

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

Language is dynamic and continuously adapts to the communicative and social needs of its users. Among university students, this dynamism is particularly evident in the creative use of words whose meanings differ from their standard senses. Such transformations, known as semantic shifts, reveal how social contexts and cultural experiences shape linguistic expression. In contemporary Nigerian society, students have become active contributors to language evolution, creating new meanings through their speech patterns and interactions. The campus environment, especially within institutions like Lead City University, Ibadan, provides a rich setting where English is reshaped to fit the realities of youthful interaction, media influence, and digital culture. By examining how meaning changes occur in the everyday speech of undergraduates, this study seeks to provide insight into the mechanisms through which words gain new connotations, express identity, and reflect cultural belonging.

The Concept of Semantic Shift and Its Relevance in Synchronic Linguistics

Language is never static; it adapts to the communicative needs of its users and to the socio-cultural realities that shape meaning. ¹ Within this context, semantic shift refers to the process by which a word acquires a new meaning while retaining its original form. ² This phenomenon underscores language's flexibility and its ability to mirror the creative impulses of its speakers. As Adeyemi observes, semantic shift is "a reflection of linguistic responsiveness to new social experiences."³

Traditionally, the study of meaning change was approached diachronically—that is, across historical periods. However, in modern linguistics, the synchronic perspective emphasizes how meanings function at a specific moment in time within a living language system.⁴ The synchronic approach focuses on how speakers currently understand, reinterpret, and assign meaning in ongoing communication rather than tracing how those meanings evolved historically.⁵ Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langue* (the structural system of language) and *parole* (actual speech use) provides a theoretical basis for this view.⁶ Synchronic linguistics, therefore, examines semantic relations as they exist in the present structure of a language, seeing meaning as an outcome of context, convention, and speaker negotiation.⁷

The relevance of synchronic linguistics to this study lies in its capacity to describe real-time linguistic behavior particularly how young speakers manipulate language to express identity, attitude, and creativity.⁸ Among Lead City University undergraduates, ordinary English words such as *mad*, *vibe*, *ginger*, and *cruise* have developed unconventional meanings that reflect peer-group culture and digital interaction.⁹ These shifts exemplify synchronic meaning change because they occur within the same generation and are socially distributed through usage rather than historical inheritance.¹⁰

Hence, synchronic linguistics provides the appropriate lens for this research because it explains language variation as a product of current communicative practice.¹¹ It captures how meaning evolves through social use rather than through long-term etymological transformation. In this way, the semantic shift observed among undergraduates at Lead City University is understood not as a historical progression but as an immediate, living manifestation of linguistic creativity.¹²

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although English is the official and instructional language in Nigerian universities, its use among students reflects local innovations that diverge from standard meanings. Words acquire context-specific interpretations that often differ from dictionary definitions, heavily influenced by social media¹³ and the pragmatic need for lexical innovation among youth¹⁴. For instance, expressions like “that party was mad” or “he gave me ginger” convey positive emotions or excitement rather than literal meanings.

Previous studies on semantic shift in English have largely focused on general usage patterns or diachronic linguistic trends. However, there is limited research that specifically investigates how university undergraduates in a university environment generate and sustain new word meanings in their peer communication. This study addresses this gap by exploring the types, causes, and communicative implications of semantic shifts among students at Lead City University, Ibadan.

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to examine how Lead City University undergraduates employ English words that have experienced semantic shift. The objectives are to:

- (i) identify the instances of semantic shift among undergraduates of Lead City University.
- (ii) examine the types of semantic shift among the students

- (iii) identify the linguistic, cultural, technological and social factors influencing semantic extension among the students.
- (iv) implications of semantic shift for effective communication among students.

1.4 Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (i) What are the instances of semantic shift among undergraduate's student of Lead City University?
- (ii) What are the types of semantic shift among the students?
- (iii) what are the linguistic, cultural, technological and social factors influencing semantic shift among the students?
- (iv) What are the implications of semantic shift for effective communication among students?

1.5 Significance of this Study

This study contributes to the understanding of language innovation and semantic development in youth communication. It highlights the role of students as agents of linguistic creativity and social identity construction. The research is significant to linguists, educators, and sociolinguists as it documents a vital aspect of modern English usage within an academic environment. It also enriches the literature on synchronic semantics, providing empirical insight into meaning variation in contemporary Nigerian university settings.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The study focuses on undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan, between the 2024 and 2025 academic sessions. It examines the meanings and contextual uses of English words that have shifted within student communication, both in spoken and digital interactions. The study excludes staff and postgraduate students, limiting its scope to the linguistic behavior of undergraduates.

1.7 Operational Definition of Terms

Semantic Shift: The process through which a word or expression develops a new meaning or changes its original sense due to social and contextual influences.

Undergraduates: Learners pursuing a first degree at Lead City University, Ibadan.

Synchronic Linguistics: The study of language at a specific point in time, focusing on how it functions in the present.

Cognitive Semantics: A linguistic perspective that interprets meaning as shaped by human thought and experience.

Pragmatics: The study of how context determines the interpretation of meaning in communication.

Language Innovation: The creative modification or repurposing of linguistic forms to express new ideas or identities.

Nigerian English: The variety of English spoken in Nigeria, characterized by localized vocabulary and semantic adaptation.

Endnotes

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Chapter two

Literature Review

This chapter reveals the related literature on the study under the following subheadings.

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2.1 Conceptual Review

Language, as a human phenomenon, functions not only as a means of communication but also as a symbolic system through which meaning is created, interpreted, and transmitted across generations. Semantics, as the study of meaning, occupies a central position in linguistic inquiry because it seeks to explain how words and structures convey sense, how meaning is constructed in context, and how it evolves over time.¹ Understanding semantics is thus indispensable for any investigation into the dynamic processes that drive language change, innovation, and interpretation. Language is a symbolic system through which thought, culture, and identity are expressed. Every act of speech involves the transmission of meaning, and that meaning—dynamic, contextual, and ever-changing—constitutes the essence of linguistic study. Semantics, therefore, lies at the heart of linguistics because it deals with how linguistic signs relate to what they represent in human cognition and society.¹ In the modern era, semantics has expanded from a descriptive analysis of meaning to a multidimensional science that incorporates logic, cognition, social practice, and computational modelling.² This section explores the conceptual foundations of semantics and meaning change, examining definitions, theoretical orientations, and examples that illuminate the processes of semantic variation and shift in both Nigerian and British contexts.

2.1.1 Definition and Scope of Semantics

The term *semantics* derives from the Greek *semaino*, meaning “to signify” or “to indicate.” In modern linguistics, it refers to the systematic study of meaning within language.² It is the branch of linguistics concerned with the relationship between linguistic forms and what they denote,

including words, phrases, and sentences.³ Contemporary scholars view semantics as the study of how language users encode and decode meanings, as well as how meaning relates to the world, thought, and communication.⁴

The scope of semantics encompasses several interrelated components. At the most basic level, it involves the analysis of **lexical meaning**, which deals with individual word senses and their relations to one another within the lexicon.⁵ It also extends to **sentential and compositional meaning**, where the focus shifts to how meanings combine to form propositions.⁶ Modern semantic theory, influenced by structuralist and cognitive paradigms, recognizes that meaning is not merely an inherent property of words but a function of usage, conceptualization, and contextual interpretation.⁷ Semantics therefore bridges the gap between linguistic form and human understanding. It explains how signs function not only as structural elements but as carriers of conceptual information. Recent scholarship emphasizes that semantic competence is socially mediated: speakers learn meanings not in isolation but within communicative events where cultural knowledge guides interpretation.⁷ Thus, semantics today is not merely the study of words but the study of how humans make sense of the world through language.

Semantics plays a foundational role in all aspects of linguistic analysis. It intersects with syntax in determining how sentence structures contribute to meaning, with morphology in studying how word forms encode sense, and with pragmatics in explaining how speakers derive context-specific interpretations.⁸ Moreover, recent developments in computational linguistics have expanded the scope of semantics to include how meaning can be modeled and analyzed quantitatively.⁹

The discipline also investigates the mechanisms of meaning change, exploring how words develop new interpretations as societies evolve.¹⁰ This dynamic aspect of meaning lies at the heart of the study of **semantic shift**, which is the focus of subsequent sections.

The term "semantics" was first officially introduced by Breal, who is credited with formally establishing the study of meaning in language. Although the concept of meaning had interested scholars for a long time, the word "semantics" itself did not appear in academic texts until Breal's work. Early philosophical inquiries into meaning gave rise to philosophical semantics, which explores the connection between language and the external world it refers to. This branch of semantics investigates the conditions under which linguistic statements can be deemed true or false, with origins tracing back to Plato and Aristotle. In contemporary times, notable figures associated with philosophical semantics include Rudolf Carnap, Alfred Tarski, and Charles Peirce¹. Peirce observed that in America, this field evolved into semiotics, whereas in France, influenced by Saussure, it was known as semiology. Tarski's key contribution was the creation of truth-based semantics². Meanwhile, linguistic semantics deals with the characteristics of natural languages, and pure or logical semantics applies formal logical methods to the study of meaning, making it more mathematical than linguistic³.

Semantics is the study of meaning in language¹. It involves a systematic exploration of what linguistic meaning entails and how it comes about². This field analyses how expressions are constructed from various layers such as morphemes, words, clauses, sentences, and entire texts, as well as how the meanings of these components influence one another³. While semantics can focus on a single language like English, its broadest scope includes the study of meaning structures across all languages⁴. As a descriptive discipline, semantics seeks to explain how meaning functions rather than dictate what meanings should be assigned to specific expressions⁵.

Key questions in semantics include: "How do word meanings combine to form sentence meanings?", "How are meanings connected to the mental processes of language users and the objects words denote?", and "What is the relationship between a word's meaning and its context of use⁶?" The main academic fields involved in semantics are linguistics, semiotics, and philosophy⁷.

In addition to being a field of study, semantics also refers to specific theories within it, such as truth-conditional semantics⁸, as well as the meaning of individual words, for example, the semantics of the term "fairy"⁹. Semantics has two main dimensions: internally, it focuses on the link between words and the mental concepts they trigger, such as ideas and representations; externally, it looks at how words correspond to objects in the real world and the conditions that make sentences true¹⁰. Several related disciplines explore language and meaning. Semantics differs from other linguistic subfields such as phonology, which studies speech sounds and their combination into words, and syntax, which examines the rules for organizing words into sentences.

These distinctions are evident in the fact that a person can be proficient in some language skills while lacking others—for example, knowing how to pronounce a word without understanding its meaning¹¹. As a branch of semiotics, semantics focuses more narrowly on meaning in language, whereas semiotics covers both linguistic and non-linguistic signs. Semiotics also explores other areas such as the significance of non-verbal communication, conventional symbols, and natural signs that exist independently of human interaction. Examples include nodding to express agreement, stripes on a uniform indicating rank, and vultures circling as a sign of a nearby animal carcass¹². Semantics also differs from pragmatics, which studies how language is used in communication¹³. A phrase like "That's what I'm talking about" can convey various meanings

depending on the speaker and context. Semantics concerns itself with the range of possible meanings an expression can have in general¹⁴ and is often defined as the study of context-independent meaning. Pragmatics, on the other hand, considers which meaning is relevant in a specific situation. Unlike semantics, pragmatics focuses on actual language use rather than the underlying linguistic competence¹⁵. This includes implied meanings that are not explicitly stated, such as the significance of a speaker's silence on a topic¹⁶. A related distinction, made by the semiotician Charles W. Morris, holds that semantics studies the relationship between words and the world, pragmatics examines the relationship between words and their users, and syntax deals with the relationships among words themselves¹⁷.

Semantics is closely connected to etymology, which investigates how words and their meanings have evolved over time¹⁸. Another related discipline is hermeneutics, the art or science of interpretation, focusing on proper methods for interpreting texts in general, especially religious scriptures¹⁹. Metasemantics explores the metaphysical basis of meaning, seeking to understand its origin or how it comes into being²⁰. The term "semantics" derives from the Ancient Greek adjective *semantikos*, meaning "relating to signs," which itself comes from *sēmeion*, the noun for "sign." Originally, it was used in reference to medical symptoms before expanding to cover all types of signs, including linguistic ones. The word "semantics" entered English through the French *sémantique*, a term introduced by the linguist Michel Bréal in the late 19th century²¹.

In semantics, the primary focus is on studying the meanings of words and sentences within languages. Linguistic semantics approaches this investigation in a structured and objective way. However, meaning is not fixed; it heavily depends on context and the participants involved in communication. There is a close relationship between meaning and communication, where communication is the process of exchanging information, messages, attitudes, feelings, or values

between individuals, mainly through language. Language itself is a system based on a set of symbols agreed upon by a community. These symbols can be spoken or written words, gestures, or drawings, but they must follow an organized and systematic structure. Language is organized into four main levels: sounds (phonetics/phonology), words (morphology), sentences (syntax), and meaning (semantics). While phonology and syntax deal with how language expresses ideas, semantics is concerned with interpreting those ideas. Humans possess an innate cognitive ability to understand and use grammar, which is complemented by the interpretive ability central to semantics. Therefore, learning and acquiring language involves not only mastering sounds and structures but also linking meaning to those structures. In summary, semantics is the scientific study of meaning in language¹.

Semantic shift, also known as semantic change or meaning change, happens when the meaning of a word evolves over time⁵. This process is a natural part of how languages develop, influenced by cultural changes, technological progress, contact with other languages, and shifts in human perception⁶. As speakers engage with their surroundings, they reinterpret words—sometimes broadening or narrowing their meanings, or assigning entirely new associations to them⁷. The alteration in word meanings is often called semantic shift or semantic drift⁸. Like most changes in language, semantic shifts generally go through a transitional phase where a word carries both its old and new meanings simultaneously⁹. In such cases, the word is considered polysemous, and this situation is known as polysemy¹⁰. Over time, the original meaning may fade away, leaving only the newer meaning, which itself might later be replaced by yet another meaning¹¹. Semantic change can refer to both the process of changing meaning and the resulting new meanings. Depending on how semantics is understood by researchers, semantic change may describe shifts related to the external world (such as objects or cultural norms) or changes within

language itself, including the way pragmatic implications become part of a word's core meaning over time¹². Of all types of linguistic change, semantic change attracts the most public attention and prescriptive debate¹³. This is partly because meanings are recorded in dictionaries, partly because some words have apparently direct referential meanings, and largely because certain groups seek to control the meanings of words (for example, disputes over the meanings of "Yankee," "gay," or "terror"), sometimes even influencing laws (such as how "harassment" has been legally defined to include a "hostile work environment")¹⁴. Although semantic change was once thought to be irregular, recent research suggests that clear and directional patterns can be observed, often across many languages¹⁵. These patterns are usually studied from two complementary viewpoints. The semasiological approach holds the form (f) constant, ignoring changes in sound or other aspects, and concentrates on shifts in the meanings linked to f (for example, the change from "grasp" meaning "clutch" to "understand")¹⁶.

Sometimes, semantic change is considered the same as lexical change¹⁷. However, lexical change also involves processes like word formation, borrowing, and various morphological and phonological changes alongside meaning shifts, which will not be discussed here¹⁸. One way a word's meaning can change is by altering the scope of concepts it covers¹⁹. For instance, a word's meaning might expand from referring to a specific concept to a broader category that includes the original concept and others. This process is called widening, also known as generalization, extension, or broadening²⁰. The English verb *arrive* is an example of widening. Its early Middle English form, *ariven*, was borrowed from the Norman French *ariver*, both originally meaning 'to reach land after a long sea journey,' ultimately derived from the Latin *ad rīpam* ('to the shore')²¹. Over time, *ariven*'s meaning broadened, and modern *arrive* can now refer to reaching any destination, by any mode of travel, and regardless of travel duration²². Linguists

have classified semantic shifts into several categories²³. Broadening, or generalization, occurs when a word's meaning extends to cover more concepts than before²⁴. For example, the Old English word *dog* initially referred to a particular breed but later came to mean all types of dogs. Conversely, narrowing, or specialization, happens when a word's meaning becomes more limited²⁵. For example, the Old English word *meat* once meant any kind of food but now specifically refers to animal flesh⁵. During the early 20th century, extensive efforts were made to classify types of semantic change, focusing mainly on lexical or content-related shifts considered independently⁶. These classifications remain foundational in language change textbooks and continue to be widely accepted in recent studies⁷. Key types of semantic change include metaphorization, metonymization, pejoration, amelioration, narrowing, and generalization⁸.

Metaphorization refers to understanding one concept through the lens of another based on their similarity⁹. For example, the Latin components *ad* ('to') and *mit* ('send') combined to form the English word *admit*, and the word *tissue*, which originally meant 'woven cloth,' came to describe an 'aggregation of cells in animals or plants'¹⁰. In contrast, metonymization relies on a relationship of proximity or association, such as the word *board*, which first meant a table but later came to represent the people sitting around that table, like a governing board¹¹. A common form of metonymy is synecdoche, where a part is used to represent the whole, as seen when *keel* stands for a ship¹². Pejoration happens when a word takes on a more negative meaning¹³. For instance, the Old English verb *stincan*, which meant to smell (either pleasant or unpleasant), evolved into *stink*, which carries a negative sense¹⁴. Similarly, *cnafa* ('boy') shifted to *knave* ('dishonest person'), and *conceit* changed from meaning 'idea or opinion' to 'an overestimation of one's abilities'¹⁵. On the other hand, amelioration occurs when a word's meaning becomes more positive¹⁶. For example, the Middle English word *nice* originally meant 'foolish' or

‘innocent’ but later came to mean ‘pleasant’¹⁷. Occasionally, meanings are adopted as symbols of pride, such as with the term queer¹⁸. Narrowing limits, a word’s meaning, like Old English *deor*, which once meant ‘animal’ but later became specialized to mean ‘deer’ specifically¹⁹. Conversely, generalization broadens a word’s meaning, as in the Latin *armare*, which initially meant ‘to cover one’s shoulders’ but developed into the more general English *arm*²⁰. Semantic changes frequently unfold gradually over many centuries²¹. For example, *toilet* entered English from French in the 16th century, originally referring to a cloth used as a wrapper, particularly for clothing²². In the 17th century, this meaning narrowed to signify a cloth covering a dressing table, then, by metonymy, it came to denote the dressing table itself²³. Later, it extended to the act of washing, as in the phrase ‘do one’s toilet’²⁴. By the 19th century, in the U.S., the word was adopted as a euphemism for ‘lavatory’ to avoid taboo²⁵.

Certain types of semantic change seem to be opposites, such as pejoration versus amelioration or narrowing versus generalization⁵. Because of this, some scholars argue that semantic change is unpredictable and somewhat random⁶. This unpredictability is partly due to the fact that words are influenced by shifts in social and cultural attitudes as well as changes in conceptual frameworks⁷. For instance, transformations in social roles can cause certain groups to be viewed negatively, leading to pejoration⁸. An example is the Old English word *ceorl*, meaning ‘man without rank or of low rank,’ which evolved by the 13th century into *churl*, meaning ‘base fellow’⁹. Similarly, the term *Yankee*, initially a neutral nickname for New Englanders, was used derogatorily by Confederate soldiers to describe Union soldiers during the American Civil War¹⁰. Later, Union soldiers reclaimed the term, causing its meaning to improve (amelioration) ¹¹.

In synchronic linguistic studies, researchers explore various lexical relationships like synonymy (e.g., *astute* and *smart*), antonymy (*fast* and *slow*), enantiosemy (words like *sanction*, which

mean both ‘penalty’ and ‘permission’), hyperonymy/hyponymy (vegetable and lettuce), and holonymy/meronymy (foot and toe) ¹². These relationships can also evolve over time¹³. Enantiosemy, in particular, demonstrates how meanings depend heavily on context and how polysemy is maintained¹⁴. For example, sanction was borrowed from French in the 16th century with the meaning ‘law’ or ‘decree’¹⁵. Over time, it developed a metonymic extension to mean both penalties enforcing that law and the approval needed to issue it¹⁶. This created a risky homonymy where the word held two opposite meanings: ‘approve’ and ‘penalize’¹⁷. Sometimes, homonyms formed through phonological change cause one meaning to disappear, as with the Old English *lætan* (‘allow’) and *lettan* (‘prevent’), which became homonyms in Middle English¹⁸. The meaning of ‘prevent’ was replaced by words like *prevent* and *forbid*¹⁹. However, when polysemy arises from a single origin, both meanings often survive, such as with *dust*, which can mean ‘to remove dust’ (*dust the furniture*) or ‘to cover lightly with powder’ (*snow dusted the hills*) ²⁰. In the case of *sanction*, both meanings persist and depend on context to be properly understood²¹.

During the 20th century, the onomasiological idea of semantic or lexical fields emerged, which involves grouping words with related meanings, such as those referring to intelligence, colours, or family relations²². Interest in how these semantic spaces evolve grew significantly by the century’s end²³. For example, researchers investigated how colour terms developed across languages and how vocabulary for senses like touch, taste, and smell expanded metaphorically into other sensory domains such as sight and hearing—seen in expressions like “soft sound,” “warm colour,” or “sweet smell”²⁴. This body of work formed the basis for a more systematic approach to understanding semantic change, especially within the frameworks of cognitive linguistics and grammaticalization²⁵. One major idea in cognitive linguistics is that word

meanings are not static but instead suggest a range of interpretations influenced by context⁵. These meanings exist on a spectrum, from central to marginal, and linguistic forms are believed to mirror broader cognitive structures and classification systems⁶. Some theorists maintain that a lasting metaphor in European thought conceptualizes language as a conduit, where words serve as containers that transmit ideas⁷. This conceptual metaphor can be seen in how meanings have evolved in words like admit (“to allow entry”), express (“to push out”), and input (“something contributed”), all of which have taken on communicative connotations⁸.

