



PAPER

CONTEXTUAL AND COGNITIVE FACTORS IN THE SEMANTIC SHIFT OF VERBS

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Abstract

Semantic change refers to the gradual alteration in a word's meaning that takes place over a long period of time. This phenomenon is examined within the fields of historical linguistics and semantics and is often known by several other terms, such as *semantic shift*, *lexical change*, or *semantic progression*. There are various forms of semantic change, including *amelioration*, *pejoration*, *broadening*, *narrowing*, *bleaching*, as well as changes brought about through *metaphor* and *metonymy*. Moreover, language learners can also contribute to semantic change when interpreting words or expressions, since people come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This article discusses several characteristics of the semantic development of verbs.

Key words: semantic shift, change, metaphor, metonymy, meaning, verb, common vocabulary.

Introduction

The development of technology has significantly influenced the evolution of word meanings. A striking example can be seen in the term mouse. Traditionally, this word denoted a small rodent; however, with the invention of the computer, the same term was metaphorically extended to name a device used to control the cursor on a monitor. Over time, the noun mouse has also given rise to the verb to mouse, meaning “to use a mouse in operating a computer.” This shift demonstrates how semantic change operates within a linguistic system, allowing existing words to

gain new meanings while retaining their original form. Semantic change, however, does not occur uniformly or instantaneously across a language community. When an innovative usage emerges, it gradually spreads among speakers through social and communicative interaction. For a certain period, the old and new meanings often coexist, leading to a stage of semantic overlap. As linguistic scholars note, semantic change does not necessarily replace an earlier meaning but rather expands or narrows the semantic range of a word. In essence, it reflects the dynamic nature of language, where forms remain stable, but meanings evolve in response to technological, cultural, and social developments.

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Materials and Methods

Metaphor plays a crucial role in the process of semantic change. When a writer or speaker uses a word metaphorically, that new figurative sense can, over time, become accepted within the speech community. For instance, the verb *see* originally referred to the physical act of perceiving something with one's eyes. Gradually, however, it developed an additional metaphorical meaning — to understand. In everyday spoken English, the expression *I see* is frequently used not to indicate visual perception, but rather intellectual comprehension. Although this usage may not always be considered formal, it is widely recognized and understood by both native and non-native speakers. Thus, context determines whether *see* conveys literal or figurative meaning. In this article, the contrast between the oral and written use of verbs is highlighted to show how metaphorical extensions arise and stabilize over time. According to semantic theory, metaphor in meaning change occurs when a word's sense expands to cover a new conceptual domain that is semantically related to the original one. Metaphor is therefore seen as one of the primary driving forces behind semantic evolution. For example, the verb *grasp* once meant "to seize or hold physically," but later extended to mean "to comprehend or understand." This shift represents a movement from the physical domain to the mental domain. Similar metaphorical extensions are found in euphemistic verbs for to kill, such as *dispose of*, *do someone in*, *liquidate*, *terminate*, or *eliminate*. Each of these expressions demonstrates how metaphor can reshape a word's meaning while keeping its core form intact.

Semantic shift — the gradual change in a word's meaning — may occur through various cognitive, cultural, and linguistic processes. Words often undergo semantic expansion or restriction depending on how speakers conceptualize and use them in different contexts. Among the most common causes of semantic shift are **limited cultural knowledge**, **metaphorical extension**, and **differences in viewpoint** across speech communities.

One major factor contributing to semantic shift is the difference in cultural or experiential knowledge among language users. When speakers of another language lack direct experience with a

particular cultural practice, the associated verbs or expressions may be interpreted differently or lose their specificity. For instance, in the Uzbek language, the process of baking bread involves several precise stages, each expressed through a distinct verb: *xamir qilmoq* (to make dough), *non yasamoq* (to form bread), *zuvala olmoq* (to make portions), *yoymoq* (to flatten), *nampar urmoq* (to stamp the bread), *suv sepmoq* (to sprinkle water), and *nonni uzmoq* (to remove from the oven). These verbs reflect deep cultural knowledge and daily practice, as almost every Uzbek household bakes bread. However, in British English, baking is not a traditional, everyday activity; therefore, the verb *bake* covers the entire process. This demonstrates how cultural background shapes the semantic range of verbs: what is represented by multiple specific verbs in one culture may be condensed into a single general term in another.

