

A *dull* paper: exploring the role of proportional analogy in semantic change

Kathryn Allan
University College London
kathryn.allan@ucl.ac.uk

Diachronic work on lexical semantic change has shown that assumptions based on synchronic observations are not always consistent with the historical record. It is generally accepted that metaphorical mappings are unidirectional and most commonly follow a concrete > abstract path. However, a small number of cases which appear synchronically to fit in with this pattern of meaning change can be shown to be problematic from a diachronic perspective, and an alternative account of their semantic development is needed.

This paper will explore the semantic development of the lexeme *dull*, and consider what this can tell us about cognitive and historical semantic processes. As noted in Allan (2012), *dull* shows an apparently counter-intuitive development: both the history of the lexeme in English and evidence from etymological cognates indicate that the earliest sense was 'stupid', and the physical senses 'not sharp' and 'not bright' are attested very substantially later. An initial consideration of lexemes in related semantic fields (i.e. intelligence, physical sharpness and physical brightness) suggests that *sharp* originally had the meaning 'physically sharp', and developed the meaning 'intelligent' within the Old English period. It is therefore tempting to explain the development of *dull* as showing traditional proportional analogy, once *sharp* had the meanings 'physically sharp' and 'clever', i.e. clever : sharp = stupid : blunt. By contrast, a comparison with *bright* does not support a similar account for how *dull* developed the meaning 'not physically bright'; *bright* appears to have developed the sense 'intelligent' much later than *dull* developed the sense 'not physically bright'.

The paper will examine these three semantic fields and consider the role of proportional analogy in semantic change. It will draw on the resources of the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* alongside the full range of relevant historical dictionaries (the *Dictionary of Old English*, the *Middle English Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*).

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