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Langston University
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SEMANTIC CHANGES IN PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH (PDE)

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Topic: This thesis will discuss the semantic changes found in Present-Day English.

1. Introduction of Thesis Subject

Before the printing press was invented, there was no recognized Standard English. There was no need for an English standard because most important public writing was in either French or Latin. “English was used primarily for oral and informal purposes and varied quite a bit from place to place” (Barry 2002). Mechanized printing, introduced into England in the late fifteenth century, made standardization a necessity. Later, in the eighteenth century, a small group of influential people decided that there needed to be a fixed standard for the English language. The group was appalled at the chaos in English and believed that language ought to be unvarying and permanent. Unfortunately, the group took on an impossible task. The English language is constantly changing in order to adapt to the ever-changing world.

The eighteenth-century grammarians used logic to help them make decisions among competing usages. In other instances, they looked to Classical Latin and Greek as models for proper structure. The grammarians also based their choices on English history. “Since they viewed language change as the equivalent of language decay, they tended to assume that earlier forms and meanings were correct, while the more recent ones were wrong” (Barry 2002).

Over the centuries, speakers of the language have made increasingly more shifts and changes to the English language. Most speakers do not rely heavily on books that were written two hundred years ago to tell them what is correct English today. “The eighteenth-century grammarians argued that English could be perfect and permanent if not for the laziness and carelessness of its users. Modern linguists argue that change is inherent to all languages” (Barry 2002). If English lexicon had not been able to change, there would not be words like hard drive, floppy disk, or any other computer terminology.
Since the small group of eighteenth-century grammarians attempted to create a permanent standard of English, there have been innumerable alterations. A word’s meaning a hundred years ago is not necessarily the same as it is today. Changes take place at many levels, including lexical, semantics, syntactical, morphological, phonemic, et cetera. This study will focus on the different semantic changes the English lexicon has undergone.

2. Background of the Problem/Topic

During the spring semester 2002, I took a class entitled Advanced Grammar. The textbook for the course, *English Grammar: Language as Human Behavior*, devoted attention to how the Standard American English language has changed over the centuries. As a student of English, I was immediately intrigued by numerous changes the English lexicon has undergone, and I soon decided that I should focus my thesis on the English language.

The following fall semester I took a required class entitled History of the English language, which fell in perfect alignment with my Thesis topic. In this class, I was able to narrow and focus my topic to the semantic changes in the language.

3. Statement of the Problem/Topic

The topic of my thesis project is Changes in the Semantics of Present-Day English. “Like all other aspects of language, meanings change over time” (Millward 1996). I will examine how certain words in Present-Day English no longer have the same meaning they once had. For example, the Germanic ancestor of the English word *thing* once meant an assembly or legal case, but the word has generalized to be applicable to any topic (Millward 1996). I will
show how through various outside influences words’ meanings can undergo specific alterations that forever change how they are used.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study is to show how Present-Day English (PDE) has changed in recent history. My purpose is to explain in detail how the English language is forever changing. The eighteenth-century grammarians believed that the English language would remain constant, but I plan to show that this is not the case and explain why an unchanging live language is not possible. Dictionaries must be edited and revised constantly in order to keep up with the ever-changing English language. In addition, my purpose for this study is to explain the steps that are taken when a change is effected in the English language. I will explain the different transitions and modifications that take place. Finally, this study will elucidate the error in the judgment that change is tantamount to decay or degradation.

5. Questions to be Answered

1. Who is the authority on the English language?
2. How did he/she/they become the authority?
3. What happens when a word is going through transition from one meaning to another?
4. When does the new meaning become the accepted or most understood meaning?
5. Why are the changes made?
6. How often are semantic changes made to the English language?
7. Currently, are only additions made to the English language or do words continue to be eliminated from Present-Day English?
8. What is the impact of Black English Vernacular on the changes in PDE?

9. What steps are taken to keep up with the constant emergence of new word meanings?

10. How strong is the desire to preserve original meanings of words?

11. Is a word’s original meaning always preferred over its newly emerged meaning?

12. How many word meanings are derived from the word’s original meaning?

13. How many word meanings are completely unrelated to the word’s original meaning?

6. Assumptions You Make in Stating Thesis Question/Topic

For my thesis project, I have assumed that most individuals do not realize how much the English language has changed. In addition, people do not realize that all living languages are in a constant state of transformation and that this change is not only inevitable but highly desirable. Another assumption I have made for this thesis project is that the confusion about which meaning of a word is intended has affected and interested other people.

