

LOANWORDS AND POLYSEMY: WHAT HAPPENS TO LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE MEANINGS IN BORROWING?

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This paper revisits earlier work on the semantics of loanwords in the light of new research that seems to contradict established ideas. It is well-known that the meanings of new words in English are not constructed in isolation, but relate to both the origins of these words and semantically related forms that already exist in the language. When forms are borrowed into the language, their meanings reflect that of their sources in the donor language, but they tend not to be exact copies (Durkin 2014). Particular senses have relationships both with other meanings of the form, and with other forms in the linguistic system (Zenner et al. 2014); the precise nature of the semantic relationship between a loanword and its source can therefore be complex, and often changes over time. Allan (2014, 2015) examined the meanings of several forms in English that have metaphorical meanings borrowed from their source languages, including *ardent*, and suggested that ‘metaphorical senses, which are typically less experientially basic and more abstract, are much more likely to be borrowed and to become the dominant senses of borrowed lexemes’ (2015: 47). However, Sylvester et al. find the opposite pattern in a larger body of data: in a dataset of 110 loanwords in Middle English, literal senses are borrowed more often than metaphorical senses, and ‘it is rare for figurative senses... to outlive literal senses’ (2025: 155). A further finding is that additional figurative senses which were subsequently innovated within English are less likely to survive than borrowed figurative senses (ibid.: 154). This paper re-engages with the data used by Sylvester et al. and considers whether their findings can be reconciled with earlier studies. I explore two issues that they note but do not pursue: first, that figurative senses may not always be markedly more ‘experientially basic’ than their literal counterparts, and second, that the existence of near-synonyms may be the most important factor in the survival, adaptation or obsolescence of a sense.

References:

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