

Semantic Change in Historical Linguistics: Theories, Evidence, and Contexts

Buhari¹, Sonya Ayu Kusuma²

¹Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang, Indonesia

²Universitas Budhi Darma, Indonesia

Correspondent: Buharifakka9@gmail.com¹

Received : April 30, 2024

Accepted : June 15, 2024

Published : June 30, 2024

Citation: Buhari., Kusuma, S. A. (2024). Semantic Change in Historical Linguistics: Theories, Evidence, and Contexts. *Lingua: Journal of Linguistics and Language*, 2(2), 102-115.

ABSTRACT: Semantic change has become an increasingly important focus in historical linguistics and sociolinguistics, reflecting how language evolves in response to social, cultural, and technological transformations. This narrative review aimed to synthesize conceptual, empirical, and contextual perspectives on semantic change and to assess the implications of these shifts for broader societal dynamics. Literature was systematically collected from major databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and PubMed, using keywords such as semantic change, sociolinguistics, migration discourse, and linguistic evolution. Inclusion criteria emphasized peer-reviewed studies published in the past five years, complemented by seminal works providing historical context. The results reveal three interrelated themes: conceptual frameworks including semantic gradation and discourse-historical approaches; empirical patterns documented through quantitative analyses of lexical shifts and concreteness in language use; and contextual influences encompassing social policies, cultural traditions, and digital communication. These findings demonstrate that semantic change is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a reflection of systemic structures, power relations, and cultural identities. The discussion highlights the need for inclusive language policies, culturally responsive education, and interdisciplinary research to mitigate inequalities and preserve linguistic diversity. By linking theory, data, and context, this review contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of semantic change and its relevance for language, society, and identity in a globalized world.

Keywords: Semantic Change, Sociolinguistics, Migration Discourse, Linguistic Evolution, Cultural Context, Historical Linguistics.



This is an open access article under the CC-BY 4.0 license

INTRODUCTION

Language evolves in response to specific cultural, social, and historical pressures. For example, studies on bilingual Basque-Spanish communities reveal how entrenched code-switching reflects

semantic-pragmatic shifts (Lantto, 2014). Similarly, research on Scandinavian languages documents variation in gender classification as a marker of social identity (Epps et al., 2021). Such findings indicate that semantic change is not only structural but also linked to concrete sociocultural contexts. In recent decades, research into language change has grown substantially, employing both traditional linguistic analysis and computational methods to trace shifts in meaning and structure across different languages and contexts. This growing body of work reflects a recognition that linguistic change is not merely an abstract phenomenon but a crucial indicator of broader social transformations (Lantto, 2014; Epps et al., 2021). As global interconnectedness deepens and multilingual communities expand, the study of semantic change has become increasingly urgent to capture the ways in which language adapts to shifting realities.

Over the past ten years, scholars have intensified their efforts to examine the mechanisms and consequences of semantic change. Technological advancements, particularly in computational linguistics, have enabled the large-scale analysis of diachronic corpora, offering insights into patterns of semantic drift and stability (Mukanova et al., 2024; Hills & Adelman, 2015). At the same time, qualitative research has emphasized the social and cultural dimensions of change, demonstrating that linguistic evolution is shaped not only by internal grammatical tendencies but also by external social pressures. For instance, research on discourse about migration has shown that evolving narratives influence both word choice and semantic associations, highlighting the mutual reinforcement of linguistic and societal shifts (Viola & Verheul, 2020). Such findings underscore the significance of linguistic inquiry for understanding identity, ideology, and collective memory.

Empirical studies further confirm the importance of investigating semantic change. Lantto (2014), for example, documents how code-switching in bilingual communities serves as a site where cultural influence and language intersect, revealing the role of social context in shaping meaning. Similarly, Epps et al. (2021) identify variation in gender classification across North Scandinavian languages, demonstrating that shifts in semantic categories are intimately tied to social variation and identity formation. These findings highlight that semantic change cannot be explained solely by reference to linguistic structures; rather, it must be situated within the broader cultural and social environment in which language is used.

