INNOVATIONS IN TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE EDUCATION
ISSN 2181-371X
https://sr-journals.org/index.php/ITSE

LEXICAL SEMANTIC SHIFT IN ENGLISH

Khalikulova Musharraf
Teacher, Navoi State University

Abstract: The article examines semantic shift as a fundamental process in the historical development of the English lexicon. It defines semantic change and explains its gradual nature, emphasizing the role of polysemy as an intermediate stage in meaning evolution. The study analyzes major types of semantic shift, including changes in scope such as widening and narrowing, as well as meaning transfer through metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor. Particular attention is given to shifts in evaluative quality, namely euphemism, hyperbole, and litotes. Each type is illustrated with historically grounded examples that demonstrate how linguistic, cultural, and social factors influence meaning change. The article highlights the importance of semantic shift for lexicology, historical linguistics, and translation studies, showing how awareness of meaning evolution contributes to accurate interpretation and effective communication.

Keywords: semantic shift (semantic drift), polysemy, widening (generalization), narrowing (specialization), metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor, euphemism, hyperbole, litotes, historical semantics, lexical change

Annotatsiya: Maqolada semantik o‘zgarish ingliz leksikasining tarixiy rivojlanishidagi asosiy jarayon sifatida tahlil qilinadi. Unda bu tushunchaning mazmun -mohiyati aniqlanib, uning bosqichma-bosqich sodir bo‘lishi tushuntiriladi hamda ma’no taraqqiyotida polisemiyaning oraliq bosqich sifatidagi roli alohida ta’kidlanadi. Tadqiqotda semantik o‘zgarishning asosiy turlari, jumladan, ma’no doirasining o‘zgarishi (kengayish va torayish), shuningdek metonimiya, sinekdoxa va metafora orqali ma’no ko‘chishi tahlil etiladi. Baholovchi ma’noning o‘zgarishlariga, ya’ni evfemizm, giperbola va litota kabi pragmatik mexanizmlarga alohida e’tibor qaratiladi. Har bir tur tarixiy asosga ega misollar orqali yoritilib, lingvistik, madaniy va ijtimoiy omillarning ma’no o‘zgarishiga qanday ta’sir ko‘rsatishi ko‘rsatiladi. Maqolada semantik o‘zgarishning leksikologiya, tarixiy tilshunoslik va tarjimashunoslik uchun muhim ahamiyati ta’kidlanib, ma’no evolyutsiyasini anglash aniq talqin va samarali muloqotga xizmat qilishi asoslab beriladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: semantik o‘zgarish, semantik drift, polisemiya, kengayish (umumlashuv), torayish (ixtisoslashuv), metonimiya, sinekdoxa, metafora, evfemizm, giperbola, litota, tarixiy semantika, leksik o‘zgarish.

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается семантический сдвиг как фундаментальный процесс в историческом развитии английской лексики. Даётся определение семантического изменения и объясняется его постепенный характер, при этом особое внимание уделяется роли полисемии как промежуточного этапа в эволюции значения. В исследовании анализируются основные типы семантического сдвига, включая изменения объёма значения — расширение и сужение, а также перенос значения посредством метонимии, синекдохи и метафоры. Особое внимание уделяется изменениям оценочной окраски значения, а именно процессам эвфемизма, гиперболы и литоты. Каждый тип иллюстрируется исторически обоснованными примерами, демонстрирующими влияние лингвистических, культурных и социальных факторов на изменение значения. В статье подчёркивается значение семантического сдвига для лексикологии, исторического языкознания и переводоведения, показывается, как осознание эволюции значения способствует точной интерпретации и эффективной коммуникации.

Ключевые слова: семантический сдвиг (семантический дрейф), полисемия, расширение значения (обобщение), сужение значения (специализация), метонимия, синекдоха, метафора, эвфемизм, гипербола, литота, историческая семантика, лексическое изменение

INTRODUCTION

Semantic shift, also known as semantic change or semantic drift, refers to the process through which the meanings of words evolve over time. This phenomenon is a natural and inevitable aspect of language development, reflecting changes in culture, society, technology, and human cognition. Semantic change often occurs gradually and may involve a transitional stage of polysemy, during which both the older and newer meanings of a word coexist.

Language is not static, it develops continuously as speakers adapt it to new realities and communicative needs. One of the most significant aspects of lexical change is semantic shift – the alteration of word meanings across time. Words may expand or restrict their meanings, acquire emotional coloring, or transfer meaning through association or similarity. Understanding semantic shift is essential for linguistics, lexicology, translation studies, and historical semantics, as it helps explain why modern meanings often differ from their original senses.

DISCUSSION

Semantic change rarely occurs abruptly. In many cases, a word enters a stage of polysemy, where an older meaning and a newer meaning coexist within the language. Over time, one meaning may become dominant while the other fades or disappears. For example, the word ‘holiday’ originally referred exclusively to a religious “holy day,” but during the polysemous stage it could denote both religious festivals and days of rest. Eventually, the secular meaning became primary.

A shift in scope involves either the expansion or the restriction of a word’s meaning.

Widening occurs when a word’s meaning expands to include a broader range of referents than it originally denoted. Historically, the verb ‘arrive’ meant “to reach land after sea travel,” but today it applies to reaching any destination. Similarly, ‘build’ once referred specifically to constructing a house, whereas it now covers the creation of any structure or system. The noun ‘holiday’ shifted from a strictly religious observance to any period of rest or vacation. The word ‘dog’ initially named a particular breed (‘dogge’), but later came to represent all canines. Likewise, ‘picture’ originally meant only a painted image, but now includes photographs, drawings, and digital images.

