

## Analysis of English Semantic Change

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### Abstract

Semantics changes with the times all the time. When a word loses its original meaning, and refers to other different things, this may lead to the semantic change. The factors, such as the change of people's living environment, the revolutionary of society, the progress of technology may contribute to the semantic change. The semantic change has some forms, including the extension of meaning, restriction of meaning, the elevation of meaning, degradation of meaning and transference of meaning. In this paper, the types of semantic change will be illustrated at first. Then the reasons of semantic change will be discussed. At last, the conclusion can be drawn that understanding the types, reasons and history will help us to master more vocabulary, and improve our ability of using language.

**Key words:** Semantic change; Types; Reasons

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### INTRODUCTION

Semantic change is a common phenomenon in all the language. In modern English, the semantic of many words have changed and the new meaning has been extended based on the original meaning. Generally speaking, semantic change not only adds the new meaning to the certain word, but also makes the meaning changed.

When the word lose its original meaning and is endowed with new meaning, we call it semantic change.

The factors, such as the change of people's living environment, the revolutionary of society, the progress of technology may contribute to the semantic change. Semantic change has been studied by some scholars. Many results of this aspect have been achieved. To write this paper, I collected the materials from the Internet, the periodicals and books.

## 1. TYPES OF SEMANTIC CHANGE

### 1.1 The Change in Range

#### 1.1.1 Restriction of Meaning

Restriction of meaning refers to the range of object thing which is reflected is smaller than the original after the semantic change, that is the change from the general meaning to the specific meaning. For example, the original meaning of the meat was food, especially the solid food, which was used to distinguish drink. But now, it refers to the flush of animal used for food. Another example is fowl, its original meaning was bird, but now it refers to a farmyard bird, especially a hen. Deer refers to a large wild animal that can run very fast, eats grass, and has horns. But in old English, it refers to any animal from lion to rat. So in King Lear, the writer wrote: rats and mice and such small deer, have been Tom's food seven long year. Moreover, wife meant woman in general in Chaucer's work, while now it means married women, esp. in relation to her husband. A girl meant the male or female child, but now only refers to the female child. More examples, the original meaning of hangar was shed, now means a big building where planes are kept. The original meaning of garage was a safe place, now means building for housing a vehicle. Poison's original meaning was beverage, now refers to substance causing death or injury if absorbed by animals. The original meaning of liquor was liquid, now means alcoholic drink. The original meaning of stink was smell or flavor, now refers to a strong bad smell. The

original meaning of starve was to die, now to die from lack of food.

### 1.1.2 Extension of Meaning

Extension of meaning refers to the range of object thing which is reflected is wider than the original after the semantic change, that is to say, new meaning is larger than the original meaning, the original meaning is included in the new meaning.

It can be divided into four circumstances: (a) The meaning changes from the concrete to abstract. For example, religious referred to the person who sacrificed himself for religion after swearing in the middle century, such as monk or nun. No matter how a person was loyal to the religion, he could not be named as a person who believed in religion, except the monk or nun. But now it refers to the person who believes in religion in general. (b) The meaning changes from the specific to general. The meaning of some English words was narrow in early times. But with the change of times, its specific meaning is widened to a general meaning. For example, arrive was used in navigation, especially referred to the ship to shore. Now it extends to get to a place on foot or by vehicle. The word "person" meant the body in Chaucer's time to 19<sup>th</sup> century. In modern time, it means individual not body. (c) Proper noun is changed to common noun. The proper noun can be changed into common noun by the metonymy to extend its meaning. For example, utopian means the imaginary place or state in which everything is perfect. It is from the Utopia written by Thomas More. (d) The extension of meaning is achieved by figure of speech. The extended meaning can be vivid and elegant by figure of speech. There are several figures of speech which can make semantic change: metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole and so on. For example, fox refers to the cunning person, bee refers to the industrious person and bull refers to the rush person. Crown refers to monarch, cowl refers to monk, and olive branch refers to peace.

## 1.2 The Change in Evaluation

### 1.2.1 The Degradation of Meaning

The degradation of meaning refers to the commendatory word or neutral word change into derogatory word in the linguistic development.

For example, the original meaning of silly was blessed and happy, Since the blessed people were used to represent the innocent of evil, its meaning was innocent in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Since the innocent people lived a simple life, so the silly meant simple and simple-minded, while this always connected with lack of intelligence. So silly means foolish nowadays. So we can show its semantic change below: blessed and happy-innocent-simple-lack of intelligence-foolish.

The prejudice from society may also give rise to the degradation of meaning. For example, peasant is a loanword, which means countryman. It conveys the

information about the low class in the society, esp. the poor and uneducated countryman. That is why we use famer to represent the countryman instead of peasant.