The increasing reliance on computational approaches has further transformed the study of language change. Mukanova et al. (2024) illustrate how abstract concepts such as “wealth” and “poverty” are linguistically represented in shifting ways across time, showing that semantic change often emerges from historical and social contexts. Hills and Adelman (2015) employ large-scale quantitative methods to trace the evolution of English vocabulary, revealing systematic shifts that correlate with cognitive and social indicators. Together, these studies demonstrate the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative approaches in capturing the complexity of semantic change.

At a broader level, linguistic change reflects how speakers negotiate meaning in diverse contexts. Viola and Verheul (2020) analyze migration discourse in the United Kingdom, demonstrating that the language of migration evolves alongside political and social developments. Their findings reveal that language is not only a reflection of social change but also a mechanism through which societal

debates and ideologies are articulated. This underscores the relevance of linguistic research beyond academia, as semantic shifts directly impact how communities perceive and respond to pressing social issues.

The urgency of understanding language change is underscored by its global implications. Semantic evolution affects not only everyday communication but also the transmission of knowledge, values, and cultural identity. As Schneider (2022) argues, the framing of poverty in public discourse provides new perspectives on linguistic adaptation, yet much remains to be explored about how such frames affect linguistic structure and meaning. These insights indicate that the study of semantic change is vital for tracing the interplay between language and society, particularly in an era of rapid cultural and technological transformation.

Despite substantial progress, significant challenges remain in the study of semantic change. One major difficulty is the detection and analysis of subtle shifts in word meaning across time. Although machine learning and statistical modeling have improved the precision of semantic analysis, gaps persist in our ability to account for the influence of social context on meaning (Viola & Verheul, 2020). For example, polarized narratives in migration discourse complicate efforts to identify how linguistic choices both reflect and shape public opinion. This highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches that combine linguistic analysis with insights from sociology and political science.

Another challenge lies in integrating traditional and computational methodologies. Hamilton et al. (2016) emphasize that semantic change involves both linguistic drift, driven by structural tendencies within language, and cultural shift, shaped by broader social forces. Disentangling these influences requires careful methodological design and comparative analysis across languages and contexts. Without such integration, analyses risk oversimplifying the complex processes underlying language change.

In addition, while computational models can identify large-scale patterns, they often fail to capture the nuanced ways in which meaning is negotiated in everyday interaction. Hills and Adelman (2015) demonstrate the potential of statistical models, yet also acknowledge the limitations of data-driven approaches in accounting for the sociohistorical factors that underlie semantic evolution. Similarly, Stratton (2022) highlights the need for further research into how historical linguistics can inform vocabulary learning in second language education, an area where current models remain underdeveloped.

The persistence of knowledge gaps justifies the need for systematic reviews of semantic change. While existing studies provide valuable insights, many have focused narrowly on particular languages or contexts, leaving broader questions about cross-cultural and cross-linguistic patterns underexplored. For example, Schneider (2022) points to the under-investigated role of institutions and media in shaping meaning, while Hills and Adelman (2015) stress the necessity of incorporating more diverse and comprehensive datasets. These gaps underscore the importance of synthesizing findings across disciplines to achieve a holistic understanding of semantic change.

A primary aim of this review is therefore to consolidate current knowledge on semantic change while identifying the mechanisms, drivers, and consequences of linguistic evolution. Specifically, it will analyze how computational methods, cognitive frameworks, and sociocultural contexts interact to shape the trajectory of semantic change. By doing so, the review seeks to bridge theoretical and methodological divides, offering an integrative account that highlights both established insights and emerging directions for research.

The scope of this review extends across multiple linguistic traditions and geographic contexts. While much research has focused on major world languages, there is growing recognition of the need to examine underrepresented languages and communities. Aman et al. (2021), for example, document language change in Miriek, a minority language in Sarawak, Malaysia, emphasizing the importance of preserving and studying linguistic diversity. Such cases illustrate that semantic change is not limited to global languages but is equally relevant for understanding the identity and resilience of minority communities. Similarly, studies of multilingualism in African contexts highlight how social and political dynamics shape linguistic evolution, yet these remain underexplored in the literature (Schneider, 2022).

In this light, the present review contributes to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of semantic change by incorporating perspectives from both global and local contexts. By examining diverse linguistic settings, it highlights the universal processes underlying language change while acknowledging the particularities of individual communities. This approach not only advances scholarly knowledge but also underscores the broader societal relevance of linguistic research, particularly in informing education, policy, and cultural preservation.

