

From colour adjective to degree modifier

The case of *blå* in Swedish

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Abstract This short contribution is concerned with the development of the colour adjective *blå* (blue) in Swedish and the underlying semantic conditions and mechanisms that have been favourable for the development of the new senses that have gained ground among speakers.

1. Introduction

A question in a Q-and-A column dealing with expressions in the Swedish language that readers may wonder about in *Sydsvenskan* on 8 July 2021 sparked my interest in the use of the colour adjective *blå* (blue). The question concerned a reader's observation that speakers make use of *blå* in combinations such as *blåneka* (blue deny). *Blåneka* has two parts, *blå* and *neka*, and the role of *blå* is not to refer to the colour but to modify the verb deny with respect to degree and subjective speaker stance. This means that *blå* does not refer to a region in colour space in this combination. The question is: Why did a word denoting a colour develop into an item that is more like a grammatical element, namely an operator with the function of reinforcing *neka* (deny)?

In this short article, my aim is to try to account for the recruitment of *blå* to the domain of degree. For that purpose, I take a look at different uses of *blå* as the first part of five compound words: *blåfrusen* (blue frozen), *blåögd* (blue eyed), *blåneka* (blue deny), *blåsnål* (blue mean), *blådåre* (blue idiot). The article focusses on three questions. They are:

- What are the semantic properties of *blå* that make it possible for it to develop a degree reading?
- What are the semantic properties of the item that *blå* modifies?
- What are the mechanisms that drive the change?

An intriguing question is why a word that refers to the domain of colour becomes a modifier of degree. Such a development entails a shift from a contentful (lexical meaning) to a configurational operator (function role). It also entails that we are dealing with a polysemous item that may be instantiated in both the COLOUR and DEGREE domains. Such a polysemy development is a synchronic reflection of diachronic change at some point in time. According to SAOB (s.v. *blå*), *blå* as an operator is a development from *blå* as a descriptor of a colour into a modifier of degree in combinations with certain items, for instance *blåfattig* (blue poor). Such uses had been found in dialects already in the early 1600s, but the more general development did not take off and spread until in the mid-19th century. The use of *blå* as a reinforcing degree modifier is still used and is also productive in contemporary Swedish. *Blå* in Swedish underwent this process of grammaticalization and subjectification from its propositional colour meaning into a reinforcing degree modifier round about at the same time as this development of a range of word meanings developed into degree modifiers in English, i.e., in the latter part of the 19th century (Méndez-Naya, 2008; Paradis, 1997).

2. The blå senses and their contexts

Many core adjectives that are in frequent use, for instance the colour adjectives *blue* (*blå*), *yellow* (*gul*), *red* (*röd*), *black* (*svart*) and adjectives that denote properties of dimensions of different kind such as *old* (*gammal*), *long* (*lång*), *short* (*kort*), *thick* (*tjock*), *hard* (*hård*), *soft* (*mjuk*) are intrinsically malleable and flexible as to their meaning application in discourse. They are also prone to interpretative vagueness (meaning generality) as well as ambiguity (polysemy) across senses. They all require another element to combine with for their specific interpretation and instantiation in a domain that may be expressed by a noun, an adjective or a verb just as is the case for *blå*. For instance, out of context, it is hard to know whether *soft* expresses something in the domain of touch, smell, taste, sound or even vision. This is also the reason why a closer look at the items that *blå* combines with is crucial because they provide the locus of instantiation that is necessary for how they are interpreted. In this respect, both the contentful meaning as such and the configurational properties of the second part of the compound of these combinations are important for its

interpretation. In the next few paragraphs, I will clarify this statement through concrete examples of the above five words.

Blåfrusen means ‘blue with cold’. *Blå* refers to the colour blue as the skin takes on a shade of blue when a person is very cold. In this case we are dealing with a meaning of *blå* instantiated in the COLOUR domain, and *blå* refers to something that can be seen and confirmed objectively by speakers in the real world. *Blå* does not take scope over *frusen* but is an attribute evoking a meaning describing the state of being cold.

Blåögd has two meanings. One of them refers to a person who has blue eyes. *Blå* here refers to the colour blue and is an attribute of eyes. The other meaning of *blåögd* refers to a person who is innocent and gullible. This change involves a process of metaphORIZATION from COLOUR to PERSONALITY, which is evoked by a mapping from one domain to another. Such a meaning change follows a developmental path that includes a contentful meaning that changes into another contentful meaning, which in this case is from COLOUR to PERSONALITY (Paradis, 2011). According to SAOB (s.v. *blå*), this association originated from the use of *blå* in religious contexts, where it is associated with piety, kindness, honour and similar dispositions and personality traits. The leap from the colour that symbolizes such traits to kindness and innocence as a characteristic of a type of personality makes sense and is not far-fetched. In this case the two senses of *blåögd* represent two different domains, both of them contentful domains.

