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## IT BEFALLS WORDS TO FALL DOWN: PEJORATION AS A TYPE OF SEMANTIC CHANGE

### Introduction

Since the beginnings of linguistic thought, it has been agreed upon that every one of the constitutive elements of any natural language are prone to continual fluctuation and modification. Yet, although language changes are both constant and all-pervading, the very process of the replacement of forms and rules is often indiscernible and difficult to comprehend. We would not be in great error in quoting Hudson (2000:392) at this point, who – speaking of language change – argues that:

*[...] it is rarely noticeable within one generation, but we are often aware that generations before and after ours speak differently, preferring forms and rules different from those we prefer and even having some different ones. Whenever a language at some point in time is compared with its descendant language even a few hundred years later, the change is obvious.*

We live in an ever-changing and fluctuating world, in which both society and its broadly understood environment are intrinsically linked with creation and erosion, and where nothing remains invariable. On the level of language, such impermanence in historical and cultural background is inevitably revealed in the expansion of the vocabulary stock and the modification of meanings of individual lexical items which go in different quantitative and qualitative directions. In the light of this, the main purpose of this paper is to delve into the question of one particular type of semantic modification of meaning content known as **pejoration**, **derogation** or **worsening** of meaning.

### Pejoration as a category of semantic change

The presence of a substantial number of classifications of semantic changes that have been advanced in the history of linguistics is due to the fact that

analysts of meaning alterations base their classificatory frames on distinctive foundations. Some students of diachronic semantics employ sociological, axiological or logic based standpoints, whereas others adopt historical, linguistic or psychological perspectives in their formulations of classificatory schemes (see Kleparski (1996:48)). Here, for the reasons of economy, we shall outline briefly those taxonomies that may be said to have had the greatest impact on the study of historical semantic changes. Let us first outline Meillet's (1974) casual classification whose axis is formed by the issue of the **causes** of the alteration of lexical meaning. According to Meillet (1974:21):

*[...] die Prozesse, durch die Sprachfakten realisiert werden, sind teilweise klarer geworden, aber die Ursachen, von denen sie bestimmt werden, liegen immer noch im Dunklen; man sieht besser, wie die Sprachen sich entwickeln; aber man weiß immernoch nicht, welche Aktionen Neurungen und Erhaltung bestimmen, deren Gesamtheit die Sprachgeschichte aus macht.*<sup>1</sup>

Meillet's (1974) classificatory proposal highlights the importance of ultimate causes and – in particular – stresses the significance of social and dialectical factors in the process of meaning change. Because, in the view of the author, language is utterly dependent on the social group which employs the language for communicative purposes, it is only natural that changes in the language employed by the social group should be of a social nature. And so, within the scope of this typology, one may discern three significant causes of semantic change, that is **changes due to linguistic causes, changes due to historical causes and changes due to social stratification.**

It is Stern's (1931) pioneering work that is regarded as being one of the most triumphant and, probably, the most frequently referred-to attempt to confront the abounding factual material with thoroughly elaborated theory. Without any doubt, the author sets his aim higher than most of those who wish to develop a system of classifying all types of sense change occurring in language evolution. In comparison to all earlier publications on the semantic history of distinct words and groups of words, which often provide somewhat atomistic treatment, Stern's work is one of the first, which develops systematic managements of lexical system.<sup>2</sup> The seven classes differentiated by Stern (1931) are **substitution, analogy, shortening, nomination, regular transfer, permutation and adequation.**

In turn, Ullmann's (1957) functional typology elaborates and organises particular hypothesis suggested by Saussure's *Course de linguistique generale*. In the words of Ullmann (1957:171), if meaning is seen as a mutual relationship existing between name and sense, then *a semantic change will*

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<sup>1</sup> Translation (Kleparski (1996:43)): *The processes through which linguistic facts are realised have been partly clarified, but the causes which determine them are still unclear. One can see better how languages develop but it remains unknown what factors determine the changes and invariability which constitute the history of language.*

<sup>2</sup> For further reference to this issue see Kleparski (1985:112).

occur whenever a new name becomes attached to a sense and a new sense to a name. Similarly, Warren (1992:9) stresses that if a word is treated as a union of form (name) and content (sense), we can see that there are two possible options, that is either the name or the sense of word may change. In both cases contiguity or similarity relations bring about the associations. Generally, Ullmann (1957) distinguishes two major categories of semantic change, that is changes due to **linguistic innovation** and those that are due to **linguistic conservatism**, but these are of uneven interest to Ullmann because there is the susceptibility to preserve words in certain uses while the things to which they refer change over time.<sup>3</sup>

Yet another classificatory frame is Paul's (1880) logico-rhetorical classification, which is one of the earliest attempts at classifying historical semantic alterations. There have been numerous occasions on which Paul's (1880) typology of semantic changes has been examined. On the basis of the classification developed by Paul (1880) one may talk about **widening** of meaning, **narrowing** of meaning and **transfer** of meaning. Because the logico-rhetorical classification is the most quoted, both in the literature dedicated to the problems of diachronic semantics and in general handbooks on linguistics, it is pertinent to outline it in greater detail.

