

Semantic change in Brazilian-Portuguese lexicon

ABSTRACT

This article analyses from a semantic-diachronic viewpoint the change of meanings that two lexical items of Brazilian-Portuguese language have gone through. *Cerrado* and *vereda* designate currently the second largest Brazilian biome and one of its most important subsystems. Nevertheless, these two words have long individual histories that can be tracked back to their Latin etymons. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to highlight the process by which meaning instantiates itself in word formation and to discuss how semantic change installs subsequently in them. As this article shows, the aforementioned words were, in different past synchronies, created and underwent changes of meanings by metaphor and metonymy. Besides, it is argued here that semantic change takes place due to external causes, as when the use of a lexical item, restricted to a particular linguistic group, is adopted by other groups, having its meaning generalized in the formers. In this process, the etymological idea of the word is generally lost, which gains, in the new group, a less specific meaning in relation to its etymology, sometimes with no relation to the original idea. As a final point, it is claimed that both the creation of a lexical item and its change of meaning involve pragmatic objectives, such as the need the users have to express a new meaning related to a certain reality in the empirical world.

Keywords: Semantic Change; Lexicon; Metaphor/Metonymy; *Cerrado*; *Vereda*.

INTRODUCTION

Eugênio Coseriu (1921-2002) since his first writings in general linguistics (Coseriu, 1955-1956) onwards formulated the thesis about the speaker's linguistic knowledge. This thesis was developed during his lifetime and was systematically expressed in his book *Sprachkompetenz. Grundzüge der theorie des sprechens* (1988). He has, among many things, discussed whether the speaker's linguistic knowledge is about signs or procedures. For this, he presented Saussure's position (2006[1916]), which privileges the conception of *langue* as a set of signs, since the combinations of signs within the sentence would be tributary to *parole* and not to *langue*, and Chomsky's position (1965), which establishes procedures and rules that enables the production of discourse, a more dynamic position. Coseriu would take a conciliatory stance by saying that the content of the linguistic knowledge, necessarily, includes signs and procedures: "we would rather maintain that the content of linguistic competence cannot simply be reduced neither to signs nor to operations, but that both things exist, signs and operations" (COSERIU, 1992 [1988], p. 279).

Coseriu's thought highlights two distinct ways of approaching the content of linguistic competence: either one can start from a conception of language that privileges signs as forms and contents with their combinations, or one can adopt a position that considers language as a system of rules that creates sentences. Unquestionably, the study of lexicon privileges the analysis of the lexical forms and formations, as well as the semantic content they express, and this is the approach adopted in this paper.

In addition, this paper adopts a diachronic approach seeking to show how the meaning is instantiated in the formation of a new word and how the semantic change is implemented over time. For this, semantic theory is approached in its historical or diachronic face, which deals with the study of the "meaningful units of language" and has as guiding principle "the explanation of semantic change" (ROTH, 1998, p. 66, 70). Regarding semantic change, Silva (2006) distinguishes between semasiological change, which concerns the development of

new meanings of a given word, and onomasiological change, concerning the expression of a given concept, by a new lexical item. Both play distinct roles in this process.

This study shows that it is the semasiological change that enables the change of meaning from *vereda*¹ (narrow path) to *Vereda*² (*Cerrado*'s biome subsystem), or from *cerrado*¹ (closed) to *Cerrado*² (typical Brazilian Midwestern vegetation). Notably, metaphorical and/or metonymic processes are involved in both the creation of these lexical items and their subsequent changes of meaning. The approach adopted here highlights the semantic-diachronic approach to the study of semantic change and highlights the role of metaphor and metonymy involved in the creation and the change of meaning.

This approach shows that semantic change results from causes external to language, as generalization of meaning (Meillet, 1905-1906) and the pragmatic endings of communication. The words studied here are analyzed as having their meanings constituted by metaphor (*cerrado*) and metaphor and metonymy (*vereda*), although such ideas are no longer perceived without resorting to past synchronies or even to the etymon of the lexical items under analysis.

