Aspects of meaning shift

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Numerous linguistic expressions require meaning shift and the enrichment of missing or incomplete constituents (e.g., the a-cases in the examples below).

(1) a. My grandmother read Kafka.
   b. My grandmother met Kafka.
(2) a. The ham sandwich wanted to pay.
   b. The ham sandwich was delicious.
(3) a. Roberto’s eyes were lively.
   b. Olivia’s baby was lively.

In this talk, I want to address the following issues relating to the adjustment of meaning: i) What is the time-course of the mechanisms that are involved in meaning shift? ii) What is the contribution of context and conventionality to different types of meaning shift? iii) What is the role of the target of meaning shift in cases of predicate and reference transfer respectively? I will present time-sensitive processing data (from electrophysiology) that indicate that context information facilitates early stages of comprehension but absence of contextual support cannot block subsequent pragmatic mechanisms involved in meaning shift. This implies that enriched composition during reference shift occurs independently from contextual licensing. The same applies to differences in conventionality. Adjective-noun combinations further reveal a distinction between predicate and reference transfer, suggesting that adjectives are lexically underspecified and obtain their interpretation via different mechanisms than referential expressions that come with a core meaning that is shifted in certain environments.