

Regularity in Semantic Change. Onomatopoeias as Centers of Expansion in Romance Languages

Review

Simona GEORGESCU

La regularidad en el cambio semántico. Las onomatopeyas en cuanto centros de expansión en las lenguas románicas. (2021): Strasbourg, Éditions de Linguistique et de Philologie

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After two centuries of Romance linguistics, one might assume there is nothing left to discover: each Romance language has been studied synchronically and diachronically, compared to other languages and varieties, analyzed and dissected to its finest atoms. Nevertheless, there are still plenty of grey areas that may benefit from a historical and comparative approach, especially in the field of etymology, where dictionaries sometimes show hesitations about the origin of certain lexemes and list them with an unknown / uncertain etymology, as expressive formations or as elements inherited from an obscure substratum.

Compared linguistics might shed some light upon the issue, and several studies have shown that there is more than one approach to the matter. Recently, the Society of Romance Linguistics has published an outstanding work authored by Simona Georgescu, which is entitled *Regularity in Semantic Change. Onomatopoeias as Centers of Expansion in Romance Languages (La regularidad en el cambio semántico. Las onomatopeyas en cuanto centros de expansión en las lenguas románicas, Éditions de Linguistique et de Philologie, Strasbourg, 2021)*.

The research traces the recurrent semantic-cognitive schemes that determine the evolution of onomatopoeias from a typological perspective, and later applies such schemes within the Romance language family in order to identify the etymology of words of an obscure origin. The author first observes that there are certain conceptual areas which, recurrently and regardless of language, contain a

large number of lexemes whose origin is unknown. This category includes Romance terms that refer to, for example, various types of “spherical objects”, “protrusions”, “cavities” or “small animals” (such as frogs or lizards).

Etymological dictionaries often accept with resignation the apparent impossibility of identifying the origin of the terms, either by offering a compromise solution or by applying the label of “expressive creations”. However, as the author points out, this etymological difficulty perpetuated from one dictionary to another is not accidental, since it derives from the chronic habit of ignoring semantics in etymological investigations.

Simona Georgescu revives the century-old observations in Hermann Hilmer’s works that had been ignored by linguists, explores and capitalizes these old perspectives and manages to reinterpret them from the perspective of recent linguistic theories. Hilmer’s work forms the basis of her theoretical model, but she proposes a new, innovative method of research by placing historical semantics in the foreground and rejecting the traditional etymological approach. The latter sought almost exclusively to explain the phonetic form by applying the classical laws of evolution, while semantic change was interpreted at will, with the mere intention to find the slightest justification for the proposed etymology. Georgescu’s book changes this perspective by favoring the concept over the form.

The theoretical basis of this approach is cognitive semantics, whose principles are clearly and concisely described in the first part of the work. Reviewing the most important theories on the cognitive and experiential foundations that underlie the change of meaning, Simona Georgescu aims, among other things, to provide an answer to the question posed by Peter Koch in 2000: are there any cognitive universals that are strong enough to guide, like an invisible hand, the innovations speakers bring on designation and consequently the permanent changes in designation?

In her quest for a viable conclusion, Simona Georgescu starts by analyzing a significant number of empirical data from various Indo-European languages, which prove that semantic evolutions are not chaotic – as assumed in traditional studies – but fall into certain patterns that are valid regardless of time and space. After observing certain meanings in a recurrently polysemous relationship, such as “blow”, “spherical object”, “instrument”, “fragment”, “protuberance”, “cavity”, etc. and, at the same time, the repetition of the same concepts within etymological families, the author establishes a coherent system of semantic trajectories that encompass these seemingly divergent meanings, and thus manages to explain the cognitive connections between them. Thus, the investigation based on numerous examples excerpted from different languages highlights the fact that an original

semantic core, represented by the concept of “sudden and violent movement” (“blow”, “cut”, “fall”), is the basis for the evolution in two general directions:

- an object involved in the movement: e. g. a falling object (most often a fruit, hence “spherical object”), an instrument used for applying the blow (cudgel, hammer etc.);

- the result of the movement: a fragment obtained from a cut, blow, break; a protuberance seen either as a remnant of a cut object (e. g. stump) or as a projection of an object after the impact with a malleable surface; a trace (left, for example, by a falling object, such as a stain); a cavity (the reverse of the protrusion due to the impact of a body with a surface); a trait (resulting as an effect of such a sudden movement, for example “pointless”, “hornless”, “blunt” – hence, metaphorically, “stupid”, “rude” etc.).

After analyzing this basic concept of “sudden movement” from a typological perspective, the author points out that its verbalization is done instinctively through an onomatopoeia that reproduces the acoustic impression it causes. Thus, it is fair to say that onomatopoeias are some of the most prolific centers of semantic expansion, as the trajectories she identifies outline a well-defined cognitive network with an acoustic sensation as its core.

Based on this network of semantic evolutions, it is possible to advance towards the etymological identification of many lexemes that were presented by dictionaries as having an uncertain origin. This concrete application of the schemes on the lexis with unknown etymology constitutes the second part of the work, in which four etymological families are analyzed, derived from the following roots: **bott-/*butt-*, **tokk-*, **takk-*, **tšott-/*tšutt-*.

In order to ensure a scientific approach to etymology, the author consistently uses the comparative grammar/ reconstruction method, based on the model used in the new *Dictionnaire Étymologique Roman* (DÉRom, <http://www.atilf.fr/DERom>) for the reconstruction of the Old Romance lexis.

Thus, the first step is to identify all the Romance terms that belong to a family. It is precisely this etymological identification that has presented the most difficulties so far, as many words whose phonetic structure undoubtedly indicated a genetic relationship have formerly been separated from their cognates due to an apparent semantic divergence. Or, by proving that all their meanings actually fit inside a single cognitive network, Simona Georgescu manages to establish etymological relationships between words that, not infrequently, appeared in dictionaries as having completely different origins. Also, the trajectories she identified as recurrent in the semantic evolution demonstrate that certain meanings recorded in lexicography as belonging to homonyms are, in fact, polysemy

relationships. Actually, by identifying an original semantic nucleus, the identity between lexemes considered of different origins becomes evident.

After a detailed analysis, the author proposes, at the end of each chapter of the second part of the book, the reconstruction of some Old Romance lexemes whose semantics justify all further developments. The applied chapters, consisting in the actual interpretations and results of the research, investigate a corpus excerpted from numerous sources (lexicographic and other), which illustrates the particular situation of the lexemes and roots in diverse Romance languages and dialects.

Simona Georgescu achieves her goals both in the reconstruction of the etymology of some frequently used Romance lexemes and in the establishment of the bases for a new method of investigation in compared lexicology – or in historical semantics, to be more accurate. Her research is reliable and rigorous, well documented and supported by logical inferences, so it is fair to assume that it will become the foundation for other researches in this scientific field.

References:

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