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# FROM DICTIONARY TO DIGITAL DISCOURSE: SEMANTIC INTERPRETATION IN CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL ENGLISH

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**Abstract**

The rapid development of social media transforms not only the language but also the meanings attached to familiar lexical items. The transformation takes place within and across languages. Words that carry stable dictionary definitions are increasingly being used in transformed semantic and pragmatic contexts within digital discourse. Expressions such as aura, lore, brainrot, coded and troll illustrate how existing English words can acquire extended, metaphorical, evaluative, or context-dependent meanings through contemporary online communication. This study examines the semantic interpretation of selected English words in digital discourse, focusing on the movement from dictionary meanings to transformed social-media meanings. Drawing on theories of semantic change, the study compares dictionary definitions with contemporary social-media discourse. A qualitative analysis of selected digital examples will be used to analyse recurring patterns of semantic transformation and to examine the communicative and cultural factors contributing to these changes, including memes, viral trends, popular culture, and rapid circulation across social media platforms. Rather than treating digital language as a source of new slang or neologisms, the study argues that social media also functions as a significant environment for the interpretation and expansion of existing lexical meanings. By tracing the relationship between conventional and digitally transformed meanings, the study contributes to the understanding of semantic change in contemporary English and demonstrates how meaning remains dynamic within changing communicative environments.

**Keywords:** Semantic change; Semantic Shift; Digital English; Social Media Discourse; Language change.

## Introduction

Language is one among the interesting inventions of humanity. It is a constantly evolving system of communication which is dynamic and shaped by social, cultural, and technological

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changes. One among those communication changes contribute to the change in meanings of existing words through development, expansion, or new associations. Newman defines semantic shift as "changes in the meaning of a given lexical form" (qtd. In Noble et al.). Semantic change can occur through different processes rather than following a single pattern. One such process is semantic broadening, which refers to a situation in which "a term extends beyond a more specific sense to a more general sense" (Hashim).

The emergence of social media has created an environment for such linguistic developments. Platforms such as Instagram, X, and YouTube allow words and expressions to circulate among large and diverse communities of users which eventually helps in transformed and formation of new meanings. Frequent and creative usage can give existing words new meanings, associations, and functions.

This study examines the semantic development of ten words prominent in contemporary digital discourse: lore, brainrot, coded, aura, polyester, troll, savage, story, crashout, and rent-free. These words demonstrate different relationships between traditional and contemporary meanings. For instance, lore has expanded from traditional meaning of knowledge and stories to the background or history of people, fictional worlds, memes, and online events, while savage has developed a positive sense describing someone as bold or ruthlessly impressive.

The study therefore compares the established dictionary meanings of these lexical items with their contemporary social-media meaning and identifies the semantic processes involved in their development. The analysis considers broadening, sematic, metaphorical and figurative extension, amelioration, and pejorative development. By examining these patterns, the study highlights how digital communication contributes to the constant evolution of English language and demonstrates that semantic change involves not only the creation of new words but also the reinterpretation of existing vocabulary.

**Literature Review**

Semantic change is an area which fundamentally focuses on historical linguistics concerning the development and modification of meaning over time. Lyle Campbell (2004) defines semantic change as a change in the concepts associated with a word, distinguishing it from changes in the phonetic form of a lexical item. Similarly, Elizabeth Closs Traugott (2017) describes semantic change as the study of changes in sense and emphasizes that such changes may involve

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developments in lexical meaning as well as semantic-pragmatic relations. Stephen Ullmann's Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning (1962) also treats changes in meaning as an important area of semantic study and examines the factors and mechanisms through which meanings develop. These perspectives not only establish the idea of semantic change as the simple replacement of an "old" meaning with a "new" one. It explores how a lexical item may retain its earlier meaning while developing additional senses, or an existing sense may gradually become more prominent. This understanding is particularly relevant to the present study, which examines established English words that have acquired additional meanings in contemporary digital communication.