In sum, this introduction establishes the significance, challenges, and scope of the study of semantic change. It demonstrates that while advances in theory and methodology have greatly enriched our understanding, key questions remain unresolved. Addressing these gaps requires sustained interdisciplinary collaboration and attention to linguistic diversity across geographic and social contexts. The following sections of this review will build upon these foundations to provide a systematic analysis of the mechanisms and implications of semantic change in historical linguistics.

METHOD

This review applied a systematic methodology to capture recent and influential studies on semantic change. Literature was sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and PubMed using targeted keywords (e.g., semantic change, code-switching, migration discourse). Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed studies from the past five years, supplemented by seminal works when essential. Screening followed a multi-stage process (titles, abstracts, and full texts), ensuring relevance, methodological rigor, and cross-disciplinary perspectives.

The first step in the methodology involved identifying appropriate electronic databases for the search. Scopus was selected as a primary database because of its reputation as one of the largest

and most comprehensive repositories of peer-reviewed scholarly publications. Scopus provides extensive coverage of journals in linguistics, cognitive sciences, and cultural studies, offering citation indexing that helps assess the academic impact of individual studies. Complementing Scopus, Web of Science was also employed due to its strong emphasis on citation metrics and its established use in systematic reviews across the humanities and social sciences. Together, Scopus and Web of Science ensured access to high-quality, peer-reviewed sources that reflect the most influential research in the field.

In addition to these databases, Google Scholar was included to broaden the scope of the search and to capture sources that may not appear in the more selective indexing services. Google Scholar allowed the inclusion of grey literature such as dissertations, theses, and preprints, which, while requiring careful evaluation, provided additional insights into emerging trends and less mainstream perspectives on language change. PubMed, though primarily focused on health sciences, was also utilized. This choice was based on the recognition that research on cognitive development, psychology, and social interaction often intersects with linguistic change, particularly in studies that investigate how language use and meaning shift within developmental or clinical contexts.

Following the identification of databases, a carefully structured set of search terms was developed to capture the central themes of the review. Keywords included “semantic change,” “sociolinguistics,” “code-switching,” “migration discourse,” “cultural context,” and “linguistic evolution.” Boolean operators were applied strategically to refine the searches. For example, combinations such as “semantic change” AND “cultural context” targeted studies that directly addressed the relationship between meaning shift and sociocultural dynamics. Similarly, “code-switching” OR “language alternation” expanded the scope to include studies employing different terminology for similar phenomena. In some cases, exclusion operators were used to refine the search, as in “migration discourse” NOT “bilingualism,” which helped avoid studies narrowly focused on bilingual competence rather than broader discourse-level changes.

The process of screening began with a comprehensive review of titles and abstracts generated by these search strategies. Studies were assessed for their relevance to the central themes of semantic and linguistic change within social and cultural contexts. A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was then applied. Inclusion criteria required that publications be peer-reviewed, published within the past five years to ensure the currency of findings, and explicitly address the relationship between language change and broader social, cultural, or cognitive factors. This time frame was chosen to balance the need for up-to-date insights with the recognition that semantic change is often best understood through diachronic perspectives, thus allowing for selective inclusion of older foundational studies when deemed essential.

Exclusion criteria were established to maintain focus and academic rigor. Studies were excluded if they lacked empirical data or substantive analytical frameworks. Articles that were purely theoretical without clear application to real linguistic contexts were omitted, as were sources peripheral to the linguistic and semantic domains. For example, publications focusing exclusively on general social theory without explicit discussion of linguistic processes were excluded. Non-peer-reviewed sources, unless providing unique data unavailable elsewhere, were also excluded to ensure that the review maintained a high standard of scholarly reliability.

After applying these criteria, the selected literature was subjected to a multi-stage evaluation process. Initial screening of abstracts was followed by full-text reviews of potentially eligible studies. At this stage, particular emphasis was placed on assessing methodological robustness, theoretical frameworks, and relevance to the research objectives. Studies were evaluated not only for the originality of their contributions but also for their methodological rigor, including the clarity of research design, appropriateness of data collection, and transparency in reporting results. To mitigate bias, articles representing diverse methodological approaches were deliberately included, encompassing both qualitative analyses of discourse and quantitative, computational models of semantic change.

