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THE INFLUENCE OF CONTEXTUAL FACTORS
UPON THE SEMANTICS OF SELLY

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the impact of contextual factors upon the semantic development of *selly* (PDE 'silly'). The analysis is a cognitively oriented study based on *The Canterbury Tales*. The paper will emphasise the role of context, the contextual implications, and the metonymic shifts that led to the gradual changes in *selly*. It will be demonstrated that the senses in the conceptual framework of *selly* are not distinct and unconnected, but rather, are in close semantic proximity, while the borders between the emerging senses are not fixed, but are fuzzy and difficult to delineate. The overall process will be shown to be one that is complex, gradual and slow, characterised by the synchronic coexistence of various senses, and highly contingent on the role of context, rather than a dynamic one that could be explained solely by means of metaphor.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper explores the semantics of Middle English *selly* (PDE 'silly'), thus a word which was subject to pejoration. The analysis attempts to account for the processes, whereby a word which originally evoked the positive sense of 'happy' or 'blessed', started to acquire unfavourable connotations, such as 'wretched', 'unfavourable' or 'miserable'. The aims of the paper are the following:

The present study is cognitively oriented, so the semantics of *selly* will not be separated from its etymological, cultural and semantic contexts. The suggested conceptualisation of *selly* will not reflect objective reality, but rather a mental reality. The paper will thus reflect the widely-held idea that the former sharp distinction between linguistic knowledge, and thus a knowledge of linguistic categories, and an encyclopaedic one, stemming from the acquisition of culture, should be abandoned. The way humans use lexical categories is always conditioned by the cultural background in which such lexical categories have been acquired. Hence, the borderline between the two formerly rigidly defined types of knowledge becomes blurred, a consequence of which is one type of knowledge affecting the concept formation. Various linguists have emphasised the active role of experience in the human perception of concepts. Langacker (1987) uses

the term *degree of entrenchment* to refer to the extent to which people highlight and downgrade the semantic properties of concepts as a result of their interaction with the corresponding entities or events. Lakoff (1982) discusses ICM (Idealised Cogntive Models) (Lakoff 1982), which constitute idealised, conventional schema that are heavily laden with the cultural stereotypes of a particular society and do not fit external world directly. Grzegorczykowa (1993) stresses the term *global patterns of knowledge* to refer to the categorisation of reality. Similarly, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1985: 306) emphasises that cognitive categories are associated with cultural specificity, personal experience, recurring salient contextual features and language-specific discourse organisation. Moreover, she indicates that the ability to form concepts and the ability to conceive of and interpret diverse phenomena is unquestionably a cognitive universal.

Secondly, the analysis will suggest that *selly* originally denoted a less evaluative, and hence, a less abstract sense when compared with latter senses, which reflects the tendencies related to the unidirectionality of semantic change (Traugott 1989; Sweetser 1990). The study will show that new senses in the lexeme *selly* can coexist synchronically, which is in agreement with the idea of *layering* (Hopper 1991). The aim of the analysis will therefore point to a variety of senses existing side by side. The paper will also try to distinguish which senses are central and peripheral in the conceptual framework of *selly*, as well as establish the mode of the contexts where the marginal senses were put.

Moreover, the paper will emphasise the role of conventionalisation of conversational implicature in the emergence of new senses, in line with Grice's analysis of implicational inferences. He claims that they are not due to lexical meanings alone, but due to lexical meanings together with implicatures: "It may not be implausible for what starts life, so to speak, as conversational implicature to become conventionalised" (1975: 58). Hence, the semantic analysis of *selly* will be shown as a slow and a gradual process affected by the contextual implications in the discourse. Dahl (1985), advocates the similar idea that conversational implicature contributes to the original meaning of a category, and consequently becomes a part of a new meaning.

Furthermore, the study will attempt to relate the role of the pragmaticalisation of conversational implicature to a purely metonymic process (Panther and Thornburg 1999). Panther and Thornburg describe this kind of inference as the POTENTIALITY FOR ACTUALITY. They emphasise that the conceptual relationship between a named and an implied entity is based on contiguity, and thereby on metonymy. Moreover, the implicature itself rests on the Grice's second maxim of Quality – Say no more than you must and mean more thereby. In other words, Panther and Thornburg view the emergence of a new sense in terms of the pragmaticalisation of the implicature, and thus of the implied meaning by the utterer. What takes place is the development of a semantic link between the named and implied entity in the mind of a conceptualiser.

