

Studying Semantic Drift and How It Affects ESL Learners' Linguistics and Literary Understanding

Uzma Arshad Mughal¹, Muhammad Saqib Zaigham², Anjum Akbar Bukhari³

Abstract

This study delves into semantic drift or change in English words, paying particular attention to how some common words' meanings have changed over time. Language is constantly changing. The process by which a word's meaning changes over time is known as "semantic drift." Words can change in both their literal meaning and their actual use. This study analyzed semantic change from a different perspective. This research focused on words that change meaning quickly. English is another area of attention for this investigation. The study examines how well these users adjust to changes in meaning. Additionally, it enables us to assess users' level of knowledge regarding the many interpretations of the same words. Another objective of this study is to determine whether semantic change affects readers' comprehension of literature that employs the words that experienced semantic change. The findings present mixed results that add value to the quality paradigms of semantic drift-related knowledge, thus aligned with Goal 4 of UNICEF's 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). One important aspect of this study's quality was the creation of a closed-ended questionnaire that focused on fifteen words whose definitions have evolved throughout time. The 50 female responders represented a wide variety of educational backgrounds. The results were examined using pie chart analysis. The results showed that although the majority of ESL students can keep up with semantic change, a sizeable percentage still struggles to understand the process. The results also showed how little second-language English learners understand about the historical meanings of words. ESL pupils are unable to comprehend a word that has changed throughout time as it should be understood when it comes to literary work. This might be viewed as a drawback of semantic shift. Therefore, it was determined that while ESL students may adapt to change, the majority of them struggle to understand literature as it is meant to be comprehended.

Keywords: semantic change, ESL learners, comprehension, language

¹⁻² Department of English, Capital University of Science and Technology, Islamabad – Pakistan

³ Govt Model Science College, Muzaffarabad – Pakistan

Introduction

Language is a dynamic system that reflects society, culture, and history rather than being static. Language development is fascinating, particularly when we look at how words can acquire new meanings or change over time, a phenomenon known as semantic drift and change (Tahmasebi, Borin, Jatowt, ,2018, p.1810). One must first identify all of the elements that contribute to language development and human impact, including but not limited to semantic evolution. This study will investigate how the meaning of some English terms has evolved with time.

The study of semantic drift, also known as "semantic change" or "evolving semantics," is a dynamic and expanding field of study that tracks how concepts' meanings change over time within knowledge representation models and how they may be replaced by new meanings. The management, long-term access, and reuse of digital collections heavily depend on an understanding of this phenomenon and the ability to predict trends.

The process of semantic drift is under examination in this chapter. The study's first section goes over the specifics of the approach. The term "semantic change" describes how a word's meaning evolves. Examples of this include the inclusion of meat, girls, trolls, and more in literature. These words have an impact on ESL student's comprehension. This study concentrates mostly on the narrowing and broadening of word meaning in this study. Second-language users may find semantic change to be bewildering. According to Haug (2008), when people communicate, they are looking for the most relevant interpretation. So, there is a great need to make semantic change research.

This study is important for comprehending literature and applied linguistics. The results of this study can be utilized to better understand semantic change and how it impacts ESL students. This study will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the definition of semantic change. Additionally, it will demonstrate the speed at which semantic change is happening in the modern day and attempt to determine what consequences this rapid change in word meaning has for ESL students.

The goal of this study is to determine whether student's difficulties with literary comprehension are being caused by quick changes in semantics and how these

changes affect ESL learners. Additionally, it investigates if people can stay up with semantic shifts or not.

Semantic change has already been investigated by researchers. However, little attention has been paid to how this process affects ESL students and how they read English literature. However, this study offers a fresh viewpoint on semantic progression. It will demonstrate how this change affects ESL students and whether semantic drift has an impact on how literature is interpreted

Review of the Literature

A broader knowledge of semantics is necessary to study semantic drift. We must first understand what meanings are to understand what it means for a meaning to change. When we claim that a word (or more general construction) has meaning, what do we mean?

