# ФІЛОЛОГІЧНІ НАУКИ

## SEMANTIC INNOVATIONS IN ENGLISH: MOTIVATIONS FOR CHANGES

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The article puts an insight to the main causes of word meaning changes in the English language. It aims to explore the forces, the nature and the consequences which bring to this semantic change of the word meaning. Using all the time a comparative approach, the article traces the traditional typologies for motivating semantic changes made by world-known scholars. It addresses to four main factors and consequences of this change: internal linguistic factors, historical factors or cultural changes, social factors, psychological factors which can help us to understand the actual meaning of a word, illustrating them with relevant examples from the English language. The article provides the explanation of semantic shifts that combines a framework taken from pragmatics with the cognitive regularities of linguistic innovations.
**Keywords:** semantic changes, typology of motivations, cognitive linguistics, taxonomies, pragmatic.

*To the 100th anniversary of Oles Honchar Dnipro University*

**Introduction.** In recent years there has been considerable interest in accounting for motivations of semantic changes: why words 'will not stay in place, / Will not stay still'? [2, p. 50]. That language change occurs primarily as a result of acquisition is uncontroversial.

**Recent Research Analysis.** There are, however, different theories and discourses about how to classify and interpret motivations for these changes. One view assumes that semantic shift is internal and endogenous, in other words grammars change and focuses on syntactic change (Fleischman S., 1982; Kyparskyi V., 1975; Lighfoot G., 1980; Langacker R., 1999; Stern G., 1931). A competing view is that change is not only internal but also external driven by social factors and language users who are active participants in negotiating the linguistic patterning, meaning "languages don't change, people change language" (Cambell L., 1998; Croft W., 1980; Meillet A., 1912).

Despite century-old taxonomies that state that semantic changes are bidirectional, e.g. narrowing and generalization, metaphor and metonymy, the modern taxonomies focus on mechanisms, the kind of cognitive and communicative processes the speaker or the hearer brings to the task of learning and using a language. As pointed by Bartsch, "semantic change is possible because the specific linguistic norms, including semantic norms, are hypothetical norms, subordinated to the highest norms of communication (the pragmatic aspect of change) [1, p. 393]. Within this process shifts from one linguistically coded meaning to another occur, and they are replicated across times and languages. This phenomenon is, we think, is connected with the cognitive and communicative processes due to which pragmatic meanings come to be conventionalized and reanalyzed as semantic polysemies.

Some scholars state that semantic changes are very difficult to classify or even to foresee their occurrence. Dik claims that "equally difficult to detect and systemise are the various factors that may presume to play a role in the initiation and in the spread of semantic innovations" [3, p. 12]. The processes of semantic change are common and normal because linguistic and its evolution is part of human culture; and as culture, linguistics is life as well. It comes into life, grows up and modifies itself. It also may adapt to everyday use and most time it falls into disuse. This 'natural' process guide the word to its semantic maturity and, sometimes, to its more developed morphological form.

So, **the focus of this article** is mainly to put an insight to the major causes of semantic changes as well as trace the traditional classifications made by various scholars. It attempts to explore the forces for motivating semantic changes, and provides the explanation of semantic shifts that combines a framework taken from pragmatics with the cognitive regularities of linguistic innovations. Studying a number of cases of semantic changes in phonology, lexicon and grammar, it demonstrates the cognitive linkage of different levels of language on which changes may occur. At the same time, it develops the well-known hypothesis that the chief driving force in processes of regular semantic change is pragmatic: the context-dependency of abstract structural meaning allows for change in the situations of use, most particularly the speaker's role in strategizing this dynamic use. As cognition and our basic human conceptual system are highly involved in lexical and grammatical changes, the article considers the inferences in question to be both cognitive (information-related) and communicative/ rhetorical (arising out of purposeful negotiation between speaker and addressee). **The topicality of this research** is not only due to the growing interest to pragmatic researches in language in view of developing cross-cultural cooperation, but also to the lack of comprehensive description of typologies of semantic changes in the English language. There is a necessity in approaching the problem in question from different theoretical points of view and applying different conceptions of cognitive linguistics.

**Presenting research material.** The studies on the problem in question show that the complexity of the task of developing a comprehensive classification system of motivations for semantic changes has been recognised by semanticists who have embarked on this task. According to S. Ullmann, "…most semanticists, fully aware of the magnitude of the task … have … refrained from advancing any comprehensive and overall formula covering these forces" [8, p. 191–2]. The necessity to analyze semantic changes against the background of the history was stressed by Brйal in 1899:

"*On doit voir combien il est nŭcessaire que notre connaissance d'une langue soit ŭtaуйe sur l'histoire. L'histoire peut seule donner aux mots le degrŭ de prŭcision dont nous avons besoin pour les bien comprendre. Supposons, par exemple, que pour connaotre les magistratures romaines nous n'ayons d'autre secours que l'ŭtymologie*" ("We must see how necessary it is that our knowledge of a language be supported by history. Only history can provide words with the precision we need to understand them properly") [3, p. 29].