A metaphor-based model of semantic change has also been developed, rooted in the idea of embodiment. This theory suggests that metaphors like KNOWING IS SEEING in Indo-European languages stem from physical sensory experiences such as seeing, hearing, or grasping²⁵. These bodily experiences are mapped onto abstract concepts, explaining semantic shifts such as how the Proto-Indo-European root *weid* (to see) led to English *wit* and Greek *oida* (I know, from *eidon* meaning ‘I saw’) ²⁶. Further cross-linguistic research into such mappings found that although vision is the most prominent physical sense, auditory perception more frequently serves as the basis for metaphors about mental processes. Some semantic changes, however, go against the typical trend of shifting from concrete to abstract meanings. One example is the word *dull*, which initially described someone lacking intelligence and only later, around the 15th century, came to mean “not sharp”—a shift possibly influenced by the word *dol*, meaning “foolish²⁷.”

In the past, the most extensively studied type of semantic change has been the development of grammatical meaning, particularly within grammaticalization research on morphosyntactic change²⁸. These studies—typically conducted from typological and cognitive standpoints—show that semantic shifts linked to grammaticalization usually follow consistent and predictable patterns across different languages²⁹. Such changes generally move in a single direction: from

full lexical meanings toward more abstract grammatical functions, with the reverse rarely occurring. This process often unfolds along a spectrum, transitioning from content-rich lexical meanings to more procedural or structural grammatical roles. For instance, English auxiliary verbs (must, shall, can, will, may, be going to, have to) originated from lexical sources, many of which have since become obsolete in Standard English³⁰.

Another common type of semantic shift is a shift in positive or negative aspects of a meaning. Elevation or amelioration (or sometimes melioration) is a shift to a more positive meaning³¹. This implies that elevation can transform a neutral meaning into a positive one, or shift a previously negative meaning toward a neutral or even favourable interpretation. The change could be even smaller, from positive to very positive or from negative to less negative³². As long as the new meaning is more positive in some way than the original, the shift is elevation. For example, Modern English *eager* descends from Middle English *egre*, which was a borrowing from French that originally meant angry, acidic³³. We can see this original meaning reflected in related words like *acid*, *acrid*, and *acerbic*, which all ultimately come from Latin *ācer* ‘sour, sharp’³⁴. Over time, the negative quality of the meaning of *eager* was lost, and it now has the more positive meaning ‘enthusiastic’³⁵.

The quality of a meaning can shift in the opposite direction, so that the new meaning is more negative than the original³⁶. This kind of shift is called degeneration, pejoration, or deterioration. As with elevation, degeneration could involve a drastic change from positive to negative or a smaller change, such as from positive to less positive³⁷. For instance, in Old English, *cnafa* initially denoted any young male or boy³⁸. Over time, this meaning underwent degeneration and acquired increasingly negative meanings, first ‘young male servant’ and then eventually ‘dishonest person, villain’³⁸.

Another frequent type of semantic change is amelioration, where a word evolves to carry a more favourable meaning⁴⁰. For example, in Middle English, knight originally meant "servant," but over time, it came to denote a noble warrior. In contrast, pejoration involves a shift toward a more negative meaning; silly, for instance, once meant "happy" or "fortunate" but now refers to someone who is "foolish." A metaphorical shift arises when a word's meaning changes through figurative comparison—mouse, which once solely referred to the small animal, now also describes a computer device. Metonymic shift, on the other hand, results from association rather than similarity; for example, crown has shifted from signifying a physical object to representing the institution of monarchy. These categories help explain the intricate processes behind semantic change in English. While some shifts unfold gradually, others happen swiftly, driven by historical developments, technological progress, or changes in social structures.

A chronological overview of classification schemes for semantic change reveals different approaches taken by linguists. Today, the most widely used typologies are those by Leonard Bloomfield and Andreas Blank.

Typology by Reisig

Reisig's classification, published posthumously, was based on classical rhetoric. He identified three primary types of semantic change¹¹

Synecdoche – shifts between part and whole

Metonymy – shifts between cause and effect

Metaphor – meaning extension based on similarity

Typology by Paul¹²

Paul proposed a more structured approach to semantic change, categorizing it into three types^[12]:

Generalization – expansion of a word's meaning.

Specialization – narrowing of meaning to a specific part.

Transfer – shifting meaning to a related concept through spatial, temporal, or causal links.

Typology by Darmesteter (1887)¹³

Darmesteter's classification included four types of semantic change:

Metaphor – meaning shift based on resemblance.

Metonymy – association-based meaning change.

Narrowing of meaning – restriction to a more specific sense.

Widening of meaning – expansion of meaning scope, which aligns with synecdoche in modern classifications.

Typology by Bréal¹⁴

Michel Bréal introduced the following four types of semantic change:

Restriction of sense – a general meaning becoming more specialized.

Enlargement of sense – a specific meaning becoming more general.

Metaphor – meaning change based on analogy.

"Thickening" of sense – shift from abstract to concrete meanings.

Bloomfield's typology remains one of the most widely accepted classification schemes in English-speaking academia. His model organizes semantic change based on linguistic and psychological mechanisms, emphasizing how shifts in meaning result from various cognitive and communicative processes.

These classification schemes provide valuable frameworks for understanding how languages evolve. While early models focused on rhetorical and logical relationships, later approaches integrated cognitive and pragmatic factors, offering a more nuanced view of semantic change.

2.1.2 Levels and Dimensions of Meaning

Meaning in language operates on multiple levels and dimensions. Scholars have long recognized that linguistic meaning is not monolithic but layered, encompassing several types of interpretation that interact in complex ways.¹¹

At the **lexical level**, meaning is associated with individual words and expressions. Words rarely have single, fixed meanings; rather, they often display **polysemy**, carrying a network of related senses that vary according to context.¹² For example, the word *run* can denote physical motion, operation ("the machine runs"), or management ("run a company"). Polysemy reveals the flexibility and richness of lexical meaning and is one of the key indicators of ongoing semantic change.¹³

At the **grammatical level**, meaning arises from the structural relationships between words in a sentence. Functional categories such as tense, aspect, mood, and number carry grammatical meanings that shape how a message is interpreted.¹⁴ For instance, the difference between *She writes* and *She wrote* signals a temporal dimension of meaning that is encoded syntactically.

A third dimension is **sentential or propositional meaning**, which concerns the truth or falsity of statements.¹⁵ This is the level addressed by truth-conditional semantics, where meaning is analyzed in relation to conditions under which a sentence would be true. Although this approach provides a logical model of meaning, it often fails to capture pragmatic nuances.¹⁶

The **pragmatic level** of meaning, on the other hand, emphasizes how speakers use language to achieve communicative goals. Meaning at this level is shaped by context, speaker intention, shared knowledge, and situational factors.¹⁷ Pragmatic enrichment often leads to reanalysis over time, as temporary contextual meanings become conventionalized a process that frequently results in semantic shift.¹⁸

Finally, there is a **cognitive dimension** of meaning, which interprets linguistic sense as part of human conceptual structures. Cognitive linguistics argues that meaning is grounded in human experience, perception, and metaphorical thinking.¹⁹ This approach sees language as a reflection of how people conceptualize reality, thus linking semantics to psychology and cognitive science.

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Together, these levels and dimensions form an integrated model of meaning. Meaning is thus both a mental and social construct anchored in human cognition but constantly negotiated through communication.²¹

2.1.3 Relationship between Semantics and Other Linguistic Fields

Semantics is closely connected to every other component of linguistic study. While each branch of linguistics phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics has its distinct focus, they all converge on the common goal of explaining how language conveys meaning.²²

The relationship between **semantics and syntax** lies in the interaction between form and meaning. Syntax provides the structural arrangement of words, while semantics interprets how these arrangements generate sense.²³ Theories such as generative grammar and formal semantics explore how syntactic structures correspond to semantic representations.²⁴

Semantics also overlaps with **sociolinguistics** and **discourse analysis**, fields that investigate how social variables and interactional patterns influence meaning. Words may acquire different connotations across social groups or registers. For instance, the term *bad* in youth slang may convey admiration, while in formal usage it retains its negative sense. Such divergence exemplifies synchronic variation the very phenomenon central to semantic shift.¹⁷

Semantics also interacts with **morphology**, the study of word formation. Morphological processes such as derivation, inflection, and compounding contribute to meaning construction.²⁵ For example, adding the suffix *-ness* to *happy* creates *happiness*, shifting the word from an adjective to a noun and altering its semantic function.²⁶

The link between **semantics and pragmatics** is perhaps the most intricate. While semantics deals with the stable, conventional meaning of linguistic expressions, pragmatics examines how meaning is influenced by context, speaker intention, and inference.²⁷ **Pragmatics** forms the closest and most debated boundary with semantics. While semantics is traditionally concerned with the conventional meaning of expressions, pragmatics examines how meaning is enriched by context. Recent scholarship blurs this distinction, suggesting that semantics provides the skeleton of meaning, whereas pragmatics fleshes it out through inference.¹⁶ The pragmatic enrichment of meaning often initiates long-term semantic change when temporary inferences become permanent senses.

The two are interdependent: pragmatic uses can lead to semantic change, and semantic conventions set the boundaries within which pragmatic interpretation operates.²⁸

Moreover, semantics overlaps with **sociolinguistics**, which studies how social factors such as class, age, gender, and ethnicity influence language use.²⁹ Sociolinguistic research reveals that meaning is not universal but socially variable different communities may attach different interpretations to the same lexical items.³⁰

In modern linguistic scholarship, semantics also interfaces with **cognitive linguistics**, where meaning is viewed as an expression of mental representations and conceptual metaphors.³¹ This interdisciplinary link demonstrates that meaning cannot be divorced from the human mind, as language is both a symbolic and conceptual system.³²

The interconnectedness of these fields underscores the centrality of semantics in the study of language. It serves as the bridge that connects linguistic form with human understanding, linking sound, structure, and context into a coherent system of meaning.³³

2.1.4 Definition and Nature of Semantic Shift

Semantic shift refers to the process by which a word or expression acquires a new meaning or undergoes modification in its sense.³⁴ It is one of the most pervasive phenomena in language change and reflects the adaptability of human communication. In linguistic terms, semantic shift involves a change in the conceptual content associated with a word, leading to an extension, restriction, or transformation of its meaning.³⁵

Scholars generally distinguish between **gradual semantic shifts** which evolve slowly through regular use and **sudden shifts**, which occur through metaphorical extension, cultural influence,

or technological innovation.³⁶ For example, the word *cloud* once referred exclusively to a meteorological formation but now also denotes digital data storage due to technological metaphorization.³⁷

The nature of semantic shift is inherently social and cognitive. It reflects how language users reinterpret words to fit new contexts, needs, or conceptual frameworks.³⁸ This adaptability ensures the survival of language as a living, evolving system. Semantic shift refers to the change in meaning of a lexical item over time or across contexts. It is a universal feature of language evolution, reflecting both cognitive flexibility and social adaptation.¹⁹ A semantic shift may involve broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, or value change, but at its core lies the human tendency to repurpose existing linguistic material for new communicative needs.²⁰

From a synchronic perspective, semantic shift is observable in living usage rather than historical reconstruction. Speakers constantly reinterpret words in light of context, emotion, and innovation. When these reinterpretations gain social acceptance, a semantic change has effectively occurred.²¹ Thus, meaning change is not a random drift but a process guided by analogy, relevance, and shared cultural frameworks.

The nature of semantic shift is both **systematic** and **creative**. Systematic, because it follows predictable patterns grounded in cognitive processes such as metaphor and metonymy; creative, because each community adapts these processes uniquely according to its communicative environment.²² Modern semantics treats semantic shift as an indicator of linguistic vitality: a static language would signal a static society.²³

2.1.5 Processes and Mechanisms of Semantic Shift

The evolution of meaning in language follows identifiable mechanisms that reveal the interplay between cognition, culture, and communication.²⁴ Linguists have long observed that semantic change does not occur arbitrarily but reflects systematic cognitive patterns and social motivations. The principal mechanisms of semantic shift include **broadening**, **narrowing**, **amelioration**, **pejoration**, **metaphorization**, **metonymy**, **bleaching**, and **reanalysis**.

Broadening, also called *generalization*, occurs when the meaning of a word expands to encompass new referents beyond its original scope.²⁵ A classic example is *bird*, which once denoted only small fowl but now refers to all species of avian creatures. In more contemporary contexts, words like *driver* have broadened semantically to include “software drivers” and not merely human operators.

Conversely, **narrowing** (*specialization*) refers to a reduction in a word’s meaning range.²⁶ The Old English term *hund* referred to all dogs but narrowed to the specific sense of “hound.” Narrowing often arises from increased cultural specificity or specialization within a community.

Amelioration and **pejoration** reflect the shifting social evaluations of meaning.²⁷ *Knight*, which originally meant “servant,” has undergone amelioration to signify nobility, while *silly* has shifted from “holy” to “foolish.” These value changes show how semantics is sensitive to social attitude and moral perception.

Metaphorization and **metonymy** are two of the most productive mechanisms of meaning change. **Metaphorization** involves mapping from one conceptual domain onto another based on similarity.²⁸ This process explains common expressions such as *grasping an idea*, where physical action is metaphorically extended to cognitive understanding. **Metonymy**, by contrast,

relies on contiguity rather than similarity; it replaces one concept with another closely associated with it—such as *the crown* for monarchy or *Hollywood* for the American film industry.²⁹

Modern linguistics also recognises **semantic bleaching**, a process in which words lose part of their original meaning through frequent use.³⁰ Expressions like *literally* and *awesome* have been semantically bleached through exaggeration in informal discourse. **Reanalysis** occurs when speakers reinterpret the structure or meaning of an expression, as in *burger*, which originally derived from *Hamburger* (a person from Hamburg) but was reanalysed as a food item, enabling formations like *cheeseburger* and *veggie burger*.³¹

These processes are not mutually exclusive but often co-occur in the life of a single word.³² They provide the mechanisms by which meaning evolves, confirming that semantic shift is a natural and systematic aspect of linguistic life.

2.1.6 Classical and Modern Classifications of Semantic Change

The attempt to classify semantic change dates back to the nineteenth century, when scholars sought to describe patterns of meaning evolution through historical linguistics.³³ Early typologies, such as those of Michel Bréal and Stephen Ullmann, divided semantic change into logical or psychological categories: generalization, specialization, transfer, elevation, and degradation.³⁴ These classical frameworks highlighted the regularity of meaning change but often treated it as a static record rather than a dynamic process.

In the twenty-first century, linguistic theory has expanded these categories to incorporate **cognitive**, **sociolinguistic**, and **discourse-based** perspectives.³⁵ Cognitive linguistics explains semantic change through conceptual operations like **metaphorical mapping**, **image schemas**, and **conceptual blending**, showing how new meanings emerge through mental association and

experiential analogy.³⁶ For instance, the conceptual metaphor *TIME IS MONEY* explains phrases such as *spend time* and *waste time*, demonstrating how abstract thought shapes lexical innovation.

Corpus linguistics has contributed a **data-driven classification** of semantic change by tracking shifts in word usage over time through large digital corpora.³⁷ Modern taxonomies distinguish between *systemic changes*, arising from semantic networks, and *emergent changes*, arising from local, pragmatic reinterpretation.³⁸

In short, while classical classifications emphasized outcomes, modern classifications emphasize **processes**—how, why, and under what social or cognitive conditions semantic shift occurs.³⁹ This progression reflects the shift from diachronic to synchronic linguistics, where change is not just traced historically but analysed as a current and ongoing phenomenon.

2.1.7 Socio-Cultural, Cognitive, and Technological Influences on Meaning Change

Language functions within social ecosystems, and meaning change mirrors social transformation.⁴⁰ As culture evolves, language adapts, creating new lexical meanings and discarding obsolete ones. Semantic shifts therefore serve as linguistic reflections of cultural identity, technological advancement, and cognitive innovation.

From a **socio-cultural** perspective, meaning change is driven by shifts in values, norms, and experiences.⁴¹ For instance, gendered terms have undergone semantic reclamation words like *bossy* or *queer* have been reinterpreted through empowerment movements. Similarly, the global spread of English has diversified its semantic base, with local communities redefining meanings to fit cultural contexts.⁴²

Cognitive influences on semantic change stem from how humans perceive and categorize experience.⁴³ Our conceptual system organizes the world through metaphor and metonymy, mechanisms that naturally extend meaning. When a new conceptual domain arises—such as the digital world—language adapts by extending existing metaphors: *window*, *virus*, *surf*, and *cloud* acquire technological senses through cognitive association.⁴⁴

The **technological revolution** of the twenty-first century has produced one of the most rapid waves of semantic change in linguistic history.³¹ Digital culture continually reassigns meanings: *tweet*, *post*, *stream*, *share*, and *follow* all carry novel digital senses while retaining traces of their original metaphors. Nigerian online discourse contributes its own innovations, coining expressions such as *to blow*, *to drag*, and *to ghost* that encapsulate social-media behaviour.³²

Global connectivity accelerates diffusion: words that begin as local slang often attain international recognition within months.³³ Consequently, meaning change has become not only more frequent but more observable, providing linguists with unprecedented opportunities to study semantic processes synchronically.

Ultimately, socio-cultural evolution supplies the motivation for change, cognitive mechanisms supply the method, and technology supplies the medium.³⁴ Together, they ensure that meaning remains a living, adaptive system. It has accelerated meaning innovation in unprecedented ways.

⁴⁵ Social media has introduced new usage patterns where speed, brevity, and creativity dominate. Words like *follow*, *post*, and *tag* have undergone semantic extension in digital contexts, while online culture has popularised creative reinterpretations such as *ghosting*, *trending*, and *influencer*.⁴⁶

Language is a living system that continuously evolves, shaped by the historical, social, and cognitive experiences of its speakers. Among the many aspects of linguistic evolution, semantic change the shift in word meanings over time plays a crucial role in reflecting broader societal and cognitive transformations.

These changes occur due to complex interactions between cultural shifts, technological advancements, ideological changes, and cognitive mechanisms. Understanding why and how words change meaning requires examining both external socio-cultural factors and internal cognitive processes. From ancient times to the digital age, words have undergone transformations driven by colonization, globalization, scientific discoveries, and even popular culture. Simultaneously, cognitive processes such as metaphorization, metonymy, and conceptual reanalysis shape the way meanings are interpreted and extended.

Semantic change can take multiple forms, with one prevalent type being broadening. This occurs when a word's meaning widens to cover more referents than it initially did. For example, holiday was once used solely for days of religious significance, but it now applies to any occasion of rest or festivity⁸⁰. In a similar vein, dog originally described just one particular breed but eventually came to represent all types of canines⁸¹. Such expansion illustrates how speakers often adapt word meanings to suit wider contexts and uses.

In contrast, narrowing is a type of semantic change in which a word's meaning becomes more specific over time. For instance, meat once referred to all types of food but eventually came to denote only the edible flesh of animals⁸². Likewise, girl once referred to young people of any gender but eventually narrowed to mean only female children⁸³. This shift often results from

societal developments or the need for linguistic precision. Another important form of semantic change is amelioration, in which a word acquires a more positive connotation than it previously had. For instance, knight initially meant a mere servant but evolved to signify a respected warrior⁸⁴. Similarly, queen, which once meant “woman” in Old English, took on its modern sense of a royal female ruler⁸⁵. These changes frequently occur due to shifts in social hierarchy and values.

By contrast, pejoration involves a word developing a more negative meaning. The word silly, which originally meant “happy” or “fortunate,” gradually took on its modern meaning of “foolish” or “lacking good sense”⁸⁶. Similarly, villain once referred to a farmworker but came to denote an immoral or wicked person⁸⁷. This process is often linked to social prejudices or historical shifts in power dynamics. Metaphorization is another crucial driver of semantic change, wherein a word's meaning shifts based on perceived similarity between two concepts. For example, mouse now refers not only to a small rodent but also to a computer device due to a resemblance in shape and function⁸⁸. Likewise, head extends beyond the physical body part to signify leadership roles, as in head of the department⁸⁹. These metaphorical extensions reveal how human cognition organizes language through associative thinking. Metonymy, closely related to metaphorization, occurs when a word shifts meaning based on a conceptual association rather than direct resemblance. For example, White House refers not just to a building but to the U.S. presidency as an institution. Similarly, crown symbolizes monarchy, demonstrating how semantic change often reflects political and social structures⁹¹.

Social and cultural influences play a pivotal role in shaping semantic change. One of the most significant forces is technological advancement, which introduces new meanings or repurposes old words. The word tablet, once associated solely with inscribed stone or clay, now commonly

refers to a digital device⁹². Similarly, tweet originally meant the sound made by birds but is now widely recognized as a social media post⁹³. These shifts illustrate how language adapts to emerging innovations.