❖ Semantic change/ drift traditional classifications:

Many perspectives have historically been used to examine semantic drift or change. Before talking about the various categories of meaning shifts/drifts that go along with these viewpoints, it's critical to understand two things: 1. Not all changes can be the researcher categorized using conventional methods. 2. Depending on the feature of the change decide to utilize as the foundation for our classification, we can occasionally assign two or even more labels to a single change. The initial conventional typology of semantic modifications distinguishes between those that produce a more negative meaning (pejoration) and those that provide a more positive meaning (referred to as amelioration). The following two lyrics, which are taken from the Streets song *Fit but You Know it*, demonstrate a recent instance of melioration in British English:

*I didn't wanna bowl over all geezer and rude,
Not rude as in good but just rude like uncouth*

These sentences demonstrate how the word *rude*, which originally meant "unmannered" or even "uncouth," can now be used in a more positive context. According to my conversations with my CUST University undergraduate students, the precise definition is "physically attractive (often in a slightly vulgar way)". As in

She's rude or employing the currently popular intensifier well, she's well rude, it truly appears to be applied specifically to women.

Similarly, the evolution of the English term "dog" is referred to as expanding, broadening, or generalization. (Many distinct terminologies exist for what is the same thing, as is so frequently the case in linguistics and other sciences.) Specialization, sometimes referred to as narrowing, is the antithesis of generalization. Any young person might be referred to as a girl in Middle English; the early Modern era saw the restriction to female young people.

❖ **Recent developments: regularities in semantic change /drift**

As we've seen, the meaning of linguistic things can evolve in either direction, and the conventional methods of categorizing meaning changes require a variety of oppositions or contrasts. Factors inside or outside of language can influence meanings to become more positive or negative, broader or narrower, and entail metaphor or (various forms of) metonymy.

It is unclear whether we may properly refer to a semantic change (or a language in general) when it has been adopted by the entire speech community, many language users, or maybe only one speaker has developed a new usage.

In my point of view, meaning shift or drift is a synchronic phenomenon that always begins in the present moment for some creative speakers. It might or might not spread to other speakers after that. Because of the inevitable time required for this dissemination process, meaning change also appears diachronically. Propagation is dependent on social variables and must therefore be explained in terms of sociolinguistic theory, whereas invention is a cognitive activity and so needs a psychological explanation.

A shift in a word's meaning is referred to as semantic transformation. It essentially describes how a word's meaning has changed over time. Other terminology like semantic drift, semantic broadening, semantic development, and semantic shift are also used to characterize semantic change. Several things can cause semantic shift Aitchison (2003) claims that there is no conclusive evidence of language change occurring across generational gaps in child base theory, regardless of the school of thought—from structuralism to generative. There are standards of correctness that others should conform to and should follow, according to Aitchison (2013). The use

of the English language started evolving as it spread across the world as an additional tongue of time. Additionally, a lot of language has been contributed to this through variables like code-switching. The linguistics subsequently gave the language more expansive connotations. Area of semantic shift, there are at least two identifiable causes. First, on the internal semantic category design. Second, emphasizes the specific term instead of searching the complete corpus (Geeraerts, 1997).

Three categories were proposed by Hallman (2009) for the semantic shift. These are referred to as broadening and narrowing, amelioration and pejoration, semantic shift, and metaphor.

❖ **Semantics Change/drifts Types**

• **Semantic narrowing**

Semantic narrowing is the process by which a word's meaning becomes less broad or completely different from its previous usage. It is sometimes referred to as specialization or restriction. Generalization or semantic broadening is the opposite process. "Such specialization is slow and need not be complete," according to renowned linguist Tom McArthur. For example, the word "fowl" is typically limited to the farmyard hen these days, but it still has the sense of "bird" in phrases like "wildfowl" and "fowls of the air." (McArthur 1992).

• **Semantic Branching**

The new meaning of a word coexists with its previous meaning in this type of semantic shift. There are no meanings left out. For instance, the word "head" has several different connotations. It indicates both a bodily portion and the psyche. Furthermore, it also represents the heads of other objects, including humans and nails. An individual is also referred to by the word.