LEXICON

The current Brazilian Portuguese lexicon is the result of internal and external historical processes that defined the contours of the forms and meanings of their lexical items. A detailed analysis of such forms and meanings unveils their constitutive features and tells the story of their developments. In this sense, Rio-Torto (2014, p. 31) points out that “in Portuguese, as in other languages, the internal structure of words reflects the historical trends of the language”. Viaro *et al.* (2014, p. 60) corroborate this statement by saying that “to understand how a language works we need to merge historical data with the present elements of current communication between speakers”, and that focusing only on the current synchrony is a mistake, “since we all know that the essence of languages is diachronically changeable, as one can see it in the span of a lifetime.”

Historical approaches to the study of language change have been for centuries, and continue to be, among the main activities within linguistic studies. Such studies concern with the factors that motivate changes. Ferdinand de Saussure (2006[1916], p. 117), concomitantly with his defense of the study of language from a synchronic point of view, stressed that studying historical data is simpler than studying synchronic data: “the facts about evolution are more concrete; ... it's comfortable and, often, even fun to follow a series of transformations”. On the other hand, William Labov (1994, p. 9), recognizing the importance of diachronic studies on linguistic change, highlighted the difficulty of unraveling its mysteries: “The fact of language change is a given ... Yet this fact alone – the existence of language change – is among the most stubborn and difficult to assimilate when we try to come to grips with the nature of language in general as it is reflected in the history of a language” (LABOV, 1994, p. 9).

In the context of dialectological studies, the nineteenth century was awarded with the eloquent voice of Hugo Schuchardt (1842-1927) in defense of the study of words. According to Viaro (2011), Schuchardt argued that since a language is a continuum its study could not be divorced from time and space. Moreover, he claimed that each word has its history, a fact that made him stand out the singularity of the words.

In accordance with this position, it can be said that it is in the lexicon of a language that one can verify how linguistic forms are created, change their form and meaning, revealing the inherent dynamism of the language. Given the relationship between the designation and the meaning, and their importance for linguistic activity, the lexical level stands itself as the quintessential locus for the establishment of semantic change. Hereof,

Villalva and Silvestre (2014, p. 23) point out that “the lexical knowledge the speaker has at a given moment may, therefore, not be identical to that of an earlier or later moment, since it is a cumulative knowledge, and also degradable”.

Certainly, the knowledge of the lexicon of a language does not require from the ordinary speaker the etymological knowledge of the lexical items that compose it. Nevertheless, Villalva and Silvestre (2014, p. 24-25) state that “the knowledge of a given property of lexical units enhances the knowledge of others of their properties”. Hence, they claim a prominent place for etymological studies, arguing “that much of the etymology of the lexicon of languages is yet to be studied”.

Notably, the acquisition of the lexical inventory of a language by the speaker occurs through his exposure to the signs of that language, through the interaction with individuals that belong to the same speech community. Such words represent to the individual, in the process of acquisition, arbitrary and conventional signs. Such notions, although belonging to a long tradition in philosophical thought (Plato had already expressed these ideas in *Cratylus* [cf. Plato, 1973]), gained with William D. Whitney (1867) a very clarifying definition. By saying that each word represents an arbitrary and conventional sign, Whitney stated that arbitrariness concerns the fact that “any of the thousands of other words could have been so easily learned by us and associated with the same idea”; on the other hand, he argued that conventionality is related to the fact that the word the speaker acquired “has its sole foundation and sanction in the consented use of the community” of which this individual is a member (Whitney, 1867, p. 14 as cited in Marra & Milani, 2013, p. 133).

Following this, it is reasonable to say that the lexicon available to each individual is representative of the lexicon of the speech community of which he belongs to. Certainly, the lexical inventory that makes up the repertoire of the speech community is much more numerous than the individual speaker’s one, since each speaker acquires in a particular way the lexical items of his language. Therefore, the sum of the lexical units available to individual speakers is greater than the one that the individual speaker can embrace. But every speaker belonging to a linguistic community can interact intelligibly with the other members, since the linguistic inventory of the particular being does not differ substantially from the lexicon that constitutes the repository of the community as a whole.