The category of widening of meaning (also called broadening or generalisation), is the historical semantic process that has contributed greatly to the qualitative modification of the English vocabulary. According to Rayevska (1979:130), this process pertains to those words that have precise denotation (specific names for things), however, during their history the words lose their denotation and the word's meaning becomes extended and generalized. As an illustration, let us quote the historical evolution of the word *pipe*, which was originally used in the sense 'a simple musical instrument'<sup>4</sup> while – in present-day English – it is used to denote objects 'similar in shape to a pipe'.<sup>5</sup>

Rayevska (1979:145–147) defines narrowing of meaning (also called specialisation) as a major process whereby words regularly used under prevailing conditions start to be employed in a specific context. Such words acquire a narrower sense, which means that they can only be applied to some of the objects which they previously denoted. For instance, the French lexeme *chauffeur*, which originally meant 'a man who stokes a fire', acquired the

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<sup>3</sup> Along similar lines, Kleparski (1996:46) states that *the tendencies of innovation and conservatism are of unequal interest to Ullmann, because there is little more to be said about linguistic conservatism than that a linguistic system preserve lexical items in certain uses, while the things they stand for are susceptible to continuous modification.*

<sup>4</sup> This sense emerges from the following *OED* quotation: (1799) Σηε ηαδ μαδε α πιπε οφ στραω, Ανδ μυσιχ φορομ τηατ πιπε χουλδ δραω.

<sup>5</sup> The following quotation from the *OED* documents this sense of *pipe*: (1795) Τηε πιπεσ φορμεδ ονλψ οφ βρασσ, μυστ ηαωε βεεν σο σηριλλ ανδ περχινγ τηατ [ετχ].

general sense of ‘driver’, but – with time – the word has specialised to be used in the present-day sense ‘driver of a motor vehicle’.<sup>6</sup>

The category referred to as transfer of meaning may be defined as a type of sense development, by which a comprehensively new meaning becomes associated to a word as a result of some resemblance, correlation or other connection of the new sense to that of the old sense of the word. The history of the word *barbecue* originally employed in the sense ‘a framework of sticks where an animal such as a sheep could be roasted’,<sup>7</sup> which – at a later stage of semantic evolution – came to be employed in the sense, ‘the meal made in order to eat the animal’ illustrates the working of the process discussed here.<sup>8</sup>

One viewpoint out of the multitude that analysts of meaning alterations have at their disposal is the **axiological** or **evaluative**, according to which certain cases of meaning change may be classed as either **ameliorative** or **pejorative**. To start with, let us quote Boretzky (1977:223) who says:

*What evaluation means here is not that a given change should be viewed as either bringing positive or negative results into language. Rather, it is estimated here in a narrow sense if, according to some customary scale, the change has led to an improvement or a worsening or if such a shift cannot be ascertained.*<sup>9</sup>

Any discussion dedicated to the issue of typologising semantic changes, such as that of Kleparski (1986, 1988), Kiełtyka (2006), Grygiel and Kleparski (2007) requires reference to evaluative category of semantic developments which yields two types of semantic changes, that is **amelioration/elevation** and **pejoration/degradation**.<sup>10</sup> Yet, it is impossible to speak of a single representative of what may be termed axiological classification; rather one may speak of the two evaluative categories as emerging from a number of works published in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Bechstein (1863), Müller (1965), Schreuder (1929) and Dongen (1933).

Rayevska (1979:149) provides a general, if somewhat vague, definition of the process of amelioration, pointing out that this semantic process takes place when words rise from humble beginnings to a position of greater importance. It is stressed in the literature of the subject that social changes are the decisive

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<sup>6</sup> For more examples see Rayevska (1979:146).

<sup>7</sup> See Room’s *Dictionary*.

<sup>8</sup> Definition taken from Room’s *Dictionary*.

<sup>9</sup> Translation (Kleparski 1988): *Mit Wertung ist hier nicht gemeint, dass ein einzelner Wandel im Hinblick darauf, was er für die Sprache erbringt, als positiv oder negativ befunden werden soll. [...] Vielmehr wird hier in einem bescheideneren Sinne gewertet, ob der Bedeutungswandel nach einer landläufigen Werteskala zu einer Verbesserung oder Verschlechterung geführt hat oder eine derartige Verschiebung nicht festzustellen ist.*

<sup>10</sup> Further subdivision of evaluative changes is proposed in Kleparski (1990) and Kiełtyka (2006).

