
Storia della Lingua Inglese

Lecture 2

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Types of Semantic Change

- **Change in meaning** undergone by an individual word in the course of time, with addition of new senses
 - *cookie* – biscuit
 - *cookie* – a text file stored in the user's web browser for purposes of identification
 - *Worm* – small elongated soft-bodied animal
 - *Worm* – self-replicating computer program, invading computers and networks to perform a destructive action
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Types of Semantic Change (2)

- **Lexical change**, i.e. obsolescence of some words and introduction of new words via borrowing or invention
 - *Satellite* (in 1540s)
 - *Railway* (in 1770s)
 - *Video, laser* (in the 1960s)
 - *Blue-collar* (in the 1950s), *yuppie* (in the 1980s)
 - *Browser, Hacker, Spamming* (in 2000s)
 - †*Vambrace, rerebrace, crinet, peytral*: medieval terms for 'armour'

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Types of Semantic Change (3)

- **Register change**, special word choice appropriate to a given social situation or literary context
 - Ex. Semantic field of madness:
 - *insane* → literary
 - *demented, mental* → archaic
 - *psychotic, neurotic* → neologisms
 - *loony, crazy, nuts, potty* → slang and colloquialisms

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Changes in Meaning

- **Generalisation:** words take on a broader range of meanings
Ex. the metaphorical extension of *pilot* and *ship* from 'sea contexts', via air to space
- **Specialization:** narrowing in sense Ex. *intrigue*
– intricacy, complexity → clandestine love affair
- **Amelioration**, whereby a word takes on a favourable connotation Ex. *Noble* and *gentle*

Changes in Meaning (2)

- **Deterioration**, whereby a word takes on a pejorative connotation Ex. *Villein* (a medieval serf) → *villain* (a person capable of great wickedness)
- **Emotive Intensification**, classically derived words such as *phenomenal*, *categorical*, *sensational*, *diametrical* are used in emotive and emphatic ways
 - 'a sensational development'; 'a phenomenal achievement', 'a diametrical opposition', 'categorical denial/judgement'
- **Shift to Opposite**. Ex. *Fast*, originally 'fixed', or 'firmly', now 'rapidly'

Change in Meaning: The Case of *Silly*

- Change through **deterioration**, particularly from Modern English on.
 - 700 *OE *sælig* – happy, blessed
 - 1100-1300 *ME *seely* – innocent
 - 1400 *ME *silly* – deserving compassion
- ↓
- weak, feeble
- ↓
- simple ignorant
- ↓
- feeble-minded
- ↓
- foolish, empty-headed

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Changes in Meaning (3)

- **Verbicide.** Words are indiscriminately applied to different domains through fashionable affectation.
Ex. *Monstrous, ghastly, terrific* Ex. 'That's terrific news'
- **Euphemism.** A figure of speech in which an offensive word is avoided and replaced with one that is more polite.
 - Swearing moved away from the religious field to that of bodily functions *blooming* for *bloody*, *flaming* for *fucking*
- **Dysphemism.** A figure of speech in which an offensive word is used in place of a neutral or more polite term.
 - *Worm food*: a dead person; *kick the bucket*: to die;

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Semantic Change in Slang

■ Generalization.

- *Eppy* (epileptic fit) → furious uncontrollable outrage Ex. *Have an eppy*
- *Fix*: a dose of narcotics to which one is addicted → a necessary habit Ex. *Let's call in this café and get a fix of caffeine*

■ Specification

- *grass/weed* (marijuana); *inside* → in jail; *old man* → father; *old lady* → mother

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Semantic Change in Slang (2)

■ Amelioration

- *cock* (penis) → term to apostrophy someone; Ex. *Right cock, that'll be 46 pence please*
- *cunt* (female genital organ) way to apostrophy a woman Ex. *Hello, you old cunt, how are you? You're looking well*

■ Pejoration.

- *article*; displeasing person;
- *boot*, unattractive guy

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Figurative Devices in Slang

- **Antiphrasis:** A word is used in an abnormal sense, esp for ironic purposes.
 - *bad* 'very pleasing, extremely impressing';
 - *winner* 'disappointing, or a loser';
 - *son of a bitch* 'a remarkable fellow'
- **Antonomasia:** Representation of a concept by identification with the most clear case
 - *Romeo* 'a man noted for his many love affairs';
 - *John Wayne* 'a foolish daring fellow'
 - *Uncle Tom* 'a black man who behaves subserviently towards whites'
- **Burlesque Metaphor:**
 - *doughnut* 'automobile tire';
 - *cowboy cadillac* 'pickup truck';
 - *lung-duster* 'cigarette'

Figurative Devices in Slang (2)