SEMANTIC CHANGE: METAPHOR AND METONYMY

In a pioneering study of semantic change, Meillet (1905-1906) demonstrates how the meaning of words depends on the circumstances of their use and how the change of meaning is closely related to the uses that different linguistic groups make of particular words. For Meillet, some lexical items have their meaning changed depending on the nature of the linguistic group that employs them, that is to say, whether the group is more, or less, isolated, closed or autonomous in relation to the rest of society. Additionally, for the author, the lexical inventory of the group expands and differs as a way of reinforcing linguistic identity, and he emphasizes the fact that the lexicon is the item that undergoes the most effects of the action of particular groups on language:

It (the lexicon) is intentionally extended for the reason that each group tends to externally mark its independence and originality; whereas the action of society in general tends to standardize language, the action of particular groups tends to differentiate it, if not the pronunciation and grammar, which remain substantially unified, at least the vocabulary of the individuals who take part in it.

(1905-1906, p. 246 -247, emphasis added).

Meillet, moreover, highlights the fundamental role that metaphors play for both vocabulary creation and change of meaning, since languages are full of metaphorical uses. Therefore, he demonstrates how a change of meaning is instantiated in a given lexical item:

Arriver (to arrive) etymologically means “*aborder*” (to drive the ship into port), it is *ad-ripare*, and this meaning has been well maintained for example in Portuguese *arribar*; but for a sailor, *aborder* means to be at the end of the journey: if, from the language of the sailors, the term passes to the common language, it simply means what *arriver* means in French.

(1905-1906, p. 259, emphasis added).

According to Meillet’s reflection, a change of meaning is completed when the word goes from restricted (specialized) use of a particular group and generalizes in other linguistic groups. These are two fundamental processes of semantic change: specialization and generalization. As the author argues, when the term *aborder*, or *arribar*, is no longer restricted to the use of sailors, to steer the ship into port, and enters the general language, it will lose its etymological meaning and the speakers will use it only with the meaning of arrive, without knowing that this term meant in its etymon sense, to drive a vessel to port.

This way, Meillet argues that even though the etymological term *aborder* has a metaphorical meaning, when it comes to common use, or generalizes, this figurative idea disappears, and it is no longer legitimate to speak of metaphor, but of an etymological mode of expression that does not reach the full awareness of the speaker:

For a sailor who *aborde*, the idea of shore is self-evident, the essential thing is that one reaches the shore; and when the words pass from the specific language to the common language, they pass not with an etymological value which they have lost, but with the secondary value which they have acquired: the idea of arriving at the shore which, for a sailor, obscurely subsist in arriving is then eliminated without even being noticed, because it was no longer perceived.

(1905-1906, p. 260, emphasis added).

The change of meaning of words emerges, in this perspective, through the transposition of a restricted use by a certain linguistic group to a general use, when the word loses the etymological idea and gains on a new meaning (semasiological change). In this sense, metaphorical terms, quite abundant in the process of lexical creation, will no longer be noted as such when they cease their specialized uses and pass into general use. Nonetheless, Meillet warned that one can never ignore the fact that changes in the meaning of words are related to the social differentiation that constitutes societies:

These examples, of which only the largest and most general facts have been noticed, give an idea of how linguistic facts, historical facts and social facts unite, act and react to transform the meaning of words; we see everywhere that the essential moment is the passing of a word from the general language to a particular language, or the opposite fact, or both, and that, consequently, the changes of meaning must be considered as having as their main condition the differentiation of the elements that constitute societies.

(1905-1906, p. 271).

Meillet’s avant-garde sociolinguistic viewpoint, which sought “social laws” for semantic change, reflects the attempts of the historical-philological tradition to understand the change meaning, which recognized on metaphor, metonymy, and polysemy a key role. This appeal to metaphor and metonymy as the foundation of natural languages’ semantics gained, in the late twentieth century, the support of Johnson and Lakoff (1980), who made of these two figures the core of Cognitive Linguistics. For the authors, metaphor and metonymy form coherent systems through which experience is conceptualized. This recognition of metaphor and metonymy as constitutive of the way human beings think the world and represent it

through language is highlighted by these authors when they state its importance for scientific research: “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (LAKOFF & JOHNSONS, 1980, p. 3). The authors argue that the instantiation of these processes in language occurs through the need of individuals to express abstract concepts of everyday life related to the notions of time, space, scientific theory, interpersonal relations and life in general, which are usually metaphorically verbalized.

