DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR SEMANTIC CHANGE

Questions 1, 3, and 4 below will require that you consult etymological information in a dictionary. Most hard-cover dictionaries will have the minimum necessary information. The best one volume dictionary for this is the American Heritage Dictionary (full-sized hardcover version—smaller versions have more restricted information). By far the most complete information is to be found in the multi-volume Oxford English Dictionary, the best language reference work in the world. There is a copy in the URL Reference Section as well as on a shelf on the east wall of the Linguistics Reading Room.

1. Types of semantic change I. Each of the words below, given with its modern meaning, has undergone a change in the signified to which it applies (narrowing, widening, pejoration, melioration). State (a) what the original meaning was and (b) which of the 4 types of change just mentioned BEST describes the effect on the signified.

villain (noun ‘evil or corrupt person’)

a. ORIGINAL MEANING: ‘peasant, inhabitant of a farm’ < OFr ‘farm, village’

b. TYPE OF MEANING CHANGE: pejoration/degeneration

wax (noun ‘a viscous substance used to make candles or to make a surface shiny’)

a. ORIGINAL MEANING: ‘beeswax’ (related to PIE *weg- ‘weave’—ref. to honeycomb)

b. TYPE OF MEANING CHANGE: widening/extension

wax (verb ‘(for the moon) to increase in illumination each night during the first half of a lunar month’)

a. ORIGINAL MEANING: ‘to grow, increase’ (cf. German wachsen ‘to grow’)

b. TYPE OF MEANING CHANGE: narrowing/restriction

nice (adjective ‘kind, considerate’)

a. ORIGINAL MEANING: ‘foolish, senseless’ < OFr nice < Latin ne + sctre ‘not know’

b. TYPE OF MEANING CHANGE: melioration/elevation

2. Types of semantic change II. Identify the examples of semantic change in terms of one of the CATEGORIES OF SEMANTIC SHIFT listed on pages 87-88, i.e. Metaphor, Metonymy, etc. No type of change is illustrated more than once, and some are not illustrated at all. Choose the single BEST term for each example.

a. ___ hyperbole _____ German laufen ‘run’ now means ‘walk’ in some dialects.

b. ___ metonymy _____ In many languages, including English, French, and Hausa, the word ‘tongue’ comes to mean ‘language’. (Indeed, the English word ‘language’ comes from the Latin word for ‘tongue’.)

c. ___ subreption _____ The word for ‘o’clock’ in Hausa is karfe ‘metal’, e.g. karfe biyu ‘2:00’. This comes from the use of a metal gong to signal the beginning and end of work hours when clocks were not common in the Hausa area.
d. **metaphor** The original meaning of the adjective *callous* ‘insensitive, unfeeling’ is seen in the noun *callus* ‘a localized hardening and thickening of the skin’ (cf. calling someone “thick-skinned” if he is insensitive to criticism).

e. **habitual context** Noël, the French word for ‘Christmas’, comes from Latin *natalis* ‘of birth’ as it frequently occurred in the phrase *natalis dies* ‘the day of birth (of Jesus)’.

f. **synechdoche** Rifle referring to a type of gun with a long barrel takes its name from the *rifles*, or spiral grooves, inside its barrel which cause the bullet to spin and thus go in a straight line.

g. **litotes** Couple originally meant ‘two, a pair’ (from Latin *copula* ‘bond, link’). It can now be used in phrases such as *give me a couple of minutes* (which would usually mean more than “2 minutes”).

h. **synaesthesia** We can say ‘this is a *dull* knife’ and ‘this is a *dull* story’. (We can also say ‘this is a *boring* story’, but not *‘this is a *boring* knife’*).

3. **Motivations for semantic change**: In a number of the examples above, words have expanded in terms of the range of meanings they cover (they have become *polysemous*) but some have not. Explain the meaning changes that have taken place in the following two words in terms of the the *one form, one meaning* principle:

**wax** ‘(for the moon) to increase in illumination during the first phase of the lunar cycle’

*Wax* meant ‘increase, grow’ in general. Because the phases of the moon are a distinct type of “increasing”, *wax* was interpreted as polysemous and its meaning was narrowed to conform to the “one meaning, one form” principle.

**callous** ‘insensitive’

The metaphorical use (see 2d) created polysemy. The “one meaning, one form” principle separated the concrete and metaphorical use, seen by the different spellings, though they remain homophonous.

4. **Semantic change III.** Below are several words (*signifiers*) which have gone out of use, at least in American English, but the concepts referred to (*signifieds*) still exist. Give the Modern English word which has replaced each obsolete word and the origin of the modern word, e.g. “borrowed from French”, “compound composed of native English roots”, etc.

**thorp:** **MODERN ENGLISH WORD:** village  
**SOURCE OF MODERN WORD:** OFr vilage < Latin ‘homestead’  

**weald:** **MODERN ENGLISH WORD:** woodland, forest  
**SOURCE OF MODERN WORD:** wood < OE wudu + land < OE land; OFr forest  

**omnibus:** **MODERN ENGLISH WORD:** bus  
**SOURCE OF MODERN WORD:** Fr voiture omnibus ‘car for all’ > *(omni)*bus
queeth: MODERN ENGLISH WORD: *speak, say* (cf. *bequeath*)
SOURCE OF MODERN WORD: *OE cwethan* < PIE *gʷet-* ‘speak, say’

swive: MODERN ENGLISH WORD: *copulate* (and various other less polite words)
SOURCE OF MODERN WORD: *Latin cōpulāre* ‘to join’

5. Motivations for change. Can you think of any motivations for language change that we have studied which might account for any or all of the changes in question #4?

I can’t remember what I had in mind for this question!

6. Semantic change IV. Below is a pair of words which are spelled alike and pronounced alike in Modern English. For each word, look up the etymology in a dictionary and find out what its origin is WITHIN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH. You need not trace the word beyond its original source in English, i.e. a native word coming down from Old English or the language from which English most directly acquired the word. Write (1) the source and the earliest form of the word and (2) the earliest meaning.

EXAMPLE: *mean* ‘ornery’
SOURCE AND EARLIEST FORM: *OE gemēne*
EARLIEST MEANING: ‘low in quality; ornery’

*mean* ‘mid-point’
SOURCE AND EARLIEST FORM: *OFr meien*
EARLIEST MEANING: ‘middle’

*bound* ‘tied up’ (past participle of ‘bind’)
SOURCE AND EARLIEST FORM: *PIE *bhendh-* > *OE bindan* ‘bind, tie’
EARLIEST MEANING: Comes into MnE with essentially the original meaning.

*bound* ‘headed for; determined’ (e.g. ‘bound for home; bound to succeed’)
SOURCE AND EARLIEST FORM: *PIE *bheu-* ‘be, grow’
EARLIEST MEANING: from ONorse verb *būa* ‘live, prepare’

7. Motivation for change. Some speakers of English may not even associate the two words bound, i.e. for such speakers, they would just be accidental homophones like ‘to’ and ‘two’. Other speakers probably do think of them as the “same” word. What might motivate this latter feeling?

The “one meaning, one form” principle can work in either of two ways. On the one hand, an item may be viewed as *polysemous* and ultimately lead to getting rid of some of the meanings or assigning them to other words, leading to *monosemic* items with restricted meanings. The other possibility is to mentally connect originally distinct meaning to create mental *monosemy*, such as connecting *soil* ‘earth, dirt’ with the verb *to soil* even though these are etymologically distinct. Since the two past participles *bound* have come out homophonous speakers might connect the ‘determined’ meaning to the ‘tie’ meaning, e.g. begin “tied to” an idea.