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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE SEMANTIC EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH WORDS

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ABOUT ARTICLE

Key words: semantic change, social media, English lexicon, semantic broadening, semantic narrowing, metaphorical extension, emoji semantics, hashtag, sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics.

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Abstract: This article examines how social media platforms accelerate and redirect the semantic evolution of English words. The relevance of the study lies in the fact that digital communication has become the primary environment in which new word senses first emerge, spread and stabilize, while traditional accounts of semantic change were developed for slower, print-mediated processes and do not fully capture the speed and mechanisms of change observed online. The aim of the research is to identify the principal types of semantic change operating in social media English and to relate them to the platform features that drive them. The material comprises peer-reviewed studies on lexical semantic change detection, sociolinguistic accounts of digital communication, and corpus-based analyses of emoji and hashtag meaning, illustrated with attested social-media word senses. Descriptive, comparative and componential analysis methods were applied, together with a qualitative review of documented case items. The results show that four mechanisms recur most frequently: semantic broadening, semantic narrowing, metaphorical extension, and pragmatic-emotive shift, each linked to identifiable platform affordances such as brevity constraints, virality, visual-textual hybridity, and community-specific register. The discussion situates these findings within classical semantic-change theory and computational change-detection research, showing continuity as well as genuine novelty

in the digital context. The practical value of the study lies in its applicability to lexicography, corpus linguistics and English-language teaching materials that address contemporary usage.

IJTIMOIY TARMOQLARNING INGLIZ TILIDAGI SO‘ZLARNING SEMANTIK EVOLYUTSIYASIGA TA’SIRI

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MAQOLA HAQIDA

Kalit so‘zlar: semantik o‘zgarish, ijtimoiy tarmoqlar, ingliz tili leksikasi, ma’noning kengayishi, ma’noning torayishi, metaforik kengayish, emodzi semantikasi, xeshteg, sotsiolingvistika, korpus tilshunosligi.

Annotatsiya: Maqolada ijtimoiy tarmoqlarning ingliz tilidagi so‘zlarning semantik evolyutsiyasini tezlashtirishi va yo‘nalishini o‘zgartirishi tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotning dolzarbligi shundan iboratki, raqamli muloqot yangi ma’nolarning dastlab paydo bo‘lishi, tarqalishi va mustahkamlanishi kechadigan asosiy muhitga aylangan, ammo semantik o‘zgarishning an’anaviy nazariyalari bosma matnga asoslangan sekinroq jarayonlar uchun ishlab chiqilgan bo‘lib, internetdagi o‘zgarishlarning tezligi va mexanizmlarini to‘liq qamrab olmaydi. Tadqiqot maqsadi – ijtimoiy tarmoqlar ingliz tilida amal qiladigan asosiy semantik o‘zgarish turlarini aniqlash va ularni shu o‘zgarishlarni keltirib chiqaruvchi platforma xususiyatlari bilan bog’lashdan iborat. Material sifatida leksik-semantik o‘zgarishni aniqlash bo‘yicha ilmiy tadqiqotlar, raqamli muloqotga oid sotsiolingvistik ishlar hamda emodzi va xeshteg ma’nolari bo‘yicha korpusga asoslangan tahlillar olindi, ular tasdiqlangan yangi so‘z ma’nolari bilan misollangan. Tavsifiy, qiyosiy va komponent tahlil metodlari, shuningdek qayd etilgan holatlarning sifat jihatidan ko‘rib chiqilishi qo‘llanildi. Natijalar shuni ko‘rsatadiki, to‘rt mexanizm eng ko‘p uchraydi: ma’noning kengayishi, ma’noning torayishi, metaforik kengayish va pragmatik-emotiv siljish, ularning har biri qisqalik talabi, virallik, vizual-matn gibridligi va jamoaga xos registr kabi platforma xususiyatlari bilan bog’liq. Muhokama qismida olingan natijalar klassik semantik o‘zgarish nazariyasi va o‘zgarishni

aniqlashning kompyuter usullariga asoslangan tadqiqotlar bilan qiyoslanadi. Ishning amaliy ahamiyati natijalarni leksikografiya, korpus tilshunosligi va zamonaviy ingliz tili o‘quv materiallarida qo‘llash imkoniyatidadir.

ВЛИЯНИЕ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ СЕТЕЙ НА СЕМАНТИЧЕСКУЮ ЭВОЛЮЦИЮ АНГЛИЙСКИХ СЛОВ

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О СТАТЬЕ

Ключевые слова: семантическое изменение, социальные сети, английская лексика, расширение значения, сужение значения, метафорическое расширение, семантика эмодзи, хэштег, социолингвистика, корпусная лингвистика.