Scholars have identified several patterns through which semantic change can occur. Campbell (2004) discusses categories including widening or broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphor, metonymy, and other forms of semantic development. Traugott (2006) similarly identifies broadening, narrowing, metaphorization, and metonymization among important patterns of lexical meaning change. Broadening occurs when a word develops a meaning that covers a wider range of concepts than its earlier meaning, whereas narrowing restricts its semantic range. Amelioration involves the development of a more positive meaning, while pejoration involves the development of a more negative one. Metaphorical extension is particularly significant for digital vocabulary because an established meaning may be transferred to a new form on the basis of similarity. These categories provide a detailed analysis of vocabulary for identifying the type of semantic development observed in contemporary English. They are therefore useful to the present research for distinguishing different kinds of meaning change in the contemporary slang words.

The emergence of computer-mediated communication has created new environments in which language variation and change can be observed. Tagliamonte and Derek Denis (2008) investigate instant messaging through a corpus consisting of more than one million words of natural, unmonitored messages produced by seventy-two teenagers. Their study demonstrates that instant messaging is firmly rooted in existing English while simultaneously functioning as a distinctive hybrid register containing formal, informal, and vernacular forms (Tagliamonte and Denis 3–4). Their findings challenge the assumption that digital communication represents merely a decline in linguistic standards. Instead, digital communication can be understood as a legitimate

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linguistic environment in which established forms coexist with innovative uses. Although Tagliamonte and Denis focus primarily on grammatical and stylistic variation rather than semantic change, their work provides an important foundation for the present study by demonstrating that digitally mediated communication can participate in ongoing processes of language change.

The development of social-media platforms has further expanded the scale and speed at which linguistic forms circulate. Eisenstein, O'Connor, Smith, and Xing (2014) examine the diffusion of lexical change through a corpus of 107 million Twitter messages produced by more than 2.7 million user accounts. Their study demonstrates that linguistic influence on social media is associated with geographical and demographic patterns and does not simply produce a single homogeneous form of online English. They consequently show that social-media networks can facilitate the circulation and diffusion of linguistic innovations while also reflecting existing patterns of linguistic variation (Eisenstein et al.). Although their research focuses on lexical diffusion rather than specifically on semantic transformation, it is significant for the present study because the spread of new lexical usages is an important condition for their wider recognition. Social media therefore provides a space where innovative uses of words can emerge and circulated into usage.

Recent studies have increasingly examined semantic change within social-media vocabulary itself. Research on online slang has shown that digital language involves not only the creation of new lexical items but also the reinterpretation of existing English words. This distinction is particularly important for the present study because its focus is on established vocabulary that has developed contemporary digital meanings. Valentino's 2026 study of Generation Alpha language on TikTok, for instance, applies a lexical-semantic approach to twenty-two expressions and identifies processes including amelioration, pejoration, generalization, and specialization. The study demonstrates how words and expressions circulating within a particular digital community can acquire meanings that differ from their conventional interpretations. Such platform-specific research provides a useful methodological model for identifying and classifying semantic change in digital discourse.

Existing studies have frequently concentrated on specific platforms, particular generations, online slang, or relatively limited groups of lexical items. Valentino, for example, focuses specifically on Generation Alpha language on TikTok. These studies establish the significance of

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digital environments in semantic change, but they also demonstrate the need for further research. Despite having so many research foundations and examination, the evolving field of semantic change requires constant study on new emerging words to understand this further.

Based on this gap, the present study therefore focuses on the semantic transformation of selected existing English words in contemporary digital discourse. Rather than concentrating exclusively on newly created slang or neologisms, it compares the conventional meanings of selected lexical items with their contemporary digital meanings and examines the semantic processes responsible for these changes.

**Research methodology**:

The research design that is employed in this paper is qualitative descriptive methodology. It is used to examine semantic shifts in contemporary English influenced by digital communication and social media. This method is suitable as it aims to analyse a purposive sample of selected words and expressions that have acquired or developed new meanings in digital contexts. Initially the research focuses establishing the traditional meanings of the selected terms based on established English dictionaries such as the Cambridge Dictionary and Merriam-Webster along with its contemporary evolved meaning. The traditional and contemporary meanings are compared to identify changes in meaning and usage.