factor in acquisition of ameliorative or pejorative denotation by words. Note that society often reverses itself over the course of time, and words – which were once disapproved of – may become respectable while others that had social favour may lose it. The history of the word *knight* provides a good illustration of this process. Originally, in Anglo-Saxon times *knight* meant merely ‘a boy’,<sup>11</sup> and through military and feudal associations it came to its later user as a title of rank. Likewise, the term *minister* has undergone the process of elevation, since in earlier times it meant ‘servant’ and nowadays it is used in the sense ‘a head of the government department’ or ‘a diplomatic agent usually ranking below and ambassador, representing a state or sovereign in a foreign country’.<sup>12</sup> Another word the historical development of which provides a good illustration of the process of amelioration is *luxury*, which is currently used in a sense ‘the enjoyment of special and expensive things, particularly food, drink, clothes and surroundings.’<sup>13</sup> Surprisingly, the historical dictionaries of English give evidence that its historically original sense was ‘lust’.<sup>14</sup>

### The scope of pejoration

Let us now concentrate on the target issue of this paper, that is the pejorative category of evaluative developments. In short, pejoration of meaning content is the opposite phenomenon to amelioration and it occurs when a word is used to express negatively loaded values not inherent in its historically original (or historically prior) meaning scope. For example, as shown in Schultz (1975), Kleparski (1988, 1990, 1997), Kochman-Haładaj (this volume), several words with the diachronically primary meaning ‘woman’ acquired – at various periods during the history of English – certain negative overtones, if not an outwardly pejorative sense. As an illustration, O.E. *wencla* ‘child of either sex’ developed the sense ‘female child’, and later on there appeared a socially and behaviourally pejorative sense ‘(young) woman, especially of low origin and rude manners’. Along similar lines, O.E. *cnafa* ‘boy’ successively changed meaning into socially pregnant ‘boy servant’, behaviourally loaded ‘sly fellow’ and – with the progress of pejoration – it developed a highly depreciative sense ‘rogue’. Also, the process of pejoration finds its reflection in the history of the word *idiot*, which originally meant ‘a private person’<sup>15</sup> and is currently used in the sense ‘a stupid person or someone has done something stupid’ or ‘someone who is

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<sup>11</sup> See the *OED*.

<sup>12</sup> Definition taken from the *OED*.

<sup>13</sup> See the *LDCE*.

<sup>14</sup> See the *OED*.

<sup>15</sup> See the *OED*.

mentally ill or has a very low level of intelligence'.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the history of *villain* shows this type of semantic development as originally the word implied nothing unfavourable; its etymological sense was 'a man who worked on a farm or villa', while in present-day English it is used with a evaluatively pregnant sense 'a wicked person, criminal'.<sup>17</sup>

Considering the analysis of the historical development of words related to the category **FEMALE HUMAN BEING** carried out in, among others, Schultz (1975), Kleparski (1988, 1990), Kiełtyka (2006) and Kochman-Haładaj (this volume), one may conclude that the process of pejorative evolution is far more common here than that of ameliorative change, and that the majority of words denoting 'women' at one point of their history are likely to – if not doomed to – descend on the evaluative scale. With this in mind, let us look more closely at some individual cases of pejorative developments, for instance the cases of *wench* and *bitch*.<sup>18</sup>

The original historically testified meaning of *wench* was 'child of either sex'. By the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the word came to be applied in the sense 'child of the female sex'. Later, by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, *wench* developed a socially pregnant sense as it started to be applied with reference to 'females in service', and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – more generally – it started to designate 'young females of rustic or working class origin'. Thus, one may say that the originally evaluatively neutral *wench* acquired the evaluatively loaded meaning of 'female of low social status'. The semantic history of *bitch*, the original sense of which was 'female dog', went in two directions. On the one hand, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the word came to be used with reference to 'females of some other species of quadrupeds', and – on the other hand – in the 14<sup>th</sup> century *bitch* started to be used to mean 'lewd, unchaste female'.

Interestingly enough, the examination of lexical items related to the domain **MALE HUMAN BEING** seems to illustrate that, in this specific domain, the number of ameliorative developments is much greater than those of a pejorative nature, as opposed to the corresponding domain **FEMALE HUMAN BEING**.<sup>19</sup> Consider, for example, the history of the word *page*, whose diachronically earliest known uses are documented in the sense 'boy' as well as 'youth or lad'.<sup>20</sup> Occasionally, as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the word is employed in the sense 'a baby'.<sup>21</sup> However, as shown by the OED material, these senses are no longer present in the English lexical system. Already by the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> These senses are taken from the *LDCE*.

<sup>17</sup> For further discussion of the pejorative development of *villain* see Kleparski (1986:164).

<sup>18</sup> Examples taken from Kleparski and Kardela (1990:7–10).

<sup>19</sup> On this issue see, among others, Kleparski (1988, 1990), Kiełtyka (2006).

<sup>20</sup> Definitions taken from the *OED*.

