

# THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

SEVENTH EDITION

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# Words and Meanings

## CHAPTER 10



A word is the basic stuff of language. Sounds and letters are the way words are expressed, and grammar is the way words are arranged. Thus language is centrally words. Linguists tend to prefer the study of sounds (phonology) and grammar (morphosyntax) over words (lexis) because those first two have comparatively strict regularities that can be described as more or less fixed “laws” or “rules.” And linguists love laws. Yet language regularity is fuzzy, variable, and only imperfectly predictable, unlike good human laws and all natural laws. So the lack of strictness in our vocabulary is not an aberration but is really typical of language.

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure famously compared the rules of language to those of chess. But the American linguist Charles Hockett responded that they are more like the rules of sandlot baseball—they are whatever one player can persuade other players to accept, so they are uncertain and constantly changing. Hockett was right. Language is the usage of people who speak the language. The “rules” of language are descriptions of what people tend to do; they are not prescriptions from outside the language that people have to follow.

English has an extraordinarily large vocabulary, much larger than that of many other languages, because of its extensive contacts with other languages, because of the large numbers of people all over the world who have come to use it, and because of the increasingly manifold purposes for which it is used. It is hardly surprising that the large English vocabulary includes words most of us have little occasion to use and may not recognize at all. You have undoubtedly encountered some such words already in the course of reading this book. But here are a few others that are unfamiliar to many speakers of English: *aglet*, *blatherskite*, *crepuscule*, *dottle*, *eidolon*, *felly*, *gudgeon*, *hajji*, *incunabulum*, *jerican*, *kyphotic*, *latitudinarian*, *maculate*, *navicular*, *osculate*, *pyx*, *quidnunc*, *recuse*, *swarf*, *toque*, *usufruct*, *vexillology*, *warison*, *Xanthippe*, *yashmak*, *zori*. If you know at least seven of those words (all of which are in any good dictionary), you are an eruditionally nonpareil polymath. If you know half of them, you should have written this book instead of its author.



Moreover, the English word stock is constantly growing. Several websites and newspaper articles now cater to the student of neologisms and language trends. *Language Log*, a group blog started by Mark Liberman and Geoffrey Pullum, with its catchy subtitle, “Far from the madding gerund: and other dispatches from the Language Log,” provides blogs by linguists from around the world, covering up-to-the-minute language developments. Other timely sources are mentioned below, and still more can be found in this book’s bibliography under the “Online Sources” section. In *Time* magazine’s “Top 10 Everything of 2011,” Katy Steinmetz recorded buzzwords for that year, many of which were older but were prominent then. Five of these words were *occupy*, *planking*, *carmageddon*, *super PAC*, and *hacktivist*. *Occupy* began with a group of protesters with a vague, lefty anti-Wall Street impulse. A few started camping out at a park in Manhattan’s financial district. Then, as the movement coalesced around the idea that it represented “the 99%”—as opposed to the richest 1%—Occupy protests spread to Boston, London, even Antarctica. Another social-media phenomenon was *planking*. For reasons that may never be clear to historians, this trend of people positioning themselves horizontally in unusual or even dangerous places to be photographed for social-media sites went viral in 2011. Planking apparently began in Australia, but eventually the phenomenon had people going prostrate the world over. *Carmageddon* was coined in 2011 in anticipation of “an existential threat to motorized Los Angeles.” Early that summer, Los Angeles transportation officials announced that a 10-mile (16 km) stretch of the 405 freeway would be closed for a weekend in July. The media anticipated an apocalyptic traffic jam, but *carmageddon* turned out to be anticlimactic, just like most end-of-the-world predictions. In Washington, D.C., the term *super PAC* emerged in 2010 to describe political action committees that can spend unlimited amounts of money in elections; in the run-up to the 2012 elections, this term became popularized, particularly after satirical newsman Stephen Colbert formed a super PAC to highlight the corporate powers behind campaign finance. His slogan is still the one to beat: “Making a better tomorrow, tomorrow.” Hacktivists, meanwhile, took matters into their own hands, or rather, keyboards. Hacking is usually considered a criminal act, but in 2011 it was also a political one. *Hacktivist* describes someone who uses invasive technology skills to advance a cause and leak information. Hacktivist group Anonymous was the highest profile, with its repeated attacks on “corrupt companies.”

The Global Language Monitor at <http://www.languagemonitor.com/> tracks English-language trends worldwide, and GLM selected as its top phrase of 2011 *Arab Spring* (often paired with *digital democracy*) ‘the revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests in the Arab world that also used social media to organize, communicate, and raise awareness.’ For 2011, the aforementioned *occupy* was the word of the year (or WOTY) for the American Dialect Society (ADS), and in 2010, the ADS WOTY went to *app* ‘a software program for a computer or phone operating system.’ Few, if any, of these will long survive, but all are illustrative of the creativity of wordsmiths.

Many people find the study of words and their meanings interesting and colorful. Witness the many e-mails and letters to the editors of newspapers

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and magazines—all devoted to the uses and misuses of words, but usually misinformed. The misinformation is sometimes etymological in nature, like the old and oft-recurring wheeze that *sirloin* is so called because King Henry VIII (or James I or Charles II) liked a loin of beef so well that he knighted one, saying “Arise, Sir Loin” at the conferring of the accolade. In reality, the term comes from French *sur-* ‘over, above’ and *loin* and is thus a cut of meat from the top of the loin. It is likely, however, that the popular explanation of the knighting has influenced the modern spelling of the word.

Such fanciful tales appeal to our imagination and therefore are difficult to exorcise. The real history of words, however, is interesting enough to make unnecessary such fictions as that about the knighting of the steak. When the speakers of a language have need for a new word, they can make one up, borrow one from some other language, or adapt one of the words they already use by changing its meaning. The first two techniques for increasing the vocabulary will be the subjects of the next two chapters; the third will occupy our attention for the remainder of this one.

## SEMANTICS AND CHANGE OF MEANING

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The meaning of a word is what those who use it intend or understand that it represents. Semantics is the study of meaning in all of its aspects. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which was mentioned in Chapter 1, proposes that the way our language formulates meaning affects the way we respond to the world or even perceive it. On an ordinary level, language clearly influences our daily activities and habits of thought. Because two individuals can be referred to by the same word—for example, *Irish*—we assume that they must be alike in certain stereotyped ways. Thus we may unconsciously believe that all the Irish have red hair, drink too much, and are quarrelsome. General Semantics, a study founded by Alfred Korzybski, is an effort to pay attention to such traps that language sets for us (Hayakawa and Hayakawa). Our concern in this chapter, however, is not with such studies, but rather with the ways in which the meanings of words change over time to allow us to talk about new things or about old things in a new light.

