

THE WAYS OF SEMANTIC CHANGE IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN ENGLISH

M.Norimova¹

Mas'ul muallif: Norimova Maftuna, English Teacher, Faculty of Social Sciences and Philology, Asia International University.

e-mail:
norimovamaftuna@gmail.com

Received: 02 Oktabr 2026
Accepted: 07 Oktabr 2026
Published: 12 Oktabr 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author(s). Licensee Buxoro xalqaro universiteti ilmiy axborotnomasi.

Iqtibos uchun: Norimova, M. THE WAYS OF SEMANTIC CHANGE IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN ENGLISH / M. Norimova // Buxoro xalqaro universiteti ilmiy axborotnomasi. — 2026. — T. 10, № 1. — B. 410–413.

1. English Teacher, Faculty of Social Sciences and Philology, Asia International University

Abstract. Semantic change is a central process in the development of vocabulary: words acquire new senses, lose earlier meanings, or extend their use to new social and communicative contexts. This article examines major mechanisms of semantic change in Modern English, focusing on metaphor, metonymy, euphemism, irony, broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration and semantic bleaching. Particular attention is paid to the role of context in interpreting a word's intended meaning and to the interaction between lexical meaning, pragmatic inference and social convention. The study uses a qualitative descriptive approach based on established works in historical semantics and illustrative English examples. The analysis shows that semantic change is not simply a replacement of one dictionary definition by another: it is a gradual process shaped by recurrent contextual uses, cognitive associations, communicative needs and the conventionalisation of new interpretations. The article concludes that context is both a source of innovation and an important condition for the stabilisation of new meanings.

Keywords: semantic change, semantic shift, context, metaphor, metonymy, broadening, narrowing, euphemism, pragmatics, Modern English.

ZAMONAVIY INGLIZ TILI KONTEKSTIDA SEMANTIK O'ZGARISHLARNING NAMOYON BO'LIH YO'LLARI

Annotatsiya. Semantik o'zgarish lug'at tarkibining tarixiy rivojlanishidagi muhim jarayon bo'lib, so'zlarning yangi ma'nolar kasb etishi, avvalgi ma'nolarining zaiflashishi yoki yangi ijtimoiy-kommunikativ vaziyatlarda qo'llanish doirasining kengayishi bilan tavsiflanadi. Maqolada zamonaviy ingliz tilidagi semantik o'zgarishning asosiy mexanizmlari — metafora, metonimiya, evfemizm, ironiya, ma'no kengayishi, torayishi, yaxshilanishi, salbiylashuvi va semantik xiralashuv tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda kontekstning so'z ma'nosini aniqlashdagi o'rni hamda leksik ma'no, pragmatik xulosa va ijtimoiy kelishuv o'rtasidagi munosabat yoritiladi. Tahlil sifatida tavsifiy yondashuv va ilmiy adabiyotlarga tayangan misollar qo'llanadi.

Kalit so'zlar: semantik o'zgarish, ma'no ko'chishi, kontekst, metafora, metonimiya, ma'no kengayishi, ma'no torayishi, evfemizm, pragmatika, zamonaviy ingliz tili.

СПОСОБЫ СЕМАНТИЧЕСКИХ ИЗМЕНЕНИЙ В КОНТЕКСТЕ СОВРЕМЕННОГО АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА

Аннотация. Семантическое изменение является одним из ключевых процессов развития лексики: слова приобретают новые значения, утрачивают прежние оттенки или расширяют сферу употребления в новых социальных и коммуникативных контекстах. В статье рассматриваются основные механизмы семантических изменений в современном английском языке: метафора, метонимия, эвфемизм, ирония, расширение и сужение значения, улучшение и ухудшение значения, а также семантическое ослабление. Особое внимание уделяется роли контекста в интерпретации значения слова и взаимодействию лексической семантики, прагматического вывода и языковой конвенции.

Ключевые слова: семантическое изменение, семантический сдвиг, контекст, метафора, метонимия, расширение значения, сужение значения, эвфемизм, прагматика, современный английский язык.

1. Introduction. Language is not a static system. Its vocabulary changes as speakers encounter new technologies, social practices, cultural values and communicative needs. One important dimension of this development is semantic change, understood as a change in the conventional meaning or range of use of a lexical item over time. A word may develop an additional sense while retaining its older one, acquire a more specialised meaning, or become associated with positive or negative evaluation. Such changes are especially visible when a word is repeatedly used in contexts that invite an interpretation different from its most established meaning.

