

SEMANTIC CHANGES WITHIN THE DOMAIN *BOY*
IN PANCHRONIC PERSPECTIVE¹

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally considered a subject of historical linguistics studies *par excellence* – semantic change – can be understood as conventionalisation of context-dependent modification of usage. Treated in this way, it does not necessarily imply reference to diachrony, but instead, may be approached as a timeless, universal and geographically boundary-free panchronic process; its constraints being delimited by cognitive mechanisms, especially that of conceptual blending.² This paper examines selected cases of changes in meaning pertaining to the semantic domain *BOY* and seeks the basis for their explanation in the blending operations of meaning construction. From this perspective, semantic change appears as a natural consequence of language usage directly related to cognitive processing.

1. Discussion

In the body of the paper we will analyse the cognitive principles which condition the mechanism of semantic change in a particular case taking as an example the concept 'boy' and its panchronic variation. An attempt will be made to provide answers to the following questions: What lexical items were/are used to express the meaning? How in the course of the diachronic development do certain expressions come to stand for the concept and how does it happen that later they become associated with other ideas? Although only a fragment of the develop-

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² For a detailed discussion of semantic change as a process of conceptual blending see Grygiel (2004).

ment will be discussed here in detail, I hope that it will suffice to demonstrate the analysability of semantic change in terms of conceptual blending.

Kleparski (1996) provides a historical onomasiological dictionary of the concept BOY which includes items that at a certain stage in the development of English possessed the meaning 'boy' (see Figure 1 opposite).

Figure 1. The historical onomasiological dictionary of the concept BOY (Kleparski 1996: 70)

	Old English	/	Middle English	/	Modern English
byre	←→				
cnapa	←→				
cnæpling	←→				
cniht	←→				
cnihtcild	←→				
hysecild	←→				
mago	←→				
wæpnedbearn	←→				
wæpnecild	←→				
beardlēas	←→				
mægcnafa	←→				
frumbyrdling	←→				
frysca	←→				
geongling	←→				
magu	←→				
samgeong	←→				
cnihtcild	←→				
knave < cnapa		→	1470		
knave-child		1175 →	1440		
knape-child		1200-1220			
knight-bairn		1205			
groom		1225 →	1675		
bird		1300 →	1571		
girl		1290 →	1490		
swain		1300 →	1582		
boy		1300 →	20 th c.		
page		1300 →	1582		
little man		1300 →	1854		
stripling		1398 →	20 th c.		
imp		1412 →	20 th c.		
nipper		1535 →	20 th c.		
laddie		1546 →	20 th c.		
boykin		1547 →	1822		
tomboy		1553-1599			

ragamuffin	1581 →	20 th c.
kid	1599 →	20 th c.
urchin	1600 →	20 th c.
chappie	1821 →	20 th c.
bo	1825 →	20 th c.
gamin	1840 →	20 th c.
sonny	1850 →	20 th c.
shaveling	1854 →	20 th c.
boyo	1870 →	20 th c.
spalpeen	1891 →	20 th c.
bug	←→	
spadger	←→	
sonny boy	←→	

Among other things, it should be pointed out that not all the items could be treated as equally representative members of the category BOY. Those which occupied a central position in the onomasiological structure of BOY include chronologically: *cniht*, *cnapa/cnafa* and *boy*. Also, if we compare the dating of the *OED* quotations with the respective words used in the sense of 'boy', we will observe a considerable degree of overlapping and rivalry between them. This, in most cases, led to the predominance of one of the items as a central expression displaying the meaning, and final elimination of the other. Thus, *cniht* meaning 'boy' could be limited in its use to the Old English period, e.g.:

c893 Philippus, þa he *cniht* wæs, wæs Thebanum to 3isle 3eseald.

971 He wearþ færinga 3eong *cniht* & sona eft eald man.

Around the year 1000, a clear decrease of *cniht* in the sense of 'boy' can be observed (cf. Diensberg 1985: 326), and this meaning was from then on more and more frequently primarily associated with *cnapa/cnafa*, e.g.:

a1050 Na 3edafenað þam se to fulfremednyse ho3að, gamenian mid *cnafan*.

c1460 Is youre chyld a *knave*?

In Old English, *cniht* and *cnapa/cnafa* were close enough to each other for Dongen (1933: 18) to claim they constituted a pair of absolute synonyms. However, Łozowski (2000: 123-124) questions this possibility believing there is a clear progression in age from *cild* via *cnapa* to *cniht* and the words can, by no means, be treated as completely interchangeable.

