



The Relationship Between English Etymology and Semantic Change

Ningge Gao

School of Critical Studies, University of Glasgow, UK

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Abstract: This paper explores the intricate relationship between English etymology and semantic change, emphasizing how etymology provides a historical and cultural foundation for the evolution of word meanings. It discusses various forms of semantic change, including broadening, narrowing, elevation, pejoration, and shifts, and how these changes are influenced by social, cultural, and technological developments. The paper examines specific case studies such as irregular verbs, idioms, and specialized vocabulary in fields like medicine and law, to illustrate how etymology affects semantic evolution and vice versa. The analysis reveals that etymology and semantic change are deeply interconnected, reflecting the dynamic and adaptive nature of language. As globalization continues, these processes will further enrich the English language, offering valuable insights into the ongoing evolution of linguistic expression.

Keywords: etymology, semantic change, English language, vocabulary evolution, cross-cultural influence, language contact, word meaning, language adaptation, globalization

1. Introduction

The study of etymology and semantic change offers a deep insight into the dynamic nature of the English language, reflecting its historical evolution and cultural influences. Etymology, the study of word origins and their historical development, provides the foundation for understanding how words acquire new meanings and adapt over time. This paper explores the intricate relationship between English etymology and semantic change, emphasizing how etymology serves as a lens through which the evolution of word meanings can be examined. By analyzing various forms of semantic change, such as broadening, narrowing, elevation, and pejoration, the study highlights the significant role that social, cultural, and technological developments play in shaping the language. Through case studies that include irregular verbs, idioms, and specialized vocabulary in fields like medicine and law, the paper illustrates how etymology influences semantic evolution and vice versa. Furthermore, the paper delves into the cross-cultural impacts on English vocabulary, demonstrating how global interactions and language contact lead to significant shifts in semantics and the creation of new meanings. The analysis reveals that etymology and semantic change are deeply interconnected, showcasing the adaptive and ever-evolving nature of language in response to external influences.

2. Overview of Etymology

Etymology is the study of the origins and historical development of vocabulary. Through etymology, we can trace the original meanings of words and their evolution at different stages of the language. The importance of etymology lies in its ability to help us understand the deeper meanings of words and their evolutionary processes within historical contexts. The main methods of etymological research include three key approaches: the historical comparative method, lexicographical research, and phonological evolution analysis. The historical comparative method involves comparing similar words across different languages to analyze their phonetic, grammatical, and semantic changes, which helps in tracing the origins and evolution of words. Lexicographical research focuses on studying the history of dictionary compilation, tracking the changes in definitions, usage, and meanings of words over time. Phonological evolution analysis examines the changes in word pronunciations across different historical periods, using phonetic rules to reconstruct the phonological structure of ancient languages, thereby inferring the evolutionary paths of words.[2].

The etymology of English is complex and diverse, with vocabulary deriving from multiple linguistic systems. Old English forms the primary foundation of English, with its vocabulary mainly originating from the West Germanic branch of the Germanic language family. With the Norman Conquest, French significantly influenced English, introducing a large number of French words, particularly in the fields of law, politics, and the arts. Latin and Greek, as languages of academia and science, have profoundly shaped English's specialized terminology. Through etymological analysis, it becomes evident that the history of English vocabulary development is essentially a continuous process of absorbing foreign words. These foreign words not only enriched the English lexicon but also influenced the semantic evolution of English vocabulary[3].

3. Concepts and Types of Semantic Change

Semantic change refers to the process by which the meanings of words evolve over time. This change can take various forms, including broadening, narrowing, elevation, pejoration, and shift. The process of semantic change reflects the flexibility and adaptability of language in use and is also indicative of the influence of social and cultural changes on language[4].

Semantic Broadening: The range of a word's meaning expands to cover more concepts or things than it originally did. For example, the English word "holiday" originally meant a "holy day," but it has since broadened to refer to any type of vacation or break.

Semantic Narrowing: The range of a word's meaning becomes more restricted, applying to only a portion of its original meaning. For instance, "meat" in Old English could refer to any kind of food, but in modern English, it specifically refers to animal flesh consumed as food.

Semantic Elevation: The meaning of a word shifts from a negative or neutral connotation to a positive one. For example, the word "knight" in Old English referred to a "young man" or "servant," but over time, it evolved to mean "knight," a title associated with nobility and chivalry[5].