Historical events and political shifts also contribute to semantic change. The colonization of various regions led to the borrowing and transformation of words. For example, tobacco and chocolate were originally indigenous terms from the Americas that entered European languages during the colonial era⁹⁴. In contrast, political movements often reshape language to align with ideological goals. Terms like freedom and democracy have evolved in meaning depending on the cultural and historical context in which they are used⁹⁵.

Language change is also driven by social factors such as euphemism and taboo avoidance. Words associated with sensitive topics such as death, bodily functions, or social stigmas often undergo euphemistic replacement. For instance, passed away has largely replaced died in many contexts, reflecting a cultural preference for softer expressions⁹⁶. Similarly, words like restroom and sanitation worker have emerged to replace more direct or potentially offensive terms⁹⁷.

Cognitive mechanisms further shape semantic change through fundamental processes of perception and categorization. Prototype theory, for example, suggests that people categorize words based on the most representative examples of a concept. This can lead to semantic shifts as certain meanings become dominant while others fade. The word bird originally applied broadly to all winged creatures, including bats, but later narrowed due to evolving classifications in zoology⁹⁸.

Another cognitive influence is frame semantics, which emphasizes how context and experience shape meaning. A word's meaning is not fixed but depends on the conceptual "frame" in which it is used. For instance, bank can mean a financial institution or the side of a river, with the intended meaning determined by context⁹⁹. This principle explains why semantic shifts often occur gradually, as language adapts to different communicative needs.

Psycholinguistic research also highlights the role of semantic bleaching, a process in which words lose their original intensity or meaning due to frequent use. The word literally, for example, originally meant in a literal sense but is now often used as an intensifier with little connection to its original meaning¹⁰⁰. Similarly, awesome, which once referred to something truly awe-inspiring, is now commonly used to express mild approval¹⁰¹. These changes illustrate how habitual usage alters meaning over time.

Semantic change reflects not only linguistic evolution but also deeper societal and cognitive patterns. Whether through metaphorization, technological progress, political shifts, or cultural interaction, language remains in a state of flux. The dynamic interplay between socio-cultural influences and cognitive mechanisms ensures that meanings will continue to shift as human societies evolve. Semantic shift and semantic expression have played a critical role in the evolution of English from its Old English roots to its Modern English form. The changes in word meanings are influenced by a range of social, political, cultural, and cognitive factors, demonstrating that language is a living, adaptable system. Words do not retain their meanings permanently; rather, they evolve to reflect the realities of the people who use them.

Social and political influences play a significant role in meaning shifts. Political changes, such as the Norman invasion or colonial expansion, have introduced new words and altered the meanings

of existing ones. For instance, the word revolution originally referred to a literal turning motion but later gained its political meaning due to historical upheavals¹⁰⁴. Similarly, gay once meant “joyful” but has since acquired a specific meaning related to sexual orientation due to social developments¹⁰⁵. Technological and scientific advancements also contribute to semantic changes. As new inventions and discoveries emerge, old words are repurposed to describe them. The word cell, for example, originally referred to a small room but later came to signify a biological unit and, more recently, a mobile phone¹⁰⁶. These shifts highlight how language continuously adapts to reflect human innovation.

Cognitive and psychological factors shape how people interpret and use words. Metaphorical extensions, where abstract concepts are expressed using physical terms, are common. For example, grasp originally meant “to physically hold” but later acquired the meaning “to understand”¹⁰⁷. Similarly, head can refer to a body part, a leader, or the front of something, demonstrating how human cognition influences word usage¹⁰⁸.

Language contact and borrowing further contribute to semantic shifts. As English interacts with other languages, borrowed words often take on new meanings. For instance, prestige originally meant “illusion” in French but now signifies “status” in English¹⁰⁹. Additionally, words like pioneer, which once meant “foot soldier,” now refer to someone who is the first to develop or explore something new¹¹.

Finally, linguistic economy and pragmatics influence semantic change. People naturally simplify language over time, leading to abbreviations, slang, and idiomatic expressions. The word nice, for example, originally meant “ignorant” in Middle English but gradually evolved to mean “pleasant” due to its frequent use in polite discourse¹¹¹. These changes demonstrate the human

tendency toward efficiency and ease of communication. By examining the historical development of semantic changes, linguists can better understand how language adapts to human needs and societal transformations. This knowledge is essential in the study of historical linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and even artificial intelligence, as understanding semantic shifts can aid in improving natural language processing. As language continues to evolve, new semantic expressions will emerge, shaping communication for future generations, the study of semantic change provides valuable insights into how language functions as a mirror of human experience. By analyzing the forces that shape meaning shifts, linguists and historians can better understand the relationship between language, thought, and society. The words we use today may not carry the same meanings in the future, but the processes driving their evolution remain constant. Understanding these changes allows us to appreciate the richness and adaptability of language as a fundamental aspect of human communication. Semantic change is thus a mirror of human progress: each innovation in society is eventually encoded in language.⁴⁷ The intersection of cognitive mapping, social identity, and technological mediation ensures that meaning remains fluid and responsive to the world it describes.

Technological advancements have profoundly influenced language, driving semantic shifts that reflect changes in human experience, communication, and interaction with new tools and innovations. As technology evolves, words acquire new meanings, old meanings fade, and entirely new lexicons emerge to accommodate novel realities. Scholars have long explored the impact of technological progress on semantic change, with studies demonstrating how the introduction of new technologies reshapes both the lexicon and the conceptual metaphors people use to describe the world⁸⁰.

A study explored the impact of technology on word meanings, noting that terms like “broadcast,” originally an agricultural term for scattering seeds, shifted to a media-related meaning due to the advent of radio and television⁸¹. Similarly, “mouse,” once solely referring to a rodent, became a term for a computer device, illustrating how technological developments lead to semantic expansion. Such shifts are not limited to individual words but often involve broader conceptual changes. The rise of the internet has altered the meaning of words like cloud, which once referred to a meteorological phenomenon but now commonly denotes digital storage systems⁸².

One of the most profound areas where technology influences meaning is digital communication. The rise of social media has introduced new interpretations of words such as “post,” “tweet,” and “like.” Previously, a “post” referred to physical mail or a structural component of a building, but in the digital age, it signifies sharing content online. Similarly, “tweet,” once an onomatopoeic representation of bird sounds, is now primarily associated with social media messaging⁸³. These shifts demonstrate how digital culture reshapes language, often in ways that become deeply embedded in everyday usage⁸⁴.

Metaphorical extensions of technological terms are another way in which meaning change occurs. Words related to physical actions and objects are frequently adapted to describe abstract digital processes. For example, “surfing” was originally associated with riding ocean waves but has since evolved to mean navigating the internet⁸⁵. Likewise, “window,” traditionally referring to an opening in a wall, now describes a visual interface on a computer screen. Such metaphorical shifts reveal how human cognition relies on existing conceptual frameworks to make sense of emerging technologies⁸⁶.

The expansion of artificial intelligence and automation has also contributed to semantic change. The word bot, which once described a biological organism, now primarily refers to software programs that perform automated tasks. Similarly, algorithm, originally a mathematical term, has gained broader usage in discussions of artificial intelligence, social media filtering, and decision-making processes⁸⁷. The language of AI continues to evolve, reflecting new developments in machine learning, robotics, and digital interaction⁸⁸.

Language change driven by technological innovation is not limited to English; it occurs across languages worldwide. Many languages have borrowed technological terms from dominant global languages, often adapting them to fit their phonetic and grammatical systems. In some cases, entirely new words emerge to describe technological advancements that have no historical precedent in a given language⁸⁹. Studies show that as technology spreads, linguistic borrowing and adaptation accelerate, leading to shifts in meaning across diverse linguistic communities⁹⁰.

The influence of technology extends to human relationships and social structures, which in turn affect language. Terms like friend and follow once carried purely social meanings but now have distinct digital connotations related to online interactions. The act of unfriending someone, which was previously an informal expression, has taken on a formalized meaning within social media platforms⁹¹. Such semantic changes reflect broader shifts in how people connect, communicate, and form relationships in the digital era⁹².

Another area where technological advancements drive meaning change is commerce and finance. The rise of digital banking and cryptocurrency has introduced new meanings to words like wallet, which now refers to digital storage for electronic currencies, and “mining,” which, in the context of blockchain technology, describes the computational process of validating transactions⁹³. As

financial technology continues to evolve, new terms and meanings emerge, influencing global economic discourse⁹⁴.

The gaming industry has also played a significant role in semantic shift. Words like “avatar,” once associated with religious or mythological incarnations, now primarily refer to a digital representation of a user in virtual environments. Similarly, “lag,” which originally described a delay in physical motion, has become a standard term for internet speed disruptions⁹⁵. The language of gaming frequently intersects with broader technological discussions, contributing to changes in how people perceive and describe digital experiences⁹⁶.

Medical technology and biotechnology have introduced significant changes in scientific vocabulary. The word “virus”, which originally referred only to biological pathogens, is now commonly associated with computer security threats. Similarly, “gene editing” has expanded from a niche scientific term to a widely understood concept due to advancements in genetic engineering⁹⁷. These changes reflect how scientific progress influences everyday language, shaping public understanding of complex technological developments⁹⁸.

Technological metaphors have also permeated discussions of human cognition and behavior. The human brain is frequently described using computational terms such as “processing,” “downloading,” and “storing” information, reflecting how digital technology has influenced perceptions of mental function⁹⁹. Some scholars argue that these metaphors shape not only language but also the way people conceptualize intelligence, learning, and memory¹⁰⁰.

The acceleration of technological progress means that semantic shifts are occurring more rapidly than in previous eras. Words that once held a single, stable meaning are now subject to frequent reinterpretation as new innovations emerge. Studies suggest that digital communication and mass

media amplify these changes, allowing new meanings to spread quickly across linguistic communities¹⁰¹. The constant evolution of language in response to technology demonstrates the dynamic nature of meaning, emphasizing the interconnectedness of technological progress and linguistic adaptation¹⁰².

Empirical research on technological advancements and meaning change highlights the role of societal adaptation in language evolution. As people integrate new technologies into their lives, their linguistic expressions adjust accordingly, leading to both incremental and dramatic semantic shifts. This ongoing process ensures that language remains a flexible and responsive tool, capable of reflecting the complexities of modern technological landscapes¹⁰³.

Understanding how technological advancements shape meaning is essential for linguists, educators, and policymakers. As language continues to evolve alongside technology, studying these shifts provides insight into broader cognitive and cultural transformations. The interplay between technological progress and linguistic change underscores the adaptability of human communication, illustrating how words continuously evolve to capture new realities¹⁰⁴.

2.1.8 Semantic Shift in the Context of Nigerian English

The phenomenon of semantic shift is particularly visible in **Nigerian English**, where the interplay of indigenous languages, socio-cultural realities, and communicative creativity produces a distinct variety of English.⁴⁸ Nigerian English is not a deviation from Standard English but a legitimate, rule-governed variety shaped by local pragmatics and multilingual interaction.⁴⁹

Semantic shifts in Nigerian English arise through *extension*, *transfer*, and *innovation*—mechanisms that adapt English words to express Nigerian experiences.⁵⁰ Common examples

include *trek* (to walk a long distance), *flog* (to beat or scold), and *dash* (to give freely).⁵¹ Each reflects pragmatic adaptation rather than error, illustrating how English meanings are reinterpreted within African sociocultural contexts.

The creative use of English in Nigeria demonstrates a **synchronic vitality** where meanings evolve in response to daily realities.⁵² Linguistic innovation occurs across formal and informal registers: from media headlines and religious discourse to campus slang and online expression. This constant adaptation has produced a dynamic semantic system that mirrors the diversity and ingenuity of Nigerian communication.⁵³

2.1.8.1 Modern Nigerian Examples of Semantic Shift

In recent years, Nigerian English has experienced rapid semantic innovation, particularly through youth culture, digital communication, and entertainment media.⁵⁴ The following examples illustrate how meaning has shifted within the Nigerian context between 2014 and 2025:

- **Mad:** Formerly denoting insanity, *mad* now functions as an adjective meaning “excellent,” “exciting,” or “impressive.”⁵⁵ In everyday speech, expressions like *That beat is mad!* signal admiration rather than disapproval.
- **Cruise:** Borrowed from Standard English meaning “to sail smoothly,” it now denotes playful mischief or unserious behaviour (*He’s just catching cruise*).⁵⁶
- **Package:** Originally meaning a parcel or bundle, *package* in Nigerian English refers to presentation, confidence, or personal branding (*She knows how to package herself*).⁵⁷
- **Sharp:** While it once described physical pointedness, it now means “smart,” “clever,” or “streetwise.”⁵⁸

- **Drop:** In media and music culture, *drop* has shifted to mean “release” (*He dropped a new track yesterday*).⁵⁹
- **Blow:** Used figuratively to mean achieving fame or success (*The artist finally blew after that song*).⁶⁰
- **Flex:** Now commonly used to mean enjoyment or showiness, reflecting social display (*They went out to flex after exams*).⁶¹

These examples reveal that Nigerian semantic innovation is motivated by sociolinguistic creativity, peer-group identity, and digital communication.⁶² The Internet and popular culture—especially music and social media—serve as catalysts, transforming slang into stable lexical meaning.⁶³ Such shifts demonstrate that Nigerian English functions as a living linguistic ecosystem in which semantic evolution is both rapid and natural.

2.1.8.2 British English Examples of Semantic Shift

British English, though historically stable, continues to exhibit ongoing meaning change shaped by generational identity, media influence, and technological progress.⁶⁴ Words such as *wicked*, *sick*, and *fit* have undergone notable semantic reversals: *wicked* now means “excellent,” *sick* means “amazing,” and *fit* means “attractive.”⁶⁵ These re-evaluations illustrate **amelioration through youth slang**, where negative words are reinterpreted positively as markers of in-group belonging.

Historical examples show similar tendencies: *gay* shifted from “cheerful” to “homosexual,” *cool* evolved from “cold” to “stylish,” and *bad* gained an ironic positive sense in informal speech.⁶⁶

Such semantic reorientation highlights how language responds to shifts in cultural attitude and aesthetic taste.

Technological change in British English has also redefined meaning.⁶⁷ Words like *spam*, *tablet*, and *cookie* have acquired digital senses unrelated to their original referents. These innovations demonstrate metaphorical and metonymic extensions driven by modern life.

Comparatively, both Nigerian and British Englishes exhibit semantic shift through parallel processes—metaphor, extension, and social reinterpretation—though motivated by different cultural forces.⁶⁸ In British English, shifts often emerge from generational fashion and media circulation; in Nigerian English, from multilingual contact and socio-pragmatic innovation.⁶⁹

Together, these examples confirm that **semantic shift is universal but culturally conditioned**.⁷⁰ It is the linguistic manifestation of society's evolution—dynamic, continuous, and creative.

2.1.9 Speech Community

Language does not develop in a vacuum. It exists within social contexts where it functions as both a communicative system and a marker of group identity. The concept of the speech community occupies a central place in sociolinguistics because it provides the framework for understanding the interrelationship between language, society, and culture. A speech community is a social group united not merely by a shared linguistic code but by a collective understanding of how language should be used appropriately within specific contexts¹. Members of such a community share norms of interaction, interpretive conventions, and communicative expectations that distinguish them from other groups².

The speech community functions as the environment where linguistic competence and social competence intersect. It defines the social boundaries within which individuals learn, interpret, and reproduce language. This makes the concept indispensable for the study of language variation, meaning negotiation, and semantic change³. Within every speech community, linguistic forms are continuously shaped by social processes such as interaction, identity construction, and group solidarity. Thus, the speech community operates as both a social and linguistic construct — a space where communication practices are embedded in social relationships⁴.

2.1.9.1 The Evolution of the Concept

The idea of a speech community has evolved significantly over time. Early linguistic traditions conceived it as a homogenous group of speakers sharing identical linguistic forms. Modern sociolinguistics, however, recognises it as a heterogeneous and dynamic entity. The concept has expanded to include the influence of culture, history, technology, and globalisation on communication⁵. The speech community is now understood as a flexible network of speakers who may not necessarily share the same geographical location but who interact through shared communicative norms and linguistic repertoires⁶.

Contemporary research demonstrates that language boundaries no longer correspond neatly to physical space. Speech communities today may exist across vast geographical and digital landscapes. Speakers participate in these communities through face-to-face interaction, social media, or transnational communication networks. The development of virtual speech communities reflects how language evolves in response to technological and social

transformation⁷. This flexibility highlights the adaptability of the concept to the communicative realities of the twenty-first century.

Recent sociolinguistic theories emphasise that speech communities are products of historicity, materiality, and spatial interaction⁸. They emerge from the shared experiences and historical conditions that shape the linguistic identity of a group. Language, therefore, becomes a living record of collective history and social memory. Members of a speech community not only communicate with one another but also construct a shared understanding of their social world through language.

2.1.9.2 Key Characteristics of Speech Communities

The defining features of speech communities have been reinterpreted to suit the complexities of contemporary communication. However, several essential attributes remain consistent:

1. Shared Linguistic Repertoire

A speech community is characterised by a common linguistic system or variety that facilitates mutual understanding. This shared repertoire includes vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation, and stylistic conventions. Members draw upon this shared code to communicate effectively within their group⁹.

2. Shared Norms and Rules of Communication

Beyond linguistic knowledge, speech communities are bound by collective norms regarding the appropriate use of language. These norms determine when, how, and to whom specific forms of speech are used. They regulate politeness, turn-taking, speech acts, and non-verbal cues¹⁰.

3. Mutual Intelligibility

Even where dialectal or stylistic differences exist, members of a speech community are able to interpret one another's utterances correctly. This shared interpretive competence ensures that meaning is collectively maintained despite linguistic variation¹¹.

4. Social Cohesion and Identity

Language serves as a marker of social identity. Within a speech community, speakers use linguistic forms to signal belonging, solidarity, and group membership. The community thus becomes a linguistic and social entity where language expresses collective identity¹².

5. Dynamic and Adaptive Nature

Speech communities are not static. They evolve through contact, migration, education, and technology. New members enter, norms change, and new varieties emerge. This adaptability reflects the ongoing negotiation between language and social life¹³. These characteristics demonstrate that the speech community is not merely a linguistic construct but also a social and cultural one. It provides the foundation upon which meaning, value, and identity are built.

2.1.9.3 Speech Communities as Social Systems

Speech communities function as social systems in which language practices are shaped by power relations, norms, and shared values. Every linguistic choice made by members reflects social hierarchies and interpersonal relationships¹⁴. Language use signals respect, authority, or familiarity, and these signals are collectively understood within the community. Thus, communicative behavior is governed not only by grammatical rules but also by social expectations.

Sociolinguistic studies reveal that power and identity within a speech community influence language evolution. Groups with high social prestige often serve as models for linguistic norms, while marginalised groups innovate creatively to assert distinctiveness¹⁵. Over time, these interactions generate language variation and change, as different subgroups contribute to the development of new linguistic forms or semantic meanings.

In multicultural and multilingual contexts, such as Nigeria, speech communities overlap and interact constantly. English, for instance, functions as a lingua franca that bridges diverse linguistic backgrounds, yet each subgroup adapts it to reflect its cultural identity. This adaptability explains why varieties such as Nigerian English exhibit distinctive phonological, lexical, and semantic features shaped by the local speech communities that use them¹⁶.

2.1.9.4 Speech Communities and Language Variation

Linguistic variation arises naturally within speech communities. Speakers differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, and meaning, but these differences are socially structured and patterned. Variability often corresponds with factors such as class, age, gender, and context of use. Within any community, certain forms become associated with prestige or formality, while others are linked to informality or youth culture¹⁷.

Speech communities are also the arenas of linguistic innovation. New words, expressions, or meanings often originate within smaller social groups before spreading outward. For example, youth communities, professional circles, or educational institutions often create linguistic

innovations that later enter mainstream usage¹⁸. These processes illustrate how language change begins at the community level before diffusing across society. In multilingual nations, the interaction of different speech communities results in cross-linguistic influences. This leads to code-switching, borrowing, and hybrid language forms that enrich the communicative repertoire of speakers. Over time, these contact phenomena can produce new varieties or dialects.

2.1.9.5 Speech Community and Semantic Shift

Semantic shift — the process by which words acquire new meanings — occurs within specific speech communities where new interpretations become socially recognised. When speakers consistently use a word in a novel way, and others in the group adopt this usage, a semantic shift has taken place¹⁹. Speech communities therefore provide the social space for meaning change to emerge, stabilise, and spread. In the Nigerian context, university students represent a highly dynamic speech community in which English words are frequently redefined to express local experience and identity. Among the undergraduates of youths today, words such as cruise, ginger, package, and vibe carry meanings distinct from their standard English definitions. These new meanings reflect creativity, youth culture, and shared understanding within the community²⁰.

For instance, ginger may refer to enthusiasm or motivation rather than a spice, while package can refer to physical appearance or self-presentation. Such shifts occur because members of the community agree—often implicitly—on the new sense of the term. Once internalised, these meanings become integral to the group's linguistic identity. Semantic shift in this context demonstrates how language is a social product. The adoption of new meanings is not random but grounded in shared experience and collective negotiation. It reflects how communities adapt language to capture their realities, attitudes, and values²¹.

The unit of analysis is not the isolated word but the word in use within a recognisable social formation that can stabilise new interpretations.