<sup>21</sup> See Room's *Dictionary*.

century, *page* can be found to be used vaguely to designate ‘a boy or lad in training for kinthood, and attached to the personal service of a knight, whom he followed on foot, being not yet advanced to the rank of squire’,<sup>22</sup> the meaning which is currently restricted to historical usage. As the result of further development, the application of *page* widened considerably. In particular, the 15<sup>th</sup> century quotations given by the OED and Room’s *Dictionary* testify that the word started to be applied to denote ‘a youth employed as the personal attendant of a person of rank’ (in earlier times often himself of gentle birth and placed in this position in order to be trained in the usage of good society). Hence, it became a title of various officers of royal or princely household, usually with some distinctive addition as *page of honour*, *page of the back-stairs*, *page of the chamber*, *page of presence* etc.<sup>23</sup>

Another example to illustrate the point is the semantic history of *hind*. As the OED data shows, at the close of the O.E. period the word *hind* was employed in a generalised sense to designate ‘household servants, domestics, servants’, though the sense is no longer current in contemporary English. Simultaneously, at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, *hind* was used with reference to ‘a servant’, especially, ‘a farm servant, an agricultural labourer’.<sup>24</sup> The next modification that took place in the semantic content of *hind* shows that in northern English the word is applied in the sense ‘a married and skilled farm-workman, for whom a cottage is provided on the farm, and sometimes a cow, he has the charge of a pair of horses and a responsible part in the working of the farm’.<sup>25</sup> As borne out by the OED material, the word *hind* underwent further transformation of meaning and started to designate ‘a bailiff or steward on a farm’ in some parts of England. Finally, on the basis of the material given in the OED, one notices that in the ensuing years, there was a further movement upwards the evaluative scale in that that there developed the sense ‘a lad, boy’, and later – more generally – ‘person, fellow, chap’, senses that are entirely free of any socially evaluative overtones.<sup>26</sup>

Coming back to the very nature of pejoration, for Rayevska (1979:150) pejoration is the process whereby, for one reason or another, a word falls into broadly understood disrepute and adds that some words reach such a low point that it is seen improper to use them at all. An entirely different view on evaluative developments is expressed in Stevick (1968:267), who formulates his definition of evaluative developments in terms of changes in the attitude to those elements of content with which the expressions are associated:

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<sup>22</sup> The quotations are taken from the *OED*.

<sup>23</sup> On this issue see the *OED*.

<sup>24</sup> This contextual evidence is taken from the *OED*.

<sup>25</sup> See the *OED*.

<sup>26</sup> All examples are taken from Borkowska (2005).

*If at one time T1 the referent of a term has directed to it one attitude A1 among those who use the term, and if at a later time T2 its referent has a different attitude A2 directed to it; then if A1 has been favourable (in the nature of awe, admiration, respect, pleasure, security), but A2 is unfavourable (often the opposite of A1), it is said that the word has undergone degenerative (pejorative) change [...].*

What makes evaluative changes and – in particular – pejoration different from other types of semantic alterations that have been singled out is the factor of emotive load that is involved in its operation. As early as 1930s Stern (1931:411) observed that pejorative developments are more emotive in character than ameliorative changes and that *the causes triggering pejorative extensions are to be sought in circumstances when the user of the language finds one of the characteristics of the referent disadvantageous, contemptible or ridiculous*.<sup>27</sup> Recently, Grygiel and Kleparski (2007:89) state that when we incorporate such terms as *amelioration* and pejoration we are doing so with the explicit remark that – by nature – there are categories of value, which here stand for an extra-linguistic phenomenon reflected in the semantics of the world.<sup>28</sup>

Let us outline Kleparski's (1990) apparatus employed for his analysis of pejorative developments, who distinguishes various types of negatively loaded elements associated with the lexical categories linked to the domain **HUMAN BEING** encoded and formalised by means of semantic components:

- 1) morally loaded **elements of meaning (evaluatively negative, e.g. +DISREPUTABLE, +DEPRAVED),**
- 2) behaviourally loaded **elements of meaning (evaluatively negative, e.g. +LAZY, +MISCHIEVOUS, +MEAN),**
- 3) aesthetically loaded **elements of meaning (evaluatively negative, e.g. +UNTIDY, +SLOVENLY, +DIRTY),**
- 4) socially loaded **elements of meaning (evaluatively negative, e.g. [LOW[SOCIAL[STATUS]]]).**<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted from Grygiel and Kleparski (2007:88).

<sup>28</sup> This is clearly stated by Kleparski (1990:45), who says that the term *evaluation* is understood as the application of moral (e.g. the Decalogue), social (e.g. social conventions and hierarchy), legal (e.g. civil and criminal law), aesthetic and other norms which enable the members of a community to classify certain states, qualities, phenomena or actions as either positive or negative. The existence of this system of norms has a definite bearing on language itself. It allows the existence in the semantic system of lexical units whose meaning structure, set against this shared system of norms, proves to possess either evaluatively positive or evaluatively negative elements.

