

Semantic change

Semantic change (also **semantic shift**, **semantic progression**, **semantic development**, or **semantic drift**) is the evolution of word usage—usually to the point that the modern meaning is radically different from the original usage. In diachronic (or historical) linguistics, semantic change is a change in one of the meanings of a word. Every word has a variety of senses and connotations, which can be added, removed, or altered over time, often to the extent that cognates across space and time have very different meanings. The study of semantic change can be seen as part of etymology, onomasiology, semasiology, and semantics.

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Examples

- Awful—Originally meant "inspiring wonder (o fear)". Used originally as a shortening for "full of awe", in contemporary usage the word usually has negative meaning.
- Demagogue—Originally meant "a popular leader". It is from the Greek *dēmagōgós* "leader of the people", from *dēmos* "people" + *agōgós* "leading, guiding". Now the word has strong connotations of a politician who panders to emotions and prejudice.
- Egregious—Originally described something that was remarkably good. The word is from the Latin *egregius* "illustrious, select", literally "standing out from the flock", which is from *ex*—"out of" + *greg*—(*grex*) "flock". Now it means something that is remarkably bad or flagrant.
- Guy—Guy Fawkes was the alleged leader of a plot to blow up the English Houses of Parliament on 5 November 1605. The day was made a holiday Guy Fawkes Day, commemorated by parading and burning a ragged, grotesque effigy of Fawkes, known as a Guy. This led to the use of the word *guy* as a term for any "person of grotesque appearance" and then by the late 1800s—especially in the United States—for "any man", as in, e.g., "Someguy called for you." Over the 20th century *guy* has replaced *fellow* in the U.S., and, under the influence of American popular culture, has been gradually replacing *fellow*, *bloke*, *chap* and other such words throughout the rest of the English-speaking world. In the plural, it can refer to a mixture of genders (e.g., "Come on, you guys!" could be directed to a group of men and women).

- Gay—Originally meant (13th century) "lighthearted", "joyous" or (14th century) "bright and showy", it also came to mean "happy"; it acquired connotations of immorality as early as 1637, either sexual e.g. *gay woman* "prostitute", *gay man* "womanizer", *gay house* "brothel", or otherwise, e.g., *gay dog* "over-indulgent man" and *gay deceiver* "deceitful and lecherous". In the United States by 1897 the expression *gay cat* referred to a hobo, especially a younger hobo in the company of an older one; by 1935, it was used in prison slang for a homosexual boy; and by 1951 and clipped to *gay*, referred to homosexuals.

George Chauncey, in his book *Gay New York*, would put this shift as early as the late 19th century among a certain "in crowd" knowledgeable of gay night life.

Types

A number of classification schemes have been suggested for semantic change.

Typology by Bloomfield (1933)

The most widely accepted scheme in the English-speaking academic world is from Bloomfield (1933):

- Narrowing: Change from superordinate level to subordinate level. For example *skyline* formerly referred to any horizon, but now in the USA it has narrowed to a horizon decorated by skyscrapers.^[1]
- Widening: There are many examples of specific brand names being used for the general product, such as with *Kleenex*.^[1] Such uses are known as generonyms: see genericization.
- Metaphor: Change based on similarity of thing. For example *broadcast* originally meant "to cast seeds out"; with the advent of radio and television, the word was extended to indicate the transmission of audio and video signals. Outside of agricultural circles, very few use *broadcast* in the earlier sense.^[1]
- Metonymy: Change based on nearness in space or time, e.g. *jaw* "cheek" → "mandible".
- Synecdoche: Change based on whole-part relation. The convention of using capital cities to represent countries or their governments is an example of this.
- Hyperbole: Change from weaker to stronger meaning, e.g. *kill* "torment" → "slaughter".
- Meiosis: Change from stronger to weaker meaning, e.g. *astound* "strike with thunder" → "surprise strongly".
- Degeneration: e.g., *knave* "boy" → "servant" → "deceitful or despicable man".
- Elevation: e.g., *knight* "boy" → "nobleman".

