

Semantic change

Although changes in word meaning take place continually in all languages, words rarely jump from one meaning to an unrelated one. Typically, the changes are step by step and involve one of the following phenomena.

Semantic broadening is the process in which the meaning of a word becomes more general or more inclusive than its historically earlier form (see Table 1).

Table 1 Semantic broadening		
Word	Old meaning	New meaning
bird	'small fowl'	'any winged creature'
barn	'place to store barley'	'farm building for storage and shelter'
aunt	'father's sister'	'father or mother's sister'

Semantic narrowing is the process in which the meaning of a word becomes less general or less inclusive than its historically earlier meaning (see Table 2).

Table 2 Semantic narrowing		
Word	Old meaning	New meaning
hound	'any dog'	'a hunting breed'
meat	'any type of food'	'flesh of an animal'
fowl	'any bird'	'a domesticated bird'
disease	'any unfavorable state'	'an illness'

In **amelioration**, the meaning of a word becomes more positive or favorable. The opposite change, **pejoration**, also occurs (see Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3 Amelioration		
Word	Old meaning	New meaning
pretty	'tricky, sly, cunning'	'attractive'
knight	'boy'	'a special title or position'

Table 4 Pejoration		
Word	Old meaning	New meaning
silly	'happy, prosperous'	'foolish'
wench	'girl'	'wanton woman, prostitute'

Given the propensity of human beings to exaggerate, it is not surprising that the **weakening** of meaning frequently occurs. For example, our word soon used to mean

'immediately' but now simply means 'in the near future'. Other examples are included in Table 5.

Table 5 Weakening		
Word	Old meaning	New meaning
wreak	'avenge, punish'	'to cause, inflict'
quell	'kill, murder'	'to put down, pacify'

Semantic shift is a process in which a word loses its former meaning and takes on a new, but often related, meaning (see Table 6).

Table 6 Semantic shift		
Word	Old meaning	New meaning
immoral	'not customary'	'unethical'
bead	'prayer'	'prayer bead, bead'

Sometimes a series of semantic shifts occurs over an extended period of time, resulting in a meaning that is completely unrelated to the original sense of a word. The word *hearse*, for example, originally referred to a triangular harrow. Later, it denoted a triangular frame for church candles and later still was used to refer to the device that held candles over a coffin. In a subsequent shift, it came to refer to the framework on which curtains were hung over a coffin or tomb. Still later, *hearse* was used to refer to the coffin itself before finally taking on its current sense of the vehicle used to transport a coffin.

More recently, the word *gay* has undergone a dramatic and unusually rapid set of shifts. Just a few generations ago this word was typically used in the sense of "lively, happy." It then came to designate "homosexual," and a phrase such as "a gay film" would be interpreted in this sense.

One of the most striking types of semantic change is triggered by **metaphor**, a figure of speech based on a perceived similarity between distinct objects or actions. (See Chapter 6 for a discussion of metaphor.) Metaphorical change usually involves a word with a concrete meaning taking on a more abstract sense, although the word's original meaning is not lost. The meanings of many English words have been extended through metaphor (see Table 7).

Table 7 Some examples of metaphor in English	
Word	Metaphorical meaning
grasp	'understand'
yarn	'story'
high	'on drugs'

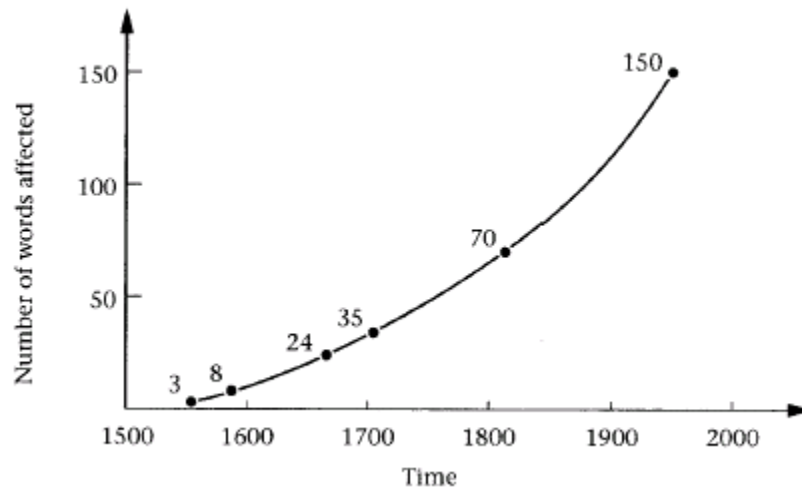
The spread of change

Up to this point, we have been concerned with the causes and description of linguistic change. Still to be dealt with is the question of how linguistic innovations spread. This section focuses on two types of spread, one involving the way in which an innovation is extended through the vocabulary of a language and the other, the way in which it spreads through the population.