One should also realise that the various items aspiring to the meaning 'boy' or at least being attached to some facet of the concept associated with it, did not come out of the blue and disappeared into thin air, but rather underwent a process of semantic change which might be schematised as follows:

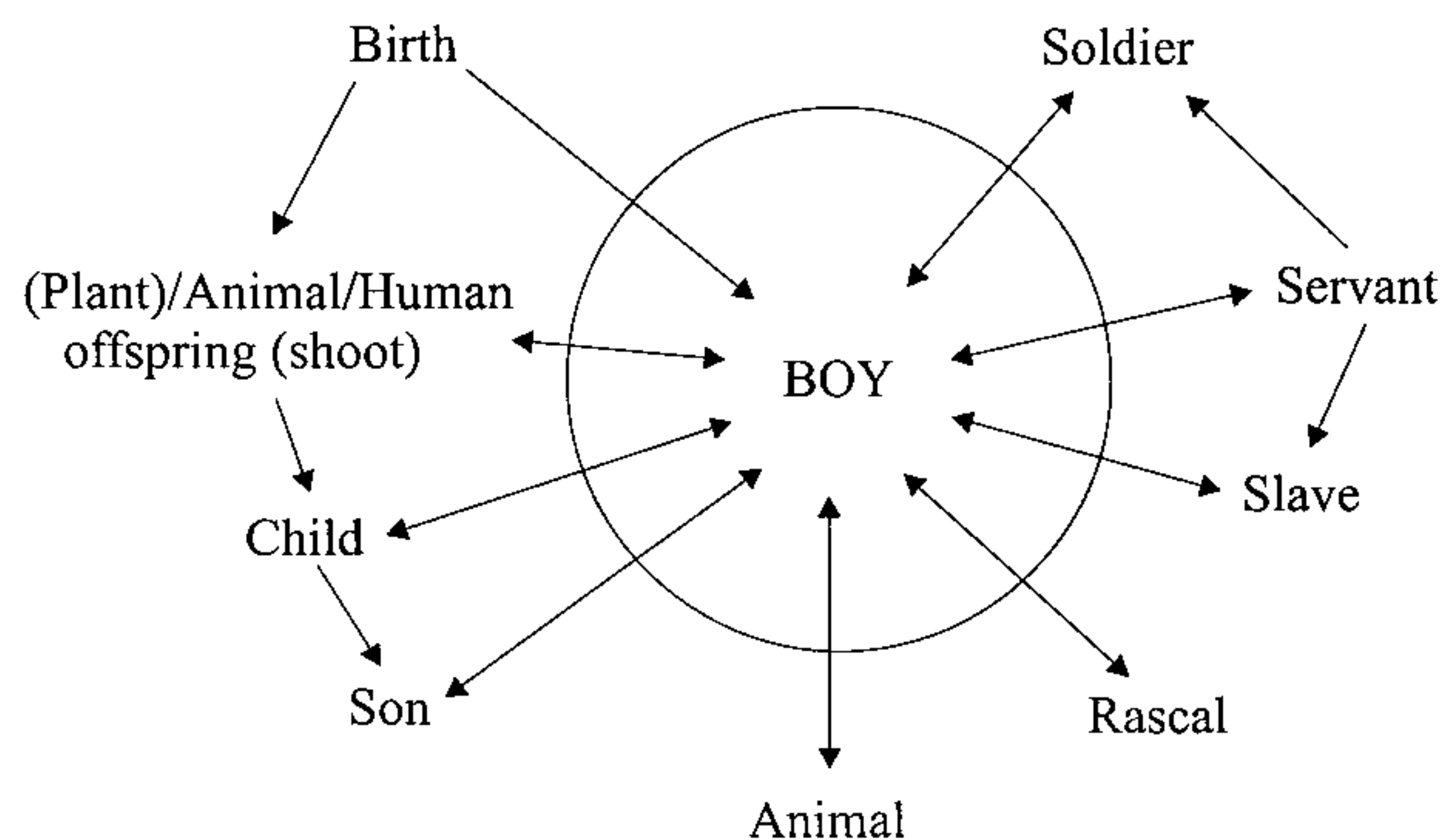


Figure 2. The panchronic changes of meaning within the domain BOY

The first item from Kleparski's (1996) list – *byre* – was, as Bäck (1934: 64) notes, an abstract noun meaning 'birth' and its use in the sense 'boy' appears already in *Beowulf*. The association of ideas – BIRTH and BOY – is also attested by *The Aberdeen bestiary* f91v (*Liber de bestiarum natura*) while providing the etymology of each age and where the Latin word itself – *puer* – designates both 'boy and 'child'.

