SEMANTIC CHANGE IN LEXICON AND GRAMMAR
Questions for today

1. Are the mechanisms of semantic change for lexemes the same as for grammaticalizing constructions?

2. Can changes in lexical meaning be directional?

3. How are the speaker and listener involved in these changes?

4. What role does frequency play?
Types of change to be discussed

1. Metaphor
2. Metonymy
3. Bleaching or generalization
4. Narrowing
5. Hyperbole
Repetition

The mechanisms we will discuss are all normal cognitive and phonetic processes that take place when language is used.

One instance of such a process will not result in what we would recognize as language change. (Traugott and Trousdale: innovation vs. change.)

However, multiple instances, over many usage-events and many language users, can result in change.
Repetition

So that means either that

An innovation occurs independently in different speakers, or

An innovation is adopted by many speakers
Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson *Metaphors we live by*

concrete > abstract

field (division of land) > field (of study)

*Up is happy; down is sad*

Time as space: *behind the times*
Time comes towards us: *the time is coming*…
A metaphor transfers an image schematic structure from one domain to another.

*Head* as a body part of a human has a certain relational structure – it is on top

The *head* of a nail in on top
The *head* of an organization is at the top
The *head* of a class
Metaphors in action

Cows have calves, glaciers calve icebergs, which are chunks of ice that break off glaciers and fall into water.
Metaphor in grammaticalization

Heine, Claudi and Hünnemeyer 1991

PERSON > OBJECT > PROCESS > SPACE > TIME > QUALITY

Human body part > object part

Swahili:

'breast, udder' > mbele 'front, before'
'back, rear' > nyuma 'behind'
'intestines, abdomen' > ndani 'inside'

Metaphors in action

Cows have calves, glaciers calve icebergs, which are chunks of ice that break off glaciers and fall into water.
White snow cover usually reflects sunshine, protecting the ice below from melting.

Where more snow melts than accumulates, glacier ice is exposed.

Exposed ice, which is darker than snow, absorbs heat.

Meltwater pools on the glacier's surface.

Pooled water drains through crevasses and moulins, breaking up ice and lubricating the glacier's base.

Source: Denver Museum of Nature & Science
Metaphor in grammaticalization

Many examples of body parts in adpositions for spatial relations (Svorou 1994).

However, space > time changes in gramm’tion may not be due to metaphor.

Existence in space always includes existence in time. 

*Be going to* > in space and time

*Be at doing / the doing place* > progressives

*In back of in space* > after (in time)
Metonymy

Part stands for whole

wheels for car
hand for helper
White House for US president and staff

Change by pragmatic inference considered metonymic in Traugott’s and Heine’s work.
Constructions bear meaning

All kinds of meaning

- semantic
- contexts of use (social contexts, discourse contexts)
- commonly made pragmatic inferences

  - first, co-occurring with semantic meaning
  - later, occurring in new contexts
Bleaching or generalization

In grammaticalization, parts of the meaning of the gram or construction are lost.
As meaning generalizes, selectional restrictions are also lost.

Is generalization a mechanism or an effect?

metaphor can lead to generalization
pragmatic inferencing can, too
AN EXAMPLE OF GENERALIZATION AS A MECHANISM

The semantic development of English can
The development of English *can* from OE *cunnan, cunnen*

Examples from Bybee 2003

(2) *Mental ability:*
Ful wys is he that kan hymselven knowe!
“Completely wise is one who knows himself!” (B. Mk. 3329)

(3) *Skill:*
Ther seen men who kan juste and who kan ryde
“Men are seen there who can (i.e., know how to) joust and who can ride”
(A. Kn. 2604)
The development of English *can* in Middle English and Early Modern

(4) *Ability:*
But I wol passe as lightly as I kan
"But I will pass by as lightly as I can" (B. NP. 4129)

