprised of basically three factors, which must be strictly differentiated:

1. the (assumed) motives of the speakers (e.g., wanting to avoid being misunderstood)
2. the linguistic means for the realization of these motives (e.g., avoiding one of the two meanings of an expression)
3. the linguistic consequences (on the level of langue) that are the results of speakers' choices (e.g., »homonymiphobia«).

A genetic explanation of this type is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Full explanation is achieved only when all three factors are elaborated. Often it is not possible to reconstruct the process leading from speakers' choices to language change, or if so, only incompletely (cf. Baldinger 2005: 45).

3. WHAT IS MEANING?

People have a trick with which they can specifically influence others – a trick of which other animals are not capable. Below are three types of abilities that animals (can) have. The third is probably possessed only by humans, and it is what is unique about what we call the ability to communicate in the human sense.

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4 On the process of metaphorical inferencing and lexicalization, see Keller 1998, pp. 164 ff.
1. All animals are able to perceive and interpret events that take place in their environment. Some animals, for example, perceive scents and »infer« from them that prey or a dangerous predator is in the vicinity. Baboons can interpret a certain pattern of movement in the grass as a sign of danger, a typical sign of a big cat approaching. In terms of sign theory, this means that animals are able to interpret events as symptoms (indexes) in order to use them for their own purposes.

2. Some animals are able to do something with the intention of bringing another animal to make a certain conclusion. For example, the following has been observed among baboons (Sommer 1989: 151): when a baboon senses danger and assumes that a big cat is approaching through the grass, it sometimes gets up on its hind legs to get a better view. Other baboons who see this behavior recognize that their standing comrade senses danger and retreat to safety. Baboons are thus able to interpret as symptoms the reactions of other baboons to perceived symptoms (»I perceive the fact that you are standing on your hind legs as a symptom of your having perceived a symptom of a big cat approaching.«) Now, in baboon families, young males sometimes challenge stronger and older ones, but ultimately are forced to accept their inferiority and flee. For example, researchers have witnessed the following scene: the young challenger begins to flee, but suddenly stops, stands upright, and looks spellbound into the distance. His stronger pursuer also stops, turns around, and flees. He has clearly interpreted the behavior of the younger baboon as a symptom for the latter’s having seen a symptom. But the point is this: there is no big cat anywhere in sight; the young challenger »lied.« Baboons know, then, that others are able to interpret certain behaviors as a symptom of the perception of a symptom of danger, and they are also able to utilize this knowledge for their own ends: they can simulate a symptom to bring other members of their species to a certain conclusion. It seems that behavior like this is widely observed in the animal world. Of course, humans do the same thing, but we go a step further, and this is what makes our communicative abilities specifically human.

3. Humans are able to let others of their species know that they are behaving in a certain way solely with the aim of bring them to a certain conclusion. What baboons would have to learn in order to communicate like humans would be something like this: a baboon would have to be able to approach another baboon, stand up in front of him, and look in the direction from which danger is coming, making clear that »Look, I’m standing here in front of you to let you know that there is danger coming from the direction in which I am looking.« That is, he would have to be able to reveal his simulation of a symptom as a simulation. This is the decisive step
from deception to communication in the human sense. In time, the simulation would only have to be implied, and gradually an arbitrary gesture of warning would come into existence. (And if an older baboon implicitly stood up in front of one of his old friends while casting a glance toward a member of his harem, he might be using the rhetorical device of irony.)

Thus communicating in the human sense means, to put it simply, giving others a means from which may be inferred what one wants them to do.⁵ And how do addressees recognize what a communicator wants them to do? First, as in our example, the addressee recognized this because the communicator's device was sufficiently similar to the original symptom. To the extent in which the use of the device becomes a convention, the aspect of similarity becomes obsolete, giving rise to an unmotivated means of communication. A symptom becomes a symbol. Symbols can be interpreted by those who are familiar with the convention of its use, that is, who know under which circumstances a symbol is used to what end. When we call that which allows an addressee to interpret a symbol its meaning, we may say that the meaning of a symbol is the convention of its use.

