Semantic Change of the Publication-Concept?

Alexander Tokar

Department of English Linguistics, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf

The semantic feature [quality control through other experts in the appropriate research field] constitutes one of the distinctive features of the concept of academic publication. That is, only those texts that have been positively evaluated by other scholars can be regarded as academic publications. However, on the Internet any scholar can easily publish the results of his or her research without subjecting these results to the scrutiny of other scholars (e.g., by uploading a manuscript on a homepage or posting it on a blog site). Do those publications also qualify as academic publications? Has the concept of academic publication recently undergone a semantic change?

Introduction

The Internet (especially, the so-called Web 2.0) has given rise to new modes of scholarly communication. These include, for example, scholarly blogging, scholarly tweeting, presenting the results of one’s research in a wiki, and the like. One of the most important differences between these new Internet-based forms of scholarly communication and traditional academic communication is that the former do not rely on quality control through other experts in the appropriate field. This means that any scholar can post the results of his or her research to, e.g., his or her blog page without subjecting these results to the scrutiny of reviewers, which is characteristic of traditional scholarly communication (e.g., submitting a manuscript to a refereed journal or an edited volume). The central question raised by this article is whether this...
democratization of scholarly communication, which has been brought about by the Internet, has resulted in a change in the concept of academic publication. That is, do present-day scholars regard as legitimate publications only those texts that have been positively evaluated by other scholars? Or: Does any text that a scholar uploads to the Internet automatically qualify as a publication?

This article utilizes the following structure: The first section discusses the most important theoretical issues pertaining to the notion of semantic change. The focus is on mechanisms, outcomes, and causes of semantic change. The second section expands on what has already been said above: In which respects are Internet publications different from traditional academic publications? The third section presents the results of an empirical investigation aimed at answering the question of whether the concept of academic publication has recently undergone a semantic change. Finally, the article discusses the results of this investigation and proposes a new research question and a methodology for further study of this topic.

Semantic Change: Mechanisms, Outcomes, and Causes

Meaning change is traditionally classified into a number of subcategories. First of all, with regard to its mechanisms, semantic change can be classified into metonymy and metaphor. The difference between these mechanisms is that while an output meaning that has come into existence via metonymization exhibits a more or less real, “objective” link to its input meaning, an output meaning that has been a product of metaphorization is only perceptually similar to its input meaning (see, e.g., Hock, 1986, p. 285). For example, as I have argued elsewhere (Tokar, 2009, pp. 52-65), the use of the word friend in the context of online social networking Web sites such as Facebook is an example of metonymization: Facebook friends can include Facebook users’ offline friends, but very often they also include people whom Facebook users do not regard as friends in the literal, real-life meaning of this word, i.e., as people whom they “know well and regard with affection and trust” (WordNet). By contrast, the semantic development of the word firewall, which originally meant “a wall designed to prevent the spread of fire in a building,” but over the course of time has also come to signify “a piece of software designed to protect computers from viruses and especially hackers’ attacks,” is an example of metaphorization: Firewalls in buildings are considerably different from computer firewalls, but we perceive a functional similarity between them (i.e., that both are protection devices).
Secondly, with regard to its outcomes, a semantic change can be classified into an instance of full-idiomatization and that of quasi-idiomatization (Mel’čuk, 2001, pp. 447-460). The former gives rise to an output meaning that does not contain its input meaning. For example, the output meaning “a computer firewall” does not contain the input meanings “fire” and “wall,” which are inherent in the components fire and wall: A computer firewall is never literally a wall that prevents the spread of fire in a building. In contrast to full-idiomatization, quasi-idiomatization produces output meanings that contain their input meanings plus some additional (often unpredictable) meanings. A case in point is the use of the phrase list of publications or publications list in the context of scholars’ institutional and private homepages. What is interesting here is that an online-based publications list often does not only list the publications of a particular scholar, but also provides information as to how those publications can be accessed (e.g., downloadable PDF files, links to journals’ Web sites, and sources alike). An online-based publications list is, thus, a quasi-idiom in relation to its pre-Internet counterpart. The meaning of the former contains the input meaning “a list of some scholar’s publications” plus the additional meaning “information as to how those publications can be accessed.”