The study of semantic change connects historical linguistics with lexical semantics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistics. Historical linguistics investigates how meanings develop across time, while pragmatics helps explain how speakers infer

meanings from particular utterances and situations. Cognitive approaches highlight the role of analogy, conceptual association and categorisation. These perspectives are complementary: a contextual interpretation may first be temporary and inferential, but repeated use can make it conventional and eventually part of a word's recognised semantic potential.

The aim of this article is to describe major ways of semantic change in Modern English and to explain how context contributes to their emergence and interpretation. The objectives are: (1) to clarify the relationship between lexical meaning and context; (2) to classify common semantic changes; (3) to analyse illustrative English examples; and (4) to identify the role of social use in the conventionalisation of new meanings. The article is descriptive rather than corpus-statistical; its examples are used to explain mechanisms and should not be interpreted as frequency claims.

2. Theoretical background

Semantic change is often described as a diachronic process because it concerns the development of meaning over time. However, the evidence for a possible change is frequently synchronic: speakers encounter a word in a particular context and interpret it through the relationship between its established meaning and the current situation. Traugott and Dasher emphasise the importance of pragmatic inference in semantic change, showing how meanings can develop through repeated inferences that become conventionalised [1]. This perspective helps explain why context is not merely a background detail; it can provide the conditions under which a new sense becomes plausible.

A useful distinction is that between semantic meaning and contextual interpretation. The lexical meaning of a word provides conventional information shared by a speech community, whereas the context includes the surrounding words, the situation, the speaker's purpose, shared knowledge and cultural expectations. Context can select one of several existing senses, create a temporary figurative interpretation, or support the emergence of a new conventional sense. Not every creative use results in semantic change: a new interpretation becomes a lasting change only when it is adopted and reproduced by other speakers.

3. Methodology

The article applies qualitative descriptive analysis and a thematic classification of semantic-change mechanisms. The discussion draws on established scholarship in historical semantics and English word structure, including Traugott and Dasher [1], Stockwell and Minkova [2], and Blank's work on lexical meaning change [3]. Examples are examined by identifying (a) the conventional or literal sense, (b) the contextual association, and (c) the interpretation that may become conventional. This method is appropriate for explaining the mechanisms, although a future corpus-based study would be needed to measure frequency, chronology and distribution across genres.

4. Major mechanisms of semantic change

4.1. Metaphor

Metaphor is one of the most productive mechanisms of semantic extension. It involves understanding or describing one domain in terms of another on the basis of a perceived similarity or analogy. A familiar example is head. In its literal sense, the word denotes a body part; in expressions such as "the head of the department" or "head of the organisation", it refers to a person who leads or directs a group. The contextual association between the head and the body's control or leading position supports the figurative interpretation. Repeated use in institutional settings makes this interpretation conventional rather than merely poetic.

Metaphorical extension is common in professional, technological and everyday language. Expressions such as "the foot of the mountain", "the mouth of a river" and "the backbone of the economy" transfer vocabulary from familiar physical experience to spatial, natural or abstract domains. In economic discourse, "growth", "recovery" and "healthy market" may also draw on bodily or organic imagery. Such expressions help speakers conceptualise complex or abstract processes through more concrete experience. Their interpretation still depends on context: "growth" can refer to a plant, a child, a business or an economy, and the surrounding discourse identifies the relevant domain.

4.2. Metonymy

Metonymy involves referring to an entity through another entity closely associated with it, such as an object, attribute, place or institution. The word crown can stand for a monarch or monarchy because a crown is conventionally associated with royal authority. Similarly, "the White House announced" can refer to an administration or its representatives rather than to a building speaking. In everyday English, "the press" may refer to journalists or news organisations, while "the bench" may refer to judges in a legal context.

Metaphor and metonymy are related but distinct. Metaphor typically relies on perceived similarity across conceptual domains; metonymy relies on contiguity or an established association within a domain. Context helps the listener determine which relation is active. For example, "the crown issued a statement" is normally interpreted metonymically, while "her voice was velvet" is metaphorical because the voice is described through a quality associated with velvet.