### VARIABLE AND VAGUE MEANINGS

The meanings of words vary with place, time, and situation. Thus the noun *tonic* may mean ‘soft drink made with carbonated water’ in parts of eastern New England, though elsewhere it usually means ‘liquid medicinal preparation to invigorate the system’ or, in the phrase *gin and tonic*, ‘quinine water.’ In the usage of musicians, the same word may also mean the first tone of a musical scale. And some linguists use it to mean the syllable of maximum prominence in an intonational phrase.

A large number of educated speakers and writers, for whatever reason, object to *disinterested* in the sense ‘uninterested, unconcerned’—a sense it previously had but lost for a while—and want the word to have only the meaning



'impartial, unprejudiced.' The criticized use has nevertheless gained such ground that it has practically driven out the other one. That change causes no harm to language as communication. We have merely lost a synonym for *impartial* and gained one for *indifferent*.

Many words in frequent use, like *democracy* and *nice*, have meanings that are more or less subjective and hence vague. For instance, after seeing a well-dressed person take the arm of a blind and ragged person and escort that person across a crowded street, a sentimental man remarked, "That was true democracy." It was, of course, ordinary human decency, as likely to occur in a monarchy or dictatorship as in a democracy. The semantic element of the word *democracy* in the speaker's mind was 'kindness to those less fortunate than oneself.' He approved of such kindness, as we all do, and because he regarded both kindness and democracy as good, he equated the two.

Some words are generally used with very loose meanings, and we could not easily get along without such words—*nice*, for example, as in "She's a nice person" (meaning that she has been well brought up and is kind, gracious, and generally well-mannered), in contrast to "That's a nice state of affairs" (meaning it is a perfectly awful state of affairs). There is certainly nothing wrong with expressing pleasure and appreciation to a hostess by a heartfelt "I've had a very nice [or even "awfully nice"] time." To seek for a more "accurate" word, one of more precise meaning, would be self-conscious and affected. Vagueness is often useful.

### ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING

The belief is widespread, even among some otherwise well-informed people, that what a word means today is what it meant in the past—preferably what it meant originally, if it were possible to discover that. Such belief is frequent for borrowed words, the mistaken idea being that the meaning of the word in our English and the meaning of the foreign word from which the English word was derived must be, or at least ought to be, the same. An appeal to etymology to determine a word's present-day meaning is as unreliable as an appeal to spelling to determine modern pronunciation. The etymology of *etymology* itself often contributes to this confusion because its root *etymon*, Greek for 'true,' is misunderstood as referring to a word's one 'true' meaning, but as most all words change in meaning over time, over centuries a single word can have many different meanings, all true. Most people, for example, do not know that there is a loaf of bread in the word *lord*, which originated in the Old English *bláford*, a compound of *bláf* for 'bread' (from whence comes today's 'loaf') and *weard* for 'guardian' (or 'warden'), originally meaning 'the one who provides and protects the bread,' no small thing with Vikings on the prowl. *Etymology*, therefore, is the fascinating study of a word's history, from its earliest recorded occurrence to its transmission from one language to another, and includes an analysis of a word's parts and the identification of its cognates.

So we see that change of meaning—semantic change—may, and frequently does, alter the so-called etymological sense, which may have become altogether

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obsolete. (The etymological sense is only the earliest sense we can *discover*, not necessarily the very earliest.) The study of etymologies is richly rewarding. A word's etymology may, for instance, throw light on how a present-day meaning developed or may reveal something about the working of the human mind, though it is of no help in determining for us what a word "actually" means today.

Certain popular writers, overeager to display their learning, have asserted that words are misused when they depart from their etymological meanings. Thus Ambrose Bierce, in what he called a "blacklist of literary faults," declared that *dilapidated*, because of its ultimate derivation from Latin *lapis* 'stone,' could appropriately be used only of a stone structure. Such a notion, if true, would commit us to the parallel assertions that only what actually has roots can properly be eradicated, since *eradicate* is ultimately derived from Latin *radix* 'root'; that only a strong dislike for a food's flavor can merit disgust, since *disgust* is from the Old French *gouster* 'to taste' and *des-* 'not, opposite of'; that *calculation* be restricted to counting pebbles (Latin *calx* 'stone'); and that *sinister* be applied only to leftists and *dexterous* to rightists. By the same token we should have to insist that we could *admire* only what we could wonder at, because the English word comes from Latin *ad* 'at' plus *mīrārī* 'to wonder'—as indeed Hamlet so used it in "Season your admiration for a while / With an attent eare." Or we might insist that *giddy* persons must be divinely inspired, because *gid* is a derivative of *god* (*enthusiastic*, from Greek, also had this meaning, from Greek *theos* for 'god'); that only women may be *hysterical*, because *hysteria* originates in the Greek *hystera* for 'womb'; or that only men may be *virtuous*, because *virtue* is derived from Latin *virtus* 'manliness,' itself a derivative of *vir* 'man.' Now, alas for the wicked times in which we live, *virtue* is applied to few men and not many women. *Virile*, also a derivative of *vir*, has retained all of its earlier meaning and has even added to it.

From these few examples, it must be obvious that we cannot ascribe anything like "fixed" meanings to words. Meanings are variable and have often wandered far from what their etymologies suggest. To suppose that invariable meanings exist, quite apart from context, is to be guilty of a type of naïveté that vitiates clear thinking.

### HOW MEANING CHANGES

Meaning is particularly likely to change in a field undergoing rapid expansion and development, such as computer technology. All of the following terms had earlier meanings that were changed when they were applied to computers: *bookmark*, *boot*, *cookie*, *floppy*, *follower*, *friend*, "like," *mail*, *mouse*, *notebook*, "poke," *save*, *server*, *spam*, *surf*, *troll*, *virtual*, *virus*, *wallpaper*, *web*, *window*, and *zip*.

How such words change their meaning, though unpredictable, is not chaotic, but follows certain paths. First, it is necessary to distinguish between the sense—literal meaning or denotation—of an expression and its associations or connotations. *Father*, *dad*, and *the old man* may all refer to the same person, but the associations of the three expressions are likely to be different, as are those of

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other synonymous terms like *dada*, *daddy*, *governor*, *pa*, *pappy*, *pater*, *poppa*, *pops*, and *sire*. Words change in both their senses and their associations. A sense may expand to include more referents than it formerly had (generalization), contract to include fewer referents (specialization), or shift to include a quite different set of referents (transfer of meaning). The associations of a word may become worse (pejoration) or better (amelioration) and stronger or weaker than they formerly were. Each of these possibilities is examined below.