For instance, the words *monsieur* and *madame* ("*sir*" and "*madam*") were – forcefully – replaced by *citoyen* and *citoyenne* ("citizen"), after the French Revolution; however these changes did not persist and the original terms were quickly re-instituted. These types of imposed vocabulary changes are still happening today in countries in which there are governmental bodies and recognized institutions that have the power to do so.

Brйal's early works also contained a typology of social and psychological motivations, summed up later by Traugott and Dasher as follows: "(a) avoidance of difficulty; (b) securing of greater clarity; (c) taboo and euphemism; (c) fading and discoloration, or loss of semantic content; (d) external factors such as cultural change" [7].

Among the many and often confusing attempts to treat the causes of semantic changes in the context of historic linguistic one should single out two most systematic ones that appeared in the early 20s of the XX century: the theory of Meillet, and that of Sperber. Meillet distinguishes three types of causes, related to a) linguistic structure; b) cultural history and its content; c) the particular social stratification. He treats language as *a fait social* in the line of Durkheim's theory, placing the individual at the center of the analysis. Semantic change is grounded in the effects of the distribution of individuals into social groups. Each individual may belong to several social groups, through which they spread semantic changes, in particular via borrowings, both social borrowings and cross-linguistic ones. He cites the case of modern French, which contains many lexical items which have evolved simply from their equivalents in Latin, the language of Roman Gaul, such as *père, chien* and *lait* [5]. By looking at such examples, we find cases to demonstrate Meringer's concept of semantic widening and narrowing, and realize the importance of Meillet's concepts of the role of social group contact.

Hans Sperber's scheme, in contradiction to Meillet's, is eminently psychological. He concludes that the basic cause of semantic changes is emotive, namely the need to find a linguistic outlet for emotionally-charged ideas.

Extending semantic change understanding to the individual (psychology) and the collective (society) is an issue that has been summarized by Eugenio Coseriu and structural linguists who made an attempt to explain its driving force and motivation, presenting the dynamic view of the language as something that is reified every time someone speaks that bridges "the apparent aporia of semantic change" [1, p. 39]. In other words, when we communicate, we reify what is in our mind, and thereby we reinvent the language every time we speak. Hence, speaking as well as writing is the only way to introduce innovations that might be adopted by other speakers, and, thus, become new language rules" [2, p. 62]. Coseriu insists on the idea that semantic change is a dynamic process, contending:

"*Semantic changes, [..] can only be explained (motivated)… in functional and cultural terms. But the cultural and functional explanations of changes are not, in any way, "causal". The very idea of "causality" in what is termed idiomatic "evolution" is a vestige from the old conception of languages as "natural organisms" and from the positivistic dream of discovering the putative "laws" of language (or of the languages) and of turning linguistics into an "exact science" (science of laws) similar to the natural sciences*" [2, p. 64].

This is undoubtedly a fairly realistic way of looking at semantic changes, not only because it assumes that any change may be conditioned by a number of coexisting circumstances, but also because it acknowledges the intentional character of speaking, whether it follows or breaks with the tradition, and hence, by implication, an element of intention in stability and change.

The differentiation between innovation and adoption has brought about the development of another typology of motivations. On the one hand, there is the motivation a speaker has when he/she is innovating, and, on the other hand, there are the motivations other speakers feel to adopt his/her innovations. Adoption thus shows a sociolinguistic, a pragmatic and a cognitive sides: when speakers decide to accept the innovation, because it is convincing to any extent, this is a pragmatic decision mainly based on good cognitive performance of the innovation. If we find that *to trash* is a good expression for 'erasing files or e-mails from the computer', speakers decide to use it for that purpose because it is convincing; the persuasive power of this metaphor lies in the clear-shaped similarity between the concept throwing waste into the garbage can or to erase data. Consequently, the semantic innovation becomes lexicalized.

On the cognitive level, lexicalization states that, if we want to explore the cognitive aspect of semantic change, we may therefore safely concentrate on the motivations for semantic innovation, and examine lexicalized material. As to the reasons why speakers innovate, Coseriu differentiates three levels of causes or motivations:

- the general motivation for semantic change, which, according to Coseriu, is the "speaker's expressive and communicative purpose" [2, p. 76];
- the general conditions for semantic change;
- the specific motivation for a concrete innovation.

