

CHANGE OF MEANING (OR) SEMANTIC CHANGES

Words have changed their meaning and they have been changing quite often. For example, 'fond' meant 'foolish' now means 'affectionate', 'prevent' meant 'go before' now means 'to prevent'. Because the characteristic of language is to be dynamic there is change of meaning. Sometimes a word has more than one meaning because of different associations. For example, 'pipe' can mean 'to smoke', 'musician' or 'plumber'. There are various ways by which words have changed their meaning.

(i) Generalization (or) Extension

A term which at one time had a specialized and restricted meaning comes to have a wider application, that is, the word which formally signified a particular thing has in course of time come to refer to a large number of things of the same kind. The meaning of the term is extended. For example, the word, 'box' originally referred to 'the name of a tree'. Then was applied to 'a case made of any wood'. Now it is 'a case made of anything'. Other examples are:

	Former	Now
comrade	roommate	friend
companion	one who dines with other	friend
tragedy	drama	calamity

(ii) Specialization (or) Restriction of Meaning

This process is the reverse of generalization. Many words which once had a general application come to have a specialized application. For example, originally the word 'deer' referred to 'any animal' but later it referred to 'that particular animal'. For example,

	Original Sense	Present Sense
weed	any cloth	widow's weed
shroud	any cloth	burial cloth
lust	healthy man	sexual attraction
cousin	any relative	a particular kind of relative
apple	any fruit	a particular fruit

(iii) Extension (or) Transference followed by Differentiation of Meaning

A word is applied to an object or idea other than that for which it originally stood. But it does not lose its earlier meaning. For Example, 'to send a wire' means 'to send a telegram'. Similarly, 'to drop a line' refers to 'send a letter', 'to ring up' refers to 'to telephone', 'crane' refers to 'a lift', 'fine' comes from the word 'finish' and refers to 'to make perfect', also 'sharpness of nib', 'fine quality of cloth', 'superfine', 'to levy something', etc. 'Brand' originally means 'a turning of wood from which a part of coal marking', then it refers to 'any marking'.

(iv) Association of ideas

A word changes its meaning according to its association with the ideas related to it. Many current derogatory terms were once ordinary terms. For example, 'villain' originally referred to a 'villager'. As 'villagers' were then uncivilized the term came to refer to 'cruelty'. For example,

	Original Sense	Present Sense
heathen	heath dweller	non-Christians, non-believer, pagan
vulgar	behaviour of the crowd	low taste
prophet	spokesman	spokesman of God
sabotage	willful breaking of machines	any plot

(v) Polarization (or) Colouring

In the course of time or acquires a definite colouring or emotional significance for which etymologically there is no justification. For example, the word 'propaganda' originally meant 'Christian missionary work'. Now it refers to 'political propaganda'. Similarly, the word 'bolshevik' was originally used with horror now used without emotion. 'Enthusiasm', 'red', 'hello', 'gothic', etc. are a few other examples.

(vi) Loss of Colouring

Sometimes a word loses its distinctive colouring. There are only a few words like this in English. For example, Shakespeare used the word 'politician' in the sense of colouring; but now it is 'anyone involved in politics'. The word 'quaker' refers to the 'act of quaking' but now that colouring is lost.

(vii) Metaphorical Application

In English many words are capable of being used metaphorically. Metaphorical application is classified under two heads. a) where the literal sense is still preserved. b) where the literal sense is lost. For example,

sharp	sharp point of knife, sharp intelligence.
bright	bright colour, brave boy, etc.
sad	meaning 'full' (full of sorrow), now only 'sad' (sorrowful)
silly	originally meant 'happy', now 'stupidity'.
broadcast	originally meant 'sowing' - loss of colouring - of 'news'
bias	originally from the 'game of bowls', now 'partial', 'prejudiced'

(viii) Euphemism

It is a figure of speech by which one seeks to hide the real nature of something unpleasant by giving it a less offensive name. For example, to refer to 'death' people use 'pass away', 'expire', 'breathe last', 'join the majority', etc. Also a 'latrine' is called a 'toilet', 'convenience', 'lavatory', 'water closet', etc.

(ix) Prudery

A number of euphemistic expressions are used with a false sense of delicacy and refinement rather than a genuine desire to avoid embarrassment. Such instances are called prudery, which accounts for snobbery in the language. For example,

money lender	financiers
scavengers	sanitary engineers
paying guest	boarder
expectorant	spitting

(x) Reversal of Meaning

Some words change their meanings to the point of actually refer reversing it. There are a few examples in the language.

Grocer	now refers to 'a retailer' but at one time it referred to 'a wholesaler'. It came from the term 'engross', 'bulk' because the retailer purchases from the grocer.
Restive	originally meant patience now 'impatient'.
Scan	originally meant 'read carefully', now 'to skip through'.

(xi) Popular Misunderstanding

Sometimes a word acquires meaning because of the misunderstanding of the people. For example, 'premises' originally 'logical terms referred to the property noted above', now it refers to 'a place', 'camp', 'area', etc. 'Helpmate' comes from 'help + meet' and 'suitable help'. 'Emergency' originally meant 'change' that is, 'anything emerging suddenly, later misunderstood to refer to 'urgency'.

(xii) Proper Names Meaning Becoming Ordinary Part of Speech

In some cases very popular names are established as a standard word and it has a meaning of its own. For example,

dunce	from 'Duns Scotus', a philosopher called a 'fool' those days.
guy	from 'Guy Fawkes', participated in the gunpowder plot, 'very bold' now.
Bedlam	originally, 'lunatic asylum' in Bethlehem, now it refers to 'any mental hospital.'