Finally, with regard to its causes, semantic change can be classified into semantic change caused by lexical gaps and semantic change due to linguistic conservatism. The former can again be exemplified by the metaphorization of firewall and many other Internet terms (e.g., to surf, to visit a Web site, a browser, a bookmark, etc.). As Meyer et al. (1997, p. 3) pointed out, software developers usually give preference to metaphoric expressions when dealing with lexical gaps because metaphors allow “computer users to see a potentially complex concept in terms of a well-known and simple one” and, precisely because of this, “aid users in understanding and remembering new concepts.” In addition to this, semantic change represents the default strategy of dealing with lexical gaps because it is cognitively easier to modify the meaning of an existing expression than to coin an entirely new expression (Tokar, 2012, p. 124, 129; see also Jansen, 2005). As far as semantic change due to linguistic conservatism is concerned, consider the following quote from Ullmann (1970):

> It often happens that language is more conservative than civilization, material as well as moral. Objects, institutions, ideas, scientific concepts change in the course of time; yet in many cases the name is retained and thus helps to ensure a sense of tradition and continuity. (p. 198)

A good illustration of this is the phrase publications list, mentioned above. As stated earlier, an online-based publications list is more than a list
of some scholar’s publications. It is a Web page that (often) enables its visitors to access (at least some of) the publications listed there. Nevertheless, the original expression *publications list* has not been abandoned in favor of some other word or phrase that better describes what a list of publications on the Internet usually is.

The term “semantic change due to linguistic conservatism,” proposed by Ullmann, is not a very successful terminological solution since it suggests that, for example, scholars who post their publications lists online and allow other Internet users to access them use the term *publications list* because of their conservatism. That is, they are consciously aware of the fact that their online-based publications lists are more than lists of their publications, but in order “to ensure a sense of tradition and continuity” (in the sense of Ullmann), they have (deliberately!) decided to retain the original expression *publications list*. On the contrary, the majority of Internet users are actually unaware of the semantic development undergone by *publications list*. This is because an online-based publications list is, as stated above, a quasi-idiom in relation to its pre-Internet counterpart. That is, the former is, like the latter, a list of some scholar’s publications (the input meaning is thus retained), but in contrast to the latter, the former is also a location on the Internet where some of the publications can be accessed (this is the additional idiomatic meaning). Given the preservation of the input meaning “a list of some scholar’s publications” in the output meaning, it is extremely unlikely that Internet users have ever considered the possibility of replacing *publications lists* with some other expression.

**Traditional Publications versus Internet Publications**

As Stefik (1996) pointed out, in the offline world,

> writers write and editors determine which books are worth publishing. They control access to the printing presses and the distribution channels of publishers. Publishers publish the books, have them printed, and ship copies to wholesalers, libraries, and bookstores. (p. 6)

In stark contrast to this, on the Internet, “writers can be their own publishers” (Stefik, 1996, p. 9). That is, nobody has to subject their work to the scrutiny of editors and publishers in order to be able to “publish” it on a personal Web site or a blog page. One consequence of this is that the Internet abounds in “a vast array of digital works of indeterminate quality and value” (Stefik, 1996, p. 9) or, as the Russian journalist Mikhail Leontyev once put it, in a “rubbish-heap” of content of very poor quality (an interview with Sergey
Korzun on July 23, 2008). The second consequence, which is more important for this article, is that this “elimination” of editors and publishers on the Internet has resulted in a semantic change of the terms publish and publication. Consider, for example, the use of the verb publish in the following two sentences:

A photograph of my dog, taken by me and published on my website, was used on another website without my permission. (http://tinyurl.com/ced4p2b)

RSS feeds allow you to receive on your computer updates on the last posts published on my blog. (http://www.beppegrillo.it/en/aiuto.php)

