

A *dull* paper: exploring apparent contradictions in the semantic histories of metaphorical mappings.

One of the most significant aspects of diachronic work on lexical semantic change is the way in which assumptions based on synchronic observations can prove to be at odds with the historical picture. It is generally accepted that metaphorical mappings are unidirectional and most commonly follow a concrete > abstract path, and this has been shown to be the case in a number of studies. However, a small number of cases which appear synchronically to fit in with this pattern of meaning change can be shown to be problematic from a diachronic perspective, and these potentially pose a challenge to cognitive semantic accounts of metaphorical motivation.

This paper will explore the semantic development of the lexeme *dull*, and consider what this can tell us about cognitive and historical semantic processes. The history of *dull* shows an apparently counter-intuitive development: both the history of the lexeme in English and evidence from etymological cognates indicate that the earliest sense was ‘stupid’, and the physical senses ‘not sharp’ and ‘not bright’ are attested very substantially later. An initial consideration of lexemes in related semantic fields (i.e. INTELLIGENCE, PHYSICAL SHARPNESS, PHYSICAL BRIGHTNESS) suggests the following:

- *sharp* originally had the meaning ‘physically sharp’
- within the Old English period it developed the meaning ‘intelligent’
- therefore it is tempting to explain the development of *dull* as showing traditional proportional analogy, once *sharp* had the meanings ‘sharp’ and ‘clever’, i.e.
clever : sharp = stupid : blunt

By contrast, a comparison with *bright* does not support a similar account for how *dull* developed the meaning ‘not physically bright’. *bright* appears to have developed the sense ‘intelligent’ much later than *dull* developed the sense ‘not physically bright’, therefore proportional analogy with *bright* would not provide a satisfactory explanation for this meaning.

In this paper, these three semantic fields will be examined in detail, drawing on the resources of the *Historical Thesaurus of English* alongside the full range of relevant historical dictionaries (the *Dictionary of Old English*, the *Middle English Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*). In doing so, I will suggest how a combination of traditional mechanisms of semantic change and insights from cognitive semantics may provide the best framework for explaining the surprising meaning history of *dull*.

Author, 2008.

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Historical Thesaurus of English Online:

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