The final corpus of studies represented a wide range of methodological traditions. Experimental research, including cognitive and psycholinguistic studies, was included to highlight how meaning change is tied to mental processes and language acquisition. Observational studies, such as ethnographic accounts of code-switching in bilingual communities, provided insights into the social embedding of linguistic practices. Computational approaches, particularly those employing diachronic corpora and machine learning algorithms, were incorporated to showcase innovations in detecting and modeling semantic drift. Case studies focusing on minority and lesser-studied languages, such as Miriek in Sarawak, were prioritized where available to address the tendency of research to focus predominantly on dominant world languages. Together, these diverse methodologies ensured a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under review.

The evaluation process also incorporated cross-validation with citation analysis. By reviewing the frequency with which individual studies were cited in subsequent scholarship, the review was able to identify works of significant influence in shaping current debates. This helped balance the inclusion of recent, innovative studies with recognition of seminal contributions that remain relevant to ongoing theoretical and methodological discussions. Special attention was also given to studies that explicitly engaged with interdisciplinary perspectives, such as the intersection of linguistics with sociology, anthropology, or psychology, as these approaches offered broader explanatory frameworks for understanding semantic change.

The methodological approach of this review further sought to balance breadth with depth. While the search process was deliberately expansive to capture diverse perspectives, the subsequent filtering and evaluation stages ensured that only studies meeting high academic standards were retained. This balance was critical to avoid the pitfalls of both narrow over-specialization and uncritical inclusion of heterogeneous sources. The result was a curated body of literature capable of supporting nuanced analysis while maintaining coherence around the central research questions.

In summary, this methodology was guided by principles of systematic rigor, inclusivity, and interdisciplinarity. By leveraging multiple databases, employing carefully designed search strategies, and applying transparent inclusion and exclusion criteria, the review ensured that the resulting corpus of literature is both comprehensive and reliable. The integration of diverse research traditions, from computational modeling to ethnographic fieldwork, reflects the multifaceted nature of semantic change and underscores the importance of methodological pluralism in linguistic research. This methodological foundation provides a robust basis for the subsequent

analysis and discussion, ensuring that the review contributes meaningfully to scholarly understanding of semantic change in historical and sociolinguistic contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this narrative review are presented according to three interrelated thematic domains that emerged consistently in the literature: conceptual and theoretical factors, empirical and statistical evidence, and contextual influences including geographical, social, and cultural dimensions. This organization reflects the diversity of methodological approaches and highlights how theoretical perspectives, quantitative data, and contextual factors converge to provide a comprehensive picture of semantic change. Each theme incorporates findings from multiple disciplines, thereby underscoring the interdisciplinary character of research in historical linguistics and sociolinguistics.

The first theme centers on conceptual and theoretical frameworks used to explain semantic change. One widely discussed perspective is the theory of semantic gradation, which posits that word meanings shift gradually over time under the influence of usage frequency, discourse context, and social relevance. Hamilton et al. (2016) provided empirical support for this framework by analyzing large linguistic corpora and showing that verbs tend to experience more rapid semantic shifts compared to nouns. This difference was attributed to the functional roles of verbs in expressing dynamic actions, making them more susceptible to shifts as communicative needs evolve. Their findings confirmed the importance of considering grammatical categories as a variable in semantic change. At the same time, the study demonstrated that contextual learning and usage strongly mediate how meanings develop, adding complexity to traditional models of linguistic drift.

A different but complementary perspective has been offered through discourse-historical approaches, particularly in the work of Viola and Verheul (2020). They examined one hundred years of migration discourse in the United Kingdom, demonstrating how political debates, media narratives, and social anxieties shaped the linguistic construction of identity. Their analysis showed that semantic shifts are embedded in broader discursive practices, where words take on new meanings or emphases in response to changes in ideology and policy. This work illustrates that semantic change cannot be understood solely as an internal linguistic phenomenon but must be situated within the larger social and historical processes that produce discourse. By combining sociolinguistic and psychological insights, this approach validated the conceptual framework through interdisciplinary methods.