<sup>29</sup> For details see Kleparski (1990:46).



Another important issue related to the pejorative category of evaluative developments that should be mentioned in this context is Kleparski's (1990:48) distinction between two main operative processes that may lead to the rise of pejoratively loaded senses, that is:

- 1) The **acquisition of evaluatively negative components**, i.e., the semantic structure of a lexical item  $x$  which lacks evaluatively negative elements is, at one point of its history, associated with evaluatively negative components ( $0 > C_{neg}$ ).
- 2) The **loss of evaluatively positive components** from the semantic structure of  $x$ , i.e., evaluatively positive components present at one stage in the semantic structure of a lexical item are lost at certain point of time ( $C_{pos} > 0$ ).

As mentioned previously, it is generally agreed that the cases of evolution in a pejorative direction in natural languages exhibit a higher frequency of occurrence than ameliorative developments (see, for example, Kleparski (1986, 1990, 1997), Grygiel (2005), Kiełtyka (2006) and Czapiga (2006)). In fact, pejoration is more noticeable not because it is more spectacular, but simply because it is all-pervading, which amelioration is not. Nevertheless, one comes across opposing views such as that of McKnight (1925:290), who states that *these two opposite processes balance each other as well as there are few instances of words which have degenerated in meaning which cannot be matched by words that have been elevated in a corresponding way*.

As to the scope of pejoration, the results of various studies carried out on the issue of pejoration seem to point clearly to the fact that the semantic mechanism in question affects the meaning of nouns as well as that of adjectives as shown in, among others, the material quoted and analysed in Hughes (1978) and Kleparski (1988, 1990). Let us now have a closer look at selected examples of pejoration that have affected different grammatical categories.

In the category of nouns, as pointed by Kleparski (1990:53), evaluatively loaded meanings seem to have much to do with social values and nowhere is it clearer than in the attitude to different occupations. For example, the word *politician* has suffered an evaluative downward slide in American English, while in British English it is not entirely negative. The word is used in a negatively loaded sense in America, as applied to people who make politics a profession, and are skilled in the art of 'wire pulling' and such practices. Another example that belongs to this category of developments is the history of the word *assassin*, which was originally the name of a well-known sect in Palestine which flourished in the Middle Ages, i.e. the *Hashshashin* 'drinkers of hashish' whose chief made his followers drink a concoction of hemp and

sent them to stab his enemies afterwards.<sup>30</sup> Bolinger and Sears (1981:264) discuss the case history of the word *saloon* which was originally used in the sense of ‘large reception rooms’, but when the proprietors of grog-shops in America began to call their establishment *saloon*, the word suffered a fall on the evaluative scale.

Coming back to the category **HUMAN BEING** it is worthwhile to point to the type of development whereby evaluatively loaded meanings are derived from proper nouns. It has been observed in many data-oriented studies that proper names come to be used as generic terms which are frequently evaluatively charged (see, for example, Kleparski (1997, 2000)). For example, *She is a Venus* may be interpreted as saying that she is as beautiful as the goddess Venus while *He is a Goliath* may refer to a man of great strength since the word *Goliath* comes from the name of the biblical character whose physical strength was legendary. Someone who is described as *Don Quixote* may be defined as a ‘naïve idealist who does not take into consideration the pros and cons of a given situation’. Note that a *Don Juan*, a *Penelope*, a *Croesus*, a *Judas* and a *Quisling* are also familiar names in this category of transfers in various languages.

Recently, Grygiel and Kleparski (2007) point to the fact that – not infrequently – names of nations acquire the status of common nouns that are often negatively loaded. Notice that the transfer of many such names is based either on similarity of a quality or an activity, but there are many cases where clear-cut motivation is hard to find, too. For example, English *Hun* and *Tartar* have become synonyms for *barbarian*, a *Spartan* may be defined as a ‘person who endures difficulties and privation of all sorts’ while *Turk* is used with reference to ‘ferocious, wild or unmanageable person’.<sup>31</sup> In a study on pejoration of proper names in Polish, Masłowska (1989) provides the following examples of proper names that have acquired pejorative senses:

| LEXICAL ITEM              | LITERAL MEANING                        | METAPHORICAL MEANING             |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Hitler</i>             | ‘a man called by the surname’          | ‘sadist, cruel man’              |
| <i>Kozak</i>              | ‘dweller of the province of Zaporozhe’ | ‘blusterer, swashbuckler’        |
| <i>Cygan</i>              | ‘gypsy’                                | ‘liar, deceiver’                 |
| <i>Kalwin</i> (dialectal) | ‘Calvinist’                            | ‘rebellious, disobedient person’ |

<sup>30</sup> See Kleparski (1990:52).

