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MEANING-CHANGING AS A FORM OF TRANSLATION: A 'WOKE' CASE

ABSTRACT

This article examines the issue of the reasons and mechanisms involved when words change meaning. The questions that the author raises include: can we consider this a form of translation? How does the meaning of a word change, and what factors influence this transformation? Are these changes predictable and can they be controlled? Aiming to identify the moments or catalysts that prompt these shifts, the author engages in particular with Antoine Mailet's seminal *Comment les Mots Changent le Sens*, published in 1904-05 and 1921 respectively, and Charles Taylor's "The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity" in 2016, inspired by Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt and their views on language development. The encounter with these texts brings together theories of translation, general linguistics and sociolinguistics, and the complexities of the philosophy of language around the issue of how words change their meanings, particularly in terms of power dynamics. In conclusion, the article suggests that this meaning-making is a form of translation as this shift in meaning is not just a neutral linguistic evolution but a reflection of who controls language and, by extension, shapes the narratives around social issues.

KEYWORDS

Woke, Meaning-making, Translation, Language, Antoine Mailet, Charles Taylor

"Translation is political because it is a relation, a context of negotiating power," asserts Rada Iveković at the incipit of the rationale for the conference on "The Politics of Translation."¹ This sentence alone provokes myriad interpretations, creating a complex interplay between highly charged concepts: 'relation,' 'context,' 'negotiation,' and 'power,' all integral to the practice of translation. Each term is not merely definitional but interwoven, forming a matrix of influence

1 Rada Iveković, as a special guest of the conference, held in a hybrid format on September 1–2, 2022, at the University of Rijeka's Moise Palace on the island of Cres, wrote its rationale and, with her characteristic energy and generosity, alongside Aleksandar Pavlović and Sanja Bojanić, inspired colleagues and friends to respond to the invitation.



and authority that underscores the political dimensions of translation. Situated within contested spaces of meaning-changing, translation acts as a site for negotiating societal power dynamics, challenging the very notion of the neutrality of language. It becomes a potent tool for upholding and subverting dominant narratives, thereby shaping discourse and social change.

This paper explores the reasons and mechanisms involved when words change meaning. Through a series of questions, it is important to determine and specify what this type of change entails. Can we consider this a form of translation? How does the meaning of a word change, and what factors influence this transformation? Are these changes predictable and can they be controlled? Or do they simply confirm that a change in context leads to a change in meaning? While primarily linguistic, their consequences extend beyond language, impacting and drawing from nearly every aspect of life. What occurs during this transformation or translation? The paper tackles how and why specific keywords in ideological battles, such as ‘feminism’,² ‘gay’, ‘queer’, ‘woke’, or the binary ‘nature/culture,’ undergo significant shifts in meaning and connotation. My interest is not in the words themselves—linguistically, culturally, or sociologically—nor in their influence on future segments of their lives and solidified meanings. Rather, I aim to identify the moments or catalysts that prompt these shifts, subsequently directing their further development. My focus lies exclusively on the unpredictable dynamics of their usage, without detailing any specific term, but using ‘woke’ as a case. What kind of value exchange leads to the exhaustion of one concept’s argumentative power gained in the first usage and its adoption by opposing ideological/political forces?

What are the tools at our disposal to conduct this analysis? Let us assume we have noticed the change in meaning and identified some elements that influenced this change. Can we negotiate with the new meaning, or do we stubbornly continue to widen the meaning gap between ‘before’ and ‘after’ on behalf of the entity we knew before the change occurred? Are we moving beyond random linguistic changes to detect complex sociocultural drives where there is always the possibility of meaning entropy? Why are some words forgotten while others reappear after long periods of non-use? These questions, which once belonged exclusively to specialized and expert linguistic circles, can now be answered with technical precision thanks to modern computer processing and advanced linguistic analyses. Today, we are better equipped to understand the dynamic and evolving nature of language. Shifts in meaning, or semantic change, occur for various reasons. One is the influence of frequency and co-occurrence patterns in large text corpora as words frequently and gradually appear in new contexts alongside different sets of words. Metrics and computational

2 The earliest form of ‘féminisme’ originally referred to being feminine or effeminate, particularly in men. However, this meaning did not last long. By the late nineteenth century, the term had taken on its modern significance, associated with advocating for women’s rights and gender equality. Hubertine Auclert popularized the term in this new context, particularly regarding suffrage and the rights of women in France in the 1880s.

mainstreaming provide a graphically presentable and convincing answer, reflecting how language adapts to social, cultural, and technological realities. However, the uncertainty begins with interpretation, which—for this paper—involves the interplay of context and the negotiating power of translation, a highly political process.