• **Semantic Broadening**

Broadening is a type of semantic shift where an expression's meaning expands beyond its initial meaning to become more expansive. It is sometimes referred to as expansion, extension, or generalization. Semantic narrowing, the opposite process, is when a word acquires a more limited meaning than it did in the beginning. "When the meaning of a word becomes broader, it means everything it used to mean and more," claims Victoria (2013). For example, the word "tea" was used in ancient

literature and is still used today to designate any hot beverage, not just the beverage prepared from several leaves.

- **Semantic Amelioration**

This occurrence involves the word acquiring a new meaning that includes connotation. The newly created meaning is associated with a negative connotation. A "hussy," for instance, was a term that had no positive or negative meaning and was used to refer to a housewife. But as time went on, the word began to carry a negative connotation, and now it refers to a lady who is not trustworthy. In the example provided, the process of turning a neutral meaning into a negative connotation is evident.

- **Semantic Pejoration**

Pejoration is not the same as this technique. This technique gives the term a more positive meaning. Indeed, the word's meaning does evolve, although the more recent interpretation is associated with a more positive sense. For instance, the term "queen" used to refer to a woman, but throughout time, its meaning changed, and it now denotes a worthy member of the royal family.

- ❖ **Language Change**

It is a well-known and established fact that every language evolves. The English language goes through the same process. English changes can be studied from various aspects; this can be semantic (the sense of language), pragmatic (social use of the language), and can also be the addition of new words, sentences, and slang. It may be surprising to observe changes in the language. Crystal (2006) proposed the term "Netspeak" to refer to CMC as a monolingual variety.

Emojis, memes, and acronyms such as LOL, LMAO, FML, and BRB. Changing the way language is used. The works of classical authors such as Shakespeare (16th century) are now considered difficult for modern people to understand. The rapid advancement of the English language over the past few centuries has been well-documented. Keller (1994) explained the occurrence of "semantic change," attributing it to a variety of factors. These factors encompass a wide range, from political influences to the impacts of colonization and invasions. The introduction of advanced technologies like cell phones and advancements in the natural sciences necessitate the creation of new words or alterations in the semantic meaning of existing ones. Additionally, semantic change can be influenced by the lifestyles,

social status, age, education, and social interactions of language users. While semantics has been extensively researched in the past, its impact on ESL learners is of paramount importance. This study aims to investigate the effects of semantic change on ESL learners.

Methodology

In this section, the study will examine the research methodology to gain a detailed understanding of how the research was carried out. The type of research conducted is quantitative.

The sample population consisted of 70 English words that have evolved in meaning over time. Out of these words, 15 were used in the questionnaires, which were distributed to undergraduate students at the Capital University of Science and Technology (CUST) Islamabad. 50 questionnaires were given to ESL learners from diverse educational and social backgrounds to complete.

❖ Research Tools

The 20 different words were included in the Questionnaire to explore their usage and changes in meaning

❖ Data collection

Data was collected through various means. The use of the word in ancient and modern literature has been studied. Social media was also used to gather the necessary material. Analysis techniques old and new meanings of words were compared to find out the way the words were and are used. The impact of these words and their interpretation was analyzed. This chapter summarizes the questions asked in the survey and presents the results of these questions in both graphical and theoretical form.

❖ Population

The researcher chose seventy English phrases whose meanings have changed over time. Questionnaires including 15 of these terms were distributed to undergraduate students at Capital University of Science and Technology (CUST) Islamabad. The surveys were distributed to fifty ESL students from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Data Analysis and Discussion

To determine how the words were and are used, their ancient and new meanings were compared. It was examined how these terms affected and were interpreted by Generation Z. Semantic change is a continuous process and has been occurring since time immemorial. As a language spreads, its usage also increases as users of the language add more connotations to the word and its use in a wider variety of scenarios increases. There are many different types of semantic drifts, where one meaning may dominate the others or multiple meanings may be associated with the same word. The interpretation of words such as gay, hookup, cell, troll, and disease depend primarily on the scenario in which they are used. So, Understanding the phrase "it's raining cats and dogs" to signify intense rain is an example of linguistic comprehension: pragmatic inference. It is possible to interpret idiomatic expressions like "let the cat out of the bag" as disclosing a secret. Moreover, understand that the term "shrew" has a negative connotation when applied to women.

