

SEMANTIC CHANGES IN ENGLISH VOCABULARY OVER THE CENTURIES

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Abstract: In this article, we examine semantic changes in the English vocabulary over centuries, influenced by historical, social, cultural, and technological factors. Particular attention is paid to processes such as the expansion and contraction of word meanings, metaphorization, metonymy, amelioration, and pejoration. The study demonstrates that the semantic evolution of vocabulary reflects the dynamics of social consciousness and cultural transformations, making the study of this process important for understanding both the history of language and its contemporary structure.

Key words: semantics, vocabulary, language evolution, word meaning change, metaphorization, historical linguistics, english, amelioration, pejoration, language development.

Аннотация: В статье мы рассматриваем семантические изменения в английской лексике, происходившие на протяжении веков под влиянием исторических, социальных, культурных и технологических факторов. Особое внимание уделяется таким процессам, как расширение и сужение значения слов, метафоризация, метонимия, амелиорация и пейорация. Исследование показывает, что семантическая эволюция словарного состава является отражением динамики общественного сознания и культурных преобразований, что делает изучение данного процесса важным для понимания как истории языка, так и его современной структуры.

Ключевые слова: семантика, лексика, эволюция языка, изменение значения слов, метафоризация, историческая лингвистика, английский язык, амелиорация, пейорация, языковое развитие.

Introduction. Language is a living and constantly changing organism, reflecting all the processes occurring in society. Vocabulary, as the most fluid and sensitive layer of language, is particularly susceptible to change under the influence of historical, cultural, and social factors. One of the most important areas of vocabulary study is the analysis of semantic change—the processes by which words modify, refine, or expand their meanings over the centuries.

English, as one of the most widespread and dynamically developing languages in the world, is a striking example of linguistic evolution. Since its inception, it has come a long way—from Old English, rich in Germanic elements, to modern global English, actively absorbing borrowings and neologisms. During this development, significant changes in word meanings have occurred, conditioned by historical events, contacts with other peoples, advances in science and technology, and changes in the worldviews of native speakers. The study of semantic change

allows us not only to understand the internal mechanisms of the linguistic system but also to trace how the transformation of meanings reflects changes in culture, thought, and social life. Thus, research on this topic is important not only for historical linguistics, but also for general linguistic theory, cultural studies, and translation studies.

The purpose of our article is to examine the main types of semantic change in English vocabulary, identify their causes and patterns, and analyze specific examples illustrating the evolution of word meanings at different stages of the development of the English language.

Main part. The vocabulary of a language invariably reflects the cultural and historical background of a society, and in English, semantic changes in words, that is, changes in their meanings, are a stable phenomenon conditioned by social, cognitive, and pragmatic factors. One of the key processes is broadening of meaning (generalization), when a word begins to cover a wider range of phenomena than it originally did. For example, the word holiday in Old English meant exclusively "holy day," whereas today it is applied to a vacation, a holiday of any nature [1]. The opposite process is narrowing of meaning (narrowing / specialization), when a word begins to be used in a narrower sense: for example, meat used to mean any food, but now it means only the meat of animal origin [2]. More complex changes occur through metaphorization (transfer of meaning by analogy) and metonymy (by contiguity): the word head came to denote not only a part of the body, but also a leader or the upper part of an object; the word crown denotes not just a crown as an object, but also monarchy as an institution [3]. Along with this, the processes of amelioration and pejoration should be distinguished: the former is an improvement or positive shift in meaning (for example, "knight" originally meant "servant, boy," later "knight, noble warrior"), while the latter, on the contrary, deteriorates in value (comparable to the word "silly": from "innocent, blessed" to "stupid") [4].

The reasons for semantic change are varied: historical (conquests, migrations, borrowings), cultural and religious (changes in worldviews and moral concepts), scientific and technological (the emergence of new objects and concepts; for example, the word "mouse" came to mean not only an animal but also a computer device), as well as psychological and pragmatic (economy of speech, metaphorization, expansion of contexts). Historical linguistics confirms that changes often occur gradually, with the coexistence of old and new meanings until one becomes dominant [5].

Modern English, especially in the era of globalization and digital communication, is experiencing accelerated semantic shifts: words acquire new figurative and metaphorical meanings, while old ones are lost or reinterpreted. For example, the word "friend" in the context of social media has come to mean not just a close friend, but any user; "tweet" has evolved from the sound of birds to a social media message. These changes demonstrate the high adaptability of vocabulary and the close connection between language and society and technology. Thus, the study of semantic change allows us to trace how language reflects the development of thought, culture, and communication.

Table 1.

Examples of semantic changes in English words at different stages of language development

English word	Original meaning (early stage):	Modern meaning
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meat	"any food, meal" (Old English mete)	"meat of animal origin" [2]
girl	"a child of either sex" (Middle English)	"girl, young woman" [6]
holiday	"holy day"	"vacation, holiday of any kind" [1]
mouse	"rodent"	"computer device" [7]
silly	"blessed, innocent"	"stupid, ridiculous" [4]

(Note: The last two examples are illustrative, and the sources are related to the discussion of metaphorization and technological influence.)

Research shows that semantic changes are not random—they are determined by cognitive mechanisms (metaphor, metonymy, analogy), social conditions (changing functions, statuses, technologies), and the pragmatics of usage (context, frequency, collocations). As E. Traugott notes, a change in word meaning reflects a shift in cognitive models of reality perception [8]. Consequently, the lexical evolution of the English language serves as a mirror of social transformations: a change in word meaning reflects shifts in perception, functions, and the environment in which the language functions.

Conclusions and suggestions. The analysis revealed that semantic changes in the English vocabulary are a natural and consistent process, reflecting the evolution of society, culture, and the thinking of its speakers. The lexical system of the language is not static; it flexibly responds to historical, cultural, and technological shifts, ensuring its vitality and adaptability. The study identified the following key types of change: expansion and contraction of meaning, metaphorization, metonymy, amelioration, and pejoration, each of which plays an important role in the renewal and development of the English vocabulary.

The influence of scientific and technological progress and the digital environment, where many words acquire new meanings (e.g., mouse, cloud, tweet), deserves special attention. This demonstrates that language develops in close connection with the sociocultural and technological changes of our time. The analysis also showed that semantic changes do not occur chaotically, but are driven by specific cognitive and pragmatic patterns associated with human thought and communication.

Based on the results obtained, the following directions and recommendations can be proposed:

- when studying english, more attention should be paid to the history of words and their semantic evolution, as knowledge of etymology contributes to a deeper understanding of modern usage.
- in teaching vocabulary, it is advisable to use a comparative approach—showing how word meanings have changed over time and why.
- linguistic research on digital neologisms and their impact on traditional semantic structures must be developed.
- the dynamics of lexical change should be taken into account when compiling dictionaries, textbooks, and translations to reflect current word meanings.

Thus, semantic changes in English vocabulary are not simply a linguistic phenomenon, but an important indicator of the cultural and intellectual development of society. Their systematic study helps to better understand not only language but also the very process of human cognition and communication.

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