Words in a language are special cases of symbols. When our primary interest in regard to semantic change is change in the meanings of words, we may say that the meaning of a word is its conventional use, or – to use Wittgenstein's term – the rule of its use. Meaning is therefore not what a speaker intends to convey in a certain situation, but that which allows it to be conveyed: the rules of use.

To trace changes in a word's meaning, we have to find out how and why the rules of use for the word changed. Or, to put it more generally, we have to find out what it was in the actual use of the word by the speakers involved in the process that led over time to change in its rules of use.

Lately the meanings of words are often equated with concepts.⁶ I will not go into this theory in detail here, but name three reasons why I consider it to be inadequate, at least for our considerations:

1. All of the words in a language have meaning, but not all of the words in a language express concepts. Expressions such as hello, yet, and if are meaningful, no doubt. For example, the difference in meaning between the two sentences I know that he’s coming tonight and I know if he’s coming tonight (but I’m not going to tell you) makes clear that that and if have different meanings. These meanings can be formulated as rules, but there are no matching concepts. The same goes for words with meanings that include a component with which the speaker makes a

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⁵ This is a simplified version of Grice's explication of »meaning« (cf. Grice 1969).
certain opinion known, such as Gesöff or slim. (When two people argue about whether Eric is slim or thin, they are not arguing about Eric's figure, but about their differing opinions of Eric's figure.)

2. One might be able to defend the theory that all meanings are concepts by defining the concept »concept« in such a way that it is identical with the concept »meaning.« But all this does is duplicate the terminology, and with that, theory that all meanings are concepts surrenders any new insight it might have provided.

3. We are familiar with the idea that rules of use can change over time. This occurs in all sociocultural domains, and there are established explanatory models for it. There is no explanatory model for how and why millions of people would substitute the concept that they associate with a certain word with a different concept, and furthermore, why they would do so at nearly the same time. Rules of use can be taught, learned, practiced, restricted, expanded, formulated, and much more. But how can you teach someone a concept without teaching him a rule of use? What we learn are rules of use, some of which are a type that engenders conceptual correlates in our minds. These are primarily rules of use whose conditions for use are truth conditions. But on the linguistic level, ontological truth conditions are simply rules of use. The statement »x is a bachelor if x is human, male, adult, and unmarried« can be correctly reformulated as »You can use the noun bachelor to refer to an x who is human, male, adult, and unmarried.« The point is that all of the words in a language are subject to rules of use. Some words – the ones whose conditions for use are truth conditions – also express concepts.

To understand how meanings can change, we must make an important distinction: between the meaning of a word on the level of langue and the sense of an utterance on the level of parole. HERMANN PAUL essentially made this distinction as early as 1888: 65) by differentiating between »usual and occasional« signification, although his underlying theory of meaning was a completely different one. TRAUGOTT and DASHER (2002: 16 ff.) distinguish, for example, between »coded« meaning and »utterance-type« (or »token«) meaning. However, I find it unhelpful to use the same designation for both (»meaning«), since the two are categorically different concepts.

To understand the sense of an utterance is to understand what the speaker means with it in the specific context. For this, the addressee must know the meanings of the words used. In other words, the goal of understanding an expression is to make sense of it; one prerequisite for understanding an
expression is to know its meaning. Knowing the meaning of an expression is an important part of understanding its sense, but it is not the only one. Anyone who wants to understand an expression must also be familiar with the rules of syntax and – depending on the expression – must also have more or less specific knowledge about the context, the world in general, and the person with whom he or she is communicating.

Let’s consider a simple example: When someone says *The weather is nice today*, she might mean *nice* in the sense of ›not raining and not too hot‹. If someone says *Our new neighbor is very nice*, he means something completely different with the word *nice* – ›friendly and quiet‹, perhaps. What is meant with the adjective *nice* from case to case can be very different. But we would still want to say that *nice* has precisely one meaning: I say *nice* to say of something that it pleases me, or at least does not bother me. To know this is to know the meaning of *nice*. On the basis of this knowledge, in addition to knowledge about the context and the speaker, the addressee can derive in which sense a given utterance of *nice* is meant.