## GENERALIZATION AND SPECIALIZATION

One classification of meaning is based on the scope of things to which a word can apply. That is to say, meaning may be generalized (extended, widened), or it may be specialized (restricted, narrowed). When we increase the scope of a word, we reduce the number of features in its definition that restrict its application. The word undergoes generalization. For instance, *tail* in earlier times seems to have meant 'hairy caudal appendage, as of a horse.' When we eliminated the hairiness (or the horsiness) from the meaning, we increased its scope, so that in Modern English the word means simply 'caudal appendage' or more generally 'the last part' of anything.

Similarly, a *mill* was earlier a place for making things by the process of grinding, that is, for making meal. The words *meal* and *mill* are themselves related, as one might guess from their similarity. A mill is now, however, a place for making or processing things: the grinding has been eliminated, so that we may speak of a cotton mill, a steel mill, or even a gin mill. The word *corn* earlier meant 'grain' and is in fact related to the word *grain*. It is still used in this general sense in Britain, as in the "Corn Laws," but specifically it may refer there to either oats (for animals) or wheat (for human beings). In American usage, *corn* denotes 'maize,' which is of course not at all what Keats meant in his "Ode to a Nightingale" when he described Ruth as standing "in tears amid the alien corn."

The building in which corn, regardless of its meaning, is stored is called a barn. *Barn* earlier denoted a storehouse for barley; the word is, in fact, a compound of two Old English words, *bere* 'barley' and *ærn* 'house.' By eliminating the barley feature of its earlier sense, the scope of this word has been extended to mean a storehouse for any kind of grain. American English has still further generalized the term by eliminating the grain, so that *barn* may mean also a place for housing livestock or, more recently, a warehouse (a truck barn), a building for sales (an antique barn), or merely a large, open structure (a barn of a hotel).

The opposite of generalization is specialization, a process in which, by adding to the features of meaning, the referential scope of a word is reduced. *Deer*, for instance, used to mean simply 'animal' (OE *dēor*), as its German cognate *Tier* still does. Shakespeare writes of "Mice, and Rats, and such small Deere" (*King Lear*). By adding something particular (the family *Cervidae*) to the sense, the scope of the word has been reduced, and it has come to mean a specific kind of animal. Similarly, *hound* used to mean 'dog,' like its German cognate

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*Hund*. To this earlier meaning we have added the idea of hunting and thereby restricted the scope of the word, which to us means a special sort of dog, a hunting dog. In another example, to the earlier content of *liquor* 'fluid' (compare *liquid*) we have added 'alcoholic.'

*Meat* once meant simply 'solid food' of any kind, a meaning that it retains in *sweetmeat* and throughout the King James Bible ("meat for the belly," "meat and drink"), though it acquired the more specialized meaning 'flesh' by the late Middle English period. *Starve* (OE *steorfan*) used to mean simply 'to die,' as its German cognate *sterben* still does. Chaucer writes, for instance, "But as hire man I wol ay lyve and sterve" (*Troilus and Criseyde*). A specific way of dying had to be expressed by a following phrase—for example, "of hunger, of cold." The OED cites "starving with the cold" as late as 1867. The word came to be associated primarily with death by hunger, and for a while there existed a compound verb *hunger-starve*. Although the usual meaning of *starve* now is 'to die of hunger,' we also use the phrase "starve to death," which in earlier times would have been tautological. An additional, toned-down meaning grows out of hyperbole, so that "I'm starving" may mean only 'I'm very hungry.' The word, of course, is used figuratively, as in "starving for love," which, as we have seen, once meant 'dying for love.' This word furnishes a striking example of specialization and proliferation of meaning.

## TRANSFER OF MEANING

There are a good many ways to transfer a word's meaning. *Long* and *short* are metaphorically transferred from space to time in *a long day*, *a short while*; similarly with such nouns as *length* (of a room or a conversation) and *space* (of a field or an hour). Metaphor is also involved when we extend the word *foot* 'lowest extremity of an animal' to other things, as in *foot of a mountain*, *tree*, and so forth, because those are alike in being at the bottom of their things. The meaning of *foot* is shifted in a different way (by metonymy) when we use it for a length of twelve inches, by associating part of our anatomy with its typical length. We do much the same thing with *hand* when we use it as a unit of measure for the height of horses. The somewhat similar synecdoche involves equating more and less comprehensive terms, as in using *cat* for any 'feline' (lion, tiger, etc.), or *earth* 'ground' for the planet of which it is a part, or *wheels* for 'car.'

Meaning may be transferred from one sensory faculty to another (synesthesia), as when we use *clear* for what we can hear rather than see, as in *clear-sounding*. *Loud* is transferred the opposite way, from hearing to sight, when we speak of *loud colors*. *Sweet*, with primary reference to taste, may be extended to hearing (*sweet music*), smell ("The rose smells *sweet*"), and all senses at once (*a sweet person*). *Sharp* may be transferred from feeling to taste, and so may *smooth*. *Warm* may shift its usual reference from feeling to sight, as in *warm colors*, and along with *cold* may refer in a general way to all senses, as in *a warm (cold) welcome*.

Abstract meanings may evolve from more concrete ones. In prehistoric Old English times, the compound *understand* must have meant 'to stand among,'

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that is, 'close to'—*under* presumably having had the meaning 'among,' as do its German and Latin cognates *unter* and *inter*. But this literal concrete meaning gave way to the abstract sense the word has today. Parallel shifts from concrete to abstract in words meaning 'understand' can be seen in German *verstehen* ('to stand before'), Greek *epistamai* ('I stand upon'), Latin *comprehendere* ('to take hold of'), and Italian *capire*, based on Latin *capere* 'to grasp,' among others.

The first person to use *grasp* in an abstract sense, as in "He has a good grasp of his subject," was coining a metaphor. But the shift from concrete to abstract, or from physical to mental, has been so complete that we no longer think of this usage as metaphorical: *grasp* has come to be synonymous with *comprehension* in some contexts, even though in other uses the word has retained its physical reference. *Glad* is a similar case, for earlier it meant 'smooth,' though this word has completely lost the earlier meaning (except in the proper name *Gladstone*, if surnames may be thought of as having such meaning) and may now refer only to a serene mental state. Likewise, meaning may shift from subjective to objective, as when *pitiful*, earlier 'full of pity, compassionate,' came to mean 'deserving of pity'; or the shift may be the other way around, as when *fear*, earlier an objective 'danger,' came to mean 'terror,' a state of mind.

#### ASSOCIATION OF IDEAS

Change of meaning is often due to association of ideas, whether by metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, or otherwise, as discussed above. Latin *penna*, for example, originally meant 'feather' but came to be used to indicate an instrument for writing, whether made of a feather or not, because of the association of the quill with writing, hence our *pen* (via Old French). Similarly, *paper* is from *papyrus*, a kind of Egyptian plant, though paper is nowadays made from rags, wood, straw, and the like. Sensational magazines used to be printed on paper of inferior quality made from wood pulp. So they were derisively called wood-pulp magazines, or simply *pulps*, in contrast to the *slicks*, those printed on paper of better quality. A computer *mouse* is so called because of a fancied resemblance between the little rodent and that instrument, with its tail-like cord and scurrying movement on a pad. An electronic *virus* can affect the proper functions of a computer program just as its biological namesake can a body of flesh. An extreme result of such infection is a computer *crash*, in which electronic programs collapse, just as a dynamited building or missile-hit airliner does.