Diffusion through the language

Some linguistic change first manifests itself in a few words and then gradually spreads through the vocabulary of the language. This type of change is called **lexical diffusion**. A well-attested example in English involves an ongoing change in the stress pattern of words such as *convert*, which can be used as either a noun or a verb. Although the stress originally fell on the second syllable regardless of lexical category, in the latter half of the sixteenth century three such words, *rebel*, *outlaw*, and *record*, came to be pronounced with the stress on the first syllable when used as nouns. As Figure 1 illustrates, this stress shift was extended to an increasing number of words over the next decades.

Figure 1
Diffusion of stress shift in English



This change still has not diffused through the entire vocabulary of English. There are about a thousand nouns of the relevant sort that still place the stress on the second syllable (e.g. *report*, *mistake*, and *support*). Table 8 illustrates the spread of this change to date.

Table 8 Stress shift in English (nouns)			
Before the 16th century	During the 16th century	During the 18th century	Today
rebél	rébel	rébel	rébel
affix	affix	áffix	áffix
recéss	recéss	recéss	récess
místáke	místáke	místáke	místáke

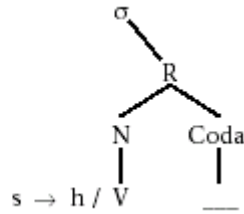
This ongoing change can be observed in progress today. The noun *address*, for example, is pronounced by many people with stress on the first syllable [ædrɛs], although the older pronunciation [ədrɛs] is still heard. Some speakers alternate between the two pronunciations. This change may continue to work its way through the language until all nouns in the class we have been considering are stressed on the first syllable.

The changes discussed in the section on analogy also spread word by word. For example, the transition of strong (irregular) verbs (the *sing/sang/sung* type) to the weak verb class (regular verbs with past tense *-ed*) is an ongoing change. Both strong and weak past tense forms of original strong verbs such as *dive* and *shine* are heard in current English: *dove/dived* and *shone/shined*.

However, not all linguistic change involves gradual diffusion through the vocabulary of a language. Sound changes typically affect all instances of the segment(s) involved. For example, in some dialects of Spanish (such as Cuban), the

consonantal weakening of [s] to [h] in syllable-final position affects all instances of s in those positions. The relevant rule can be stated as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Consonant weakening
of [s] to [h] in certain
Spanish dialects



This rule has resulted in changes such as those exemplified in Table 9.

Table 9 The effects of the [s] to [h] change in Spanish dialects		
Standard pronunciation	New pronunciation	
[felismente]	[felihmente]	'happily'
[estilo]	[ehtilo]	'type'
[españa]	[ehpaña]	'Spain'

This change is entirely regular, affecting all instances of syllable-final [s] in the speech of individuals who adopt it.

Accordingly, two types of language change can be identified. One, exemplified by the stress shifts in bisyllabic English nouns of the type we have discussed, affects individual words one at a time and gradually spreads through the vocabulary of the language. The other, exemplified by the consonant weakening of syllable-final [s] to [h] in some dialects of Spanish, involves an across-the-board change that applies without exception to all words.

Spread through the population

For a language change to take place, the particular innovation must be accepted by the linguistic community as a whole. For example, although children acquiring English typically form the past tense of go as *goed* instead of *went*, *goed* has never received widespread acceptance. Doubtless the verb form in *he throve on fame* would be equally unacceptable to most speakers today. In earlier English, however, *throve* was the past tense form of *thrive* (compare *drive/drove*). At some point in the past, then, the novel form *thrived* did receive general acceptance.

Just as change sometimes begins with a small number of words, the effects of a change often appear first in the speech of only a small number of people. Social pressures often play an important role in whether a particular innovation will spread through the entire linguistic community. Since speakers can consciously or subconsciously alter the way they speak to approximate what they perceive to be a

more prestigious or socially desirable variety of speech, once a change has taken hold in the speech of a particular group, it may gradually spread to other speakers and ultimately affect the entire linguistic community.

There have been numerous examples of this in the history of English, notably the loss of postvocalic [r] along the East Coast of the United States. This change, which led to an “r-less” pronunciation of words such as *far* as [fa:], originated in parts of England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At that time, postvocalic [r] was still pronounced throughout English-speaking settlements in North America. Two factors accounted for its loss in parts of this continent. First, the children of the New England gentry picked up the new pronunciation in British schools and subsequently brought it back to the colony. Second, the speech of newly arrived immigrants, including colonial administrators and church officials who enjoyed high social status in the colony, typically lacked the postvocalic [r]. As a result, the innovation was widely imitated and ultimately spread along much of the East Coast and into the South.

Social pressures were also involved in limiting the spread of this innovation. It did not penetrate Pennsylvania or the other Midland states, since the most prestigious group of settlers there were Quakers from northern England, an area that retained the postvocalic [r]. More recently the “r-less” pronunciation has become stigmatized in some areas, even where it was previously firmly entrenched, and we now see a trend to restoration of [r] in environments where it had been deleted.

You are now ready to do the [exercises on semantic change](#).