<sup>31</sup> It goes without saying that historical contexts are self-explanatory in tracing lexical developments of this type.

Not infrequently the connotation of the word is affected by social backgrounds. In the age of feudalism *villain* meant merely ‘a type of humble serf who cultivated the lord’s land’.<sup>32</sup> Obviously, such a person was felt by his social superiors to have a low sense of morality. Today *villain* no longer means ‘a peasant’, but is used in the sense ‘a person of doubtful virtue, a scoundrel’. When we assume a socio-cultural perspective represented by, for example, Hughes (1978) we may say that such semantic transformations reflect class relations, the attitude of ruling classes towards the toilers and social injustice in bourgeois society. Another similar example, discussed in Katamba (1994) and Kleparski (1997) is the history of the word *peasant*. When the word was first adopted from French, it was used in the sense ‘a country person who worked the land’, so *peasant* basically referred to someone from a country district without any negative overtones. Note that although this sense is not entirely lost in modern English, the word has acquired additional negative connotations and in present day English it is often used in the sense ‘boorish, low-status person’.<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned previously, the process of pejoration affects the category of adjectives in equal measure.<sup>34</sup> Thus, for example, the Latin noun *vulgus* denoting ‘common people’ had the derivative *vulgaris* ‘common’ which yielded English *vulgar* meaning originally ‘employed in common reasoning, customary’. Note that today the original meaning of *vulgar* is retained in such frozen collocations as *vulgar fraction* and *Vulgar Latin*. Other examples that may readily be quoted in this category of developments are *notorious* which at the beginning was used in the sense ‘widely known’. Yet, with the passage of time it has gone through the process of pejorative extension to mean in present-day English ‘widely and unfavourably known’.<sup>35</sup> The adjective *promiscuous* – today used chiefly in the sense ‘having many sexual partners or sexual relationships’ – goes back to Latin *promiscuus* meaning ‘mixed’, and was used at the beginning of its history in English solely in the etymological Latin sense while *specious* meaning today ‘seemingly right or true but really wrong or false’ was once positively loaded as it was used in the sense ‘beautiful, lovely’.<sup>36</sup>

The phenomenon of **zoosemy** is often viewed as intimately related to the mechanism of pejorative evolution (see Kleparski (1990, 1997), Kiełtyka (2005, 2006)). In particular, it is well-documented by the material analysed in Kiełtyka (2005:69), who concludes that *in the majority of cases equine terms applied to human beings refer to some pejorative traits characteristic of human beings*.

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<sup>32</sup> See the *OED*.

<sup>33</sup> For detailed discussion of the history of *peasant* and its historical synonyms see Kleparski (1997).

<sup>34</sup> See Kleparski (1990:54).

<sup>35</sup> See [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org).

<sup>36</sup> For more examples see Kleparski (1990:54).

The following data has been drawn from Kiełtyka (2005, 2006) and it shows the mutual interconnection of zoosemy and pejoration in the history of English in one specific animal domain, that is the domain **EQUINE**:

| <b><u>EQUINE</u></b> | <b>LITERAL SENSE</b>                                                                   | <b>METAPHORICAL SENSE</b>                  |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| <i>Hilding</i>       | ‘worthless horse’                                                                      | ‘a, worthless person, a good for nothing’  |
| <i>Rip</i>           | ‘an inferior, worthless, or worn-out horse’                                            | ‘a worthless, dissolute fellow’            |
| <i>Stallion</i>      | ‘a male horse not castrated, an entire horse, especially one kept for mating purposes’ | ‘a person of lascivious life, a courtesan’ |
| <i>Mare</i>          | ‘the female of any equine animal esp. female of domestic horse’                        | ‘a contemptible woman’                     |
| <i>Cob</i>           | ‘a short-legged, stout variety of horse, usually ridden by heavy person’               | ‘a great, big man, leading man’            |
| <i>Nag</i>           | ‘a small riding horse or pony’                                                         | ‘an execrated, detested person’            |

It is fairly evident that the process of zoosemy is universally present in languages of the world and – as the data from various languages shows – such cases of metaphorical transfer are usually loaded with derisive connotations. Consider, cases of zoosemic evolution in pejorative direction in various languages: Polish *cielę* ‘calf’ > ‘naive, silly person’, *osioł* ‘ass’ > ‘silly, stupid person’, *koza* ‘goat’ > ‘silly, naive (young) female’, Spanish *burro* ‘donkey’ > ‘stupid or stubborn person’, *perra* ‘female dog’ > ‘mean, spiteful woman’, Hungarian *birka* ‘sheep’ > ‘somebody who follows blindly others’, *szuka* ‘bitch’ > ‘sex-mad female’, German *Hund* ‘dog’ > ‘person you very strongly dislike’, *Paard* ‘horse’ > ‘ugly woman’, *alter Esel* ‘old ass’ > ‘stupid person’, *Eselin* ‘jenny/mare’ > ‘stupid woman’, *dumme Gans* ‘stupid goose’ > ‘stupid woman’, *Gänschen* ‘gosling’ > ‘stupid person’, *dummes Huhn* ‘stupid hen’ > ‘stupid woman’, *dummer Hund* ‘stupid dog’ > ‘stupid person’, *Du Dackel* ‘you duchshund’ > ‘you silly man’, *ein dummes Kamel* ‘stupid camel’ > ‘stupid person’, Russian *собака [sobaka]* ‘dog’ is secondarily used in the sense ‘evil, ill-mannered person’, *осёл [osjol]* ‘donkey’ > ‘stupid, obstinate person’, *баран [baran]* ‘ram’ > ‘person following others blindly’, *корова [korova]* ‘cow’ >

