

Shifting semantics: Here are 33 language facts that will impress no one

Turns out, words you probably use all the time used to mean something totally different



Broken Books in St. John's. (Knoah Bender)

National Puzzlers' League Jonathan Berkowitz is a huge language nerd.

He joined *North by Northwest* host Sheryl MacKay to discuss semantics, or how words shift their meaning over time. Here are 33 facts courtesy of Berkowitz about words with meanings that haven't always been the same.

Generalization — when a word's meaning becomes broader over time

- An "office" was originally a prescribed form or service of worship.
- A "doctrine" was originally only a teaching of the Catholic church.
- In ancient Rome, a "novice" (*novicius*) was a newly imported slave.

Catholic and Buddhist novices were priests or monks in training.

- "Thing" originally referred to a public assembly. Someone who said that they would "meet you at the thing" would have been being very specific.
- "Salon" has its roots in French aristocracy and originally referred to an assembly of notable people who would discuss matters of the day.

Specialization — when a word's meaning gets narrower

- "Engine" originally referred to any kind of machinery.
- "Deer" originally referred to any animal.
- "Girl" just meant "young person" — not necessarily a female one.
- "Meat" originally referred to any type of food.
- "Bugle" was originally a type of wild ox.

Amelioration — when a word becomes more positive

- "Meticulous" once meant fearful and timid.
- "Sensitive" simply meant capable of using one's senses.
- "Nice" originally meant "foolish," coming from the Latin prefix *ne-*, meaning "not," and *scire*, meaning "to know."
- "Naughty" used to mean straight-up "wicked."

Pejoration — when a word becomes more negative

- "Sly" originally meant "wise."
- "Lewd" just described something that was not of the clergy. It has the same roots as "layman" (a non-clergyman).
- A "harbinger" was a man sent ahead of a travelling party to organize lodgings.
- A "mugger" would have originally sold mugs.
- "Snobs" were once shoe-menders.
- "Bully" was originally a positive word. You can still hear it in old movies — "Bully for you!"
- "Awful" originally referred to something that inspires awe.

"Janus words" have opposite meanings, depending on

how they're used

Janus is the two-faced Roman god of transitions, which makes sense.

- A few men have "left," but there are still a few left.
- A "fast" car moves quickly, but a jammed door is stuck fast.
- You can "dust" your house or dust a cake with icing sugar.
- You can "clip" out a coupon or clip two together.
- You can "bolt" down a table and then bolt away.
- You can "sanction" a party, but place sanctions on Russia.

Some words with really, really old roots

When you hear the words "Old English," you might picture a flowery Shakespearean sonnet, but the reality is a strange Germanic language with a large Nordic influence that looks [nothing like](#) English today.

Here are some words from around 1,600 years ago that have managed to stick around:

- "Bonfire" (originally pronounced "bone-fire") meant a fire in which you would burn bones. It evolved to mean any sort of purifying fire, then just any big fire.
- The "were" part of "werewolf" comes from the Old English (400-1100 AD) *wer* (pronounced *wair*), meaning man.
- "Ang" (pronounced "ong") meant "painful." The only place it survives today is in the word "hangnail," because of its double meaning.
- "Eke," as in "to eke out a living" — comes from the Old English word *eaca*, meaning "to increase."
- "Hue," meaning "colour," was originally *hiew*, which meant "appearance."
- "Sleight" is a Middle English (1100-1500 AD) word meaning "cunning" or "trickery."

After rattling off a slew of facts, Berkowitz ended his segment with a rather fitting TS Eliot quote: "Our language, or any civilized language, is like the phoenix: it springs anew from its own ashes."

With files from CBC North by Northwest