Cultural perspectives on semantic change also highlight the interplay between language and socioeconomic factors. Mukanova et al. (2024) explored the linguistic representation of concepts such as “wealth” and “poverty” across Kazakh, Chinese, and English. Their analysis revealed that these terms acquire distinct semantic associations depending on cultural and historical contexts. For example, in some traditions, wealth is closely tied to moral and spiritual values, whereas in others it is linked to material accumulation and economic power. This research reinforced the argument that semantic change reflects broader cultural responses to evolving social and economic

realities. The study concluded that language serves as a cultural repository, encoding shifting values that differ across societies.

The second thematic domain concerns empirical and statistical findings that quantify semantic change. Hills and Adelman (2015) conducted a large-scale diachronic analysis of American English spanning two centuries, from 1800 to 2000. Their results demonstrated systematic declines in the frequency and diversity of certain words, particularly those associated with social diffusion. The authors observed that as words spread across wider contexts, their semantic distinctiveness often diminished, leading to measurable reductions in contextual diversity. This pattern provided statistical evidence of how semantic drift manifests in real linguistic usage over time. The strength of this work lies in its integration of cognitive and social variables, showing how language evolution reflects both individual processing constraints and collective social patterns.

Complementary evidence was provided by Snefjella et al. (2018), who examined trends in concrete versus abstract word usage. Using computational analyses across large datasets, they found a notable increase in the use of concrete terms in everyday discourse, while abstract vocabulary showed relative decline. This shift was interpreted as reflecting cultural and cognitive preferences for more tangible, accessible forms of communication, particularly in public and media discourse. The study not only offered quantitative insights but also illuminated broader societal tendencies, linking linguistic change to shifts in public values and communicative practices. By contrasting abstract and concrete language, the research highlighted one of the measurable dimensions along which semantic change can be systematically tracked.

Empirical research also underscores the importance of cross-national variation in interpreting semantic change. Viola and Verheul (2020) demonstrated that the trajectory of migration discourse in the United Kingdom reflected its unique historical and political context, differing significantly from patterns observed in other European countries. Their findings emphasized that although similar semantic processes may occur across societies, the outcomes vary due to local histories and identities. This indicates that any global account of semantic change must take into account regional specificities. The interplay between universal linguistic mechanisms and local sociocultural conditions emerges as a critical insight from comparative analysis.

The third theme focuses on contextual factors, including geographical, social, and cultural influences, which deeply shape semantic change. Social structures and public policies have been shown to exert powerful effects on language use. Viola and Verheul (2020), for example, demonstrated that restrictive immigration policies in the United Kingdom fostered polarized discourses, where specific terms acquired politicized and divisive meanings. This dynamic illustrates that language is not merely descriptive but actively participates in the construction of social reality. Semantic shifts thus become tools for negotiating inclusion and exclusion within society.

Cultural conditions also play a central role in shaping semantic change. Mukanova et al. (2024) revealed how the meanings of “wealth” and “poverty” varied across cultural traditions, reflecting deeply embedded societal values. Their findings underscore that semantic evolution is culturally contingent, shaped by the collective worldview of speech communities. In societies where moral or spiritual dimensions of wealth dominate, the term carries evaluative connotations distinct from

cultures where economic definitions prevail. This demonstrates that semantic change is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a reflection of broader cultural logics.

Comparative studies further illustrate the influence of geography and cultural history. Research on Scandinavian languages has revealed that shifts in gender classification reflect broader historical and cultural changes, though the available evidence highlights the need for more robust empirical validation. Even in the absence of conclusive data, these comparative insights demonstrate how semantic change is shaped by local traditions, historical trajectories, and linguistic practices. Snefjella et al. (2018) contributed further cross-national evidence by analyzing differences in the balance of concrete and abstract vocabulary across countries. Their findings revealed that cultural and social environments play a key role in determining linguistic preferences, providing fresh perspectives on the universality and diversity of semantic processes.

Taken together, these results suggest that semantic change arises from the interaction of conceptual frameworks, empirical patterns, and contextual influences. Theoretical models such as semantic gradation and discourse-historical approaches provide explanations for how meanings shift over time. Quantitative studies offer statistical validation and highlight measurable patterns of change, such as the decline of certain lexical items and the increasing prominence of concrete language. Contextual analyses demonstrate that local histories, policies, and cultural values shape the specific trajectories of change in different societies. Importantly, these three thematic domains do not operate independently but intersect in complex ways. For instance, the cultural framing of wealth and poverty identified by Mukanova et al. (2024) can be understood both through the lens of semantic gradation and through statistical analysis of usage patterns. Similarly, the polarized migration discourse examined by Viola and Verheul (2020) exemplifies how social context drives semantic drift, with consequences observable in quantitative data.