When answering the first question, 65% of the respondents rated the meaning of the word "gay" as the correct usage based on their knowledge, while 20% said the meaning of the word gay was "happy." Only 15% of respondents were able to interpret the latter meaning of the word gay, which is unappealing. The second question is designed to test ESL students' knowledge of words whose meanings have changed over time.

Most respondents answered "unpleasant," but some also understood the meaning of the word "unexpected." Only 20 percent chose the older meaning of "unbelievable." Meanwhile, 80% chose the current meaning of the word: "unpleasant."

The third question included phrases whose meanings have expanded over time. The broadening of meaning is also incorporated in the phenomenon of semantic change. This question was designed to test the use of the phrase in different scenarios. Half of the participants selected "having sexual activity." However, 45% of respondents said that the phrase should be used to "meet up" with someone. Merely 5% of participants, considered to be a minority, believed that the expression is appropriately used when characterizing a scenario in which something has been successfully launched. Just thirty percent of respondents mentioned in their

response to the fourth question that they use the word to refer to “physical illness.” The definition of “sick” has evolved. Of those surveyed, 55% admitted to using the term “sick” to describe upsetting things. Yet 15% of respondents stated they use the phrase in its most recent sense, which is to describe something truly amazing. In response to the fifth question, 20% of participants believed that “body part” was the best option. Of those surveyed, 35% said they use it to define phones. 45% percent of respondents selected Prion. Learners of ESL are also getting acquainted with new definitions. In response to the following query, a significant percentage of participants—more than four in five—stated that the term “fantastic” is used to characterize extraordinary things.

A little under half of the participants said that wonderful refers to something that is completely a product of someone’s imagination. The results of the remaining first section of the questionnaire are displayed as pie charts. The majority of respondents selected alternatives that displayed the most recent definitions of words in the literature part of the questionnaire because they were unable to understand the phrases correctly. Three primary aspects comprise the research. First, is it possible for people who speak English as a second language to stay up to date with word meaning changes. A majority of users are able to adapt to the changes in word meanings since they are aware of them. Social media’s contribution to the spreading and alteration of meaning is the second factor. The study’s conclusion states that most undergraduate students are particularly conscious of how social media has changed the meaning of words. These pupils utilize the terms in situations where the new meaning makes sense since they are aware of their new connotations.

One major reason that continuously modifies word meanings is social media. But the choice of media is crucial to maintaining alignment among language users. The study’s third finding demonstrates how semantic shift harms ESL pupils. There is a drawback to the circumstance when the words lose their intended meaning. Words that had a distinct meaning in literature are now interpreted differently. Literature is one of the instruments used to maintain language. In fact, the meaning of numerous words in English literature has evolved over time. The research focused on words like girls, meat, cheater, etc.

The written text was difficult for ESL students to understand accurately. Each and every word matters for understanding meaning correctly. If a word’s definition has evolved but its literary usage remains unchanged. The Literature’s true nature has

been changed, which might be troublesome. The research's findings show that most students without a degree are unable to decipher words used in the literature's older definitions. Word meanings change over time, and this process is slow and constant. Recent technological advancements have sped up communication. Additionally, when individuals with diverse cultural origins and when people of diverse ethnic backgrounds join together on one stage, they carry with them varying cultural and connotative connotations. They take up these meanings if they make sense to other language users. The rise of memes in popular culture has demonstrated that language users can find catharsis by punning their way through ordinary problems. Likewise, a new meaning spreads faster over the globe the more relatable it is. This meaning becomes a new meaning after it is recognized by several people.

