



SEMANTIC CHANGES IN ENGLISH WORDS: HISTORICAL AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This article explores how the meanings of English words have changed over time, analyzing both historical developments and current trends. Semantic change – the evolution of word meanings – is a central aspect of language development. These changes occur due to cultural shifts, technological progress, social change, and linguistic processes. The paper discusses core types of semantic change – broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, and semantic shift – and supports each with historical and modern examples. Tables are provided to offer a clear classification and analysis of semantic developments. The study highlights how understanding semantic change benefits linguists, educators, and learners in grasping both the richness and complexity of the English language.

Keywords: Semantic change, lexical shift, historical linguistics, broadening, narrowing, metaphor, English vocabulary

Introduction

Semantic change refers to the process by which word meanings evolve. Unlike phonological or syntactic change, which affects how language sounds or is structured, semantic change alters the meaning of individual words. The English language, due to its contact with multiple languages (e.g., Latin, Norse, French) and its global use, provides a vast landscape for studying such changes. Semantic change can occur gradually, often unnoticed by speakers, yet its effects are profound in literature, communication, and language education. This paper aims to analyze semantic change from two perspectives:

1. Historically, examining how English words transformed in meaning from Old and Middle English to Modern English.



2. Contemporarily, exploring how technology, social dynamics, and popular culture have altered word usage today.

Semantic changes are typically categorized into five main types. These changes are not mutually exclusive and can overlap depending on context and time period.

Table 1: Types of Semantic Change with Examples

Type of Change	Definition	Historical Example	Modern Example
Broadening	Meaning becomes more general or inclusive	Holiday – from “holy day” to any day off	Cookie – now includes browser data, not just food
Narrowing	Meaning becomes more specific or restricted	Meat – from “any food” to “animal flesh”	Doctor – in casual use now often only medical
Amelioration	Word gains a more positive connotation	Knight – from “servant” to “noble warrior”	Nice – from “ignorant” to “pleasant”
Pejoration	Word gains a more negative connotation	Silly – from “happy/blessed” to “foolish”	Spinster – now seen as derogatory
Shift (Transfer)	Word acquires a completely new meaning, often metaphorical or symbolic	Journey – from “a day’s travel” to “any travel”	Mouse – now also refers to a computer device

The history of English spans multiple linguistic layers: Old English (c. 450–1150), Middle English (c. 1150–1500), Early Modern English (c. 1500–1700), and Modern English (1700–present). Each stage introduced semantic shifts due to internal linguistic development or external influence.

A. Influence of Old Norse and Norman French:

- After Viking invasions, Old Norse contributed to vocabulary like sky, egg, and take, many of which changed meaning.
- After the Norman Conquest (1066), French words entered English and underwent transformation:
 - Chef originally meant “head” (Latin caput), but came to mean “cook”.



- Chivalry came from “cavalry” but shifted to signify “knightly behavior”.

B. Cultural and Religious Changes. Words gained new meanings under Christianity and feudalism:

- Passion – originally meant “suffering,” especially of Christ; now also means intense emotion or desire.

- Minister – from ‘servant’ to a government or religious official.

Contemporary society, especially through digital culture, causes rapid semantic shifts:

- ✓ Technological Influence: Cloud – formerly a weather term, now means internet-based data storage; Stream – originally a water flow; now also means media broadcasted online.

- ✓ Social and Political Discourse: Woke – once meant simply “aware”; now heavily politicized to mean socially conscious (often sarcastically); Cancel – once neutral (to annul), now refers to public boycotting of people/brands.

- ✓ Slang and Pop Culture: Ghost (verb) – to cut off communication without explanation; Lit – from “illuminated” to “exciting” or “intoxicated”.

Table 2: Modern Semantic Changes in Context

Word	Original Meaning	Current (New) Meaning	Category of Change
Tablet	A flat stone or clay for writing	A handheld digital device	Shift
Friend	A close companion	A social media connection	Broadening
Stream	Flow of water	Online broadcasting (audio/video)	Shift
Crush	To compress	A romantic interest	Shift
Spam	A type of canned meat	Unwanted electronic messages	Shift/Pejoration
Hack	To chop or cut	Unauthorized computer access	Shift/Narrowing
Boomer	Someone born 1946–1964	Pejorative term for outdated thinking	Pejoration/Shift