The analysis is based on all texts of Caxton's *The Canterbury Tales*: *The British Library Copies* (ed. by Barbara Bordalejo), which is a CD-Rom that contains the first full-colour facsimiles of all copies of Willliam Caxton's first and second editions of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The semantic analysis focuses on all the contexts and phrases in which *selly* was recorded, and views them from a cognitive perspective. The paper also takes data from the *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (1882), edited by Walter W. Skeat, and from the *Middle English Dictionary* (1925).

2. THE ETYMOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF *SELLY*

According to the *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (CEDEL, sv. *silly*), *silly* originates from PIE base *sel* – 'happy'. In the Anglo-Saxon period, *selly* had the form of *gesælig*, which denoted 'happy, blessed.' Its recorded cognates point to the following senses; O.N. *sæl* 'happy', Goth. *sels* 'good, kind-hearted', as well as O.S. *salig*, M.Du. *salich*, OHG *salig* and Ger *selig*, all of which stood for 'blessed, happy, blissful'.

Furthermore, the available data from the CEDEL record the following time-span for the emergence of the various senses of *silly*:

– innocent (c. 1200)
– harmless, pitiable (late 13c)
– weak (c. 1300)
– feeble in mind, lacking in reason, foolish (1570)

As has already been mentioned, the present study is based on *The Canterbury Tales* and explores the semantics of Middle English *selly* with a view to accounting for the reasons underlying the emergence of new senses in the analysed lexeme. According to the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED, sv. *selly*), *selly* contained the following senses in the Middle English period:

I
    a) spiritually favoured, blessed
    b) worth, fine, noble, virtuous
    c) happy, bringing happiness

II
    a) innocent; harmless; good
    b) simple, guileless, foolish, gullible, doting, ignorant
    c) weak, helpless, defenseless

III
    a) wretched, unfortunate, miserable, pitiable
    b) humble, lowly, poor
    c) worthless, trifling, insignificant

One can view these stages (I, II, and III) as a path to the development of greater subjectivity. Although in all stages, *selly* had an abstract sense, the changes in meaning are undeniable. In all of them, *selly* expresses various aspects of reality. In (I), *selly* is the least judgmental, as the evaluation is based on more objective criteria, that is, on the canon of norms which may qualify a person as happy, rather than on subjective judgments. It should be emphasised that the concept of happiness was grounded in religion and had a different dimension than the contemporary understanding of the idea of happiness. There was a close link between being moral, virtuous and happy. Moreover, in stage (I), a variety of lexemes are provided, which seem to be synonymous once one takes into account the medieval system of values. Hence, a happy person evoked connotations of the one who is spiritually favoured and blessed, but also worthy, fine, noble and virtuous. In other words, the rendition of someone as a happy person did not reflect a subjective, egocentric approach to the concept of happiness based on the individual's inner feeling of satisfaction or self-commitment, but rather it encoded a normative character and a system of norms in light of which a person could be referred to as happy, and therefore blessed. The senses in (II) constitute an intermediate stage. They are more evaluative than the senses in (I), but nevertheless not as judgmental as the senses in stage (III). Moreover, the senses in (II) can be characterised by a changing level of subjectivity as they encode different attitudes to the person described. The sense 'innocent' is positive and based on religious values, and, thus, on a corresponding system of norms, whereas the senses 'gullible', 'doting' or 'helpless' involve an increase in the coding of the speaker's attitude. They are more evaluative and critical towards the person being referred to. In other words, within stage (II) two instantiations can be observed. The first one is connected with the concept of 'innocence' and evokes such associations as harmlessness and goodness. The other line is related to the concept of 'gullibility', and thereby in proximity with 'foolishness', 'ignorance' or even 'helplessness'. These senses are epistemic and subjective as they do not take social norms, customs or propriety as a point of reference, but a subjective judgment.

