

# **Awareness of Contemporary Lexical Change for Professional Competence in English Language Education**

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## **Abstract**

Influential languages such as English reinvent themselves and prosper. The ongoing language developments taking place in such dynamic languages make it imperative for language users to be up-to-date and be familiar with the changes affecting the language they are professionally involved with, more so those involved with its instruction. Language change, especially lexical change, may be observed from the television programs we watch, news broadcasts we listen to, popular reading materials we skim through or peruse and through our interaction with those who speak the language natively. Areas of variation are mostly identified in vocabulary and pronunciation, and to a lesser extent in grammar and spelling. Language teachers' awareness of such changes will enhance their professional growth. Their productive language use will project a contemporary image, besides contributing to their discourse competence. In Malaysia, for instance, it is felt that the teaching of English, particularly in non-urban areas has got to improve to make sure pupils will acquire the language at a highly satisfactory level (Nik Safiah, 2008). This paper serves to exemplify many vocabulary items that have undergone change in various ways.

The purpose of the article is to create professional awareness among language teachers of the need to be current with our knowledge of lexis. Older and contemporary English language dictionaries were used to investigate lexical change in the language. It was found that certain lexical items had acquired additional meanings besides the earlier ones. Some were gradually being replaced by others, there was variation between varieties of English, some were becoming old-fashioned in the modern context, words once considered formal were also being used casually and certain vocabulary items were unpredictable in meaning. It was also found that there were many new euphemistic and non-sexist words and new coinages too. It may be concluded that language educators' awareness of ongoing lexical changes will enhance their professional growth.

**Keywords:** Language change, lexis, language awareness

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to familiarize ourselves with the numerous changes taking place in the various components of language, especially so in the lexical field. Language variation may be attributed to internal and external factors. A phonemic distinction may be gained where previously there was none, for example a *house* with an [s] but *to house* with a [z] (Wardough, 1992:192). Alternative pronunciations may emerge for certain words, for instance, *sure* and *poor*. American English spelling is gradually overtaking British spelling because the former is shorter, for example, compare ‘catalog’ with ‘catalogue’. It also eliminates redundancy in the spelling, for example, ‘labor’, ‘honor’ and ‘vigor’. Researchers who contribute to international journals are most likely going to use American spelling as this is the preferred spelling of many journals. Moreover, when we type on the computer, it is quite embarrassing to see red lines underneath some words. Morphological and syntactic changes are also possible. From ‘video’ and ‘conference’ we have ‘videoconference’. The word ‘digicam’ is a shortened version of ‘digital camera’. The sentence ‘Everyone must bring their original documents for the interview’ is acceptable usage today. A language teacher should not be quick to correct ‘their’ to ‘his’, or ‘his or her’.

Language change is due to a host of factors (please refer to Haja Mohideen and Shamimah Mohideen, 2008, for an extended treatment of the subject). In the following discussion, we analyze certain vocabulary expressions which have undergone some change under appropriate sections to illustrate developments that have taken place.

## 2. Acquisition of New Meaning besides the Original One

There are lexical items which have acquired additional meaning. Those below exemplify:

**Carnival**- The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) has the following entry: “a public event at which people play music, wear special clothes, and dance in the streets.....Carnival in Rio” (2003:223). The Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (hereafter ALDCE) published in 1948 had two meanings for this word, one referring to noisy merrymaking and the other a religious occasion of feasting and merrymaking, especially the week before Lent. However, the religious association of the second one has disappeared from later dictionaries. In 1974, on page 127 there was only one entry, having a similar meaning to merrymaking and dancing in the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (hereafter OALDCE). Those of us who have seen pictures of a carnival as described above know that in such carnivals in South American cities, and other places where these carnivals are celebrated, there is free intermingling of men and women dressed in outlandish attire, they are sometimes scantily dressed and behave in ways which are not compatible with the culture of others and such events are considered inappropriate and deemed offensive. Today, in other parts of the world a carnival has become a healthy family event. In American English it can also refer to outdoor amusement, park activities and a school event which students participate in games for prizes. In the UK, it also refers to a funfair. In Malaysia there are carnivals all the year round, for instance, there are book carnivals, food carnivals, sports carnivals, shopping carnivals, career carnivals and computer carnivals.

