

SEMANTIC DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH WORDS AND THE SHIFT FROM POSITIVE TO NEGATIVE MEANINGS

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Abstract:

This study investigates pejoration, the process by which words gradually change from having neutral or positive meanings to having negative ones. A crucial component of linguistic development, semantic change is a reflection of the historical, cultural, and social forces that have shaped language. According to the study, terms are derogatory because of societal attitudes, class differences, gender biases, and ideological changes. The study shows how biases and power dynamics are encoded in language.

Key words: pejoration, semantic change, language evolution, historical linguistics, gendered language, sociolinguistics.

Introduction

For over a century, the history of the English language has been taught as a formal academic subject at the university level. It is a very complicated subject that encompasses several subfields (Momma & Matto, 2008, p.5). A form of language evolution in which the meanings of words changes over time is called semantic change, sometimes referred to as semantic shift, semantic advancement, semantic development, or semantic drift. The original and contemporary meanings of a term may significantly diverge as a result of this process. Semantic change, as used in diachronic linguistics, which studies how languages evolve over time, particularly refers to changes in a word's meaning. Words can expand, narrow, or completely change their meanings, as they often have multiple senses and connotations. This can occasionally lead to significant changes between related words in various languages and historical periods. Semantics, etymology, onomasiology, and semasiology are all closely related to the study of semantic change. Semantic shift plays an important role in linguistics. For example, it may affect the evolution and adaptation of language. As languages are not static, they continuously develop to meet the communicative demands of their speakers. Semantic change shows that vocabulary remains relevant in changing social contexts. For instance, the term "mouse" currently refers to a computer device, while it was initially used to describe a rodent (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The reflection of cultural and social changes is also an important aspect of linguistics. Social views are frequently reflected in semantic shifts. Word related to social roles, professions and gender, for instance, have evolved over time. Originally referred to a noblewoman, the term "lady" is now a general term for any woman (Trask, 1996).

Methodology

Semantic change, the process by which meaning of words can change over the time, is one of the most important components of language's continuous evolution. Cultural, social, and historical influences can impact this process, causing words to expand, narrow, improve, or worsen in meaning. . According to researchers like Ullmann (1962) and Trask (1996), there are several reasons why words change from positive to negative ones. Word meanings evolve along with society attitudes, which are reflected in language. Pejoration often happens when a concept, group, or profession is devalued by society. For example, originally meaning young girl, the term wench became a derogatory term for a promiscuous woman (McMahon 1994). As language reflects class differences, words linked to lower social classes or professions sometimes take on a negative connotation. For instance In Old English, the word "churl" originally meant a free farmer or peasant, but because peasants were despised by nobles, it came to imply a rude or uncivilized person. Also language change has historically been influenced by religious views, which can result in derogatory language when words are linked to immoral or sinful behaviour. As an example, the word "heretic" originally meant "someone who chooses" (from the Greek *hairesis*), but as religious dogma grew, it came to mean a someone who held perilous or immoral views (Trask, 1996) or the term libertine originally meant a free-thinking person, but it became a negative term for someone who lacks moral restraint (Ullmann, 1962).

The main techniques used in the study to investigate the semantic shift of words from neutral or positive meanings to negative ones are comparative semantic analysis and diachronic analysis. Words' original and contemporary meanings are compared using comparative semantic analysis, which also shows how words have changed throughout time. This method makes it possible to thoroughly analyse how word

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meanings change over time and how these changes impact more general linguistic and cultural patterns. One of the main techniques in historical linguistics is diachronic analysis, which examines how word meanings evolve over time. This research sheds light on how language changes in response to historical, social, and cultural influences, mirroring shifts in societal structures, beliefs, and attitudes.

The process of devaluing or degrading a word's meaning, known as pejoration (negative shift), is more common than amelioration. For example, officious used to mean "hard working," aggravate meant to "increase the weight" of something, and "silly" used to mean "blessed" or "innocent."

Results

The study revealed that a number of English words have undergone pejoration, changing throughout time from having neutral or positive meanings to having negative ones. For example:

Silly- originally meant "happy" or "fortunate" but now means "foolish" or "lacking intelligence".

Villain- formerly used to describe a commoner or farmworker, but now it refers to a criminal or wicked person

Knave- originally meant a young servant boy but later took on meaning of dishonest person.

Hussy- the term housewife has been replaced by an immoral woman

Lewd- used to describe an uneducated layperson, but now implies obscene or offensive behavior

Crafty- originally meant skillful or intelligent, now implies deceptiveness or slyness

Discussion

Several English terms have had their meanings changed from neutral or positive to negative due to pejoration. Historical, social, and cultural shifts in how people view particular behaviours, social classes, and gender roles are reflected in this transformation. The term "silly" can be as a clear example. She was silly about receiving such wonderful news, in this example the word "silly" meant "happy" or "fortunate" in old English, but now it means "foolish" or "lacking intelligence". Similarly, "villain" was a term referring to a commoner or farmworker, but today it means a "criminal" or "wicked person". Changes in gender are reflected in terms such as "hussy." The word, which originally meant "housewife," was neutral and even dignified. Later on, though, it came to be used disparagingly to describe a woman who was shameless or immoral. The way language has been used to regulate and criticize female behavior, especially when women deviate from established norms, is reflected in this development. "Only a knave would betray his best friend for money". In this sentence the word "knave" meant "young servant boy" in old English, but later, it became a term for a dishonest person. This change could be related to past class distinctions, where those of lower status were often treated with distrust. The word's initial meaning gradually changed, and it started to be used as a broad insult.

Conclusion

This study has examined the phenomenon of pejoration, showing how words in the English language change over time from having positive or neutral meanings to having negative ones. Pejoration is intimately associated with social, historical, and cultural elements, such as class differences, gender prejudices, and ideology transformations, as demonstrated by comparative semantic analysis and diachronic analysis. Since it sheds light on how language encodes societal ideals and perpetuates power relations, an understanding of pejoration is essential to the study of historical linguistics. These results also imply that comparable semantic changes may occur in the future in contemporary terminology, particularly in digital and internet culture. In order to forecast possible pejoration tendencies in the ensuing decades, more research might concentrate on modern slang and technological vocabulary. Linguists and educators can promote more inclusive and thoughtful language use and a deeper comprehension of how words form and reflect social reality by acknowledging the dynamics underlying pejoration.

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