Semantic Pejoration: The meaning of a word shifts from a positive or neutral connotation to a negative one. For example, the word "silly" originally meant "happy" or "fortunate" in Old English but later came to mean "foolish."

Semantic Shift: The core meaning of a word undergoes a significant change. For example, the Old English word "girl" originally referred to a "young person" without specifying gender, but in modern English, it specifically refers to a "female child."

Metaphorical Extension: The meaning of a word changes through metaphor or analogy. For instance, the word "mouse" originally referred to a small rodent, but in the computer age, it extended to mean a computer pointing device[6].

The causes of semantic change are varied and include social and cultural shifts, technological advancements, language contact, and psychological factors. For example, with the development of technology, many words have undergone semantic change; the word "cloud," which originally referred to a formation in the sky, now also refers to data storage in the internet.

4. The Influence of English Etymology on Semantic Change

Etymology, as the origin and historical development of words, provides the foundation for semantic change. Different etymologies not only influence the form of words but also deeply affect their semantic evolution. When vocabulary is borrowed from one language into English, it often undergoes semantic changes, which may involve either an expansion or a shift in meaning. By analyzing the semantic evolution of Old English words, French borrowings, and Latin and Greek vocabulary, we can better understand the influence of etymology on semantic change[7].

4.1 Semantic Evolution of Old English Vocabulary

Old English is the early form of the English language, and its vocabulary system contains many words that later evolved into core modern English vocabulary. Over time, the meanings of these words have undergone significant changes. For example, the word "knight" originally meant "young man"[8] or "servant" in Old English, derived from the word "cniht." Initially, this term was associated with a lower-class servant in medieval society. However, with the development of the medieval knight system, the meaning of "knight" was elevated, gradually evolving to denote a "noble warrior," representing a prestigious status and profession, embodying values such as bravery, honor, and nobility.

This semantic evolution not only reflects changes in the word itself but also mirrors shifts in social structures and cultural values. In medieval times, knights, as part of the warrior class, played an important role in protecting lords and maintaining social order, thereby gaining high social status. As knight culture developed, the meaning of "knight" transitioned from an ordinary servant to a more elevated and important role. This evolution process demonstrates the close connection between etymology and semantics, as well as how social and cultural factors shape word meanings.

4.2 Semantic Change of French Borrowings

Following the Norman Conquest, French had a profound influence on English, with a large influx of French vocabulary that became an important part of the English lexicon. These French borrowings often underwent significant semantic changes upon entering English. For instance, the word "courtesy" is derived from Old French "courtoisie," [9] which originally referred to "courtly manners," closely associated with the behavioral norms of aristocratic society. In French, this word was inseparable from the etiquette and manners of the upper class, reflecting the influence of aristocratic culture.

However, after being borrowed into English, the semantic range of "courtesy" gradually expanded, becoming more generalized and no longer restricted to aristocratic or courtly manners. Instead, it came to broadly refer to polite behavior in general. This semantic change illustrates how vocabulary adapts to a new cultural context in cross-cultural settings. English

society embraced this word but assigned it a broader scope of application, making it relevant not only to upper-class etiquette but also to everyday polite and appropriate behavior.

The semantic evolution of French borrowings is not only a result of language contact but also a reflection of cultural integration. This expansion of meaning reflects how English, in absorbing foreign vocabulary, adjusts and reconstructs word meanings to meet its own cultural and social needs.

4.3 Semantic Change of Latin and Greek Vocabulary

Many scientific and academic terms are derived from Latin and Greek. Upon entering English, these words underwent semantic expansion and shift, forming specialized terms in modern English. For example, the word "virus" originally meant "poison" or "venom" in Latin. With the development of medical science, "virus" evolved in modern English to mean "virus," specifically referring to microorganisms that cause diseases, especially in the medical field[10].

This semantic shift is not merely an expansion of meaning but also a reflection of the impact of scientific progress on language. As virology developed, scientists needed a word that could accurately describe and communicate this new discovery, and "virus" was thus assigned a new semantic layer. This expansion of meaning reflects language's adaptability to new knowledge and also demonstrates the continued influence of Latin vocabulary in modern scientific language.

