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## FIGURATIVE, TRANSFERRED OR EXTENDED USE? The Use of Semantic Labels in the First Edition and the Revised Version of the Swedish Academy Dictionary

**Abstract** In this paper, a doctoral study on the description of semantic change in the Swedish Academy Dictionary (SAOB) is presented. The starting point for the study is semantic labels like figurative and in extended use. Five such labels in SAOB are examined, mainly with methods from the cognitive linguistic framework. The results show, among other things, that the most labelled mechanism is metaphor, that metaphor and metonymy often co-occur and that such co-occurrences often are expressed and explained in the dictionary with combined or modified labels. Furthermore, there seems to be a certain overlap between some of the labels in use, and one could question if all five labels are needed. Since the first volume of SAOB was completed in 2023 and a revision project now is launched, it is possible to make practical use of the results of the study in the dictionary. Therefore, some practical outcomes and applications that are either planned or already started are also presented in this paper.

**Keywords** lexicography; figurative language; semantic change; cognitive linguistics; conceptual metaphor theory; Swedish Academy Dictionary

### 1. Introduction

Semantic labels such as *figurative*, *transferred* and *extended use* are well established in lexicographical meta-language and occur in many dictionaries. In the extensive *Swedish Academy Dictionary* (SAOB 1893–) they are highly frequent; to give an example, the term *bildlig* (‘figurative’) alone is used more than 40,000 times. However, how these labels are used in practice in the dictionary and what the users can expect from them is not quite clear. It is not distinctly stated in the readers’ manuals nor in the internal editorial handbooks. This is the starting point for Nilsson, 2023 who studies different types of mechanisms of meaning change, and the description of these in SAOB based on five such definition labels. The labels in question are *bildlig* (‘figurative’), *oegentlig* (‘un-actual/non-factual’), *överförd* (‘transferred’), *utvidgad* (‘extended’) and *allmänna användning* (‘more general use’). These are examined with different methods and from different perspectives, mainly within the framework of cognitive linguistics.

The question posed is how the labels are used in the dictionary and how systematic and consequent the use is. The aim is to find out what the labels in question mean in practice: what is a figurative use in SAOB? What is the difference between an extended and a more general use, and what, more precisely does it mean in the dictionary that a meaning could be un-actual? The purpose of the survey is to assess how relevant and consistent the analysis and the description method applied in SAOB (a dictionary in the making

for more than 130 years) are today, from a theoretical point of view. To what extent is the lexicographical description of the mechanisms behind semantic change compatible with modern semantic theory and in particular the ideas of cognitive semantics? From the opposite perspective, the purpose is to find out what the definitions in SAOB can teach us about semantic change and meaning-changing mechanisms. In addition, an overarching aim of the project is to make use of the results in the forthcoming revision of the dictionary. As from the beginning of 2024 a revision project is initiated, and thus, it is now possible to implement changes based on the findings from the study.

After this introduction a short description of SAOB as a dictionary follows in section 2 below. The survey, some of its different sub-studies and main results are presented in section 3. In section 4 practical applications of the results in the revision of the dictionary is presented, and in section 5 the discussion is summed up.

## 2. SAOB – A Short Introduction

SAOB is an extensive diachronic-contemporary dictionary that consist of 39 printed volumes and a corresponding digital version. The first volume was published in 1898, and the work was completed when the last volume was published and officially launched at the website saob.se in December 2023, thus more than 120 years later. The dictionary describes the Swedish language from the 1520s to the present day, the so-called modern Swedish period.

The microstructure of the dictionary entries is chronologically organized, with the most basic and primary meanings of the words presented before later developed and lexicologically secondary ones, as far as this is possible to establish. The semantic relations between the meanings and uses are also often described in much detail as can be seen in the entry ELEFANT ('elephant') in fig. 1 below (cf. also e.g., Holm & Jonsson, 1990; Eaker, 2006).



Fig. 1: Demonstration of SAOB's microstructure

The figure displays the principle of SAOB to mark main senses with Arabic numbers. In the entry the relation between the main sense of 1 and the secondary sub-sense (for clarity marked with a red box) is explained with the label “mer l. mindre bildl.” (‘more or less figurative’) and with an supplementing comment highlighting the elephant’s strength and clumsy physique, way of moving etc. This is a typical way of describing figurative extensions in SAOB.