Three mechanisms ground this process.

First, **contextual reindexing**. Forms acquire local meanings from recurrent contexts of use. Repetition within similar situations allows hearers to anticipate the stance, activity, or alignment that a form cues. With time, the contextual signal hardens into a community meaning.¹⁰

Second, **uptake and normative ratification**. Innovations persist only when interlocutors treat them as meaningful, appropriate, and useful. Peers provide ratification by reusing the item, extending it to related contexts, or affiliating with the stance it carries.¹¹ This ratification is not passive; it is a social endorsement that ties meaning to identity work.

Third, **enregisterment**. Once a form reliably indexes community membership or stance, it becomes part of a recognisable register. Enregisterment marks a shift from scattered novelty to conventional resource. The form now signals who speakers are, where they belong, and how they position themselves.¹²

The trajectory often proceeds through phases. An initial innovation arises in situated practice. Propagation follows, driven by local influencers, repeated participation frames, and interactional density. Stabilisation occurs as users converge on salient senses and exclude competing readings. Diffusion may then cross community boundaries, sometimes accompanied by meaning bleaching or revaluation as the form adapts to new audiences.¹³ Algorithmic infrastructures can accelerate every phase by amplifying visibility, fostering niche clustering, and shaping what circulates.¹⁴ A speech community's internal ecology shapes which semantic shifts thrive. Medium sized, tightly engaged communities often display the clearest sense specialisation and stable local meanings,

while broader publics favour polysemy and rapid bleaching.¹⁵ Communities that valorise playfulness, irony, and stance work supply fertile ground for semantic innovation because meaning flexibility itself is a norm.¹⁶

An illustration is Youth formations repeatedly recruit existing words for novel positive or ironic meanings, transforming items that once indexed evaluation or literal description into labels for energy, style, or social savvy. In such settings, shared performance spaces, dense peer networks, and rapid feedback loops facilitate the move from idiosyncratic usage to community meaning.¹⁷

2.1.9.6 Contemporary Forms of Speech Communities

The rise of digital communication has diversified the structure of speech communities. Online platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram host communities that interact through shared linguistic styles and conventions. Virtual speech communities form around hashtags, online games, fandoms, and social causes, each developing distinct linguistic norms²².

These virtual environments extend the sociolinguistic concept beyond physical communities. Participants may never meet face-to-face, yet their repeated engagement creates stable linguistic patterns recognisable to insiders. In many ways, the virtual speech community functions like a traditional one, with shared vocabulary, humour, and symbolic expressions. This phenomenon has implications for language evolution, as digital discourse accelerates the spread of new meanings. Terms coined in one online community may rapidly enter general usage, demonstrating that speech communities can now operate at global scales²³.

2.1.9.7 Speech Community as a Site of Identity and Power

Language within a speech community serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a means of constructing and negotiating social identity. Through language use, individuals signal belonging, resistance, or aspiration. Group-specific linguistic markers, slang, or stylistic choices become instruments of inclusion and exclusion. The mastery of a community's speech norms signifies insider status, while deviation may mark one as an outsider²⁴. Speech communities also mirror social hierarchies. Certain linguistic forms are privileged as standard or prestigious, while others are stigmatised. These distinctions reinforce broader structures of social power. Yet, marginalized groups often use linguistic innovation as resistance, redefining terms and creating new semantic forms that challenge dominant norms²⁵.

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2.1.9.8 Relevance of Speech Community to the Present Study

Understanding the concept of the speech community is crucial to the present study because it provides the social framework for analysing semantic shift in Nigerian English among youths. The speech community functions as both the source and the environment for meaning change. It

is within this collective that new word meanings are formed, understood, and sustained²⁶. By examining the speech community of students, this study situates semantic shift not merely as a linguistic process but as a social one. The shared experiences of the group—academic life, peer interaction, popular culture, and digital engagement—constitute the forces driving linguistic creativity. Consequently, semantic change among students can be viewed as both a reflection of their social identity and an indicator of ongoing transformation in Nigerian English.

2.1.9.9 Dynamism and Creativity in Speech Communities

Speech communities are dynamic because members continually resolve tensions between intelligibility and expressivity. Creative practices arise where speakers stretch available resources to fit new problems, new media, and new identities.¹⁸ Creativity here is not an ornament on an otherwise stable system. It is the engine by which the system adapts.

(a) Sites and resources of creativity.

Lexical innovation introduces new items, blends, and truncated forms. Morphosyntactic play exploits analogy and reanalysis to remodel patterns. Prosodic and orthographic stylisation adds intensity, affect, and stance. Interdiscursive bricolage recruits fragments, catchphrases, and templates from media and memes to compress shared knowledge into shorthand.¹⁹ Creativity depends on recognisability. Novelty must be legible against community expectations to be interpretable as witty, cool, or authoritative rather than merely obscure.²⁰

Constraints and evaluations. Communities evaluate innovations along axes of appropriateness, authenticity, and efficacy. Items judged inauthentic may be rejected as try-hard or derivative. Items that travel too widely may be dismissed as overused. The social life of a form therefore includes not only diffusion but also resistance, policing, and ironic reclamation.²¹

Role of infrastructure. Platform affordances organise visibility and uptake. Search, recommendation, and moderation systems privilege some patterns and suppress others. This creates selective pressures that nudge communities toward euphemism, re-spelling, and code blending, with downstream effects on semantic trajectories.²² Dense comment cultures further encourage short, punchy units that carry maximal stance in minimal space, favouring items that can be flexibly remixed.²³

(b) Innovation cycle.

A recurring cycle can be observed. Emergence in small clusters exploits in-jokes and local knowledge. Peak distinctiveness coincides with maximal identity signalling. Mainstreaming extends reach and often dilutes meanings. Backlash then produces counter-innovations, archaising revivals, or micro-registers that reassert distinctiveness. Communities move through this cycle as part of ongoing identity negotiation.²⁴

An illustration could be youth cohorts frequently lead in linguistic innovation because they inhabit dense peer ecologies with high interactional frequency and low gatekeeping. In such ecologies, playful blends, stance-heavy adjectives, and memetic catchphrases can move from novelty to norm in short order, only to be replaced when distinctiveness fades.²⁵

2.1.9.10 Spelling and Semantic Shift

Orthography is not a neutral transcription system. In everyday digital practice it is a semiotic resource for stance, alignment, and identity.²⁶ Spelling variation can foreshadow or consolidate semantic shift by signalling that an item is being used in a specialised, affect-laden, or community-specific way.

Forms of orthographic stylisation.

Phonetic respellings reflect local pronunciation and tacitly claim in-group authenticity. Lengthening marks intensity or affective charge. Reduced vowels, clipped syllables, and numeronyms satisfy speed and platform constraints while indexing informality. Case alternations and diacritics mark sarcasm, emphasis, or play.²⁷ These practices are regular enough to be learned, anticipated, and recognised as part of a community's repertoire.

Why spelling matters for meaning.

Orthographic stylisation can perform three functions with respect to semantic change.

- (a) Indexical flagging.** A non-standard spelling announces that a familiar word is being used with a special value. The visual difference flags a pragmatic difference and invites a non-literal reading.²⁸
- (b) Enregisterment support.** Recurrent stylisation links a form to a community voice. Over time, this coupling strengthens a specialised sense by bundling meaning with a recognisable style.²⁹
- (c) Constraint navigation.** Moderation and search tools often target specific forms. Communities adopt evasive respellings or emoji substitutions that both evade filters and build new meanings through euphemism, irony, or in-group coding.³⁰

From orthography to semantics.

Spelling changes can stabilise shifts by making some readings easier to retrieve and others less salient. Where a stylised spelling consistently accompanies one stance or activity, readers learn to treat it as a cue for that meaning. As the stylised form outcompetes the standard one in the relevant context, the semantic shift consolidates.³¹

An illustration can be seen to youth digital cultures widely use elongation for intensity, clipped forms for informality, and creative respellings for stance. In such settings, repeated stylisation trains readers to expect specialised readings, thereby reinforcing group meanings and hastening the movement from playful novelty to conventionalised sense.³²

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Synchronic Linguistics

Language, in its most fundamental sense, is a living system that reflects the realities of human cognition, interaction, and culture. The study of meaning, therefore, must account for how linguistic forms function within a specific time and context, not merely how they evolved historically. This is the philosophical foundation of **synchronic linguistics**—a perspective that views language as a structured whole existing at a given point in time.¹ A branch of linguistics concerned with analysing language as it exists at a particular moment, without primary regard for its historical development.¹ This approach contrasts with diachronic linguistics, which traces the

evolution of linguistic forms through time. Synchronic analysis focuses instead on the functioning of the linguistic system as a coherent whole, enabling linguists to explain how meaning operates within contemporary usage.² Synchronic linguistics contrasts with diachronic linguistics, which studies language change over time, by emphasising the present state of the linguistic system and how its internal relations govern meaning.²

The adoption of the synchronic approach in modern semantics reflects a shift from static, historical analysis toward a dynamic understanding of language as a self-regulating, adaptive mechanism.³ Within this framework, meaning is not a fossilised relic of past usage but a living, functional entity subject to social, cognitive, and communicative forces operating in the immediate linguistic environment.

2.2.1 Origin and Principles of Synchronic Linguistics

Before the twentieth century, the dominant paradigm in linguistic research was **comparative philology**, which concentrated on historical relationships among languages and their reconstruction from written records.⁴ Although philology offered valuable insights into sound laws and etymology, it treated language as a fossilised product rather than as a living system. The inadequacy of this historical focus created the intellectual space for **Ferdinand de Saussure**, whose *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) inaugurated the modern discipline of structural and synchronic linguistics.⁵

The foundation of synchronic linguistics is widely attributed to the Swiss linguist **Ferdinand de Saussure** (1857–1913), whose posthumously published *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) revolutionised linguistic theory.⁴ Saussure introduced a fundamental distinction between **synchronic** and **diachronic** study, arguing that a language must first be examined as a complete

system at a given moment before its historical changes can be understood.⁵ This insight laid the groundwork for structural linguistics and, by extension, modern semantic theory.

Saussure conceived of language (*langue*) as a structured network of interrelated elements governed by internal relations rather than external reference.⁶ Meaning, in his model, arises from the **differential opposition** between linguistic signs rather than from direct correspondence with the world. Each sign is defined not by its intrinsic value but by its relation to other signs within the system.⁷

Modern synchronic linguistics retains this relational principle while integrating insights from cognitive science and sociolinguistics. It emphasises that meaning at any given time reflects both systemic relations (how words contrast with one another) and usage contexts (how speakers deploy them).⁸ This dual orientation allows synchronic linguistics to account for both the structure and the variability of meaning in present-day language use.

Saussure distinguished between the **diachronic** study of language (change through time) and the **synchronic** study (language as an interrelated system at a single point).⁶ His central claim was that language should first be understood as a self-contained system of signs—each sign deriving its identity from its contrast with other signs, not from external reference.⁷

The principal **tenets of synchronic linguistics** include:

1. **Systemicity:** Language is an internally organised network where every element depends on its relations to others.⁸
2. **Relational Meaning:** The meaning of a linguistic sign arises through difference, not inherent essence.⁹

3. **Structure Over History:** To explain language scientifically, one must describe its present structure before tracing its evolution.¹⁰
4. **Arbitrariness and Conventionality:** The link between signifier and signified is arbitrary yet stabilised by communal convention.¹¹

Later linguists extended Saussure's insights. The **Copenhagen School** (Hjelmslev, Jakobson) elaborated *glossematics*—a formal theory of language systems; the **Prague School** introduced functionalism, linking structure with communicative purpose; and **American structuralists** such as Bloomfield operationalised synchronic description through rigorous fieldwork.¹²

By the late twentieth century, synchronic principles had influenced virtually every linguistic subfield, from **generative grammar** to **cognitive linguistics**, each retaining Saussure's insistence on the systemic nature of language while adapting it to new theoretical contexts.¹³

In the twenty-first century, synchronic linguistics has merged with computational and corpus-based approaches.¹⁴ The ability to capture language data instantaneously—via large digital corpora—has redefined synchronic study as a form of *real-time linguistics*, where scholars can watch meaning shift across online environments.¹⁵

2.2.2 Ferdinand de Saussure and the Langue–Parole Distinction

A key component of Saussure's theory is the distinction between **langue** and **parole**.⁹ *Langue* refers to the abstract, systematic structure of language shared by a community—the rules, conventions, and relational values that constitute the linguistic code. *Parole*, on the other hand, denotes individual acts of speech—the actual use of language in communication.¹⁰

This distinction is crucial to synchronic semantics because it allows researchers to separate the **systemic meaning potential** of linguistic signs from their **contextual realisation**. Meaning exists within *langue* as a network of possibilities, but it is realised in *parole* through pragmatic selection and contextual adaptation.¹¹

In semantic shift, this interaction between *langue* and *parole* is especially evident. When speakers repeatedly innovate meanings in *parole*, those innovations may eventually enter *langue* as accepted semantic extensions.¹² Thus, synchronic linguistics provides a mechanism for understanding how real-time language use can lead to structural change without losing sight of systemic stability.

2.2.3 Synchronic versus Diachronic Analysis: A Comparative Perspective

While both synchronic and diachronic approaches examine language, their perspectives differ in orientation and purpose. **Diachronic linguistics** traces the historical development of linguistic forms, exploring how sounds, words, and structures evolve over centuries.¹³ It provides valuable insight into etymology and historical grammar but often abstracts language from its current communicative function.

Synchronic linguistics, by contrast, focuses on how language operates within a specific temporal frame. It treats meaning as an active relation among linguistic elements and social contexts, not merely as the residue of historical change.¹⁴ For example, a diachronic analysis of *wicked* would trace its journey from “evil” in Old English to “excellent” in contemporary slang; a synchronic analysis would explain how speakers today interpret and use *wicked* across contexts, generations, and registers.¹⁵

In modern semantics, the two approaches complement each other: diachronic study explains how meanings emerged, while synchronic study reveals how they function now. However, synchronic analysis is more appropriate for investigating ongoing semantic variation because it captures language as a living phenomenon rather than a historical artefact.¹⁶

William Labov's theory of "**change in progress**" bridges the two perspectives by observing variation within communities to infer change over time.²⁶ Corpus linguistics now allows real-time synchronic observation of change, collapsing the traditional boundary between the two approaches.²⁷

Methodologically, synchronic analysis draws data from living speakers, contemporary corpora, and interactional contexts, while diachronic studies rely on historical texts and etymological reconstruction.²⁸ For studying ongoing semantic shifts—especially in Nigerian and digital English—the synchronic method provides immediate explanatory power.

2.2.4 Core Assumptions of the Synchronic Framework

Synchronic linguistics is guided by several core assumptions that distinguish it from other approaches to language study.

(a) Language as a System of Interdependence

Language is a network of interrelated signs where each unit derives its meaning from its relationship to others.¹⁷ The value of *sheep*, for instance, depends on its opposition to *goat*, *cow*, or *lamb* within the lexicon.

(b) Structure Over Substance

Meaning is not an inherent property of words but arises from structure—the pattern of oppositions and associations that define the system.¹⁸ This structural principle supports the idea that semantic change can be understood by analysing how relationships between signs shift over time.

(c) Present Relevance:

Synchronic study prioritises how language functions in the present moment. Meaning is therefore observed in its living form—within the communicative practices of actual speakers—rather than reconstructed from historical evidence.¹⁹

(d) Integration of Usage and Cognition:

Contemporary synchronic linguistics acknowledges that meaning is not purely structural but also cognitive and social.²⁰ Speakers use linguistic forms dynamically, adapting them to context, purpose, and shared knowledge. The synchronic framework thus integrates systemic structure with usage-based flexibility.

These assumptions collectively position synchronic linguistics as a holistic model capable of explaining both stability and variation in language meaning.

2.2.5 Synchronic Linguistics and Semantic Variation

Semantic variation refers to differences in meaning that occur across speakers, regions, or contexts within the same period.²¹ From a synchronic perspective, such variation is not treated as error or corruption but as evidence of language vitality. The same linguistic sign may carry distinct shades of meaning in different social or regional settings, reflecting the diversity of communicative needs.²²

Synchronic linguistics explains semantic variation through the concept of **structural equilibrium**: a language maintains internal stability even as individual elements fluctuate.²³ For instance, in Nigerian English, *fine* may denote both aesthetic beauty and moral integrity, while in British English, it may simply express politeness (*I'm fine*).²⁴ These parallel senses coexist without disrupting the overall system, illustrating how meaning variation contributes to linguistic richness.

By examining semantic variation synchronically, linguists can describe how meaning adapts to context, how speakers negotiate sense, and how new meanings emerge within the same time frame.²⁵ This approach is particularly valuable for analysing semantic shift in global Englishes, where varieties evolve simultaneously yet distinctly.

2.2.6 Applications of Synchronic Theory in Contemporary Semantic Studies

Recent scholarship demonstrates the enduring relevance of synchronic analysis in semantic research. Corpus linguistics, sociolinguistics, and cognitive semantics have all adopted synchronic perspectives to describe meaning change as a real-time process.²⁶

Large-scale digital corpora now enable linguists to observe semantic shifts as they occur. Studies have traced the evolution of terms like *viral*, *stream*, and *cancel* through online discourse, showing how new meanings emerge from pragmatic inference and cultural recontextualisation.²⁷ In African contexts, corpus studies on Nigerian and Kenyan English reveal synchronic variation in words such as *gist*, *runz*, and *hustle*, which have developed stable meanings distinct from their British counterparts.²⁸

Synchronic theory also underpins modern **cognitive-semantic approaches**, which link meaning change to conceptual reorganisation rather than purely historical drift.²⁹ For instance, metaphorical mappings like *time is a resource* or *emotion is a journey* can be studied synchronically by analysing how speakers currently conceptualise abstract domains.³⁰

Furthermore, synchronic frameworks inform sociolinguistic studies of meaning negotiation in multilingual societies.³¹ Researchers investigating Nigerian English, Singapore English, and Indian English employ synchronic models to capture how meaning variation indexes social identity and cultural hybridity.³²

Thus, synchronic linguistics provides the theoretical foundation for analysing semantics as a living system—capable of continuous reconfiguration without losing structural coherence.

2.2.7 Relevance of Synchronic Linguistics to the Present Study

Synchronic linguistics offers a fitting theoretical lens for understanding meaning change within contemporary English varieties.³³ It enables the analysis of semantic shift as an **immediate social and cognitive phenomenon**, rather than a remote historical event.³⁴ This approach situates meaning variation within the lived experiences of speakers, revealing how linguistic creativity mirrors social transformation.

By focusing on language “in the now,” synchronic analysis captures how English adapts across contexts—global, local, and digital.³⁵ It accounts for both universal processes of meaning change (like metaphor and extension) and the specific socio-cultural dynamics that characterise varieties such as Nigerian English.³⁶

In sum, synchronic linguistics bridges structure and use, cognition and culture. It provides a framework that is at once systemic and flexible—capable of explaining the mechanisms through which meaning shifts while preserving the integrity of the linguistic system.³⁷

2.2.8 Speech Communities and Synchronic Linguistics

Language exists not in isolation but within the social context of its users. The concept of *speech community* is central to understanding how meaning operates within the synchronic study of language. In synchronic linguistics, as developed from Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist tradition, language is treated as a system of interrelated signs functioning within a specific moment in time.¹ This theoretical view holds that meaning and structure are best understood by examining language as it exists synchronically — that is, as a living, functioning entity within a community of speakers — rather than by tracing its historical evolution.²

The integration of synchronic analysis into the study of speech communities provides a framework for examining how linguistic forms, meanings, and practices vary across groups. The speech community thus becomes both the *site* and the *system* within which meaning develops, changes, and stabilizes in response to social needs.³

2.2.8.1 Concept of Speech Communities

The notion of the *speech community* has evolved over time, reflecting shifts in linguistic theory. Traditionally, linguists defined a speech community as a group of people sharing the same language or dialect.⁴ However, modern linguistic thought — particularly in synchronic and sociolinguistic studies — has expanded this concept to include shared norms of interaction, interpretation, and identity.⁵

Speech communities are not static entities; they are dynamic and constantly redefined through interaction. Synchronic linguistics provides a means of observing these communities at a specific time, revealing how language reflects and constructs social relationships.⁶ Within the Nigerian context, speech communities often intersect with ethnic, generational, and educational lines, creating a complex mosaic of linguistic variation.⁷

In this way, speech communities form the basic unit of synchronic linguistic analysis, allowing researchers to identify patterns of meaning variation within a defined social structure.⁸ The concept emphasizes that meaning is negotiated collectively — that language, in Saussure's terms, is a *social product* formed through the consensus of its users at a given moment.⁹

2.2.8.2 Synchronic Linguistic Perspectives on Speech Communities

From a synchronic standpoint, a speech community represents a living language system operating in the present. Linguistic signs — words, sounds, and structures — derive meaning from their functional relationships within the system.¹⁰ Therefore, synchronic linguistics focuses on *how* meanings are maintained, reshaped, or reinterpreted within a linguistic network at a particular time.

This perspective departs from diachronic linguistics, which seeks to explain how language changes over time. Instead, synchronic linguistics examines *variation* as it exists now — within a community, across social groups, and between registers of speech.¹¹ Such analysis reveals the internal logic of linguistic behaviour and highlights the interplay between structure and usage.

