

HISTORICAL AND LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF SEMANTIC CHANGES IN ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGY

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Abstract. Phraseology, as a crucial aspect of any language, encompasses idioms, proverbs, and fixed expressions that develop over time. The meanings of phraseological units are subject to constant change due to linguistic, cultural, and historical influences. This article provides a comprehensive historical-linguistic analysis of semantic changes in English phraseology, focusing on the main types of semantic transformations, their causes, and their role in language evolution. The study highlights how socio-political events, technological progress, and cultural shifts contribute to the modification of phraseological meanings, making them a valuable linguistic resource for understanding historical language dynamics.

Key words: Phraseology, Semantic changes, English language, Idioms, Proverbs, Fixed expressions, Historical-linguistic analysis, Semantic transformations, Socio-political events, Cultural shifts, Technological progress, Narrowing of meaning, Expansion of meaning, Metaphorical shift, Euphemistic change, Pejoration, Amelioration, Linguistic evolution, Historical events, Cultural influences

Language is a living system that continuously evolves under the influence of various internal and external factors. As societies progress, cultures interact, and new technologies emerge, linguistic structures adapt to reflect these changes. One of the most dynamic and expressive components of language is phraseology, which includes idioms, proverbs, sayings, and other fixed expressions. These units are deeply rooted in the historical and cultural contexts of a language, often carrying metaphorical meanings that extend beyond their literal interpretations. Over time, phraseological units undergo semantic shifts, altering their meanings, connotations, and usage. The study of semantic changes in phraseology is crucial for understanding not only linguistic evolution but also the social and historical processes that shape communication. These changes provide valuable insights into:

- How historical events shape language evolution – Wars, revolutions, migrations, and significant political transformations introduce new meanings to existing expressions or lead to the creation of new idioms and proverbs.
- The role of cultural shifts in modifying phraseological meanings – As societal values and norms change, certain expressions acquire different connotations, sometimes becoming obsolete or developing new metaphorical interpretations.
- The impact of linguistic innovations on fixed expressions – Advancements in science, technology, and media influence language use, leading to the emergence of new phraseological units or the reinterpretation of older ones.

Phraseological expressions serve as linguistic fossils, preserving traces of historical events, cultural ideologies, and social practices. Understanding their semantic transformations allows linguists, historians, and language learners to grasp how language reflects the continuous adaptation of human thought and experience.

This article aims to analyze the main types of semantic changes in English phraseology from a historical-linguistic perspective and examine the key factors driving these changes. By exploring different patterns of semantic shift—such as narrowing, expansion, metaphorical extension, euphemism, and changes in connotation—this study highlights the dynamic nature of phraseology as a reflection of historical and societal transformations.

Types of Semantic Changes in English Phraseology. The meanings of phraseological units can change in various ways. The primary types of semantic changes include narrowing,

expansion, metaphorical shift, euphemistic change, and shifts in connotation (pejoration and amelioration).

1. *Narrowing of Meaning.* Semantic narrowing occurs when a phraseological unit's meaning becomes more specific over time. Example: *Meat* (Old English: *mete*) originally referred to any kind of food. Over time, it narrowed in meaning and now specifically denotes animal flesh. *Deer* once meant any wild animal but now refers only to a specific species. *Apple.* In Old English, the word *æppel* referred to any type of fruit. Over time, *apple* became restricted to the specific fruit we know today, while other fruits were given distinct names. *Wife.* In Old English, *wīf* referred to any woman, not just a married one. Over time, the meaning narrowed to specifically denote a married woman. *Liquor.* In Middle English, *liquor* referred to any liquid substance. Over time, it became restricted to alcoholic beverages.