According to Silva (2006), these concepts traditionally conceived as rhetorical figures have given way, in recent decades, to a reconceptualization. He refers to the importance of Lakoff and Johnson’s studies for the understanding of the cognitive process:

Today we know that metaphor and metonymy are conceptual phenomena by nature, cognitive processes and models, constitutive of our conceptual system, natural ways of thinking and speaking, both in everyday language and scientific discourse, rooted in human experience and responsible either for the structuring of thought, language and action, or by conceptual innovation.

(2006, p. 110).

Dubois *et al.* (2004, p. 411) shed light on the definition of metaphor by saying that it is an “employment of every term that replaced by another assimilates its meaning after the suppression of the words that introduce the comparison ... Metaphor plays a large role in lexical creation; many figurative senses are just used up metaphors”. For Trask (2011, p. 190-191), metaphor refers to the “literal use of a linguistic form, used as a resource to draw attention to perceived similarity”. He argues that most metaphors are so familiar “that we no longer perceive them as metaphorical”. Accordingly, Fiorin (2014) adds that “metaphor is a semantic concentration”, that is, a new meaning forming with reference to another meaning that already existed in the language assimilates of the former the semic traits that will define both:

In the extension axis, it [the metaphor] despises a series of traits and takes into account only a few traits common to two coexisting meanings. (...) What establishes a compatibility between the two meanings is a similarity, that is, the existence of traits common to both. The metaphor is, thus, the trope in which a predicative compatibility is established by similarity, restricting the semic extension of coexisting elements and increasing their tonicity.

(2014, p. 33, emphasis added).

Differently from metaphor, metonymy establishes a compatibility of meaning by proximity, it expands the meaning of words in a process of semantic transfer. Thus, Fiorin (2014, p. 37) argues that “on the axis of extension, a semantic value is transferred to another, as in a semic spread ... What establishes a compatibility between the two meanings is a contiguity, that is, a proximity, a neighborhood, a contact”. Accordingly, Silva (1999) states that metaphor differs from metonymy due the fact that the former is based in a relationship of similarity; and the latter, in a contiguity. Silva (1999), in addition, draws attention to other processes that play similar roles in semantic change, as generalization and specialization, already discussed by Meillet (1905-1906) and aforementioned.

Remarkably, metaphorical and metonymic processes play important roles in the process of lexical creation. They also show that the change of meaning of words can be regarded as resulting of causes external to language, but related to the cognitive process, to the way the linguistic universe is apprehended. The following analysis highlights two lexical items that designate Brazilian Midwestern vegetation, which meanings suggest that one of them (*Cerrado*) was constituted by metaphor, and the other underwent the two processes, metaphor and metonymy, in different past synchronies of Portuguese language (*Vereda*).

ANALYSIS OF THE LEXICAL ITEMS LEXICAL ITEM *CERRADO*

The lexical item *Cerrado* designates the second largest Brazilian biome. This biome is also, according to Altair Sales Barbosa (2015), the oldest of recent environments of planet Earth. For this author, after the devastation caused by the meteors that extinguished almost all living beings that lived in the planet, the first signs of vegetation to appear were those that gave origin to what is called today *Cerrado*. For that reason, the author points out that the *Cerrado* represents the oldest forms of environment in recent history of the planet.

According to Ribeiro and Walter (2008), conditioning factors gave origin to three physiognomic subdivisions of the *Cerrado* strict sense: the heavy, the typical and the sparse *Cerrado*. The heavy *Cerrado* is a subtype of predominant arboreal vegetation. It represents the heaviest and highest form of *Cerrado* strict sense. The typical *Cerrado* is a subtype of predominantly bush-arboreal vegetation. It is a common and an intermediate form between the heavy *Cerrado* and the sparse one. The sparse *Cerrado* is a subtype of vegetation consisting of trees and bushes. It represents the lowest and the least dense form of the *Cerrado* strict sense.

Ribeiro and Walter (2008, p. 160), while conceptualizing the *Cerrado* biome as a “bush-arboreal vegetation that occurs in the savannah formation”, assert that the word *Cerrado* is “a word of Spanish origins that means closed”. The authors point to the use of this word by Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius in the early nineteenth century, when addressing the characteristics of Midwestern Brazilian vegetation. This word was mentioned by Martius (1943 [1824], p. 256) in passages in which he describes its use by the countrymen: “... The most important difference is that which is designated by Brazilians as the names of open-field and closed-field, *cerrado*”.