What these sentences serve to illustrate is that an Internet publication is anything that can be uploaded to the Internet: e.g., a photograph of one’s dog, a blog post, a video, etc. At first glance, it may seem that the verb publish is used here in its literal meaning “to make public” (Oxford English Dictionary), “to make generally known,” “to disseminate to the public” (Merriam-Webster Online). Indeed, when, for example, bloggers post information on the Internet, they make it public (i.e., generally known). However, as was recognized by Stefik, in the offline world, due to the fact that editors and publishers determine which books are worth publishing, not every piece of information can be made public. For instance, we can hardly imagine a traditional publisher such as Cambridge University Press publishing blog posts or photographs of users’ dogs (unless editors find a special reason why this might be interesting to readers).

As with online-based publications lists, Internet publications whose quality has not been determined by editors and publishers belong to Ullmann’s category of semantic change due to linguistic conservatism. That is, even though publishing practices on the Internet have become considerably different from those in the offline world, both are regarded and referred to as instances of one and the same process: publishing. In other words, for an ordinary language user, it does not make a big (semantic) difference whether someone publishes an article in an academic journal or whether someone publishes a photo of a dog on his or her blog. This is due to the fact that, as in the case of publications lists, an important aspect of the input meaning “a traditional publication” has remained part of the output meaning “an Internet publication”: Both publishing an article in a journal and publishing a photo of a dog in a blog post involve disseminating the objects of publishing to other people. Hence, the above-cited dictionary definitions of to publish as “to make public,” “to make generally known,” “to disseminate to the public.”

However, notice that the case of Internet publications that have not been subjected to any quality control before publication is different from that of
Internet-based publications lists in that the former does not involve the addition of new semantic content. The case of Internet publications involves the removal or, as we said earlier, the “elimination” of some semantic content in the input meaning. That is, the information “editors and publishers warrant the quality of publications they disseminate to the public” has been removed from the input meaning “a traditional publication,” thereby giving rise to the output meaning “anything posted to the Internet without any quality control through other Internet users.”

This conceptual “elimination” has been committed by people such as Tim Berners-Lee, who invented and created the World Wide Web. That is, the fact that the Internet has, from its earliest days, remained a publication platform for virtually anyone is directly connected to the fact that Internet creators and later, providers of various Web 2.0 services, which mainly contain user-generated content (which usually does not undergo any quality control on the part of service providers!), have removed the semantic content “quality control” from the input meaning “a traditional publication.” Had it not been for this removal, active access to the Internet (i.e., the one that involves not only the consumption but also the production of Internet content) would now be in the hands of a relatively small number of people. A somewhat similar example, which I discussed elsewhere (Tokar, 2009, p. 8; see also Stefik, 1996, pp. 115-120), is electronic mail. If e-mail creators had not removed, for example, “envelopes” and “stamps” from the input meaning “traditional mail,” sending an e-mail would now involve putting an e-mail message into an electronic “envelope” and placing a digital “stamp” on it, for which we would probably have to pay the providers of e-mail services.