Overall, Semantic Change gives the idea of meaning change as the term "mouse" can be used to describe a computer input device as well as a small rodent. A semantic shift occurred when the word "nice" changed from meaning "silly" Or foolish to mean pleasant or agreeable.

Broadening was originally used to describe a particular breed, the term "dog" has come to refer to all canines while narrowing was initially used to describe any kind of sustenance, the term "meat" has come to refer only to animal flesh. Explicit Vocabulary Instruction: Teaching ESL students a word's several meanings and subtleties, such as the word "bank." Giving ESL students examples of a word's usage in many settings to help them understand it is Known as contextual learning exposing ESL students to real-world language usage and semantic shifts through the utilization of authentic language data.

These examples can illuminate the main ideas and how they are applied in the context of the study of semantic change and its impact on the linguistic and literary comprehension of ESL learners.

Conclusion

The study concentrated on semantic drift and shift, the ways in which some English words have evolved over time. Semantic evolution is an ongoing process. This adjustment has an impact on ESL learners. The majority of them stay updated with the addition of new meanings. However, a sizable portion of respondents said that they were unable to adapt to changes in semantics. Social media helps to generate

new meanings and has accelerated the rate at which meanings are changing. Furthermore, it's a medium for spreading new perspectives. As a result, even though ESL students use English as a second language, it has a significant impact on them since they keep taking on new meanings. One platform that puts all English speakers on the same page is social media. Additionally, ESL students struggle to understand the proper meaning of literature that uses terms that have undergone semantic changes. Thus, ESL learners are negatively impacted by semantic drift or shift. A semantic drift appears to be happening quite quickly. ESL students can, however, keep up with the updated meanings. It is challenging to give ESL students a proper interpretation of English literature because the traditional meanings have been lost. It would be crucial for future research to broaden the study's focus by taking into account additional English terms and various linguistic subjects. In order to produce sophisticated models for interpretation processes, including their evolutionary aspects in human languages, such research should be multidisciplinary and incorporate theoretical viewpoints from cognitive science, artificial intelligence, and linguistics. In addition to continuing to advance artificial intelligence technologies, this will assist us navigate more easily when faced with challenging situations like cross-cultural.

References

- Aitchison, J. (2003). Psycholinguistic perspectives on language change. In B. D. Joseph, R. D. Janda (Eds.), *The Handbook of historical linguistics* (p. 736-43). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Aitchison, J. (2013). *Language change: Progress or decay*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2006). *Language and the Internet* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Geeraerts, D. (1997). *Diachronic prototype semantics: A contribution to historical lexicology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Grice, H. P. (1989). *Logic and conversation*. In H. P. Grice (Ed.), *Studies in the way of words*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Hallman, W. B. (2009). Semantic change. In Jonathan Culpeper, Francis Katamba, Paul Kerswill, and Tony McEnery (Eds.), *English language: Description, variation, and context* (pp. 301-313). Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Tahmasebi, N., Borin, L., & Jatowt, A. (2018). Survey of computational approaches to lexical semantic change. ARXiv preprint arXiv:1811.06278.
- Haug, D. (2008). From resultative to interiors in ancient Greek: On the role of paradigmatic in semantic change. In T. Eythórsson (Ed.), *Grammatical change and linguistic theory: The Rosendal papers* (pp. 285-305). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Keller, R. (1994). *On language change: The invisible hand in language*. London/New York: Routledge.
- McArthur, T. (Ed.). (1992). *The Oxford Companion to the English language*. Oxford: OUP Victoria, F. (Ed.). (2013). *An introduction to the language*. California: University of California.

Article Information:

<i>Received</i>	28-Apr-2025
<i>Revised</i>	30-May-2025
<i>Accepted</i>	7-Jun-2025
<i>Published</i>	15-Jun-2025

Declarations:

Authors' Contribution:

- All authors **Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions. Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript**
- The authors agree to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed

• **Conflict of Interest:** NIL

• **Funding Sources:** NIL

Correspondence:

Uzma Arshad Mughal

uzma.arshad@cust.edu.pk