7. Rationale for Doing This Study

My rationale for doing this topic is general interest. I am an English major, and I am interested in the English language. I want to learn more about why that small group of grammarians decided to sit down and construct a standard for the English language. I want to know why the language that was spoken at the time was “not correct.” I want to know why so many changes and exceptions have been made to the rules constructed by the eighteenth-century grammarians. I want to know just how extensively certain words have changed. I want to know if the changes are derived from the word’s original meaning. My reason for doing this study is to answer the questions and minimize the confusions I have about Present-Day English.
8. Importance of the Study

The importance of this study is to examine and explain the semantic changes made to words in Present-Day English. English is the major language spoken in the world today, so it is important to examine certain aspects of the language. Because of its socio-economic, scientific, political, cultural, and military dominance in the world today, the United States of America, and consequently its language, maintain a particular prominence. Language is mankind’s primary method of communication. Today, perhaps more than ever before in the history of the world, effective communication through language may determine the fate of mankind. It is essential that we do all we can to facilitate effective verbal communication.

I believe it is important to know and understand the changes in Present-Day English; therefore, it is important to know and understand how the semantics have changed. As I have previously stated, the English language is constantly changing, and it is important to do all that we can keep up with these changes.

9. Definitions of Terms

**Abstraction**—A semantic change from a concrete meaning to a more abstract meaning

**Amelioration**—A semantic change from a negative meaning to a more favorable meaning

**Concretization**—A semantic change from an abstract meaning to a more concrete meaning

**Connotation**—The emotional meaning of a word; its implication, suggestions, or associations, as opposed to its explicit literal meaning

**Denotation**—The basic, specific, literal meaning of a word or phrase as opposed to its emotional meaning and associations

**Early Modern English (EMnE)**—The English language from approximately A.D. 1500 to 1800
Generalization—Semantic change whereby a word comes to have a wider or more general application

Middle English (ME)—The English language from about A.D. 1100-1500

Narrowing—A semantic change restricting the meaning of a word to a smaller domain

Old English (OE)—The English language from A.D. 450-1100

Pejoration—A semantic change whereby a word comes to have a more negative meaning

Present-Day English (PDE)—The English language from roughly A.D. 1800 to the present

Semantic Change—A change in the real world meaning of a word

Semantics—The study of meanings or all the meanings expressed by a language; it is the relationship between language and the real world

Shift in Connotation—A change in the emotional meaning of a word

Shift in Denotation—A change in the basic, specific, literal meaning of a word

Standard American English—The form of English that is expected in public discourse in the United States: in newspapers and magazines, in radio and television news broadcasts, in textbooks, and in public lectures. It is the form of English that is recognized as the English of the educated, irrespective of region, gender, or ethnicity.

Strengthening—A semantic change whereby a word’s meaning is strengthened or intensified

Weakening—A semantic change whereby a word decreases in the force or quality of the meaning it expresses

*Definitions from A Biography of the English Language.
10. SCOPE AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY:

In this study, I will be unable to determine whether the semantic changes of a word will be retained or whether the change is temporary. Furthermore, this study will not attempt to determine whether changes occur in all English speaking locations or if they are only regional changes.
11. Outline of the Remainder of the Thesis

I. Chapter 2: Review of Literature
   1. Overview of the chapter
   2. Historical Background
   3. Summary of existing studies relative to what has been found
   4. Establishment of possible need for this study and likelihood for obtaining meaningful, relevant, and significant results.
   5. Report on the literature/studies reviewed
   6. Brief summary of literature reviewed

II. Chapter 3: Methodology
   1. Overview of the chapter
   2. Description of research approach
   3. Research instruments—books, articles, Internet resources
   4. Data collection
   5. Methodological assumptions
   6. Limitations of study
   7. Summary

III. Chapter 4: Analysis or Presentation or Findings
   1. Summary of data
   2. Selected words
   3. Summary of chapter

IV. Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations
   1. Summary of previous chapters
   2. Conclusion
   3. Recommendations
1. Overview of the Chapter

Language is ever-changing and ever-adapting. The English language is no exception. The version of English spoken today is not the same as the language was in its origin. Because of this constant changing, there have been numerous studies on PDE and the semantic changes that have occurred. This chapter will explain what is already known about semantics in PDE. It will discuss studies and other findings related to semantics and PDE. The topic of this thesis is studied extensively in its most general sense. Most English textbooks explain semantics, and some delve a little deeper by explaining the different categories of semantic changes (e.g., pejoration, amelioration, et cetera).

