How lexical meaning evolves. Methods and models of reconstructing the change patterns of semantic categories

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The evolution of lexical semantics is an area where much research is still to be done. Over time, the meaning of words change, and this change is often unpredictable and open to a large number of options. In the presentation, lexical change will deal with nouns and verbs and their meaning change. Noun and verbs are open classes of which the only constraint is the reality of speakers, including their natural environment, cognitive preferences, and socio-cultural factors. These factors also impact the evolution and change of lexemes. In the current presentation, I will describe some of the problems and results connected to ongoing research of reconstructing the evolutionary dynamics and borrowability of lexical concepts in relation to their meaning. In addition, the presentation will talk about categorization – how nouns are categorised onto gender and noun class categories, and in which way this classification potentially is connected to borrowability and evolution. It is known that lexemes behave differently depending on their meaning. Lexemes have different substitution rates (Pagel, Atkinson, and Meade 2007), lexemes differ in their propensity for colexification (François 2008; Jackson et al. 2019), and lexical concepts have varying degrees of borrowability (Haspelmath 2009)(Carling et al. 2019). Further, evolutionary rates of concepts are varying depending on semantic class and property (Carling et al. 2023). In the presentation, these results will be connected to ongoing research on the evolutionary dynamics of gender. Linguistic gender is found in about 20% of the world's languages (Allassonnière-Tang et al. 2021), and these languages have conditions for how lexemes are assigned to gender categories (Corbett 2014, 2013). By data from the Indo-European and Arawak families I will demonstrate that the semantic core of gender assignment (i.e., cognitive factors) has an impact on the evolutionary rates of gender change in the lexicon. Apparently, core semantic properties (sexus, humanness, animacy) impact both evolutionary rates of lexemes as well as their gender categorization. A question that remains to be answered is whether cultural factors – which are known to influence borrowability (Carling et al. 2019) – also have an impact on semantic change in a larger perspective.

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