*Silver* has come to be used for eating utensils made of silver—an instance of synecdoche—and sometimes, by association, for flatware made of other substances, so that we may speak of stainless steel or even plastic silverware. The product derived from latex and earlier known as *caoutchouc* soon acquired a less difficult name, *rubber*, from association with one of its earliest uses, making erasures on paper by rubbing. *China* 'earthenware' originally designated porcelain of a type first manufactured in the country whose name it bears. And the name of a native American bird, *turkey*, derives from the fact that our ancestors somehow got the notion that it was of Turkish origin. In French,

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the same creature is called *dinde*, that is, *d'Inde* 'from India.' The French thought that America was India at the time when the name was conferred. These names arose out of associations long since lost.

#### TRANSFER FROM OTHER LANGUAGES

Other languages have also affected English word meanings. *Thing*, for example, in Old English meant 'assembly, court of law, legal case,' a meaning that it had in the other Germanic languages and has retained in Icelandic, as in *Alþingi* 'all-assembly,' the name of the Icelandic parliament. Latin *rēs* denoted 'object, possession, business matter, legal case.' Because of the overlapping legal uses, *thing* acquired the other meanings of Latin *rēs*, that is, practically any *thing*. German *Ding* had, quite independently, the same semantic history. A word whose meaning has been thus affected by a foreign word with overlapping sense is called a calque.

#### SOUND ASSOCIATIONS

Similarity or identity of sound may likewise influence meaning. *Fay*, from the Old French *fae* 'fairy' has influenced *fey*, from Old English *fæge* 'fated, doomed to die' to such an extent that *fey* is widely used nowadays in other senses, such as 'fairylike, campy' or 'visionary.' The two words are pronounced alike, and there is an association of meaning at one small point: fairies are mysterious; so is being fated to die, even though we all are so fated. There are many other instances of such confusion through clang association (i.e., association by sound rather than meaning). For example, in conservative use *fulsome* means 'offensively insincere' as in "fulsome praise," but it is often used in the sense 'extensive' because of the clang with *full*. Similarly, *fruition* is from Latin *frui* 'to enjoy' by way of Old French, and the term originally meant 'enjoyment' but now usually means 'state of bearing fruit, completion'; and *fortuitous* earlier meant 'occurring by chance' but now is generally used as a synonym for *fortunate* because of its similarity to that word.

#### PEJORATION AND AMELIORATION

In addition to a change in its sense or literal meaning, a word may also undergo change in its associations, especially of value. A word may, as it were, go downhill, or it may rise in the world; there is no way of predicting what its career may be. *Politician* has had a downhill development, or pejoration (from Latin *pejor* 'worse'). So has *knave* (OE *cnafa*), which used to mean simply 'boy'—it is cognate with German *Knabe*, which retains the earlier meaning. *Knave* came to mean 'serving boy' (specialization), like that well-known knave of hearts who was given to stealing tarts, and later 'bad human being' (pejoration and generalization) so that we may now speak of an old knave or a knavish woman. On its journey downhill this word has thus undergone both specialization and generalization; the knave in cards (for which the usual American term is *jack*) is a further specialization. *Boor* once meant 'peasant'

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but has also had a pejorative development. Its cognate *Bauer* is the usual equivalent of *jack* or *knave* in German card playing, whence English *bower*—as in *right bower* and *left bower*—in the card game euchre.

*Lewd*, earlier 'lay, as opposed to clerical,' underwent pejoration to 'ignorant,' 'base,' and finally 'obscene,' which is the only meaning to survive. A similar fate has befallen the Latin loanword *vulgar*, ultimately from *vulgus* 'the common people,' although the earlier meaning is retained in Vulgar Latin, the Latin spoken by ordinary people until it developed into the various Romance languages. *Censure* earlier meant 'opinion,' but it has come to mean 'bad opinion.' *Criticism* is well on its way to the same pejorative end, nowadays ordinarily meaning 'adverse judgment' rather than earlier 'analysis, evaluation.' *Deserts* (as in *just deserts*) likewise started out indifferently to mean simply what one deserved, whether good or bad, but has come to mean 'punishment.' A more complex example is *silly*, which has roots in the Old English *sælig*, 'timely,' and the masculine Old English noun *sæl* 'time, occasion, opportunity,' and it first improved its meaning to 'happy, blessed' and then to 'innocent, simple'; but because simplicity, a desirable quality under most circumstances, was thought of as foolishness, the word developed our pejorative meaning. *Silly*'s German cognate *selig* progressed only to the second stage, 'happy, blessed,' though that word may be used facetiously to mean 'tipsy.'

The opposite of pejoration is amelioration, the improvement in value of a word. Like *censure* and *criticize*, *praise* started out indifferently—it is simply *appraise* 'put a value on' with loss of its initial unstressed syllable (aphesis). But *praise* has come to mean 'value highly.' The meaning of the word has ameliorated, or elevated. The development of *nice*, going back to Latin *nescius* 'ignorant,' is similar. The Old French form used in English meant 'simple,' a meaning retained in Modern French *niais*. In the course of its career in English, it has had the meanings 'foolishly particular' and then merely 'particular' (as in *a nice distinction*). Now it often means no more than 'pleasant' or 'proper,' having become an all-purpose word of approbation.

Amelioration is also illustrated by *knight*, which used to mean 'servant,' as its German relative *Knecht* still does. This particular word has obviously moved far from its earlier meaning, denoting as it usually now does a man who has been honored by his sovereign and who is entitled to prefix *Sir* to his name. *Earl* (OE *eorl*) once meant simply 'man,' though in ancient Germanic times it was specially applied to a warrior, who was almost invariably a man of high standing, in contrast to a *churl* (OE *ceorl*), or ordinary freeman. When the Norman kings brought many French titles to England, *earl* remained as the equivalent of Continental *count*.

## TABOO AND EUPHEMISM

Some words undergo pejoration because of a taboo against talking about the things they name; the replacement for a taboo term is a *euphemism* (from a Greek word meaning 'good-sounding'). Euphemisms, in their turn, are often subject to pejoration, eventually becoming taboo. Then the whole cycle starts again.