Modern scholars emphasize that synchronic linguistics cannot be divorced from social context.¹² Language, though structured, exists only through its users. A synchronic study of speech

communities thus captures the *snapshot* of language in its living, relational form, where speakers actively co-construct and redefine meaning.

2.2.8.3 Meaning Variation Across Speech Communities

Meaning is inherently variable across speech communities because it depends on shared experiences, cultural values, and social identities.¹³ Words may carry specific connotations in one group that are absent in another, even when the literal sense remains the same. Synchronic linguistics enables the analysis of such meaning differences as systemic — arising from internal linguistic relations rather than external historical evolution.¹⁴

For instance, within student communities, expressions like “*vibe*,” “*cruise*,” and “*ginger*” illustrate how speech communities innovate and stabilize meaning synchronically. These meanings emerge through peer interaction and gain coherence as collective identity markers.¹⁵

Thus, the synchronic study of speech communities highlights *variation as structure* — not as deviation from a norm but as evidence of how linguistic systems adapt to social functions.¹⁶ This reflects Saussure’s principle that language is a self-contained system of values determined by usage at a particular time.¹⁷

2.2.8.4 Nigerian English Speech Communities and Semantic Variation

Within Nigerian English, speech communities such as university students, media professionals, and urban youth have become key agents of meaning innovation.¹⁸ Each group adapts English vocabulary to local realities, generating distinct semantic variations that enrich the broader linguistic ecosystem.

At Lead City University, for instance, meaning creation often occurs through social interaction, humour, and digital communication. Expressions like “*package*,” “*pepper*,” and “*scatter*” have developed locally understood meanings that diverge from standard English but remain coherent within the speech community.¹⁹

This phenomenon demonstrates the synchronic nature of language change — where new meanings emerge and stabilize within a short time frame as part of living linguistic practice.²⁰ Nigerian English speech communities thus embody the principle that language is a dynamic social institution, continuously renewed by its users.²¹

The synchronic study of these communities allows linguists to capture meaning evolution as it happens, offering insights into how social context drives semantic adaptation.²² As Saussure asserted, language at any given point in time is both *structured* and *fluid*, balancing systemic coherence with creative innovation.²³

2.2.9 Dynamism and Creativity in Synchronic Linguistics

Language, in its natural state, is never static. It is a dynamic social instrument that evolves in response to communicative, cognitive, and cultural pressures. Within the framework of **synchronic linguistics**, language dynamism and creativity are viewed not as disruptions of linguistic order but as expressions of its living vitality.¹

In the modern linguistic paradigm, especially following the works of Saussure, Halliday, and later sociolinguists, synchronic analysis provides a means to capture how linguistic change and creative expression emerge in the current system of communication.²

Synchronic linguistics examines how speakers innovate within the boundaries of the linguistic code.³ This approach recognizes that creativity — whether lexical, semantic, or pragmatic — occurs within the structural possibilities of the language system. The continuous tension between stability and innovation sustains language dynamism.⁴

2.2.9.1 Language Change as a Synchronic Phenomenon

In earlier linguistic models, language change was primarily seen as a diachronic process — that is, change occurring over time and observable across historical stages. However, the **synchronic approach** offers an alternative: it situates change within the living system of language at a specific point in time.⁵

This means that linguistic transformation can be observed as it happens — not only through historical comparison but through present variation among speakers.

Saussure's framework redefined linguistic change as the result of collective social practice rather than individual innovation.⁶ Every modification, reinterpretation, or adaptation of meaning within a community reflects language's continuous adjustment to new communicative needs.⁷

In synchronic linguistics, the study of change focuses on *variation* rather than *succession.*⁸ For example, when students use “*mad*” to mean “*exciting*” or “*amazing*,” this represents an active synchronic shift, signalling creative redefinition within the system's current state.⁹

Such examples demonstrate that meaning change can be documented synchronically, revealing the adaptability of linguistic structure in real time.¹⁰ It also reflects the collective agency of speakers in shaping the semantic landscape of their language.

2.2.9.2 Creativity and Innovation in Linguistic Expression

Creativity in language is a defining feature of synchronic dynamism.¹¹ It manifests in the ability of speakers to use linguistic forms in new, unexpected ways while maintaining mutual intelligibility. Creativity involves the reconfiguration of existing linguistic resources to convey fresh meanings, emotions, or identities.¹²

Synchronic linguistics treats creativity as a central property of language rather than as an exception to its rules.¹³ Language is generative; it allows infinite combinations from finite structures. Speakers exploit this potential to produce innovations that expand the expressive range of communication.¹⁴ At the lexical level, creativity often appears in the form of semantic shift,¹⁵

At the pragmatic level, it includes code-switching, *contextual inference*, and *discourse innovation.¹⁶

In the Nigerian English context, lexical creativity reflects sociocultural realities and youth identity.¹⁷ Students frequently innovate expressions that capture humour, attitude, and digital culture. Phrases like “*no wahala*,” “*carry me go*,” “*we move*,” and “*outside dey*” are emblematic of creative repurposing of English syntax and semantics.¹⁸

Such innovations demonstrate that creativity functions as a synchronic force sustaining linguistic vitality and community identity.¹⁹ Rather than eroding linguistic norms, these adaptations confirm the dynamic flexibility of the English language system in Nigeria.²⁰

2.2.9.3 Social and Cognitive Drivers of Linguistic Dynamism

Linguistic dynamism stems from both **social** and **cognitive** factors.²¹ Socially, language change is influenced by community interaction, digital communication, and peer identity. Cognitively, it arises from the mental capacity of speakers to generalize, analogize, and create metaphorical connections.²²

In synchronic linguistics, these factors converge in the present moment of language use. The speaker's brain continuously generates and tests linguistic possibilities, while society selects and stabilizes those innovations that become meaningful.²³

The influence of media and technology amplifies linguistic dynamism.²⁴ Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and TikTok accelerate the spread of new expressions, creating what sociolinguists describe as *micro-synchronic change* — rapid cycles of lexical innovation within months rather than decades.²⁵

Moreover, cognitive linguistics has shown that creativity often arises from **conceptual metaphor** — the mapping of abstract ideas onto familiar experiences.²⁶ For instance, using “pepper” to signify *wealth or success* reflects an associative transfer from the sensory intensity of spice to the emotional intensity of prosperity.²⁷ Such metaphoric reasoning illustrates how cognition drives synchronic meaning change.

Thus, language dynamism represents the interplay between **mental inventiveness** and **social negotiation**, both of which operate in real time.²⁸

2.2.9.4 Dynamism in Nigerian English and Emerging Youth Registers

Nowhere is synchronic dynamism more evident than in **Nigerian English**, particularly within urban and university speech communities.²⁹ Nigerian English embodies an ongoing linguistic negotiation between global norms and local identities. Its users continuously reinterpret English vocabulary to reflect their lived realities, resulting in a vibrant and expressive linguistic variety.³⁰

Within undergraduate speech, words often undergo swift semantic innovation.³¹ New expressions emerge from music, social media, and peer interaction, entering daily speech almost instantaneously.³² For instance, the popularization of “*package*” to mean self-presentation or “*hustle*” to denote entrepreneurial effort reveals language’s responsiveness to contemporary socio-economic life.³³

Such synchronic creativity is not accidental. It reflects what sociolinguists term **linguistic economy and adaptability** — the natural drive of speakers to economize language while maximizing expressiveness.³⁴ Nigerian English thrives because it allows immediate conceptual alignment between speaker and listener, grounded in shared cultural context.³⁵

Furthermore, this dynamism underlines the **legitimacy of Nigerian English** as an autonomous and evolving variety.³⁶ It is no longer a “deviant form” of English but a fully functional system reflecting Nigerian sociocultural identity.³⁷

Through synchronic analysis, researchers can document the mechanisms of this creativity — how meanings shift, stabilize, and spread across generations.³⁸ By focusing on the present structure and use of Nigerian English, synchronic linguistics captures the pulse of an evolving language in real

2.2.9.5 Synchronic Linguistics and the Study of Spelling Variation

Language is not only a system of sounds and meanings but also of visual representation through writing. Spelling, or orthography, constitutes an essential part of linguistic structure because it reflects how speakers and writers encode phonological and semantic information in written form.¹ Within the framework of **synchronic linguistics**, spelling can be studied as a living component of the language system, revealing how written conventions evolve and adapt in response to communicative, social, and technological factors.²

While traditional linguistic research often treated spelling as a matter of standardisation or orthographic correctness, synchronic linguistics provides a broader and more dynamic perspective.³ It views spelling patterns as part of the *current linguistic state* of a community — not merely as remnants of historical usage.⁴ This approach allows linguists to examine spelling variation as evidence of ongoing language change and as a reflection of users' creative negotiation of meaning and identity.⁵

2.2.9.5.1 Spelling as a Synchronic Linguistic System

Saussure's principle that language is a system of interrelated signs applies equally to orthography.⁶ Each spelling form is a signifier that links visual symbols to spoken language. At the synchronic level, these signs form an organised network governed by conventions shared among users at a given time.⁷

For example, contemporary English maintains both British and American spelling conventions (*colour/colour, centre/center, organise/organize*).⁸ From a synchronic standpoint, these are not historical residues but parallel systems coexisting within modern English usage.⁹ Linguists

therefore analyse spelling differences as current linguistic facts that reflect regional norms, educational practices, and sociocultural affiliations.¹⁰

This view diverges from prescriptive grammar, which treats one form as correct and another as erroneous. Instead, synchronic linguistics treats each spelling variant as an element of the present linguistic reality.¹¹ In Nigerian English, for instance, users often blend British and American spellings due to educational exposure, digital influence, and media contact.¹² This hybrid orthography illustrates how spelling functions synchronically as a mirror of linguistic identity.¹³

2.2.9.5.2 Social and Technological Influences on Spelling Variation

The modern digital environment has accelerated spelling variation.¹⁴ Synchronic linguistic studies observe that texting, social media, and online writing encourage abbreviated, phonetically inspired spellings such as *u* for *you*, *ur* for *your*, or *b4* for **before**.¹⁵ These are not random deviations but systematic adaptations to technological constraints and communication speed.¹⁶

From a synchronic viewpoint, such variations represent active linguistic strategies within present communication systems.¹⁷ They demonstrate how users adapt the written code to suit new modes of expression while preserving intelligibility.¹⁸ For instance, university students in Nigeria frequently employ digital spellings that merge orthographic economy with sociolinguistic creativity (*tinz* for *things*, *ppl* for *people*, *abi?* as a discourse marker).¹⁹

Thus, synchronic linguistics reveals how spelling is not static but responsive to the communicative ecology of its users.²⁰ As with semantic shift, spelling change and variation serve as indicators of linguistic innovation.²¹

2.2.9.5.3 Synchronic Linguistics and Orthographic Standardisation

Synchronic analysis also contributes to understanding orthographic standardisation.²² At any given point, the written form of a language represents a balance between institutional authority and actual usage.²³ Dictionaries, educational systems, and publishing norms attempt to codify spelling conventions, but synchronic research often shows that *usage precedes codification.*²⁴

In the Nigerian English context, there is increasing recognition of local orthographic patterns.²⁵ Spellings such as *okada*, *agbada*, and *naija* have achieved synchronic stability — they are consistently used, understood, and reproduced within written English communication in Nigeria.²⁶ These forms illustrate how synchronic linguistics acknowledges the legitimacy of emerging orthographies when they achieve systematic and social coherence.²⁷

2.3 Empirical Review

Empirical research on semantic shift and linguistic variation in recent years has expanded dramatically, reflecting both technological advancement and increased interest in the global diversity of English.¹ Scholars in recent years have employed corpus analysis, sociolinguistic fieldwork, and cognitive-linguistic interpretation to explore how meanings evolve across contexts, especially in emerging varieties of English.² This section reviews the most relevant findings, focusing on **world Englishes**, **youth and digital language**, **Nigerian English**, **African Englishes**, and **technological influences** on real-time meaning variation.

2.3.1 Contemporary Studies on Semantic Shift in World Englishes

The study of **World Englishes** has transitioned from describing structural variation to investigating semantic creativity and innovation.³ Between recent years, scholars such as Schneider, Mesthrie, and Buschfeld have emphasised that lexical semantics is one of the clearest markers of localisation in global Englishes.⁴

Empirical data from corpora such as the *Global Web-Based English Corpus (GloWbE)* and *ICE (International Corpus of English)* reveal consistent patterns of semantic extension, metaphorisation, and pragmaticalisation across regional varieties.⁵ For example, in Indian English, *batchmate* and *timepass* have acquired culturally specific meanings, while Singaporean English has extended *send* to include accompanying someone physically (*I'll send you to the bus stop*).⁶

A 2022 comparative corpus study by Buschfeld and Kautzsch demonstrated that semantic innovation in postcolonial Englishes follows predictable pragmatic pathways: metaphorical extension, functional broadening, and socio-pragmatic adaptation.⁷ Similarly, Schneider's (2023) model of "dynamic semantisation" describes how new meanings stabilise through repeated contextual usage within speech communities.⁸

From a synchronic perspective, these findings show that meaning change in World Englishes occurs **simultaneously**, not sequentially.⁹ English in Nigeria, Kenya, India, and Singapore evolves in real time, reflecting each community's unique communicative needs and socio-cultural environment.¹⁰

Thus, the global empirical evidence confirms that semantic shift is not a peripheral phenomenon but a defining feature of English's internationalisation.¹¹

2.3.2 Semantic Innovation and Youth Language in Global Contexts

Youth language has long been recognised as a primary driver of lexical and semantic innovation.¹² Recent researches identifies digital communication and global media as catalysts accelerating these changes.¹³

In a large-scale study of social-media discourse, observed that youth-led semantic shifts follow a **viral diffusion model**: a small in-group innovation gains widespread recognition through online repetition.¹⁴ Examples include *lit* (exciting), *salty* (irritated), and *ghost* (suddenly withdraw from communication). These words illustrate the mechanism of *pragmatic inference* becoming lexicalised—a process central to semantic change theory.¹⁵

A recent study analysing British and Canadian youth speech identified three main sources of innovation:

1. **Reversal of evaluative polarity** (*sick*, *wicked*, *dead* as positive descriptors).
2. **Metaphorical extension** (*fire* for excellence, *ice* for calmness).
3. **Contextual abstraction**, where literal meanings become emotional or social indicators (*vibe*, *energy*).¹⁶

In African contexts, digital ethnolinguistic research has shown that youth creativity fuels rapid semantic reorientation.¹⁷ A recent study of Kenyan and Ghanaian English TikTok communities revealed parallel processes of resemanticisation, with terms like *vibes*, *plug*, and *link up* undergoing locally meaningful reinterpretations.¹⁸

These studies underscore that the engine of semantic shift in global English lies within **youth digital discourse**, where linguistic innovation aligns with identity formation, humour, and social belonging.¹⁹

Studies across Europe, North America, and Asia consistently show that young speakers:-
Introduce new meanings- Repurpose old words- Spread innovations through digital communication- Use semantic creativity to express identity Research from British, Canadian, and American youth corpora reveals:- Reversal of evaluative polarity: Words like sick, wicked, dead become positive intensifiers.- Metaphorical extension: fire (excellent), ice (cool/calm), shade (insult), vibe (atmosphere).- Contextual abstraction: Words like energy and aura acquire emotional and social meanings. Digital ethnographies of youth TikTok communities show that:- Slang spreads at viral speed- New meanings diffuse across countries- Online platforms create multi-modal contexts that accelerate semantic drift- Innovations often emerge from minority or subcultural groups before mainstream adoption These findings support the idea that youth-based digital discourse is the primary domain for contemporary meaning change.

2.3.3 Empirical Studies on Semantic Shift in Nigerian English

Among African Englishes, **Nigerian English** has received the most sustained empirical attention in recent years.²⁰ Recent studies have shifted from merely cataloguing lexical differences to analysing their semantic underpinnings and communicative motivations.²¹

Corpus-based studies by that was recent demonstrate that Nigerian English exhibits systematic processes of **semantic extension, metaphorical transfer, and pragmatic adaptation**.²² For

instance, the words *trek*, *flog*, and *dash* show regularised semantic broadening consistent across speech communities.²³

A particularly influential study noted the process by which English words acquire indigenous conceptual meanings.²⁴ The study used field data from 200 undergraduate respondents across four Nigerian universities, revealing that words like *gist* (“informal talk”), *cruise* (“playful behaviour”), and *package* (“personal presentation”) have become entrenched in Nigerian English lexicon.²⁵

A similar recent paper also found that social-media communication serves as a crucible for contemporary semantic shift, with expressions like *blow*, *drag*, and *drop* demonstrating cross-linguistic metaphorisation influenced by Pidgin English and Afrobeat culture.²⁶

Quantitative corpus studies further show that Nigerian English semantic innovations stabilise more rapidly than in other Englishes, likely due to the nation’s intense multilingualism and media-driven linguistic interaction.²⁷ Pragmatic motivation—rather than grammatical necessity—appears to drive most of these changes.²⁸

A significant number of Nigerian studies have documented lexical innovation and semantic shift. Nigerian English displays:- High rates of metaphorical extension- Strong influence of local languages- Youth-driven resemanticisation- Contextual creativity- Socio-cultural motivation Empirical examples from Nigerian research include:-

- pepper → success, wealth
- package → self-presentation
- drop → give someone a ride

- flash → call briefly and hang up
- hustle → entrepreneurial pursuit
- sharp → skilled, efficient
- blow → become famous
- ginger → motivate
- carry → date/escort
- dry → boring
- scatter → excite or electrify

Studies using interviews, observation, and digital corpora consistently show that Nigerian English is an active site of synchronic semantic innovation driven by:-

1. Popular culture
2. Music and Afrobeats
3. Social media
4. Peer-group pressure
5. Urban youth identity

Researchers also note strong connections between socio-economic contexts and semantic reinterpretation, such as hustle (entrepreneurial struggle) and pepper (money/enjoyment).

Overall, the Nigerian English evidence supports the synchronic linguistic model: meaning is actively constructed and reinterpreted by speakers in the present moment, not merely inherited from historical precedent.²⁹

2.3.4 Synchronic Approaches to Meaning Change in African English Varieties

In broader African English scholarship, researchers have increasingly adopted **synchronic methodologies** to capture ongoing meaning change.³⁰ Theoretical frameworks by scholars in recent years combine cognitive semantics and sociolinguistics to analyse English as a dynamic African linguistic resource.³¹

Empirical work in **Kenyan English**, **Ghanaian English**, and **South African English** reveals that speakers actively reshape English semantics to reflect African worldviews.³² For instance, Ghanaian English speakers use *respect yourself* pragmatically as a warning or rebuke rather than literal instruction, illustrating cultural reinterpretation of politeness.³³

In Kenyan English, *extend* has broadened to mean “to postpone,” while *escort* is used for “accompany someone home”—semantic shifts paralleling those in Nigerian English.³⁴ A study in recent years identified **semantic convergence** among African Englishes, showing overlapping innovations across the continent due to shared postcolonial experiences and media networks.³⁵

African synchronic studies now emphasise *variation as identity*: language use indexes cultural belonging and creative agency.³⁶ This theoretical stance aligns closely with synchronic linguistics, which treats meaning variation as a normal, systematic manifestation of language functioning within its social environment.³⁷

2.3.5 Technological Advancements and Real-Time Meaning Variation

One of the most transformative empirical trends in recent years involves the use of technology to observe **semantic change in real time**.³⁸ Through computational linguistics and natural language

processing (NLP), researchers now monitor how meanings drift across digital corpora from day to day.³⁹

A recent study used word embedding models to track meaning shifts in English social-media language during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁰ Words like *mask*, *quarantine*, and *remote* displayed measurable vector displacement, reflecting new associations and cognitive salience.⁴¹

African computational linguists have begun applying similar models to regional Englishes. A study employed a 50-million-word social-media corpus to trace emerging senses of *drag*, *cancel*, and *savage*, demonstrating that machine learning can detect and quantify meaning innovation synchronically.⁴²

The integration of computational tools has redefined empirical semantics, bridging the gap between linguistic theory and technological practice.⁴³ It also aligns directly with the synchronic framework by enabling the observation of ongoing linguistic phenomena rather than relying on retrospective reconstruction.⁴⁴

2.3.6 Linguistic Creativity, Identity, and Semantic Shift among Undergraduates

A growing body of research has examined semantic shift among **undergraduates**, particularly in multilingual African universities.⁴⁵ Studies conducted in recent years highlight students as agents of meaning innovation and linguistic creativity.⁴⁶

Ethnographic investigations at Nigerian universities reveal that students deliberately manipulate English meanings to express belonging, humour, and modern identity.⁴⁷ The lexemes *cruise*, *vibe*, *drop*, *package*, and *blow* dominate student discourse, often appearing in academic, social, and online contexts.⁴⁸

A linguistic field study found that undergraduate speech exhibits clear synchronic semantic processes: metaphorisation, reanalysis, and pragmatic enrichment.⁴⁹ Students use language innovatively to reflect contemporary realities, mirroring patterns observed globally in youth discourse.⁵⁰

These findings confirm that universities serve as linguistic laboratories where semantic shifts are created, tested, and disseminated.⁵¹ The Nigerian undergraduate population, being digitally connected and sociolinguistically diverse, accelerates the process by which new meanings gain currency and enter mainstream usage.⁵²

Hence, empirical evidence positions youth linguistic creativity as a central force in the evolution of meaning, validating the synchronic approach's focus on *present linguistic activity*.⁵³

2.3.7 Social Determinants of Semantic Shift

Language evolves continuously, shaped by various social forces that influence how words and expressions shift in meaning. Over time, semantic shift refers to the process through which words acquire new meanings or lose old ones, is deeply embedded in societal changes, cultural transformations, technological advancements, and political ideologies. Conceptual metaphor theory provides a useful framework for understanding these shifts, as metaphors emerge from real-world experiences and adapt to new contexts as societies evolve. The way people

conceptualize abstract ideas, emotions, and relationships is closely tied to the metaphors they use, which, in turn, are shaped by the social environment in which they exist.⁹¹

Cultural evolution is one of the most significant social forces influencing semantic shifts. As societies transition from one cultural phase to another, their values, norms, and traditions change, leading to modifications in metaphorical expressions. Metaphors that were once deeply rooted in agricultural societies, such as “reap what you sow,” have gradually lost their strength in urbanized environments where agriculture is no longer a primary concern⁹⁰. Instead, metaphors derived from business and technology, such as “investing in relationships” or “downloading ideas,” have gained prominence as modern lifestyles revolve more around economics and digital communication⁹¹. Studies show that as societies urbanize, their metaphors shift accordingly, reflecting the dominant economic and technological paradigms of the time⁹².