(5) *Root possibility:*
Thou cannest not haue of Phocion a frende and a flaterer both to gether
"You cannot (It is not possible to) have of Phocion both a friend and a flatterer both" (UDALL Erasm. Apoph. 299a)
### Table 19.1  Stages of development for *can*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental ability</td>
<td>Mental enabling conditions exist in the agent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
<td>___________________________ enabling conditions exist in the agent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Root possibility</td>
<td>___________________________ enabling conditions exist ___________________________</td>
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### Table 19.2  Contexts of use of *can*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Main verbs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental ability</td>
<td>Human agents</td>
<td>Intellectual states and activities</td>
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<td>Communicating</td>
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<td>Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
<td>Human agents</td>
<td>All of the above</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Overt actions and activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Root possibility</td>
<td>Human agents</td>
<td>All of the above</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Passive subjects</td>
<td>All of the above</td>
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<td>Inanimate subjects</td>
<td>All of the above</td>
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<tr>
<td>OED</td>
<td>Additional items listed by Goosens (1992)</td>
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<td><strong>Mental states or activities:</strong></td>
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<td>understandan</td>
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<td>ongietan (2)</td>
<td>behabban</td>
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<td>tocnowan</td>
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<td>'to comprehend'</td>
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<td>'to esteem'</td>
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<td>'to perceive, know'</td>
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<td><strong>Communication:</strong></td>
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<td>sprecan</td>
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<td>'to speak'</td>
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<td>'to teach'</td>
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<td><strong>Skills:</strong></td>
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<td>wunda snidan</td>
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<td>'to touch a harp'</td>
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<td>'to hunt'</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'to cut a wound'</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other:</strong></td>
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<td>afandian</td>
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<td>bebeorgan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'to prove, try'</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'to defend oneself'</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Expansion of verb classes

Each of these verb classes expands in Middle English.

As that happens, the ‘know’ meaning of can is less prominent.

Speaker?

Listener?
Certain formulae are retained with the older meaning

I can tell = I can’t tell
I can say = I can’t say

I can understand = I understand
I can’t understand = I don’t understand
Bleaching or generalization

Gradual

Expansion of the categories (verbal complements) goes hand in hand with bleaching of meaning

Habituation may be working here

Root possibility
Speaker or listener?

Frequent items are more polysemous than infrequent ones (Zipf 1949)

The explanation for this could be their accessibility. Speakers choose them for new uses because they are accessible.

Another view would be that because they have many uses, they occur more often and are high frequency.
Speaker or listener?

H & K

The entrenchment hypothesis: If a form is often associated with a particular meaning, the user (listener) will assume that is the ONLY meaning.

This hypothesis is meant to explain who children work their way back from overgeneralization.

*He vanished the bunny* vs. *he disappeared the bunny*

(Theakston 2004)

*Disappear* is more entrenched as an intransitive
H&K experiments

In production task, subjects chose the more frequent form for the novel meaning.

In comprehension (form-to-meaning mapping), they chose an infrequent form for the novel meaning.
Broadening (generalization, bleaching)

Narrowing

Generalization occurs when speakers use an accessible form in a new context.

(Many such innovations are unsuccessful.)
Causal relations

Haspelmath 1999: generalization > extension > frequency

Schuchardt 1885: frequency > bleaching

Bybee 2003: habituation > bleaching > extension > frequency

Heine 2011: extension > generalization > frequency

H&K: frequency > extension > generalization
Accessibility account

Not just a form, but a construction

I Original context  
   source meaning

II Bridging context  
   pragmatic inference

If bridging context occurs frequently

III Switch context  
   incompatible with source meaning

IV Conventionalization  
   target meaning only
The development of English *may*

*May* meant ‘physical ability’

In the Middle English period it had already developed to mean ‘root possibility’

(22) Make we mery quy l we may and mynne vpon joye, (line 1681)
Let us make merry while we can, and think of joyful things,

For the lur may mon lach when-so mon lykez. (line 1682)
For a man can take sorrow whenever he likes.
Ability:

(24) A! mon, how may thou slepe, this morning is so clere? (line 1746)
    Oh, how can you sleep, the morning is so bright?
From root possibility > epistemic

Change in scope:

Rather than expressing the relation between an agent and the predicate, epistemic possibility expresses the degree of certainty of the speaker with regard to the whole clause.