**Icon** - There was initially only one meaning for ‘icon’ according to ALDCE (1948) and OALDCE (1974). The meaning in the latter dictionary is given as: “(in the Eastern Church) painting, carving or mosaic of a sacred person, itself regarded as sacred” (1974:420). A dictionary published nearly thirty years later has two additional meanings, namely “a small sign or picture on a computer screen to start a particular operation: *To open a new file, click on the icon at the top of the screen* and “someone famous who is admired by many people and is thought to represent an important idea: *a 60s cultural icon*” (Longman, 2003:803). It is therefore possible to have collocations such as ‘literary icon’ and ‘musical icon’ to refer to people who excel in their respective fields.

**Guys** - The term was once restricted in usage to refer to males. But in American English it can now be used to address a group comprising both male and female, for example, *We are already late guys, we*

*ought to hurry up.* Women too can be addressed as guys today in informal American English (Collins, 2006)

**Hero** - This word commonly refers to a male who possesses “exceptional courage” and “superior qualities” (Collins, 1987: 469). But today it can also be used to refer to a female who does acts of courage such as fighting sexual exploitation of women. There are children who refer to their mothers as in ‘My mum is my hero’. The Macmillan English Dictionary (2002:671) has the following entry: *The sisters were treated as local heroes after rescuing a two-year old boy from drowning.*

### **3. Gradual Loss of Meaning for Attitudinal Reason**

There are some words which have had their usage altered. The two items here are given as examples:

**Gay:** This word also has the meaning of being merry and cheerful. This was the meaning in many poems and it was used in this sense quite a long time ago (ALDCE, 1948). But it is almost no longer used in this sense because it is now increasingly used to refer to persons, especially men, who are sexually attracted to their kind. So, this word has to be used with caution so as not to cause embarrassment. This word once had the meaning of ‘immoral’ too, as in *The bachelor led a gay life* (ALDCE, 1948: .515).

**Partner:** It can mean one of two persons who is married, or those who live together and cohabit with one another without getting married. The latter meaning is not available in ALDCE (1948). Those who value the institution of marriage will probably like to refer to their spouse as husband or wife rather than partner. Nowadays there are partners of the same sex too, giving the word ‘partner’ different meanings. The American Heritage Dictionary (hereafter AHD, 1996) does not include the meaning of one who is involved in a sexual relationship outside wedlock as Longman (2003) does. Maybe the preferred words could be ‘boyfriend’ or ‘girlfriend’. The word ‘partner’ may cease to have the meaning of a marriage partner, now that ‘partners’ refer to various relationships, including sexual partners as well.

### **4. Variation in Connotation According to Variety**

We have to acknowledge that there is variation between varieties of English. The two items below serve to illustrate:

**Bar** - A bar has a common meaning of a place where alcoholic drinks such as beer and wine are served. But today, one can still go to a bar, meaning “a place where a particular kind of food or drink is served” (Longman, 2003: 104) and have non- alcoholic drinks such as coffee or milk and something to eat in a snack bar. There are coffee bars, milk bars and even a breakfast bar. In countries like India, a bar is a place where men go to consume alcoholic drinks, and both the place and the act are loathed by women. The connotation of ‘bar’ is somewhat less positive for those who are not involved with alcohol, in Indian English.

**Pub** - In the UK, a pub, short for ‘public house’ is a place for the purchase and consumption of alcohol and even soft drinks. Meals are also served in some pubs. It is a meeting place for the local folk to socialize. Even a teetotaler can walk into a certain pub to have a meal and lemonade. In some countries, a pub may be more than just a place to have a drink. Pubs are very often seedy and sleazy places where arguments and fights are known to take place and these have sometimes been fatal. Decent people in such countries would not want to be seen visiting a pub. The reverse is true in UK where all sorts of people, both respectable and the not-so-respectable go to one. In Malaysian English, perhaps the term ‘bistro’ sounds more acceptable. There are two faces of English in former British colonies. One is used for global communication, while the other is used in local contexts (Rajadurai, 2005).

## 5. Words Considered Old-Fashioned in Modern Context

The word ‘master’ in the sense of “a man who has control or authority over servants or workers” (Longman, 2003: 1012) is considered old-fashioned. So is ‘mistress’, the female equivalent of the word, meaning “the female employer of a servant”, (*ibid.* 1054). The nearest modern-day equivalent is ‘employer’. An additional note of caution may be necessary here. The latter word has to be used carefully since it also refers to a kept woman. Just as ‘master’ and ‘mistress’ are regarded as old-fashioned, so must be ‘servant’ who is employed by them. In the modern context, it sounds anachronistic to talk about ‘servant’, ‘master’ and ‘mistress’. In modern times employers engage the services of household staff such as housekeepers, maids and caregivers. The words ‘servant’ ‘master’ and ‘mistress’ sound feudalistic. Therefore, even the expression ‘civil servants’ or ‘government servants’ may not be quite satisfactory. We might refer to them as ‘public sector employees’, ‘civil service staff’ or ‘government staff’.