Actually, the change of meaning from BIRTH to BOY as well as from BIRTH to CHILD could be explained by what Fauconnier and Turner (2002) call *cause-effect conceptual blending*. They claim that mental spaces are built up dynamically in working memory and used for on-line meaning construction, but they can also become entrenched in long-term memory as conventionalised blends. However, the productive way in which people are able to extend these conventionalised blends suggests that the blended model maintains links to its original inputs. In this case, it is not enough to see one thing as caused by the other; but rather, we need the two proper mental spaces, in this particular situation, the one with a woman giving birth to a baby and the other with a new born child. These are connected by *vital relations of time* (one space takes place later than the other), *space* (they are originally in the same space), *change* (one state is followed by a different one) and *cause-effect* (we have production and its product). This already entrenched conceptual blending is further extended, by means of yet another vital relation – *analogy*, onto animals and plants, both capable of reproduction that can be likened to human experiences. The semantic development could be documented with the following *OED* quotations where

'birth' is used in the sense of 'the product of bearing, that which is born; offspring, child; young (of animals)', e.g.:

a1400 For þi of þe beþ born a *burþ*.

1711 Others hatch their Eggs and tend the *Birth*, 'till it is able to shift for it self.

The onomasiological dictionary of the concept BOY abounds in words primarily related to the sense '(Plant), Animal, Human offspring (shoot)'. For example, words ending in *-ling*, such as *cnæpling*, *frumbyrdling*, *geongling*, *stripling*, *shaveling* where the diminutive suffix *-ling* was originally used for forming names of baby animals, e.g.: *duckling*, *yeaneling* 'young lamb', *fledgling* 'a young bird', *yearling* 'an animal, especially horse, between one and two years old', Swedish *killling* 'goatling', also by extension *sapling* 'a young tree'; many of which can also refer to a 'boy'. Other words from the domain '(Plant), Animal, Human offspring (shoot)' that became attached to the concept BOY as indicated by the *RIT* include *kid*, *chick*, *cub*, *puppy*, *calf*, *runt* and also *sprout* or Turkish *çocuk* 'boy; child; sprout, shoot' and Polish *latorośl* 'sprout, shoot, grape-vine; human off-spring of both sexes'. Notice that the English word *imp* before acquiring the meaning of 'child' and then 'boy' used to designate 'a young shoot of a plant or tree, a sapling; a sucker, slip, scion', e.g.:

c897 Sio halize zesomnung Godes folces, ðæt eardað on æppeltunum, ðonne hie wel begað hira plantan & hira *impan*, oð hie fulweaxne beoð.

1669 When the young *Imps* or Seedlings are sprung up, you must be very careful in keeping them from weeds.

The change of meaning from CHILD to BOY, apart from semantically transparent compounds such as *cnihcild*, *hysecild*, *wæpnecild*, *knave-child*, *knape-child*, *knight-bairn* as well as *man-child*, is also visible in the history of *nipper*, *bairn* and *girl* that originally referred to children of both sexes and later started to be used as synonyms for *boy*, for example, *girl* appears in phrases such as *knave girl* 'a boy' and *gal girl* 'a girl'. Similarly, in Polish *dzieciak* 'kid', derived from *dziecko* 'child', could be considered a category in transition as it shows semantic characteristics of both CHILD and BOY, whereas Serbian *dečak* has permanently changed its sense to 'boy'; the word *dečko* also meaning 'boy'. The same kind of conceptual development can be observed in the Arabic counterpart of the English word *boy* – *ولد* [*walad*]. Note that an identical root is also associated with the following meanings: 'to bear, to give birth to, to produce, descendant, offspring, scion, child, son, young animal'.

The concept BOY could be characterised by a number of attributes that may themselves be referents for the whole category, e.g. Old English *beardlēas* and

frumbyrdling as well as Modern English *shaveling* or *shaver* stress the feature of having no beard, having first beard or shaving first time in life, respectively, as the most recognisable aspect of being a boy, probably in contrast to a man or a child. In the same way, Spanish word for 'boy' – *muchacho* comes from the Old Spanish *mochacho* originally meaning 'trimmed, cut short' just like Portuguese principal term for 'boy' – *rapaz* is etymologically connected to the verb *rapar* 'to scrape or shave'. Other attributes include, in the first place, being young, e.g.: *geongling* < *youngling*, *samgeong*, *youngster*, *youth*, *juvenile*, *junior*, Dutch *jongen* 'a boy' (*jong* meaning both 'a boy' and 'a young animal'), Serbian *mladić* 'youth' and *junak* (which changed meaning into 'a brave man, hero' like Russian *молодец* [molodec]); and being small, e.g.: *little man*, Spanish *chico* 'boy', Russian *мальчик* [mal'čik] 'boy', Serbian *mališan* 'a small boy'. Further selection of attributes which highlight particular characteristics of the category may restrict the number of its representatives to very specific groups, e.g. Polish *mieśniak* 'a muscular boy, athlete', *dresiarz* 'a boy wearing a tracksuit who belongs to a kind of a street gang', English *skinhead*, etc. Also, seemingly peripheral aspects of a concept can be recruited in blends when demanded by current goals like in the *OED* attested use of *boy* in the sense 'champagne',³ which suggests that the conceptual core is of little relevance outside of what Coulson (2001) calls *restricted default contexts*.