2. Historical Background

The study of semantics dates back centuries. The English language itself has an extensive historical background. The language began as OE, which was spoken from A.D. 450-1100. The period from 1100 to A.D. 1500 was designated Middle English (ME). The English language then evolved into Early Modern English (EMnE), which lasted until A.D. 1800. Since the 19th century, the language has been known as Present-Day English (PDE). Semantics and semantic changes date back as far as OE. Speakers have been putting their own spins and changes on words since they began to speak.

The meanings of words have been in a constant flux. Words such as lady, which was once a title given in an aristocratic society in OE and ME, now has a somewhat pejorative connotation in PDE. Over the centuries, there have been few word meanings that have stayed the same. Some changes have occurred regionally and in different dialects; others have occurred
because the next generation has placed a different connotative or, in some cases, denotative meanings on words. Changes occur for any number of reasons; they always have and presumably, they always will. Language is not a fixable entity, and this fact has been proven since OE.

3. Summary of Existing Studies

The study of semantics extends from college courses to highly specialized research projects. Courses about the English language and its changes are taught in numerous colleges and universities around the country. *A Biography of the English Language* by Millward C. M., a textbook used at Langston University, helps to define semantics and explain what has to occur in order for a change to be categorized as a semantic change. It also explains the different types of semantic changes. Paivi Koivisto-Alanko has done research that explains how semantic changes typically occur in abstract nouns. An article in the *Economist* explains how war affects language change. Anne M. Peterson has researched language change and published in *Marketing News* the effects of the Internet on language.

4. Possible Need and Likelihood for Obtaining Meaningful Results

The most important possible needs for this study is adequate research findings and correct categorization. Many speakers of the English language change words and word meanings to suit their speaking needs, so it is difficult to find semantic changes that occur throughout the entire English speaking population and not just a particular region or dialect. The popularity of ebonics studies makes it increasingly difficult to find research that discusses semantic changes outside the ebonic movement. This complication makes it challenging to
categorize certain changes. It is necessary for this thesis to study only semantic changes that occur in multiple areas and groups because my focus is on widespread semantic changes and not regional changes.

The likelihood that this thesis will obtain meaningful results seems good. The focus and purpose of this study is to inform; therefore, the results of this study will be meaningful, relevant, and significant because it will enlighten and educate the reader on semantic changes in Present-Day English. Furthermore, the study will help enlighten those who have holdfast to the misguided beliefs of the eighteenth century grammarians and still endeavor to “fix” and “correct” a “degenerate” language and who see all change as an indication of moral decay.

5. Report on the Literature

a. Revised list of questions to be considered:

1. What type of semantic change occurs most commonly in verbs?
2. In what way do most semantic changes occur in nouns?
3. How do semantic changes typically occur in adjectives?

Hypothesis set forth:

Most semantic changes occur in a typical order, pattern, and/or style.

b. Types of literature to be considered

Books:

6. Brief Summary of Literature Reviewed

Through my research, I have been able to answer some of my questions and, in turn, create more. Koivisto-Alanko’s research explains that “semantic changes typically seem to move towards more subjective meanings in abstract nouns.” This points to the direction that
subjectification is a governing principle in many areas of semantic change, not only in grammaticalization” (1997). *A Biography* explains, in depth, the different semantic changes. It also goes on to give examples of each of the changes beginning in OE and continuing to PDE. I was also able to find out that not only do technology and the Internet affect language change but also war and its aftermath. “Truth we know is the first casualty of war, but language comes a close second” (Economist 1995)
CHAPTER 3

1. Overview of the Chapter

This chapter will discuss the methodology I have used in order to obtain information relating to my thesis. It will also briefly discuss the information I have gathered and the limitations I faced during my research process.

2. Description of Research Methodology and Approach

Because my thesis is informative rather than scientific, my research methods included extensive dictionary and Internet usage, along with textbook and article referencing. Although they are typical research approach in similar studies, I found that there was no need for the usual surveys or analyses.

3. Research Instruments

My research instruments included textbooks, journal and magazine articles, Internet resources, and dictionaries.

4. Data Collection

My data collection process consisted mainly of reading anything I was able to find that was written in PDE, and when I came across a word that was used in a way that seemed unfamiliar to me, I added to a list. I also listened to the way individuals used certain words compared to their original meanings and added those words to my list. Eventually I collected a list of 16 words.
5. Methodological Assumptions

I assume that my methodology is the best way to prove my hypothesis and gather the necessary information.

