

Shifty Words Meanings

Did you know that the meanings of words shift all the time? Isn't that wicked? Word meanings can shift in a number of ways. Here are some of them.

Worsening Meaning - Some words start out with a good meaning but later develop a bad one. *Stink*, for example, once meant the same thing as *odor* or *smell*. Of course, *smell* is starting to take on a bad meaning too!

Improving Meaning - Some words start out with a bad meaning or a plain meaning and then develop a bad one. One example of this is the word *knight*. That word first meant the same as *servant*.

Specializing Meaning - Some words start out meaning something general and then become more specific. For example, *girl* once meant any young person, but now is used only for young females. *Starve* once meant "to die," but now it means to die of hunger.

Generalizing Meaning - Some words start out meaning something specific and then become more general. Our word *thing* comes from a Norse word used for a kind of court or legal assembly. It then was used for any matters that people would take to the court. Then it was used for any serious matters, even outside the assembly. Now it refers to anything at all!

Why do words shift meaning? They may shift because of what we associate with the word. We can see how association worked to change the meaning of the word *thing*.

Words also shift meaning because of our feelings. For example, the word *janitor* is a little negative. It is negative because many people do not think highly of the job of a janitor. However, the word originally meant "doorkeeper." It came from Roman mythology. Janus was the doorkeeper of heaven.

The word *nice* started out meaning "foolish" and "ignorant." It then shifted to mean "willful." Today it means "pleasant." But maybe it is changing again. Have you ever used it to mean the opposite of "pleasant"? What about *great*? Have you ever used that word to mean less than "very good"?

What about the word *wicked*? Is it ever used today to mean something besides "bad" or "evil"?