3. SENSES OF *SELLY* RELATED TO STAGE ONE

According to the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED, sv. *selly*), *selly* could denote the following senses; spiritually favoured, blessed, worthy, fine, noble,

virtuous, happy, and bringing happiness, thus the senses which belong to stage (I). *The Canterbury Tales* records only one sense whose meaning can be identified with stage (I):

(1) *That man shal yelde to his wyf her dette*
Where which sholde he make his payement
Yf he ne usid his sely instrument (The Wife of Bath's Prologue 132).
(That man should yield to his wife her debt; how else should he make his payment; if he didn't use his blessed instrument).

The analysis of this context shows that the sense 'happy, blessed' in the conceptual framework of *selly* in *The Canterbury Tales* was quite obsolete or even archaic. To begin with, as has already been mentioned, the corpus records only one context in which *selly* denoted the early sense. Secondly, this context was quite satirical and humorous which points to more marginal uses of this sense. Moreover, due to the grotesque background, the meaning of *selly* could be rendered as frivolous rather than as happy or blessed. The sense 'happy' in the analysed context is far from the medieval understanding of happy/blessed where it was commonly linked with the human soul and religious values. Chaucer thus uses the technique of playing with words. He takes lexemes which were grounded in the social, normative sphere and gives them a different tone, thereby modifying the conventional, socio-cultural core meaning of the early sense.

Nevertheless, the approach to the early unmodified core meaning of *selly* – 'happy/blessed' from the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED, sv. *seli*), shows that it corresponds to the socio-physical world of reference. Consequently, the meaning can act as a reference point for the development of other more abstract senses. Traugott recapitulates the process of the emergence of abstract senses in the following way:

> If the meaning of a lexical item or construction is grounded in the socio-physical world of reference, it is likely that over time speakers will develop polysemies that are grounded in the speaker's reasoning, belief, or meta-textual attitude to the discourse (Traugott 1999: 179).

The data from the *Middle English Dictionary* reflect the common understanding of the sense 'happy/blessed' in *selly*, which can be exemplified by the following contexts:

(2) *He þurh seli martyrdom uerden to Criste* (St. Katherine of Alexandria (1) Bod 34: 74/517).
(Through blessed/happy martyrdom, he went to Christ).
(3) *Tressur of heuene þou scalt habbe*
He is celi þat hit getet (Sermon of the Anniversary of Saint Nicholas Trin-C B.14.39: 66/113).

(You shall have a treasure of heaven; Blessed/happy will be the one that will get it).
(4) *Cely art thou, hooli virgyne marie, and worthiest al maner preising* (Primer: Lay Folks' Prayer Book Add366683: 13).
(Blessed you are, Holy Virgin Mary and the most praiseworthy).

In these contexts, the concept of happiness was grounded in religion and based on objective values. It reflected a close link between being moral, virtuous and happy.

4. SENSES OF *SELLY* RELATED TO STAGE II

Within stage (II), a distinction can be drawn between the senses that referred to the concepts of *innocence* and *gullibility*. These senses were the most frequently recorded in the corpus.

With regard to the sense of *innocence*, the corpus records the following contexts:

(5) *For sely child wol alwey soone lere* (The Prioress Tale 60).
(For the innocent child will always learn soon).
(6) *For drede of wreche saue Constance alone*
Greet was the drede and eke the repentaunce
Of him that hadde wrong suspection
Up on this sely Inocent Constaunce (…)
The fals knight was slayn for his untrouthe (The Man of Law's Prologue 581-589).
(From the dread of punishment save Constance alone; great was the dread and also the repentance of the one who had the wrong suspicion of the Innocent Constance).

In these contexts, the meaning of *selly*, that is 'innocence', is grounded in the religious sphere, and is thus based on objectivity. The idea of being innocent was strictly linked with being inexperienced and therefore sinless. From this perspective, the attribute of a lack of experience evoked positive associations related to a lack of opportunities to sin. In other words, by referring to someone as innocent, the utterer implied that a person is sinless, moral and virtuous. Moreover, the speaker based his/her judgment on the common religious code of morality rather than on his/her individual assessments based on an autonomous system of values.

