Title: Lexical Semantic Change and the Discursive Construction of Political Identity:
Narrative*, *Gaslighting*, and *Performative Wokeness

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In the 4th century BCE, Aristotle asserted that "man is the political animal" (*Politics* 1.2). Since humans are also linguistic animals, it follows that a theory of politics should include a theory of language and vice versa. The social turn in the cognitive sciences and anthropology emphasizes that human thought and language is as much an effect of interpersonal social action as it is a motivator (Agha 2003; Dingemanse et al. 2023; Gal and Irvine 2019), and, by extension, that the political and ideological environments that language users find themselves in affect their thoughts and language. While the interpersonal focus is not new to usage-based grammar (Langacker 2001), we argue more focus needs to be given to how ideology affects language change. This talk investigates a cluster of terms which have recently shown a sharp increase in usage over the past five centuries and especially in the last decade: the adverb *literally*, the verb *to gaslight,* the adjectives *woke* and *performative*, and the noun *narrative*.

In all these cases, a construction which starts in relatively narrow and homogeneous communities spreads to a diverse and more general audience, indexing traces of ideological concepts from the narrow community and allowing for stance taking on those concepts: thus, in the case of *literally*, the concept of 'literal meaning', which starts off in Christian hermeneutics as the lowest level of scriptural interpretation (the carnal, not the spiritual) is reinterpreted in the modern scientific age as the privileged and original level of meaning from which figurative meanings depart. This conceptual-ideological shift contributes to, and is reflexively reinforced by, the word *literally*'s conventionalization as an emphatic stance marker; utterances like "that is literally what happened" (COCA), thus, both index and entrench an ideology of language use that privileges the "literal", referential and informative over the "figurative", interpersonal and affective functions of language. We illustrate familiar analyses for *narrative*, which shifts from referencing a story to expressing a stance on politically biased spin; *gaslight*, which shifts from metonymically referencing a cinematic relationship from the 1944 film *Gas Light*, where a person intentionally drives his significant other mad through lying about flickering a gas light, to referencing a general act of manipulation, frequently through an accusatory speech act; *woke*, which shifts from an AAVE expression of well-informedness to a politically progressive stance of well-informedness to a pejoratively ironic stance of politically progressive ideology; and *performative*, which shifts from a philosophical expression that an entity is reality-performing to an expression that an entity is reality-mimicking.

While these developments all fit a classic pattern of semantic bleaching and pragmatic strengthening (Bybee 2001, Traugott 1988), we suggest that these processes themselves are driven by the ideological contexts which give these constructions their social value. Ultimately, these results remind us of the political potency that resides in our lexical choices and of the basic fact that language is political.

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