Toward a Universal Dictionary
Of Semantic Change

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‘Human’: *OED* definition

“A human being, a **person**; a member of the species *Homo sapiens*.”
‘Human’

• Latin *homo*, related to *humus*, ‘earthling’.
1949

CARL DARLING BUCK

A DICTIONARY OF SELECTED SYNONYMS IN THE PRINCIPAL INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES
2.1 MAN

(Human Being)

| Grk. | ἄνθρωπος | Goth. | manna |
| NG | ἄνθρωπος | ON | mātr, gumi |
| Lat. | homō | Dan. | menneske |
| It. | uomo | Sw. | menniska |
| Fr. | homme | OE | man(n), gum |
| Sp. | hombre | ME | man |
| Rum. | om | NE | man |
| Ir. | duine | Du. | mensch |
| NIr. | duine | OHG | man, mannisco, gomo |
| W. | dyn | MHG | mensch |
| Br. | den | NHG | mensch |

Lith. žmogus, pl. žmonės
Lett. cilvēks
ChSl. člověk
SCr. čovjek
Boh. člověk
Pol. człowiek
Russ. čelovek
Skt. manu-, purusa-
Av. maśya-, maśyaka-
OPers. martiya-

The more general notion of ‘man’ as a human being (‘man’₁) and the more specific notion of ‘man’ as an adult male human being (‘man’₂) may be combined in the same word, as in NE *man*, Fr. *homme*, etc.; or they may be differentiated (1) by related forms, as NHG *mensch* vs. *mann*, (2) by unrelated words, as Lat. *homō* vs. *vir*, etc. An old differentiation may be lost, as in VLatin,
(Semitic / Afro-Asiatic)
Hebrew *adam*, ‘man’, ‘of the earth’
English ‘person’, ‘persona’,
Etruscan *phersu, ‘mask’*
English ‘man’, Sanskrit *manu*, ‘man’, as ‘thinker’
Farsi, Armenian *mard, ‘man’, ‘the mortal one’*
Types of semantic change: Bloomfield (1933); Blank (1999)

Typology by Bloomfield (1933)  [edit]

The most widely accepted scheme in the English-speaking academic world is from Bloomfield (1933):

- **Narrowing**: Change from superordinate level to subordinate level. For example, *skyline* formerly referred to any *horizon*, but now in the USA it has narrowed to a horizon decorated by skyscrapers.\(^1\)
- **Widening**: There are many examples of specific brand names being used for the general product, such as with *Kleenex*.\(^1\) Such uses are known as generonyms: see *genericization*.
- **Metaphor**: Change based on similarity of thing. For example, *broadcast* originally meant "to cast seeds out"; with the advent of radio and television, the word was extended to indicate the transmission of audio and video signals. Outside of agricultural circles, very few use *broadcast* in the earlier sense.\(^1\)
- **Metonymy**: Change based on nearness in space or time, e.g., *jaw* "cheek" → "mandible".
- **Synecdoche**: Change based on whole-part relation. The convention of using capital cities to represent countries or their governments is an example of this.
- **Hyperbole**: Change from weaker to stronger meaning, e.g., *kili* "torment" → "slaughter"
- **Meiosis**: Change from stronger to weaker meaning, e.g., *astound* "strike with thunder" → "surprise strongly".
- **Degeneration**: e.g., *knave* "boy" → "servant" → "deceitful or despicable man".
- **Elevation**: e.g., *knight* "boy" → "nobleman".
What can be gained from a universal database:

1. The probability of meaning X evolving to Y, generally speaking.
2. The rate at which X evolves to Y: is it decades, centuries or millenia?
3. Cultural or geographic correlates for such changes.
4. A map showing the interconnectedness of different meanings, the extent to which they converge, their diachronic stability, and the extent to which different meanings stay away from each other over time.
5. Ultimately, a universal database of semantic change may allow linguists, and lexicographers, to uncover new subtypes of semantic change, which may have hitherto been underappreciated or ill-explored by the scholarly community.
Example 2: What can etymology teach us about the beautiful?
1. Beautiful as ‘(little) good’

- Latin *bellus*, **diminutive** of Latin *bonus* ‘good’ (Old Latin *duenos*).

- Spanish *bonito* ‘pretty’, diminutive of Spanish *bueno* ‘good’.
2. Beautiful... like a flower

From flowers to...

Flour! (la fleur de... 'the flower of',
'the best part of')
3. Beautiful as luminous and bright

- German *schön*
- Lithuanian *dailus*
- Avestan *xvaini*
4. Beautiful as “worth looking at”

- English *sightly*
- Anglo-Saxon *wlitig*, ’beautiful’, from *wlitan* ‘to look at’
- Greek *eu-eidēs* ‘of good sight’, ‘of good appearance’
5. Beautiful as ‘strong’, ‘warlike’
6. Beautiful as ‘familiar’, ‘to which one is accustomed’
7. Beautiful as ‘careful’
Call for collaborators (...and sponsors!)

- Aboriginal languages
- Sino-Tibetan
- Papuan
- Afro-Asiatic
- Bantu
- Vietnamese

- Austronesian
- Caucasian
- Amerindian
- Isolates (like Basque)
- Even Indo-European!
Universal Dictionary in the *Lingua Franca*: (English)

• Under letter B

• BEAUTIFUL....

• Under letter H

• HUMAN...
Limitations...
Ode to the West Wind

BY PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

I
O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,
It is a green hollow where a stream gurgles,
Crazily catching silver rags of itself on the grasses;
Where the sun shines from the proud mountain:
It is a little valley bubbling over with light.

A young soldier, open-mouthed, bare-headed,
With the nape of his neck bathed in cool blue cresses,
Sleeps; he is stretched out on the grass, under the sky,
Pale on his green bed where the light falls like rain.

His feet in the yellow flags, he lies sleeping. Smiling as
A sick child might smile, he is having a nap:
Cradle him warmly, Nature: he is cold.

No odour makes his nostrils quiver;
He sleeps in the sun, his hand on his breast
At peace. There are two red holes in his right side.

Arthur Rimbaud

October 1870
The Eyes as Sun or Moon

Lord Byron (1788-1824):

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellow’d to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

Old Irish súil ‘eye’ from IE ‘sun’, cf ‘solar’