What happened when ‘woke’ changed its semantic field? Did we gain the ability to negotiate power grounded in language? What does understanding that context offer us? How does a significant meaning-shift in emerging emancipatory strategies get adopted by different sides of the political spectrum? Does the volatile nature of language drive these changes, renewing itself by incorporating vernacular forms that continue their formal or normative linguistic lives? What kind of translation are we talking about here, and for the sake of clarity, are we dealing with synchronic or diachronic language issues when discussing word change? The transformation of the terms ‘feminism’ or ‘queer’ from derogatory invectives to established fields of study can be attributed to various factors, including changes in societal attitudes, advancements in academic thought, and the efforts of social and political movements. Phenomenologically, this shift may be connected to evolving perceptions and experiences of gender and sexuality, while epistemologically, it reflects a reevaluation of knowledge production and its relationship to power structures. Culturally, the transition signifies a broader recognition and acceptance of diverse perspectives and identities within academic, social, and political spheres.

Conversely, how does a term like ‘woke,’ originally rooted in emancipation, come to be used in a strongly negative sense on the opposite spectrum of emancipation? I am interested in the reasons and mechanisms that initiate these changes in meaning rather than the ontic or ontological status of the concepts themselves. This exploration delves into the dynamics of meaning changes and the inherently political translation processes that enable such significant shifts in inference and usage. Can we discover and articulate justifiable answers to these questions?

One could embark on any number of paths to investigate these fundamental elements. I begin by reflecting on my experience of translating Antoine Meillet’s “*Comment les Mots Changent de Sens*”—a comparative linguistic study from the beginning of the twentieth century—into Serbian (2009). Formative in a certain way, this translation taught me to consult and read dictionaries and grammar manuals (nor only them) in search of idioms and syntagms that, in addition to the literalness of the translation, follow basic translation guidelines and bridge meaning from one language to another. A translator’s intrinsically rich general knowledge must be complemented with more technical expertise to ensure a deep understanding and the capability to construct effective translation strategies. The next step involves immersing oneself in the singularities of the language, adhering to Jakobson’s principles of intra-translation techniques and extending beyond them in search for fully embraced sociolinguistics. Before we engage in problematizing issues of legacy and assuming a cultural burden—invariably weighty—it is good to confront our own stereotypes

and refine our *episteme*, which is possible with Charles Taylor’s *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (2016). According to Taylor, besides its utilitarian function as a tool for communication, language is fundamental to human experience, shaping how we reason and think, interact, and understand the world. “Language doesn’t just develop inside individuals, to be then communication to others. It evolves always in the interspace of joint attention, or communion” (Taylor 2016: 59). My contention is that these two elements—Meillet’s linguistic (syntactical) volatile capacity for change and Taylor’s humanist (semantic) grounding of language beyond singular word—function together but not necessarily harmoniously in situating translation as a political thing *par excellence*. The banal question of how words change their meaning thus becomes a pool in which it is almost impossible to determine clear coordinates and crystallize the future development of any social construct.

The Meillet premise

A student of Michel Bréal, Antoine Meillet attended Saussure’s lectures at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) in 1885-1886, which influenced his scholarly trajectory. Meillet became known for his mentorship of a generation of linguists and philologists who became pivotal in French linguistics, including Émile Benveniste, Georges Dumézil, Aurélien Sauvageot, Lucien Tesnière, Charles Haguenauer, Joseph Vendryes, and André Martinet. His work explored how words change meanings over time due to social, cultural, and contextual influences, thereby laying the foundation for sociolinguistics and applying comparative and historical methods to the study of the Armenian language, establishing its grammar, extending his research to various Southeast European languages, including Greek, Albanian, and South Slavic languages. While examining their development and place within the Indo-European language family, Meillet coined the term ‘grammaticalization’ to describe the process by which autonomous words evolve into ‘grammatical agents’ (Bisang 2017: 3). This concept has become central in the field of historical linguistics. Updated references relative to comparative linguistics can be found in a recently published, exhaustive presentation of his work, *The Limits of Structuralism: Forgotten Sources in the History of Modern Linguistics* (McElvenny 2023). The chapter “Grammaticalization and the Sentimental Evolution of Antoine Meillet,” written by John E. Joseph, also traces some elements intended with my analysis.