This word was also used by Eugenius Warning in the late 19th century (see Warning, 1973 [1892]). Warning’s text was translated from Danish by Albert Löfgren and was published in 1908. It is a study of the vegetation of Lagoa Santa, Minas Gerais, Brazil. In it, the author used both the expression *campos-cerrados* (closed-fields) and the simplified form, *cerrado* (closed). Before that, however, Löfgren himself (1896) had already used the term in a study of plant distribution in the state of São Paulo.

Etymologically, the meaning of the lexical item *cerrado* is rooted in the origin of the verb *cerrar*, from Portuguese language, whose definition refers to the verbs *fechar* (close) and *selar* (seal). Hence, the past participle of this verb is used to say that something has been closed (*cerrado*), in a way that it does not enable the passage through it. So, it is not legitimate to say that the lexical item *Cerrado* was originated from Spanish as asserted by Ribeiro and Walter (2008).

The biome *Cerrado*, according to the definition presented, is characterized by the phytophysiological particularity of its arboreal vegetation. As defined by Ferreira (2004), *Cerrado* is a “closed field whose trees are closer to each other”. It is inferred, then, that this biome received its name because of the characteristics of its vegetation whose trees are positioned closer to each other. Since their trunks are closer to the ground, their crowns “close” the environment in which they are concentrated, making circulation and passage difficult.

Undoubtedly, although it is not possible to get those who first applied the meaning *Cerrado* to designate a type of vegetation (even though, apparently, in the scientific literature, Martius was the first to use the term, it was already common in the speech of the Brazilians who inhabited the center of Brazil), which is characterized by the traits that led them to this designation, it was certainly metaphorically motivated. Conversely, over time, as it happens

with most words, the lexical item *Cerrado* no longer claims the meaning that first designated that object in the empirical world. At least, the language user does not make such a metalinguistic reflection on the origin and motivation of names, especially when it concerns a lexical item already crystallized in Portuguese language as it is the case under analysis.

Such obliviousness is necessary for the names to be established in the languages. In the case of the lexical item under analysis, it turns possible to speak of heavy or closed *Cerrado* – and to define it as a “closed-field whose trees are closer to each other” – and to conceptualize sparse *Cerrado* – a vegetation “in which the trees maintain a distance amongst them that facilitates the transit of animals” (Ferreira, 2004, p. 443). In the first case, heavy or closed *Cerrado* covers a redundant meaning, because *cerrado*, etymologically, means closed. This redundancy results from this fundamental oblivion for the instantiation of semantic change and for the establishment of the new meanings in the conceptual apparatus of the language users. In the second case, the sparse *Cerrado* loses contact with the etymological meaning of the terminology that named the vegetation, and therefore this term is re-signified from closed *Cerrado*, making it a counterpoint of meaning and naming another aspect of the vegetation.

Therefore, one can use the terms typical, closed and sparse *Cerrado*, all of them covering the designation of the physiognomic subdivisions of the *Cerrado* biome. Notably, once a name has been created to designate an object in the extralinguistic world and the factors that motivated its creation have been forgotten, the semantic relationship between the designation and its meaning is lost.

The union of designation (the object in the world), the linguistic form and its meaning gives them a coexistence of identity in such a way that the linguistic sign *Cerrado* gains an autonomous definition, as if this sign could only evoke the object in the empirical world, *the typical vegetation of Brazilian Midwest*. Thus, the term *Cerrado* can be used in varying forms and compositions such as *closed Cerrado* and *sparse Cerrado*, since *Cerrado* no longer means only the heavy and hard-to-reach vegetation that led to its original designation, it also covers the meaning of less dense vegetation, but that retains other phytophysiognomic characteristics of this biome.

Notably, unlike what Ribeiro and Walter (2008) asserted, the lexical item *Cerrado* was constituted by the Portuguese adjective *cerrado*, whose immediate meaning is *closed*, with metaphorical motivation. The adjective *cerrado*, in this case, functions as a specifier of the lexical item *campo* (field), as it occurs in *campos-cerrados* (closed-fields). This name would be simplified in *Cerrado*, however, maintaining the metaphorical meaning that characterizes the phytophysiognomic aspect of *campos-cerrados*. The language users, searching for a term that could describe and represent the characteristics of this vegetation, identified in the word *Cerrado* the meaning that would cover that designation. Thus, the semantic features of the adjective *cerrado* and the physiognomic traits of the vegetation intersected, as if one implied the other, in a coexistence of meaning in which the term *cerrado* came to designate a biome due to its phytophysiognomic characteristics.

