The semantic change of *ato* ‘later, behind’ in Japanese

From the Peircean sign to metonymy

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This paper explores the semantic change of the polysemous Japanese word *ato* from the perspective of metonymy. In order to define how metonymy contributed to *ato*’s semantic development, I employ Peirce’s conception of the sign. I argue that the rise of *ato*’s meanings reflects the relations between the components of Peirce’s semiotic model; that is, *representamen, object* and *interpreant*. This account challenges a major previous study by Heine, Claudi and Hünnefelder that approaches semantic change from the perspective of the conceptual notion “metaphor from metonymy”, putting two aspects, namely family resemblance and unidirectionality, to the fore. While I concur with Panther, who identifies metonymy as an indexical (pointing-to) operation, it will be shown that the crucial factor in *ato*’s semantic change is that indexicality operates in a triadic fashion facilitated by various cognitive processes. That is, Peirce’s “thirdness”, the concept that a sign mediates between the *interpreant* and its *object*, is the key to an account of *ato*’s semantic change.

Keywords: cognitive processes, Japanese, metonymy, Peircean semiotic model, semantic change

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the semantic change of the polysemous word *ato* in Japanese, the main meanings of which fall under temporal (‘later’) and spatial (‘behind’) domains. For the definition of semantic change, I refer to Werth’s formulation (1974: 377–378; quoted in Hasar 2000: 173): “[…] a lexical item *a*, hither to associate with a semantic *A*, comes to associate with the new, but related (polysemous) semantic configuration *A’*, which may co-exist, or replace, *A’*. *Ato*’s original meaning was ‘foot’, which was then extended to mean ‘footprint’. The latter