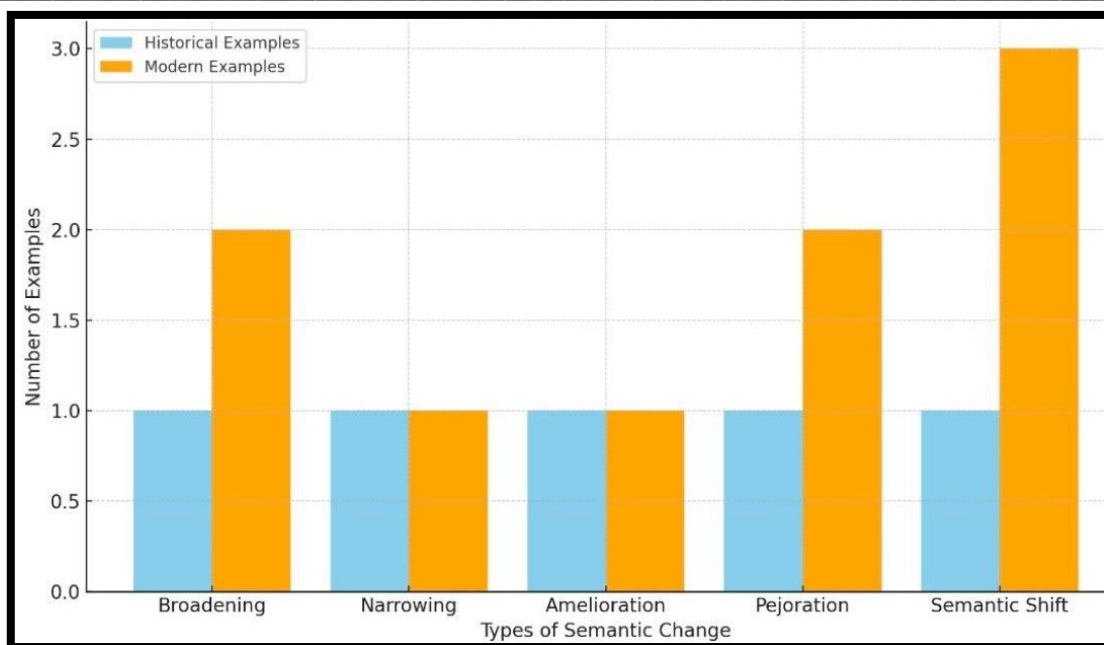
Metaphor:	• transferring meaning based on resemblance (eye of a needle).
Metonymy:	• association-based meaning (Hollywood for American film industry).
Euphemism:	• softening harsh meanings (pass away instead of die).
Taboo replacement:	• using new words to avoid offensive ones (toilet → restroom).
Hyperbole/ Understatement:	• exaggerating or minimizing for effect.

Table 3. Causes and Mechanisms of Semantic Change.

Thus, as can be seen from table 3, semantic changes come from various sources.

Importance of understanding semantic change for various fields:

- Linguistics: tracks language evolution and mental lexicon shifts.
- Translation: avoids errors in outdated or culturally sensitive terms.
- Education: helps learners grasp figurative and literal meanings.
- Lexicography: essential for updating dictionaries and corpora.
- AI/NLP: critical for understanding context and word sense disambiguation.



Graph 1. Types of Semantic Change in Historical and Modern English

Graph Interpretation: Semantic Changes in English – Historical vs. Modern Usage. The graph titled “Types of Semantic Change in Historical and Modern English” illustrates the frequency of key semantic change types – semantic shift, broadening, narrowing, and amelioration/pejoration – in two distinct time periods: historical and modern English. From the graph, we can observe the following:

Semantic shift is notably more prevalent in modern English than in the historical period. This increase is largely due to rapid technological, cultural, and social developments, which often cause existing words to acquire new meanings. For example, the word “cloud” has shifted from its original meaning in nature to a modern usage in digital storage. Broadening, where a word’s meaning becomes more general over time, also shows significant growth in modern usage. For instance, “holiday” once referred only to religious days but now refers to any form of vacation or break. Narrowing, the process by which a word’s meaning becomes more specific, remains relatively stable across both periods but is slightly more common historically. A classic example is “meat”, which used to mean any kind of food and now specifically refers to animal flesh.



Amelioration/pejoration, where words improve or worsen in meaning, appear at relatively similar rates across both periods, indicating that value changes in words are a consistent phenomenon in language evolution. In conclusion, the graph reflects the dynamic nature of the English language, where semantic change is more frequent and diverse in the modern era due to faster societal and technological shifts. Understanding these trends helps linguists and language learners better grasp how meanings evolve over time.

Conclusion

Semantic change is both a reflection and a driver of cultural and technological evolution. English, due to its global reach and dynamic usage, provides countless examples of how meanings expand, shrink, improve, worsen, or shift entirely. From historical shifts in words like silly and knight to modern transformations like cloud and ghost, semantic change enriches and complicates communication. Understanding this phenomenon allows us to better navigate both historical texts and modern interactions in English.

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