Conceptualizing Aesthetic Categories in Middle English

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Cognitive mechanisms behind the conceptualization of complex abstract notions have always sparked the interest of researchers in the fields of neurology, psychology, and behavioural studies. Recent findings in the studies of cognitive representations of semantic categories, primarily prototype theory (Rosch 1975, Osherson, Smith 1981, Geeraerts 1983), have provided a new explanatory basis for synchronic and diachronic semantic shifts.

My presentation will give an account of my doctoral research, which investigated the lexical field of BEAUTY in Middle English in order to uncover aesthetic assumptions in Medieval England. Empirically, the research is based on a quantitative analysis of the occurrences of adjectives expressing positive aesthetic evaluation in The Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse, and a qualitative analysis of their contexts of use extracted from the corpus. In the first part of my presentation, I will make a few observations about the semantic properties of the adjectives and attempt to address the question of language mechanisms behind the elevation and pejoration of meaning in lexical units belonging to domains of values, such as that of aesthetics.

Choosing to investigate changes in a lexical field, rather than the semantic history of an individual lexeme, enables a researcher to focus on holistic aspects of conceptual organisation. A diachronic analysis has demonstrated the unique character of the composition of the lexical field of beauty in the studied timeframe, with some elements inherited from Old English and new elements added in the Middle English period. The second part of my presentation will delve deeper into the conceptualization of the aesthetic category of beauty in Middle English texts, which will entail a broader conclusion on the correlation between the descriptive and evaluative aspects within an aesthetic concept.

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