Empirical research indicates that metaphorical shifts align with cultural transitions. Kövecses found that while many metaphors are grounded in universal bodily experiences, the specific way they are expressed varies from culture to culture⁹³. For instance, anger metaphors in English frequently draw on heat imagery, as seen in expressions like “boiling with rage” or “hot-tempered.” However, in other cultures, different domains are used to conceptualize the same emotion. In some Asian languages, anger is conceptualized as pressure, leading to metaphorical expressions that frame anger as a build-up that can “burst” if not controlled⁹⁴. These variations illustrate how cultural perspectives shape metaphorical expressions and how interactions between cultures lead to semantic shifts over time.

Another significant driver of semantic shift is technological advancement. As technology progresses, the metaphors people use to describe mental and social processes often shift in

response. In the digital age, the human brain is frequently compared to a computer, with expressions such as “processing information,” “retrieving memories,” and “storing knowledge” becoming commonplace⁹⁵. Such metaphors shape how people understand cognition, reinforcing a computational model of the mind that may not have been as prominent before the rise of digital technology⁹⁶. The language of communication has also changed dramatically, with metaphors like “streaming content,” “going viral,” and “cloud storage” becoming embedded in everyday discourse⁹⁷. Research suggests that as new technologies emerge, new metaphorical frameworks develop alongside them, sometimes replacing older metaphors entirely⁹⁸.

Political discourse is another domain where semantic shifts frequently occur. Political ideologies reshape language to reflect changing power structures, social priorities, and ideological perspectives⁹⁹. Terms like “freedom,” “justice,” and “democracy” have undergone significant shifts in meaning depending on historical and political contexts¹⁰⁰. For instance, the phrase “freedom fighter” can carry positive connotations in one context but be labelled as “terrorist” in another, depending on political narratives¹⁰¹. Political metaphors, such as “war on drugs” or “fight for justice,” are instrumental in shaping public perception, influencing policy decisions, and even altering how people understand social issues¹⁰². Studies in political linguistics suggest that these shifts are often deliberate, used strategically by political actors to frame issues in ways that align with their agendas¹⁰³.

Migration and language contact also play a crucial role in semantic shift. When languages interact due to migration, trade, or colonial expansion, words and metaphors are borrowed, but their meanings often shift in the process¹⁰⁴. For example, English has borrowed the Sanskrit word “guru,” which originally referred to a spiritual teacher, but in Western discourse, it has broadened to mean an expert in any field¹⁰⁵. Similarly, metaphors from one language can

influence another, leading to semantic broadening or narrowing. Research on bilingual communities indicates that speakers often adopt metaphors from their second language while adapting them to their cultural context, demonstrating how language contact accelerates semantic shifts¹⁰⁶.

The influence of media and popular culture on semantic shift cannot be overstated. Mass media, including television, film, and social media, plays a significant role in spreading and solidifying metaphorical language. Pop culture introduces new metaphors that quickly become mainstream, sometimes replacing older expressions entirely¹⁰⁷. For instance, the metaphor “going viral” originated from digital media and has largely supplanted older expressions like “spreading like wildfire” when describing rapid dissemination¹⁰⁸. The speed at which language changes has increased dramatically in the age of the internet, as social media platforms amplify new metaphorical usages and introduce novel expressions that can gain widespread acceptance within a short period¹⁰⁹. Research indicates that social media contributes to metaphor innovation by allowing users to repurpose words and phrases in creative ways, accelerating the process of semantic change¹¹⁰.

In addition to these broad social factors, individual and generational differences also contribute to semantic shift. Younger generations often develop new metaphorical expressions that reflect contemporary experiences, while older generations may retain older usages¹¹¹. Linguistic studies show that language innovation is particularly strong among younger speakers, who frequently adapt and redefine metaphors to align with cultural trends¹¹². Over time, these generational differences lead to broader shifts in language, as newer expressions replace older ones and become widely accepted¹¹³.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that metaphorical meaning is not static but evolves in response to social, cultural, technological, and political changes. Semantic shifts occur as societies transition from one dominant paradigm to another, reflecting new ways of thinking, communicating, and interacting with the world¹¹⁴. Understanding these shifts is crucial for linguists, educators, and policymakers, as it provides insights into how language adapts to social realities¹¹⁵. The study of metaphorical change offers valuable perspectives on human cognition, illustrating how the words and expressions people use shape and are shaped by the world around them¹¹⁶.

2.4 Summary of Reviewed Literature

The review of conceptual, theoretical, and empirical literature has shown that the study of meaning and semantic shift occupies a central position in modern linguistic inquiry.¹ Meaning is not a fixed property of words but a dynamic construct shaped by the interaction of cognition, culture, and context. The findings across recent literature consistently affirm that **semantic change is an inherent and predictable feature of all living languages**, occurring simultaneously across global English varieties.²

2.4.1 Summary of Major Themes and Findings

The literature reviewed in Sections 2.1–2.3 reveals several major converging themes: the **interdependence of semantics and society**, the **systematic mechanisms of meaning change**, the **relevance of synchronic linguistics**, and the **role of digital and youth culture** in accelerating lexical innovation.³

At the conceptual level, semantics was defined as the science of meaning in language, dealing with how linguistic signs relate to the world, to thought, and to one another.⁴ Scholars recent

years have reinforced the understanding that meaning exists at multiple dimensions — lexical, grammatical, propositional, pragmatic, and cognitive — all of which interact dynamically.⁵

The review of theoretical perspectives highlighted **synchronic linguistics** as the principal framework for explaining how meaning functions within a living language system.⁶ Drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist principles and extending through modern cognitive and usage-based theories, synchronic linguistics views language as a self-regulating, interrelated structure capable of accommodating change without losing coherence.⁷ It emphasises how speakers actively construct meaning through real-time usage rather than through inherited historical associations.

Empirically, recent studies across **World Englishes** demonstrate that semantic shift is a universal process of adaptation.⁸ Postcolonial Englishes such as Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Kenyan English exhibit consistent patterns of metaphorical extension, pragmatic innovation, and socio-cultural domestication.⁹ Similar processes occur in British English and other inner-circle varieties, confirming that semantic reorientation is not exclusive to non-native contexts but is a core feature of English evolution.¹⁰

The studies on youth and digital language reaffirmed that linguistic innovation today is driven primarily by young speakers operating within networked, multimodal spaces.¹¹ Through social media, slang, and digital discourse, new meanings emerge, spread, and stabilise at unprecedented speed — a phenomenon that aligns perfectly with synchronic linguistic analysis.¹²

Finally, Nigerian English has been shown to be a particularly fertile ground for semantic innovation.¹³ Its lexical creativity — *cruise, drop, vibe, package, blow, sharp* — demonstrates

meaning adaptation as a living communicative strategy.¹⁴ The corpus and ethnographic studies reviewed confirm that these changes are systematic, recurrent, and socially motivated.¹⁵

2.4.2 Critical Evaluation of Existing Research

While the reviewed literature provides a rich understanding of semantic shift, several critical observations emerge regarding its theoretical orientation, methodological scope, and contextual balance.¹⁶

First, although synchronic linguistics has gained renewed attention, many studies still treat it narrowly as a structural framework rather than as a multi-dimensional approach integrating cognition, pragmatics, and technology.¹⁷ The dominance of corpus linguistics, while useful for quantification, sometimes underrepresents the social and cultural contexts that shape meaning in multilingual societies.¹⁸

Second, global research in recent years has been disproportionately focused on Euro-American data.¹⁹ While British and American corpora are extensively analysed, African and Asian varieties often remain underrepresented in large-scale semantic drift studies.²⁰ This imbalance limits the universality of theoretical conclusions about meaning change and underscores the need for contextually grounded studies of semantic innovation in African Englishes.

Third, in African contexts where such research exists, there is a tendency toward descriptive rather than explanatory analysis.²¹ Many Nigerian studies catalogue lexical innovations without adequately connecting them to cognitive, cultural, or technological frameworks.²² As a result, the deeper synchronic mechanisms — metaphorisation, pragmatic enrichment, or social identity indexing — remain underexplored.²³

Fourth, despite the rapid development of computational tools, few studies in Nigeria or West Africa have applied quantitative or AI-based models to monitor real-time meaning change.²⁴ This methodological gap persists even as global linguistics moves toward computational synchronic analysis.²⁵ Local researchers often lack access to digital corpora and machine-learning tools capable of modelling semantic drift across millions of tokens.²⁶

Fifth, the theoretical integration of **synchronic linguistics** and **World Englishes** remains incomplete.²⁷ Some scholars still frame African English varieties through a deficit lens, focusing on “deviation” from British norms rather than viewing them as legitimate, synchronically evolving systems.²⁸ Recent empirical evidence strongly challenges this perception, revealing that Nigerian English, like any other variety, obeys internal rules of coherence and adaptation.²⁹

In essence, while the past five years have witnessed significant progress in understanding semantic shift, there remains an urgent need for **theoretically grounded, contextually sensitive, and methodologically innovative research** that reflects both global and local realities.³⁰

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Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design adopted for this study was qualitative. This design was considered appropriate because it allowed for a detailed exploration of how undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan, use and interpret English words that have undergone semantic shift in their everyday communication. The qualitative approach was chosen because it focuses on understanding meaning within its natural context rather than through numerical measurement. It enabled the researcher to observe the phenomenon of semantic change as it occurs in the living language of the participants, consistent with the synchronic linguistic framework established in Chapter Two.

The study sought to describe, interpret, and explain how words in Nigerian English acquire new meanings as a result of social, cultural, and cognitive influences. The qualitative design supported the interpretive nature of the research, allowing meaning to emerge through direct engagement with participants and observation of authentic language use.

3.2 Population of the Study

The population for this study consisted of undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan. This group was selected because they represent an active and dynamic linguistic community in which English is used as both a formal and informal medium of communication. Students at this level frequently engage in diverse communicative situations — academic discussions, social interactions, and digital exchanges — where meaning innovation is most visible.

Their consistent exposure to media, technology, and peer culture makes them a representative sample for examining how semantic shifts emerge and stabilize within Nigerian English.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

The study adopted a random sampling technique. This method was chosen to ensure that participants were selected objectively from the population, with each student having an equal opportunity to be included in the study. Random sampling reduced bias and enhanced the representativeness of the data collected.

A total of thirty (30) undergraduates were randomly selected from different faculties and academic levels of Lead City University. This number was considered sufficient to capture linguistic diversity while maintaining the depth required for qualitative interpretation. Students who participated did so voluntarily and were available during the data collection period.

3.4 Research Instruments

The primary instruments used for data collection were field notes and an interview guide.

- The field notes were used to record naturally occurring language use among students during informal interactions.
- The interview guide contained structured and flexible questions designed to guide the semi-structured interviews while allowing participants to freely express their linguistic interpretations and experiences.

These instruments were suitable for qualitative inquiry because they encouraged open-ended responses and natural communication. They allowed the researcher to obtain rich, descriptive data about how words are used and understood in context without imposing rigid constraints.

3.5 Methods of Data Collection

Data were collected through direct observation and semi-structured interviews conducted with randomly selected participants.

During the observation phase, the researcher interacted with students in natural campus environments such as classrooms, cafeterias, student lounges, and recreational spaces. The purpose was to note instances where English words appeared to be used in new or contextually modified ways. Observations were recorded through detailed field notes, ensuring that no mechanical recording devices were used.

The semi-structured interviews were then conducted to complement the observations. Each interview lasted approximately five to ten minutes. Using the interview guide, the researcher asked open-ended questions that encouraged participants to explain their understanding and intended meanings of selected words that had undergone semantic shift.

Participants' responses were documented entirely through field notes. This approach preserved the authenticity of their speech while maintaining privacy and comfort. It also reduced any potential observer effect that might arise from being recorded, thereby ensuring the natural flow of language.

3.6 Method of Data Analysis

The data obtained from field notes and interviews were analysed using content analysis. This method involved identifying recurring patterns, themes, and processes of semantic shift in the participants' language.

The analysis focused on categorizing examples of meaning change into major types such as:

- **Broadening** – where a word acquires a wider range of meanings;
- **Narrowing** – where a word's meaning becomes more specific;
- **Metaphorical extension** – where figurative use creates new interpretations;
- **Amelioration** – where a negative meaning becomes positive;
- **Pejoration** – where a positive meaning takes on a negative sense.

Each identified example was interpreted based on its social and situational context. The analysis aimed to understand not only how meanings shifted but also the reasons behind these changes — such as peer influence, humour, technology, or social identity.

This method aligned with the synchronic linguistic framework, which emphasizes studying meaning within its current linguistic system rather than its historical development.

Chapter four

Results and discussions of Findings

This chapter presents, analyzes, and discusses the data collected through observation and semi-structured interviews conducted among thirty (30) randomly selected undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan. The purpose is to examine how English words that have undergone semantic shift in the English usage of the students. Data were analyzed using content analysis to identify instances, types, motivations, and communicative effects of semantic shift. The study investigates how meanings of English words have changed in the linguistic practices of students, focusing on how social, cultural, and linguistic influences contribute to such shifts. The chapter is structured according to the four research questions that guided the study and relies on qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

The discussion is anchored in **Ferdinand de Saussure's Synchronic Linguistic Theory**, which emphasizes the study of language at a particular point in time. This theoretical framework allows for an analysis of how semantic meanings evolve within a contemporary speech community, providing insight into the living dynamics of language use among undergraduates. By examining present-day patterns of meaning change, this chapter situates the phenomenon of semantic shift as a reflection of linguistic creativity, social identity, and communicative adaptation among university students.

Data were obtained from 30 randomly selected groups within the university. Observation and semi-structured interviews provided the corpus of naturally occurring words and expressions that have undergone semantic modification. The research instruments used include field notes, and an

interview guide. Data were transcribed and analyzed using **content analysis**, enabling identification of contextual meanings and motivations behind each instance of shift.

The structure of this chapter follows the four research questions outlined in Chapter Three. This first section addresses the first question, while the subsequent parts will handle the remaining questions. The analysis begins with an exploration of the first research question:

The analysis was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the instances of semantic shift among undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan?
2. What are the types of semantic shift among the students?
3. What are the linguistic, cultural, and social factors influencing semantic extension among the students?
4. What are the implications of semantic shift for effective communication among students?

This chapter presents the data gathered through semi-structured interviews and field notes, interpreting them through the lens of synchronic linguistics. The analysis focuses on the meanings of English words as they function in the present-day linguistic system of Nigerian English, reflecting social and cognitive factors that drive meaning change.

4.1 Research Question One: What are the instances of semantic shift among undergraduates of Lead City University?

This section identifies the various instances of semantic shift used by the students. Twenty (20) lexical items were observed to have developed new meanings different from their standard dictionary meanings. These new meanings have become part of the students' informal communication and campus identity.

The words and expressions presented in the following tables represent instances of meaning change observed among Lead City University undergraduates. These examples were selected because they demonstrate key processes of semantic shift—broadening, narrowing, and metaphorical extension—within everyday student communication. The data show that meaning broadening is a common process in the students' speech. Words originally tied to specific contexts or actions have acquired wider and more general applications.

This pattern indicates that meaning broadening arises from the students' creative adaptation of English to fit new social experiences. Words that once denoted precise ideas, such as “*vibe*”, “*package*”, or “*pepper*”, now convey broader emotional or situational meanings. For instance, “*pepper*” may extend from its literal sense of spice or pain to signify wealth, success, or social status. Such extensions demonstrate how meaning is negotiated in everyday interaction. This linguistic flexibility aligns with the synchronic view that meaning evolves to meet contemporary communicative needs rather than following historical or etymological boundaries. It also reflects students' desire for expressiveness and identity construction, as meanings are broadened to capture their modern realities and aspirations.

Table 4.1: Instances of Semantic Shift among Students

Word/Phrase	Original Meaning	Shifted/Contextual Meaning	Type of Shift	Influence/Motivation	Contextual Usage
Flash	A burst of light	To call and hang up quickly	Narrowing	Technological/Social	I'll flash you when I get there.
Drop	To let something fall	To alight from a vehicle or deliver	Broadening	Social interaction	Drop me at the gate.
Carry	To lift or transport	To date or be in a relationship	Metaphorical Extension	Cultural/Youth slang	He is carrying that girl.
Dash	To move quickly	To give freely	Broadening	Cultural generosity	He dashed me ₦500.
Hustle	To push or shove	To work hard or struggle	Amelioration	Economic/Youth culture	Everybody is hustling to survive.
Toast	To brown by heat	To woo or flirt	Metaphorical Extension	Social/Youth slang	He is toasting that girl.
Go-slow	Reduction in speed	Traffic jam	Narrowing	Urban lifestyle	There's go-slow at Dugbe.
Package	To wrap or enclose	To appear well-dressed or organized	Metaphorical Extension	Image/status motivation	She knows how to package.

Scatter	To disperse	To excite or disrupt positively	Amelioration	Peer influence	That performance scattered the place.
Pepper	A spice	Money or success	Metaphorical Extension	Economic/Cultural	She's enjoying pepper this semester.
Snap	To break suddenly	To take a photo	Broadening	Technological	Let's snap a picture.
Madam	Woman in authority	Girlfriend or female companion	Metaphorical Extension	Social relationship	That's his madam.
Uncle	Parent's brother	Older male figure	Broadening	Cultural respect	My uncle gave me a lift.
Aunty	Parent's sister	Older female figure	Broadening	Cultural respect	Aunty please buy me food.
Night	Period of darkness	Social outing or party	Broadening	Youth culture	We have a night at the club.
Green	A color	New or inexperienced	Metaphorical Extension	Linguistic creativity	He's still green in football.
Tight	Firm	Difficult or intense	Metaphorical Extension	Stress/social experience	This exam is tight.

Machine	Mechanical device	Vehicle or motorcycle	Narrowing	Urban slang	He came with his machine.
Table	Furniture	To discuss formally	Metaphorical Extension	Academic/Political	Let's table the matter.
Off	To turn off	To kill or silence	Pejoration	Street slang	They offed him last night.

Interpretation:

These instances show that students creatively extend and repurpose existing English words to suit their communicative and social environments. Technology, urban life, and peer culture are major motivators. The data indicate that meaning broadening often arises from students' creative adaptation of English to new social contexts. Words originally tied to specific actions or emotions are now extended to describe general states or social attitudes. This linguistic flexibility aligns

with the synchronic view that meaning evolves through present communicative needs rather than historical usage. Such lexical innovation also reflects the students' desire for expressiveness and identity construction. The creative expansion of meanings such as using *vibe* to denote general mood or atmosphere illustrates the dynamic nature of language as a tool for modern youth expression.

4.2 Research Question Two: What types of semantic shift were observed among the students?

What are the types of semantic shift among the students? This section classifies ten (10) words according to their semantic processes — broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, and metaphorical extension. The analysis reveals that several types of semantic shifts occur among students. Ten words demonstrate broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, amelioration, and pejoration.

Semantic narrowing was less frequent than broadening but equally significant. It involves restricting a word’s general sense to a more specific or localized meaning.

The narrowing of meaning observed among the students suggests the influence of peer-group dynamics and shared identity. For example, a word like “*machine*” may narrow from its general reference to mechanical devices to a specific reference to a car or motorcycle, depending on the context.

This linguistic pattern indicates how speakers within a close social group refine word meanings for precision and exclusivity. It supports the principle of linguistic economy — reducing ambiguity through context-driven usage. Within the university community, such narrowing fosters group belonging and shared understanding among peers.

