PAPER 7 (HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS)
SEMANTIC CHANGE

There is a considerable disagreement among scholars on the classification and terminology of semantic change. According to Millet, who classified semantic change on the basis of the ultimate causes, there are three types of semantic change- 'changes due to linguistic reasons', 'changes due to historical reasons', and 'changes due to social stratification.' A more comprehensive classification has been given by Stephen Ullman in his book "The Principles of Semantics", in which he tries to fuse the 'logico-rhetorical', generic, casual, empirical and functional approaches in a broad manner. According to him, semantic change may be broadly divided into two categories -changes due to 'linguistic conservatism', and changes due to 'linguistic innovation'. But the most acceptable classification of semantic change has been made by Lehmann. According to him, semantic change occurs due to:
1. Reduction in context
2. Expansion in context, and
3. Alteration in context.

REDUCTION IN CONTEXT

As the context of words is reduced, they often survive in restricted patterns, or with former peripheral meanings. For the Greek, 'myth' meant 'story'; for us it is a special kind of story, whose truth exists largely in the imagination. Formerly in English 'ghost' meant 'spirit', a meaning surviving in the specialized context Holy Ghost and evident in the German cognate Geist.

Such narrowings may sometimes be ascribed to omission of a modifier. The word 'undertaker' once meant in English 'one who undertakes', 'an energetic promoter'. One translation of the twenty third psalm began "The Lord is my undertaker." A common context in which it was used was that of 'funeral undertaker'; funeral then was omitted, and until Morticians thought they could sweeten their trade with a new name, the chief context for undertaker was for men who assisted in obsequies for the dead.

We may cite a similar example of restriction of meaning from Sanskrit. In the Vedas, the Sanskrit word 'Rudra' was used for several gods - Agni (fire), Mitra (the sun), Varuna (the wind), Shiv, Pusha, Soma, etc., but now it is used only for Shiva. An instance from Hindi is the word 'duhita' which originally meant any maid who milked the cows, but in course of time it has come to mean 'daughter' (as restriction resulting from loss of words we may cite fall 'autumn' form 'fall of leaves', private lowest ranking soldier' from 'private soldier'.)

Whatever the process leading to restrictions may be, many further such examples could be cited.

EXPANSION IN CONTEXT

Other words may be expanded in possibility of context. With the proliferation of the 'haves' the term 'pool' or 'swimming pool' has experienced a broad increase in distribution, as did earlier 'garage' at the expense of 'stable'. The term 'plane' was formerly found largely in modest contexts of scientific material but it is now used for 'airplane' also. Similarly, a 'picture' formerly was something painted but now we have our picture taken with a photographic camera.

Examples of expansion in meaning may be cited from Hindi also. The Hindi word 'pravin' originally meant 'one who was skilled in playing a musical instrument called 'Veena' in Hindi, but now it has come to mean a 'person skilled in anything'. Similarly the Hindi word 'syahi' (ink) was originally used only for 'black ink', but in course of time it has come to mean ink of any color - black, or blue, or red, etc.

Such expansions may also be noted for entities with a specific meaning which are not words or even morphemes. In English the 'fl' - cluster has been extended widely as in flame, flare, flap, flex, flicker,, flounce, flutter, all of which have the meaning of motion, generally rapid.

ALTERATION OF CONTEXT

With the tremendous number of geographical, technical and social dialects and their interaction in the complex languages of today, semantic change by alteration of context is readily attested. If we are in contact with professionals in housing, we may acquire terms like 'split level', 'cape cod Bungalow', or extend our use of 'estate' and 'ranch' to a plot of an acre or less in a new housing development.

Often the shift is from a serene to an emotionally active context, which corresponds to the hyperbole of literary analysis. 'Astonish' somewhat like 'stun', once meant 'strike by thunder'. Such shifts seem to lead a less vivid meaning, as may be illustrated by words of strong assent, e.g. 'certainly', 'surely', 'indeed', which today have less force than does 'yes'.

Shifts of context which bring about shifts of meaning provide the simplest examples by which we may explain semantic change. When a real state agent reaches for a term from a different context, such as 'broker', he has brought about a shift in meaning - which may be followed by another if the attitude of the general public towards real state brokers remains unchanged. Similarly when a stony lake side lot is widely advertised as an estate, brokers undermine with their own status that of a segment of the language.

Some shifts represent general, cultural or geographical changes, rather than those introduced by a class of imaginative speakers. When people from Britain settled in America, they gave a red-breasted thrus the name of their 'robin', a much smaller bird with similar coloring. A 'holiday' is not merely a sacred festival day any longer, but rather any say in which one engages in more than usually vigorous activities.

Transfer or shift of meaning can also be found in Hindi. Hindi 'mon' once meant 'the conduct of a muni' (saint), but now it means 'silence'.