2. *Expansion of Meaning.* In contrast to narrowing, expansion occurs when a word or phrase acquires a broader meaning than it originally had. Example: *Holiday.* Originally, *holiday* meant a religious festival or a "holy day" dedicated to religious observance. Over time, the meaning expanded to include any period of rest, vacation, or leisure time, regardless of religious significance. *Journey.* Derived from the Old French *journée*, meaning "a day's travel," the term initially referred to the distance a person could travel in one day. Today, *journey* has a much broader meaning, referring to any long trip or even metaphorical experiences (e.g., "a journey of self-discovery"). *Thing.* In Old English, *thing* (or *þing*) specifically referred to a council or an assembly for discussion. Over time, the word's meaning expanded to include any object, concept, or matter in general use. *Bird* Originally, *bird* (Old English *brid*) referred only to young or small birds. Over time, its meaning expanded to include all avian species.

3. *Metaphorical Shift.* Metaphorical changes occur when an expression takes on a figurative meaning, often unrelated to its original literal sense. Example: *Kick the bucket.* Literal origin: This phrase is believed to have originated from an old method of execution or suicide, where a person standing on a bucket would kick it away, leading to hanging. Metaphorical meaning: Today, it simply means "to die," without any reference to its original literal action. *Spill the beans.* Literal origin: Some sources trace this phrase back to an ancient Greek voting system, where beans were used to cast votes. Spilling the beans could reveal the outcome prematurely. Metaphorical meaning: Now, it means "to reveal a secret." *Break the ice.* Literal origin: In the past, breaking ice on rivers or lakes was necessary for ships to pass through. It also symbolized breaking barriers between groups. Metaphorical meaning: Now, it refers to easing tension in social situations or starting a conversation. *Bite the bullet.* Literal origin: Soldiers used to bite on a bullet during surgery without anesthesia to endure the pain. Metaphorical meaning: Today, it means "to endure a painful or difficult situation bravely."

4. *Euphemistic Change.* Euphemisms arise when phrases are modified to sound more polite or less harsh. This often occurs in expressions related to death, bodily functions, or social taboos. Example: *Death-related euphemisms:* *Pass away* replaced *die* to soften the impact of the phrase. *Rest in peace (RIP)* is a respectful way of referring to someone's death. *Departed* or *gone to a better place* is often used in place of *dead*. *Job-related euphemisms:* *Let go* or *downsized* is often used instead of *fired* when referring to job termination. *Career transition* is sometimes used to refer to job loss. *Restructure* can be a euphemism for company layoffs. *Bodily function and health euphemisms:* *Use the restroom* instead of *go to the toilet*. *Expecting* instead of *pregnant*. *Senior citizen* instead of *old person*. *Visually impaired* instead of *blind*. *Crime and punishment-related euphemisms:* *Correctional facility* instead of *prison*. *Enhanced interrogation* instead of *torture*. *Collateral damage* instead of *civilian casualties*.

5. *Pejoration and Amelioration.* Semantic changes in phraseology are not limited to shifts in denotation; they also involve transformations in connotation, where the emotional or evaluative tone of a word or phrase changes over time. Two key processes in this domain are pejoration and amelioration. Pejoration refers to a negative shift in meaning, where a phrase or word acquires a more unfavorable or derogatory connotation than it originally had. Conversely, amelioration describes a positive shift, where the meaning of a phrase improves, gaining a more

favorable or prestigious connotation. These processes are often driven by cultural attitudes, societal changes, and shifts in usage patterns, reflecting how speakers' perceptions of certain concepts evolve. *Pejoration (Negative Shift)* Pejoration occurs when a phrase or word's meaning deteriorates over time, often reflecting a decline in social perception or a shift toward a more critical or negative judgment. This process can be influenced by historical events, changing moral standards, or cultural biases. Examples include: *Silly*: In Old English, the term *sælig* meant "happy," "blessed," or "innocent," carrying a positive or neutral tone. Over time, its meaning shifted through Middle English (*sely*, meaning "pitiable" or "weak") to its modern sense of "foolish" or "lacking seriousness." This gradual pejoration reflects a societal tendency to associate simplicity or naivety with a lack of intelligence. *Villain*: Originally, in Old French (*vilain*) and Middle English, this word referred to a "peasant" or "farmworker," a neutral description of social status. By the Renaissance, it had deteriorated to mean a "wicked" or "evil person," likely due to class prejudices that equated lower social standing with moral inferiority. *Cunning*: In Middle English, *cunning* meant "skillful" or "knowledgeable," derived from the Old English *cunnan* ("to know"). While it once had a positive or neutral connotation, it now often implies deceit or slyness, as in "a cunning plan," reflecting a pejorative shift toward mistrust of cleverness. Pejoration often occurs when a term becomes associated with undesirable traits or behaviors, influenced by societal attitudes or stereotypes. For instance, terms linked to marginalized groups or outdated professions may degrade as those groups or roles lose prestige.