For a vocable to be considered metaphorical, there must be a coexistence of identity between the object in the empirical world (designation), the linguistic form of designation (meaning) and the resulting semantic content (sense) (see Coseriu, 1980). This is self-evident with the occurrence of the word *Cerrado*, which designates a type of vegetation. This coexistence of identity is realized in such a way that it turns possible to speak of “closed *Cerrado*” and “sparse *Cerrado*”, without seeming contradictory. But another issue is worthy to be highlighted. It has to do with the passage of a specialized term to the general use (Meillet, 1905-1906). The speaker does not make any metalinguistic analysis before deciding to name an aspect of the *Cerrado* vegetation, which is not so thick, of open or sparse *Cerrado*, because in the common speaker’s consciousness the coexistence of identity between

the object of designation and its meaning is such that he does not even wonder whether it would be contradictory to name an aspect of this biome as *sparse Cerrado*, because this term is re-signified through *closed Cerrado*, one of the *Cerrado* aspects.

According to Silva (2006, p. 122), metaphor “involves distinct conceptual domains, such as mapping, by a series of ontological and epistemic correspondences, of the structure of a domain (source) in another (target), being understood in terms of the latter”. In this sense, metaphors are configured so that X is Y, where X is the target-domain and Y is the source-domain. For instance, speakers in Midwestern Brazil sought to name a vegetation with a name that could conceptually highlight and describe its visually perceptible characteristics. Therefore, the source-domain - Y - is the lexicographic form *cerrado*; the vegetation to be named - X - is the target-domain (the designation, the object in the world). By being named as *Cerrado*, X - the target-domain - is understood in terms of Y, source-domain. Thus, to say that X is Y is equivalent to say: vegetation with *cerrado* (closed) aspects is equals *cerrado*. Put in another way, *Cerrado* is equals *cerrado*. In other words, Y (*cerrado*, adjective form) projects its senses into X (Brazil’s Midwestern vegetation), which is now understood in the former’s meanings.

“The true motivations of semantic change,” asserts Silva (2006, p. 89), “cannot be found in languages themselves, but rather in the pragmatic goals of languages users – natural goals of expressiveness and communicative efficiency”. As seen above, the isomorphic relationship between *cerrado* (grammatical form) and *Cerrado* (lexicalized form) was lost over time in the conceptual apparatus of Portuguese speakers, causing the term *Cerrado* to cease to evoke the meaning that motivated its creation and, therefore, to claim only the concept of Brazil’s Midwestern typical vegetation. On the other hand, the adjective form *cerrado* kept its original meaning and can be applied in contexts that claim the sense of *closed*.

LEXICAL ITEM *VEREDA*

The word *Vereda* designates a typical subsystem of the *Cerrado* biome. According to Ribeiro and Walter (2008, p. 183), this subsystem was formed as a result of groundwater protuberance and plays a fundamental role in the *Cerrado* hydrological system. It is also fundamental for the “maintenance of the *Cerrado* fauna, functioning as a landing site for the avifauna, and acting as a refuge, shelter, food source and breeding site for terrestrial and aquatic fauna”.

This subsystem was first described by Martius (1838), named *varredas*, in his classic text *Travel through Brazil 1817-1820*. In this paper, the author describes the physical characteristics of the *Cerrado* and its subsystems: “The countrymen call *varredas* these covered fields. We found here a flabby, thorny palm, the *carimá* (*Mauritia armata*, M.), the greatest charm of the soil; and, beyond that rarer one, the noble buriti (*Mauritia vinifera*, M.)” (Martius, 1838, p. 109-110).

The Brazilian lexicographer, Silveira Bueno (1974) defines *vereda* in the following way:

Path, road, shortcut, bypath, cut path. It is a female drawer of the masculine *veredus*, late Latin, meaning horse of post, that is, that served the messengers to carry messages, warnings, the post office as it would be said today. The name of road, path, shortcut was taken from the horse’s name that ran through them.... The name *veredus* is of Celtic origin *voredos*, horse.

(1974, p. 4227).