4.3. Broadening and narrowing

Broadening, also called generalisation, occurs when a word's range of reference expands. A term that once applied to a relatively restricted category may come to include additional members or uses. Narrowing, or specialisation, is the opposite process: a word becomes restricted to a smaller or more specific category. These developments are not necessarily conscious decisions by individual speakers; they may emerge through repeated usage and changing social conventions.

The word bird provides a commonly discussed illustration of broadening in the history of English: its earlier use was more restricted than its current general sense. Conversely, meat historically referred more broadly to food, whereas

in present-day general English it usually denotes animal flesh used as food. These examples demonstrate that semantic scope can expand or contract over time. In analysing such cases, researchers must distinguish a genuine historical shift from differences between dialects, registers or specialised fields.

4.4. Amelioration and pejoration

Amelioration occurs when a word develops a more favourable or socially prestigious meaning, while pejoration occurs when a word acquires a more negative or disapproving meaning. These processes reflect changes in social evaluation as well as changes in reference. For instance, the history of the English word knight shows a development from a term associated with a servant or attendant to one associated with a mounted warrior and, later, a title of honour. The word silly, by contrast, developed from earlier senses associated with blessedness or innocence towards its modern meanings of foolishness or lack of good judgement [2]. Such histories illustrate that connotations are not fixed permanently.

Evaluative change is closely connected to social attitudes, power relations and cultural expectations. A word can be neutral in one period or community but insulting in another. Therefore, semantic analysis should avoid assuming that current connotations have always existed. It should also distinguish pejoration in a word's conventional meaning from a negative implication created by a particular speaker in a particular context.

4.5. Euphemism and pragmatic change

Euphemism is the use of a less direct or less offensive expression in place of one that may be considered uncomfortable, taboo or socially inappropriate. Expressions such as "pass away" instead of "die" and "use the restroom" instead of naming bodily functions are shaped by politeness and cultural expectations. Euphemisms can reduce social discomfort, protect face and help speakers manage sensitive topics. Some euphemisms remain conventional for long periods; others lose their softening effect when their original reference becomes widely recognised, prompting speakers to adopt new alternatives.

Euphemism demonstrates the interaction between meaning and social context. The expression "let go" may be used in workplace communication to describe dismissal, while "downsizing" can refer to reducing a company's workforce. These expressions do not remove the underlying event; rather, they frame it in a less direct or institutionally acceptable way. Their interpretation depends on the situation, the relationship between speakers and the communicative purpose.

4.6. Irony and semantic bleaching

Irony occurs when a speaker communicates an attitude or evaluation that contrasts with the literal meaning or expected use of an expression. A word such as brilliant may be used sincerely to praise an idea, but in a sarcastic context it can convey criticism: "Brilliant—you deleted the whole file." The ironic interpretation depends on shared knowledge, tone, the situation and the mismatch between words and events. Although irony may contribute to longer-term changes in connotation, not every ironic utterance changes the conventional meaning of a word.

Semantic bleaching refers to the weakening or loss of some of a word's original semantic content, often as it develops a grammatical or discourse function. In expressions such as "I literally died laughing", literally may be used as an intensifier even though the speaker did not die. The original sense remains available in other contexts, but its force can be weakened in some uses. Such cases show why meaning should be studied in real contexts rather than through isolated words alone.

4.7. Extension to new domains

Words may also move from a specialised domain into general use. Dinosaur, originally associated with a scientific category of extinct reptiles, is used informally for something outdated or resistant to change: "This computer system is a dinosaur." Similarly, virus has a biological meaning and a well-established computing sense. The new-domain use becomes interpretable because speakers recognise a relevant analogy or association. As the use spreads across communities, it may become an established additional sense.

5. The role of context in semantic change

Context plays at least three roles in semantic change. First, it disambiguates: it helps listeners select the intended sense of a polysemous word. In "The bank approved the loan", the financial institution sense of bank is strongly indicated by loan; in "They sat on the river bank", the geographical sense is selected by river. Second, context supports innovation by making a figurative, evaluative or domain-specific interpretation understandable. Third, repeated contextual use can lead to conventionalisation, when a once-inferred interpretation becomes sufficiently familiar to be recognised as part of the word's meaning.