It is important to note that the categories of meaning and sense are very different ones. Meaning is a rule of use. Anyone who knows the meaning of a word has a skill. Sense, on the other hand, is an intention. A person who understands the sense of an utterance recognizes what the speaker intended with it, and understands what the speaker wants of him. Or, to put it differently, a person who knows the meaning of an expression knows the communicative means, and a person who understands the sense of an utterance knows the communicative end.

When we interpret a certain utterance, we deduce the ends from the means. We see the fact that the speaker has used a certain linguistic symbol as a symptom for meaning a certain thing. So when TRAUGOTT and DASHER write »We regard the basic function of language to be to convey meaning« (Traugott/Dasher 2002: 7), I cannot agree. According to my use of language, meaning is not that what is conveyed; it is a means for conveying sense. The basic function of a language is to be a conventional means for speakers to use in getting across their intentions to addressees, or – and here I am in agreement with Traugott und Dasher – to invite the addressees to certain inferences. In every case, the addressee has to infer the intended end from the means used, both when expressions are used in the literal sense as well as when they are not.

In native languages, we normally do not learn the rules of use from explicit instructions. However, this is how we learn specialized terminology. For example, we learn the expression *primary number* by being told by someone what its conditions of use are: a number that is divisible only by 1 and by itself.
But we learn most of the rules for our vocabulary in communicative deployment. From the instances of use we experience, we form rule hypotheses inductively. And the essence of conventional rules is that people are relatively willing to modify them. To adhere to a communicative convention means to do that with which one expects the greatest success. In most cases, this in turn means that speakers make choices that they believe their addressees would make in a similar situation (cf. Lewis 1969, chap. 1).

Morphological change usually begins when speakers – for reasons of »false« analogies, for example – deviate from an established rule and, to put it simply, make a mistake. Anyone who says in German »im Herbst diesen Jahres« instead of »im Herbst dieses Jahres« makes a mistake, using »diesen« like »nächst en« or »vorigen«. At some point, we all make this »mistake«, and as of that time this form is no longer a mistake, but a newly established rule. The systematic mistakes of today are the new rules of tomorrow.

Semantic change, however, usually does not start as a »mistake.« Why is this? It is because the use of a word outside the rule is highly likely to end in misunderstanding or incomprehension. Semantic change comes about, for example, when a special use that itself conforms to the rule is newly conventionalized. I would like to demonstrate this using the adjective nice in a fictive example: Let’s imagine that from now on, speakers – for whatever reason – start using the adjective nice mainly for the weather and never for neighbors. In my country, the sense of the utterance »the weather is nice today« is highly likely to be ›today it is warm and not raining‹. Exactly this sense, if our scenario became reality, would give the word nice a new meaning ›warm and dry‹, because we formulate our rule hypotheses based on the strategy »Generalize only as far as has been generalized in the use you have experienced thus far.«

We will see in the next section that something similar has actually happened in German many times before. This process occurs when speakers begin to use a word in primarily a certain metaphorical sense. Here, too, chances are good that with time, the metaphorical sense – assuming sufficient frequency – will become the rule of a new meaning. In our context, the important thing is that in both cases, the start of semantic change is characterized not by the transgression of a rule, but by a special use that fully conforms to the rule. The sense of a certain use must always relate to the convention of use in a way that makes sense to the addressees, as otherwise they would not be able to interpret the utterance. Essentially, the ways such a use can relate are specification, metaphorization, metonymization, and conversational implicature. These are the paths by which most

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8 In actuality, the process is probably more complicated, because addressees must abductively derive the sense and inductively develop a hypothesis concerning the rule. They must therefore go back and forth between abduction and induction until they reach a satisfactory result. On induction and abduction, see Keller (1998), p. 123.
semantic change takes place. Generally speaking, we may say that semantic change occurs when a frequently used sense becomes conventionalized in a new rule of use.