There are some more examples are given. The original meaning of hussy was a thrifty woman, and the degradation meaning is worthless, ill-mannered girl. The original meaning was farm-hand, and the degradation meaning is ill-bred person, peasant. The original meaning of knave was boy, servant boy, and the degradation meaning is rouge, scoundrel.

### 1.2.2 Elevation of Meaning

The elevation of meaning refers to the derogatory meaning and neutral meaning change into commendatory meaning.

For example, the original meaning of ambassador was the person who takes a message. Now it was elevated to the meaning that an official who lives in a foreign country as the senior representative there of his or her own country. The original meaning of enthusiasm was the religious emotions with scornful meaning. Now it refers to the zeal without scornful meaning. The word black was used to a black with the insulting meaning. But because the black people launched the civil rights movement, now when people say black with a serious meaning. The word nice was originated from the nescius which was a Latin word. Since the middle age, its meaning gradually had the commendatory meaning. Its evolution process of meaning was foolish-simple-shy-modest-discriminating-agreeable. Another example, innocent was used as a noun with the meaning of a stupid person, and an adjective with the meaning of stupid. It was a Latin transferred from old French word. Now it means not guilty of a crime, or having little experience of the world.

There are some other examples, the original meaning of marshal was a horse tender, now it means high-ranking officer of state or in the armed forces. The original meaning of shrewd was wicked, malicious, now it means keen-witted, clever or sharp in practical affairs. The original meaning of nimble was quick to seize steal, now it means quick and light in movement or function. The original meaning of chiffon was rag, now it means light diaphanous fabric of silk.

### 1.3 Transference of Meaning

Transference of meaning refers to the concept which the word refers to transfers from the angel of talking. In English, transference of meaning occurs among the adjectives, verbs and nouns. There are two ways of adjective transference. The first is transferred from a person into a thing, ie. Transfer the person with some property to thing of the same property. For example, sleepy language was used in *Tempest*. The second is transferred from the thing to a person. For example, a prolix talker refers to a person who gabbles. Mellifluous songsters refer to the singer with sweet voice. Solemn meant the annual religious ceremony, but a solemn person refers to a serious person. The transference of

verb meaning may produce the strange semantic change. For example, the original meaning of empty is to remove everything that is in a container. But through the transference of meaning, we can say a river empties into the sea, which means to flow or move out from one place to another.

Moreover, the intransitive verb can transfer into the transitive verb. For example, to fly a kite means to cause it to fly. So we can say grow wheat, run a company, gallop a horse.

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## 2. REASONS OF SEMANTIC CHANGE

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### 2.1 External Reason of Language

#### 2.1.1 Social Reason

We cannot study the semantic change without the times. Social revolution, technology development, material and spiritual construction, and the improvement of people's observation level, etc can lead to the semantic change.

For example, in Shakespeare's time, actors were living in the low class of society and were looked down upon. While with the change of times, actors are respected now. This shows the change of people's mind.

With the further social division of labor, different professions have different usage and understanding on the same word. For example, when referring "action", lawyers may think of the legal action, while soldiers may think of the military action.

In addition, because of the interaction between the common word and technical word, some technical words may lose their specific meaning and are used as common words. Most of these words are related to electricity, physics, chemistry, etc. For example, feedback's common meaning is response. In return, it is common that common words are used in specialized areas and have specific meaning. Dimension which is related to physics, it is a common word, and refers to progress in one aspect, eg. This problem has a new dimension. Catalyst is related with chemistry, and usually refers to the person or thing that speeds up the development of things. For example, it is the catalyst of the Second World War.

#### 2.1.2 Historical Reason

Language is the product of society and changes with the development of social history. There continuously occur the new innovations during the process of the transformation of objective world by human beings. Except creating the new words, people tend to give the new meaning to the old words to express these new things. So semantic is not only social but historical.

For example, ship had no change since Anglo-Saxon Times. But the present ship was totally different from that in the 10<sup>th</sup> century in size, figure and structure, etc. Especially with the development of space industry, spaceship appeared. We can see that although the ship

changes, yet its name is still the same. Pencil was from the Latin word, meant a little tail, or a fine brush. Just like the pen in China. Later the material of pencil was wood and graphite, but it was still called pencil. Paper was originated from Greece, it is a kind of plant called papyrus in Egypt. The Egyptians use it to make paper. Although the types of materials for making paper are various, yet the word paper is still used.

There are some scientific concepts still preserve their original form, although their meaning change owing to the development of science. Engine was originated from the Latin word ingenium, meant talent. Until in the creation of steamer before the half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, engine had another meaning of a railroad locomotive. In modern English, it means the part of a vehicle that produces power to make the vehicle move.