Typology by Blank (1999)

However, the categorization of Blank (1999) has gained increasing acceptance.^[2]

- Metaphor: Change based on similarity between concepts, e.g. *mouse* "rodent" → "computer device".
- Metonymy: Change based on contiguity between concepts, e.g. *horn* "animal horn" → "musical instrument".
- Synecdoche: A type of metonymy involving a part to whole relationship, e.g. "hands" from "all hands on deck" → "bodies".
- Specialization of meaning: Downward shift in a taxonomy e.g., *corn* "grain" → "wheat" (UK), → "maize" (US).
- Generalization of meaning: Upward shift in a taxonomy e.g., *hoover* "Hoover vacuum cleaner" → "any type of vacuum cleaner".
- Cohyponymic transfer: Horizontal shift in a taxonomy e.g., the confusion of *mouse* and *rat* in some dialects.
- Antiphrasis: Change based on a contrastive aspect of the concepts, e.g. *perfect lady* in the sense of "prostitute".
- Auto-antonymy: Change of a word's sense and concept to the complementary opposite, e.g. *bad* in the slang sense of "good".
- Auto-converse: Lexical expression of a relationship by the two extremes of the respective relationship, e.g. *give* in the dialectal use as "give".
- Ellipsis: Semantic change based on the contiguity of names, e.g. *car* "cart" → "automobile", due to the invention of the (motor) car.
- Folk-etymology: Semantic change based on the similarity of names, e.g., French *contredanse*, orig. English *country dance*.

Blank considers it problematic, though, to include amelioration and pejoration of meaning as well as strengthening and weakening of meaning. According to Blank, these are not objectively classifiable phenomena; moreover, Blank has shown that all of the examples listed under these headings can be grouped into the other phenomena.

Forces triggering change

Blank^[3] has tried to create a complete list of motivations for semantic change. They can be summarized as:

- Linguistic forces
- Psychological forces
- Sociocultural forces
- Cultural/encyclopedic forces

This list has been revised and slightly enlarged by Grzegorz (2004)^[4]

- Fuzziness (i.e., difficulties in classifying the referent or attributing the right word to the referent, thus mixing up designations)
- Dominance of the prototype (i.e., fuzzy difference between superordinate and subordinate term due to the monopoly of the prototypical member of a category in the real world)
- Social reasons (i.e., contact situation with "undemarcation" effects)
- Institutional and non-institutional linguistic pre- and proscriptivism (i.e., legal and peer-group linguistic pre- and proscriptivism, aiming at "demarcation")
- Flattery
- Insult
- Disguising language (i.e., "misnomers")
- Taboo (i.e., taboo concepts)
- Aesthetic-formal reasons (i.e., avoidance of words that are phonetically similar or identical to negatively associated words)
- Communicative-formal reasons (i.e., abolition of the ambiguity of forms in context, keyword: "homonymic conflict and polysemic conflict")
- Wordplay/punning
- Excessive length of words
- Morphological misinterpretation (keyword: "folk-etymology", creation of transparency by changes within a word)
- Logical-formal reasons (keyword: "lexical regularization", creation of consociation)
- Desire for plasticity (creation of a salient motivation of a name)
- Anthropological salience of a concept (i.e., anthropologically given emotionality of a concept, "natural salience")
- Culture-induced salience of a concept ("cultural importance")
- Changes in the referents (i.e., changes in the world)
- Worldview change (i.e., changes in the categorization of the world)
- Prestige/fashion (based on the prestige of another language or variety of certain word-formation patterns, or of certain semasiological centers of expansion)

Practical studies

Apart from many individual studies, etymological dictionaries are prominent reference books for finding out about semantic changes.

Theoretical studies

Recent overviews have been presented by Blank^[5] and Blank & Koch (1999). Semantic change had attracted academic discussions already in ancient times. The first major works of modern times were Reisig (1839), Darmesteter (1887), Bréal (1899), Paul (1880), Stern (1931), Bloomfield (1933) and Stephen Ullmann.^[6] Studies beyond the analysis of single words have been started with the word-field analyses of Trier (1931), who claimed that every semantic change of a word would also affect all other words in a lexical field.^[7] His approach was later refined by Coseriu (1964). Fritz (1974) introduced Generative semantics. More recent works including pragmatic and cognitive theories are those in Warren (1992), Dirk Geeraerts^[8], Traugott (1990) and Blank (1997).

