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WAR AND DEATH IN BUSINESS – SOME REMARKS ON THE NATURE OF CONCEPTUALISATION IN THE FIELD ECONOMY¹

Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to look into the nature of the forces which have guided the semantic developments of numerous terms panchronically related to the field ECONOMY. The research has been carried out in light of modern approaches to semantic change, namely metaphorisation and conceptualisation of already existing referents to express novel concepts of the changeable reality. The approach adopted in the paper is meant to bridge the gap between unintentional transfers and metaphors which, in my view, form a panchronic continuum determined by conceptual processes.

The method applied in the analysis carried out in what follows is couched within the cognitive framework, with an extensive use of the cognitive techniques of enquiry. The notion inherent in a cognitive approach is the issue of categorisation implying the grouping of similar entities in the speaker's mind and treating them as belonging to the same conceptual category (see Kleparski (1997)). The instances of a given category may be represented by means of **attributive values**, which may be either central, or core to the category or peripheral. Meanings of lexical items may be characterised as being determined by these attributive values, whose gaining in salience, or **foregrounding**, as well as weakening, or **backgrounding**, are the means by which the resultant sense change may be accounted for.

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WAR and DEATH metaphors in the field ECONOMY

The fact that metaphor is not solely restricted to poetic imagination and deliberate figurative language, but represents our conceptual system, in which meaning as a mental phenomenon can only be described with reference to cognitive processes (see Langacker (1987:97)), was noticed and described already by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Since meaning cannot be analysed independently and does not exist on its own, as noticed by Langacker (1987), in order to describe meaning successfully a prior description of such phenomena as thoughts, concepts, perceptions, images and mental experience has to be carried out.² Nevertheless, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) notice, language users are not aware of their conceptual system because their every-day actions, and hence linguistic activities, are somewhat automatic, though guided by certain factors. The chief determinant of the structuring of their daily activities is the very metaphor, whose essence is *understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another* (see Lakoff and Johnson (1980:5)). The inseparable notions of metaphor are thought and experience on the basis of which speakers conceptualise a given entity in terms of some other. This type of metaphor, whereby one concept gives metaphorical structure to another concept, may be referred to as **structural metaphor** and illustrated by the phrase *time is money*, in which one's every-day experience with *money* – which is valuable – is applied with the aim of understanding the concept of time (see Lakoff and Johnson (1980:7–9)).

In a similar metaphorical manner, the human conceptual system comprehends the two following concepts belonging to the semantic field ECONOMY, i.e. **BUSINESS ACTIVITY** and **BUSINESS FAILURE**, which could not be made explicit without the use of metaphor. Doing business in a competitive market sometimes requires the use of tactics and procedures unparalleled with any other type of economic activity. Since language always reflects the socio-cultural background of the speaker, language users unintentionally may tend to employ certain linguistic processes, whereby the concept **COMPETITION** can be expressed in a more direct and meaningful way. Thus, the speaker's cognitive system unintentionally conceptualises **COMPETITION** as being determined, as it is made evident in the examples below, by the working of the attributive value <WAR> owing to the operation of the mechanism of overall resemblance between the original and transferred senses. Similarly, the field ECONOMY is abundant in **DEATH** metaphors, where the concept of **BUSINESS FAILURE** is made explicit by the use of terms referring to the concept of **DEATH**. Again, the mechanisms of similarity

² According to Langacker (1987), thoughts, concepts, perceptions, images and mental experience in general, constitute an entity referred to as **conceptual structure** whose semantic realisation is **semantic structure**.

between the subsequent senses is the factor responsible for the development of semantic change.

Examples of WAR and DEATH metaphors:

1. The debate team brought out their *big guns*.
2. The other team sent in the *cavalry* against us.
3. *Cut-throat* competition is keeping the ticket prices low.
4. We took over the ball deep in their *territory*.
5. Our *strategy* through the year was to maintain market share, keep it at the same level and control costs.
6. Stansted Airport transatlantic service is to be *axed* next month following fierce competition from low-budget airlines.
7. A price *war* may *break out* as tyre makers try to grab market share and put spare capacity to work.
8. Gasoline retailers have been *waging price wars*.
9. They *battled* each other over the chess board every week.
10. American Brands executed a successful PacMan *defence* by acquiring E-II Holding following a *hostile* bid.
11. They have *killed* plans for a weekly regional magazine in Los Angeles.
12. Over the last year the work force has been *slashed* by 50%.

The sentences quoted provide sufficient evidence for the existence of the structural metaphors **COMPETITION IS WAR** and **BUSINESS FAILURE IS DEATH**, where the resultant unintentional inter-domain metaphorical transfer involves the following type of naming: **WAR** (source domain) → **COMPETITION** (target domain) and **DEATH** (source domain) → **BUSINESS FAILURE** (target domain). The primary cause of the conceptualisation of **COMPETITION** in terms of **WAR** and **BUSINESS FAILURE** in terms of **DEATH** seems to be what Hughes (1992) refers to as the relationship between social and cultural factors on the one hand, and economic factors on the other. Such metaphors serve not only as an explicit medium of expressing meaning, but may tend to act as a marker of a social position. It is worth noting that the metaphors **COMPETITION IS WAR** and **BUSINESS FAILURE IS DEATH** constitute a somewhat socially higher layer of class terms and status words, whose application in every-day use is a marker of belonging to a given class or profession.

