


2.2. Semantic change

Types of semantic change

- **Generalization (broadening, widening)** → from a narrower to a broader class of thing
- **Specialization (narrowing, restriction)** → opposite change broad > narrow
- **(A)melioration (elevation)** → neutral / negative > positive; negative > neutral
- **Pejoration (deterioration, degeneration)** → positive / neutral > negative
- **Semantic shift** → addition of a new meaning
- **Bleaching** → loss of lexical meaning

Identify the type of semantic change affecting the following words:

1. *apple* 'fruit' > '  ' **SPECIALIZATION**
2. *cell* 'a small room' > 'the smallest unit of living matter' **SEMANTIC SHIFT DUE TO METAPHOR**
3. *jowl* 'jaw bone' > 'cheek' E.g. *cheek by jowl* 'cheek to cheek' **SEMANTIC SHIFT DUE TO METONYMY**
4. *journey* 'the distance travelled in a day' > 'act of travelling, especially in a vehicle' **GENERALIZATION**
5. *go* 'walk' > 'move, travel' **GENERALIZATION** > *be going to* 'future time reference' **BLEACHING** > *go* (informal) 'go to the toilet' **SEMANTIC SHIFT (TABOO; this is an euphemism). To go to the toilet is also a euphemism, but it is now too closely associated to the taboo, so it asks for replacement. Euphemisms are usually replaced by other euphemisms (lexical replacement, sometimes lexical loss).**
6. *mistress* 'female head of a house' > 'a woman who has a sexual relationship with a man who is married to someone else' **PEJORATION**
7. *starve* 'die' > 'die of hunger and cold' > 'die of hunger' **PROGRESSIVE SPECIALIZATION > 'be very hungry' SEMANTIC SHIFT (EXAGGERATION; hyperbolic language).**

In Old English *steorfan* meant 'die'. It was actually a euphemism to avoid mentioning death in a direct way. According to the OED it derives from an IE root which meant 'to become rigid'. There was another OE verb for dying, namely *sweltan*. This must have been another euphemism, since it seems to go back to a root meaning 'burn slowly'. *Steorfan* was replaced by the Scandinavian loanword *die* in its general sense.

8. *stink* 'to smell, sweetly or otherwise' > 'to emit a disgusting smell' **PEJORATION**
This kind of semantic change also affected the related noun *stench*, which in OE was also neutral 'smell'. In the Middle English period some words from French origin entered this semantic field (e.g. *scent*, *odour*). These French words originally referred to a sweet smell (so, the word from English, the subordinate language in a diglossic situation, acquires a negative meaning). Cf. use of *cheirar* for 'emit a disgusting smell' when used in the Spanish spoken in Galicia.

9. *terribly* 'inspiring terror' > 'very' **BLEACHING** (the original meaning of *terror* is gone and the word now has a grammatical meaning: it is used to indicate (high) degree).

10. *wicked* 'morally bad' > 'slightly bad but in a way that is amusing and/or attractive' > 'very good' AMELIORATION. Probably exaggeration and hyperbole play a role here because the word is highly expressive. It is common to find negative words used emphatically to indicate something good: *terrific*, *awesome*, *wicked* and *sick* are relevant examples here.

Does this passage make sense? Use the OED to discover the earlier meanings of the words in italics (adapted from and inspired in Brinton & Arnovik 2006: 87)

He was a happy and *sad girl* who lived in a *town* forty miles from the closest neighbour. He was a vegetarian teetotaler, and eat *meat* and drank *liquor* three times a day. He loved *deer* and had three cats and two *hounds*, a poodle and a chihuahua.

<i>sad</i>	'satisfied, serious' > 'sad'	PEJORATION
<i>girl</i>	'a child of either sex' > 'girl'	SPECIALIZATION
<i>meat</i>	'food' > 'animal flesh eaten as food'	SPECIALIZATION
<i>liquor</i>	'liquid for drinking' > 'alcoholic drink'	SPECIALIZATION
<i>deer</i>	'animal' > 'deer'	SPECIALIZATION
<i>hound</i>	'dog' > 'hunting dog'	SPECIALIZATION