On the level of specific motivation, while examining different examples of innovations (e.g. an American inventor's development of the word *torpedo*), we conclude that specific motivation is the need for a new name in a concrete situation, and the general motivation for the innovator's choice was the wish to give it somewhat a suggestive and, hence, successful name. Only by combining the individual and the general aspects can we provide satisfying explanations for semantic innovations.

After presenting types of classification based on logical formalism (Darmesteter, Breal, Paul) and on 'ultimate' causes (Meillet, Welander), Ullmann sets forth his own scheme of "functional classification", grounded on works of Wundt, Schuchardt, Roudet and Gombocz [8]. According to his theory, semantic changes can be due to newly developed objects or ideas (need for a new name), to technical, scientific, socio-cultural developments which influence our conception of things, people, ideas (historical and social causes), as well as to changes that have already occurred in one language and that are subsequently copied in another (foreign influence) [8]. Finally, change can happen when two words are habitually collocated in speech and the sense of one word is transferred to the other (linguistic cause):

Eng. *torpedo* 'electric ray' > 'self-propelled submarine explosive'

Fr. *plume* 'goose feather for writing' > 'a pen with metal nib'

What is more, utilizing his definition of meaning as a reciprocal relation between name and sense, on the one side, and the Aristotelian-Wundtian primary laws of associated bonds, on the other, he arrives at the following schema: a) semantic changes due to linguistic conservatism; b) semantic changes due to linguistic innovation.

The initial distinction between linguistically conservative changes and those innovative in nature can be exemplified in the following way. When one compares the senses of *coach* in the late XIX and late XX centuries, there has obviously been quite a considerable shift in the speaker's understanding of the word, due to the difference in form of the XIX century *coach* (stage) and the XX century *coach* (bus). Ullmann would cite this as being a case of linguistic conservatism, claiming that the identical orthographic representation of the two means of transport is not due to any similarity which has been noticed, but rather to differences which have gone unnoticed [8]. This type of semantic change parallels Meillet's second category. Ullmann says that other changes in meaning "are all the outcome of linguistic innovations, conscious or unconscious, deliberate or involuntary, accompanied or unaccompanied by extra-linguistic reforms" [8, p. 211].

Geeraerts recognizes Ullmann's classification as highly attractive, because it tries to be functional rather than a mere taxonomy, in order "to give an explanation of how linguistic changes come about" [4, p. 87]. However, he insists on clarifying the distinction between 'ultimate' and 'immediate' causes of change. He states that one should not confuse 'mechanisms' with 'causes' of semantic change. What he calls 'mechanisms' (metonymy, euphemisms, metaphor) indicates "the possible paths of change", while 'causes' specify "why these potential developments are realized at all" [2, p. 72]. So he defines expressivity and efficiency to be the causes of semantic changes.

Geeraerts adds that Ullmann does not include any factor external to language, as social or emotional factors introduced by Meillet and Sperber [4, p. 123]. In my opinion, this critique may be extended to all classifications and typologies that exclusively focus their efforts on language-internal processes, as if language had no relationship whatsoever with its speakers.

Ullmann's typology lacks traditional causes such as "irony" or what Nyrop called "relations between things" [1, p. 42]. To blank's mind, Nyrop was the first to state that concepts in our mind are interconnected, and that one concept can evoke those concepts related to it:

Lat. *focus* 'fireplace' > 'fire'

In the view of historical semantics, Ullmann's theory can praise two attempts to bring out order in causes of semantic changes, for its ingenuity and systematic strength. In contrast to Sperber's classification, based entirely on psychological constructs, and Meillet's, failing to use the latter, Ullmann feels compelled to use psychological criteria (emotive factors and taboos), viz, the familiar psychological constructs of similarity and contiguity; but unfortunately the concepts are so general, that they seem too inclusive to be of much value for semantic research.

Blank also recognizes Ullmann's classification to have been the most popular and important theory in this domain for decades. But analyzing it, Blank insists on reducing six types of causes to three, as *historical cause, foreign influence* and *need for a new name* are the facets of one and the same type, "insofar as in both cases there are new concepts − *the submarine bomb, and the modern pen* − that need to be expressed"[2, p.67]. Linguistic causes are "not the motivation for semantic change", but "a necessary condition that makes a change possible" [2, p. 68]. So, we can reduce Ullmann's types to three: historical, social and psychological. This reduction seems reasonable, but produces not motivations, but only plausible domains where meanings might have changed.