WAR and DEATH unintentional transfers

The forthcoming section revolves around selected instances of **unintentional**, or regular **transfer** – a process which may be defined as the

unintentional transference of a word to denote some other referent than the usual one, based on certain similarities between the two referents (see Stern (1931)). To use the present-day terminology, regular transfer may be described as the use of a word habitually denoting one referent, to denote some other instead, because certain elements of the referent become salient to the given context, and thus foregrounded in the speaker's attention, leading to specialisation of the word's meaning around its central attributive elements.³

The aim set to this subsection is the search for parallel semantic developments in the field **ECONOMY** which may be characterised as being guided by the backgrounding of the attributive values <DEATH> or <WAR> while foregrounding other elements of meaning related to the analysed field. The most important issue shall be to trace the causes and determinants responsible for a given sense development.

Amortisation: As evidenced by *the OED*, the noun *amortisation* was historically preceded by the verb *amortise*, being a cognate of French *amort-ir* – meaning ‘to bring to death,’ whose original and now largely obscure sense was to ‘deaden, destroy or kill’ (1386>1656). The semantics of this primary meaning may be described as being determined by the foregrounding of the attributive value <DEATH>. It is also this meaning that has given rise to the contemporary sense of the verb *amortise* defined by *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (henceforth: *LDCE*) as ‘to pay a debt by making regular payments’. Consequently, the very same concept is expressed by the noun *amortisation* which, as *the Penguin Dictionary of Economics* (henceforth: *the PDE*) goes on to inform us, is used to denote ‘the repayment of debt by means of accumulating a “sinking fund” through regular payments which, with accumulated interest, may be used to settle the debt in instalments over a period of time.’ In other words, as hinted by *the OED*, the term signals ‘the extinction of a debt, or of any pecuniary liability, especially by means of a sinking fund.’ Apparently, one may claim that the present-day meaning of *amortisation* is not affected by the working of the semantic element <DEATH>, yet a certain connection between the two subsequent senses is noticeable. An interesting suggestion is made by Funk (1978:122), who claims that the original sense of killing is still present in the semantics of *amortisation* since it denotes the ‘killing’ or resolving the debt gradually by means of a sinking fund. Therefore, the then core attributive value <DEATH> is still echoed in the periphery of its structure of meaning.

Attrition: *The ODEE* and *the OED* testify that the term *attrition* originates from Latin *attritiōn-em* and inform us that its historically primary meaning was ‘the action or process of rubbing one thing against another, or mutual friction’ (1601>1858). Owing to an unintentionally-perceived similarity, the term was

³ For a more detailed description of the working of regular transfer in the field **ECONOMY** see Kleparski and Drażek (2003).

later transferred to express ‘the wearing down of the enemy’s strength and morale by unremitting harassment’ (1914>present) as in the phrase *war of attrition* (see *LDCE*). It is worth noting that this novel sense coincides with a development of modern warfare during the First World War, resulting in unprecedented casualties and atrocities. One may speculate that, semantically speaking, the core element present in the original semantic structure of *attrition*, namely <REPEATED^FRICTION>, was substituted by the value <REPEATED^ATTACK>, following the application of the term to refer to the novel referent. As documented by *Longman Business English Dictionary* (henceforth: *LBED*), in contemporary English the term *attrition* may also be used to refer to the field ECONOMY to denote either ‘the process of reducing the number of employees by not replacing those who leave for normal reasons’, or ‘a situation where a company loses its customers because they start buying a competitor’s product.’ It is obvious that the gradual wearing away of unwanted employees in a company as well as the loss of its consumers provide enough evidence that its economic condition is far from sound. Since such corporate difficulties do not occur overnight, one might conclude that these senses share the backgrounded, yet distinguishable, element <REPEATED^ATTACK> which may be understood as an attack launched by the company’s competitors to gain its market share.

Competition: As evidenced by Ayto (1990:127), *the ODEE* and *the OED*, the English noun *competition* goes back to the Latin verb *compet-ĕre*, signalling ‘to strive after something in company or together’, whose meaning is echoed in the primary semantic structure of the verb *to compete*, referring to the action of ‘entering into or being put in rivalry with someone’ (1620>present). According to *the OED*, the original Latin sense is present in the semantics of *competition* primarily denoting ‘rivalry, or the striving of two or more for the same object’ – the meaning which in contemporary English is rather restricted to competitive examinations. It is evident that the original semantic structure of English *competition* is determined by the foregrounding of the attributive value <FIGHT> salient to its primary structure of meaning. At the close of the 18th century, the noun *competition* was subject to unintentional transfer, whereby the sense of ‘rivalry’ was specialised to refer to ‘rivalry in the market, or striving for customers between those who have the same commodities to dispose of’. One may conclude that the rise of capitalism facilitating business activity, resulting in the increase in the number of manufacturers from the same sector striving for a fixed number of consumers, brought about the need to express the new referent in terms of the already-existing ones. Hence, on the basis of the similarity of meaning, the term *competition* has developed its present-day meaning of ‘a situation in which businesses are trying to be more successful than others by selling more goods and services and making more profit.’ Nevertheless, the attributive value

<**FIGHT**> is notably present in the periphery of the semantic structure of *competition* today since **COMPETITION** > is a kind of < **FIGHT** >.