The datas including words such as coded, ragebait, slopper, polyester and brainrot are gathered from platforms such as Instagram, youtube, twitter and other forums. These words have been chosen because they have been repeatedly used in these forums and has been least prevalently used in research scholarships. The different primary sources for data collection were

1. Authoritative dictionaries like Cambridge dictionary and Merriam-Webster were used to derive the traditional meanings of collected words.
2. Online sources such as posts, comments and videos to collect evolved contemporary meaning.

Later the selected examples are subsequently categorised according to established types of semantic change, such as broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical extension, and meaning shift. The study lies on the basis of lexical semantic approach. Semantic analysis is used to find the difference between the dictionary meaning and contemporary meaning

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of the selected words. The theories of semantic shift, postulated by some of the scholars, including Ullmann(1964) and Traugatt and Dasher(2002) is used to analyse the classifications.

**Discussion and Analysis**:

**LORE**

Traditional meaning: Cambridge Dictionary defines lore as "traditional knowledge and stories about a subject."

Social-media meaning: Social media defines lore as the accumulated background or history behind a person, relationship, meme, incident, fandom, or online situation.

Semantic shift: Broadening / Generalization.

Lore traditionally defines the knowledge about a particular subject in the form of stories. In the contemporary context it refers to background information about fictional characters or celebrities, situations, memes, or imaginary scenarios covering information about a particular person, history, subject or situation. This semantic shift represents a clear case of semantic broadening. The traditional meaning of lore restricts it to the knowledge associated with the subject. In a social media context, the range expands and the meaning broadens to concepts such as individuals, relationships, memes, fandom, imagination etc,. Therefore the semantic range becomes wider making lore an example of semantic broadening.

**BRAINROT**

Traditional meaning: The literal expression is based on the idea of decay or deterioration of the brain.

Social-media meaning: The supposedly mind-numbing effect of excessive online content, and the absurd, repetitive, nonsensical content itself.

Semantic shift: Metaphorical extension + semantic extension

Brainrot traditionally means the deterioration or decay of the brain. In contemporary social-media usage, brainrot refers to the mental effect of high exposure to low-quality, repetitive, or meaningless digital content and, increasingly, to the content itself. The word undergoes metaphorical extension and semantic broadening. The idea of physical or mental deterioration is metaphorically transferred to excessive digital consumption and it's damages while its reference expands from the supposed mental condition to the digital content believed to produce that

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condition. Thus, brainrot has moved from the idea of mental decay to a broader digital-cultural concept involving the same decay due to digital effects.

**CODED**

Traditional meaning: In traditional sense as written, sent, or expressed through a code. Also gives sense of something expressed indirectly.

Social-media meaning: The suffix -coded used to mean that something or someone possesses qualities associated with a particular type of person or thing, even though this is not directly stated. Examples include feminine-coded, 80s-coded, and queer-coded.

Semantic shift: Semantic extension / metaphorical-conceptual extension

Coded traditionally refers to something written, expressed, or communicated through a code, and it can also refer to something expressed indirectly. In contemporary social-media usage, coded appears in constructions such as villain-coded, 90s-coded, and queer-coded to describe something that suggests characteristics associated with a particular identity, category, aesthetic, or period. The word undergoes semantic extension through metaphorical and conceptual association. The original idea of information being encoded or indirectly communicated shifts the concept of literal systems of communication to the interpretation of social, cultural, and aesthetic signals.

**AURA**

Traditional meaning: Traditionally it can refer to a coloured light surrounding a person or animal, or more generally to a feeling or character that a person or place seems to have.

Social-media meaning: A personality and style that people admire and find attractive or interesting.