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается, каким образом социальные сети ускоряют и переориентируют семантическую эволюцию английских слов. Актуальность исследования обусловлена тем, что цифровая коммуникация стала основной средой, в которой новые значения слов впервые возникают, распространяются и закрепляются, тогда как традиционные модели семантического изменения были разработаны для более медленных, опосредованных печатью процессов и не полностью отражают скорость и механизмы изменений, наблюдаемых в интернете. Цель исследования – выявить основные типы семантических изменений, действующих в англоязычной речи социальных сетей, и соотнести их с особенностями платформ, которые их порождают. Материалом послужили рецензируемые исследования по выявлению лексико-семантических изменений, социолингвистические работы о цифровой коммуникации и корпусные исследования значений эмодзи и хэштегов, иллюстрированные засвидетельствованными новыми значениями слов. Применялись описательный, сопоставительный и компонентный методы анализа, а также качественный обзор документированных случаев. Результаты показывают, что чаще всего действуют четыре механизма: расширение значения, сужение значения, метафорическое расширение и прагматико-эмотивный сдвиг, каждый из которых связан с определёнными свойствами

платформ – краткостью, виральностью, визуально-текстовой гибридностью и регистром конкретного сообщества. В обсуждении полученные результаты соотносятся с классической теорией семантического изменения и компьютерными исследованиями обнаружения изменений, показывая как преемственность, так и подлинную новизну цифрового контекста. Практическая значимость работы состоит в возможности применения результатов в лексикографии, корпусной лингвистике и учебных материалах по современному английскому языку.

Introduction. Social media platforms have transformed the conditions under which the English lexicon changes. Where earlier semantic shifts typically required decades to move from marginal usage to dictionary recognition, platforms such as Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok and Reddit now compress this trajectory into months or even weeks. A word coined or repurposed in a niche online community can reach mainstream press coverage and formal dictionary entries within a single year, a pace that classical historical semantics was never designed to describe [1].

This acceleration is not merely quantitative. The platforms themselves impose structural constraints – character limits, algorithmic amplification, visual-textual hybridity, and community-specific registers – that shape which kinds of semantic change are favored. Brevity constraints reward compact polysemy over the coining of new word forms; virality rewards emotionally salient reinterpretation over neutral extension; and the co-occurrence of text with images and emoji introduces a genuinely new channel of meaning-making that print-based language had never possessed to the same degree [2].

Despite a growing body of computational work on detecting lexical semantic change in large corpora [1], and a parallel body of sociolinguistic work on digital communication [3], the two literatures have developed largely independently. Computational studies typically quantify change without explaining which platform mechanism produced it; sociolinguistic studies describe platform mechanisms without systematically classifying the resulting semantic change types. This gap motivates the present study.

The purpose of this research is to classify the principal types of semantic change attested in English-language social media discourse and to relate each type to the platform feature that most plausibly drives it. The objectives are: 1) to review classical and computational approaches to semantic change and situate the social-media case within them; 2) to identify recurrent change

types in documented social-media word senses, emoji, and hashtags; 3) to link each change type to a specific platform affordance; 4) to discuss the theoretical and pedagogical implications of the resulting model. The scientific novelty of the article lies in proposing an affordance-based explanatory link between platform features and semantic change types, rather than treating online lexical innovation as an undifferentiated category.

Literature review and research methodology. Classical and cognitive theories of semantic change. The theoretical vocabulary for describing semantic change predates the internet by more than a century, and it remains indispensable for analyzing digital data. Blank's cognitive-onomasiological framework treats semantic change as a rational, cognitively motivated process driven by mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy, generalization and specialization, rather than as random lexical drift [4]. This framework supplies the categorical apparatus – broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension – that the present study applies to social-media data.

A recurrent limitation of classical accounts, however, is their reliance on written, edited, low-frequency textual evidence accumulated over long time spans. Digital corpora reverse both conditions: text is unedited, high-frequency, and densely time-stamped. This does not invalidate the classical mechanisms, but it requires that they be tested against a much faster and noisier data stream than the one for which they were originally formulated [1].

Computational detection of lexical semantic change. A substantial computational literature has emerged to detect semantic change automatically in large diachronic corpora. Tahmasebi, Borin and Jatowt provide a comprehensive survey of approaches to lexical semantic change detection, distinguishing time-series methods, word-embedding alignment methods, and topic-based methods, and noting that social media corpora present distinctive challenges of noise, brevity and rapid turnover compared with edited text [1]. Baes, Haslam and Vylomova propose a multidimensional framework for evaluating lexical semantic change that explicitly incorporates social-scientific applications, arguing that change should be assessed along several independent dimensions – including sentiment, breadth and emotionality – rather than a single scalar measure of drift [5]. Boukhaled, Fagard and Poibeau offer a corpus-based analysis of the dynamics of semantic change, showing that change trajectories in digital corpora are frequently non-monotonic, with meanings oscillating before stabilizing [6].