4. **A FEW SELECTED EXAMPLES**

One problem in trying to find invisible-hand explanations for individual cases of semantic change is developing plausible hypotheses about the motives of the speakers. What brings speakers to use a certain word in a certain special sense so frequently that this sense can be lexicalized as a convention? Very often, the motive is their desire to express themselves politely – or, from another angle, to express themselves in such a way that their utterances cannot be interpreted as being negative. Courtesy or consideration is often the starting point for semantic change. Consider the case of the German adjective *rüstig* («spry»): a little over a hundred years ago, this word could still be applied to people of all ages to say that they were vigorous and energetic. In Daniel Sanders’s *Handwörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* of 1878, the entry under »rüstig« is »mit tüchtiger frischer Kraft ausgestattet« (endowed with capable, fresh energy). For instance, Goethe writes of a »rüstigen« son⁹ and of »rüstige und lebensfrohe« grandchildren.¹⁰ But today we can use the adjective *rüstig* in its literal sense only for older people, to say that, considering their age, they are not as frail as might be expected. Accordingly, the entry under »rüstig« in the fourth, expanded edition of Duden’s *Deutsches Universalwörterbuch* is »(despite age) still capable of performing [strenuous] tasks; not yet frail, but fresh and fit.« Clearly, what happened here is exactly the process described in the previous section with the fictive example of the adjective *nice*: a word with a relatively wide range of applicability is specifically used for the domain of older people, for whatever reason, and the specific sense that results from this usage become the rule of a new meaning.

But why did this process take place, and why at exactly the time it did? The underlying motive for the choice of expression was likely charitableness. »Still spry« sounds better than »already frail.« But why can we now no longer say of a forty-year-old that he is *rüstig* – in the sense of ›fit and healthy‹? Semantic change often has a self-accelerating effect. When a word begins to be used specifically for older people, there is the danger that using the word in the old sense could be misunderstood. Anyone who is aware of this danger, or who has unwittingly brought forth chuckles from listeners by calling a forty-year-old neighbor »rüstig«, will henceforth avoid this usage – and this, in turn, will accelerate the narrowing of the range of applicability, including the formation of a new rule of use. Now, why did this process take place exactly in the last third of the nineteenth century? For this, I

have no rational hypothesis. Maybe older people started to be perceived differently at that time? At any rate, this case shows how semantic change can be influenced by sociocultural change – not in the sense of simply reflecting it, but in the sense that extralinguistic sociocultural factors can play a role in the choice of linguistic means, which in turn can produce unintended effects in the evolution of the language (cf. Keller 1995).

The semantic change, or change in meaning, of the adjective rüstig has traditionally been categorized as a narrowing of meaning, a category that STEPHEN ULLMANN has already criticized: »What do we know about ›undertaker‹ if we are merely told that it has narrowed its signification?« 11 I would like to call this kind of change »specification of meaning (meaning specification)«, because there is one thing that is characteristic for all processes of this type: a word whose use is relatively independent of a domain, like nice, has a specific sense when used for an object from a certain domain (the weather, say). The domain-specific sense becomes the rule of a new meaning when speakers – for whatever reason – begin to use the word primarily for objects in this domain. 12

Speakers of natural languages have a creative program (cf. Nerlich/Clarke 1988) that allows them to create completely new sense with old material. We can use linguistic expressions in a non-literal sense. When we do so, we expect our addressees to take an interpretive detour. They must understand what has been said in the literal sense; ascertain that this, in the given situation or context, cannot be intended; and then search for another plausible sense that has a systematic connection with the literal sense. The most prominent systematic connections that we use here are metaphor and metonymy; both play an important part in the processes of semantic change. This is anything but coincidental, because metaphor and metonymy provide reliable solutions for any number of the standard problems of communication: for example, those who are looking for attention are always well-served with a fitting metaphor, and those who want to express themselves charitably or euphemistically can also make use of metaphorical expressions. For example, when we consider the terms of mental disability used colloquially in German, we see that all of them are former metaphors (doof [ndd. ›deaf‹], blöd [fnhd. ›weak‹]) or metonymies (beklopf, behämmert, beknackt). In the case of the two metaphors, words for physical deficits are used to refer to mental deficits, and in the case of the three metonymies, causes are named (to knock or hammer [on the head]; to have a cracked skull) to refer to their effects. While the original motive for the choice of the adjective blöd was probably charitableness – just as a teacher today might call a pupil »weak« – the main motive for the choice of the other four adjectives was most likely to attract attention.