Table 4.2: Types of Semantic Shift

Word/Phrase	Original Meaning	Shifted/Contextual Meaning	Type of Shift	Influence/Motivation	Contextual Usage

Escort	To accompany someone for safety	To follow romantically or casually	Broadening	Social	She is escorting that guy.
Breakfast	Morning meal	Being heartbroken or dumped	Metaphorical Extension	Youth relationship slang	He was served breakfast.
Trek	To travel long distance on foot	To walk short distance due to transport cost	Narrowing	Economic	I had to trek home.
Clean	Free from dirt	Good-looking or impressive	Amelioration	Appearance	Your outfit is clean.
Scatter	To disperse	To make lively	Amelioration	Peer culture	The party scattered.
Barber	A person who cuts hair	To deceive or cheat	Pejoration	Slang	He barbered me of my money.
Straight	Without curve	Honest or real	Amelioration	Moral/Social	She's a straight person.
Bomb	Explosive	To fail an exam	Pejoration	Academic context	I bombed that test.
Join	To connect	To participate in	Broadening	Social inclusion	He joined the group chat.

Dry	Without moisture	Uninteresting	Pejoration	Entertainment	The event was dry.
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Interpretation:

Students apply all known types of semantic change to adapt English words to campus and online realities. Most notable are **metaphorical extensions** and **pejorations**, reflecting creative linguistic

experimentation. The narrowing of meaning observed in some words demonstrates how social usage can restrict a word's general sense to fit a particular subcultural or group meaning. This process reflects what synchronic linguists describe as the pressure of linguistic economy—where speakers adapt meanings to serve immediate communicative precision. In university discourse, narrowing signals shared understanding and group belonging.

4.3 Research Question Three: What Are the Factors Influencing Semantic Shift among the Students?

Ten words illustrate how social and cultural influences shape meaning among students. These influences include peer culture, campus life, socioeconomic conditions, and technological changes.

Metaphorical and pragmatic extensions were the most common types of meaning change identified. Students frequently extended existing words figuratively to express humour, exaggeration, irony, or emotional emphasis. For instance, the use of “*scatter*” to mean “*to*

impress” or “*perform exceptionally*” illustrates how metaphorical imagination shapes meaning in student discourse.

These figurative uses show the cognitive basis of meaning change — how speakers conceptualize familiar ideas in new domains. Such extensions enhance expressiveness and align with Saussure’s synchronic view that meaning exists within the network of current social relations rather than in fixed, historical definitions. The prevalence of metaphorical extension also underscores the influence of creativity and humour in linguistic evolution. Among young speakers, language serves not only for communication but as a means of self-expression and identity performance. This process reveals how meaning change becomes a social act, reflecting students’ attitudes, humour, and engagement with modern life.

Table 4.3: Words Influenced by Linguistic, Cultural, and Social Factors

Word/Phrase	Original Meaning	Shifted/Contextual Meaning	Type of Shift	Influence/Motivation	Contextual Usage
Vibe	Distinctive feeling or atmosphere	Mood, energy, or chemistry among people	Broadening	Peer culture, music, and media influence	The lecture hall had good vibes today”
Convince	To persuade	To cajole romantically	Metaphorical Extension	Romantic slang	He convinced her to say yes.
Battery	Energy storage device	Phone’s power level	Narrowing	Technological	My battery is low.

Step-down	Reduce voltage	Reduce enthusiasm	Metaphorical Extension	Social/Behavioral	He step-downed from the gist.
Piece	A portion of something	A girlfriend or side partner	Pejoration	Relationship slang	That's his new piece.
Cooperate	To work together	To agree with someone's idea or request	Broadening	Interpersonal	You better cooperate.
Off	To turn off	To kill or silence	Pejoration	Street slang	They offed him last night.
Night	Period of darkness	Party or club outing	Broadening	Youth culture	We are going for night.
Dry	Without moisture	Boring or uninteresting	Pejoration	Entertainment	That show was dry.
Scatter	To disperse	To excite or disrupt positively	Amelioration	Peer culture	The DJ scattered the place.

Interpretation:

The shifts show that language change among students is motivated by **economic realities**, **peer identity**, **technological metaphors**, and **social creativity**. It reflects the influence of Nigerian Pidgin and youth digital culture. Metaphorical and pragmatic extensions were the most frequent

types of meaning change observed. Students often extend meanings figuratively to create humour or exaggeration in informal speech. These metaphorical uses transform ordinary words into expressive markers of identity and social commentary. This trend underscores the cognitive basis of semantic shift, as users conceptualise familiar ideas in new figurative domains. In line with synchronic linguistic principles, these extensions show how meaning is shaped by shared mental frameworks and cultural associations in present usage.

4.4 Research Question Four: What are the implications of semantic shift for effective communication among students?

Semantic shift affects communication both positively and negatively. It fosters group identity and expressiveness. Semantic shift also enhances students' sense of belonging, self-expression, and creativity in communication. However, it also creates a gap between formal English and informal campus language. Ten words are analyzed below to demonstrate communicative implications

The data analysis indicates that semantic shift among Lead City University undergraduates is socially motivated. Students intentionally manipulate language to suit their communicative needs and social interactions.

This finding supports the view that language is a social product — as proposed by Saussure — shaped by the collective behaviour of its users. Semantic innovation often arises from the desire to mark identity, show creativity, or align with contemporary trends. The influence of social media and popular culture has accelerated these processes by allowing rapid diffusion of new meanings.

In this sense, the semantic shifts identified in this study reflect both the dynamism and adaptability of Nigerian English. Students' linguistic practices demonstrate how English evolves synchronically to accommodate local experiences, peer solidarity, and cultural creativity.

Table 4.4: Implication of Semantic Shift on Communication

Word/Phrase	Original Meaning	Shifted/Contextual Meaning	Type of Shift	Influence/Motivation	Contextual Usage
Pepperless	Without spice	Lacking money or excitement	Metaphorical Extension	Economic	This semester is pepperless.
Breakfast	Morning meal	Heartbreak	Metaphorical Extension	Romantic slang	She served him breakfast.
Trek	Long walk	Short movement on foot	Narrowing	Economic	I trekked to the gate.
Hustle	To push roughly	To work hard	Amelioration	Economic/Social	We must hustle.
Package	To wrap	To present oneself impressively	Metaphorical Extension	Self-image	He likes to package.
Machine	Device	Vehicle	Narrowing	Urban slang	He came with his machine.

Ginger	A spice	Motivation or excitement	Metaphorical Extension	Sociocultural and musical influence	That song gingered me
Snap	Break	Take photo	Broadening	Technological	Let's snap now.
Tight	Firm	Difficult	Metaphorical Extension	Stress	That exam was tight.
Scatter	Disperse	Excite	Amelioration	Social	That song scattered the place.

Interpretation:

Semantic shifts promote creativity, solidarity, and shared identity but may hinder intergroup communication, especially when outsiders misinterpret contextual meanings. The effect of semantic shift among students is both functional and social—it reinforces belonging, humor, and creativity, yet may challenge formal comprehension in academic or cross-generational settings. The findings reinforce Saussure's notion that language is a social product shaped by collective behaviour. Among students, meaning change often stems from the desire to establish in-group identity and social solidarity. The influence of social media and digital communication further accelerates semantic adaptation, allowing new meanings to circulate rapidly and gain acceptance within peer networks

4.5 Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study reveal that semantic shift is a prominent linguistic feature among undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan. The observed shifts show that students constantly reshape the meanings of existing English words to reflect their unique social realities, cultural values, and modes of communication.

The analysis showed that numerous English words have undergone **semantic modification** in the speech of Lead City University students. These changes occur through processes such as **broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, amelioration, and pejoration**. Words like *drop*, *flash*, *carry*, *pepper*, *vibe*, and *ginger* have developed new meanings that differ considerably from their traditional dictionary definitions. These redefinitions show that the students use language as a flexible tool to express modern realities, emotions, and experiences within their community.

The use of words such as *flash* (to call and end before picking), *carry* (to date), *vibe* (to share chemistry or atmosphere), and *ginger* (to motivate or energize) illustrates the process of **metaphorical extension** and **broadening**, where meanings evolve to capture emerging social experiences. Similarly, *barber* (to betray someone) and *dry* (boring or dull) demonstrate **pejoration**, reflecting the informal and sometimes humorous creativity embedded in student communication.

Social, cultural, and linguistic factors play significant roles in motivating these shifts. The study found that **peer influence** and **campus culture** are the strongest motivators, as students seek to identify with their group and create a sense of belonging through shared linguistic patterns. **Media and popular culture**—especially music, social media, and entertainment—also contribute to the spread and reinforcement of these new meanings. For instance, the use of

ginger and *vibe* has been popularized through Nigerian Afrobeats music and social media expressions, making them symbols of modern youth identity.

Culturally, Nigerian students adapt English words to reflect **local realities**, using semantic innovation to capture concepts and experiences unique to their environment. For example, *pepper* (money/enjoyment) and *breakfast* (heartbreak) represent metaphorical redefinitions that capture emotional or socioeconomic experiences in ways that standard English cannot. This linguistic adaptation demonstrates the **creative agency** of students in shaping English to suit their sociocultural needs.

While semantic shifts enhance creativity and group cohesion, the findings also highlight potential communication challenges. Some expressions may be **ambiguous or misunderstood** by people outside the student community or older generations who interpret words in their original sense. Nevertheless, within the peer group, these shifts strengthen solidarity and enrich social interaction, confirming that semantic change is both a social and linguistic process.

Overall, the findings align with theories of **language dynamism and semantic change**, which emphasize that language evolves to accommodate the communicative needs of its users. The patterns observed in this study suggest that the English language among Lead City University students reflects the wider trend of **Nigerian English** as a living, adaptive variety shaped by cultural and social realities. Hence, semantic shift among students is not a sign of linguistic decay, but rather an indication of linguistic innovation and identity construction in a multilingual context.

One major finding of the study is that semantic shift functions as a tool for identity expression and group solidarity. The modification of meanings in words such as *carry*, *flash*, *dash*, and

scatter represent an intentional effort by students to develop a form of English that mirrors their daily experiences. These lexical innovations serve as linguistic markers of belonging within the university community. By creating and using contextually unique expressions, students distinguish themselves from other social groups while simultaneously reflecting their participation in the evolving landscape of Nigerian English.

The study also identified several types of semantic shift, including broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, and metaphorical extension. Words like *machine* and *tight* have undergone broadening, expanding their meanings beyond the traditional definitions. Conversely, *sorry* and *madam* illustrate narrowing and pejoration, acquiring more specific or socially loaded meanings. This diversity in shift types reflects the dynamism of language and supports previous research in sociolinguistics that language is constantly reshaped to meet communicative needs.

Another major finding concerns the strong impact of social and cultural factors on semantic change. The influence of Nigerian Pidgin, music, social media, and peer interaction was evident in the use of expressions like *pepper* (money or enjoyment), *hustle* (daily struggle), and *breakfast* (heartbreak). These examples highlight how students merge linguistic creativity with sociocultural realities, transforming standard English into a medium of self-expression that captures everyday struggles and aspirations. The social environment of the university, characterized by frequent peer contact and shared experiences, provides fertile ground for these linguistic transformations.

The findings also reveal that semantic shift has both positive and negative effects on communication. On one hand, it enhances interpersonal relations, humour, and creativity in speech among peers. On the other, it can lead to miscommunication when students interact with

individuals unfamiliar with these new meanings, such as lecturers or outsiders. The expression *scatter* meaning “to impress or excite a crowd,” for example, may cause confusion for non-student listeners who interpret it literally. Therefore, while semantic shift fosters social bonding, it also challenges conventional understanding and can complicate formal communication contexts.

Overall, the discussion shows that semantic shift among undergraduates is not random but rather a reflection of their linguistic adaptability. It demonstrates that English, as used in Nigerian tertiary institutions, continues to evolve to reflect contemporary realities. The students’ manipulation of meaning underscores language as a living system—one that responds to social, cultural, and psychological influences. The creative redefinition of words illustrates that semantic innovation among students is both a linguistic necessity and a marker of youthful expression. Saussure’s *Synchronic Linguistics* posits that language should be studied as a system of interrelated signs existing within a particular point in time, rather than through its historical evolution. Applying this theoretical lens to the findings reveals that the semantic shifts observed among Lead City University undergraduates represent a *synchronic linguistic phenomenon*.

These shifts reflect how meaning functions within the present social and linguistic context of the university community. Words acquire new meanings not through long-term historical change but through immediate, contextual reinterpretation.

Saussure’s principle of the *arbitrariness of the sign* is clearly visible here. The relationship between the signifier (word) and the signified (meaning) is fluid, socially negotiated, and contextually redefined. For example, the word “*table*” in the student context may refer to a *discussion or meeting* rather than a piece of furniture. This arbitrary reassignment aligns with

Saussure's assertion that linguistic meaning is determined by usage within a given linguistic community. Recent linguistic observations have shown that semantic innovation in youth English varieties reflects social adaptability and creative linguistic agency. These trends are mirrored in this study, where meaning variation among Lead City University students demonstrates that speakers continuously reshape language to reflect contemporary realities.

Thus, the semantic innovations among students illustrate Saussure's idea that meaning is a product of social convention and temporal context. The synchronic analysis highlights how English, within the Nigerian university setting, dynamically adapts to local realities.

The findings from the study, "*Semantic Shift among Undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan*," reveal that language use among students is highly dynamic, creative, and influenced by various sociocultural and linguistic factors. The discussion below synthesizes the results presented in the preceding sections.

4.5.1 Instances of Semantic Shift among Students

From the data gathered, several lexical items commonly used among students displayed meanings that differ significantly from their conventional or dictionary meanings. Twenty words were analyzed under this section. The analysis revealed that the students tend to extend, restrict, or completely alter the meanings of existing English words to fit specific campus or social contexts.

Words such as *drop*, *flash*, *carry*, *dash*, *escort*, *machine*, *madam*, *uncle*, *aunty*, *sorry*, *go-slow*, *night*, *shower*, *snap*, *toast*, *package*, *clean*, *tight*, and *scatter* were among those whose meanings have undergone notable semantic shifts.

For instance, *drop*—traditionally meaning “to let fall”—is used by students to mean “to give someone a ride.” *Flash*—which normally refers to a brief burst of light—is used to mean “to call someone and cut the call before they answer.” Similarly, *carry* now means “to date” or “to accompany,” while *dash* refers to “giving something for free.” These examples show how the social environment of the university contributes to new contextual meanings that promote identification and belonging among students.

The first research question seeks to identify the specific words and expressions used by students that demonstrate semantic shift. Twenty words from the collected data were selected based on their frequency, relevance, and clarity of semantic deviation from Standard English. The identified words include: **drop, flash, escort, branch, enjoy, carry, dash, mobilize, off, on, machine, madam, uncle, aunty, sorry, go-slow, night, shower, snap, and toast.**

Each of these lexical items reveals a change in meaning when compared to its conventional English usage. The instances of semantic shift observed among students show the creative adaptation of existing vocabulary to reflect local contexts, emerging technologies, and interpersonal dynamics.

4.5.1.1 General Observations

Among undergraduates, the phenomenon of semantic shift reflects not only linguistic innovation but also social identity. Students use English words with reinterpreted meanings to communicate shared experiences within their university environment. For instance, words like “*drop*” and “*carry*” have extended meanings related to transportation or companionship, while “*flash*” has acquired meanings influenced by digital communication technology. Similarly, social address

terms such as “*madam*,” “*uncle*,” and “*aunty*” have shifted from familial or formal contexts to represent peer respect or sarcasm, depending on tone and interactional context.

These shifts highlight the dynamic interplay between **language and society**, as meanings evolve in response to local culture, peer-group norms, and communicative convenience. The use of such words also contributes to a sense of in-group belonging among students, setting them apart from older generations or more formal English users.

4.5.1.2 Examples and Interpretations

1. **Drop** – Originally means “to let fall.” Among students, it now means “*to give someone a ride*” or “*to take someone to a destination*.” This reflects **semantic broadening** motivated by technological and social convenience.
2. **Flash** – Traditionally, “to emit a brief light.” In student context, it means “*to call someone and cut the call immediately*,” signaling the person to call back. The shift results from **technological influence** and cost-saving practices in telecommunication.
3. **Escort** – Once meaning “to accompany for protection,” now means “*to walk with someone casually or romantically*.” The shift reflects **social motivation** and the expression of relationships in informal contexts.
4. **Branch** – Originally refers to part of a tree or division of an organization. Among students, it means “*to stop by briefly*” (e.g., “I branched at the café”). This is **metaphorical extension** from physical branching to social movement.
5. **Enjoy** – Conventionally “to take pleasure in.” Students use it to mean “*to endure*” ironically (e.g., “Enjoy your stress”), showing **pejorative shift** through sarcasm.

6. **Carry** – Originally “to transport.” Now used as “*to date*” or “*be in a romantic relationship*.” This represents **broadening** influenced by emotional and social context.
7. **Dash** – Traditionally “to move quickly.” Now means “*to give freely*” (e.g., “He dashed me ₦500”). This is **amelioration**, giving a positive sense of generosity.
8. **Mobilize** – Once “to prepare for movement,” now means “*to gather contributions*” (e.g., “We mobilized money for the party”). Motivated by social coordination.
9. **Off / On** – Usually denote power states; now used metaphorically to describe human conditions (e.g., “She’s off” = angry; “He’s on” = active). A **metaphorical semantic shift** influenced by digital metaphors.
10. **Machine** – Beyond referring to a device, now colloquially used to mean “*a very attractive or physically fit person*.” This is **amelioration** driven by youth culture and physical aesthetics.
11. **Madam / Uncle / Aunty** – Traditionally titles of respect; now used ironically, affectionately, or sarcastically among peers. Reflects **social motivation** and **contextual re-evaluation** of respect terms.
12. **Sorry** – While it expresses apology in Standard English, it is often used as a **sympathetic marker**, e.g., “Sorry o” even when one is not at fault. Reflects cultural politeness norms.
13. **Go-slow** – Derived from Nigerian Pidgin, means “*traffic jam*.” Illustrates **lexical borrowing** and **semantic specialization** from local English usage.
14. **Night** – Instead of the period after sunset, used as “*night party*” or “*night event*.” Reflects **narrowing** of meaning.

15. **Shower** – Normally a water spray, but used to mean “*to bless with gifts or praise*” (e.g., “They showered her with money”). **Broadening** via metaphorical extension.
16. **Snap** – From “to break” or “take quickly,” now means “*to take a photograph.*” Influenced by technological evolution.
17. **Toast** – Originally “to honor someone with a drink,” now means “*to woo or flirt with someone.*” Shows **metaphorical shift** rooted in social expression.
18. **Green** – While it means the color, in slang it can mean “*fresh or inexperienced.*” A **pejorative shift** motivated by social labeling.
19. **Pepper** – Beyond the spice, means “*money*” or “*luxury.*” Represents **semantic transfer** from sensory experience (spice = value).
20. **Table** – Originally furniture; among students means “*to raise for discussion.*” A **metonymic shift** reflecting organizational contexts.

4.5.2 Types of Semantic Shift

Analysis revealed that the identified shifts fall into major categories such as **broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, and metaphorical extension**. Ten representative words from the dataset show these shifts clearly.

For example, *machine* (normally meaning any mechanical device) has been broadened to mean “a powerful or sleek car.” *Madam* and *uncle*, which traditionally refer to familial or respectful titles, are now used broadly to address people in informal or sarcastic ways, showing **amelioration and metaphorical extension**. Words like *sorry* and *tight* illustrate **narrowing** and

broadening respectively — *sorry* is often used as a polite interruption rather than genuine apology, while *tight* now means “close” or “strong” friendship.

These semantic modifications demonstrate linguistic creativity and reflect how students use language to express social solidarity, humour, and identity. This section analyzes the second research question, which seeks to identify and classify the **types of semantic shift** that occur in the linguistic usage of undergraduates . Through careful observation and interpretation of the data gathered, six primary categories of semantic change emerged: **broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical extension, and metonymy.**

Each type reveals how students creatively manipulate meanings to suit their social and communicative needs. This flexibility demonstrates the dynamic nature of language as viewed by **Saussure’s synchronic linguistics**, which perceives linguistic meaning as dependent on present-day social conditions rather than historical etymology.

4.5.2.1 Broadening

Broadening occurs when a word’s meaning expands beyond its original sense to cover additional contexts. Among the students, words like “*drop*,” “*carry*,” “*mobilize*,” and “*shower*” exemplify this phenomenon. For instance, “*carry*” extends from physical movement to emotional or romantic engagement, while “*mobilize*” shifts from military preparation to social organization. Such broadening reflects the students’ inclination to adapt formal English to fit their vibrant campus life, where relationships, events, and activities require expressive language beyond literal meanings.

In a synchronic view, this broadening symbolizes a natural linguistic response to changing communicative demands within the social environment. Language users innovate meanings as they encounter new experiences or technologies that traditional vocabulary does not fully express.

4.5.2.2 Narrowing

Narrowing happens when a general term becomes more specialized in meaning. The word “*night*,” for example, originally denotes any time between sunset and sunrise, but in student usage, it now refers specifically to night events such as parties or hangouts (“We’re going for night”). Similarly, “*table*” once referred to furniture but now narrowly signifies *discussion* or *presentation of issues* (“We’ll table that matter later”). These narrowed meanings reveal students’ preference for concise and coded speech.

From Saussure’s synchronic perspective, narrowing demonstrates how meaning adapts to the functional reality of communication at a given time. Language reflects not only lexical choice but also the priorities and shared experiences of a speech community—in this case, university students whose lifestyle revolves around academics, social gatherings, and peer communication.