These computational studies converge on a methodological point directly relevant to the present research: semantic change in digital text is better modeled as a multidimensional trajectory than as a single before/after contrast, which supports treating broadening, narrowing, metaphor and pragmatic shift as co-occurring rather than mutually exclusive categories.

Sociolinguistics of digital communication. A parallel sociolinguistic literature addresses how platform structure shapes language use and change. Ilbury reviews social media as a site of

sociolinguistic change, arguing that platforms function as new kinds of speech communities with their own norms of stylization and audience design, which accelerates the diffusion of innovative forms across otherwise disconnected populations [3]. Panjaitan and Patria examine the broader impact of digital communication on language change, documenting how abbreviation, blending and repurposing of existing words are favored by the informal, high-frequency register of social platforms [7]. Donoso and Sánchez apply dialectometric methods to Twitter data and show that lexical variation online correlates with geographic and social variables in ways that mirror, but also intensify, patterns known from offline dialectology [8]. Shoemark's doctoral research on discovering and analysing lexical variation in social media text further demonstrates that platform-specific lexical items frequently begin as geographically or socially localized innovations before diffusing more broadly [9].

Taken together, this literature establishes that platforms are not a neutral conduit for pre-existing language change but an active shaping force, a claim the present study operationalizes by tying specific change types to specific platform affordances.

Emoji and hashtags as emergent semantic units. Two platform-native units merit separate attention because they lack a direct analogue in pre-digital English. Robertson, Liza, Nguyen, McGillivray and Hale quantify change in emoji meaning between 2012 and 2018, showing that individual emoji undergo measurable semantic drift analogous to word-level semantic change, including both broadening and narrowing of their associated sentiment and referential range [2]. This finding is significant because it demonstrates that semantic change mechanisms established for words extend to non-alphabetic visual signs functioning as lexical units within English-language text. Calude, Long and Burnette, addressing the syntactic status of hashtags, ask whether hashtags should be treated as words in the grammatical sense, concluding that hashtags occupy a hybrid position: they are integrated into clause structure in some contexts while retaining a distinct metatextual, indexing function in others [10]. This hybridity is itself a novel category that classical semantic-change theory, developed for lexical items with stable word-class membership, did not anticipate.

Research gap. The reviewed literature leaves three questions insufficiently answered. First, although computational studies detect that change is occurring, they rarely classify it using the qualitative categories developed in cognitive semantics, leaving the relationship between statistical drift and traditional change types under-specified. Second, sociolinguistic accounts describe platform affordances in general terms but do not map them onto specific semantic-change mechanisms in a systematic way. Third, emoji and hashtags are typically studied as isolated phenomena rather than integrated into a unified account of semantic change alongside

conventional words. The present article addresses these three gaps by building an affordance-to-mechanism classification that spans words, emoji and hashtags within a single analytical frame.

Materials and methods. The material for this study consists of the peer-reviewed and thesis-level sources identified above [1]–[10], together with a set of attested, publicly documented English-language social-media word senses, emoji uses and hashtags cited in this literature as illustrative examples (for instance, the extension of “ghost” to the verb “to ghost” someone, the narrowing of “salty” to a specifically online register of resentment, and the sentiment drift documented for widely used emoji such as the “loudly crying face”) [2], [7]. No new corpus was compiled and no original quantitative experiment was conducted for this article; the study is theoretical-analytical in nature, synthesizing and reclassifying findings already reported in the cited sources.

Three methods were applied. Descriptive analysis was used to summarize the classical and computational approaches to semantic change reviewed in Section II. Comparative analysis was used to align each documented case of online lexical, emoji or hashtag change with one of four recurrent change types identified in the sources: semantic broadening, semantic narrowing, metaphorical extension, and pragmatic-emotive shift. Componential analysis was used to decompose each case into a small set of semantic features (referential scope, evaluative polarity, register) whose alteration constitutes the change in question, following the componential logic used in cognitive semantic-change theory [4].

The research proceeded in three stages. In the first stage, the reviewed sources were coded for the change type(s) and platform affordance(s) they document or imply. In the second stage, a classification linking four change types to four corresponding platform affordances was constructed and cross-checked against the coded material. In the third stage, the classification was evaluated against the computational multidimensional framework of Baes, Haslam and Vylomova [5] to verify that the four qualitative types are compatible with, rather than contradicted by, quantitative change-detection dimensions.

Limitations. This study does not include an original corpus-based experiment; consequently, no frequency counts, statistical significance values or embedding-based drift scores are reported, and none should be inferred from the discussion below. All illustrative examples are drawn from, or consistent with, the cited literature rather than independently measured. Extending the present classification through a dedicated diachronic corpus analysis of English-language social media is identified as a direction for future research rather than as a claim made by this article.

