On Pejoration and Melioration From a Prototype Perspective: The Semantic Change of "Schwul" as an Example

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This study critiques structuralist feature semantics for analyzing pejoration/melioration, proposing Prototype Theory as a superior cognitive framework. Through the case of German *schwul*, it models semantic change as a dynamic shift in a category's evaluative prototype along a connotative continuum. The analysis shows how social stigma triggered pejoration (prototype shift negative), and later reclamation enabled melioration (prototype shift positive). This approach captures the gradience and socio-cognitive fluidity of evaluative meaning more effectively than binary feature-based models.

Keywords: metaphorical thinking, semantic networks, lexical competence

Introduction

In traditional structuralist linguistics, the study of pejoration and melioration has predominantly relied on feature semantics, which describes semantic change through the binary addition or subtraction of connotative features. This method, however, is problematic as connotative meaning is inherently gradable and resists rigid, binary classification.

Consequently, alternative approaches are needed to address these limitations. Prototype Theory offers a promising framework. Originating from cognitive science, it proposes a non-binary model of categorization that rejects the classical reliance on necessary and sufficient conditions. Within this model, category membership is a matter of degree, and boundaries between categories are flexible (Löbner, 2003).

Prototype Theory thus provides a valuable complement to feature semantics, particularly for analyzing phenomena where traditional methods falter (Kleiber, 1993). Given that investigating semantic change through a cognitive lens can enhance our understanding of language use, this paper will employ Prototype Theory to examine the processes of pejoration and melioration, using the semantic evolution of the German word *schwul* as a central case study.

Dysphemisms and Euphemisms: Designations for Homosexuals in the German Language

The term *schwul* (and its nominal form *Schwuler*) has become the predominant contemporary German designation for same-sex oriented individuals, following a complex historical connotative shift. Once primarily a derogatory label, it has been reclaimed as a positive self-designation since the 1970s and 1980s.

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To contextualize this semantic change, it is useful to outline the broader landscape of German terms for homosexuals, which is shaped by the dynamics of linguistic taboo, euphemism, and dysphemism. Dysphemisms are taboo-violating, pejorative terms often used to insult and marginalize, ranging from crude sexual references (*Arschficker*) to pathologizing (*Anormale*) or feminizing labels (*Schwuchtel, Tunte*). Conversely, euphemisms (e.g., *vom anderen Ufer*—"from the other shore") attempt to avoid taboo through obfuscation, though they often reinforce an exclusionary "us *vs*. them" dichotomy. A third category comprises relatively neutral terms (e.g., *homophil* and *queer*), which may also function as self-designations (Skinner, 1997).

This tripartite framework provides essential concepts for analyzing the socio-linguistic tensions inherent in the evolution of *schwul*.

Analyzing the Pejoration of *Schwul* Through Prototype Semantics

Having briefly examined the German designations for homosexual individuals, we now return to the term *schwul*. This lexeme originates as the Low German variant of the High German adjective *schwül* (meaning "oppressively hot"), which was incorporated into Standard German during the 17th century. The original motivation for applying this specific term to homosexual persons remains unfortunately obscure.

Notably, as late as the end of the 19th century, this designation carried only mildly derogatory connotations. As documented by Albert Moll in his 1891 work *Die Conträre Sexualempfindung*, homosexual men and women reciprocally referred to themselves as *schwul*, with cohabiting relationships described as a *schwule Ehe* (gay marriage) or *schwules Verhältnis* (gay relationship).

A significant shift in usage occurred during the first half of the 20th century. The term was increasingly employed by heterosexual society as a pejorative to insult and denigrate homosexual individuals. Consequently, the semantic value of *schwul* underwent deterioration during this period, acquiring distinctly negative connotations.

This process of pejoration coincided with the term's taboofication. The socio-psycholinguistic framework provides explanatory insights: Firstly, no lexical item possesses inherent "dirty" qualities—such associations derive from contaminated contextual usage; secondly, linguistic practices function as group identity markers.

These perspectives illuminate the underlying sociopsychological mechanism: The taboofication of an expression serves to suppress its specific contextual associations. Heterosexual individuals, seeking to demarcate themselves from homosexual communities and avoid perceived "contaminated" contexts, progressively tabooed *schwul* based on its perceived affiliation with homosexual subculture. As the dominant social majority controlling linguistic norms, heterosexuals successfully imposed negative connotations through this taboofication process. Gradually, even homosexual minorities were compelled to acquiesce to this normative framework, accepting *schwul* as inherently derogatory and avoiding its usage.

This semantic deterioration can be effectively modeled through prototype semantics by introducing an evaluative dimension to the relevant categorical structure. Thus, the internal organization of the > SCHWUL < category during the pre-pejoration phase can be represented as illustrated in the following diagram:

In Figure 1, the category > SCHWUL < is delineated by the dotted line. Within it, the members (S_0, S_{+1}, S_{+2}, S_{+3}, … S_{-1}, S_{-2}, and S_{-3}…) are distributed from the center to the periphery of this category according to their degree of membership.