Since the end of the XIX century cognitive linguistics has had considerable influence on the development of theories and methods of descriptions in semantics (Lakoff, 1958; Langacker, 1987; Taylor, 1989; Zipf K., 1987; Ullmann A., 1996). Considering the language as a product of social interaction, created through a series of "invisible-hand processes" [1, p. 45] by speakers whose main purpose was to achieve success, they implied that language change is a mere-side effect of the speaker's pragmatic goals. Humans speak with the intention to communicate, to influence, and to accomplish their goals. Elizabeth Closs Traugott and Richard B. Dasher develop the idea of the 'purposeful negotiation' [3, p. 17]. Stern reinforces this idea, and even Knud Schibsbye says change occurs when speakers make an effort 'to get his thoughts across' [ibid, p. 54]. Thus, semantic change is not inherent in language. It is a consequence of inherent characteristics of man's mind and human social interaction [2, p. 67].

Since pragmatics deals with meanings beyond structure, many linguists working in the tradition of formal grammar excluded pragmatics from consideration in accounting for motivations for change. A very insightful comment on the importance of the application of the cognitive linguistic and pragmatic apparatus to the study of the semantic innovations was made by Geeraerts and Grondelaers [4]. Using the pragmatic view of language, they state that while communicating speakers produce innovations any time they judge it to be the most successful strategy. Therefore, innovations can be produced with regard to the speaker himself or with regard to the interlocutor [4, p. 134]. Among the strategies that aim to maximize the communication, Geeraerts and Grondelaers single out speaker-oriented and hearer-oriented strategies. Speaker-oriented strategies aim at reducing linguistic effort by shortening words, integrating "orphaned words" into the lexicon, making use of analogies, etc. In certain communicative situations speaker-oriented can also be increased by using the word for the prototype instead of the category, or by creating the metaphor or metonymy. Such strategies enable speakers to maximize the communicative relevance of the discourse. Hearer-oriented strategies aim at assuring the correct understanding of what the speaker wants to express and at influencing the hearer in favor of the speaker.

This conception on applying strategies in communication leads to defining expressive factors and efficiency principles as a driving force for motivating semantic changes. Expressivity is a tendency "serving to express something, communicating any kind of message" and actually "trigger the use of linguistic forms" [4, p. 97]. For example, a new word may be introduced by a speaker because "people want to express something for which they have no adequate means of expression" [4, p. 104−105]. Efficiency, on the other hand, only plays role in executing these communicative acts.

Considering Greeraerts's ultimate causes, Blank insists that they are not the motivations for changes, but communicative strategies. The typical mechanisms are again "metaphor and metonymy, although pragmatic extension of meaning is also found" [1, p. 38].

From these reviews of the causes of semantic changes, we can realize there are two aspects of motivations causing semantic changes: cognitive and communicative. The cognitive basis may underlie most semantic changes, even if variants and modulations arise in conventional existing meanings at each communicative scene. We can consider the cognitive basis as a necessary condition, and communicative strategy as a sufficient condition for causing semantic change.

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## ДО ПИТАННЯ КЛАСИФІКАЦІЙ ПРИЧИН СЕМАНТИЧНИХ ЗМІН В АНГЛІЙСЬКІЙ МОВІ

**Анотація**
Досліджено питання семантичного розвитку лексичного значення слів сучасної англійської мови у контексті лінгвістичної семантики. Особливу увагу приділено комплексному дослідженню чинників динамічності лексичного складу англійської мови. Зокрема розглянуто внутрішньолінгвальні та позалінгвальні чинники, що допомагають встановити причини змін дійсного змісту слова. За допомогою порівняльного підходу, здійснено спробу описати традиційні класифікації мотивацій семантичних змін. У статті наведено пояснення семантичних зрушень, що поєднує прагматичні чинники з когнітивними закономірностями лінгвістичних інновацій.
**Ключові слова:** семантичні зміни, типологія, мотивації, когнітивна лінгвістика, таксономії, прагматика.

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# К ВОПРОСУ КЛАССИФИКАЦИЙ ПРИЧИН СЕМАНТИЧЕСКИХ ИЗМЕНЕНИЙ В АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

**Аннотация**
Исследован вопрос семантического развития лексического значения слов в современном английском языке в контексте лингвистической семантики. Особое внимание уделено комплексному исследованию факторов динамичности лексического состава английского языка. В частности, рассмотрены лингвистические и экстралингвистические факторы, помогающие установить причины изменений в семантике слова. Используя компаративистский анализ, предпринята попытка описать традиционные классификации мотиваций семантических изменений. В статье сделана попытка дать объяснение семантических сдвигов в контексте прагматики и когнитивистских закономерностей лингвистических инноваций.
**Ключевые слова:** семантические изменения, типология, мотивации, когнитивная лингвистика, таксономии, прагматика.