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It is not surprising that superstition should play a part in change of meaning, as when *sinister*, the Latin word for 'left' (the unlucky side), acquired its present baleful significance. The verb *die*, of Germanic origin, is not once recorded in Old English. Its absence from surviving documents does not necessarily mean that it did not exist in Old English. But in the writings that have come down to us, roundabout expressions such as "go on a journey" are used instead, perhaps because of superstitions connected with the word itself—superstitions that survive into our own day, when people (at least those whom we know personally) "pass away," "go to sleep," or "depart." Louise Pound, the first woman president of the Modern Language Association, collected an imposing and—to the irreverent—amusing list of words and phrases referring to death in her 1936 *American Speech* article "American Euphemisms for Dying, Death, and Burial." She concluded that "one of mankind's gravest problems is to avoid a straightforward mention of dying or burial."

Euphemism is especially frequent, and probably always has been, when we must come face to face with the less happy facts of our existence, for life holds even for the most fortunate of people experiences that are inartistic, violent, and hence shocking to contemplate in the full light of day—for instance, the first and last facts of human existence, birth and death, despite the sentimentality with which we have surrounded them. And it is certainly true that the sting of the latter is somewhat alleviated—for the survivors, anyway—by calling it by some other name, such as "the final sleep," which is among the many terms cited by Pound in the article just alluded to.

*Mortician* is a much flossier word than *undertaker* (which is itself a euphemism with such earlier meanings as 'helper,' 'contractor,' 'publisher,' and 'baptismal sponsor'), but the *loved one* whom he prepares for public view and subsequent interment in a *casket* (earlier a 'jewel box,' as in *The Merchant of Venice*) is just as dead as a *corpse* in a *coffin*. Such verbal subterfuges are apparently thought to rob the grave of some of its victory; the notion of death is thus made more tolerable to human consciousness than it would otherwise be. Birth is much more plainly alluded to nowadays than it used to be. There was a time, not so long ago, when *pregnant* was avoided in polite company. A woman who was *with child*, *going to have a baby*, *in a family way*, or *enceinte* would deliver during her *confinement*, or, if one wanted to be exceptionally fancy about it, her *accouchement*.

Ideas of decency profoundly affect language. During the Victorian era, ladies and gentlemen were very sensitive about using the word *leg*, *limb* being almost invariably substituted, sometimes even if only the legs of a piano were being referred to. In the very year that marks the beginning of Queen Victoria's long reign, Captain Frederick Marryat in his *Diary in America* (1837) noted the American taboo on this word when, having asked a young American lady who had taken a spill whether she had hurt her leg, she turned from him, "evidently much shocked, or much offended," later explaining to him that in America the word *leg* was never used in the presence of ladies. Later, the captain visited a school for young ladies where he saw, according to his own testimony, "a square pianoforte with four limbs," all dressed in little frilled pantalettes. For reasons that it would be difficult to analyze, a similar taboo was placed on



*belly*, *stomach* being usually substituted for it, along with such nursery terms as *tummy* and *breadbasket* and the advertising copywriter's *midriff*.

*Toilet*, a diminutive of French *toile* 'cloth,' in its earliest English uses meant a piece of cloth in which to wrap clothes; subsequently it came to be used for a cloth cover for a dressing table, and then the table itself, as when Lydia Languish in Sheridan's late eighteenth-century comedy of manners *The Rivals* says, "Here, my dear Lucy, hide these books. Quick, quick! Fling *Peregrine Pickle* under the toilet—throw *Roderick Random* into the closet." (A century or so ago, the direction for the disposal of *Roderick Random* would have been as laughable as that for *Peregrine Pickle*, for *closet* was then frequently used for *water closet*, now practically obsolete, though the short form, WC, is still used in Britain, especially in signs.) *Toilet* came to be used as a euphemism for *privy*—itself a euphemism ('private place'), as are *latrine* (ultimately derived from Latin *lavāre* 'to wash') and *lavatory* (note the euphemistic phrase "to wash one's hands"). But *toilet* is now frequently replaced by *restroom*, *comfort station*, *powder room*, the coy *little boys'* (or *girls'*) *room*, or especially *bathroom*, even though there may be no tub and no occasion for taking a bath. One may even hear of a dog's "going to the bathroom" in the living room. The British also use *loo*, a word of obscure origin, or *Gents* and *Ladies* for public facilities. It is safe to predict that these evasions will in their turn come to be regarded as indecorous, and other expressions will be substituted for them. Even in Old English, that *facility* (another current term for it) was called *goldhordhūs* 'gold hoard house, treasury.'

Euphemism is likewise resorted to in reference to certain diseases. Like terms for birth, death, and excretion, those for disease are doubtless rooted in anxiety and superstition. An ailment of almost any sort is often referred to as a *condition* (*heart condition*, *kidney condition*, *malignant condition*, and so forth), so that *condition*, hitherto a more or less neutral word, has thus had a pejorative development, coming to mean 'bad condition.' *Leprosy* is no longer used by the American Medical Association because of its connotations and owing to patient activist Stanley Stein's efforts to combat leprosy stigma; it is now replaced by the colorless *Hansen's disease*. *Cancer* may be openly referred to, though it is notable that some astrologers have abandoned the term as a sign of the zodiac, referring instead to those born under Cancer as "Moon Children." The taboo has been removed from reference to the various specific venereal diseases, formerly known as *blood diseases* or *social diseases*, now impartially called *STDs* (for 'sexually transmitted diseases'). Recent years have seen a greater tendency toward straightforward language about such matters. No euphemisms seem to have arisen for *AIDS* or *HIV*.

Old age and its attendant decay have probably been made more bearable for many elderly people by calling them *senior citizens*. A similar verbal humanitarianism is responsible for a good many other vogueish euphemisms, such as *underprivileged* 'poor,' now largely supplanted by *disadvantaged*; *sick* 'insane'; and *special ed* 'a student experiencing learning difficulties or other disabilities.'

Sentimental equalitarianism has led us to attempt to dignify occupations by giving them high-sounding titles. Thus a *janitor* (originally a doorkeeper, from

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*Janus*, the doorkeeper of heaven in Roman mythology) has become a *custodian* (one who has custody), and *teachers* have become *educators* (a four-syllable term presumably making the designee twice as important as does a two-syllable one). There are many *engineers* who would not know the difference between a calculator and a cantilever; H. L. Mencken (*American Language*) cites, among a good many others, *demolition engineer* 'house wrecker,' *sanitary engineer* 'garbage man,' and *extermination engineer* 'rat catcher.'

Also, the meaning of *profession* has been generalized to such an extent that it no longer refers solely to, as *Webster's Third* describes it: 'a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation including instruction in skills and methods as well as in the scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods, maintaining by force of organization or concerted opinion high standards of achievement and conduct, and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work which has for its prime purpose the rendering of a public service,' a sense used by Joseph Addison in London's daily *Spectator*, March 24, 1711: "I am sometimes very much troubled, when I reflect upon the three great Professions of Divinity, Law, and Physick; how they are each of them over-burdened with Practitioners, and filled with Multitudes of Ingenious Gentlemen that starve one another." *Webster's Third* also illustrates the extended sense of the word with quotations referring to the "old profession of farming" and "men who make it their profession to hunt the hippopotamus." The term is now applied to practically any kind of employment, such as plumbing, waiting on tables, computer programming, or selling real estate. Such occupations are both useful and honorable, but they are not professions according to the old undemocratic and now outmoded sense of the term.