Similarly, the Greek word "logos" originally meant "speech" or "reason," and after entering English, it underwent semantic change, giving rise to the term "logic," which refers to the science of reasoning and argument. This evolution reflects the language's flexibility and creativity in responding to new ideas and disciplines.

The influence of etymology on semantic change is particularly evident in certain specialized fields. Many terms in medicine, law, and science are borrowings from Latin and Greek. The process of semantic change in these terms not only reflects the development of language but also mirrors academic advancements and technological innovations in these fields[11].

In the field of medicine, the Latin word "cancer" originally meant "crab," used metaphorically to describe the spreading nature of tumors, resembling the claws of a crab. As medical knowledge accumulated, "cancer" gradually evolved to mean "cancer" in modern English, specifically used to describe malignant tumors. This process of semantic change demonstrates how medical science develops and expresses new discoveries and phenomena through language.

In the field of law, the Latin word "subpoena" originally meant "under penalty," referring to a legal document that orders someone to appear in court at a specified time and place to testify. As the legal system developed, this term was widely accepted and became a common term in modern legal systems. This process not only shows how language adapts to complex concepts but also reflects how authority and obligation are expressed in the legal system.

In the field of science, many Greek and Latin terms have undergone semantic changes that demonstrate the language's inclusiveness and creativity in accommodating new knowledge. For example, the Greek word "atomos" originally meant "indivisible,"[12] and after entering English, it evolved into the term "atom," meaning "atom." Although modern science has discovered that atoms can be further divided into smaller particles, the term still retains traces of its original meaning.

These examples illustrate how etymology influences the process of semantic change, shaping the meanings of words in response to advancements in knowledge and shifts in cultural context. Understanding this relationship provides valuable insights into the dynamic nature of language and its role in reflecting and shaping human experience.

5. The Phenomenon of Semantic Change Affecting Etymology

Semantic change is not just a shift in the meaning of words; it also influences the reinterpretation of etymology and the creation of new words or meanings. As words evolve in response to social, cultural, and technological changes, this process not only enriches the language's expressive capabilities but also prompts a reexamination of the original meanings of words. This reinterpretation can lead to changes in the etymology of words, and even the creation of new words or meanings, reflecting the dynamic and adaptive nature of language.

5.1 Semantic Change and the Creation of New Words

As society and culture evolve, especially with rapid technological advancements, the creation of new words is often accompanied by changes in meaning. These new words typically emerge from the extension or shift of existing vocabulary to fit new contexts or express new concepts. However, with the development of information technology, "cloud" has been adapted to mean "cloud storage" or "cloud computing," giving rise to an entirely new technical concept[13].

The semantic expansion of "cloud" in this context is a typical example of metaphorical extension. It utilizes the natural phenomenon of a cloud to metaphorically describe data and resources stored on the internet, an analogy that is both vivid and aligned with the new technological characteristics. In this way, language provides new tools for expressing technological

advances, and this semantic change not only reflects language's adaptation to new environments but also demonstrates the creative interpretation of vocabulary by language users.

This phenomenon is particularly prominent in the field of technology. For instance, the word "mouse" originally referred to a small rodent, but in the computing field, "mouse" was borrowed to denote a computer input device. This borrowing is not only a change in form but also a semantic innovation. Through the shift in meaning, an old word gains new significance in a new context, reflecting the flexibility and adaptability of language.

The process of semantic change can also prompt a reinterpretation of etymology, leading to the creation of new words or meanings. When a word undergoes significant semantic change, users often attempt to reinterpret its etymology. This reinterpretation process may result in new word forms or new semantic layers. For example, in modern English, the word "broadcast" originally referred to the act of "scattering seeds" in agriculture. With the invention of radio and television, "broadcast" gradually evolved to mean "transmitting information widely through electronic media." This evolution process not only changed the word's meaning but also prompted people to reinterpret its etymology, thereby enriching the language's expressive capabilities.

Through semantic evolution, language users can create new forms of expression that meet new communicative needs in ever-changing social and cultural environments. This feedback mechanism demonstrates the dynamic and adaptive nature of language, enabling it to remain vital in a constantly changing world.

