

The Abstraction of Movement: A Cognitive and Diachronic Analysis of the Verb *émouvoir*

This study contributes to studies on embodiment (see Rohrer 2006 for instance) by showing that the universal and ahistoric character of metaphors within the emotive field (see inter alia Kövesces 1986, Lakoff 1987, Kövesces 2005, etc.) should be attenuated. As is stated by Geeraerts and Grondelaers (1995: 176), the diachronic dimension of this kind of investigation has been underestimated too often:

The basic point as we see it is this: an adequate analysis of the motivation behind cultural phenomena in general and language in particular has to take into account the diachronic dimension. [...] it would seem that the natural consequence of including the diachronic dimension into the investigation has perhaps not yet been fully appreciated.

In other words, emotional metaphors should be considered in a more historic and cultural sense. In this paper, we respond to this need by examining the evolution of the French verb *émouvoir*, which, diachronically, has evolved from a concrete verb of movement to a more abstract, psychological verb. In our corpus-based study, we explore the prototypical semantic and syntactic nature (Geeraerts 1997) of the occurrences of *émouvoir* attested in different literary and encyclopaedic texts. The analysis shows that clearly observable shifts can be attested if we compare the semantic uses of this verb in the 17th century with previous centuries. Whereas in Old French, for instance, the verb expresses a concrete movement in roughly 45% of the cases, in the 17th century, this use only accounts for roughly 8,5% of the data. An opposite trend can be observed with respect to the psychological uses of this verb where a steady increase of such uses can be witnessed (from 16% in old French to 61% in the 17th century). Nowadays, the verb is almost exclusively used within the psychological domain. By studying the evolution of this verb, we will also test whether the change in meaning is corroborated by a change in constructional possibilities and frequencies.

More importantly, we examine to what extent the semantic and syntactic evolution of *émouvoir* is actually influenced by a conceptual evolution of emotions in that same period. The attested changes will be linked to the impact of the disappearance of the humoral doctrine and the way in which the growing 17th century criticism towards previously held conceptualisation of emotion as “movements of the humors” or as “movements of the soul”, affects the lexicon in general and the evolution of the semantic and syntactic nature of the verb *émouvoir* in specific.

References

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