As long ago as 1838, James Fenimore Cooper in *The American Democrat* denounced such subterfuges as *boss* for *master* and *help* for *servant*. One of the great concerns of the progressive age in which we live would seem to be to ensure that nobody's feelings shall ever be hurt—at least not by words. And so the coinage of new euphemisms in what has been called "politically correct" language has made it often difficult to tell the seriously used term (*motivationally challenged* 'lazy') from the satirical one (*follicularly challenged* 'bald'). As the Roman satirist Juvenal put it, "In the present state of the world it is difficult not to write satire."

## THE FATE OF INTENSIFYING WORDS

Words rise and fall not only on a scale of goodness, by amelioration and pejoration, but also on a scale of strength. Intensifiers constantly stand in need of replacement, because they are so frequently used that their intensifying force is worn down. As an adverb of degree, *very* has only an intensifying function; it has altogether lost its independent meaning 'truly' (from Latin *verus* for 'true'), though as an adjective it survives with older meanings in phrases like "the very heart of the matter" and "the very thought of you." Chaucer does not use *very* as an intensifying adverb; the usage was doubtless beginning to be current in

his day, though the OED has no contemporary citations. The *verray* in Chaucer's description of his ideal soldier, "He was a verrey, parfit, gentil knyght," is an adjective; the meaning of the line is approximately 'He was a true, perfect, gentle knight.'

For Chaucer and his contemporaries, *full* seems to have been the usual intensifying adverb, though Old English *swīðe* (the adverbial form of *swīð* 'strong') retained its intensifying function until the middle of the fifteenth century, with independent meanings 'rapidly' and 'instantly' surviving much longer. *Right* was also widely used as an intensifier in Middle English times, as in Chaucer's description of the Clerk of Oxenford: "he nas [i.e., *ne was*] nat right fat," which is to say, 'He wasn't very fat.' This usage survives formally in *Right Reverend*, the title of a bishop; in *Right Honourable*, that of members of the Privy Council and a few other dignitaries; and in *Right Worshipful*, that of most lord mayors; as also in the more or less informal usages *right smart*, *right well*, *right away*, *right there*, and the like.

*Sore*, as in *sore afraid*, was similarly long used as an intensifier for adjectives and adverbs; its use to modify verbs is even older. Its cognate *sehr* is still the usual intensifier in German, in which language it has completely lost its independent use.

In view of the very understandable tendency of such intensifying words to become dulled, it is not surprising that we should cast about for other words to replace them when we really want to be emphatic. "It's been a *very* pleasant evening" seems quite inadequate under certain circumstances, and we may instead say, "It's been an *awfully* pleasant evening"; "*very* nice" may likewise become "*terribly* nice." In negative utterances, *too* is widely used as an intensifier: "Newberry's not *too* far from here"; "Juvenile-court law practice is not *too* lucrative." Also common in negative statements and in questions are *that* and *all that*: "I'm not *that* tired"; "Is he *all that* eager to go to Daytona?"

*Prodigiously* was for a while a vogueish substitute for *very*, so that a Regency "blood" like Thackeray's Jos Sedley might speak admiringly of a shapely woman as "a prodigiously fine gel" or even a "monstrous fine" one. The first of these now-forgotten intensifiers dates approximately from the second half of the seventeenth century; the second is about a century earlier. An anonymous contributor to the periodical *The World* in 1756 deplored the "pomp of utterance of our present women of fashion; which, though it may tend to spoil many a pretty mouth, can never recommend an indifferent one"; the writer cited in support of his statement the overuse of *vastly*, *horridly*, *abominably*, *immensely*, and *excessively* as intensifiers (Tucker 96).

### SOME CIRCUMSTANCES OF SEMANTIC CHANGE

The meaning of a word may vary according to the group that uses it. For all speakers, *smart* has the meaning 'intelligent,' but there is a specialized, especially British, class usage in which it means 'fashionable.' The meaning of a *smart woman* may thus vary with the social group of the speaker and may have to be inferred from the context. The earliest meaning of this word seems to have been 'sharp,' as in a *smart blow*. *Sharp* has also been used in the sense



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'up-to-date, fashionable,' as in *a sharp dresser*. But with the advent of grunge and bagginess, that use largely disappeared.

Similarly, a word's meaning may vary according to changes in the thing to which it refers. *Hall* (OE *heall*), for instance, once meant a very large roofed place, like the splendid royal dwelling place Heorot, where Beowulf fought Grendel. Such buildings were usually without smaller attached rooms, though Heorot had a "bower" (*būr*), earlier a separate cottage, but in *Beowulf* a bedroom to which the king and queen retired. (This word survives only in the sense 'arbor, enclosure formed by vegetation.') For retainers, the hall served as meeting room, feasting room, and sleeping room. Later *hall* came to mean 'the largest room in a great house,' used for large gatherings such as receptions and feasts, though the use of the word for the entire structure survives in the names of a number of manor houses such as Little Wenham Hall and Speke Hall in England and of some dormitory or other college buildings in America. A number of other meanings connote size and some degree of splendor, a far cry from the modern use of *hall* as a narrow passageway leading to rooms or as a vestibule or entrance passage immediately inside the front door of a house.

Another modification of meaning results from a shift in point of view. *Crescent*, from the present participle of Latin *cresco*, used to mean simply 'growing, increasing,' as in Pompey's "My powers are Cressent, and my Auguring hope / Sayes it will come to'th'full" (*Antony and Cleopatra*). The new, or growing, moon was thus called the crescent moon. There has been a shift, however, in the dominant element of meaning, the emphasis coming to be put entirely on shape, specifically on a particular shape of the moon, rather than upon growth. *Crescent* thus came to denote the moon between its new and quarter phases, whether increasing or decreasing, and then any similar shape, as in its British use for an arc-shaped street. Similarly, in *veteran* (Latin *veteranus*, a derivative of *vetus* 'old'), the emphasis has shifted from age to military service, though not necessarily long service, as we may speak of a *young veteran*. The fact that the phrase is etymologically self-contradictory is of no significance as far as present usage is concerned. The word is, of course, extended to other areas—for instance, *veteran politician*; in its extended meanings it continues to connote long experience and usually mature years as well.