Originally prepared as a working paper for the *Année Sociologique* of 1905-1906,³ “How Words Change the Meaning” shares a similar title with Emile Littré’s posthumously published, “Verbal pathology or Lesions of Certain Words in the Course of Use,” (fr. “Pathologie verbale ou Lésions de certains mots dans le cours de l’usage,” Bréal 1886; Littré died in 1880). Meillet’s text can still be read today, primarily because of the changes and revisions which the author

3 *L’Année sociologique* is a biannual peer-reviewed academic journal of sociology established in 1898 by Émile Durkheim, who also served as its first editor-in-chief.

included in a 1921 compilation of theoretical and programmatic texts entitled *Historical Linguistics and General Linguistics* (1982). As for Littré, using medical metaphors was quite popular at the end of the nineteenth century. Foucault epitomized it in “Society Must be Defended” while announcing what is coming after the *anatomo-politics* and the tendency of normalization with “three elements of disciplinary power: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and examination” (2003: 3). Accordingly, Littré, a lexicographer, arbitrarily selected some 98 words that had radically changed their meanings over centuries and presented them in narrative form, often portraying these changes as abnormal, unfitting, and inadequate. He personified each word as the hero of a story marked by discontinuity. This linear cataloguing of words demonstrated that in certain instances, when the actual item referred to by a word became outdated, the word evolved to signify the item’s abstract function instead—as in the case of *alternative*, which shifted from denoting a succession of options to a simplistic notion of “choice,” or *réaliser*, which moved from “to make real” to “to become aware.” In other situations, he coined new terms or assigned new definitions to existing words by merely linking ideas or actions: *prétendre*, for instance, transitioned from “to claim a right” to “to assert or believe;” *opinion* took on moral or juridical overtones beyond its original scope. Similarly, *événement* lost its specificity and began to refer to trivial facts, while *finale*ment was frequently misused to mean “in short.” Littré also critiqued structural issues, such as the redundancy in *tant soit peu* or the grammatical distortion in *sans que... ne*. Through these examples, he demonstrated how words, once anchored in precise historical usage, were reappropriated to meet shifting cultural and communicative needs.

Encouraged by Bréal, Meillet critically assessed Littré’s approach and pointed out its lack of methodical explanation despite recognizing the value of the analysis. It appears that Littré significantly overlooked the theoretical component necessary to demonstrate how changes in meaning can impact the language as a whole. In contrast, Meillet’s text described the change process through Durkheim’s sociological and methodological framework. It provided a more systematic and comprehensive explanation by viewing language as a ‘social fact.’⁴ Meillet emphasized that language must be studied within its social context rather than being reduced to psychological or individual factors, thus formally providing a critical perspective on the dynamic relationship between

4 “A social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint; or: which is general over the whole of a given society, whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations” (Durkheim 1982: 59). It should be noted that the ‘external constraint’ Durkheim mentions is not merely an abstract concept but rather encompasses all collective practices that either negatively or positively limit the capacity or the power of individual action. Relative to ‘negotiating power’ through translation, it would be possible to state that the basic idea behind the reference to coercion seems to cover all undefined social statuses, prestige, class, race, gender or social affiliations, and other invisible social ties that must be interpreted in relation to the physical or natural environment.

language/society and illustrating how linguistic changes mirror broader macro and micro social transformations. In his dialogue with his predecessors (and not only Littré), his linguistics experienced a turn from a more rigid, narrow view of language to dynamic, evolving, and deeply intertwined with society.

Meillet's ability to blend linguistic accuracy with socio-cultural insights, especially in the revisited edition from 1921, set a benchmark for the field, demonstrating how detailed knowledge of both linguistic mechanics and social context is essential for good translation and analysis. Which elements overcome narrow linguistic techniques, encompass psychological individualities and explain the historical continuities and ruptures in society? Viewing language as a 'social fact' made it possible to bridge the gap from mere hierarchical observation and normalization reach for processes behind these phenomena. Meillet identified three linguistic factors that influence semantic change: the discontinuous nature of linguistic learning, the likelihood of meaning change being reduced when a word closely corresponds to its referent, and how changes in word form or pronunciation can integrate it into new semantic networks (this analysis belongs to the second part of the book). He also discusses both internal linguistic dynamics and external factors like social group structures and technological advancements as drivers of semantic change. The third, most extensive part of the text examined the impact of social group divisions on language with consideration that the individual's affiliations with overlapping social groups create zones of tension around meaning assignment. Consequently, Meillet introduced the concept of 'borrowing' (somehow forgetting the other important linguistic tool, 'reappropriation'), where words shift in meaning as they move between different social groups, becoming more generic when moving to broader groups or more specific within narrower ones. His focus was on factors like foreign contacts and the organization of scholarly or social groups which play roles in how words are exchanged among various clusters of people. According to the author, we need general semantic studies with a three-stage approach: starting with linguistic facts (focusing on phonetic and grammatical isolation), then historical relationships between words and their referents, and finally, examining the complex patterns of 'word borrowing' among different languages and social groups.