Semantic shift: Semantic broadening / metaphorical extension

The word Aura traditionally refers to a feeling or character that a person or place possesses. The slang meaning records a personality and style that people admire and find attractive or interesting the most. The word Aura undergoes semantic broadening and metaphorical extension. Contemporary social media meaning refers to charisma, coolness, confidence, attractiveness and social presence which is extended from the narrowed traditional meaning of the word Aura.

**POLYESTER**

Traditional meaning: An artificial material that is a type of plastic, commonly used for clothing, bags, tents, etc.

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Social-media meaning

In social-media slang, polyester has become an insult for something perceived as cheap, generic artificial, unauthentic or mass produced.

Semantic shift: Pejorative evaluative extension

Polyester traditionally refers to a synthetic polymer and the artificial fabric produced from it. In emerging social-media slang, polyester is used figuratively to describe something perceived as artificial, generic, cheap, mass-produced, or inauthentic. The word undergoes figurative semantic extension along with pejorative evaluation. The physical characteristics of synthetic polyester is associated with people, lifestyles, aesthetics, and online content that are perceived as artificial or manufactured. The contemporary use therefore extends the material meaning into a negative description of cultural or social qualities.

**TROLL**

Traditional meaning: A magical imaginary creature from traditional Scandinavian stories;

Social-media meaning: A troll is now an online user who deliberately provokes other users, posts inflammatory material, or attempts to generate angry reactions.

Semantic shift: Metaphorical extension + specialization

Troll traditionally refers to a supernatural or mythical creature in Scandinavian folklore. In contemporary social-media usage, a troll refers to a person who deliberately provokes, annoys, or antagonizes others online, usually to generate reactions or conflict. The word undergoes metaphorical semantic extension and contextual specialization. The name of a troublesome mythical creature is transferred metaphorically to a person who behaves disruptively, and the contemporary meaning becomes specialized within the context of online communication. The word therefore moves from a folkloric creature to a particular type of disruptive internet user.

**SAVAGE**

Traditional meaning: Savage is established in the sense as extremely violent, wild, frightening, serious, or cruel.

Social-media meaning: Savage is often used approvingly for someone or something that is bold, fearless, witty and capable of impressive outputs.

Semantic shift:  Amelioration

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Savage traditionally refers to someone or something wild, violent, brutal, or cruel. In contemporary social-media usage, savage is often used positively to describe someone who is extremely bold, brutally witty, fearless, or capable of delivering an impressive response. The semantic shift here is amelioration. The negative qualities associated with the word is retained yet is reinterpreted positively as signs of confidence, wit, strength, or fearlessness. Thus, the word moves from a predominantly negative evaluation to a positive admiring one in contemporary social media discourse.

**STORY**

Traditional meaning: A description, either true or imagined, of a connected series of events. Social-media meaning: On platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, a story is a temporary piece of shared content, such as a photo, video, or text update, presented through the platform's "Stories" feature.

Semantic shift: Contextual specialization

Story traditionally refers to a narrative or account of connected events, whether real or imagined. In contemporary social-media usage, story refers to a temporary piece of digital content, such as a photograph, video, or text post, uploaded through platforms such as Instagram or Facebook. The word undergoes semantic specialization. The general concept of presenting events or experiences as a narrative is adapted to a specific digital format that allows users to present temporary pieces of personal content. The contemporary meaning therefore develops a specialized sense while the traditional narrative meaning continues to exist.

**CRASH OUT / CRASHOUT**

Traditional meaning: To fall asleep very quickly because of tiredness; and in British usage, to lose a sports competition when expected to win.

Social-media meaning: To lose emotional control, "freak out," or react impulsively/recklessly, especially because of anger or frustration.

Semantic shift: Semantic extension.

Crash out traditionally has established meanings involving suddenly falling asleep or being eliminated from a competition. In contemporary social-media slang, crash out refers to losing emotional control, having an intense outburst, or behaving impulsively and recklessly. The expression undergoes semantic extension through the concept of sudden collapse or breakdown.