#### VOGUE FOR WORDS OF LEARNED ORIGIN

When learned words become popular, they almost inevitably develop new, often less exact meanings. *Philosophy*, for instance, earlier 'love of wisdom,' has now a popular sense of 'practical opinion or body of opinions,' as in "the philosophy of business" and "homespun philosophy." An error in translation from a foreign language may result in a useful new meaning—for example, the English phrase *the psychological moment* means 'the most opportune time' ('the occasion when the mental atmosphere is most certain to be favorable to the full effect of an action or event') instead of 'the psychological *momentum*,' which is the proper translation of the German phrase *das psychologische Moment*, from which it comes; we see this misunderstanding put to good use when nineteenth-century British writer Edmund Gosse celebrated the

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achievement of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* in 1898, its centenary year, writing: "The association of . . . intensely brilliant and inflammatory minds at what we call *the psychological moment*, produced . . . the exquisite new flower of romantic poetry" (Roe 231). The popular misunderstanding of *inferiority complex*, first used to designate an unconscious sense of inferiority manifesting itself in assertive behavior, has given us a synonym for *diffidence*, *shyness*. It is similar with *guilt complex*, now used to denote nothing more psychopathic than a feeling of guilt, say, for eating a second slice of cake. The term *complex*, as first used by psychoanalysts more than a century ago, designated a type of aberration resulting from the unconscious suppression of emotions. The word soon passed into vogue and subsequently into general use to designate an obsession of any kind—a bee in the bonnet, as it were. Among its progeny are *Oedipus complex*, *herd complex*, and *sex complex*. The odds on its increasing fecundity would seem to be rather high.

Other terms from psychoanalysis and psychology, with which our times are so preoccupied, are *subliminal* 'influencing behavior below the level of awareness,' with reference to a sneaky kind of advertising technique; *behavior pattern*, meaning simply 'behavior'; *neurotic*, with a wide range of meaning, including 'nervous, high-strung, artistic by temperament, eccentric, or given to worry'; *compulsive* 'habitual,' as in *compulsive drinker* and *compulsive criminal*; and *schizophrenia* 'practically any mental or emotional disorder.'

It is not surprising that newer, popular meanings of what were once more or less technical terms should generally show a considerable extension of the earlier technical meanings. Thus, *sadism* has come to mean simply 'cruelty' and *exhibitionism* merely 'showing off,' without any of the earlier connotations of sexual perversion. The word *psychology* itself is often used to mean nothing more than 'mental processes' in a vague sort of way. An intense focus today on cultivating mental wellness and on healing what is compassionately referred to as *mental illness*—a less enlightened age than ours called it *insanity* or *madness*, and people suffering with it were said to be *crazy*—must to a large extent be responsible for the use of such terms as have been cited. Also notable is the already mentioned specialization of *sick* to refer to mental imbalance.

A favorite among the loosely used pseudoscientific vogue words of recent years is *image* in the sense 'impression that others subconsciously have of someone' (it is used precisely in this fashion in Susan Howatch's novel *Glittering Images*). A jaundiced observer of modern life might well suppose that what we actually are is not nearly so important as the image that we are able—to use another vogue word—to *project*. If the "image" is phony, what difference does it make? In a time when political campaigns are won or lost by the impression a candidate makes on the television screen, on YouTube, on Facebook, and on Twitter, and therefore in opinion polls, *image* can seem all important.

Among the more impressive vogue words of recent years are *charisma* and *charismatic* ('having') popular appeal' (earlier, 'a spiritual gift, such as that of tongues or prophesy'). The original sense of *ambience* or *ambiance* 'surrounding atmosphere, environment' has shifted considerably in the description of a chair as "crafted with a Spanish ambience" and has slipped away altogether in the exaggerated ad copy of a restaurant said to have "great food, served

professionally in an atmosphere of ambience." Other popular expressions are *narrative*, *discourse*, *paradigm*, *bottom line*, and *empowerment*.

Computer jargon has been a rich source of vogue words in recent years. Although *input* and *output* have been around since the early sixteenth and mid nineteenth centuries, respectively, their current fashionableness results from an extension of their use for information fed into and spewed out of a computer. *Interface* is another nineteenth-century term for the surface between any two substances—for example, oil floating on the top of a pan of water; it was taken up in computer use to denote the equipment that presents the computer's work for human inspection, such as a printout or a monitor display. Now the word is used as a noun to mean just 'connection' and as a verb to mean 'connect' or 'work together smoothly.' In 1870, *upload* was used to describe a horse-drawn cart "uploaded high" with hay; today, as any ten-year-old can tell you, *upload* means to 'transfer (data) to another computer system.'

#### LANGUAGE AND SEMANTIC MARKING

One of the awkward problems of English, and indeed of many languages, is a lack of means for talking about persons without specifying their sex. Apparently sexual differences have been so important for the human species and human societies that most languages make obligatory distinctions between males and females in both vocabulary and grammar. On those occasions, however, when one wishes to discuss human beings without reference to their sex, the obligatory distinctions are bothersome and often prejudicial. Consequently, in recent years many publishers and editors have tried to eliminate both lexical and grammatical bias toward masculine forms, which had been used generically for either sex.

The bias in question arises because of the phenomenon of *semantic marking*. A word like *sheep* is *unmarked* for sex, since it is applicable to either males or females of the species; there are separate terms *marked* for maleness (*ram*) and femaleness (*ewe*) when they are needed. If terms for all species followed this model, no problems would arise, but unfortunately they do not. *Duck* is like *sheep* in being unmarked for sex, but it has only one marked companion, namely, *drake* for the male. Because we lack a single term for talking about the female bird, we must make do with an ambiguity in the term *duck*, which refers either to a member of the species without consideration of sex or to a female. An opposite sort of problem arises with *lion* and *lioness*; the latter term is marked for femaleness, and the former is unmarked and therefore used either for felines without consideration of sex or for males of the species. The semantic features of these terms, as they relate to sex, can be shown as follows (+ means 'present,' - 'absent,' and  $\pm$  'unmarked'):

	Sheep	Ram	Ewe	Duck	Drake	Lion	Lioness
Male	$\pm$	+	-	$\pm$	+	$\pm$	-
Female	$\pm$	-	+	$\pm$	-	$\pm$	+



Lions and ducks are quite unconcerned with what we call them, but we human beings are very much concerned with what we call ourselves. Consequently, the linguistic problem of referring to men and women is both complex and emotional. *Woman* is clearly marked for femaleness, like *lioness*. Some persons interpret *man* as unmarked for sex, like *lion*. Others point out that it is so often used for males in contrast to females that it must be regarded as marked for maleness, like *drake*; they also observe that because of the male connotations of *man*, women are often by implication excluded from statements in which the word is used generically—for example, “Men have achieved great discoveries in science during the last hundred years.” By such language we may be led unconsciously to assume that males rather than females are the achievers of our species (which is simply not the whole story, as any fan of the *Return of the King* movie knows, cheering when King Théoden’s niece Éowyn whips off her helmet and declares, “I am no man,” then kills the Nazgûl Lord; see also J.R.R. Tolkien’s Book V, Chapter 6, “The Battle of the Pelennor Fields,” where Éowyn announces, “But no living man am I!”). If, as some etymologists believe, the word *man* is historically related to the word *mind*, its original sense was probably something like ‘the thinker,’ and it clearly denoted the species rather than the sex. In present use, however, the word is often ambiguous, as in the example cited a few lines above. The ambiguity can be resolved by context: “Men (the species) are mortal” versus “Men (the sex) have shorter lives than women.” Nevertheless, ambiguity is sometimes awkward and often annoying to the linguistically sensitive.

