The struggle of ideologies and the evolution of meaning of political labels (on the example of "liberal" and "conservative")

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The aim of this paper is to identify general discursive tendencies in the evolution of meaning of the words "liberal" and "conservative" in American political commentary over the recent years. As discourse analysts often note, the reproduction of meaning of particular discourse elements in successive discourse events is to a large extent influenced by dominant ideologies. And nowhere is it more transparent than in political discourse. As a result, it may be worth investigating how the changing political and cultural contexts help to constitute and reconstitute the senses of certain ideology-laden concepts (e.g. welfare, enterprise, democratization, liberalism, etc.) in various discourse communities.

Interestingly, the divergent processes of semiosis instigated by conflicting political interests make it possible to render some ideologically salient linguistic signs as inordinately polysemous in the ever-growing semiosphere of political commentary. It is not uncommon to see the same sign being invoked in different ways by political opponents: by some to represent a cherished value, and as a grave insult by others. It can be claimed that the evolution of word meaning is a natural semiotic process of language change, which reflects the historical and cultural advancement within discourse communities. However, this paper aims to demonstrate that the process of meaning evolution in political discourse may be considerably accelerated to accommodate the ideological preferences of dominant political groups. The struggle of ideologies often involves efforts to imbue popular signs with new associations, to extend their connotations or even to change their denotations.

The paper attempts to contextualize the observations of the changing meanings of selected political labels within the disciplines of semiotics and memetics, while following the critical methods of discourse analysis of textual data obtained from a range of websites devoted to American politics.