Blåneka has one meaning. The prefixed adjective does not evoke the meaning of *blue* in COLOUR but is a totality modifier of degree. The word meaning of *blå* here can be paraphrased as ‘totally deny’, and *blå* is instantiated in the DEGREE domain together with a number of its near synonyms. The developmental path can probably be traced back to a metaphorical mapping and a hyperbolic use of *blå* as something that happens because the person is physically affected by the effort of denying something, just like a person might be when s/he is physically affected by low temperatures. In the case of *blåneka*, we are dealing with a shift from a contentful domain, i.e., COLOUR, to a configurational domain, i.e., DEGREE. This involves a major leap of grammaticalization, where *blå* is no longer a descriptor, but a function word that operates on the configurational set-up of *neka* (deny). Like *deny*, the meaning of *neka* is structured in relation to a bounded configuration. Either you deny something, or you do not. This meaning harmonizes with degree modifiers of the totality type such as *total*, *absolute*, *utter*, as in *total denial*. *Blå* has become a function word that operates on the structure of what it modifies, and at the same time it also

evokes subjectivity conveyed by the speaker in that his or her personal view of the either-or status of the denial is communicated by *blå*.

Likewise, *blåsnål* and *blådåre* are also grammaticalized senses of *blå*. Like *blåneka*, they have also undergone a process of grammaticalization and subjectification in the shift from *blue* in COLOUR to *blå* in DEGREE. However, in contrast to *blåneka*, where *blå* operates on *neka* (deny), whose configuration is one of boundendess, *blå* in *blåsnål* and *blådåre* operate on the meanings of *snål* and *dåre* both of which evoke conceptual configurations of a scalar type. People may be more or less mean (*snål*) and more or less of an idiot (*dåre*). This scalar configuration has the effect on the interpretation of *blå* in so far as it, instead of expressing totality, conveys a meaning similar to expressions such as *vey*, *extremely*. This said, it is in fact also possible to interpret the meaning of *idiot* (*dåre*) in an absolute way, and then *blå* adapts and takes on the function as a degree modifier of totality similar to *total*, *absolute* and *utter*.

In sum, this short contribution dealing with *blå* includes two ways of looking at diachronic developments of words over time that have resulted in conventionalized meanings in synchrony as has happened with *blå* as a degree modifier. Such developments can be observed either from a *semasiological* or an *onomasiological* perspective (Traugott, 1997; Geeraerts, 1997). The former takes the word as its starting point and typically asks questions such as “What meanings does word x express?” In the case of *blå*, we may say that it has developed from a word that evokes the colour blue into metaphorizations into interpretations related to personality traits associated with kindness and innocence into an items with meanings similar either to ‘very’ or ‘total’. In terms of the onomasiological perspective the typical question asked is: “What words express concept c?”. Here, the focus is instead on near synonyms in a given domain, for instance DEGREE. In the case of *blå*, its cognitive synonyms match the meaning applications of scalar degree modifiers such as *very*, *much*, *extremely*, or totality modifiers such as *total*, *absolute*, *utter*. All four uses of *blå*, i.e., the use referring to the colour blue, the metaphorical use referring to kindness or innocence and the two degree uses, are examples of different senses, i.e., they are polysemes. None of them can replace one another and be used in the same contexts. They differ with respect to their contentful meanings and the two senses in the degree domain also differ with respect to their different configurations (SCALAR, BOUNDED) in relation to the modified element within the DEGREE domain.

To return to the questions posed in the introduction, I go through them one at a time in this paragraph. What then are the properties of *blå* that make for the shift into the different senses

described above. It is reasonable to assume that the bodily reactions when a human being becomes blue with cold or blue in the face due to strenuous physical efforts have been invoked as invited inferences to the meaning of something that indicates a high or extreme degree (Paradis, 1997; 2000a; 2000b; 2008, 2011). The answer to the second question in the introduction is that when *blå* is a modifier of another item with a meaning that has a colour component, *blå* specifies this colour component as is the case in *blåfrusen* and *blåögd*. *Blå* then adds a specification to the description of the meaning it combines with. It may develop other meanings in other domain as is the case of the two meanings of *blå* in *blåögd*, in which case there is a metaphorization from COLOUR to PERSONALITY. In addition, and in answer to the third question, *blå* in *blåneka* on the one hand and *blåsnål* and *blådåre* on the other, evokes a DEGREE sense. It has the function of determining the degree of the item it has in its scope. This degree meaning comes in two flavours depending on the configurational structure of what *blå* has in its scope. *Blå* evokes the meaning of totality if the meaning it modifies has a bounded configuration as is the case of *blåneka*, and it takes on a scalar reinforcing meaning if the element in its scope has a scalar configuration as is the case for *blåsnål* and *blådåre*. Finally, the construals that are behind the changes are mappings between contentful meaning domains as is the case in metaphorization and highlighting of configurational properties as is the case in grammaticalization and subjectification.

Summary

This short contribution has taken a look at some uses of *blå* in Swedish from the point of view of the polysemy of *blå*. Five different items have been discussed. They do not exhaust all the meanings that *blå* may evoke but are just used as examples of the polysemous types selected for this discussion of the meaning developments. The relations between the senses are discussed and explained by metaphorization within contentful meaning domains, e.g., *blåögd* (blue-eyed), and grammaticalization and subjectification into configurational domains (*blåneka* (blue deny), *blåsnål* (blue mean), *blådåre* (blue idiot). The grammaticalized use is productive, and there are many more examples than I have brought up here, e.g., *blåljuga* (blue lie), *blåvägra* (blue refuse), *blåplugga* (blue cram), *blåsupa* (blue booze), *blåköra* (blue drive). In other words, we can add *blå* as a reinforcer to meanings as long as the modified element has a configuration that can be reinforced.

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