Between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and 2023 the work of SAOB was progressing alphabetically forward, without any revision of older parts. As mentioned above, the first edition is now completed, and due to the long publication time there is a great need for updating and revision. A revision project was initiated in the beginning of 2024 with grants that are estimated to last for about 7 years of work. The project aims at adding new entries, carrying out systematic changes in all or several entries at the same time, and, of course, updating old and outdated descriptions more or less manually. (For a somewhat fuller description of the dictionary, the history behind it, and the different parts of the revision project see Nilsson, 2024.) A particular type of descriptions in need of updating are those concerning semantic relations between senses.

### 3. The Study – Methods, Theoretic Framework, and Some Results

Common to those semantic labels that are examined is that they all describe meaning change/sense development, and the five most frequent such labels in SAOB were selected for the study. An additional selection criterion was that the labels were to denote denotative and semasiological change (in the sense of Geeraerts, 2015). In this context the term denotative refers to referential meaning (which can be contrasted with e.g., purely emotional meaning). Semasiological refers to the perspective of the single, individual word and the various concepts it denotes (as opposed to the term onomasiological, which instead focuses on the abstract concept and what words can be used to express this).

As mentioned above the label *bildlig* (‘figurative’) occurs over 40,000 times in SAOB. The label *oegentlig* (‘un-actual/non-factual’) is found approx. 11,000 times, *utvidgad* (‘extended’) about 10,000, *allmännare* (‘more general’) just under 8,000 and *överförd* (‘transferred’) a total of about 5,000 times. These labels are traditional in the sense that they are not coined by the SAOB editors – they (or their equivalents in other languages) appear in several others dictionaries, and often the SAOB editors seem to have been inspired by them. For example, expressions such as *transferred* and *extended use* are found in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and *bildlich* and *uneigentlich* in Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm (DWB), both of which dictionary projects were initiated before the work on SAOB started. Concepts such as figurativeness and transfer are also discussed in the semantic literature.

The examined material consists of 300 occurrences of each label, hence 1,500 in total, extracted from the digital version of the dictionary, by way of free text search. In order to achieve a somewhat even distribution within the different parts (and between the years of production) of the dictionary, each amount of 300 was divided into four groups. Hence, 75 search matches per label were collected from each group.

Five different sub-studies were carried out for each semantic label, all of which were based on a certain research question in connection to semantic theory, especially cognitive linguistics and conceptual metaphor theory. In this paper three of the studies are presented in short.

With (mainly) the three mechanisms metaphor, metonymy and generalization as a benchmark, the first study examines *what semantic processes do the different labels denote?* The analysis becomes an attempt at matching to what extent for instance a use labelled figurative in SAOB corresponds to a metaphor, and an *allmännare*, ‘a more general use’, to a generalization. The method is based on Lakoff & Johnson’s (1980) definition of metaphor and metonymy: metaphors should not only be considered as a phenomenon in language, but as something related to our underlying way of think and act. Metaphors involve mapping between two different conceptual domains; and a domain is to be understood as a structured whole, a coherent organization of experiences. Metonymy means mapping within one and the same domain, or one and the same domain complex (cf. Croft, 1993), and a simultaneous shift of reference. The concept of generalization is, for various reasons, not as frequently discussed in conceptual metaphor theory. But what is usually mentioned in the discussion is that it is possible to question whether it is a separate process or just the result of some other process: if generalization is to be understood only as extension or expansion of a meaning, or a category of a meaning, metaphor becomes a subtype of generalization (cf. Bybee et al., 1994). In this study however, generalization and semantic extension is seen as two separate phenomena (in accordance with Koch, 2016). As far as domain mapping can be explained as a phenomenon of degree, generalization should belong to the same scale as metaphor. In this process, too, it is a matter of analogy between one source and one target concept; but for the generalization part it is not a question of mapping, or certain correspondences, across different domains, but within one and the same domain. The difference between generalization and metonymy lies in the fact that the latter process also requires a change of reference. However, both the result of a generalization and a metaphor can be seen as some sort of *semantic extension*.<sup>1</sup>

The next study is concerned with the matter of (mapping between) concrete and abstract concepts and domains. The research question to be answered is based on the idea that often is expressed within cognitive linguistics (see e.g., Kövecses, 2016), namely that *a metaphor is typically constituted by a projection from a concrete to a more abstract domain – does this also apply in SAOB?* Hence, the task was to examine to what extent the derived labelled meanings in the material are more abstract than their basic meanings, or if the level of abstraction can be considered the same for the different concepts that are mapped together. A concrete concept in the study is defined as a sensory one, one that is physically perceivable (in accordance with Svanlund, 2001). In the studies mentioned at this point, not only the labels as such (and their corresponding basic meanings) are analysed, but also the (other) content of the current definitions and the quotations that illustrate the meanings in the dictionary.