Having said this, let us now focus on the use of the term publication in academic contexts. As was indicated above, an academic publication (e.g., a monograph, an article in a refereed journal or in an edited volume, etc.) is one whose quality has been controlled by at least one other expert working in the same field as the author of the publication. (Hence the term “peer review,” defined by Merriam-Webster Online as “a process by which something proposed (as for research or publication) is evaluated by a group of experts in the appropriate field.”) The most prestigious academic publications are those that have been positively peer-reviewed (usually anonymously) by more than one expert in the appropriate field. The semantic feature [quality control through other experts in the appropriate field] can thus be regarded as one of the distinctive features of the concept of academic publication. (Distinctive features are necessary conditions that must be fulfilled by an entity in order to qualify as an instance of some concept. For example, being female and being someone’s parent are the necessary conditions that are fulfilled by all mothers:
Any entity that is both female and someone’s parent qualifies as a mother; see, e.g., Cruse, 2004, p. 250.) However, despite the fact that the feature [quality control through other experts] constitutes one of the necessary conditions of an academic publication, a number of online publications lists mention (and very often also provide electronic access to) “publications” that either have been rejected by other experts or have not been evaluated by them at all (i.e., texts which have never been submitted to a journal or an edited volume). These are traditionally referred to as unpublished manuscripts. What is interesting about this term is that, on the one hand, the presence of the adjective unpublished corroborates the analysis of the feature [quality control through other experts] as one of the distinctive features of the concept of academic publication: If scholars who mention unpublished manuscripts in their publications lists were not aware of this fact, they would definitely not label these manuscripts unpublished manuscripts. (These manuscripts would, for them, be, in no essential respect, different from published manuscripts, which have been positively evaluated by other scholars). On the other hand, however, the fact that publications lists include unpublished manuscripts suggests that the concept of academic publication is now, indeed, undergoing a semantic change. If a scholar mentions an unpublished manuscript in his or her publications list, that person wants to emphasize the belief that the manuscript is worth publishing even if it has not been positively evaluated by other experts in the same field. The author thus claims that he or she has sufficient authority to decide that a particular manuscript can be published in a refereed journal or an edited volume. And he or she also invites other Internet users to convince themselves that this is, indeed, the case (by reading the full text of an unpublished manuscript).

The Sociology of Semantic Change: A Case Study

Traditional linguistic studies on semantic change usually do not go beyond the mere documentation of the fact that the meaning of some expression is changing / has changed. Sociological aspects such as, for example, the question of how many members of a particular linguistic community are taking part in a change of meaning of a particular expression (i.e., the question of how many speakers use that expression in a semantically novel way) are typically not considered. This is because an answer to this question requires a manual analysis of a very large collection of both spoken and written texts produced by a very large number of members of a particular linguistic community. In other words, an analyst would have to consider all instances of the use of the expression under analysis in that corpus of spoken and written
texts. A methodological alternative to this is represented by so-called elicitation tests, which aim at eliciting native speakers’ grammaticality or acceptability judgments. That is, for example, in the case of a semantic modification, a linguist can invent sentences in which the expression under analysis is used in a semantically novel way and then ask subjects whether those sentences are grammatical / acceptable for them. Both corpus-based investigations and elicitation tests are typically large-scale studies requiring a considerable amount of time.

Fortunately, answering the question of how many scholars are participating in a change of the concept of academic publication does not require a large-scale corpus investigation or and an elicitation test. To answer this question, a researcher only has to count the overall number of publications lists that include unpublished manuscripts. Additionally, it makes sense to count the overall number of traditional academic publications citing unpublished manuscripts. These numbers can be seen as indicators of the acceptance (or the non-acceptance) of unpublished manuscripts in academia.

With respect to a particular university, these results can be obtained in the following way: Enter the URL of the university under investigation (or the URL of one of the faculties of that university) to the search mask “Enter a site URL” and the phrase *unpublished manuscript* to the search mask “Query” at http://www.google.com/enterprise/search/products_gss.html. Google Site Search, a Web tool available at this address, will then yield all occurrences of the phrase *unpublished manuscript* on the Web pages of the university or faculty under investigation. Then classify the occurrences of the phrase *unpublished manuscript* into those that occur in scholars’ publications lists and those that involve citations in traditional publications. (Many university Web sites provide their own search masks, enabling visitors to search for specific content located on the Web pages of a particular university. This is, thus, an alternative to Google Site Search.)

Before presenting the results of a Google Site Search for the occurrences of *unpublished manuscript* on the Web pages of my own university, it must be noted that the Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf comprises five faculties: the Faculty of Medicine, the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, the Faculty of Business and Economics, and the Faculty of Law. According to the Web page “University Facts and Figures” (2010), “today, around 20,000 students, more than 1,700 lecturers and 900 further employees study, teach, and work on our campus.”

