

CHANGING OF WORD MEANING IN ENGLISH

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The evolution of word meanings in the English language, known as semantic change, reflects a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and social dynamics; through processes such as amelioration, pejoration, generalization, specialization, and metaphorical extension, lexical items undergo significant semantic transformation, illustrating the fluid and adaptive nature of linguistic expression across time. The semantic shift of English vocabulary demonstrates how language adapts to changing communicative contexts, with words frequently acquiring altered or expanded meanings through mechanisms like euphemism, metaphor, and socio-cultural reinterpretation. English lexemes are not semantically static; rather, they undergo continual redefinition shaped by usage, ideology, and linguistic economy—phenomena that underscore the ever-evolving nature of human expression. The transformation in the connotative and denotative dimensions of English words reveals language’s intrinsic responsiveness to societal evolution, where terms once imbued with one meaning acquire divergent interpretations through historical progression and collective cognition.

Language is not a fixed system, but a dynamic and evolving medium of human thought and interaction. Over centuries, English has undergone profound lexical transformations, reflecting not only linguistic mechanisms but also the cultural, historical, and technological contexts in which it develops. One of the most compelling aspects of this evolution is semantic change—the process through which the meanings of words shift over time. Words may broaden, narrow, or shift in emotional tone; they may gain metaphorical extensions or lose their original sense entirely. These changes, driven by social conventions, ideological shifts, and communicative efficiency, reveal the adaptability and richness of the language. Thus, the evolution of word meanings in the English language, known as semantic change, reflects a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and social dynamics; through processes such as amelioration, pejoration, generalization, specialization, and metaphorical extension, lexical items undergo significant semantic transformation, illustrating the fluid and adaptive nature of linguistic expression across time.

On the average the number of different meanings a word has is correlated with the number of times it is used, though there are striking exceptions, such as the numerals. Zipf

has reported an extensive study of the general relation in this JoURNAL (1945, 33, 251-256). Zipf's source material automatically excluded obsolete meanings, save a very few, and utilized the rank order of words for frequency of occurrence. The investigation reported here covers both live and obsolete meanings, uses actual frequencies per million running words, and shows two relations: (a) that between date of entrance to the language and number of meanings, for words of equal frequency of occurrence, and (b) that between frequency of occurrence and number of meanings, for words of equal length of time in the language. Neither of these is the same relation as that measured by Zipf. All three are important. The facts of Tables 1, 2, and 3 concerning number of meanings, number of live meanings, and number of obsolete meanings in relation to frequency of occurrence and to date of entrance to the language come from a sample of 1784 words. Sixty-two of these were words occurring from 1800 to around 4000 times per million running words (able, accept, account, admit, affair, etc.) ; 375 of them were words occurring from 30 to 49 times per million (abandon, ability, abroad, absence, absent, etc.); 174 of them were words occurring 15, 16, or 17 times per million (abode, absurd, academy, accent, accumulate, etc.), or 7, 8, or 9 times per million (abate, abdomen, abolition, absorption, academic, etc.), these two groups being combined in the tables; 238 of them occurred four times per million words (abject, abridge, absorbent, acclamation, accomplice, etc.) ; 279 of them occurred once per million (abate-ment, abbess, aborigines, abortive, academical, etc.); 291 of them occurred four times in 18,000,000 words, or about $\frac{1}{4}$ time per million (abrogation, acclivity, adagio, adequacy, adjudicate, etc.) ; 365 of them occurred five times in 18,000,000 words (accentuation, acclimatize, acetanilid, achromatic, admonitory, etc.).

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