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Investigating semantic shifts in words related to technological advancement in English

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Abstract

This article aims at investigating semantic change in words connected to technological progress in English. The meanings of one word in different context were compared. Having analyzed semantic aspect in words the following findings were detected: 1) the most frequently implemented type of semantic change was generalization which facilitated to the formation of new meaning because of technological advancement. 2) New terms emerged mostly due to widespread utilization of computer and the Internet. In order to be aware of changes occurring to the language during the era of technologies, one should learn about new terms and notions. It is essential not to fall behind of time.

Key words: *semantic shift, technological advancement, context, meaning, factors, term.*

Introduction

Language is not static; it changes over time. All language fields including semantics undergoes changes. Semantic shift is the process of changing the meaning of a word. Semantic change has been studied from different perspectives. Types of semantic shift, factors and consequences of semantic change were investigated by many researchers. Although a lot of examples within the surveys were introduced, there are no works



dedicated to meaning change in words in technological context. Therefore, the following two questions are to be taken into consideration when doing further research:

- 1) Which type of semantic shift was implemented the most frequently?
- 2) Which field of technological progress contributed to derive new meaning of a word?

Literature review

It is a well-known fact that a language is dynamic and changeable. Many scientists did researches on the field of semantics and the change of words' meanings. There are findings which prove that semantic change is a phenomenon which requires the consideration of correct usage of specific words which undergone changes in oral and written speech. The main aspects of semantic shift studied so far are types of semantic shift, factors influencing semantic shift, consequences of semantic shift. Most frequently observed types of semantic change are pejoration (degradation) and amelioration (elevation) of meaning; generalization and specialization of meaning and many others. Generalization (widening of meaning) and specialization (narrowing of meaning) are two historical semantic process that led to the qualitative modification of the English vocabulary (Borkowska, Kleparski, 2007). From the names of processes, it can be clear that generalization is the widening of a word's meaning, while specialization is narrowing of the meaning of the word. For example, French lexeme *chauffeur* originally meant 'a man who stokes a fire', gained a new sense of 'driver' which over time it became more specific in the usage of a 'driver of a motor vehicle' (Borowska, Kleparski, 2007). In addition to types, there are also researches on factors of semantic change. Several studies suggest that there are factors which contributed to semantic shift in words. Somila Daiu (2015) suggested four main factors. They are as follows: internal linguistic factors, historical factors, social factors and psychological factors. One of the reasons why the language changes is that people tend to express their thoughts correctly and much better (Daiu, 2015). While Septika S. Tobing (2010) enlisted different factors which are: happening by chance; need of new meaning; scientific words; taboo and etc. Regarding the consequences of semantic changes, they can be classified into four big groups: semantic changes of denotative meaning; semantic changes that are not part of denotative meaning; a word copies the semantic structure of another word; a new concept equivalent with a lexical unit (Daiu, 2015). These groups are based on the changes in meaning which include denotative meaning divided in analogical and not analogical changes. To be more precise, they are divided into groups according to whether the new meaning is created in analogy with the old one or not. Although there are a lot of researches on semantic shift and its types, there is lack of investigation on the terms related to technological advancement. Accordingly, this paper aims to survey the difference of meanings of words used in direct and technological context of the same word.

Research method and process

The primary research method for this study was a context meaning difference. The meaning of the same word was compared based on the context it was used in. Mainly



the difference was identified in two different contexts: in a context where the word is used in direct (denotative) meaning and the context where the word is used according to technological progress (technological terms). Technology based words and terms were taken from different technological discoveries and inventions. The main source used was online Merriam-Webster dictionary. The examples, denotative and contextual meanings were taken from this dictionary.

Results

Word	Direct (denotative) meaning	Contextual (technological) meaning
<i>Mouse</i>	- any of numerous small rodents (as of the genus <i>Mus</i>) with pointed snout, rather small ears, elongated body, and slender tail	- a small mobile manual device that controls movement of the cursor and selection of function on a computer
<i>Bug</i>	- any of an order of insects that have sucking mouthparts, forewings thickened at the base, and incomplete metamorphosis and are often economic pests	- is a coding error that interferes with a website's normal operation
<i>Address</i>	- a place where a person or organization may be communicated with	- is a series of numbers that identifies a network adapter; a series of usually alphanumeric characters that specifies the storage location (as on a network or in a computer's memory) of particular information
<i>Cloud</i>	- a visible mass of particles of condensed vapor (such as water or ice) suspended in the atmosphere of a planet (such as the earth) or moon	- the computers and connections that support cloud computing (often used before another noun: cloud storage/backup; aloud software; cloud computing – is a method of



		storing data across remote servers instead of on a local computer
<i>Cache</i>	- a hiding place especially for concealing and preserving provisions or implements; a secure place of storage	- a computer memory with very short access time used for storage of frequently or recently used instructions or data – called also <i>cache memory</i>
<i>Window</i>	- an opening especially in the wall of a building for admission of light and air that is usually closed by casements or sashes containing transparent material (such as glass) and capable of being opened and shut	- any of various rectangular boxes appearing on a computer screen that display files or program output, that can usually be moved and resized, and that facilitate multitasking

Discussion

The words included in result part are polysemantic words. Although the results show us that words mainly are computer terms, they are not newly originated. The additional meaning of the above given words emerged. In other words, it is widening of meaning of the word. With the invention of computer these words gained additional meaning which can be used in the context of technology. If we compare the following two sentences, we can conclude that the correct utilization of the word in right context is crucial in both writing and speech:

1. The house was infested with *mice* and rats.
2. He moved the *mouse* to click on the icon.

The context and meaning are different. In first case the *mouse* is a small animal, which is considered to be rodents. In the second case the *mouse* is a small device for convenient usage of computer. Moreover, one more conclusion can be made that the usage of the word 'mouse' to define exactly this device is built upon the similarity of the features of both of them.

1. Police found a *cache* of stolen cars in the woods.
2. Her new laptop has one megabyte of *cache*.

The first sentence gives the meaning of 'cache' as 'hidden'. When in the second sentence 'cache' means the unnecessary files or data in the computer which should be



deleted and cleaned. However, the aspects of technological advancement where the terms could be taken from are too narrow. More spheres of technology were expected to be considered, but the results could be found only in the sphere of computer and the Internet.

Conclusion

Semantic shift which was witnessed owing to technological progress was mostly generalization or widening of the word's meaning. But they are not necessarily homonyms. Concerning the sphere of technology where most new meanings emerged, they were computer and the Internet as the most commonly utilized device or invention is computer nowadays. New terms of computer sphere are required to be acquired by modern society in order to catch up with time and modern trends. Further research can be done in the direction of other aspects of technological progress and other types of semantic shift. Obviously, the same issues are expected to be investigated in other languages except for English.

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