## 6. Casual use of Formal Words

Words which are used formally may also be used casually. These are often found in leisure reading materials and heard on television programs which are popular among our youth. Non-royalty may be referred to as ‘king’, ‘queen’, ‘prince’, ‘princess’ and so on in an informal style without offending royal members. The following exemplify:

- King:** a man who is considered the best at doing something  
Muhammad Ali was the undisputed king of the ring.
- Queen:** a woman who is well-known for being very good at something, similar to the informal use of the word ‘king’ Malaysia’s Nicol David is the reigning world squash queen.
- Princess:** a woman who is very much loved  
The celebrity used to be admired as the princess of pop, but she has now fallen from grace.
- Audience:** a formal meeting with someone who is very important, such as a dignitary, influential, or extremely popular, for example, a film star  
Do not miss MTV’s audience with Kylie Minogue on Sunday at 4.00 p.m.
- Pilgrimage:** a journey someone makes to a place considered important to them, for whatever reason, not necessarily a holy place as commonly understood by many  
Graceland has become a place of pilgrimage for Elvis Presley’s fans.

## 7. Unpredictable Meaning of Certain Words

There are some words which have both positive and non-positive meaning. Both ‘bad’ and ‘wicked’ used as adjectives mean “departing from moral or ethical standards” (AHD: 136). But they are also used in a non-negative sense as evident from the following discussion:

**Bad:** When used as a slang, the meaning of ‘bad’ is “very good, great” (AHD, p.136). A bad person is not always bad. The word is also used approvingly for someone who is very determined and does not always obey the rules. It is also used “when you think something is very good” (Longman, 2003: 96). An example provided by the dictionary to illustrate this meaning is: *Now that’s a bad car.*

**Wicked:** Spoken informally ‘wicked’ means “very good” (*ibid.* 1886). For example, in context: 1. That’s a wicked bike! I bet you paid a lot for it? 2. There was such a long queue to get the cricket tickets. How did you manage to get the tickets? You are wicked!

**Cool:** This can refer to “a temperature that is pleasantly cold” (*ibid.* 346). It is also used approvingly to describe someone or something as very attractive, fashionable or interesting, for example, as used in the sentences that follow: 1. She’s pretty cool even when she dresses casually. 2. Wouldn’t it be cool to

study in a university in Europe? However, ‘cool’ can also mean ‘not friendly’ or ‘unwelcome’. For example: Her recommendation received a cool response at the meeting.

**Smart:** This word has the positive meaning of ‘intelligent’ and ‘clever’. However, it also has the meaning of being clever, in a disrespectful way. For example: He made some smart comments at the meeting and antagonized those present.

## **8. Euphemism Usage**

As teachers, we need to be keenly aware of what has come to be known as verbal hygiene (Cameron, 1995). Verbal hygiene is non-offensive, non-sexist and non-racist language. There are interested groups who believe “that achieving a change in linguistic usage is itself a worthwhile form of public, political action and consciousness raising” (Holmes, 2008: 332). Verbal hygiene is synonymous with being politically correct and euphemistic. When we practice verbal hygiene we avoid being vulgar, racist, sexist and discriminatory to individuals and specific groups of people. Gone are the days when we described our below average students as ‘weak’ and ‘poor’. Today we refer to them as ‘underachievers’. They are ‘intellectually challenged’ or ‘not very bright’. Positive words are included in describing disabilities.

Educators need to use language which is not so unpleasant, less harsh and less hurtful. Euphemistic terms are being coined continually. Even the widely used term ‘disabled’ to refer to people with physical disability has been found to be inadequate. There is recognition that disabled people have abilities which are different from physically normal people. A new term which has been proposed is ‘people who are differently abled’. Another term now is ‘physically challenged’.

Language instructors are looked upon as models for language use by students and parents. Euphemistic use will provide the instructors a healthy image of being sensitive, fair, contemporary and, accommodating.

## **9. Use of Gender-Neutral and Non-Sexist Expressions**

A lot of changes are taking place to promote the use of gender-neutral or gender-sensitive expressions to include both male and female. As women are nowadays employed in almost every field of work, the use of gender-sensitive language has now become popular. Educators need to be aware of expressions deemed sexist so that neither sex is excluded, and therefore possibly offended. Very often it is the females who are discriminated against. Malaysian newspapers, for example, perhaps through lack of awareness of gender-neutral language or very recent expressions in this domain, refer to all elected representatives of state legislatures as ‘assemblyman’ regardless of whether the legislator is a male or female. The term ‘member of parliament’ is inclusive. To refer to a female state legislator, newspapers can use the term ‘assemblywoman’ which is similar to ‘congresswoman’ in the US. Sometimes a woman who chairs certain committees is called a ‘chairman’. This is quite outdated. A woman who chairs a meeting or heads a committee can be addressed as ‘chairperson’ or ‘chair’ which is gender-neutral or ‘chairwoman’ which is gender-specific, but not sexist.

