

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE EVALUATION AND PEJORATION IN LINGUISTICS

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Abstract

Pejoration, also known as derogation, is a linguistic process in which a word or expression acquires a more negative meaning over time. This semantic shift often reflects speakers' subjective evaluations of social, cultural, or moral concepts. Subjective evaluation, in this context, refers to the attitudes, judgments, and emotional responses that language users attach to words. This paper explores the intricate relationship between subjective evaluation and pejoration, examining how social perception, cultural norms, and individual attitudes influence the semantic deterioration of lexical items. Understanding this relationship provides insights into language change, pragmatics, and the social functions of communication.

Keywords: pejoration, subjective evaluation, semantic change, pragmatics, language evolution, connotation.

1. Introduction

Language is not static; it evolves alongside society and reflects the values, attitudes, and biases of its speakers. One common type of semantic change is **pejoration**, where a word shifts toward a more negative or disparaging meaning. For example, the English word *silly*, which originally meant "happy" or "blessed," has undergone pejoration to mean "foolish" or "lacking sense."

Pejoration is closely tied to **subjective evaluation**: speakers' personal or collective judgments influence which words acquire negative connotations. Subjective evaluation can be based on social, cultural, ethical, or emotional factors, which are then encoded in language.

This paper investigates how subjective evaluation drives pejoration, providing linguistic examples and theoretical perspectives.

Subjective evaluation refers to the process by which speakers attach personal or societal attitudes to words. These evaluations can be positive, negative, or neutral, influencing how language is interpreted and used in communication.

Subjective evaluation operates through:

- **Connotation:** The associative meanings of a word that convey approval, disapproval, or emotional coloring.
- **Social perception:** Attitudes toward specific social groups, behaviors, or ideas that affect word meaning.

- **Pragmatic context:** Situational factors that determine whether a word is interpreted favorably or unfavorably.

These mechanisms contribute to semantic shifts, including pejoration.

Pejoration is the linguistic phenomenon whereby a word's meaning acquires a negative evaluative component over time. This contrasts with **amelioration**, where a word gains more positive connotations.

- Villain (from Latin villanus, meaning “farmhand”) → “criminal” or “bad person.”
- Imbecile (from Latin imbecillus, meaning “weak”) → “stupid or foolish person.”
- Spinster (originally “unmarried woman”) → “old, unmarried woman with negative judgment.”

These shifts demonstrate how subjective evaluation drives negative semantic development.

The Relationship Between Subjective Evaluation and Pejoration Evaluation-Based Semantic Shift

Subjective evaluation often determines which words undergo pejoration. Words associated with marginalized groups, undesirable behaviors, or socially devalued concepts are more likely to acquire negative meanings. For instance, terms for occupations or social classes may become pejorative as social hierarchies and prejudices influence perception.

Emotional and Attitudinal Influence

Emotions such as contempt, disdain, or fear can accelerate pejoration. Words imbued with negative emotional charge are more likely to shift toward derogatory meanings. For example, words related to illness or disability may acquire pejorative nuances due to societal stigma.

Cultural and Social Mediation

Cultural norms and social judgments mediate the process. A word may remain neutral in one culture but acquire pejorative meaning in another, reflecting collective subjective evaluation. For instance, terms related to food or social status may be evaluated differently across societies, leading to divergent semantic trajectories.

Cognitive and Pragmatic Perspectives

Cognitive Linguistics

From a cognitive standpoint, pejoration results from metaphorical and metonymic associations shaped by subjective evaluation. Negative attributes may be metaphorically extended from socially devalued concepts to the words describing them.

Pragmatics

Pragmatic factors also influence pejoration. Politeness norms, speech acts, and social interactions affect how words are perceived. A term may acquire a derogatory sense when used in contexts that emphasize disapproval or ridicule.

Consequences of Pejoration

- **Lexical replacement:** Words may be replaced by euphemisms to avoid negative connotations (e.g., domestic servant replacing slave in some contexts).
- **Social indexing:** Pejorative words can index social attitudes, identity, and group membership.
- **Language change:** Pejoration illustrates the dynamic interaction between language, thought, and society.

Conclusion

The relationship between subjective evaluation and pejoration is intrinsic and reciprocal. Subjective evaluation—based on social, emotional, and cultural factors—drives the negative semantic shift of words, while pejoration, in turn, reinforces collective attitudes and social perceptions. Studying this relationship enhances our understanding of semantic change, the pragmatics of language, and the social life of words.

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