#### 2.1.3 Human Psychological Reason

Some psychological factors may cause the semantic change. A kind of associative function is similar association, that is, metaphor. English people usually use the eye of people to refer to the eye of a needle. That is because there are some similarities between the eye of people and the eye of needle. So from this kind of psychology, people use metaphor to call it sty. Another associate function is association by contiguity, that is, metonymy. In modern English, bureau can refer to the desk, office or government department. Although these two concepts have no similarities, yet they still have another association. That is the desk is in the office, which make these two concepts associate in people's mind, and produce the semantic association.

Taboo and emotive factors may also cause the semantic change. The obvious case is the euphemism. For example, the euphemism is caused by the language taboo, using toilet and the ladies' in English. Their meaning all has obvious change. When talking about the death, we don't say to die directly, but saying to pass away, to breathe one's last or to go west. Moreover, the meaning of disease is to discomfort instead of illness. Madhouse is called mental hospital. When we talk about someone is old, we use senior citizen. Retarded children are replaced by slow learner.

In civilized society, there is a common tendency to avoid using the dirty words. There are some euphemism about urinate, such as, to go to the toilet, to go to the bathroom/the lavatory/the restroom/the Ladies' or the Gentleman's.

Euphemism cannot lead to the semantic change in itself. While these substitutive word lead to the people to forget their original meaning, and convert their attention to their implied meaning.

Hyperbole is used to elevate a certain position, profession or social status by using some long and important words. That is it usually does not use the common meaning, but use more important words. For

example, the worker who works in the garden is called horticulturist.

#### 2.1.4 Foreign Influence

Another reason of semantic change is the influence of foreign word. For example, in English pig, sheep, ox not only express the name of animal, but also the flush, but since the Norman conqueror named these flush as pork, mutton and beef, they are only used to express the name of animal.

The foreign culture also influences the semantic change. For example, the word cool in English is used by Chinese people to describe someone is handsome or something is good.

#### 2.1.5 Appearance of New Things

The words, such as internet, hypertext, e-mail were the new words which were emerged by the new things.

### 2.2 Internal Reason of Language

It is mainly manifested in the contradiction between semantic and phonology, pattern; and the contradiction between word and word. The settlement of these contradiction can lead to the change of semantic or the change of phonology, pattern, and semantic.

Contradiction between semantic and phonology and pattern: it is arbitrary to use the phonology to stand for the meaning. But the meaning used for reflecting the objective thing is not arbitrary. In English, it is not only contradictory between sound and meaning, but also unified. So the pattern may be different in the semantic units with paradigmatic relations, while the semantic unit with similar patterns may not be the paradigmatic relation. This contradiction may lead to the semantic change. For example, the word sand-blind which is rarely used in English, it means bat-blind. Its original form is sam-blind, sam and semi belong to the same word, and their forms are similar, so sand-blind was used in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The contradictory semantic units between two semantic of word are not isolated, but restricted with other semantic unit. So in a fixed phrase or compound word, if one element is deleted, another element will represent the meaning of whole phrase or compound word and produce the new meaning. For example, china-chinaware, pipe-tobacco-pipe, constitutional-constitutional walk. From the extended angel, the semantic of the deleted part seems to be contagious the parts left. This kind of semantic transference is called contagion.

There is another case of the semantic contradiction

between the words. That is, in the vocabulary system of language, if the new word or new meaning occurs, it and the fixed word or meaning in the vocabulary will influence each other, and make semantic change. For example, in Old English, tide had several meanings: time; season; hour; the flow of water that happens as the sea rises and falls. Because of under the influence of time, season and hour which were from the same root, the meaning of tide changed. The meaning of the flow of water that happens as the sea rises and falls is preserved.

In addition, ellipsis and analogy also can cause the semantic change. As one of the reasons of semantic change, ellipsis usually occurs in the collocation. For instance, adjective + noun or attributive noun + noun, In this case, the last noun is often omitted, only leaving the previous part, only to keep the meaning of whole phrase. For instance, a general = a general officer, gold = gold medal, transistor = transistor radio, daily = daily newspaper. Sometimes, omitting the previous part and keeping the latter part. For instance, (gas) stove, (coal) gas. Analogy is another reason, eg. Black list.

### CONCLUSION

Semantic change is a common phenomenon in all the language. Semantics changes with the times all the time. When a word loses its original meaning, and refers to other different things, this may lead to the semantic change. In modern English, the semantic of many words have changed and the new meaning has been extended based on the original meaning. Generally speaking, semantic change not only adds the new meaning to the certain word, but also makes the meaning changed. Understanding the types, reasons and history will help us to master more vocabulary, and improve our ability of using language.

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