

Trends in semantic change in Bantu

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Quite often speakers of two Bantu languages feel embarrassed or derive fun from the use of a common word that has different meanings or connotations in the two languages. Such words are usually cognates that have expanded, narrowed or shifted their meaning over time. On occasion the words in question may be homonyms from the common Bantu stock.

This paper examines a sample of the Bantu vocabulary and shows that there are interesting patterns in the process of semantic change. It seeks to document the common patterns of semantic change for Bantu languages. One pattern involves the acquisition of additional meanings over and above the original sense (expansion). The second pattern involves the loss of many of the original senses of the word so that only a much narrower sense is retained. The third pattern consists of words that have lost the original meaning altogether and acquired a new meaning in some of the languages (shift). Running parallel to these is a fourth pattern that concerns words whose usage is restricted by sociolinguistic norms so that they get marked as taboo or euphemism.