In his work, Antoine Meillet paid attention mostly to academic matters and the organization of word change in linguistics, emphasizing the grammatical aspects of the change. However, while the sociolinguistics' focus shifts to contemporary issues dealing with society, "historical linguistics"—as Gregory R. Guy writes in the chapter "Language, Social Class, and Status" in the *Cambridge Handbook of Sociolinguistics*—"has been more concerned with a broad overview of linguistic evolution over the centuries rather than with studying the social spread of specific innovations" (2011: 179). Following the questioning of systemic knowledge about the word change, it is beneficial to revisit the role of language in shaping social identity. Furthermore, there is a need to explore a different line of interpretation, focusing on how changes in language can undermine the social identity of a group or entity, particularly when words

are employed in a derogatory or disapproving manner, which could provide an understanding of the translation as ‘negotiating power’ in either affirming or negating social belonging.

The Taylor premise

In 2016, at the dawn of the Trump era,⁵ Charles Taylor published his book *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*. The preface states that the task of the book is to include “capacities for meaning creation which go far beyond that of encoding and communicating information, which is too often taken as its central form” (2016: 3). The author aims “to refute the remaining fragments of the legacy of the HLC [Hobbes, Locke, Condillac] by developing insights out of the [Johann Georg] Hamann, [Johann Gottfried] Herder, and [Wilhelm von] Humboldt” (HHH) and their views on language development in the context of various formats of society” (*ibid.*). Clearly, language is not developed in isolation by individuals (as the HLC tradition would have it); rather, it evolves through social interactions and shared focus within a community (see Taylor’s quote in the introductory paragraphs of this paper). The HHH tradition, as he calls it, critiques the Enlightenment’s overly reductive approach to language, failing to capture its full significance. Language cannot be reduced merely to its communicative and individualistic function. On the contrary, Taylor asserts that “the fundamental point that emerges from the ontogenesis of language is that it can only be imparted from within relations of shared emotional bonding, what we might call ‘communion’” (Taylor 2016: 69). Therefore, sharing language shapes our very ability to think, understand, and interpret the world. Sharing language also translates into negotiating the languages’ relations of power. Deeply embedded in cultural and historical contexts, linguistic diversity reflects how different cultures experience and grasp reality (Taylor’s take on ‘multiculturalism’), starkly contrasting the universalistic and mechanistic perspectives on language function proposed by the Enlightenment. To encompass rich, multifaceted, and deeply embedded aspects of human experience that are constituted and channeled through language, Taylor uses the concept of ‘meanings’, central to his argument that language is not just a tool for describing the world but is integral to how we engage with reality. ‘Meanings’ are not pre-existing entities that language merely labels or describes; language plays a constitutive role in proactively creating ‘meanings’ and thus generates structure and coherence to our experiences through linguistic practices. A collaborative process inherently tied to our social interactions, ‘meaning-making’ translates how we position ourselves in the world, resonating

5 Used here as a ‘technical’ description, the ‘Trump era’ includes the period of decomposition of meaning, erosion of trust in institutions, contestation of truth, and challenge to rational discourse, leading to a more fragmented and polarized society. Still, the paper is not focused on analyzing it as such but on circumscribing word changes influenced, among other factors, by these social phenomena.

with the questions at the origin of this text. And just as the main difference between HLC legacy and HHH is in the role of language, this ‘meaning’ is not grounded in singular words but evolves and arises in sets of expressions and sentences. Word-changing, and therefore ‘meaning-making’, actively constructs and reinforces power and status differentials embedded in linguistic practices, shaping how terms and concepts evolve. This is particularly relevant in ideological battles, where meaning modifications can signify underlying shifts in power and influence as certain words (most importantly in sentences and expressions) are adopted, contested, or redefined within a society. Language is not neutral; it is a site of struggle where different groups compete to define and control the meanings of words. This nuanced understanding is essential when considering whether the volatile nature of language, constantly renewing itself by incorporating vernacular forms, drives these changes or whether these shifts reflect deeper, underlying social transformations.