Mortgage: According to Ayto (1990:355), *the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (henceforth: *the ODEE*) and *the OED*, the noun *mortgage* is borrowed from Old French *mortgage* signifying ‘a dead pledge’, and, as noted by Ayto (1990:355), being itself a compound of *mort* ‘dead’ and *gage* ‘pledge’.⁴ Carver (1991:71–72) goes on to explain that the pledge was dead in a twofold way. First, if the loan was not paid back, the property, or *gage*, was lost or ‘dead’ to the borrower, while if it was paid back, the pledge itself was ‘dead’. According to *the PDE*, in contemporary terms, *mortgage* is understood as ‘a legal agreement conveying conditional ownership of assets as security for a loan and becoming void when the debt is repaid.’ When the amount borrowed is not returned, however, the property is lost to the borrower and the lender exercises his rights to sell it in order to retrieve his funds. Hence, one may notice that the present-day meaning of *mortgage* largely reflects the original sense of ‘dead pledge’ since, owing to the working of the mechanism of overall resemblance, it has been transferred to express the notion of conditional ownership. Its history may be summarised as being guided by the backgrounding of the formerly core attributive value <**DEATH**> following the foregrounding of the element <**LOSS**> being the core attributive value salient to its present-day semantic structure.

A number of other terms belonging to the field **ECONOMY** may be evidenced to have been semantically directed by the working of the elements <**WAR**> and <**DEATH**> present at all stages of their development. For example, according to Ayto (1990:51–52), the adjective *bankrupt*, now signalling ‘unable to pay one’s debts, or financially insolvent,’ originally referred to a broken counter being a symbol of an insolvent moneylender. Similarly, when a journalist writes that a national bank *slashes* interest rates, he merely refers to the concept of **DEATH** present in the original sense of the verb to slash being ‘to cut or wound with a sweep or stroke of a sharp weapon.’ Another example is the history of the verb *to sack* whose historically primary meanings ‘to strain through a bag’ or ‘to put a person in a sack to be drowned’ are, as *the OED* testifies, echoed in the phrase *to give the sack*, meaning ‘to dismiss a person from his employment’ – the sense also determined by the fact that a dismissed worker goes away with his tools in a bag (see Ayto (1990:452)).

The enquiry into the histories of selected **ECONOMY** terms presented above has been aimed at indicating that the semantics of a number of terms has been affected by the working of two attributive values, i.e. <**WAR**> and <**DEATH**>. In the case of some words analysed, the relationship between the subsequent sense meanderings is easily noticeable, as in the case of *amortisation*

⁴ As Carver (1991:71–72) observes, in Middle English a *gage* was also a pledge to do battle such as a glove thrown on the ground.

and *mortgage* whose sense transfers clearly exhibit the presence of the value <DEATH>. In some other instances at hand, the changes in the manners of apprehending a given referent have led to a certain narrowing of meaning. For example, in the history of *attrition* the original meaning was guided by the foregrounding of the element <REPEATED^FRICTION> which later yielded <REPEATED^ATTACK> due to a clear similarity between the senses. Similarly, the history of the term *competition* has been influenced by the conceptualisation of its meaning as being equal to **WAR**.

Secondly, the so-called conjunctive relations (i.e. **X > is a kind of < Y, X > is a part of < Y**), as perceived by, for example, Brown (1979), may be said to have been responsible for a number of meaning alterations in the field in question. These links, however threadbare, must have directed the semantic histories of the words analysed and enabled them to be conceptualised in the way in which they are. For instance, in the history of the term *competition* one may observe a distinct link between the two subsequent senses since **COMPETITION > is a kind of < FIGHT**. Hence, one may speculate that the resultant transfer seems to have been conditioned by the value < **FIGHT** > as the core and foregrounded element of meaning. Likewise, in the history of *mortgage* one is able to notice a similar sense development as **MORTGAGE > is a kind of < DEAD PLEDGE**.

Thirdly, the analysis proves the validity of Keller's (1994) approach to semantic change and his claim that the process of change can be accounted for by means of the **invisible-hand theory**. One may notice here that both metaphorical extensions and regular transfers are unintended processes, determined only by the communicative actions of speakers when many people act similarly in certain respects. This echoes the words of Hughes (1992), who notices that an insight into the semantic developments in the field **ECONOMY** must take into account the role of **socio-cultural factors**, that is, the whole spectrum of social, economic and religious factors involved in the causation of diachronic semantic changes.

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