To solve the problem, would-be linguistic engineers have proposed respellings like *womyn* for *women*. (*Wymen* would be a phonetically more adequate, if politically less correct, spelling.) More realistically, editors and others have substituted other words (such as *person*) whenever *man* might be used of both sexes. Thus we have *chairperson* and *anchorperson* (for the one who anchors a TV news program), now truncated to *chair* and *anchor*. The new forms were bound to call forth some silly humor in variations like *woperson* (for ‘woman’). *Spokesman* was used as early as the sixteenth century, and, to the astonishment of some, *spokeswoman* appears in the seventeenth; yet in the 1970s *spokesperson* was thought a necessary non-sexist construction. The OED also lists *work-person* and *tradesperson* from the nineteenth century, *salesperson* and *stockperson* from the twentieth. Other efforts to avoid sexual reference, such as *supervisor* in place of *foreman* and *flight attendant* in place of both *steward* and *stewardess*, are now usual. And *housespouse* as a replacement for both *housewife* and its newfound mate, *househusband*, has a lilt and a swagger that make it appealing.

The grammatical problems of sexual reference are especially great in the choice of a pronoun after indefinite pronouns like *everyone*, *anyone*, and *someone*. Following the model of unmarked *man*, handbooks have recommended unmarked *he* in expressions like “Everyone tried his best,” with reference to a mixed group. The other generally approved option, “Everyone tried his or her best,” is wordy and can become intolerably so with repetition, as in “Everyone who has not finished writing his or her paper before he or she is required to move to his or her next class can take it with him or her.”

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In colloquial English, speakers long ago solved that problem by using the plural pronouns *they*, *them*, *their*, and *theirs* after indefinites. As the narrator says in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, "Everybody has their taste in noises as well as in other matters." Although still abjured by the linguistically fastidious, such use of *they* and its forms has been not uncommon since Chaucer's day, is increasing in formal English, and has in fact been recommended by professional groups like the National Council of Teachers of English. Idealists have also proposed a number of invented forms to fill the gap, such as *thon* (from *that one*), *he'er*, *he/she*, and *shem*, but almost no one has taken them seriously. Perhaps, as some think, one of the major languages interacting with English today will become the "new Scandinavian" (which gave us *them*), passing on to English a neologic pronoun that will solve this linguistic discombobulation; for example, Mandarin uses one word for *helhim*, *shelher*, and *it*: *tā* (Dunton-Downer 267).

Language reformers in the past have not been notably successful in remodeling English nearer to their hearts' desire. The language has a way of following its own course and leaving would-be guides behind. Whether the current interest in degenderizing language will have more lasting results than other changes proposed and labored for is an open question. Unselfconscious speech long ago solved the grammatical problem with the *everybody . . . they* construction. If the lexical problem is solved by the extended use of *person* and other epicene alternatives, we will have witnessed a remarkable influence by those who edit books and periodicals. Whatever the upshot, the contemporary concern is testimony to one kind of semantic sensibility among present-day English speakers.

### SEMANTIC CHANGE IS INEVITABLE

It is a great pity that language cannot be the exact, finely attuned instrument that deep thinkers wish it to be. But the fact is, as we have seen, that the meaning of every word is susceptible to change, and some words have changed meaning radically in the course of their history. It is probably safe to predict that the members of the human race, *homines sapientes* more or less, will go on making absurd noises with their mouths at one another in what idealists among them will go on considering a deplorably sloppy and inadequate manner, and yet manage to understand one another well enough for their own purposes.

The idealists may, if they wish, settle upon Esperanto, Ido, Interlingua, Novial 98, Ro, Villnian, Voksigid, Volapük, or any other of the excellent scientific languages that have been laboriously constructed. The game of constructing such languages is still going on; witness Talossan. Some naively suppose that, should one of these ever become generally used, there would be an end to misunderstanding, followed by an age of universal brotherhood (and sisterhood)—on the assumption that we always agree with and love those whom we understand. In fact, we frequently disagree violently with those whom we understand very well. (Cain doubtless understood Abel well enough.)

But be that as it may, it should be obvious that, if such an artificial language were by some miracle ever to be accepted and generally used, it would be susceptible to precisely the same changes in meaning that have been our concern in this chapter as well as to such changes in structure as have been

our concern throughout—the kind of changes undergone by those natural languages that have evolved over the eons, as seen in a diachronic comparison of an excerpt from the Englished Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew: from the Old English "Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum, si þin nama gehalgod" to the Middle English "Oure fadir that art in heuenes, halewid be thi name" to today's "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name." So, too, would time and regular exercise alter Otto Jespersen's 1928-created Novial, were it in general use, changing its excerpt from the Lord's Prayer: "Nusen Patro kel es in siele, mey vun nome bli sanktifika."

And most of the manifold phenomena of life—hatred, disease, famine, birth, death, sex, war, atoms, isms, and people, to name only a few—would remain just as messy and unsatisfactory to those unwilling to accept them as they have always been, regardless of what words we call them by.

## FOR FURTHER READING

### OVERVIEWS

- Ayto. *Movers and Shakers*.
- Dunton-Downer. *The English Is Coming!*
- Goddard. *Semantic Analysis*.
- Hurford et al. *Semantics*.
- Jeffries. *Meaning in English*.
- Kearns. *Semantics*.
- Kövecses. *Metaphor*.
- Kreidler. *Introducing English Semantics*.
- Lakoff and Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*.
- Leech et al. *Change in Contemporary English*.
- Löbner. *Understanding Semantics*.
- Riemer. *Introducing Semantics*.

### SOME SEMANTIC CATEGORIES

- Allan and Burridge. *Euphemism & Dysphemism*.
- Ayto. *Euphemisms*.

### GENERAL SEMANTICS

- Hayakawa and Hayakawa. *Language in Thought and Action*.
- Hockett. *The State of the Art*.
- Sanders. *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*.
- Stavans. *Knowledge and Censorship*.
- Traugott and Dasher. *Regularity in Semantic Change*.
- Wierzbicka. *English*.

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