‘clumsy, sluggish or stupid woman’, Basque *astoa* ‘donkey’ > ‘fool, a stupid, illiterate person’, *katarra* ‘male cat’ > ‘bad-tempered, aggressive person’.<sup>37</sup>

As pointed out by Grygiel and Kleparski (2007:89), it seems fairly obvious that, as such, a great number of names of animals have no emotional colouring on their own, but when applied to human beings they may acquire various derogatory connotations although the connotations may sometimes differ substantially in various languages. Thus, for example, Dutch *havik* ‘hawk’ is employed in the metaphorical sense ‘cowardly and aggressive person’ while Irish *seabhack* ‘hawk’ is used in the positively loaded sense ‘heroic person’. Similarly, one may speak of different metaphorical shifts of the verb *to caw* imitating the sound produced by a crow. In Polish, the semantic shift activates the meaning ‘to express gloomy prognoses’ while its Slovak counterpart refers to (mainly female) persons who talk too much and not very interestingly.

### **Euphemism, sexism and contaminating concepts: Towards the forces behind pejoration**

The typologies of semantic changes that have been elaborated in the history of diachronic semantics are naturally connected with the issue of the causes of meaning alterations. According to Sapir (1921:150), *language moves down time in a current of its own making [...] nothing is perfectly static. Every word, every grammatical element, every locution, every sound and accent is a slowly changing configuration*. It goes without saying that each language changes and develops constantly and it is possible to distinguish various causes responsible for semantic developments. As regards the causes of evaluative developments, typically of the older tradition in linguistic thinking, Trench (1892:72) states that it is the morality and immorality of people that account for the fate of lexical items:

*[...] I would bid you to note the many words which men have dragged downward with themselves, and made more or less partakers of their own fall. Having once an honourable meaning, they have yet with deterioration and degeneration of those about whom they were used, deteriorated and degenerated, too.*

The relation of cause and effect between the morality of the nation and its language was hinted upon much earlier in the Preface to Johnson’s *Dictionary* who puts it – somewhat pessimistically – that *tongues like governments have a natural tendency to degeneration [...]. It is incident to words as to their authors to degenerate from their ancestors*. More recently, Barber (1964:251) claims that *human nature being what it is, deterioration is commoner than*

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<sup>37</sup> Examples taken from Kiełtyka (2006).

*amelioration: we are only too prone to believe the worst of anybody, and this is reflected in the way our words change.* Stern (1931:411), on the other hand, states that pejorative developments are more complex in character than ameliorative ones and that the roots triggering shifts in pejorative direction are to be sought in circumstances when the user of a language finds one of the characteristics of the referent detrimental, despicable or ridiculous.

Ullmann (1952) points out that the figurative substitute of a tabooed word, known as euphemism, is a linguistic veil on everything sacred, dangerous, unpleasant or indecent and it is the result of the unwillingness of the people to call a spade a spade. By their nature, euphemisms are most frequently used to avoid words and expressions that are under taboo, but also – not infrequently – they are employed to avoid a wide range of unpleasant connotations. In particular, politicians are well known for notoriously employing euphemisms in order to ‘pretty up’ their actions and views. And so, for example, *liberation* or *pacification* may be used to refer to ‘killing of people’ and *ethnic cleansing* is a somewhat clinical euphemism for ‘killing or expelling unwanted ethnic groups’. In the history of literature, the use of euphemism in totalitarian states has been caricatured in the Newspeak of George Orwell’s *1984*, with numerous expressions such as, for example, *joycamp* ‘forced-labour camp’ and *Ministry of Love* ‘prisons in which dissenters are tortured’ (see Grygiel and Kleparski (2007)).

Schreuder (1929:59) – the author of one of the first publications dedicated solely to the issue of pejoration – believes that the mechanism of euphemism is the most potent cause in the rise of negatively loaded lexical items and adds that it *may in its origin or excesses be rooted in superstition and lead to ridiculous prudery [...]*. In other words, in our day-to-day communication a tabooed word or phrase tends to be pushed aside and a neutral term is used in its stead. Yet, after some time the new less offensive term, being directly associated with the new idea which it was designed to veil, ceases to be felt so and the depreciation of the novel term takes place.