Results. Four Recurrent Change Types and Their Platform Affordances. The comparative and componential analysis of the reviewed material yields four change types that recur across the sources, each linked to a specific platform affordance.

Semantic broadening is most closely associated with brevity constraints. Because character and attention limits penalize the coining of new word forms, existing words are stretched to cover new referents instead, so that a single lexical item accumulates a wider referential range than it had in pre-digital usage [1], [7].

Semantic narrowing is most closely associated with community-specific register. Words that are broadly neutral in general English acquire a restricted, often evaluatively charged sense within a particular online community of practice, a pattern consistent with the localized lexical variation documented dialectometrically on Twitter [8], [9].

Metaphorical extension is most closely associated with visual-textual hybridity. The co-presence of images, emoji and text on social platforms provides a constant supply of new source domains for metaphor, and the measured drift in emoji sentiment and reference documented by Robertson et al. shows this mechanism operating on non-alphabetic units as well as on words [2].

Pragmatic-emotive shift is most closely associated with virality. Because algorithmic amplification rewards emotionally resonant content, words and phrases used in emotionally marked contexts rapidly acquire a stable evaluative or attitudinal coloring that can outlast the original context that produced it, a dynamic compatible with the non-monotonic change trajectories reported in corpus-based dynamic analyses [6].

Emoji and hashtags within the classification. Applying the classification to non-alphabetic units confirms its coverage. The documented sentiment drift of emoji corresponds to a combination of metaphorical extension and pragmatic-emotive shift, since the same graphic sign is reinterpreted along both an iconic-metaphorical axis (what the image is taken to represent) and an evaluative axis (how positively or negatively it is used) [2]. Hashtags illustrate a different combination: their well-documented syntactic hybridity between clause-integrated word and metatextual index is best described as a narrowing of grammatical function accompanied by a broadening of pragmatic function, since a hashtag simultaneously does less grammatical work than an ordinary word and more discourse-organizing work than one [10].

Compatibility with multidimensional change metrics. Checking the four-type classification against the multidimensional framework of Baes, Haslam and Vylomova shows compatibility rather than conflict: broadening and narrowing correspond most directly to their breadth dimension, metaphorical extension corresponds to their conceptual/associative dimension, and pragmatic-emotive shift corresponds to their sentiment and emotionality dimensions [5]. This alignment suggests that the qualitative classification proposed here could, in principle, be operationalized quantitatively in a future corpus study without requiring a different theoretical vocabulary.

Discussion. The results support three broader claims. First, social media does not introduce semantic-change mechanisms unknown to historical and cognitive semantics; broadening, narrowing and metaphorical extension are long-established categories [4]. What changes is the speed and the density of triggering contexts, which platform affordances such as brevity and virality directly control. This reframes the relationship between digital and pre-digital semantic change as one of degree and mechanism-selection rather than of kind.

Second, the identification of pragmatic-emotive shift as a distinct, virality-driven category addresses a gap in classical accounts, which were formulated primarily for slowly diffusing written change and did not need to theorize algorithmically amplified emotional contagion as a change-driving force. This is consistent with sociolinguistic accounts of platforms as new speech communities with their own diffusion dynamics [3], and it explains why some social-media senses stabilize within months rather than generations.

Third, treating emoji and hashtags within the same classificatory frame as words, rather than as separate curiosities, clarifies that the boundary of the "English lexicon" itself is being renegotiated in digital communication. The syntactic hybridity of hashtags [10] and the measurable semantic drift of emoji [2] indicate that lexicographic and pedagogical practice will increasingly need to accommodate non-alphabetic and hybrid units alongside conventional words.

Conclusion. This study set out to classify the principal types of semantic change operating in English-language social media and to relate them to the platform features that drive them. Four recurrent types were identified – semantic broadening, semantic narrowing, metaphorical extension, and pragmatic-emotive shift – and each was linked to a specific affordance: brevity constraints, community-specific register, visual-textual hybridity, and virality, respectively. Applying the classification to emoji and hashtags showed that these platform-native units undergo combinations of the same four mechanisms rather than requiring an entirely separate theoretical apparatus, and cross-checking the classification against a multidimensional computational framework showed compatibility rather than contradiction.

The practical value of the study lies in its applicability to lexicography, where the affordance-based classification can help decide which platform-driven senses are likely to stabilize and merit dictionary entry; to corpus linguistics, where the four types offer a coding scheme for annotating digital corpora; and to English-language teaching, where learners benefit from an explicit account of why and how social-media English departs from, and remains continuous with, the language described in conventional grammars and dictionaries. Future research should test the proposed classification quantitatively on a dedicated diachronic social-media corpus.

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