The process is not automatic. A single metaphor, joke or ironic statement may remain an individual stylistic choice. A semantic change becomes more plausible when a form is used repeatedly, is understood consistently by different speakers, and serves a communicative purpose that other speakers find useful. Social networks, media, professional communities and technological developments can accelerate the spread of new uses. At the same time, new meanings may remain restricted to particular groups or registers instead of entering the general vocabulary.

Table 1.

Contextual mechanisms and illustrative examples

Mechanism	Illustrative expression	Contextual interpretation
Metaphor	head of a department	A body part is used for a leader.
Metonymy	the crown decided	An associated object stands for monarchy.

Mechanism	Illustrative expression	Contextual interpretation
Broadening	Meat	Historically broad 'food'; now commonly animal flesh.
Narrowing	girl (historical development)	A word's range can become more restricted over time.
Amelioration	Knight	A more prestigious sense develops historically.
Pejoration	Silly	A formerly favourable sense develops a negative one.
Euphemism	pass away	A less direct expression refers to death.
Irony	"Brilliant!" after a mistake	The context reverses the apparent praise.
New domain	computer virus	A biological term gains a computing sense.

The examples in Table 1 are illustrative rather than exhaustive. The historical development of a word may involve more than one mechanism, and different dictionaries may describe stages of that development with different levels of detail. The table therefore highlights the principal interpretive relation relevant to each example rather than claiming that one label explains the entire history of the word.

6. Discussion

The mechanisms discussed above overlap in actual language use. A metaphor can become conventional and later develop evaluative connotations; a euphemism may become so common that its indirectness weakens; a word borrowed into a new domain may also broaden in meaning. This overlap suggests that semantic change is better understood as a dynamic process than as a set of entirely separate categories. Classification remains useful for analysis, but researchers should consider the historical trajectory and the communicative environment of each example.

The evidence also supports a distinction between semantic change and contextual variation. Contextual variation occurs whenever a word is used differently across situations, while semantic change involves a more durable shift in conventional meaning or usage potential. A careful analysis should therefore ask whether an interpretation is widely shared, repeated across contexts and stable enough to be recognised beyond the original utterance. Dictionaries, historical corpora and contemporary corpora can help establish such patterns, while interviews or discourse analysis may clarify social and pragmatic motivations.

7. Conclusion

Semantic change is a fundamental aspect of the development of Modern English vocabulary. Meanings change through metaphor, metonymy, broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, euphemism, irony, semantic bleaching and the adoption of words into new domains. These mechanisms reveal that vocabulary is closely connected to human cognition, cultural conventions and practical communication. Speakers extend meanings to describe new experiences, express evaluations, manage sensitive topics and communicate efficiently.

Context is central to this process. It enables listeners to identify intended senses, supports novel interpretations and provides repeated environments in which a new use can become conventional. Nevertheless, not every figurative or ironic use constitutes semantic change. A lasting shift requires social uptake and sufficient stability across a speech community or a relevant group of speakers. The study of semantic change therefore benefits from combining lexical analysis with historical, pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspectives.

Further research could examine semantic change in larger corpora of contemporary English, compare usage across academic, media and conversational registers, and investigate how digital communication contributes to the spread of new meanings.

References

- [1] Traugott, E. C., & Dasher, R. B. (2002). *Regularity in Semantic Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Stockwell, R., & Minkova, D. (2001). *English Words: History and Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Blank, A. (1997). *Prinzipien des lexikalischen Bedeutungswandels am Beispiel der romanischen Sprachen*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- [4] Blank, A. (1999). Why do new meanings occur? A cognitive typology of the motivations for lexical semantic change. In A. Blank & P. Koch (Eds.), *Historical Semantics and Cognition* (pp. 61–90). Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- [5] Jucker, A. H., & Taavitsainen, I. (2012). Pragmatic variables. In *The Handbook of Historical Sociolinguistics* (pp. 293–306). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118257227>
- [6] Campbell, L. (2013). *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction* (3rd ed.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- [7] Cruse, D. A. (2011). *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [8] Ullmann, S. (1962). *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- [9] Geeraerts, D. (2010). *Theories of Lexical Semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [10] Blank, A., & Koch, P. (Eds.). (1999). *Historical Semantics and Cognition*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- [11] Campbell, L. (2013). *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction* (3rd ed.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- [12] Nerlich, B., & Clarke, D. D. (1992). *Semantic fields and the history of linguistics. History of European Ideas*,