This description is significant because it highlights the semantic track taken by the lexical item *vereda* in past synchronies, but it misses the last stage of change that this word

has gone through. For instance, in Northeastern Brazil, *vereda* is a “most abundant water region in the *caatinga* zone”; in the state of Goiás, it is a “floodplain that borders a river”; and in Minas Gerais, the name *vereda* is given to the “headland and watercourse bordered by *buritis*” (see Ferreira, 2004).

Given the importance of the subsystem *Vereda*, the lexical item *Vereda* composed the title of one of the most important epics of Portuguese language literature, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (Portuguese for “Great Backlands: Paths”; English translation: *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*). In this work, João Guimarães Rosa highlights the hostile environments of the *Sertão* (dry hinterlands) as opposed to the welcoming environment of the *Veredas*. In a letter sent to his Italian translator, Edoardo Bizzarri, dated October 11, 1963, Rosa clarifies a question of Bizzarri regarding the word *Vereda*, since that term was unknown to him. Before clarifying what the *Veredas* are, Rosa (2003, p. 37) gave a description of the geographical environment of what he calls *campos-gerais* (general-fields), or simply *gerais* (general ones), which are characterized by the highlands, “plateaus, wide elevations, flat, at sometimes more or less tabular hills”, and tableland, “big, huge highlands, sometimes a series of highlands”. Regarding the vegetation, Rosa highlights the characteristics of the *Cerrado* and the *Veredas*:

The vegetation is that of *Cerrado*: crooked, low, stunted trees (they only persist because they have very long, pivoting vertical roots that plunge to incredible depths). And the grass, there, is rough, of terrible quality, which, in the greenness, in the period - of the - waters, grows encrusted in the sand, of silica particles, as if it were ground glass: and so the cattle that eats it, get, dangerously, sick. Trees, bushes, and bad grass are, on the plateaus, a common green, ugly, monotonous. But in between the highlands, separating them (or sometimes, even high in depressions in the middle of the highlands) there are the *veredas*. They are valleys in the clay or peaty-clay soil, where the absorbed water emerges. In the *veredas*, there is always *buriti*. From afar, *buritis* are spotted, and one knows: there is water there. The *vereda* is an oasis. In relation to the highlands, they are, the *veredas*, of beautiful light green, pleasant, soft. The grass is intense light green, good. The *veredas* are fertile. Filled with animals, birds ... In the *veredas* there are sometimes large woods, common. But, the center, the lively and colorful core of the *vereda*, is always adorned with *buritis*, *buritiranas*, *safarrás* and *pindaíbas* along the water shore. The *veredas* are always beautiful!

(2003, p. 37).

Unquestionably, the lexical item *vereda* has a unique individual history that can be told through the development of its forms and meanings over the course of several centuries. In Brazil, as seen, it helped telling one of the most important stories in the national literature, and this was so because it gave its designation to a fundamental environment for the inhabitants of the Brazilian *sertões* (dry hinterlands) and whose existence depends not only on the survival of humans living there, but also of animal and plant species that find refuge in it.

But, what is intriguing is that a word that originally designated *horse* at the service of the post changed its meaning to *path*, and, lastly, turned to designate a *type of vegetation*. As seen, the Latin word *veredus*, horse of the post, meant horses that were engaged in the service of mail delivery. The term post designated the “stopping place formerly located on the roads, from space to space, where the stagecoach horses and other vehicles were changed, or the mail service” (Ferreira, 2004), from which the term postal originates. In future synchronies, the term *veredus* was derived by metonymy to name the *path* taken by the post horses, giving rise to the word *vereda*.

The example above, shows that there is not a coexistence of identity between the lexical unities *veredus* and *vereda*, of course they had different meanings, but it shows that there is a contiguity of meaning, as if the term *vereda* could evoke the character that defines and specifies the contours of its meaning, the *veredus*. Thus, *vereda* would originally designate the route through which the *veredus* passed. Definitely, there is, in the instantiation

of meaning in this word, a process of semic transfer from *veredus* (specifying agent) to *vereda* (specified object), but the two items retain their individual identities, just as the words train and rail remain independent terms, although one necessarily evokes the existence of the other. This contiguity of meaning allows one to take, in a metonymic relationship, the place/object by the character/agent that specifies it.

