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***Annotation:** study and classification of the lexical-semantic field as a less learnt lexical item is an urgent linguistic problem. In the context of this topic one of the key points is the psychological concept of understanding the meaning of the word itself on the example of perspective such as the well-known linguist M.Breal. The consideration of his concept leads to a deeper and more detailed understanding of the problem and the notion “word”.*

***Key words:** variety, semantics, meaning, mechanism, understanding, psychological, characterize, methodological idea, language law, improvement.*

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***Анотація:** В наш час актуальною проблемою мовознавства є вивчення та класифікація лексико-семантичного кола як найменш дослідженої лексичної одиниці. У контексті даної теми одним із значимих моментів виступає психологічна концепція розуміння змісту слова як такого на прикладі такого відомого лінгвіста як М.Бреаль. Дослідження його концепції сприяє більш глибокому та детальному розумінню даної проблеми та суті самого поняття «слово».*

***Ключові слова:** різноманітність, семантика, значення, механізм, розуміння, психологічний, характеризувати, методологічна ідея, мовний закон, удосконалення.*

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ФІЛОЛОГІЧНІ НАУКИ

(Теоретичні та методологічні проблеми дослідження мови)

THE NATURE OF MEANING. BREAL'S CONCEPT OF MEANING AND MIND

At the beginning of his *Griechische Bedeutungslehre*, Max Hecht sums up the disciplinary position of historical-philological semantics (1888: 5):

Insofern sie zugunsten der Lexikographie die Bedeutungen in zeitlicher Folge ordnet und im Interesse der Etymologie die Gesetze der Bedeutungsänderung aufstellt, hat sie sprachwissenschaftlichen Wert. Soweit sie aber diese Gesetze aus der Natur des Geistes herleitet und eine Geschichte der Vorstellungen gibt – Bedeutungen sind Vorstellungen – , fällt sie auf das Gebiet der empirischen Psychologie. [2, p. 5]

(Semantics is linguistically valuable to the extent that it chronologically classifies meanings in the interest of lexicography, and writes down the laws of semantic change in the interest of etymology. To the extent, however, that it derives these laws from the nature of the mind and that it writes a history of ideas – meanings are ideas – it falls within the realm of empirical psychology.)

This quotation (which will, incidentally, turn out to be quite important when we describe the transition from historical-philological to structuralist semantics) nicely ties in with the fact that diachronic semantics is concerned with the classification of mechanisms of semantic change, an activity that links up with lexicography on the one hand and historical linguistics on the other. At the same time, Hecht's quotation introduces an additional aspect of historical-philological semantics: it is an approach that assumes a psychological conception of meaning, one in which the linguistic phenomena under study are seen as revealing characteristics of the human mind. These two perspectives in fact demarcate the domain of historical-philological semantics. On the one hand, it produces a wealth (not to say a plethora) of systems for the classification of semantic change. On the other, it engages in a thorough reflection on the nature of semantic facts.

With regard to the psychological orientation of historical-philological semantics (which forms the focus of the present section), three steps need to be taken. First, we will introduce the overall characteristics of the approach on the basis of the work of the French linguist Michel Breal. Next, we look at the very important addition to the psychological approach formulated by the German linguist Hermann Paul: he spells out the importance of context and usage for the explanation of semantic change. (It is no coincidence, by the way, that we focus on Breal and Paul: France and Germany were the dominant countries in this period of the development of lexical semantics, and Breal and Paul were leading figures within those national traditions.) And finally, we will add a number of nuances by looking at differences of opinion or perspective that exist within the psychological orientation of historical-philological semantics.

How then, to begin with, can we characterize the overall methodological and theoretical profile of a psychologically oriented historical-philological approach?

There are three prominent features, which we will illustrate with quotations from Breal (1897), not because Breal is the first or the single most important exponent of historical semantics, but because his highly influential work clearly expresses the major methodological ideas. The three characteristics listed here need not be simultaneously present in all of the works belonging to the historical-philological era; they do, however, adequately characterize the basic methodological outlook that is shared by a majority of the semantic studies in this period. (But we will come back to the dissident voices in a moment.)

First, it can hardly come as a surprise, after what we saw in the previous section, that semantics is defined as a *historical* discipline. Already on the first page of Breal's *Essai de sémantique*, the diachronic orientation of semantics is indicated as an intuitively obvious matter of fact [1, p. 1-3].