In descriptive terms, this type of change can be represented as a movement from a narrow semantic field to a broader one, where the number of referents increases over time.

Narrowing is the opposite process, in which a word’s meaning becomes more specific and applies to fewer objects or concepts. In Old English, ‘deer’ (‘deor’) referred to any animal, but in Modern English it denotes a specific species. The word ‘meat’ once meant “food” in general, but is now limited to edible animal flesh. ‘Starve’ originally meant ‘to die,’ while today it specifically refers to dying from hunger. The noun ‘girl’ once described any young person regardless of gender, but now refers only to a female child. Similarly, ‘doctor’ previously meant a teacher or learned person, whereas it is now most commonly associated with the medical profession.

Conceptually, narrowing can be described as a contraction of meaning from a broad category to a specialized subcategory.

Metonymy involves a shift of meaning based on close association rather than similarity. The term ‘the Crown’ no longer refers only to a physical object but represents the monarchy or state authority. ‘The White House’ stands for the US president or administration rather than the building itself. The word ‘bead’ developed from the meaning ‘prayer’ to denote the small object used to count prayers. Similarly, ‘fear’ shifted from meaning ‘danger’ to the emotion experienced in the presence of danger. ‘Hollywood’ represents the American film industry, and ‘dish’ may refer not only to a plate but also to the food served on it.

This type of semantic change can be described verbally as a shift from an original object or concept to something regularly associated with it.

Synecdoche is a special type of metonymy involving part–whole relationships. For example, ‘wheels’ may represent a car, where a part stands for the whole. ‘Glasses’ refers to spectacles, with the material naming the object. ‘Canada’ can be used to represent the Canadian government or a national sports team, illustrating a whole-for-part relationship. The word ‘bread’ may denote food or livelihood

in general, and ‘hands’ can refer to workers or laborers. Synecdoche involves a semantic shift where either a component represents the whole entity or the whole stands for one of its parts.

Metaphor involves a transfer of meaning based on perceived similarity between two unrelated domains. The verb ‘grasp’ moved from the physical act of holding to the abstract idea of understanding. ‘Crane’ shifted from the name of a bird to a machine used for lifting, due to similarity in shape. The word ‘mouse’ transferred from an animal to a computer device, again based on visual resemblance. ‘Branch’ extended from a tree limb to subdivisions of science, business, or banking. Likewise, ‘virus’ evolved from a biological concept to a metaphor for harmful computer software. This process can be described as mapping meaning from a concrete source domain to a more abstract target domain.

Shift in quality of meaning.

Euphemism involves replacing unpleasant or taboo expressions with milder alternatives. For example, ‘die’ is often replaced by expressions such as “pass away” or “go to a better place.” ‘Toilet’ has been replaced over time by “bathroom,” “restroom,” and “facilities.” Occupational titles such as ‘garbage collector’ have evolved into “sanitation worker” and “waste management specialist.” Similarly, ‘old’ has been softened to “senior citizen” or “elderly person.”

Over time, euphemisms themselves may acquire negative associations, leading to a process known as the euphemism treadmill.

Hyperbole. In hyperbolic semantic shift, the modern meaning becomes weaker in intensity than the original. The word ‘bane’ once meant “killer,” but now refers to something merely harmful or annoying. ‘Awesome’ moved from “divinely awe-inspiring” to “great,” and “terrible” from “causing terror” to simply “bad.” The adverb “literally” has become an intensifier meaning “really,” even in non-literal contexts.

In contrast, *litotes* involves a strengthening of meaning. “Strike” developed from “lightly stroke” to “hit hard.” “Disease” shifted from “unease” to “serious illness.” “Grudge” evolved from “complain” to “long-lasting resentment,” and “kill” moved from “stifle” to “take life.”

CONCLUSION

In summary, semantic widening involves a shift from specific to general meaning, while narrowing moves from general to specific. Metonymy is based on association, and synecdoche operates through part–whole relationships. Metaphor relies on similarity between concepts. Elevation reflects a shift from negative or neutral meaning to positive evaluation, whereas degeneration represents the reverse. Euphemism replaces unpleasant terms with polite alternatives, hyperbole weakens original intensity, and litotes strengthens it.

Semantic shift illustrates how meaning is shaped by historical context, cultural values, and human cognition. Through processes such as widening, narrowing, metaphor, and evaluative change, words adapt to the evolving needs of speakers. Studying semantic change not only deepens our understanding of lexical history but also enhances translation accuracy and linguistic awareness in modern language use.

REFERENCES

1. Leech G. (1981). Semantics: The study of meaning (2nd ed.). Penguin Books.
2. *McMahon A. (1994). Understanding language change. Cambridge University Press.*
3. Fernando C. (1996). *Idioms and idiomaticity.* Oxford University Press.
4. Abduraxmonov G‘.A. (2019). O‘zbek tili leksikologiyasi. Toshkent: Fan va texnologiyalar.
5. Azimova N.M. (2020). Semantik o‘zgarish va uning turlari. O‘zbek tili va adabiyoti, 4, 45–52.
6. Bekmuratov A. (2018). Leksik ma’no tarqqiyoti va semantic ko‘chishi. Filologiya masalalari, 2, 33–39.
7. Isxoqov M. (2017). Tilshunoslikka kirish. Toshkent: O‘zbekiston Milliy Ensiklopediyasi.
8. Mirzayev I.A (2021). Metafora va metonimiyaning kognitiv asoslari. Zamonaviy tilshunoslik muammolari, 1, 60–68.
9. Раҳматуллаев, Ш. (2006). Ўзбек тилининг изоҳли фразеологик луғати. Тошкент: Ўқитувчи.