<sup>1</sup> Due to the lack of space it is not possible to describe the detailed method in this paper, for a fuller description of the analysis template see Nilsson (2023, p. 116 ff).

In the last study it is examined to what extent the relevant labels are combined with other labels, or modified in other ways (as in Figure 1 above, where the derived meaning was labelled “*more or less figurative*”) and, also, what such modifications and combinations denote. In the cognitivist literature, the boundaries between metaphor and metonymy are described as fuzzy: a word or an expression can be used more or less metaphorically or metonymically; different mechanisms can also interact in certain ways (cf. Goossens, 1990, Croft, 1993, Ruíz de Mendoza Ibañez, 2000). The current sub-study is a way to study grey areas between different semantic processes. The questions posed in this respect are: *What labels are combined/modified and how? In what way do the combined/modified labelled uses differ from uses marked with a single label?*

The results show, among other things, that metaphor clearly is the most labelled process in the material. However, each label involves a certain amount of all three mechanisms metaphor, metonymy and generalization. In many cases it is a matter of interplay between the different mechanisms (à la Goossens concept of *metaphonymy*).

Almost every use labelled *bildligt* (‘figurative’) involves a metaphor in some respect. Other mechanisms involved for this label are mainly made up of metonymies. Also the label *oegentlig* (‘un-actual/non-factual’) is mainly represented by metaphors, but often of a different kind than the ones labelled *bildlig*. As a matter of fact, the label *oegentlig* often is an indication of what could be described as a less figurative metaphor, in terms of a less abstract target concept, than the metaphors labelled as *bildlig*. Typically a metaphor labelled *oegentlig* is represented by concepts concerning people (or animals or plants). An example from the material is the noun *taliban* and the metaphor INTOLERANT AND STRICT PERSON IS A FUNDAMENTALIST ISLAMIST, in quotes like the following, here translated one: “The talibans called for mandatory alcohol lock in all vehicles [...] and more speed controls”. In such cases the target domain and its projected concepts are not considered to be more abstract than the source.

However, the label *oegentlig* (‘un-actual/non-factual’) is also frequently used to denote generalizations, in particular, those involving some form of norm conflict, typically an expansion of a sense depending on a technically incorrect use of a technical term in general language. An example is the use of the word *mal* (‘clothes moth’) to denote any moth (although no attack on fabrics occurs, i.e., there is no actual “milling”, as the term originally refers to).

Also the label *överförd* (‘transferred’) involves a lot of metaphors. In the first half of the dictionary it seems to be used more or less equivalent to the label *bildlig* (‘figurative’). But as frequent is it used to denote a certain kind of metonymy, illustrated by the example: *(She wrote) an angry letter*, i.e., a case where characteristics from the person are transferred to the artefact related to the person. This use is found mainly in the second half of the dictionary. This shift of use has also been regulated in the internal editorial handbooks, since at least the 1990s.

Both labels *allmännare* (‘more general’) and *utvidgad användning* (‘extended use’) are dominated by the mechanism generalization. However they quite often also

represent metaphors. In such cases it is often either a question of generalizations that are combined with or difficult to distinguish from metaphors (see example below), or else the labels are used in regard to the result, as a notion overarching figurativeness, cf. expressions like: “in more general, normally figurative, use”, found in the material.

Combined or modified labels are very frequent in SAOB and the tendency is increasing over time. Quite often it is a matter of long and tortuous combinations (such as *in improper, extended or more or less figurative use*) that are difficult for the user to decipher. *Oegentlig* (‘un-actual/non-factual’) is the most combined/modified label – almost half of the labels studied are used in this way. Furthermore, there seems often to be legitimate motives for this kind of labelling (both regarding *oegentlig* and the other labels). Normally, it is a matter of semantic changes that involve more than one mechanism at the same time, such as metaphonymy, as mentioned above, but also combinations or interactions between metaphor and generalization are found – for example in expressions like *take damage/a hit*, where the sense ‘receive’ of the verb *take* (Swedish *ta*) has acquired a more general meaning ‘to be exposed to, affected by’; the expression as a complex can then be interpreted literally (in the case of physical violence) but also metaphorically (in the case of more abstract damage or loss etc.). In addition also combinations of generalization and metonymy are found in the material.

