The Phonaestheme /bl-/

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Definition

Phonaesthemes (or phonesthemes) "[…] are word paradigms that begin (or less commonly, end) with similar or identical sounds and share certain meaning components." (Schmid 2016: 44)

Previous studies

Various studies for lexeme-initial phonaesthemes (Marchand 1969: 406–416, Käsmann 1992)

/fl-/: verbs of motion, e.g., *fly*, *flee*, *float*, *flip*, *flicker*

/gl-/ 'light, shine', e.g., *glimmer*, *gloss*, *glitter, glint, glisten*

/sl-/ 1) 'wet, slippery', e.g., *sludge, slime, slug*; 2) negative personality traits, e.g., *sloppy, slovenly*

Previous studies: /bl-/

Marchand (1969: 407):

1) 'blow up, swell', e.g., *blow*, *blast*, *bladder*, *blister*

2) 'vocal sound', e.g., *bleat*, *blatter*

Rhodes (1994: 277), Rhodes & Lawler (1981: 334)

1) 'loud, air-induced sound', e.g., *blat*, *blast*, *blab*

2) 'color', e.g., *black*, *blue*, *blank*

The studies

1) Meaning components of /bl-/

2) /bl-/ in German

3) /pl-/ in English and German

Meaning components of /bl-/

Recreation of Käsmann 1992

Method and Material:

- *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* for the lexemes, *Oxford English Dictionary* for definitions and seme analysis

- All lemmata beginning with /bl-/ excluding: compounds, derivations, proper nouns, participles, phonological and orthographic variants, and obsolete words > 70 lexemes for analysis

Meaning components of /bl-/

Two major meaning components:

1) **general negative meaning**

(i.e., *OED* definitions feature negative vocabulary or negative collocations, e.g., lexemes referring to negative emotions, lexemes formed with negative morphemes, negative markers, or explicitly state that the lexeme is considered rude or insulting)

2) **'unintentional, disruptive'**

Umbrella category for 'vocal sound' (Marchand 1969), 'loud, air-induced sound' (Rhodes & Lawler 1981) and other lemmata defined as 'unintentional, disruptive', as lacking subject-agentivity, and as relating to anomalous occurrences or behavior

Meaning components of /bl-/

1) **Negative meaning**

~77% (54 lexemes) have at least one negative meaning

~39% (27 lexemes) only have negative meanings

blame, *blanch*, *blasé*, *blatant*, *bleak*, *blood*, *blue*, *blaspheme* etc.

2) **'unintentional, disruptive'**

~50% (36 lexemes)

More than half of these lexemes only have negative meanings

blag, *blemish*, *blight*, *blip*, *blotch*, *blurt*, *blob*

/bl-/ in German

Method and Material

- *Duden – Deutsches Universalwörterbuch*

- Criteria for lexemes and meaning components identical to previous study (one addition to exclusion criteria: English loanwords)

- Problem: entries much shorter in the *Duden* than in the *OED* > seme analysis based more on introspection

- 47 lexemes for analysis

/bl-/ in German

1) Negative meaning

~64% > comparable to English

2) 'unintentional, disruptive'

~23% > only half compared to English

/bl-/ in German

Possible reasons for 'unintentional, disruptive' discrepancy

- Lexemes have no imitative equivalent in German, e.g., *blip* 'Echozeichen'

- Imitative equivalents start with different sounds/sound combinations, e.g., *to bleep* 'piepsen', *to blather* 'plappern'

/pl-/ in English and German

Method and material:

- Same as before, *Longman* and *Duden*

/pl-/ in English

Problem:

English lexemes with /pl-/ are mostly derived from three Latin words: *placēre* 'to please', *plāga* 'harm, wound, blow', *plānus* 'flat'

Imitative lexemes with lexeme-initial /pl-/:

plod, *plonk*, *plop*, *plump*, *plunk*

> describe sounds of something hitting the ground/water, setting something down

> does not directly correspond to /bl-/, even though there is some overlap with 'unintentional, disruptive', 'vocal sound', and 'air-induced sound'

/pl-/ in German

Analysis of only imitative lexemes:

1) **'unintentional, disruptive'** ~ /bl-/ in English and German

plauschen, plaudern, plempern, plieren

2) **sounds connected to water** ~ /pl-/ in English

plätschern, platsch,

3) **'loud, air-induced sound'** ~ /bl-/ in Rhodes & Lawler (1981)

platzen, plauz, plopp

In summation

- In English, the very broad meaning component 'negative' and the more narrow one 'unintentional, disruptive' can be identified

- These are also identifiable in German, but to a lesser degree

- Comparison to /pl-/ establishes that similar place of articulation does not necessarily mean similar meaning components

To conclude

- Does this type of study even make sense, considering how much subjectivity and introspection are involved? What could more objective approaches look like?

- Where do phonaesthemes come from in the first place, especially with regards to non-imitative, etymologically unrelated words (e.g., the /fl-/ paradigm)

- Which role does etymology play?

- How stable are phonaesthemes? Are lexemes belonging to a phonaestheme paradigm less likely to lose meaning components or sound combinations tied to the paradigm?

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