6. Limitation of Study

This study is limited because it is virtually impossible to track every semantic change PDE has undergone. The changes are too large in number and too random to pinpoint adequately and entirely. A second limitation is the fact that even though certain semantic changes have occurred and are widely used, educated circles may not entirely accept them. A third limitation exists because the sample of words that I am using is so small that I am unable to generalize sufficiently from the results.

7. Summary

Changes in the English language are constantly occurring. Through my research, I was able to find some of these changes. I have been able to see how semantic changes such as pejoration and generalization have been effected in PDE.
1. Summary of Data

Through my research, I found that semantic changes did not stop in EMnE. Many words in PDE have undergone at least one form of semantic change. The semantic changes did not happen to a specific lexical category alone. The continuously changing language has affected adjectives in the same way that it has affected nouns, and verbs. The list of words I was able to gather includes nine nouns: lady, boy, girl, hound, meat, plant, box, condominium, and faggot, four verbs: starve, go, ejaculate, and want, and finally three adjectives: gay, nice and jealous.

2. Selected Words that Have Undergone Semantic Changes

**Lady**—Noun; Generalization, Weakening, Pejoration, Connotative Shift, and Amelioration

*A general female title of nobility and other rank*

Lady was once a title of social class. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the term **generalized** and **weakened** to become a term suggesting proper conduct for the female gender. After the feminist movement, lady came to suggest restrictions, prohibitions, and boundaries. Although the literal meaning is still the same, the **connotative meaning** has **pejorated** into a degrading term. Since this movement, lady has **ameliorated** somewhat and has begun to regain some of its previous standing, but it has not been able to regain it entirely. “Lady is normally used as a parallel to gentleman to emphasize norms expected in polite society or in situations requiring courtesies. The attributive use of lady, as in lady doctor, is widely regarded as condescending and inappropriate. When the sex of the person is relevant, the preferred term for this usage is woman” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2000).


**Boy**—Noun; Pejoration and Connotative Shift

*A male child*

Boy’s emotional meaning went through a **pejorative** change. The literal meaning is a young male person, but over time, the **connotative meaning** has taken on a racist and disrespectful undertone.
Girl—Noun; Narrowed

A female child

The literal definition of girl has been narrowed immensely. The original meaning of the word was a young person of either sex, but now girl refers to only a young female person.


Hound—Noun; Narrowed

a. A domestic dog of any of various breeds commonly used for hunting
b. A dog

The PDE meaning of the word hound has narrowed. The word is now used to refer to a hunting dog, but it originally referred to any dog.

Meat—Noun; Narrowed

a. The edible flesh of animals, especially that of mammals as opposed to that of fish or poultry
b. Food, in general; anything eaten for nourishment, either by man or beast

The word meant has narrowed. It meant anything edible, but now only means the flesh of an animal.

Plant—Noun; Generalization

a. Any of various photosynthetic, eukaryotic, multicellular organisms of the kingdom Plantae characteristically producing embryos, containing chloroplasts, having cellulose cell walls, and lacking the power of locomotion
b. A bush, or young tree; a sapling

The recognized meaning of the word plant has generalized. Its early meaning was restricted to shrubs, saplings, and seedlings; now it refers to any organism of the kingdom Plantae.
**Box—Noun; Generalization**

*a. a container typically constructed with four sides perpendicular to the base and often having a lid or cover*

The meaning of the word box was generalized over time. “Its early meaning referred to a small container made of boxwood; now it means any container with rigid sides” (Delahunty and Garvey 2004).

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**Condominium—Noun; Denotative Shift**

*a. a building or complex in which units of property, such as apartments, are owned by individuals and common parts of the property, such as the grounds and building structure, are owned jointly by the unit owners.*

*b. Joint sovereignty, especially joint rule of territory by two or more nations or a plan to achieve it.*

Condominium has undergone a **denotative shift**. Its original meaning of joint sovereignty would no longer be recognized. The meaning has changed almost entirely to a building or complex owned jointly by the unit owners.

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**Fagot—Noun; Pejoration and Connotative Shift**

*a. A disparaging term for a homosexual man*

*b. A bundle of twigs, sticks, or branches bound together*

The **connotative** meaning behind the word fagot has pejorated over the years. It is no longer recognized by its literal meaning: a bundle of twigs.