11 Ullmann (1967), p. 205. In Keller/Kirschbaum (2003) – in order to make clear that our analyses are not based on any logic of semantic classes – we used Bierwisch’s term »differentiation«.
12 Cf. Baldinger’s analysis of the specification of meaning of the Fr. appétit (2005, p. 44).
In the adjective geil, we can observe the intertwining of the metaphorical and metonymical paths. Geile has had an amazing career in German, with the consequence that it is today both a sexual taboo word as well as being used by young people as an expression of the highest praise. Looking into Grimms dictionary and the relevant literature by RÜDIGER BRANDT (1989) and KATRIN WIEBUSCH (2003), we note that in the twelfth century, the adjective geile was still mostly used in the sense of ›cheerful‹, ›cocky‹, or ›bursting with energy‹:

»sô wart er úz der ahte stark, küene unde geile.«

[so he was extremely strong, bold, and cocky.]\(^{13}\)

»Wer hât walt sin loup benomen? Das hât winterliches twingen. Herbest, dîn geraet der swaere hilfet überwinden michel teil: in wird aber niemer geile, ich verneme ê liebiu maere.«

[Who took away the leaves of the wood? It was the might of winter. Autumn, your riches help to overcome most of the worry. But I will not be happy again until I glad tidings hear.]\(^{14}\)

Of course, even then, a word with the meaning ›cocky‹ could be used both with negative and – with a wink, as it were – sexual connotations.

»Alsô sprach ein altiu in ir geile. Der was von der minne allez ir gemüete erwagt.«

[Thus spoke the old one in her cockiness. Love had awakened all her senses.]\(^{15}\)

But this does not allow the conclusion that the word geile had already taken on a sexual meaning. Even today, cocky, for example, could be used in an erotic sense in the right context. But for Martin Luther, and generally for the contemporaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, geile already had a derogatory evaluative meaning, even though it was not yet exclusively sexual. In the first example below, a sexual interpretation of geile is out of the question, while in the second it is more likely (as the English translation confirms):

»Da er [Jakob] aber fett und satt ward, ward er geile.«\(^{16}\)

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\(^{13}\) Ulrich von Zatzikhoven (abt. 1200), Lanzelet, verse 3969, quoted from Deutsches Wörterbuch 4, p. 2582. English: my translation, R.K.

\(^{14}\) Der von Buwenburg, poem 2, verses 3-8; quoted from Bartsch (1917), pp. 257 ff. English: my translation, R.K.

\(^{15}\) Neidhart, Sommerlied 16; strophe V, quoted from Beyschlag (1975), p. 77. English: my translation, R.K.
[... the darling grew fat and frisky…]¹⁷

»Junge witwen, wenn sie geil und fürwitz worden sind [...].«¹⁸

[... younger widows, for when their sensuality estranges them from Christ [...].]¹⁹

Around the end of the seventeenth century, however, *geil* began to be used in an almost exclusively erotic or sexual sense. But it had not yet attained the status of taboo, or it would not have been used in the following examples:

»Hofmannswaldau und Lohenstein aber sind auch in diesem Stücke in die Fußstapfen der geilen Italiener getreten, die ihrer Feder so wenig als ihren Begierden ein Maß zu setzen wissen.«

[But in this piece, Hofmannswaldau and Lohenstein have followed in the footsteps of the cocky Italians, who know to practice moderation neither with their pens nor with their desires.]²⁰

»Ist das kindliche Dankbarkeit gegen väterliche Milde? Wer dem geilen Kitzel eines Augenblicks zehn Jahre eures Lebens aufopfert?«

[A child’s gratitude for a father’s tenderness? Sacrificing ten years of your life for ten minutes lustful pleasure?]²¹

The path of change cannot be finally determined in this case. If we assume that the meaning ›frisky‹ was the starting point for change leading to a sexual meaning, it is a case of specification of meaning: *geil* means ›frisky in the sexual sense‹. But if the starting point was the meaning ›cheerful, exuberant‹, it would be more logical to assume that we are dealing with a case of metaphorization: sexual lust viewed in light of psychological well-being.