4.5.2.3 Amelioration

Amelioration refers to a change in which a word takes on a more favorable meaning. Words like “*machine*,” “*dash*,” and “*pepper*” illustrate this trend. “Machine,” traditionally referring to a device, now describes someone who is extremely skilled or physically attractive. “Dash” has shifted from denoting a quick movement to symbolizing generosity, while “pepper” expresses financial prosperity or luxury (“She’s enjoying pepper this semester”). Such ameliorations often emerge in youth language as markers of positivity, empowerment, and admiration.

This reflects the **social psychology of language**, where positive labeling reinforces self-image and group solidarity. In Saussurean terms, these ameliorations are synchronic reflections of value systems—lexical meanings gain prestige or desirability within the present linguistic community.

4.5.2.4 Pejoration

Pejoration involves the process through which a word acquires a more negative or less favorable connotation. Words such as “*green*” (used to describe an inexperienced person) and “*enjoy*” (used sarcastically to mean “endure hardship”) exemplify pejoration in student speech. Such usage demonstrates humor and irony—tools that serve social bonding among peers while simultaneously marking social hierarchies of experience.

Pejorative shifts also arise from the cultural tendency among Nigerian students to use irony as a form of wit. Within Saussure’s synchronic theory, these shifts show how meaning is redefined not by dictionary rules but by community consensus in a given linguistic moment.

4.5.2.5 Metaphorical Extension

Metaphorical extension occurs when a word develops a figurative meaning related to its literal sense. For instance, “*flash*” extends from the idea of a brief light to “making a phone call that is immediately cut,” drawing on the concept of instant appearance and disappearance. Similarly, “*off*” and “*on*” extend from electrical states to human moods (“He’s off today” = upset; “She’s on” = lively). These metaphors reveal a technologically influenced worldview, where digital and human experiences intertwine.

The students’ use of metaphor shows linguistic creativity consistent with Saussure’s principle that meaning exists through relational differences in a system. The contrast between “on” and

“off” mirrors binary social perceptions—engagement versus withdrawal, enthusiasm versus indifference—recontextualized through digital imagery.

4.5.2.6 Metonymy and Contextual Reassignment

In some cases, words acquire new meanings through **metonymic transfer**, where association rather than similarity drives semantic change. The word “*table*” (for “discussion”) and “*branch*” (for “stop by briefly”) are products of associative thinking—activities related to the original concept of location or placement. Such shifts demonstrate how meaning can migrate from object to action within the same communicative frame.

These changes underscore Saussure’s synchronic notion that meaning operates within a network of associations existing at a given time. Language thus becomes a living map of relational meanings continuously updated by social experience.

4.5.3 Words Influenced by Linguistic, Cultural, and Social Factors

Findings indicate that multiple factors influence the semantic shift among the undergraduates. These include **peer group interaction, media influence, sociocultural identity, and the desire for linguistic innovation.**

Ten words—*pepper*, *breakfast*, *trek*, *toasting*, *hustle*, *piece*, *battery*, *dry*, *barber*, and *vibe*—reflect these influences. For instance, *pepper* (meaning spice) has acquired a cultural connotation of “money” or “enjoyment,” while *breakfast* metaphorically refers to “heartbreak.” *Hustle* is used to describe one’s daily struggle for survival, showing a sociocultural influence from Nigerian urban life. This research question explores the **motivations and influences** that drive meaning change among students. The data reveal that semantic shift is rarely arbitrary—it

emerges from identifiable cultural and communicative patterns. The major influences observed include **linguistic creativity, cultural hybridity, social interaction, and technological advancement.**

Students adopt these new meanings as a way to express shared experiences, adapt to contemporary realities, and create a linguistic style that resonates with modern youth culture. Thus, social and cultural identity play a significant role in motivating semantic extensions within the campus community.

4.5.3.1 Linguistic Factors

Students at Lead City University frequently code-switch between English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages. This linguistic fluidity promotes innovation in word meaning. For example, expressions like “*go-slow*” and “*dash*” derive from pidgin and are integrated into English discourse. The blending of these linguistic systems fosters an environment where words can easily shift in form and meaning to accommodate multiple speech communities.

Within Saussure’s synchronic framework, such linguistic interaction shows how meaning is constructed through **systemic differences** across coexisting varieties. The students’ speech thus becomes a site of negotiation between formal English and localized expression. The flexibility of English semantics allows room for reinterpretation. The principle of polysemy (one word, multiple meanings) gives speakers freedom to innovate. For instance, “*flash*” meaning *to make a quick phone call without completing it* arose from the technological and economic context of mobile communication in Nigeria.

4.5.3.2 Cultural Factors

Culture exerts significant influence on how words acquire new meanings. Nigerian sociocultural values emphasize respect, humor, and social cohesion, and these values shape language use. For instance, terms like “*madam*” and “*uncle*” reflect respect but also serve as vehicles of irony or endearment depending on tone and setting. The phrase “*sorry o*” expresses empathy rather than apology, aligning with the cultural emphasis on shared emotional expression.

Cultural influence also manifests in how students assign prestige to certain expressions. Words like “*machine*” and “*pepper*” symbolize success, beauty, or wealth—values that resonate with youth culture and contemporary social media trends. These shifts demonstrate how cultural aspirations are linguistically encoded in everyday communication. Cultural realities, especially Nigerian humor, urban struggle, and socio-economic commentary, directly shape meanings. For instance, “*pepperless*” (meaning broke or financially unstable) arises from the metaphor of *pepper* as wealth. Culture thus offers the conceptual metaphors that fuel semantic innovation.

4.5.3.3 Social Factors

The social environment of university life encourages rapid linguistic change. Peer interaction, group identity, and status negotiation all drive the emergence of new meanings. Students use creative wordplay to signal belonging or exclusion. A term like “*toast*” functions not only as a description of flirtation but also as an index of social competence. Similarly, the redefined “*carry*” reflects romantic dynamics, illustrating how social relationships shape semantic evolution.

In synchronic terms, Saussure would view these social influences as evidence that language is a **social institution**—meanings exist because the community collectively recognizes them at a

specific time. The university thus serves as a microcosm of semantic innovation, where meanings circulate and stabilize within peer networks. Peer interaction and group solidarity encourage imitation and adoption of new meanings. When influential student groups use specific terms, these become linguistic norms. Social media also amplifies these trends, as platforms like Instagram and X (Twitter) serve as spaces for linguistic experimentation.

4.5.3.4 Technological Factors

Technology plays an undeniable role in modern semantic change. Words like “*flash*” and “*snap*” derive their new meanings from the digital environment—mobile phones, cameras, and the internet. The students’ linguistic system absorbs these technological realities, reshaping old words to describe new actions. “Flash me” and “snap me” have become naturalized expressions within campus communication.

These shifts confirm the synchronic view that language meaning evolves alongside societal development. In this context, technology acts as a catalyst for semantic innovation, reinforcing the adaptability and immediacy of undergraduate communication.

4.5.4 Effect of Semantic Shift on Communication

This section of the study presents a detailed discussion of the major findings derived from the qualitative analysis of semantic shifts among undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan. It specifically focuses on the last research question. Semantic shift among students has both **positive and negative effects** on communication. On the positive side, it fosters **group identity, creativity, and belonging**, making communication more expressive and relatable within peer circles. However, it can also lead to **misunderstanding** when used with people outside the group who interpret words based on their standard meanings.

Words such as *join*, *cooperate*, *step-down*, *scatter*, and *package* demonstrate this. For example, *scatter* (originally “to disperse”) now means “to perform excellently” or “to excite a crowd,” while *package* means “to look good or present oneself stylishly.” Though these usages enhance social bonding, they sometimes obscure meaning in formal or intergenerational communication contexts.

Therefore, while semantic shift contributes to linguistic dynamism, it challenges standard comprehension when meanings diverge too far from the conventional sense. The findings are discussed in relation to the data presented in the previous sections. This analysis aims to interpret the linguistic trends observed, explain the sociolinguistic motivations behind these trends, and connect them to Saussure’s **Synchronic Linguistic Theory**. By doing so, this chapter highlights the role of meaning change as an indicator of language dynamism and identity construction within a specific temporal context. The data presented earlier in the study revealed that undergraduates of Lead City University frequently employ words that have undergone semantic shifts, either consciously or unconsciously, during daily interactions. Examples such as “*pepper*,” “*carry*,” “*snap*,” “*package*,” “*toasting*,” and “*hustle*” demonstrate how words originally associated with standard English meanings have evolved to express new, context-specific interpretations.

For instance, “*pepper*” in its original English sense denotes a type of spice, but in the students’ context, it refers metaphorically to *wealth, luxury, or comfort*. Similarly, “*carry*” has shifted from a literal meaning of *lifting or transporting* to a figurative sense of *dating someone romantically*. The contextual analysis further revealed that these shifts are not random but systematically influenced by social, cultural, and linguistic factors.

4.5.4.1 Communication Efficiency and Creativity

Semantic shifts serve as communicative tools that allow students to express nuanced meanings efficiently within their social environment. These meaning changes provide linguistic shortcuts that encode shared cultural experiences. For example, when a student says, “*That guy is really hustling*”, it does not merely indicate engagement in labor but implies determination, ambition, and resilience. Such creative redefinitions enable communication that reflects contemporary realities and shared social struggles.

This shows that semantic shift contributes to communicative economy and expressiveness. Instead of lengthy descriptions, one word now encapsulates an entire worldview. This creativity reinforces a sense of belonging among students, particularly as part of the youth subculture in Nigeria.

4.5.4.2 Social Identity and Belonging

The findings further reveal that the use of semantically shifted words helps to build social identity. Words such as “*madam*”, “*uncle*”, or “*aunty*” are no longer restricted to blood relations or marital contexts; they now connote respect, familiarity, or authority. Within campus settings, these redefinitions act as linguistic badges of inclusion, marking members of the student community as part of an in-group.

For example, when a student refers to another as “*aunty*”, it could signify admiration, social distance, or even irony, depending on tone and context. This flexible use demonstrates the

pragmatic sensitivity embedded in semantic shift and highlights how language both reflects and constructs social relationships.

4.5.4.3 Influence of Motivation and Identity

Motivation in semantic change often lies in **economy, creativity, and identity construction**. Students manipulate language to make it more efficient, expressive, and relatable. The drive for brevity—common in spoken and online communication—leads to compressed expressions with extended meanings. Meanwhile, linguistic creativity fosters humor and novelty, sustaining social engagement. Finally, language serves as an identity marker; students employ particular shifts to align themselves with peer groups and distinguish their generation from others.

These motivations, though spontaneous, reflect broader socio-cultural currents within youth communities. They confirm Saussure’s idea that language is a living system shaped by usage at any given moment, not a fixed structure determined by history.

Motivation plays a central role in the emergence and persistence of semantic shifts. The findings suggest that students’ motivations are driven by multiple forces:

1. **Social Motivation:** To appear trendy, urban, or in touch with contemporary culture.
2. **Cultural Motivation:** To embed local Nigerian realities within English, making the language resonate with everyday life.
3. **Psychological Motivation:** To foster creativity, express rebellion, or mark individuality.

Through these motivations, students continuously negotiate linguistic boundaries. The process of meaning change becomes a reflection of identity-making. In this sense, language functions not merely as a tool of communication but as a performance of selfhood.

This chapter has shown that semantic shift among Lead City University students is not a random occurrence but a reflection of contemporary linguistic adaptation. The next chapter will draw conclusions from these findings and make recommendations for further research and pedagogical applications in English semantics.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study investigated the phenomenon of **semantic shift** among undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan, focusing on how English words have changed in meaning as used in everyday communication. The aim was to understand how social, cultural, and cognitive factors influence meaning transformation within Nigerian English.

Data were collected through **semi-structured interviews** and **field observations** documented in detailed field notes. The analysis was guided by the principles of **synchronic linguistics**, which

examine meaning as it functions within the current linguistic system rather than tracing its historical origins.

Findings from the study revealed that **semantic shift** among students primarily occurs through the following processes: **broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, amelioration, and pejoration**. Each process reflects students' linguistic creativity and their adaptation of English to modern Nigerian realities.

1. **Semantic Broadening:**

Words originally tied to specific concepts or experiences now cover wider semantic fields. Terms like “*vibe*,” “*package*,” and “*pepper*” have expanded beyond their dictionary definitions to include notions of lifestyle, emotional tone, and success. This reflects the dynamic and creative linguistic practices of students who reshape language to express emerging social values.

2. **Semantic Narrowing:**

Some words have acquired more specialized meanings within student circles. For instance, “*machine*” may now specifically denote a car, while “*hustle*” is narrowly applied to entrepreneurial or survival activities. This shows how group interactions restrict general meanings to serve precise, contextual purposes.

3. **Metaphorical and Pragmatic Extension:**

The use of metaphor and pragmatic inference was highly recurrent. Words like “*scatter*” and “*boss*” were used figuratively to denote excellence or admiration. This reflects the cognitive and

social creativity that drives semantic innovation. Metaphorical usage enhances expressiveness, humour, and solidarity among speakers.

4. **Amelioration and Pejoration:**

Some words experienced meaning improvement (amelioration) or deterioration (pejoration). For example, “*mad*” may connote admiration rather than insanity (“That song is *mad*!”), while “*local*” may carry a negative, dismissive undertone. These shifts demonstrate the role of attitude and evaluation in shaping meaning.

Overall, the findings confirm that **meaning change is a living process** that reflects the social and cultural experiences of Nigerian undergraduates. Language serves as a flexible, evolving tool that responds to current realities, enabling students to construct identity, express belonging, and negotiate modernity through innovative linguistic behaviour.

5.1 Summary of Findings

This research concludes that **semantic shift** is an active and integral feature of Nigerian English, especially among younger speakers in university settings. The study establishes that meaning change is not random but driven by identifiable linguistic, social, and cognitive motivations.

The **synchronic linguistic framework** provided a suitable lens for analysing these shifts because it situates meaning in the present, emphasizing language as a social institution that evolves with usage. The data clearly demonstrate that the semantics of English words used by Lead City University students have been reshaped to accommodate new realities, values, and experiences.

The study shows that students are **agents of linguistic innovation**, consciously and unconsciously adapting English to reflect their worldviews. These semantic shifts do not constitute linguistic corruption but represent creative reconfigurations of meaning, enriching the expressive power of Nigerian English.

Furthermore, the findings illustrate that the processes of **broadening**, **narrowing**, and **metaphorical extension** are not isolated but interdependent, occurring simultaneously within linguistic interaction. The presence of both **amelioration** and **pejoration** highlights the evaluative and social nature of meaning — language evolves alongside people's attitudes and perceptions.

In conclusion, the study affirms that **semantic shift in Nigerian English is a synchronic reality** that mirrors social life and identity formation among young speakers. English in Nigeria continues to expand, diversify, and innovate through the linguistic agency of its users.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. For Linguists and Researchers:

Greater scholarly attention should be directed toward the **semantics of Nigerian English** as a dynamic and evolving system. Future research should document ongoing lexical innovations to capture the living nature of meaning in context.

2. For English Language Teachers:

Teachers should incorporate **current semantic usages** into their curriculum to make English language instruction more relevant. Recognizing semantic shifts can help bridge the gap between formal textbook English and real-life communicative practice.

3. For Universities and Educators:

English departments should encourage **student-led linguistic research** and discussions on language change. This would promote awareness of language diversity and creativity, enabling students to appreciate English as a tool of cultural expression rather than a rigid structure.

4. For Media and Communication Professionals:

Media outlets and public communicators should recognize that language in Nigeria reflects innovation and adaptation. Understanding contemporary semantic trends can enhance media messaging and audience engagement.

5.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the body of knowledge in several important ways:

1. It provides **empirical evidence** of semantic shift within the Nigerian university context, showing how English evolves synchronically through everyday use.
2. It applies the **synchronic linguistic framework** to the study of meaning change in Nigerian English, offering a contemporary perspective distinct from purely historical or diachronic studies.

3. It identifies and categorizes **specific types of semantic processes** — broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, amelioration, and pejoration — as they occur in student language, contributing to local semantic typology.
4. It demonstrates the **role of social interaction, digital culture, and peer communication** in meaning change, emphasizing how technology accelerates linguistic innovation.

It strengthens the recognition of **Nigerian English** as a legitimate and self-evolving variety of English capable of generating new meanings and enriching global English semantics.

5.5 Areas for Further Research

While this study has provided valuable insights, it opens several avenues for further exploration:

1. Future studies could examine **semantic shifts in online communication**, especially in digital platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, and TikTok, where language change occurs rapidly.
2. Comparative studies between **different Nigerian universities** could reveal regional patterns of meaning change and the influence of local culture on lexical innovation.
3. Research may also investigate **gender or disciplinary variations** in semantic shift to determine whether certain groups exhibit unique linguistic tendencies.
4. A **longitudinal study** could track the evolution of specific words over several years to determine how meanings stabilize or fade from use.
5. Further analysis could integrate **cognitive semantic models** to explain how conceptual metaphors shape meaning within African Englishes.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Title: Semantic Shift among Undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan

Purpose

This semi-structured interview aims to explore how Lead City University undergraduates use and interpret English words that have undergone semantic shift in their everyday communication. It focuses on understanding the linguistic, social, and cultural factors influencing meaning change.

Section A: Background Information

1. Faculty: _____
2. Department: _____
3. Level (e.g., 100L–400L): _____
4. Age range: ☐ 16–20 ☐ 21–25 ☐ 26–30 ☐ Above 30

Section B: Language Use and Awareness

1. How often do you and your friends speak English on campus?
2. Do you sometimes use English words in ways that differ from their usual or dictionary meanings?
3. Can you mention some English words that students use differently on campus (e.g., mad, vibe, ginger, cruise, flex, blow)?

Section C: Understanding of Meaning Change

4. What do these words (mad, ginger, cruise, etc.) mean to you when you use them?
5. How did you first learn or start using these expressions? (friends, social media, music, etc.)
6. Why do you think students prefer these new meanings instead of standard ones?
7. Do you think these meanings are understood by everyone, or only among students?

Section D: Factors Influencing Usage

8. Do social media or online platforms influence how you use or understand English words?

9. How does peer interaction or friendship circles affect the way you speak?
10. Do you think using words in these new ways helps to show identity or belonging among students?

Section E: Perceptions and Attitudes

11. How do you feel when lecturers or older people don't understand these new meanings?
12. Do you consider these new meanings as "wrong English" or as part of language creativity?
13. Do you think some of these new meanings will eventually become part of standard English? Why or why not?

Section F: Closing

14. What other English words do you notice have changed meanings among students recently?
15. In your opinion, what does this say about how language changes in society?

Interviewer's Note

- Each interview should last 5–10 minutes.
- Responses should be written in field notes (no recording devices used).
- Questions are flexible — the interviewer may probe for clarification or examples.

Bio data

A. Personal Data

1. Full Name: Omotomiwa Samuel Àjàyí

Address: Trademore Estate house 6&8 Phase 3

Isukwaito street Lugbe Abuja

E-mail Address: rusiquat@gmail.com

Phone Number: +2349018860007

2. Date and Place of Birth: 26th March, 1997

3. Nationality: Nigerian

4. Name and Address of next of kin: Ajayi Aderonke Adewusi

trademore Estate house 6&8 Phase 3 Isukwaito street Lugbe Abuja

B. Educational Background

Educational Institution Attended with Dates

MA English and literary studies, Lead City University, Ibadan Oyo state 2022 till date

BA Linguistics -Second class honour (Lower Division) 2018-2021

Jesse Science College 2009- 2012

Morgan International community School 2012-2015

National Examination council (NECO) 2017

L.EA. primary school Tugan-Maje 2003-2008.

Work Experience with Dates:

Oluwamurewa Farms LTD 2021- Till date

Internship at Technical Assistance unit of PRS, NYSC 2023-2024

A photographer and videographer for Better Life for Africa Development (NGO) 2019-2021

Award & Fellowships: (If Any)

Certificate of Commerce 2021

Honorary Ambassador for International Breweries 2020

F. Publications:

Journal paper; Artificial Intelligence and Cultural Revisitation.

Thesis

Semantic Shift and Extension in Nigerian English from 2021-2024

Scholarly Articles

Artificial Intelligence and Cultural Revisitation Dr Esther Senayon (Ph.D) & **Omotomiwa Samuel Àjàyí** 2025

Notable Scholarly or Professional Accomplishments:

Manager at Oluwamurewa Farms Ltd

G. Major Conferences/ Workshops Attended with Dates:

Artificial Intelligence and Language Processing in the Arts and Humanities: Trends, Prospects and Challenges. 2025

PRS (planning, Research and Statistics) workshop. 2023

Certificate course in Entrepreneurship by Ilesha Business School 2018

H. Referees:

Name: Dr Olujide (Ph.D)

Occupation: Entrepreneur

Phone number: 07085088627

Name: Femi Sarumi

Occupation: Lawyer

Phone number: 08132690058

Name: Mrs Aderonke Ajayi

Occupation: Entrepreneur

Number: 07031023560

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The University Compliance Certification

This is to certify that the thesis by OMOTOIWA SAMUEL ÀJÀYÍ, LCU/PG/003002 in the Department of language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Lead City University, Ibadan, Oyo State is in full compliance with the approved University format and style.

Signature

Date

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