As stated above, the most currently used typologies are those by Bloomfield (1933) and Blank (1999) shown above. Other typologies are listed below

Typology by Reisig (1839)

Reisig's ideas for a classification were published posthumously. He resorts to classical rhetorics and distinguishes between

- Synecdoche: shifts between part and whole
- Metonymy: shifts between cause and effect
- Metaphor

Typology by Paul (1880)

- Generalization: enlargement of single senses of a word's meaning
- Specialization on a specific part of the contents: reduction of single senses of a word's meaning
- Transfer on a notion linked to the based notion in a spatial, temporal, or causal way

Typology by Darmesteter (1887)

- Metaphor
- Metonymy
- Narrowing of meaning
- Widening of meaning

The last two are defined as change between whole and part, which would today be rendered as *synecdoche*.

Typology by Bréal (1899)

- Restriction of sense: change from a general to a special meaning
- Enlargement of sense: change from a special to a general meaning
- Metaphor
- "Thickening" of sense: change from an abstract to a concrete meaning

Typology by Stern (1931)

- Substitution: Change related to the change of an object, of the knowledge referring to the object, of the attitude toward the object, e.g., *artillery* "engines of war used to throw missiles" → "mounted guns" *atom* "inseparable smallest physical-chemical element" → "physical-chemical element consisting of electrons" *scholasticism* "philosophical system of the Middle Ages" → "servile adherence to the methods and teaching of schools"
- Analogy: Change triggered by the change of an associated word, e.g. *fast* adj. "fixed and rapid" ← *faste* adv. "fixedly, rapidly")
- Shortening: e.g., *periodical* ← *periodical paper*
- Nomination: "the intentional naming of a referent, new or old, with a name that has not previously been used for it" (Stern 1931: 282), e.g., *lion* "brave man" ← "lion"
- Regular transfer: a subconscious Nomination
- Permutation: non-intentional shift of one referent to another due to a reinterpretation of a situation, e.g. *head* "prayer" → "pearl in a rosary")
- Adequation: Change in the attitude of a concept; distinction from substitution is unclear

This classification does not neatly distinguish between processes and forces/causes of semantic change.

Typology by Ullmann (1957, 1962)

Ullmann distinguishes between nature and consequences of semantic change:

- Nature of semantic change
 - Metaphor: change based on a similarity of senses
 - Metonymy: change based on a contiguity of senses
 - Folk-etymology: change based on a similarity of names
 - Ellipsis: change based on a contiguity of names

- Consequences of semantic change
 - Widening of meaning: rise of quantity
 - Narrowing of meaning: loss of quantity
 - Amelioration of meaning: rise of quality
 - Pejoration of meaning: loss of quality

See also

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|--|---|
| ▪ Calque | ▪ List of calques |
| ▪ Euphemism treadmill | ▪ Newspeak |
| ▪ False friend | ▪ Phono-semantic matching |
| ▪ Genericized trademark | ▪ Q-based narrowing |
| ▪ Language change | ▪ Skunked term |
| ▪ Lexicology and lexical semantics | ▪ Retronym |

Notes

1. [Jeffers & Lehiste \(1979\)](#)129)
2. [Grzega \(2004\)](#) paraphrases these categories (except ellipses and folk etymology) as "similar-to" relation, "neighbor-of" relation, "part-of" relation, "kind-of" relation (for both specialization and generalization), "sibling-of" relation, and "contrast-to" relation (for antiphrasis, auto-antonymy and auto-converse), respectively
3. in [Blank \(1997\)](#) and [Blank \(1999\)](#)
4. Compare [Grzega \(2004\)](#) and [Grzega & Schöner \(2007\)](#)
5. [Blank \(1997:7–46\)](#)
6. in [Ullmann \(1957\)](#), and [Ullmann \(1962\)](#)
7. An example of this comes from [Old English](#): *meat* (or rather *mete*) referred to all forms of solid food while *flesh* (*flæsc*) referred to animal tissue and *food* (*foda*) referred to animal fodder; *meat* was eventually restricted to *flesh* of animals, then *flesh* restricted to the tissue of humans and *food* was generalized to refer to all forms of solid food
[Jeffers & Lehiste \(1979\)](#)130)
8. in [Geeraerts \(1983\)](#) and [Geeraerts \(1997\)](#)

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Further reading

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External links

- Onomasiology Online (internet platform by Joachim Grzeg, Alfred Bammesberger and Marion Schöner including a list of etymological dictionaries)
 - Etymonline, Online Etymology Dictionary of the English language
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This page was last edited on 29 March 2018, at 07:42.

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