Naturally, the words *cerrado* and *vereda* have their individual histories and singulars constitutive meanings paths. Thus, it is interesting to note how the term *vereda*, which concerned only the uniqueness of a route ran by mail horses, generalizes to include the meaning of any route; and, in reverse, it specializes to refer to the uniqueness of a type of arboreal vegetation (generalization and specialization play complementary role in the process of semantic change). The term *vereda* is widely known in Portuguese language as a narrow path. A query to any dictionary of Brazilian Portuguese sheds light on this issue. It is self-evident, then, that at present (there is a record of this word meaning arboreal formation dating back to the early nineteenth century) the meaning of this term has lost contact with its Latin etymon. The twenty-first century speaker may not even know the history of this word formation, much less that it had such a specific meaning.

Notably, as *veredus*, as the main means of transportation of post, became obsolete, making room for other means of transportation, the designation *vereda* (extralinguistic reality) started getting aside from the meaning that motivated its creation. *Vereda* was no longer a route traveled only by *veredus*, but by other means of transportation as well. Since the term was already well established among speakers (the generalization process was completed), the emergence of a new means of transportation did not imply the creation of a new word to signify the path it would take. Apropos, the speakers no longer knew that the meaning of *vereda* implied de object in the empirical world, *veredus*, which motivated it. It is as if the word *vereda* had always been there, meaning *narrow path*.

Evidently, the term *vereda* had a long journey and came to the nineteenth century meaning narrow path, and it is invested with this meaning that it may shed light on the new meaning that it came into being: the one of the *Cerrado*'s subsystem. Notably, this lexical item has been broadening its specificity and meaning by metaphor: here, it is necessary to emphasize the relationship of meaning that exists between a watercourse and the route that it builds through the geographical space: on the banks of the path built by the force of water grow tree formations because of the moist terrain. This is, certainly, a re-analysis of the lexical item *vereda*, which gains a new meaning, but maintains a metaphorical intersection with the previous sense, which is *narrow path, route*.

Guimarães Rosa (2003, p. 38) expresses concern about the origin of the word *vereda* as a designation of a *Cerrado*'s subsystem, which represents an important environment for his work: "In general, the routes, in the region, prefer or need to go, by obvious reasons, contouring highlands, by the cooled places, from *vereda* to *vereda*. (There, perhaps, the etymology of the designation: *vereda*.)". Clearly, this term stands out for its high polysemic degree, but it does not escape an analysis that highlights its individual history of the constitution and development of meanings. Finally, it may be said that the use of existing terms in language, embodied with new meanings highlights the strong metaphorical and metonymic motivation that operates in the process of naming the objects of the extralinguistic world.

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted the process of instantiation of meaning and the subsequent semantic changes that the lexical items *cerrado* and *vereda* underwent, forms that designate in the present synchrony the *Cerrado* biome and its subsystem, *Vereda*. It also showed that

the meaning surrounding a word in a current synchrony of a linguistic community gives rise to the illusion that it had always been there, meaning and describing the object of designation. As a result, studying the history of a word means to perceive both the uniqueness of its morph-phonological and semantic constitution and its relation to the object it designates. Understanding the functioning of these processes, presents itself at first as an intriguing puzzle, but whose pieces gradually reveal themselves and highlight the internal logic of lexical creation, as well as its semantic motivations in the process of naming an object in the world, as well as its subsequent changes of meaning.

William W. Whitney (1867) argued that since language is a human creation, there would be nothing internal to its system that could retain the identity of words. Consequently, a word would not represent a natural reflection of an idea, but only its designation, an arbitrary and conventional sign with which speakers learn to associate it. Since linguistic sign is an arbitrary designation, it lacks the internal strength to retain its identity. Therefore, it becomes exposed to all sorts of changes, and once a lexical item passes into the time domain, it becomes its main indicator of stability and change.

It is by observing the words located in time that one can perceive the instantiation and implementation of certain semantic changes, such as those evidenced in this study. Finally, it is important to say that in this process of creation or change of meaning that words undergo, human cognition plays the role not only of accepting this new creation or change, but of categorizing it from the meanings already existing in the target language. Far away from an exhaust analysis, this study sought to discuss the question of semantic change and to highlight the role that metaphor and metonymy, along with specialization and generalization, fundamentally, play in this process.

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