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**Starve—Verb; Narrowed**

*a. To suffer or die from extreme or prolonged lack of food.*

The archaic meaning of starved was simply to die, but in PDE its meaning is to die from lack of food. It meaning has **narrowed** to a specific way of to die.
Go—Verb; Generalization

a. To move or travel
b. To walk

Very few people would recognize the archaic meaning for the word go. The meaning has generalized. It no longer means to walk; it means to travel in any manner.

Ejaculate—Verb; Concretization

a. To eject discharge abruptly, especially to discharge semen in orgasm
b. To utter suddenly and passionately, exclaim

Using the word ejaculate in everyday speech to refer to a manner of exclaiming passionately may cause more than a few eyebrow raising because fewer people are familiar with the original meaning.

Want—Verb; Denotative Shift

a. To desire greatly; wish for
b. To be without; lack

Want has undergone a denotative shift. “It was originally an adjective meaning the state of not having; the condition of being without anything; absence or scarcity of what is needed or desired; deficiency” (Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary 1998).

Gay—Adjective; Pejoration and Denotative Shift

a. Of, relating to, or having a sexual orientation to persons of the same sex
b. Showing or characterized by cheerfulness and lighthearted excitement; merry

The primary definition of gay is homosexual. The word has pejorated and the denotative meaning has shifted completely. “The word gay is now standard in its use to refer to homosexuals, in large part because it is the term that most gays prefer in referring to themselves” (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2000).
Nice—Adjective; Generalization
a. Pleasing and agreeable in nature
b. Wanton; profligate
c. Affectedly modest; coy
The word *nice* is derived from a French word meaning foolish, but in PDE it has become so *generalized* that it now has numerous meanings.

Jealous—Adjective; Pejoration and Shift in Connotation
a. Fearful or wary of being supplanted; apprehensive of losing affection or position
b. Resentful or bitter in rivalry
*Jealous* has pejorated from its original meaning which is linked to the word *zealous*, and it connotation has shifted.

3. Summary of Chapter

In this chapter, I have categorized each of the chosen words by its part of speech, and I have determined which of the ten semantic changes each word has undergone. I focused on nine nouns, four verbs, and three adjectives. I was unable to find a specific pattern for each separate lexical category (e.g. as similar as the semantics of the words *boy* and *girl* are, they went through drastically different semantic changes). Of the nine nouns, three of the words pejorated and had a shift in connotation, three narrowed, one has undergone a shift in denotation, three went through generalization, one is in the process of amelioration, and one has weakened. Of the four verbs, one meaning has narrowed, one has gone through concretization, one has had a shift in
denotation, and the final verb has generalized. Of the three adjectives, one has pejorated and had a shift in denotation, one has generalized, and one has pejorated and had a shift in connotation.
1. Summary of Previous Chapters

This thesis has covered the first attempt of the eighteenth century grammarians to fix the English language until its current state of constant change. Chapter 1 is an introduction of semantics and a brief idea of how the thesis was started. Chapter 2 discusses the literature reviewed and the previous findings of others. Chapter 3 illustrates the methodology used in the thesis to gather the information, and finally, chapter 4 shows how the words found in chapter 3 have undergone their semantic changes.

2. Conclusion

My original hypothesis was that most semantic changes occur in a typical order, pattern or style. After completing my thesis, I realized that how a word changes is as sporadic and change itself. My hypothesis was based on ideas similar to those of the original eighteenth century grammarians who tried to “fix” the language. I tried to control and predict the language change. I believed that there was a specific pattern for word change. This idea was just as ill fated and impossible as that of the original grammarians.

My hypothesis proved to be too narrow and exact. In my research, I found that there was no set guide to how the semantics of nouns changed. Of the ten possible semantic changes, my research did not show any abstraction, strengthening, or concretization, but that obviously does not mean that no noun has undergone such changes in PDE. I found similar results with the verbs and adjectives. This thesis has taught me never to try to control or predict the changes that occur in the English language or any other language.
4. Recommendations

I strongly recommend continued research in this field. It is my belief, that to truly understand and appreciate the English language, one must learn how it changes. Further research could possibly focus on one lexical category as opposed to the tree categories on which I focused. By doing this, a researcher could possibly find a more conclusive pattern, which I was unable to discover. Another recommendation is to research semantic changes that have occurred since the original Old English (OE) until the present. This would be a rather extensive thesis, but immensely informative. The possibilities are numerous because just as the world changes, so does language and as long as there is change, there will be an opportunity for research in this area.
Works Cited