5.2 The Evolution of Idioms in Cultural Contexts

The evolution of idioms is a classic example of how semantic change can affect etymology. Idioms often carry rich cultural and historical backgrounds, and their semantic evolution frequently leads to a reinterpretation of their origins. For instance, the English idiom "the apple of one's eye" originally derived from Old English, where it referred to the "pupil of the eye"—an organ considered extremely precious and important. Over time, the phrase's meaning gradually evolved to signify "a cherished or beloved person." This semantic evolution not only changed the way the idiom is used but also influenced how people understand its etymology. In modern English, "the apple of one's eye" has almost entirely lost its original anatomical meaning and is instead used metaphorically to describe something or someone that is greatly valued. Through the evolution of meaning, language users have imbued this idiom with new cultural significance, and this new meaning, in turn, affects the cultural interpretation of the "girl", leading to a reinterpretation of the idiom's etymology.

A similar example is the idiom "let the cat out of the bag," which originally came from an 18th-century market scam and meant to reveal a secret. Over time, the specific historical background of the phrase has faded, but its meaning has been preserved and is now used to describe the act of disclosing a secret. The phrase "let the cat out of the bag" is believed to have originated in the 18th century, connected to a market scam involving the sale of livestock. At the time, merchants at marketplaces would often sell piglets in bags, but some unscrupulous sellers would secretly replace the piglets with less valuable cats. If a buyer discovered the switch before leaving, they would "let the cat out of the bag," revealing the deceit. Over time, while the specific historical context of this practice faded, the phrase endured in the English language, coming to symbolize the act of revealing a secret or exposing a hidden truth. The semantic evolution of idioms, through the reinterpretation of cultural contexts, demonstrates the adaptability and changeability of language across different historical periods.

5.3 Semantic Innovation and Language Contact

Language contact often leads to semantic innovation and change, a phenomenon particularly evident in the context of globalization. When different languages come into contact, the borrowing of vocabulary is often accompanied by a redefinition or extension of meanings. For example, the word "tea" in English traditionally refers to a common beverage. However, through contact with other cultures, the concept of "tea" has evolved into different forms and meanings in various cultural contexts.

For instance, the word "chai" in English, which originates from the Indian subcontinent, originally means "tea" but in English, it is more commonly used to refer to a specific type of spiced tea, usually containing spices and milk. This subtle semantic difference reflects how language contact influences the evolution of vocabulary in different cultural contexts. Language contact not only brings about changes in the form of words but also prompts changes in meaning, reflecting different cultural understandings and expressions of the same concept.

Additionally, many loanwords in everyday life demonstrate the process of semantic innovation. For example, the word "karaoke" comes from Japanese, meaning "empty orchestra," referring to a form of entertainment where one sings along to pre-recorded music without live instruments. Upon entering English, "karaoke" retained its original meaning, but over time, the word has expanded to refer to a broader form of social activity, encompassing a variety of entertainment events. This

semantic innovation not only showcases the diversity of language borrowing but also reflects the language's ability to adapt to new cultural environments.

6. Conclusion

This paper delves into the intricate relationship between etymology and semantic change within the English language. Etymology provides the foundational historical and cultural background for understanding how words evolve in meaning over time. Through the analysis of various semantic changes — such as broadening, narrowing, elevation, pejoration, and shifts—the study illustrates how these processes are driven by social, cultural, and technological developments. Additionally, it highlights the significant impact of language contact and globalization on the evolution of English vocabulary, leading to the creation of new meanings and the reinterpretation of existing ones. The examples discussed, including the evolution of terms from Old English, French borrowings, and specialized vocabulary in fields like medicine and law, underscore the dynamic and adaptive nature of language. The research confirms that etymology and semantic change are deeply interconnected, with each influencing and shaping the other.

Future research should continue to explore the evolution of English vocabulary in the context of globalization and cross-cultural exchange. Areas of interest include the impact of digital communication and social media on contemporary English semantics and the role of etymology in understanding linguistic adaptations in global Englishes. Additionally, the influence of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and machine translation on the interpretation and evolution of word meanings warrants further study. These investigations will deepen our understanding of the interplay between language evolution and socio-cultural dynamics. This study has several limitations. It primarily focuses on the historical development of English vocabulary, potentially overlooking rapid contemporary language changes, especially in digital contexts. While various types of semantic changes are discussed, not all influencing factors are covered exhaustively. Additionally, the reliance on selected case studies may not fully represent the diversity of semantic evolution in English. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating a broader range of examples and considering the impact of modern communication technologies on semantic change.

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