The analysis of both types of contexts, that is contexts in which *selly* denoted 'happy/blessed' (line 2,3,4) and 'innocent' (line 5,6) leads to the following conclusions.

To begin with, both senses are normative and do not rely on subjective judgments, thereby being linked with a socio-physical sphere. Secondly, the dividing line between both senses is blurred, as both senses implied similar associations. Consequently, common ground can be found that unites both senses. A person who was happy or blessed was also assumed to be moral, innocent, and sinless. These attributes were an essential prerequisite to being happy/blessed. Being 'blessed' was associated with being 'innocent'. In other words, being innocent does not seem to be a totally new meaning, but one of the attributes encoded in the idea of being 'blessed'. A person could not be blessed if he/she committed sins, and thus was not innocent. Moreover, both senses evoked highly positive associations, and were correlated with grace from God. The difference is that in the former sense 'happy/blessed', the most prominent element was put on the result, which was life in merriment with God. If a person was blessed, it meant that he/she could enjoy grace from God. At that stage, being innocent was on the level of implication. In the latter sense, attention was drawn to the cause, hence what a person should do in order to be blessed. Hence, an element that was only implied in the sense 'blessed' became a conventional part of the meaning when put into a new context. In other words, the implication was that *if you are innocent you will be blessed and you will enjoy grace from God.*

Furthermore, the mechanism that accounts for the gradual shift in meaning was the process of metonymy where the cause (being innocent, lacking in experience) stands for the result (being blessed). As has already been emphasised, the link between the two senses was very strong. Approaching the contexts where *selly* denoted 'blessed/ happy', it is quite striking that the concept of being blessed was contingent on being innocent. The frequent correlation and juxtaposition of 'being blessed' and 'being innocent' might have led to the gradual shift in meaning as the idea of being innocent was not conceptually far from being blessed, but was even contiguous to that sense. Medieval speakers thus seemed to equate the two senses. Consequently, by referring to a person as *selly,* a speaker might have been claiming that he/she is not only innocent, but could also have been implying that he/she would be blessed. Moreover, one can also account for a variety of contextual factors that were conducive to the shift in meaning. Namely, there were contexts recorded where *selly* was linked with *innocent* (line 5). Such collocations could have led to the establishment of synonymous relations between the two adjectives. Secondly, *selly* was frequently used as a modifying adjective to describe children and women. Children are believed to be innocent, while for women, the ideal was a woman who was innocent and virtuous. The frequent juxtaposition of *selly* with both children and women might have contributed to the increase in terms of prominence of the attribute of innocence in the concep-

tual framework of *selly*. Hence, the element of innocence which at some point was only one of the attributes in the semantics of *selly* became a prominent element under the conducive contextual conditions.

With regard to the sense of *gullibility* or *foolishness* the corpus records the following contexts:

(7) *The sely housbonde algate he moot paye* (The Shipman's Tale 11).
(The gullible husband by all means should pay).
(8) *The sely tunge may rynge and chymbe of wrecchednesse that passed is ful yore* (The Reeve's Tale 170).
(The gullible tongue may ring and chime of wretchedness that past long time ago).
(9) *And eke hendy Nicholas and Alison*
Acordid be fully to this conclusion
That Nicholas shal shapen hym a wyle
This sely ielous husband to begyle (The Miller's Tale 215-218).
(And moreover, the courteous Nicholas and Alison fully agreed on this conclusion that Nicholas should shape him for a while in order to beguile this gullible and jealous husband).

Contrary to the sense of 'innocence', the sense of 'gullibility' is marked by subjective judgment, and not by the canon of norms rooted in religious values. Thus, stage (II) constitutes an intermediate stage as it contains senses which are based on objectivity ('innocence') as well as ones marked by subjective judgment (gullibility). Approaching these changes in light of grammaticalisation tendencies, the emergence of the epistemic sense related to 'gullibility' corresponds to Tendency I (Traugott 1989):

Meaning based on the external described situation > meaning based on the internal situation