Another major cause of semantic shift is the evolution of metaphorical meanings into common vocabulary. Over time, figurative expressions become lexicalized and accepted as standard word meanings. For example, during a conversation in English, the term *Dodo* — originally referring to an extinct bird — was metaphorically used to describe something that has disappeared or become obsolete. In the sentence, "I found my *Dodo* book among my childhood stuff," the speaker does not refer to a literal bird, but to an old, forgotten book that once seemed lost. This is a typical case of metaphor-driven semantic shift, where a concrete term (*Dodo*) develops an abstract meaning (something outdated or lost). Such metaphorical extensions illustrate how speakers use creativity and cultural association to fill expressive gaps in vocabulary. Over time, these figurative meanings become integrated into the lexicon and understood even without conscious awareness of their metaphorical origin.

Semantic shift may also occur when the same word takes on different meanings in different regional or social varieties of a language. These shifts often arise due to variation in cultural perception or linguistic hierarchy between ordinate and superordinate terms. For example, the word *Christian* in British English serves as a superordinate term that includes all followers of Christianity, regardless of denomination. However, as Deterding (2000) notes, in Singaporean

English Christian refers specifically to Protestants, excluding Catholics. This change in scope reflects how cultural and religious distinctions influence semantic interpretation. Similarly, in Standard English, alphabet refers to the complete set of letters in a language, whereas in Singaporean English, it denotes a single letter. Thus, a speaker might say, “The word ‘alphabet’ is made up of eight alphabets,” which would sound unusual to British or American English users. These examples illustrate that semantic shift can result not only from historical or metaphorical development but also from the diversity of perspectives within global English usage. Differences in worldview, cultural background, and communicative practice all contribute to how meanings evolve, expand, or specialize within speech communities.

Results and discussion

Although semantic change plays a significant role in the evolution of verb meanings, it often remains unpredictable and difficult to classify. Linguists hold diverse views regarding how and why semantic changes occur, and as a result, certain innovations may be accepted by some scholars while being rejected by others. Traditional approaches to semantic change generally focus on the results of meaning change rather than the processes behind it. They usually categorize such changes into several major types, including metaphoric and metonymic extension, semantic broadening and narrowing, and the development of positive (ameliorative) or negative (pejorative) meanings. However, these traditional frameworks often treat examples in isolation, without considering the broader discourse or pragmatic context in which the change occurred. Moreover, much of the earlier research concentrated primarily on nouns and adjectives, while verbs — which are among the most semantically dynamic parts of speech — received comparatively less attention.

A good example of semantic evolution in verbs is found in the English modal verb *may*. Historically, *may* expressed possibility (e.g., *She may go* = “It is possible that she will go”). Over time, however, it developed an additional sense of permission (e.g., *She may go* = “She is allowed to go”). This shift demonstrates how verbs can expand their semantic range while retaining the same

grammatical form. It also reflects how language users reinterpret modal meanings according to social norms and communicative needs. Recent studies further indicate that short-term semantic shifts are complex and multifaceted phenomena. As corpus-based analyses show, an increase in a word’s frequency of use does not necessarily entail a corresponding change in its meaning, just as stable frequency levels over time do not always indicate semantic stability. This suggests that semantic change is influenced not only by frequency or usage patterns, but also by contextual, pragmatic, and cognitive factors that operate over different timescales. In essence, the unpredictability of semantic change reminds us that meaning is never fixed — it constantly adapts to human experience, interaction, and interpretation.

Semantic change in verbs reflects the natural evolution of language as new experiences and technologies shape human communication. Over time, verbs may acquire new meanings while retaining their original forms, a process often driven by social, cultural, and technological innovations. For instance, the word *mouse* originally denoted a small rodent, but with the emergence of computers, it gained a new verbal sense — to *mouse*, meaning “to move or click a computer mouse.” This transformation illustrates how a noun can extend its function to a verb through semantic shift. Such changes do not occur instantly; they spread gradually within a speech community as speakers adopt and accept the new usage. During this process, both the old and new meanings may coexist for some time before one becomes dominant. Linguists emphasize that semantic change is not merely a loss or replacement of meaning, but rather the **addition, extension, or modification** of conceptual associations within the linguistic system. Thus, the evolution of verb meanings demonstrates the dynamic and adaptive nature of language itself.

Conclusion

Semantic change in verbs is an inevitable and dynamic aspect of linguistic evolution. As society progresses, verbs continuously adapt to new communicative needs, technological advances, and cultural realities. This constant modification of meaning not only enriches the vocabulary but also mirrors the flexibility and creativity of

human thought. Understanding the mechanisms behind semantic change — such as metaphorical extension, metonymy, broadening, and narrowing — allows linguists to trace how meanings shift over time and why certain usages prevail while others disappear. Therefore, the study of semantic change in verbs plays a vital role in revealing both the historical development of language and the cognitive processes underlying human communication.

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