- **Hyperbole:** exaggeration due to strong feeling or to create a strong impression
 - *rotten* 'quite unpleasant',
 - *knock dead* 'to impress very favourably',
 - *super* 'quite pleasant or satisfactory'
 - *Annihilated* 'very drunk'
- **Meiosis:** intentionally understating something, or implying that it is less in significance or size
 - *kid* 'child';
 - *lettuce* 'money';
 - *pig* 'police officer';
 - *tin can* 'naval destroyer'

Figurative Devices in Slang (3)

■ Metaphor:

- *bread* 'money';
- *chick* 'young woman';
- *frost* 'a failure';
- *pill* 'cannonball'

■ Metonymy:

- *skirt* 'young woman';
- *kraut* 'German';
- *macaroni* 'Italian';
- *badge* 'police officer'
- *suite* 'business executive'

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Figurative Devices in Slang (4)

■ Onomatopoeia:

- *buzz* 'telephone call';
- *splash* 'to shoot down an enemy aircraft over water';
- *to biff* 'hit hard'

■ Personification:

- *Uncle Sam* 'US Government';
- *Johnny Bull* 'the British Empire';
- *Ivan* 'Soviet Forces'

■ Synecdoche: a figure of speech in which the part can be used for the whole, the whole can be used for the part; or the species can be used for the genus and viceversa

- *wheels* 'automotive transportation';
- *the tube* 'television set'

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Morphological Processes in Slang

■ Affixation

- **Suffixes** → -o/oo
 - *Kiddo* 'little boy or girl' <kid
 - *Saddo* 'pathetic person' <sad
 - *Sicko* 'perverted person' <sick
 - *Wide-o* 'insensible person' <wide
 - *Wazzoo* 'bottom' <sl. wazz: to urinate
- **Suffixoids** (final combining forms) → - head
 - *Crackhead*; *pot-head*; *smackhead*; *hash-head*; (drug addict)
 - *Dickhead*; *tit-head*; *meat-head*; *bubble-head* (idiot)
- **Infixes** → - bloody; - fucking
 - *Absofuckinlutely*
 - *absobloodylutely*

Morphological Processes in Slang (2)

■ Clipping

- Back-clipping
 - *Bi* < bisexual; *E* < Ecstasy; *bro* < brother
- Fore Clipping
 - *Nana* < banana 'idiot';
- Outer clipping
 - *Ho* < whore 'prostitute'
- Inner clipping
 - *Brer* < brother
- Clipping Compound
 - *Boyf* < boyfriend

Attitude of Slang

- The cultural focus of slang in Britain, America and Australia has always been directed towards derision and moral degradation associated to some favourite topics

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Favourite Themes in Slang

- Sexuality
- Bodily functions
- Intoxication by alcohol or drugs
- Violent actions of various kinds
- Money
- Death
- Deception
- Criminal activity
- Weakness of mind or character
- Positive or negative evaluation of people of different classes and groups
 - Racial
 - Ethnic
 - Sexual
 - Regional
 - Socioeconomic
 - occupational

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The Polyfunctionality of the Domain of Food in slang

- The 5 senses are very important as vehicles of metaphors in the creation of new meanings and expressions
- Food is a very productive field, in that it appeals to taste, smell, sight and touch
- Food terms are used to indicate
 - **Money:** *cabbage, lettuce, kale*
 - **Parts of the body:** *cabbage head; nuts; cauliflower ear*
 - **People:** *cold fish, frog, honey, sweetie pie*
 - **General situations and attitudes:** *to receive a chewing out; to be unable to swallow another's story; to ask what's cooking, or it boils down to what?*
 - **Drunkness:** *boiled, fried, pickled*

The Domain of Sexuality

- Slang words for sex carry little emotional connotation, and express naked desire or mechanical acts. They are often cynical and 'tough'
- Sex and food: subconscious relation between sex and food
 - Sexual parts: *Banana; cherry;*
 - Attractive people: *honey, peach, cookie*

The Domain of Sexuality (2)

- Sex is also frequently associated to deception, betrayal and cheating
 - I got fucked
 - Fuck you; screw you
 - Confucion: screwed up, snafu (siyuation normal all fucked up) FUBAR (fucked up beyond all recognition)
 - Success and sexual energy are related in slang, in that thwarted sexual energy will result in personal disaster

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Influences on Slang

- **Military sources:** U.S. participation in World War I and II expanded the armed forces to nearly 5 million men and forced the formation of countless networks of individuals from different regions and social classes. The spread of military jargon was amplified by mass media
 - *Snafu* (situation normal – all fucked up) ‘a positive situation suddenly turning to negative’
 - *Blitz; sweat it out; chew out; pissed off*
 - *Nam* ‘Vietnam’ from the Vietnam War

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Influences on Slang (2)

- **Cowboy slang:** in the 19th century
 - *Cowpunch*
 - *Bronco-buster*
 - *Dogey* 'a runtled or motherless calf'
- **Jazz**
 - *Jam-session*
 - *Jive*
 - *Killer-diller*
- **Black English**
 - *Funky*
 - *Dig*
 - *Man*

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