\[ \text{[agent]} \text{ may}_{\text{possible}} \text{ [predicate]} > \text{ [whole clause]}_{\text{possible}} \]
Bridging context

Indefinite subject (18)
Omitted subject (26)

(18) '3e ar a sleper ynsly3e, that mon may slyde hider;
    'You are so unwary a sleeper that someone can sneak in here;

(26) I hope that may him here
    Schal lerne of luf-talkynge. (ll. 926-7)
    I think that whoever may hear him
    Will learn of courtly love-talking.
(27) that thou schal seche me thiself, where-so thou hopes
I may be funde vpon folde... (ll. 395-6)
give me your word
that you will seek me yourself, wherever you think
I can/may be found on the earth...

(28) Gif me sumquat of thy gifte, thi gloue if hit were,
That I may mynne on the, mon, my mournyng to lass. en.
(ll. 1799-1800)
Give me something as a gift, your glove perhaps,
That I can/may be reminded of you, man, to ease my mourning.
So in these cases where there is not real agent, the whole clause is in the scope of *may*.

Root possibility sense of *may* implies the epistemic.

It is possible for someone to sneak in here >

   It is possible that someone may sneak in here
(25) Hit may be such (that) hit is the better,
and 3e me breue wolde
Where 3e wan this ilk wele bi wytte of yorseluen.
(line 1393-4)
It might be better if you would tell me
Where you won such wealth by your own wits.
Hyperbole

• Using a word with a more exaggerated meaning than you might expect in the context.

• If a word that is very specific in meaning is used often, it could lose some of its earlier intensity.
  • Intensifiers: awfully, awesome…
  • Starve used to mean ‘die of hunger’
Hyperbole with dynamic verbs

• Jump on a plane…
• Hop on a plane…
• I’ve gotta run…
• I threw some equipment in the truck.

• Just a quick question…
Traditional definition of GRAB

- OED: To grasp or seize suddenly and eagerly; hence, to appropriate to oneself in a rapacious or unscrupulous manner
- rapacious: aggressively greedy or grasping
Semantic change in **GRAB**

*Grab* is currently used to mean ‘get’
1. Aerobics class 1990: *grab your mat*
2. Electrician grabs solar battery.
3. Co-Op cashier grabs member number.
4. Zotero: *Grab your research with a single click.*
A Study of GRAB

Corpus of Historical American English (1800-2000)

Corpus of Contemporary American English, spoken portion (2015-16)

Soap opera corpus (2000-)
Grammatical contexts—subject, object, tenses of verb

Discourse context, what items give indication of meaning of GRAB.
Meanings traditionally expressed by **GRAB**

**Eager**

Whew, but they were glad to see Apache! Fitz grabbed him by the neck rope. He had a flat pack tied on with our rope… (COHA 1912).

**Quick**

Oh, nothing, Neill, nothing. Suddenly reaching down and grabbing a pan. Let's wash, everybody. He dips water out of a pot and begins washing his hands. (1927)

**Urgent**

"Grab those dogs! They'll strangle each other, " cried Darragh quickly. (1922)

**Rough**

The old chap grabbed three or four of us by the shoulders and lined us up. (COHA 1918)
Implied meanings

Competitive
He clumsily grabs for the device. She pushes his hand away. (1956)

Illegitimate
...packages of cigarettes fall out and a lot of silver. Quickly Pop and Lucky grab the cigarettes and money.
Metaphorical uses

Competitive
He grabbed away Usial's share of the home place and then he grabbed Mehitable Dole while she was keeping company with Usial. (1921)

Illegitimate
Harrison was beaten because he is in the hands of the monopolists, who grab the people's money and put it in their own pockets... (1926)
Common contexts of use

Grab a body part: shoulder, arm, hand, wrist…sexual

Grab a weapon: usually urgent

Grab inanimate objects: clothing, accessories

Grab a human: take custody, arrest, kidnap, sexual
Properties that remain constant across time

1. Human subject (close to 100% at all dates)
2. Human object (20-30%)
3. Weapon for object (10%)
4. Body part object (10-25%)
5. Other inanimate (30-45%)
6. Narrative function (20-30%)

   The doctor grabbed his emergency grip and departed on the run for the Hat Ranch.
Figure 1: objects of *GRAB* across time

- **1910-**
- **1930-**
- **1950-**
- **1970-**
- **1990-**
- **2010-**
Unlike metaphorical or inferencing changes, selectional restrictions do not change over time.