In both cases, however, the intent to express oneself euphemistically will have been the motive for the choice of linguistic means. It is also possible that both paths were taken alternatively. Those who wanted to use *geil* more in the critical, derogatory sense had the meaning ›(too) frisky‹ as a
starting point, and those who wanted to be coarsely erotic – as in the following passage from a students’ song – could ply a metaphor on the basis of the meaning ›cheerful, exuberant‹:

»Komm, mein Engel, lass uns lieben, weil der Lenz der Jahre lacht [...] Unsre Glieder fühlen Feuer, und die Ader schwillt von Blut, Ja, kein Abgang unserer Stärcke schwächt uns in dem geilen Wercke [...]«

[Come, my angel, let us love, as the spring of youth laughs [...] Our members feel fire, and our veins swell with blood, Yes, no departure of our strength will weaken us in the cheerful work.][23]

To the degree in which the adjective geil is used – especially in the first half of the nineteenth century – not to describe sexual lust, but even arousal, it becomes obscene and thus a taboo word. It disappears from public literary language, and is avoided even in dictionaries (cf. Wiebusch 2003: 109). For a half a century, it ekes out a fugitive existence in the gray zone of obscene speech and clandestine literature.

How does a word become taboo? What are the specific semantics of the taboo? These are questions that, in my view, have not been satisfactorily answered. First, the rules of use for taboo words – nouns, adjectives, and verbs – are completely normal, just like the rules for other words. But superimposed on these rules are extremely rigid dictates of avoidance. For example, you are sure to reap disapproval not only if you use a taboo word, but even if you simply quote it.[24] This is probably the reason why the word geil was banned from dictionaries around in the mid-nineteenth century, and part of the reason why the semantics of taboo words are an unsolved linguistic problem.

Taboo words are obviously associated with aversion when it comes to their use, just like taboo foods are associated with disgust. In Europe, it is not illegal to eat fried grasshoppers (as people do in many parts of Asia), and I don’t avoid eating them because I don’t like their taste. In fact, I don’t even know how they taste, but still the thought of eating them disgusts me, because in Europe it is taboo to eat insects. A similar kind of disgust is associated with taboo words. It is not as simple as if they were prohibited, as it is prohibited to park in the fire zone of a hospital. There is an internalized aversion towards using them in everyday life – an aversion that is seldom acquired with the acquisition of a foreign taboo word. This is what distinguishes taboos from things that are prohibited: the avoidance of what is prohibited is externally motivated, while the avoidance of taboos is internally motivated – by aversion or disgust, for instance. How this aversion can be described in a theory of meaning, and how it arises as a result of change in meaning, I do not know.

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[24] Interestingly, some polysemous taboo words have a non-sexual variant whose use is completely harmless.
After the time of geil's transformation into a taboo word, it becomes more difficult to trace its continued semantic development. Taboo words are used primarily in oral form, and then only in situations that by nature largely escape documentation and analysis. Thus did this adjective continue to »subsist« underground until it resurfaced again around the end of the 20th century, namely as an emotive-expressive description used by young people to denote their highest praise: »ein geiles Motorrad!«. How did this happen?