It must be emphasized, however, that the members of the category in this case—both prototypical and peripheral members—are no longer understood following Rosch, Brown, Tversky, and Barsalou as "exemplars" of the category, but rather following Ungerer and Schmid as "mental representations" and "a type of cognitive reference point". This is because only from this perspective can the connotative aspect of the term's meaning be accounted for. The subscript of a member corresponds to its value on the axis denoting the "degree of evaluation", meaning how the entity referred to by this category is assessed. Thus, positive numbers on the x-axis represent a positive evaluation, while negative numbers represent a negative evaluation. The number "0" in the center indicates a situation where the entity is judged entirely neutrally.
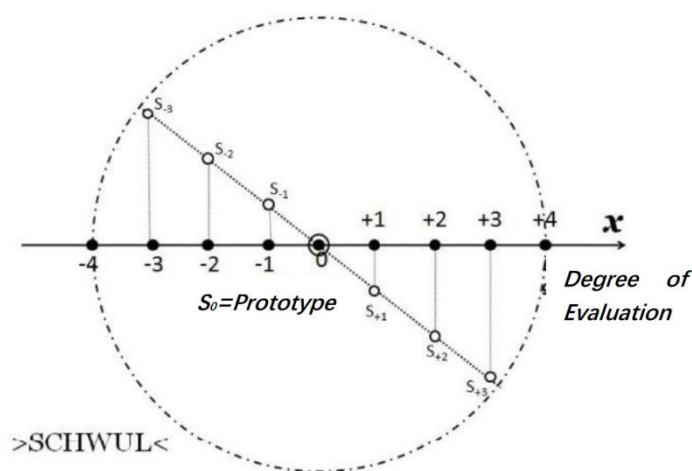

Figure 1. Pre-pejoration phase of > SCHWUL <.

Figure 1 essentially illustrates an ideal scenario where the member S_0, which is evaluated as completely neutral, constitutes the prototype of the category > SCHWUL < at this stage. Consequently, the term *schwul* is assigned neither negative nor positive connotations. This is reflected in the diagram by the value "0" on the x-axis for the degree of evaluation being located precisely at the center of the circle representing the category. In this manner, the other members (S_{+1}, S_{+2}, S_{+3}, … S_{-1}, S_{-2}, and S_{-3}…) spread out from the center towards the periphery, exhibiting increasingly stronger positive or negative connotative evaluations.
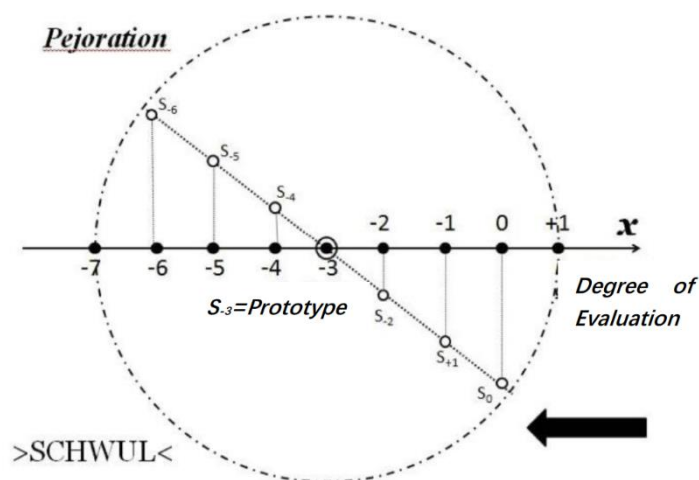

Figure 2. Pejoration phase of > SCHWUL <.

However, as previously discussed, the meaning of the word *schwul* became pejorated in the 20th century due to its predominant usage in "dirty" contexts. This process of pejoration is realized within this model by the circle shifting along the x-axis in the negative direction (see Figure 2).

Subsequently, the value "-3" on the *x*-axis has moved into the center of the circle. The member S_{-3}, corresponding to this value, has supplanted S_0 as the prototype, pushing the latter to the periphery of the category. Consequently, the prototype of > SCHWUL < is now a *Schwuler* who is associated with an evaluation degree of "-3" and viewed negatively by the majority of the German-speaking community. Accordingly, members judged more negatively (S_{-4}, S_{-5}, S_{-6}…) have also moved closer to the category's center, becoming "more prototypical". This manifests in language use as a trend whereby the category > SCHWUL < as a whole is typically negatively connotated at this time.

This shift, however, has triggered a fundamental change in the properties of the entire category > SCHWUL <: It has transformed from a neutrally evaluated category into a negatively evaluated one. This is because members assigned negative affective connotations have occupied the central position within the category, while the neutrally or positively evaluated members have been displaced to the periphery, retaining only a marginal status within the category. With this transformation, the pejoration of the word *schwul* was fully realized.