It is the ‘human GRAB inanimate object’ use that expands into hyperbolic uses.
Figure 2: Frequent readings of *GRAB* across the decades from 1910-2016.
What changes are other aspects of the meaning.

Bleaching by habituation?
Hyperbolic uses

A use is hyperbolic if it does not express any of the meanings listed: eager, urgent, quick, rough, competitive, illegitimate.

and fin'lly pull up an affair that's a cross between a small crockery crate and an openwork hen-coop. Next he'd grab a big needle and string a dozen or so of the gooey fish on a cord. (1914)
Formulaic hyperbolic uses

Grab a bite to eat
Grab a cab
Grab the headlines (metaphorical)
To critics, Leakey seemed more dilettante than Renaissance man. Although Louis grabbed the headlines, it was his second wife, Mary, an archaeologist, who made many of the actual finds associated with the Leakey name.

Grab a trophy, title, win (metaphorical)
He grabbed three titles in 15 months, including the 2011 PGA Championship.
Recent hyperbolic uses

1. And so right now, the robot is essentially learning how to grab soap bars out of the shelf. (COCA 2015)

2. But I have one baking already, so we can grab that right now. Oh, yes. Oh, my gosh. (COCA 2015)

3. She is literally walking around the cabin of the boat stepping over him, grabbing her glass of wine, carrying it around the boat cabin with her. (COCA 2015) (Progressive aspect)

4. a thousand of them on the market, how do you know which one to grab? Consumer Reports has tested and ranked the best water-resistant sunscreens. (COCA 2015)
Metaphoric uses

Metaphoric uses generally have an abstract object—not something that can be grabbed with the hand:

1. You can't come around and grab the job I'm doing. (1919)

2. The family, meeting in solemn conference, decided Henry should grab the offer. (1941)

2. Well, how about if I run up and grab a shower, and then we can celebrate … with some dinner in the solarium? (SOAP; 41 tokens of grab a shower)

3. Ok, why don't you, you know, go out and grab some daylight? Get some alone time? Here you go. (SOAP)
Other metaphorical uses

Inanimate subject

- So the title wouldn't have grabbed me. What would've grabbed me is the book jacket design. It's got that famous book jacket design. (2015)
Figure 2: Numbers of metaphorical and hyperbolic uses of GRAB across the decades.
Figure: Increase in frequency of use of GRAB from 1910 – 2010.
Larger percentage of metaphorical uses as frequency increases.

High frequency items may be more likely to be used in metaphorical expressions.
From the listener’s point of view:

Accessibility of meaning: the meanings that are most often paired with the form will be the most accessible.

Therefore, a novel use by a speaker may not be understood and accepted by the listener.
Hyperbole and *GRAB*

Hyperbole with a verb like *GRAB* makes the situation seem more dynamic: eager, quick…

Note: the more negative implications of *GRAB* are not so much part of the new hyperbolic uses.

Listener typically has no problem with the extensions to less dynamic situations.
Why positive?

The ‘competitive’ and ‘illegitimate’ uses over time comprised only about 10% of uses.

GRAB is free to be used in neutral or positive contexts.
Crosslinguistic path of change

English *get* < PIE root *ghend-* ‘seize, take’, cf. Latin *prehendere* ‘seize’.

English *have* < PIE *kap-* ‘to grasp’, cf. Latin *capere* ‘seize’.

Latin *habēre* ‘have’ < PIE root *ghab(h)-ē* ‘hold’.

- grasp, seize > get, acquire > have, possess
Given that increased frequency makes *GRAB* more accessible, we can expect a continued increase in the use of *GRAB* to replace *GET* or *TAKE*. 
Hyperbole in grammaticalization

Anterior (perfect) > perfective or past

Anterior: past with current relevance
Lexical semantic change is more difficult to predict because it depends upon the whole of the experienced world.