The results of a Google Site Search for the occurrences of the phrase *unpublished manuscript* on the Web pages of the five faculties of my university are as follows: There are no occurrences of *unpublished manuscript* on the
Web pages of the Faculty of Medicine. Likewise, there are no occurrences of the German equivalent unveröffentlichtes Manuskript. I also conducted a search for the adjectives unpublished and unveröffentlicht only, expecting to find them in collocations such as unpublished PhD thesis, unpublished work, etc. But, again, Google Site Search yielded no results for the Faculty of Medicine.

There is only one occurrence of the phrase unpublished manuscript on the Web pages of the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences. It occurs in the References lists of a PDF document available on the Web pages of the faculty. The PDF document contains a description of a research project involving Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf and another university in North Rhine-Westphalia. There is one occurrence of the German adjective unveröffentlicht in the context of a publications list of a lecturer (with a doctorate) employed by the faculty. Unveröffentlicht occurs in the context of Projekt-Abschlussbericht, i.e., a project completion report written by the lecturer in question. No PDF or Word file containing the full text of the project completion report is provided.

There are nine occurrences of the phrase unpublished manuscript on the Web pages of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Of these nine occurrences, one is a “publication” included in a publications list of a professor of the faculty. The full text of the manuscript can be downloaded as a PDF file. Another occurrence is a “publication” included in a publications list of members of a research group working at the faculty. No PDF or Word file containing the full text of the manuscript is provided. The remaining seven occurrences of unpublished manuscript can be found in the References lists of various documents (articles, abstracts, conference programs, etc.) available on the Web pages of the faculty. In addition to manuscript, the adjective unpublished can relatively often (in comparison with what is listed for other faculties) be found before other nouns. Thus, there are unpublished papers (five occurrences), unpublished bachelor thesis / unpublished BA-Thesis (two occurrences), unpublished M.A. Project (one occurrence), unpublished PhD dissertation / unpublished doctoral dissertation (six occurrences), previously-unpublished material (one occurrence), unpublished articles (one occurrence), unpublished research reviews (one occurrence), unpublished script of lecture (one occurrence), unpublished report (one occurrence), unpublished work (one occurrence), unpublished texts (one occurrence), and simply unpublished (one occurrence). Of these occurrences of the adjective unpublished, four are “publications” included in publications lists of members of the faculty. (Two of them are university professors; the other two are non-tenured lecturers with doctorates.) All other occurrences can be found in
various documents (e.g., articles, course descriptions, PowerPoint slides, etc.) available on the Web pages of the faculty. Finally, it must be mentioned that there are two occurrences of the German adjective *unveröffentlicht* on publications lists of members of the faculty and one occurrence of *unveröffentlichtes Manuskript* in the References list of a doctoral dissertation whose full text can be downloaded as a PDF file.

There are no occurrences of either the phrase *unpublished manuscript* or simply the adjective *unpublished* on the Web pages of the Faculty of Business and Economics. Likewise, there are no occurrences of the German phrase *unveröffentlichtes Manuskript* or the adjective *unveröffentlicht*.

There are no occurrences of either the phrase *unpublished manuscript* or the adjective *unpublished* on the Web pages of the Faculty of Law. Likewise, there are no occurrences of the German phrase *unveröffentlichtes Manuskript* or the adjective *unveröffentlicht*.

**Discussion and Outlook**

If we use the number of occurrences of the term *unpublished manuscript* on institutional homepages as an indicator of a semantic change of the concept under investigation, then the results obtained clearly indicate that the semantic change of the concept of academic publication as outlined in the previous sections of this article is a fairly marginal phenomenon in academia (at least, as far as my university is concerned). Thus, only a very small number of academic employees of the Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf regard themselves as qualified authorities to decide that their work is worth publishing. The most striking results are those for the Faculties of Medicine, Business and Economics, and Law, whose staff members seem to be completely unaware of the possibility of “publishing” unpublished work online. With regard to the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences and the Faculty of Law, the low number of unpublished manuscripts could perhaps be attributed to the more dominant preprint / working paper culture of those faculties, i.e., the practice of posting unpublished work at online-based document servers and repositories such as, for example, arXiv and The Social Science Research Network (SSRN).

