

Extension of meaning

Extension (or **generalization**, or **widening**) of meaning, increases the number of contexts in which a word can be used, although again, paradoxically, reducing the amount of information conveyed about each one. In other words, the meaning of a new notion is wider than the old one, whereas the content is poorer. A Romanian linguist, Mihail Andrei(1983:128), gave a definition for extension of meaning, saying that: *“unele cuvinte isi largesc sfera de curpindere, de la un sens particular se trece la un sens general, iar acest proces se numeste extensia sensului.”*

→ For instance, in Middle English, *“pigeon”* meant a *“young bird”*, especially a *“young dove”*, but from the late fifteenth century it has come to refer especially to the whole family Columbidae. *“Dove”* is now generally used for a smaller variety of *“pigeon”*. Such shifts in meaning are usually slow and tendentious rather than rapid and absolute. Early usages continue indefinitely alongside later changes that have become dominant, as was true of *“pigeon”* and *“dove”* in the sixteenth century, so in the process of change, terms may acquire further meanings within a set of words.

→ Another example is the word *“virtue”*, which was initially a quality that could only be applied to men, like our modern word manliness, but in contemporary society, it can equally be applied to women as well. Other cases of semantic widening are the words *“manage”* and *“manufacture”*.

→ The term *“manage”* means *“to handle anything successfully”* but originally it meant *“to handle a horse”*.

→ The term *“manufacture”* (*“the process of making products”*) is more complex, and comes from Latin *“manu factum”* (*“to make by hand”*). In early modern times its meaning was extended so as to include *“to make by hand or by machinery”* and subsequently, in the industrial and post-industrial age it came to mean to make by machinery rather than by hand. Also personal names often undergo widening: many commercial products are named after the principal people who were instrumental in bringing them to the market-place.

Not only English language provides examples of words which suffered the process of extension of meaning, but also Romanian language, which Brancus illustrated in his book *“Istoria cuvintelor”*.

→ For instance, the word *“barbat”* (*“men”*) it is used as a noun and also as an adjective. As a noun it means *“adult men”*, but it is in opposition with the terms *“female”* and *“child”*, *“boy”*. As an adjective, this word means *“brave”*, *“vigorous”*, but it was also used in a phrase like *“femeie barbata”* (meaning *“hardworking”*) in Caragiale's play (*“Zoe fii barbata!”*). It has even a connotation regarding animals, referring to the shepherd from Miorita, who has *“cai invatati si caini mai barbati”*.

→ Another example of extension of meaning is the word *“frumos”* (*“beautiful”*), which comes from Latin *“formosus”*, derived from the Latin adjective *“forma-ae”*, thus being used not only with the meaning of *“shape”* and with the meaning of *“beauty”* or *“beautiful face”*. First the word *“ink”* designated only black ink, but nowadays, the word *“ink”* may refer to any liquid used for writing, no matter the color (red, green ink).

According to Mike Gasser there are *“two general kinds of conceptual relations that permit word meanings to be extended: similarity and various kinds of close association”*. First consider the situation that arose when computers were first outfitted with pointing devices to be

manipulated in one hand by moving them across a pad and pushing one of their buttons. The noun that came to be used for these devices, “*mouse*”, was based on the resemblance of the devices to the animal: the general size and shape and the tail-like cable. Thus the meaning of the word “*mouse*” was extended on the basis of the physical similarity between one category (the animal) and another (the pointing device). Extension of a word meaning on the basis of similarity is known as **metaphorical extension**. Another computer-related example is when computer software started providing users with sets of choices that they could select from; the word that emerged for these lists was “*menu*”. The metaphoric extension was based on the similarity between a restaurant menu, a list of food and drink choices, and the list of choices that the computer user was to select from.

A somewhat more complicated possibility for extending a word meaning is based on a quite different conceptual relation, not similarity between the instances of the two categories but a strong association between them. This is referred to as **metonymical extension**. Consider the association between an organization (an abstract concept), such as a sports team or a government, and its base location. While we can refer to the organization directly using its name, we often find it convenient to use the name of the location to refer to the organization. Another conceptual relation that permits metonymy is that between a document and the content of the document. Thus the word “*book*” refers to a physical object: a collection of sheets with printing or pictures on them that is bound together. But we can also use the word to refer to the informational content of the physical book. For instance, if we compare the uses of the word in these two sentences: “*This book is almost too heavy to lift.*” and “*I don’t understand this book at all.*” In the first example, the speaker is clearly referring to the physical object, in the second example to the information contained in the physical object. In a case like this, metonymic extension allows a noun referring to a physical object to refer to something more abstract.

Everyday metaphors and metonymy are invisible because we understand them immediately, and therefore we have no need to pay attention to their metaphorical or metonymical character. Metaphor and metonymy are conceived and grasped with the same facility as our ordinary literal vocabulary. There is no problem in understanding metaphor or metonymy, the problem is to explain *how* we understand them.

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