

## Semantic Changes

The most obvious way in which Modern English differs from Old English is in **the number of borrowed words that have come into the language since the Old English period.** (For more on borrowing, see Chapter 5.) Less obviously, many words have ceased to be used. Since we no longer carry swords (most of us, at least), the word *foin*, meaning “the thrust of a sword,” is no longer heard. A common Old English word for “man” was *were*, but it has fallen out of use, except in horror films where the compound *werewolf* occasionally appears. A number of expressions such as *lo*, *verily* or *egad* are immediately recognized as belonging to a much earlier period, along with certain medieval-sounding names such as *Bertha*, *Egbert* and *Percival*.

### Broadening of Meaning

Another process is described as broadening of meaning, as in the change from *holy day* as a religious feast to the break from work called a *holiday*. We have broadened the use of *foda* (*fodder* for animals) to all kinds of food. Old English words such as *luflic* (“loving”) and *hræd* (“quick”) not only went through sound changes, they also developed more complex evaluative meanings (“wonderful” and “preferentially”), as in their modern uses: *That’s a lovely idea, but I’d rather have the money.* Another example is the modern use of the word *dog*. We use it very generally to refer to all breeds, but in its older form (Old English *docga*), it was only used for one breed.

### Narrowing of Meaning

The reverse process, called narrowing, has overtaken the Old English word *hund*, once used for any kind of dog, but now, as *hound*, used only for some specific breeds. Another example is *mete*, once used for any kind of food, which has in its modern form *meat* become restricted to only some specific types. The Old English version of the word *wife* could be used to refer to any woman, but has narrowed in its application nowadays to only married women. This type of change can take a word with a negative meaning, derived from Latin *nescius* (from *ne* + *sci*) meaning “not knowing” or “ignorant”, and over time give it more positive meaning in the modern word *nice*. A different kind of narrowing can lead to a negative meaning for some words, such as *notorious* (which used to mean “widely known,” but now means “known for something bad”), *vulgar* (which used to mean simply “ordinary”) and *naughty* (which used to mean “having nothing”).

## Diachronic and Synchronic Variation

None of these changes happened overnight. They were gradual and probably difficult to discern while they were in progress. Although some changes can be linked to major social changes caused by wars, invasions and other upheavals, the most pervasive source of change in language seems to be in the continual process of cultural transmission (described in Chapter 2). Each new generation has to find a way of using the language of the previous generation. In this unending process whereby each individual child has to “recreate” the language of the community, there is an unavoidable propensity to pick up some elements exactly and others only approximately. There is also the occasional desire to be different. Given this tenuous transmission process, it should be expected that languages will not remain stable and that change and variation are inevitable. In this chapter, we have concentrated on variation in language viewed diachronically, that is, from the historical perspective of change through time.