For young people who want to impress and draw attention to themselves, one good strategy is to use a sexual taboo word: it is sufficiently unusual, and using it in public takes a certain amount of courage. Plus, sex sells. So it’s logical to use the adjective geil to express enthusiasm about something. But why don’t English and American youth do the same thing with the taboo word horny, Spanish youth with the taboo word caliente, and French youth with the taboo word chaud? The answer is that there is no word in English, Spanish, or French that is really the same as the German geil. Because geil – presumably in the course of its clandestine existence – underwent a semantic development that its English, Spanish, and French counterparts did not. Like other emotive-expressive German adjectives, geil underwent a process of metonymization and thus became polysemous. Like the adjective crazy, as a »normal« adjective, crazy was first used to say of a person that he was mentally unsound. But when someone says of a soccer game »That was a crazy game«, he doesn’t mean (in the metaphorical sense) that the game was mentally unsound, but that he, the viewer, became mentally unsound (in the metaphorical sense) while watching it! In other words, as a non-expressive adjective, crazy means »mentally unsound«, and as an expressive adjective, it means »making mentally unsound in the metaphorical sense«. But for crazy to make sense as a metaphor applicable to a soccer game, the metonymization from »being crazy« to »making crazy« has to have taken place. Fritz Hermanns calls adjectives that exhibit this kind of polysemy »ergative adjectives«. What goes for crazy also goes for the German adjectives irre, wahnsinnig, verrückt – and geil: you can’t say of a motorcycle (and make sense to others) that it is sexually aroused in the metaphorical sense. But it definitely makes sense to say that it is sexually arousing in the metaphorical sense, whereby the word geil, due to the frequent, public, and metaphorical nature of its use, has increasingly lost its usefulness as a taboo.

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25 I myself remember hearing the word geil used in a non-sexual sense for the first time in 1964 while I was doing the military service that is mandatory for young German men. However, it did not take long for this usage from military jargon to be co-opted by young people in general.
26 The definition in the 23rd edition (2004) of the Duden spelling dictionary is »geil (Jugendspr. auch für großartig, toll)«. 
27 My thanks to Marta Panades Guerrero for this information on Spanish usage.
28 Hermanns (1998), pp. 310 ff. He also names the German adjectives ärgerlich, froh, freudig, lustig, traurig, glücklich, melancholisch, bange, ernst, behaglich, heiter, munter, and scharf and the non-emotive adjectives gesund and warm.
We have now reached the current status of this four-letter word's semantic development. What direction will it go from here? Serious prognoses in regard to sociocultural phenomena are basically not possible, but the rational extrapolation of trends is. And since evaluative-expressive expressions serve not only to inform addressees of speakers' opinions, but to transfer them, to »infect« the addressees, high frequency is the natural enemy of such expressions. People who too frequently use expressions meant to arouse enthusiasm run the risk of losing their emotive credibility. This means that the emotive-expressive adjective geil, if it is used frequently enough, will lose more and more of its expressiveness. It will thus lose its appeal for the users of the language. Subsequently, it will either endure a mousy existence in general colloquial speech like the formerly expressive German adjective toll, or it will disappear from the German vocabulary entirely. The way in which the remaining taboo sexual uses of geil will be affected cannot be foreseen.

5. CONCLUSION

For reasons of space, I was able to select and explain just a few examples of semantic change. But those described above are highly representative. The paths of specification, metaphorization, and metonymization appear to be the most trodden. With my examples, I wanted to demonstrate three things:

1. Semantic change means that the rules of use for a word change, namely when the speakers generate an originally occasional sense so frequently that the language community re-learns the use of the word over time.

2. One way to explain semantic change is to try to develop plausible hypotheses as to why speakers prefer a certain sense and why they do or did so at a particular period in time. It is clear that in the development of a language, sociocultural influencing factors (almost) always play a part, though this cannot be understood in linear terms like a simple mirror reflection. The deeper our attempts at explanation go, the more intensively we must consider the factors of society, economy, and mentality. And additional random effects can never be fully ruled out.

3. Semantic change does not occur with the consistency that phonetic change has and presumably still does, but it definitely follows »orderly« paths. There are a number of paths besides the ones

29 In Keller/Kirschbaum (2003), p. 145, this is called »emotive persuasion«.
described in the examples above, such as irony. Orderly paths provide innovations with the necessary predictability, without which communication cannot succeed. It is not possible to foresee the paths semantic change will take in individual cases, but we are (sometimes) able to reconstruct them diagnostically after the fact, thus contributing to the understanding of our languages and the principles and processes of communication.
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