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**S. No 10, B.A.Part-3 English Hons, Semantic Changes. Dr Umesh Prasad Singh, Assistant Prof of English, D. B. College, Jaynagar Mob No 7250460920, Email-ID [drumeshsingh131@gmail.com](mailto:drumeshsingh131@gmail.com)**

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**Semantic Changes/ Changes in Meanings**

Our discussion of changes of meaning which the English language has undergone does take place only of those which relate to its grammatical structure, and those which consist in the addition of new words to its vocabulary. These phenomena of change may chiefly take place in the form of generalization, specialization, degeneration and regeneration which generally account for most of the changes in the meaning of words.

Generalization of meaning plays an important part in the development of changes in meaning of words. It takes place in verb as well as in substantives; eg the verb 'bend' meant originally to 'string a bow' to strain it by pulling the string ; in preparation for discharging the arrow . The result of this process was to give curvature to the wood, the word come to be used in the generalized sense of 'curving'. Its contrary process viz. the process of specialization is equally important in the history of words. It's natural that the development of specific meanings

where the more general sense survives, some time lead to inconvenient ambiguous e.g. the word 'pipe' meaning originally a certain instrument of music, developed the general sense of thing of tabular shape when the smoking of tobacco was introduced the word came to specialized as well in the sense of smoker's instrument or a pipe for smoking. The word 'glass' which means either a drinking

vessel, a mirror, or a barometer the specialized application of sense will survive the sense of looking glass, drinking glass, weather glass etc.

Degeneration: When a word shows the tendency of falling down from its original meaning to inferior one, it is said to have started degenerating. This degeneration of meaning may be made clear with the help of certain examples. The word knave originally meant a boy servant then it came to be used as a general term standing for person for inferior station, and finally it has come to signify a morally worthless person. The word counterfeit originally meant imitation or copy and later it come to mean portrait, and its final meaning we all know is something spurious. The word silly originally meant blessed or good, the word cunning originally meant learned; the word crafty originally meant skilful and word sly originally meant wise, but as we find all these words are now used in a damaging sense. All these examples suggest what we call the degeneration of meaning.

There is a second kind of degeneration in respect of meaning which may be described as partial degeneration. The word execute is used in a good sense when it is associated with fellow ship or fellow feeling There is also a third kind of degeneration in respect of meaning which may be called artistic degeneration, as the word liver brine and spout which were earlier used in poetry but they are now supposed to be unfit for being used in it.

As opposed to the degeneration of meaning there is the phenomenon which is known as the regeneration of meaning. There are certain words which have come to acquire additional dignity or merit in the course of time and so they have improved their status. The word marshal originally meant a boy looking after the horse, but it is now used in relation of high ranking military officer. The word

chamberlain originally meant a servant in charge of the Royal House, but in the course of the time it came to be associated with a title of honour. The word pioneer originally meant those people in the army whose business it was to remove all obstruction in onward March of the soldiers but it has come to stand for one who does something unique or remarkable in a field. The word nice originally meant foolish, but now it is used for the word excellent. The examples indicate the upward changes in the meaning of words.

In many cases word has obtained a special shade of meaning through the accidental prominence of some particular association in which it frequently occurs. As the word 'fellow' which originally meant a business partner, and then generally a comrade had obtained the bad sense which it has in Popes well known in his Essay on criticism.

“Worth makes the man, and want of it the fellow,  
The rest is all but leather or prunella.”

And hence it is now used to signify a person for whom one has no respect. It is interesting here that in the first stage it appears a case of regeneration but finally it gets degenerated in its meaning.

We have discussed above the principles underlying changes in meanings but besides this principle there are other causes that lead to the development of new senses of words. One of these lies in this fact that most of the objects which words denote are complex. They consists several senses. As the word doctor literary means teacher, 'teacher' was given a title to persons having competence to teach some branch of learning, but as the doctor of medicine was a kind of doctor best known to the people on general, the title come to be used as a designation for a physician whether he has a university degree or not.

A large number of English words have undergone a peculiar kind of changes of meaning by the addition of an emotional connotation to their primary sense. Noteworthy instances of this process are the adjectives- enormous, extraordinary and extravagant – in their etymological sense these words express ‘something passing the ordinary words’, but now they are used to indicate not only what is unusual or abnormal but also existing words indignation, or contempt. In some instances words have undergone changes of meaning because in their literal sense they have been popularly misunderstood e.g. ‘ingenuity’ now having the sense of absurd. In some instances words branching out into many distinct meaning as the word power now having acquired more than half dozen distinct meaning such as ability, authority, strength, influence, mechanical energy, a ruler, a divinity.