Analyzing the Melioration of *Schwul* Through Prototype Semantics

Against the backdrop of the international homosexual emancipation movement, the negative image of the word *schwul* began to fade in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, this word is predominantly used in neutral and, in part, even positive contexts. This melioration arises from the *detabooification* of this expression (Löffler, 2005).

Regarding the causes of this detabooification, the primary motivation lies in same-sex oriented individuals using this term as a self-designation to accept their own identity, assert themselves, express pride in their sexual orientation, and demarcate themselves from the "normal" heterosexual group. Furthermore, this detabooification occurred concurrently with the gay rights movement and increasing social tolerance towards homosexuals, which contributed to the usage context of "homosexual vocabulary" being viewed less and less as a "dirty" context (Georg, 1994). Through frequent usage of *schwul*, homosexuals ultimately succeeded in endowing this word with a neutral, and partially even positive, connotation. This detabooification is particularly evident in the increasingly frequent use of "schwul" as a self-designation, as well as in press and political language (Bussmann, 2008).

Within the framework of prototype semantics, the model introduced in the previous section to describe the pejoration of the term *schwul* can also be employed to capture its melioration. The process of melioration, in fact, represents the reverse direction of pejoration. Consequently, the circle representing the category >SCHWUL< must shift along the x-axis for the degree of evaluation in the positive direction (see Figure 3).

Following this shift, the member S_{+1}, which carries a positive connotative evaluation of "+1", has become the new prototype of the category. Simultaneously, the negatively evaluated members (S_{-1}, S_{-2}...) have been proportionally pushed toward the periphery of the category. This is reflected in the fact that the category > SCHWUL < as a whole is no longer negatively, but sometimes even positively connoted. Since approximately the latter half of the 20th century, a new linguistic norm has emerged where *schwul* tends to be perceived by the

majority of the German-speaking community as a neutral—and in certain cases even positive—designation, and is spontaneously used in neutral or positive contexts (for example, as a self-designation by same-sex oriented individuals).

Furthermore, it must be noted that the use of *schwul* by some individuals in a negative context or even as a pejorative is not entirely precluded. This is clearly reflected in the illustration by the fact that within the "circle" of the category > SCHWUL <, negatively evaluated members persistently exist despite their more peripheral status. This is because the mental representations of > SCHWUL < associated with "bad" and "dirty" connotations continue to endure. However, such usage is no longer considered a predominant mode of application today.
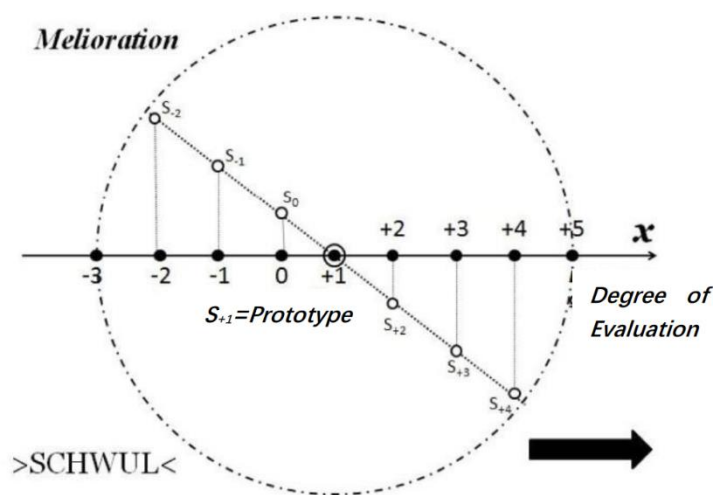

Figure 3. Melioration phase of > SCHWUL <.

According to prototype semantics, a category represents the homogenized mental image of an object shared by the entire speech community. For this reason, the connotative shift of *schwul* can be understood as a struggle between the viewpoints of different social groups. This is manifested here through the fluctuation of the category > SCHWUL < along the *x*-axis representing the degree of evaluation.

Conclusions

The case study of the connotative shift of *schwul* demonstrates that the scope of Prototype Theory is by no means confined to research on the denotative meanings of a lexical item. It is also a viable framework for describing and analyzing changes in the affective associations connected to an expression. One advantage of this Prototype Theory-based method for research in this field, compared to traditional structuralist approaches, lies in its capacity to reveal the inherent vagueness in the usage of a term regarding its connotation. It conceptualizes the affective evaluation of the entity denoted by the term not as a fixed property but as a dominant trend. Consequently, usages that run counter to this "trend" are not absolutely excluded. A word is thus no longer categorically classified as either a pejorative or a meliorative expression. Instead, it is understood as a semantic category whose prototype member is evaluated negatively or positively—a conceptualization that more accurately captures the fluid and context-dependent nature of evaluative meaning.

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