The shift reflects a change from concrete, easily identifiable elements to more abstract, cognitive ones. The new sense is emotionally marked. The direction accompanying the shift is cognitively oriented and proceeds along the subjective axis. Moreover, the juxtaposition of 'innocence' and 'gullibility' reflects a common semantic plane between the two senses. The element that is shared by 'innocence' and 'gullibility' is the idea of being 'inexperienced'. A lack of experience, when mapped on the religious sphere, evokes positive connotations, such as 'purity' and being 'sinless'. The same attribute, however, that is, 'being inexperienced', when related to contexts different than religious ones, implies negative connotations. A person who is 'inexperienced' is also gullible, ignorant, and

easy to manipulate. Consequently, contextual and attitudinal differences contributed to the conventionalisation of a new meaning, which initially was only on the level of implication. Stubbs refers to the concept of implication and the active role of a speaker (or writer) with regard to development of new senses:

> Whenever speakers (or writers) say anything , they encode their point of view toward it; whether they think it is a reasonable thing to say, or might be found to be obvious, irrelevant, impolite or whatever (Stubbs 1986: 1).

According to Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1985: 310), the conventional socio-cultural core of meaning internalised in the individual acts as a rough point of reference in the interaction. Nevertheless, as Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk stresses, this core meaning becomes subject to some modifications by both the language user's private experience and by the properties of the context. In this way, a meaning that was only implied becomes a new, conventional meaning. Consequently, language constantly changes as a result of changing priorities, cultural models, and human social interaction. The conception of a language as a dynamic and ever-changing tool is illustrated by Coseriu:

> Language is, rather than a product (ergon), a process (energeia) that exists virtually in the speaker's mind as a mere potentiality (dynamism) and finds reality only in concrete utterances. While communicating, we reify what is in our mind and thereby reinvent language every time we speak. Speaking and writing, of course, is the only way to introduce innovations that might be adopted by other speakers and thus become new language rules (Coseriu 1958: 44-46).

As has already been mentioned, the emergence of new senses can be conceived in terms of the pragmaticalisation of an implicature, that is, an implied meaning by the utterer. Panther and Thornburg refer to this mechanism as the POTENTIALITY FOR ACTUALITY. In other words, they view the process of the conventionalisation of the formerly implied meaning as a metonymous process based on contiguity. In the analysed lexeme *selly*, the actual, core meaning in the corpus was 'innocent', while the potential, implied meaning was 'not having enough wit or common sense, ignorant'. The process whereby the implied sense – 'ignorant/ gullible', and hence a sense that was initially only a contextual variant of the earlier core sense of 'innocent', becomes a fixed sense, and can be referred to as a metonymous process. Furthermore, the initially implied sense performed the role of a euphemism. *Selly*, which initially denoted positive associations such as 'happy/blessed' and 'innocent' started to be applied in a circuitous and polite way to the descriptions of people or activities that were perceived as negative. People used epithets imbued with positive values in order to avoid being called impertinent or rude. Consequently, *selly* gradually started to lose positive associations in favour of negative ones.

Moreover, the development of the sense 'gullible' in *selly* can be attributed to the mechanism of the conventionalisation of conversational implicature based

on a metonymic relationship that includes the POTENTIALITY FOR ACTUAL-ITY, and which becomes the source of the emerging metaphor, that is a metaphor based on metonymy (Raddden 2000: 98). The metaphoric reading can be received after a juxtaposition of the senses grounded in objectivity, namely 'happy/blessed' and 'innocent', with the sense rooted in subjectivity, that is, 'gullible.' In other words, what took place was an increase in the level of abstractness that accompanied the lexeme *selly* in the process of the development of new senses.

5. SENSES OF *SELLY* RELATED TO STAGE III

With regard to the senses attributed to stage III, that is, 'wretchedness', 'misery' or 'worthlessness', *The Canterbury Tales* records the following contexts:

(10) *He starith and woodith in his aduertence*
To whom almache sayde o sely wrecche
Ne wotist thou not how fer my might may strecche (The Nun's Tale 468-469).
(He stares and goes mad in his attention; to whom everybody said – o worthless wretch;
you don't know how far my might may stretch).
(11) *This sely widow and hir deughtris two*
Herden the hennys crye and make woo (The Nun's Priest's Tale 555-556).
(The wretched/miserable widow and her two daughters heard the hens cry and made lamentation).