A connection between semantic change and cognitive operations also becomes obvious when looking at the further sense development of lexical items that used to be associated with the concept BOY and later continued the process of acquiring new meanings. The vast majority of them slowly started to be associated with a new concept – SERVANT, while at the same time gradually losing the primary meaning of 'boy'. The items that underwent this sort of semantic transformation include, among others, e.g.: *cnapa/cnafa* < *knave*, *cniht*, *groom*, *page*, as indicated by the following *OED* quotations:

- c1000** Syle mihte *cnafan* þinum [L. *puero tuo*].
1825 Thou art an apt, and wilt doubtless be a useful *knave*.
c950 Onginneð..sלאא ða *cnæhtas* & ðiuwas.
c1250 Swete leuedi, of me þu reowe & haue merci of þin *knicht*.
1297 Me may yse a bondemannes sone..& some gromes squiers & suppe *kniztes some*.
1827 His *groom* was walking about his favourite saddle-horse.
a1327 Palefreiors ant *pages*.

³ Allegedly from Edward VII's habit of merely saying 'Boy!' to an attendant page who automatically brought him a glass of that wine (*CDS*).

1847 78 *Page*, the common and almost only name of a shepherd's servant, whether boy or man... Extensively used through Suffolk, and probably further.

Thus, the semantic change may be claimed to be the result of a conceptual integration network of mental spaces structured with frames which the speaker constructs from contextual information and background knowledge that with time become more and more entrenched in long-term memory. Coulson (2001: 134) stresses that while blending theory does not provide a detailed account of how abstract information represented in the inputs is accommodated in the blend, it suggests that speakers make use of constructive facets of retrieval processes to recruit specific information to structure the blended space. Furthermore, blending theory offers hypotheses about what kind of constraints are operating on the integrative mechanism.

As observed by Kleparski (1996), the fact that boys frequently entered the service of a lord or master gives an extralinguistic explanation of the development which took place in the conceptual structure of *cniht* already in the Old English period. Also Bäck (1934: 121) considers social conditions of earlier times, and especially the fact that the children of the house were almost like slaves in relation to the *pater familias*, as another reason contributing to the change. However, the process cannot be fully comprehended without reference to the more general cognitive dimension which makes the linguistic and sociocultural aspects interact in special ways, mostly by feeding one another and thus forming a chain which can lead to further concept modifications, e.g. restricting it to the meaning of 'the shepherd's attendant' like in the case of *page* or 'a servant who attends to horses' in the development of *groom*. Again, this kind of semantic innovation shows considerable universality and it seems to have proved culturally valid. Nevertheless, no words expressing the concept BOY, but at the same time lacking the characteristic 'low hierarchically', could change their meaning into 'servant'. This was the case with the Old English *eafora* which apart from the meaning 'boy' also referred to 'son, heir' or the Portuguese *menino* 'child, boy, the young master'. Also, such items as *imp*, *urchin*, *ragamuffin*, *gamin* could not become associated with the concept SERVANT as their semantic structure never indicated any implication of obedience, but rather developed in opposition to this feature.

2. Conclusion

Semantic change takes place not only over long periods of time in the history of a language, but it can also be traced in pragmatic ambiguity, polysemy or dialectal variation. In general, semantic change can be treated as panchronic conventionalisation of originally context dependent modification of word usage. This

modification, or the formation of occasion-bound meanings, for the sake of efficient but economical reference and representation occurs under the pressure of both extra- and intralinguistic circumstances.

Semantic change is a natural consequence of the dynamic and creative nature of human cognitive capacities such as, for example, the ability to compress, remember, reason, categorise or need for reclassifying and reorganising constant flow of information we are confronted with. This unconscious act of creation results from the basic mental mechanism of putting two things together. Paradoxically, language is possible only if it allows a limited number of combinable linguistic forms to cover a very large number of meaningful situations. Thanks to conceptual blending we are able to envisage a new experience in well known and familiar expressions. Constructing cross-domain mappings and putting together mental spaces we can arrive at new meanings.

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