A ‘woke’ case

Initially, in the late 1920s and during the 1930s, ‘woke’ was explicitly linked to staying vigilant against racial injustice in the American justice system, exemplified by Marcus Garvey’s “Wake up Ethiopia! Wake up Africa!” and Lead Belly’s song “Scottsboro Boys.” Throughout the twentieth century the term continued to be used within Black consciousness-raising efforts in the arts, particularly music and literature, with figures like bell hooks, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and a constellation of African-American engaged creatives who emphasized the importance of being attuned to social injustice, especially against the Black community. In her *Vox* article “A history of ‘wokeness.’ Stay woke: How a Black activist watchword got co-opted in the culture war” (2020), Aja Romano writes: “In 2014, following the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, “stay woke” suddenly became the cautionary watchword of Black Lives Matter activists on the streets, used in a chilling and specific context: keeping watch for police brutality and unjust police tactics” (ibid.). Over time, from a term of awareness in Black communities, ‘woke’ started to change its meaning, becoming synonymous with a broader symbol of leftist political ideology. Increasingly reappropriated in various directions, ‘woke’ has been commodified in the last decade, on top of which, political opponents have weaponized it and overused it, mainstreaming it precisely due to its vulnerability. For authors focused more on the dynamics of meaning change, such as Nicholas D.C. Allen (2023), the misappropriation and the shift in meaning were driven by a combination of social media dynamics, cultural and political appropriation, and the broader power struggles over who controls the narrative around social justice issues. Throughout the changes in meaning, the semantic potency of ‘woke’ remained, since this strong metonymy still performed the basic action of awaking. That is, the word still had a meaning close to a large field of theological concepts, such as illumination, enlightenment, divine inspiration, and sacred understanding – all forms of spiritual

awakening or insight which one receives through divine grace, wisdom, or the inner light of God. Finally, it is deeply set in transcendence, guidance or revelation for the sake of clarity, transformation, and growth. Yes, it still preserves this emancipatory zeal. According to many, shifting a Black Lives Matter slogan away from its original (or initial) meaning is arguably the least woke thing ever. The acceleration of its expansion, caricature and obfuscation is evident on social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, which create environments where diverse audiences with different cultural backgrounds and understandings interpret language in a flattened, context-free manner. This context collapse allows not only the distortion of the initial meaning but also linguistic oblivion of the fact that words always change meaning and that, as social facts, they provide grounds for various semantic and syntactic constructions. The central element which Allen (2023) states in his paper argues that the misappropriation of ‘woke’ constitutes a form of ‘contributory injustice,’ where the hermeneutical resources of the Black community—essentially the tools and terms used to articulate their experiences and struggles—are diluted or distorted by dominant groups. This injustice occurs because the original, nuanced meaning of ‘woke’ is overshadowed by its co-opted usage, which often serves to mock or undermine the issues the term was meant to highlight.

The intention from the incipit of this paper and the beehive of questions aim at understanding how words change their meanings, particularly in terms of power dynamics. It also suggests that this meaning-making is a form of translation as this shift in meaning is not just a neutral linguistic evolution but a reflection of who controls language and, by extension, shapes the narratives around social issues.

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Promena značenja kao oblik prevođenja: slučaj „woke“

Apstrakt

Članak razmatra razloge i mehanizme promene značenja reči. Autorka postavlja pitanja: da li se takva promena može smatrati oblikom prevođenja? Na koji način se značenje reči menja i koji faktori uslovljavaju tu transformaciju? Da li su ove promene predvidive i u kojoj meri se mogu kontrolisati? U nastojanju da identifikuje momente ili katalizatore koji podstiču ove pomake, autorka se oslanja pre svega na kapitalno delo Antoana Maljea *Comment les Mots Changent le Sens*, objavljeno 1904–05. i 1921. godine, kao i na studiju Čarlsa Tejlora „The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity“ iz 2016., inspirisanu Hamanom, Herderom i Humboltom i njihovim shvatanjem razvoja jezika. Ovi tekstovi omogućavaju povezivanje teorija prevođenja, opšte lingvistike i sociolingvistike sa složenostima filozofije jezika u razmatranju pitanja promene značenja reči, naročito u kontekstu dinamike moći. U zaključku se sugerise da je promena značenja oblik prevođenja, budući da ona ne predstavlja neutralnu lingvističku evoluciju, već odražava odnose kontrole nad jezikom i time oblikovanje narativa o društvenim pitanjima.

Ključne reči: woke, stvaranje značenja, prevođenje, jezik, Antoan Malje, Čarls Tejlor