Si l'on se borne aux changements des voyelles et des consonnes, on réduit cette étude aux proportions d'une branche secondaire de l'acoustique et de la physiologie; si l'on se contente d'énumérer les pertes subies par le mécanisme grammatical, on donne l'illusion d'un édifice qui tombe en ruines; si l'on se retranche dans de vagues théories sur l'origine du langage, on ajoute, sans grand profit, un chapitre à l'histoire des systèmes. Il y a là, il me semble, autre chose à faire [...] La linguistique parle à l'homme de lui-même: elle lui montre comment il a construit, comment il a perfectionné, à travers des obstacles de toute nature et malgré d'inévitables lenteurs, malgré même des reculs momentanés, le plus nécessaire instrument de civilisation. (If one restricts oneself to the study of the changes of vowels and consonants, this discipline is reduced to a secondary branch of acoustics and physiology; if one merely enumerates the losses suffered by the grammatical mechanism, one creates the illusion of a building tumbling into ruins; if one hides behind vague theories about the origin of languages, one adds, without much profit, a chapter to the history of systems. There is, it seems to me, something else to be done [...] Linguistics talks to man about himself: it shows how he has constructed, how he has perfected, through difficulties of all sorts and in spite of an inevitable inertia, in spite even of temporary retreats, the most indispensable tool of civilization.) It is even the case that an adequate understanding of words in their contemporary meaning requires a thorough knowledge of their semantic history:

Second, Breal highlights the *psychological orientation* of the study of meaning. There are actually two aspects to this: linguistic meaning in general is defined as a psychological phenomenon, and, more specifically, change of meaning is the result of psychological processes. With regard to the first feature, meanings are considered to be psychological entities, i.e. (kinds of) thoughts or ideas: ‘[Le langage] objective la pensee’ (Language makes thought objective) (Breal 1897: 273). The mental status of lexical meanings links up directly with the overall function of thinking, i.e. with the function of cognition as a reflection and reconstruction of experience. Language, one could say, has to do with categorization: it stores cognitive categories with which human beings make sense of the world: ‘Le langage est une traduction de la realite, une transposition ou les objets figurent deja generalises et classifies par le travail de la pensee’ (Language is a translation of reality, a transposition in which particular objects only appear through the intermediary of the generalizing and classificatory efforts of thought) [1, p. 275]. Language, then, is not autonomous; it is linked with the total set of cognitive capacities that enable men to understand the world with ever more refined conceptual tools, and it is embedded in their experience of the world. If meaning as such consists of cognitive categories—a psychological type of entity—then meaning changes must be the result of psychological processes. That is to say, the general mechanisms of semantic change that can be derived from the classificatory study of the history of words constitute patterns of thought of the human mind. Breal calls these mechanisms ‘les lois intellectuelles du langage’ (the conceptual laws of language), but he hastens to add that ‘law’ means something different here than in the natural sciences: a law of semantic change is not a strict rule without exceptions, but it represents a tendency of the human cognitive apparatus to function in a particular way. In a passage that opposes restricting linguistics to the study of the formal aspects of language [1, p. 338-9].

The moving force of the human mind also shows up in the fact that the fundamental factor that brings the psychological mechanisms of semantic change into action consists of the communicative needs of the language user. Languages change

because people try to express their thoughts as accurately and satisfactorily as possible [1, p. 8].

The psychological orientation of semantics has methodological consequences (this is the third major feature of the historical-philological approach). In the following quotation, Breal does not simply repeat the point that semantics is a historical science, but he also has something to say about the way in which that scientific project is put into practice [1, p. 278].

Although Breal does not mention the word as such, semantics as he describes it here is a *hermeneutic discipline* in the sense of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. Clearly, the natural sciences *also* study historical processes (as in geology or the study of biological evolution), and that is why the difference between the natural and the human sciences that is mentioned in the quotation has to be sought on the methodological level rather than on the level of the subject matter of both approaches. The distinction made by Breal probably refers to the theories of Dilthey, whose views on the relationship between the natural and the human sciences (*Naturwissenschaft* versus *Geisteswissenschaft*) were widely popular near the end of the nineteenth century (see e.g. Dilthey 1910). The methodological independence of the human sciences with regard to the natural sciences resides in the fact that they try to understand, by means of an empathetic process of interpretation (*Verstehen*, understanding or comprehension), the cultural forms of expression in which men have, throughout history, laid down their experience of the world.

In sum, if we take Breal as our starting point, historical-philological semantics is characterized by a focus on the dynamism of language, by a cognitive, psychological conception of meaning, and by an interpretative methodology. But how does a Breal-like approach deal with the collective side of the language? This is where Hermann Paul's view of semantics provides an answer.

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