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The established idea of suddenly "crashing" or breaking down is extended from physical situations to emotional and behavioural breakdown. The newer usage therefore applies the concept of sudden collapse to a person's emotional state or behaviour.

**RENT-FREE / RENTFREE**

Traditional meaning: Living or staying somewhere without having to pay rent.

Social-media meaning: Means that a person, event, image, song, meme, or idea occupies someone's thoughts repeatedly without being consciously invited.

Semantic shift: Metaphorical extension

Rent-free traditionally means occupying or using a property without paying rent. In contemporary social-media usage, particularly in the expression living rent-free in my head, it describes a person, event, image, song, or idea that continuously occupies someone's thoughts without requiring any conscious effort or permission. The expression undergoes metaphorical semantic extension. Physical property is metaphorically mapped onto the mind, while occupying a house becomes equivalent to occupying someone's mental attention. Thus, rent-free transfers the concept of free physical residence into the psychological domain of persistent thought.

**Findings**

The paper studies that social media functions not only as a space for creating new slang but also as an active environment for transforming the meanings of existing English words. The comparison between traditional meanings and contemporary usages reveals that the selected words undergo different forms of semantic change rather than following a single pattern. Some meanings become broader, while others become more specialized, metaphorical, or evaluatively different.

The analysis shows the evolution of meanings of words which are followed in memes, viral trends, popular culture, and repeated online usage. Words such as lore and brainrot demonstrate how digital communities extend the reference of existing expressions, while coded and rent-free illustrate the development of figurative and metaphorical meanings. Story demonstrates how technological platforms can give an established word a new, platform-specific meaning. Similarly, aura reflects the specialization of an existing meaning into a contemporary expression of charisma, confidence, and social presence.

The findings also reveal changes in the context of cultural association. Savage, for example, has developed from a negative meaning associated with violence or cruelty to an

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approving expression for boldness, wit, or ruthlessness. Conversely, the digital use of polyester can carry negative associations of artificiality or inauthenticity. These examples demonstrate that semantic change can involve not only changes in what a word refers to but also changes in the attitudes and associations attached to it.

Overall, the semantic transformation in digital English is multidirectional and context-dependent. Social media enables existing lexical items to acquire new meanings through metaphor, cultural association, technological practices, and repeated circulation. The findings therefore support the argument that contemporary digital discourse contributes to the ongoing evolution of English by reinterpreting, extending, specializing, and re-evaluating existing vocabulary, rather than producing new slang.

**Conclusion**

Therefore, the conclusion is that the study demonstrates the semantic change in contemporary English which extends beyond the creation. By comparing the conventional dictionary meanings of lore, brainrot, coded, aura, polyester, troll, savage, story, crashout, and rent-free with their contemporary social-media meanings, the study shows how existing lexical items are continuously reinterpreted within digital discourse. The findings reveal that these transformations occur through different processes, including semantic broadening, specialization, metaphorical and figurative extension, technological extension, amelioration, and pejorative development. Thus, semantic shift is not a uniform process but a multidirectional development shaped by context and usage.

The study further establishes that social media provides a significant environment for semantic transformation. Memes, viral trends, popular culture, digital communities act as the forum for the formation and circulation of new sense to words. Words such as lore demonstrate broadening, while story develops a technologically specific sense. Rent-free illustrates metaphorical transfer from physical occupation to mental occupation, whereas savage demonstrates positive evaluative change.

At the same time, the study does not suggest that social media alone originates every semantic change. Some meanings may emerge from wider cultural or linguistic practices and gain visibility through digital platforms. Social media can therefore act as the media for semantic change, allowing emerging meanings to circulate rapidly across communities.

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Ultimately, the study analyses the slang words and adds up to the existing scholarship. The movement from dictionary meanings to digitally transformed meanings demonstrates the adaptability of English to changing communicative and cultural conditions. Similarly, social media represents an important linguistic space in which the evolution of English can be observed, revealing how familiar words can acquire new meanings while retaining connections with their conventional senses.

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