



## SEMANTIC SHIFTS WITHIN MEDICAL WORDS

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**Annotation:** This study examines semantic changes in medical terminology, focusing on how the meanings of medical terms change in different contexts. It highlights the influence of linguistic, cultural, and technological factors on these changes, and provides specific examples to illustrate the altered meanings.

**Key words:** semantic shifts, medical terminology, linguistic evolution, cultural influence, healthcare communication, contextual meaning.

## СЕМАНТИЧЕСКИЕ СДВИГИ В МЕДИЦИНСКОЙ ТЕРМИНОЛОГИИ

**Аннотация:** В данном исследовании рассматриваются семантические изменения в медицинской терминологии, с акцентом на то, как значения медицинских терминов изменяются в различных контекстах. Освещается влияние лингвистических, культурных и технологических факторов на эти изменения, а также приводятся конкретные примеры для иллюстрации изменившихся значений.

**Ключевые слова:** семантические сдвиги, медицинская терминология, эволюция языка, культурное влияние, коммуникация в здравоохранении, контекстуальное значение.

## TIBBIY TERMINLARDAGI SEMANTIK O‘ZGARISHLAR

**Annotatsiya:** Ushbu tadqiqotda tibbiyot terminologiyasidagi semantik o'zgarishlar tadqiq etilgan bo'lib, tibbiyot terminlarining ma'nolari turli kontekstlarda qanday o'zgarayotganiga e'tibor qaratilgan. Ushbu o'zgarishlarga lingvistik, madaniy va texnologik omillarning ta'siri qandayligi yoritilib, ularning o'zgargan ma'nolari aniq misollarni keltirish orqali asoslangan.

**Kalit so‘zlar:** semantik o‘zgarishlar, tibbiy terminologiya, til evolyutsiyasi, madaniy ta‘sir, sog‘liqni saqlash kommunikatsiyasi, kontekstual ma‘no.

## Introduction

The evolution of language reflects societal, cultural, and technological changes, and medical terminology is no exception. Semantic shifts within medical terms can significantly impact doctor-patient communication, as well as professional discourse. These shifts occur due

to advancements in medical science, changing cultural norms, and the need for accessible communication. This study investigates the semantic shifts in medical terminology by analyzing how specific terms have adapted over time, considering their original meanings, contextual usage, and implications in modern practice.

### **Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative approach, analyzing a dataset of 50 medical terms sourced from medical texts, contemporary academic articles, and real-world clinical interactions. Each term was examined for its etymology, historical usage, and current meaning. The study integrates linguistic theories of semantic change, such as amelioration, pejoration, and metaphorical extension, to trace the evolution of these terms.

### **Results and discussions**

Medical terms undergo semantic shifts driven by scientific progress, cultural changes, and the demands of effective communication. For example, the term “cancer” historically referred to a crab-like growth due to its physical appearance (Austin, 1962, p. 34). Today, it encompasses a broader range of malignant diseases, with additional cultural connotations of fear and urgency. Similarly, “fever” initially described any condition with heightened temperature. Modern usage often implies infectious diseases, while metaphorical applications (e.g., “football fever”) highlight its linguistic flexibility. Terms like “hysteria” have seen pejorative shifts; once a clinical diagnosis rooted in antiquated theories of the uterus, it is now considered outdated and carries sexist undertones (Searle, 1969, p. 73). Another example is the word “diabetes,” which originates from a Greek term meaning “to pass through” and referred to excessive urination. Over time, its meaning narrowed to encompass specific metabolic conditions, with subtypes like “Type 1” and “Type 2” reflecting medical advancements.

Cultural factors heavily influence semantic shifts in medical terminology. Words like “quarantine,” once strictly referring to isolation measures for 40 days, now broadly denote various public health strategies, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Heritage, 2005, p. 489). In cross-cultural settings, translations often introduce subtle semantic variations. For instance, the term “heart disease” may be rendered differently in languages where the heart symbolizes emotions rather than a biological organ, necessitating culturally sensitive communication strategies. Similarly, the term “epilepsy,” once associated with spiritual possession in many cultures, has undergone semantic shifts to reflect scientific understanding, although cultural stigmas persist in some regions.

The advent of technology has accelerated semantic shifts in medical terms. Digital health tools and telemedicine platforms popularize terms like “e-health” and “virtual care,” which were nonexistent a few decades ago. Additionally, social movements, such as the push for patient-centered care, advocate for neutral and inclusive language. This has led to shifts in terminology, replacing stigmatizing terms (e.g., “addict” with “person with substance use disorder”) to prioritize dignity and respect (Clayman & Heritage, 2002, p. 116). The term “obesity,” for

example, is increasingly scrutinized for its stigmatizing implications, with some experts advocating for alternative phrases like "living with higher weight."