In many compound words, there is – *man*, and feminists do not find this inclusive of women. Examples are: mankind, mandate, workmanship, manmade, craftsmen, statesman, etc. It has been suggested that there should be suitable alternatives to replace expressions which are regarded as sexist. Instead of ‘foreman’, can we say ‘foreperson’ or ‘supervisor’? ‘Manslaughter’ refers to the killing of one human being by another without premeditation. This crime can be committed by both men and women. This legal term may be considered sexist as it is discriminatory towards men. Would ‘unpremeditated killing’ be acceptable to the legal fraternity? Can we replace ‘forefathers’ with ‘forebears’ or ‘foreparents’? The meaning of ‘forefathers’ refers mainly to ‘male ancestors’. The ancestors of immigrants to a country would have included women as well. Would ‘the average person’ be more acceptable than ‘the man in the street’? Can we substitute ‘in layman’s terms’ with ‘in simple

language’? Sensitive users of the language will be very careful to avoid using language that may appear to exclude in a discriminatory way, or offend either sex, which in most cases involve women.

## **10. Formation of New Words**

New words are currently formed from existing ones or new expressions are created. Just as ‘digital’ and ‘camera’ have been combined to form ‘digidcam’, ‘website’ and ‘camera’ have combined to form ‘webcam’. A new item to describe extremists who blow themselves up is ‘suicide bombers’. The Western world is now coming to terms with same-sex partners and marriages. Words have also been coined to portray people of a certain ethnic group or religion in a negative manner. One word we can think of is ‘jihadist’. As educators we need to know if new vocabulary items are used in a neutral sense. The term ‘jihadist’ is often used as a synonym of ‘Muslim terrorist’. This is far from the truth. The new term is derived from ‘jihad’. One of its two meanings is related to a holy struggle which Muslims participate in to defend the dignity of their religion and fellow Muslims. Therefore, jihadists are people who are involved in a legitimate struggle to defend themselves and their co-religionists from invaders and occupiers of their lands. Another term ‘Islamist’ refers to one who believes strongly in the Islamic political system. However, when we read newspapers Islamists are often made out to be people who are terrorist-minded, intolerant and oppressive by the mass-media. ‘Islamism’ is used as if it is a kind of ideology akin to communism, socialism, or a religion founded by a person, for example, Buddhism and Sikhism. This term is very offensive to Muslims as Islam, to them is a revealed religion.

## **11. Conclusion**

Teachers can sometimes find it very difficult to keep up-to-date with the most recent additions to the language. One example is ‘metrosexual’ which does not appear even in a dictionary (Collins) which was published in 2006. It is only found in some leisure magazines. The word does not refer to a person with any preferred sexual orientation. On the contrary, it refers to a male who is overly concerned with his appearance- his looks and clothes. Despite the numerous instances of the occurrence of linguistic and physical Islamophobia, the word itself has yet to find a place in a recent dictionary such as Collins (2006). It is formed from ‘Islam’ and ‘phobia’. The Internet has proven to be an extremely rich resource to complement our knowledge of and to keep abreast of the many new additions to the lexis of a language. English language dictionaries have included numerous new additions associated with the religions, cultures, flora and fauna of many countries. The English language has shown to be tolerant and capable of accommodating such words and using them natively (see, for example, Haja Mohideen, 2007).

The aim of this paper is to emphasize the fact that English teachers, or for that matter those teaching any modern language, have to be constantly aware of the many ongoing changes in the field of lexis so that we can be professionally contemporary and current. The above discussion, citing the examples of selected vocabulary items, has centered on the necessity for keep pace with the developments taking place in language use. The items included for this study are by no means exhaustive. Just as other professionals have to stay abreast, English language professionals too need to be up-to-date with the most recent language changes in all the various components of the language. By doing so we can ensure that we do not become dinosaurs in our profession. The language we teach is part of our personal and professional identity. Our ability to use it effectively, and having competence in it, including knowledge of lexical variation, reflects the degree to which we may rightfully consider to ‘possess’ a language (Nunn, 2005).

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