Both preprints and working papers are similar to unpublished manuscripts in that neither the former nor the latter have ever been accepted for publication in traditional academic journals. However, a preprint is usually a document that has been submitted to some journal for peer review, but whose author(s) has / have not yet been notified about the reviewers’ decision. A working paper is a document which, according to its author, contains some
interesting ideas but which, in its current form, does not have the potential to be positively evaluated by reviewers of a journal. The author of a working paper thus uploads his or her currently unpublishable work to an academic repository, hoping that at some point in the future, thanks to other users’ comments and his / her own further research on the same topic, this work will become publishable. In semantic terms, we can perhaps argue that the concept of a preprint is defined by the following semantic feature: [the expectation that the article will, in the near future, pass the quality control of a traditional journal]. And a working paper is defined by the semantic feature [the expectation that the article will, in the more distant future, be able to pass the quality control of a traditional journal]. In other words, the authors of both preprints and working papers share the traditional view that the feature [quality control through other experts in the appropriate research field] constitutes one of the distinctive features of the concept of academic publication. Accordingly, the occurrences of the expressions preprint and working paper on Web pages of the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences and the Faculty of Law cannot serve as indicators of semantic change of the concept of academic publication. To the contrary, they can serve as indicators of the non-change of the concept under study. However, as was conjectured above, the popularity of preprints and working papers among academics in these faculties can be one of the explanations for the non-popularity of unpublished manuscripts there. If other (especially senior) colleagues label their unpublished work preprints and working papers, why should I label my own unpublished work in a different way?!

The results for Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf presented in the preceding section cannot but raise a number of (important) questions. First of all, are these (or similar) results true for other universities in Germany and (ideally) worldwide? The preliminary answer to this question, which can be given at the moment of writing, is “Yes.” Thus, I conducted a similar Google Site Search for the occurrences of the phrases unpublished manuscript and unveröffentlichtes Manuskript (as well as related terms in English and German) on Web pages of several randomly chosen universities in Germany and English-speaking countries. The central conclusion that can be drawn from these searches is very similar to what was said before: Unpublished manuscripts represent a marginal phenomenon in academia worldwide. (Due to space limitations in this volume, these results will be presented elsewhere.)

Another important question is: Why are unpublished manuscripts more popular among academics at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities than among academic employees of other faculties? One possible explanation is that research in humanities is perceived (especially, if compared to research in so-
cial and natural sciences) as fairly subjective. Just think of the many linguistic theories such as, for example, structuralism, functionalism, generative grammar, cognitive grammar, etc., all of which can often fairly plausibly account for one and the same linguistic phenomenon (often in a very different way). It is very possible that on such occasions a structuralist analysis will not satisfy a generativist and a generative approach will not be enthusiastically accepted by a functionalist. In other words, an article submitted to a linguistic journal by a structuralist may not be positively evaluated by a reviewer of the generative persuasion. Similarly, an article submitted to a linguistic journal by a generativist may not be positively evaluated by a reviewer of the functionalist persuasion. This fairly probable scenario in humanities (at least in linguistics) considerably enhances the possibility of an author of a rejected article simply uploading his or her rejected work to the Internet (labeling it an unpublished manuscript), hoping that this work will be positively evaluated by colleagues.

Other reasons explaining the (relative) popularity of unpublished manuscripts among employees of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities can surely be identified as well, but this requires a large-scale qualitative study (i.e., conducting qualitative interviews with the members of staff of this faculty), which goes beyond the scope of the present investigation.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Düsseldorf University Strategic Research Fund. The author also wishes to express his gratitude to Wiebke Ostermann for her help with data collection during the first phase of this project. My special thanks go to Cornelius Puschmann, Jean Burgess, Axel Bruns, Ralph Schroeder, and Michael Beurskens for commenting on an earlier version of this article. I alone am responsible for any remaining errors and shortcomings.

References


Semantic Change of the Publication-Concept?  205

http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=friend&sub=Search+WordNet&o2=&o0=1&o8=1&o1=1&o7=&o5=&o9=&o6=&o3=&o4=&h=