In sum, SAOB’s description of sense development by the means of semantic labels is nuanced and overall systematic. It put to foreground the grey areas between different mechanisms and the fact that they often are combined in practice. On the other hand, the descriptions are often complicated and difficult for the user to interpret. There is also a certain overlap between different labels that is uncalled-for. The overlap means that the user cannot be confident which semantic process is actually involved in a specific description. A conclusion is that the system used has clear points and could be worth keeping, but it has potential for improvements.

#### 4. Practical Implications of the Study

Since 2024 SAOB is being revised. The description of semantic relations between meanings and uses is one defined assignment within the revision project. The purpose is to increase consistency of, and clarify, the use of labels, and to reduce overlap between them. A new order has been introduced, which implies that of the five abovementioned labels only three is still being valid, namely *bildlig* (‘figurative’), *utvidgad* (‘extended’) and *allmännare* (‘more general use’). In practice, this means that *oegentlig* (‘un-actual/non-factual’) and *överförd* (‘transferred’) are no longer allowed in new entries. In entries published in the first volume of the dictionary, the labels will be changed. These changes are (at the time of writing being initiated, and are) operated in a semi-automatic way, by identifying current occurrences and replacing with standard phrases. In the first half of the dictionary (approx. between the initial letters A–L) the label *överförd* can often easily be replaced by *bildlig*. In the second half (M–Ö) the metonymic use (“an angry letter” etc.) is replaced by phrases like: *of things or phenomena that are characterized by or bear witness of such (anger etc.)*.

SAOB's label *in metonymic use*, not mentioned to this point, and not a part of the study because of its very low frequency, is encouraged to be used more often if needed. Hence the three mechanisms of change, metaphor, metonymy and generalization, are closer connected to a single label in the dictionary. One must though bear in mind that the different labels to a different degree is a part of the general language vocabulary (cf. Nilsson & Laitinen, manuscript in preparation). Labels like *figurative* has a longer tradition in dictionaries, and probably many users have a more intuitive idea of the implications of such a process and of metaphors than of metonymies. On the other hand, the target group of SAOB is not only general language users, but also more advanced users. In long term, a possible solution to the problem would be to introduce a more detailed, advanced view.

In addition, the scope of the labels *utvidgad* ('extended') and *allmännare* ('more general') will be kept apart more clearly. As also stated in the internal handbook (but not always practised), the former label should be used to describe a (non-figurative) *development* towards a semantic extension, while the latter rather describes the extended *result* or put to focus a previously more general sense in relation to a later developed one.

Lastly, long and complicated combinations of labels will be avoided in the revised version of the dictionary. For the sake of the users' interpretability it is no longer allowed to combine more than two different labels.

## 5. Concluding Summary

To summarize, a study on the use of semantic labels in SAOB has been conducted. The results indicate a nuanced system of description that still have room for improvements. In the newly started revision project, the description of semantic relations constitutes one of the defined revision assignments. The main purpose of this part of the project is to avoid overlap of the labels and to make the use more consistent and more easily interpreted.

One could of course question the need for labels at all – wouldn't explicit explanations (in full sentences) be more than enough? Are the definitions not sufficiently detailed without the labels? The answer to these questions is yes, the user would probably often get roughly equivalent information from each entry even without the defining labels. However, often the description in SAOB consists only of the label, without any supplementary definition text, and these cannot simply be deleted without consequences. But more fundamental is the fact that the labels can contribute with information on the onomasiological level. Description of systematically recurring patterns of meaning change with recurring, precise and general terms implies, firstly, that the individual word (and its derived meanings) is related to the linguistic system and explained in accordance to this, and, secondly, that a user who is interested in changes concerning the conceptual system, by means of the semantic labels, gets access to tools for analysing (and practically searching) semantic patterns. From this point of view, the SAOB editors are looking forward to improving the dictionary and increase the areas of use.

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