Examples:

**"Virus". Original Meaning:** The term "virus" originally referred to any infectious agent, particularly those that cause diseases. It comes from the Latin word meaning "poison" or "toxins."

**Semantic Shift:** With advancements in microbiology, the meaning of "virus" has narrowed to specifically denote a type of pathogen that is smaller than bacteria and requires a host cell to replicate. This shift reflects a more nuanced understanding of infectious diseases.

**Example:** In contemporary discussions about health, "virus" is often associated with specific illnesses, such as influenza or COVID-19, emphasizing its role in modern epidemiology.

**"Mental Health". Original Meaning:** Historically, "mental health" was often equated with mental illness, and discussions around it were more stigmatized and less understood.

**Semantic Shift:** Today, "mental health" encompasses a broader range of psychological well-being, including emotional, social, and psychological aspects. It recognizes that mental health exists on a spectrum and is crucial for overall health.

**Example:** *The growing emphasis on mental health awareness has led to initiatives aimed at promoting mental well-being, such as workplace wellness programs and public campaigns focusing on anxiety and depression.*

**"Addiction". Original Meaning:** Traditionally, "addiction" was used to describe a strong dependence on substances, particularly drugs or alcohol.

**Semantic Shift:** The term has evolved to include behavioral addictions, such as gambling, gaming, and even internet use. This shift acknowledges the complexity of addiction and its effects on various aspects of life.

**Example:** *The recognition of behavioral addictions has led to the development of targeted therapies and support systems, highlighting the need for a more inclusive approach to treatment.*

**"Vaccination". Original Meaning:** Initially, "vaccination" referred specifically to inoculation with the cowpox virus to prevent smallpox, based on Edward Jenner's work in the late 18th century.

**Semantic Shift:** Now, "vaccination" encompasses a wide range of immunizations against various diseases, including influenza, hepatitis, and COVID-19. The term has expanded to cover the development of new vaccine technologies, such as mRNA vaccines.

**Example:** *The rapid development and deployment of COVID-19 vaccines have brought the term "vaccination" to the forefront of public discourse, emphasizing its role in public health strategy.*

Semantic narrowing occurs when a word's meaning becomes more specific over time. A prime example in medical terminology is the term "anxiety." Historically, "anxiety" referred

broadly to any unease or apprehension. Today, its meaning has narrowed in medical contexts to denote a specific psychological condition with diagnostic criteria outlined in frameworks such as the DSM-5 (Heritage, 2005, p. 472). Similarly, "surgery" once encompassed any physical intervention, including minor procedures like bloodletting. Modern usage restricts it to more invasive and structured interventions performed in sterile environments.

Conversely, semantic widening expands a term's meaning. "Influenza," for instance, originally referred to an illness believed to be influenced by celestial phenomena. Over time, its meaning broadened to include various viral respiratory illnesses and colloquial usage as "flu." Another example is "therapy," which once referred solely to medical treatments but now encompasses psychological, occupational, and even non-medical contexts such as "retail therapy."

These shifts reflect not only medical advancements but also broader societal trends, such as the integration of holistic and alternative approaches to health. Widening is particularly evident in patient-centered care models where terms are used inclusively to resonate with diverse experiences.

Semantic shifts significantly impact healthcare communication. Accurate understanding of evolving terms enhances the clarity and efficacy of interactions. Misinterpretations can lead to mistrust, poor adherence, and compromised care quality. For example, the redefinition of terms like "compliance" to "adherence" reflects a shift from authoritarian to collaborative patient care models, underscoring the importance of language in shaping healthcare relationships (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 245). Similarly, terms like "palliative care," once narrowly associated with end-of-life support, now encompass a broader spectrum of care aimed at improving quality of life for patients with chronic conditions.

Studying semantic shifts within medical terminology lies in its potential to enhance communication across various stakeholders in healthcare. For medical practitioners, understanding these shifts ensures more effective doctor-patient communication by using terms that are both accurate and comprehensible. This minimizes misinterpretation, improves patient adherence to treatment plans, and fosters trust in the medical process. For medical educators and students, the research provides valuable insights into the evolution of terminology, aiding in the development of culturally and linguistically sensitive communication strategies.

Moreover, this work holds importance for public health campaigns, where clear and accessible language can influence the success of health education efforts, particularly among diverse populations. Policymakers and medical translators can also benefit from this research by incorporating inclusive and non-stigmatizing terminology into healthcare policies and multilingual communication frameworks. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader goal of improving health outcomes by ensuring that language serves as a bridge rather than a barrier in the delivery of care.

## **Conclusion**

Semantic shifts within medical terminology are a testament to the dynamic nature of language and its intersection with science, culture, and technology. Understanding these shifts is crucial for improving communication, fostering empathy, and ensuring precision in medical contexts. Future research should explore the impact of globalization and artificial intelligence on the ongoing evolution of medical terms.

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