These contexts reflect a high level of subjectivity. The speaker overtly expresses a critical judgment in light of his his/her own attitude toward a person that is the subject of his/her considerations. The meaning of *selly* is highly pejorative, and corresponds to Tendency III (Traugott 1989), which states:

Meanings tend to be increasingly situated in the speaker's subjective belief state and attitude toward a proposition.

Hence, *selly* does not perform the role of an euphemistic understatement, as in case of the change from 'innocent' to 'gullible', where 'innocent' was a highly positive term. Regarding the shift from 'gullible' to 'wretched' or 'miserable, the sense 'gullible' was already negative prior to the emergence of the senses 'wretched', 'miserable' or 'pitiable'. The rendition of a person as gullible could not thus be perceived as a polite epithet that could have an additional, underly-

ing meaning between the lines. It does not mean that the factor of implication does not affect the emergence of a new sense, but only that this implication was evoked via a sense that already had a negative colouring. Consequently, what took place was a gradual increase in the level of subjectivity and negative undertones due to connotations revolving around the sense of 'gullible'. Being gullible may thus evoke connotations of being miserable, pitiable or wretched.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the present paper has been to explore the influence of contextual factors upon the semantics of *selly* (PDE 'silly'). The analysis attempted to account for the process whereby a word which originally evoked the positive sense of 'happy/blessed' came to acquire negative connotations, such as 'wretched', 'unfortunate', or 'miserable'.

The present study has been cognitively oriented. The paper approached the semantics of *selly* on the etymological, cultural and semantic planes in order to show that cognitive categories are associated with cultural specificity, personal experience, recurring salient features and discourse organisation (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1985: 306).

The paper emphasised the role of context and the contextual implications that led to the gradual changes in the analysed lexeme. Hence, contextual factors and the metonymic shift THE CAUSE STANDS FOR THE RESULT accompanied the semantic shift of the sense 'happy/blessed' into the sense 'innocent'. The whole process was thus only metonymic, and not metonymic based on metaphor, as both senses belonged to the same domain and were in semantic proximity. In the second stage, the impact of conversational implicature highly affected the emergence of the sense 'gullible' out of the positive sense 'innocent '. Hence, at some point, *selly* performed the role of a euphemism. In the third stage, *selly* underwent a further process of subjectification, which was also precipitated by contextual implications, yet was of different mode when compared with the previous stage. This change was metaphorical based on metonymy, as what took place was an increase in the level of subjectivity and abstractness. The postulated metonymic link was the POTENTIALITY FOR ACTUALITY (Panther and Thornburg 1999). Such a perceived model of *selly* gives rise to a holistic and coherent picture in which various elements are interrelated. The senses are not distinct and unconnected, but are in close semantic proximity, while the borders between the emerging senses out of the fixed ones are fuzzy and difficult to delineate. All in all, the whole process has been shown to be complex, gradual and slow, characterised by the synchronic coexistence of various senses and highly contingent on the role of context, rather than a dynamic process that could be

explained only by means of metaphor. The study showed that new senses in the lexeme *selly* could coexist synchronically, which is in agreement with the idea of layering (Hopper 1991). Moreover, regarding the frequency of senses of *selly* in *The Canterbury Tales*, happy/*blessed* (stage I) was used marginally and in satirical contexts, and was thereby obsolete. The senses in stage (III) were also rare as they were still in the process of coming into being. Senses in stage (II) were fixed and therefore frequently recorded.

The study also suggests that *selly* originally denoted a less evaluative, and hence a less abstract sense when compared with the latter senses, which reflects tendencies related to the unidirectionality of semantic change (Traugott 1989; Sweetser 1990). The senses that belonged to stage (I), that is *happy/blessed*, were the least epistemic, as they were based on objective criteria rooted in religious values. The senses from stage (II) constituted an intermediate stage as they were characterised by a different level of subjectivity. The sense 'innocent' was still based on religious values, whereas 'gullible' was more evaluative and involved an increase in the coding of the speaker's attitude. The senses that belonged to stage (III) were the most evaluative, judgmental and subjective.

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