Amelioration (Positive Shift). Amelioration, in contrast, involves an elevation in meaning, where a word or phrase gains a more positive or esteemed connotation. This process can result from cultural valorization, technological advancement, or shifts in social values. Examples include: *Knight*: In Old English, *cniht* simply meant "servant," "youth," or "attendant," a humble term without particular prestige. During the medieval period, as the feudal system and chivalric ideals developed, the term evolved to denote a "noble warrior" or "mounted soldier of high rank," reflecting a significant ameliorative shift tied to the romanticization of knighthood. *Pretty*: Originally, in Old English (*prættig*), this word meant "crafty" or "sly," with a neutral or slightly negative implication of trickery. Over time, its meaning improved to signify "attractive" or "pleasing," particularly in reference to physical appearance, a clear example of amelioration driven by changing aesthetic values. *Fond*: Derived from Middle English *fanned* ("foolish" or "infatuated"), this term once had a mildly negative or neutral connotation. By modern usage, *fond* has ameliorated to mean "affectionate" or "loving," as in "fond memories," reflecting a positive emotional shift. Amelioration often occurs when a term becomes linked to admired qualities or when societal changes elevate the status of a concept. For example, words associated with emerging technologies or heroic ideals may improve in tone as those domains gain cultural significance.

Broader Implications. Pejoration and amelioration highlight the fluidity of language and its deep connection to human experience. These shifts are not random but are shaped by extra-linguistic factors such as class dynamics, gender roles, and historical developments. For instance, pejoration is more common in words tied to femininity or lower social strata (e.g., *hussy* shifting from "housewife" to "immoral woman"), while amelioration often accompanies terms linked to power or progress (e.g., *marshal* moving from "horse servant" to "high-ranking officer"). By studying these changes, linguists can uncover how societal values influence linguistic evolution, offering a window into the interplay between language and culture.

Historical and Cultural Influences on Phraseology.

1. Medieval and Renaissance Influences. Many English idioms originated in medieval society, often reflecting feudalism, religion, and chivalry. Examples: *By hook or by crook* (referring to legal loopholes in land laws). *Turn the other cheek* (originating from biblical teachings).

2. The Impact of Colonialism and Globalization. The British Empire's expansion led to the borrowing of phraseological units from other languages. Examples: *C'est la vie* (French for "that's life").

3. The Influence of the Industrial and Digital Revolutions. Technological progress has introduced new phraseological expressions, some of which have changed meaning over time. Examples: *Go viral* (originally related to viruses, now used for rapidly spreading online content). *Boot up* (originating from early computing terminology, now commonly used in everyday language).

Factors Influencing Semantic Changes in Phraseology.

1. Linguistic Factors

- Polysemy: Words naturally develop multiple meanings over time.

- Ellipsis: Some words in expressions are omitted, leading to a shift in meaning (e.g., long story short).

2. Extra linguistic Factors. *Historical Events*: Wars, revolutions, and social changes contribute to phraseological shifts. *Cultural Evolution*: Changes in social norms and values impact idiomatic expressions. *Technological Advancements*: New inventions modify language use.

Semantic changes in English phraseology reflect the continuous evolution of language. The transformation of phraseological units is driven by historical, social, and linguistic factors. Understanding these changes provides valuable insights into the development of English and helps linguists, historians, and language learners grasp the dynamic nature of idiomatic expressions.

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