To be more precise, Schreuder (1929) postulates that the influence of euphemism is of a twofold nature. On the one hand, the offensive word being avoided, it is left to its own fate and then receives an additional push in its own direction. But – at the same time – the milder word is affected because its regular application to the offensive idea drags it down from its original position and lays the association with the negatively charged idea, for instance *a lie – an untruth – an error; dirty – unclean – soiled*.<sup>38</sup> Apart from this, other factors of special importance which generate evolution in an unfavourable direction are irony, hyperbole and litotes. However, one notices that the influence of irony on language, which evidently depends on paralinguistic aspect of a communicative

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<sup>38</sup> See Schreuder (1929:60).

act, that is intonation, facial expression and gestures of the speakers, is less significant and eludes direct observation.

Bréal (1897), in his pioneering classic, *Essai de sémantique* analysed the semantic tendency of words to undergo pejoration and attributed this tendency to *the nature of human malice, the spirit of the narrators* and to *false delicacy*. In line with his psycholinguistic-oriented explanation the great French linguist argued that:

*The so-called pejorative tendency is the result of a very human disposition which prompts us to veil, to attenuate, to disguise ideas which are disagreeable, wounding or repulsive [...]. There is nothing in it all save a feeling of consideration, a precaution against unnecessary shocks, a precaution which whether sincere or feigned is not long efficient, since the hearer seeks out things behind the word, and at once identifies them* (Bréal 1897:100–101).

True enough, as Schultz (1975:72) observes, many terms denoting ‘woman of the night’ have arisen as a corollary of the operation of euphemism extralinguistically justified by the reluctance to name the profession in question outright. Kochman-Haľadyj (this volume) quotes a large number of synonyms for *prostitute* that are clearly derogatory such as, for example, *broadtail, cocktail, flagger, guttersnipe, mutton, moonlighter, omnibus, tail trader, tickletail, twofer* and *underwear*; to mention but a few.

Obviously, euphemism is only one of the driving forces behind the mechanism of pejorative developments. Yet another stylistic device, that is hyperbole, discussed by Schreuder (1929:61), may have a lasting influence on the connotation of a word especially [...] *when a person is under a strong emotion he is apt to use stronger words than the occasion warrants and is thus unconsciously distorting facts*. The opposite mechanism known as litotes or understatement, has affected the semantics of a number of English words and has been found operative as early as in Anglo Saxon times.<sup>39</sup> As yet another cause of pejoration one should point to the process of the conversion of lexical items from one social group to another, particularly if learned, or literary language comes to be used for the purpose of everyday collective communication. Given this, the word is prone to lose its air of respectability and may become a slang, cant or vulgar word.

Pursuing other causes triggering the growth of evaluatively loaded senses one should not ignore extralinguistic factors the importance of which has been discussed over the course of the last few decades by a number of analysts of semantic change such as, for example, Hughes (1979), Kleparski (1990), Schultz (1975), Mills (1989) and Kochman-Haľadyj (this volume). Bosmajian (1974:90) mentions that *the language of sexism relegates women to the status of children*,

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<sup>39</sup> When we analyse the semantics of the phrase *sume on wale crungon* (*Beowulf* 1113) we come to the conclusion that not ‘some’, but a great many of the people fell in battle, because *sume* – in fact – stands for ‘a dreadful number’ (see Schreuder (1929:62)).

*servants, and idiots, to being the 'second sex' and to virtual invisibility.* Without doubt, words associated with the category **FEMALE HUMAN BEING** tend to be thoroughly degraded and – as Kochman-Haładyj (this volume) emphasises – may be said to *serve as an instrument by feminist sociolinguists to denote an inherent sexism in the English language.* Schultz (1975:65) stresses that even entirely innocent terms designating women may obtain negatively charged elements, at first perhaps to some extent disparaging, but after a period of time becoming strongly offensive and ending as a sexual slur. Moreover, Kleparski (1990) analyses the semantic evolution of such women terms as *leman, mopsy, paramour, tart, Kitty, Biddy, Gill, Polly* and concludes that *many words which are evaluatively negative at present were, at one time, terms of endearment* (see Kleparski (1990:149)).

As for other causes of the evaluative downfall of such a great number of items indicating women, two factors should be enumerated, i.e., the association with disparaging adjectives and the contaminating concept, as both Ullmann (1957) and Schultz (1975) identify it. The classical example of common occurrence with disparaging adjectives may be drawn from the Shakespeare's use of *quean*, which always appears with disparaging adjectives. As for the association with the contaminating concept, Schultz (1975:71) says that men think of women in sexual terms no matter what the context is, and – significantly – all words that evoke anything female may become – depending on the context and co-text – virtually synonymous with sexual imagery.

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