From a global perspective, the synthesis of these findings highlights both commonalities and divergences in the processes of semantic change. Common mechanisms such as semantic broadening, narrowing, and metaphorical extension appear across languages and contexts, suggesting underlying cognitive and communicative universals. At the same time, divergences emerge due to historical, cultural, and political specificities. This duality underscores the importance of adopting a comparative and interdisciplinary lens when analyzing semantic change. It also suggests that future research must continue to balance the search for universal patterns with sensitivity to local particularities.

In conclusion, the results of this review demonstrate that semantic change is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by theoretical, empirical, and contextual dimensions. The integration of these perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding of how language evolves, reflecting not only internal linguistic mechanisms but also broader social and cultural dynamics. By situating semantic change within these intersecting domains, the findings affirm the importance of interdisciplinary approaches and cross-national comparisons in advancing historical and sociolinguistic research.

The findings of this review align with earlier scholarship in demonstrating that semantic change is consistently shaped by sociocultural contexts, yet they also extend the literature by highlighting new dynamics introduced by technological and systemic influences. Prior research has firmly established that shifts in meaning are rarely autonomous linguistic events but instead emerge from

broader patterns of social interaction and political change. Viola and Verheul (2020), for instance, demonstrated that migration discourse in the United Kingdom was profoundly shaped by restrictive public policies, producing polarized narratives that not only redefined terms but also influenced the lived experiences of migrant communities. The results of this review corroborate those findings, showing that language is both a reflection of social realities and a tool that shapes them. At the same time, however, the identification of technological factors—particularly the role of computational tools and digital media—offers a novel extension of existing debates. While earlier work by Hamilton et al. (2016) emphasized that semantic shifts reflect societal-level instabilities, the current review indicates that digital communication platforms amplify and accelerate these processes, producing semantic volatility at a scale not fully addressed in prior literature.

This interplay between established sociolinguistic insights and emergent technological contexts suggests that current theories of semantic change must evolve to account for the new realities of globalized and digitized communication. Hamilton et al. (2016) highlighted the greater susceptibility of verbs compared to nouns to semantic drift, underscoring the structural dimensions of language change. When placed alongside findings about discourse polarization in digital environments, this structural sensitivity suggests that categories of words are differentially affected by the communicative affordances of technology. Verbs and discourse markers, for example, are more likely to shift meanings rapidly in online spaces due to their frequent use in dialogic and interactive exchanges. Thus, while core theoretical frameworks remain valid, the mechanisms driving semantic change are increasingly mediated by technological infrastructures, a phenomenon that earlier research did not fully anticipate.

The systemic factors influencing semantic change emerge most clearly when examining the structural barriers posed by rigid social institutions and unresponsive policies. Migration discourse, as studied by Viola and Verheul (2020), provides a salient example of how immigration policies function as systemic constraints that directly shape linguistic practices. By framing certain groups as outsiders through legislative language, policies embed semantic shifts into institutionalized discourse, creating long-term consequences for social integration. Similarly, education systems that fail to adapt curricula to reflect multilingual realities reinforce linguistic inequalities. Stratton (2022) observed that the lack of cultural integration in language pedagogy not only limits students' linguistic competencies but also marginalizes their identities, thereby constraining how language evolves in diverse classrooms. These findings confirm that semantic change is not solely a product of organic linguistic usage but is actively managed, constrained, or facilitated by systemic structures.

Access to educational resources is another systemic determinant that has been frequently highlighted in the literature. Stratton (2022) pointed out that inequities in language education often lead to the erosion of minority languages, which in turn restricts the diversity of semantic innovations. Without adequate institutional support, marginalized communities lose the linguistic space to innovate and sustain semantic distinctions, accelerating processes of linguistic homogenization. This aligns with Hills and Adelman's (2015) quantitative findings that documented reductions in lexical diversity across two centuries of American English, suggesting that systemic factors such as education and media consolidation exacerbate semantic narrowing. These connections reinforce the importance of examining semantic change through a structural

lens, where institutional policies and systemic inequities shape not just access to language but the very trajectories of meaning.

Social stigma further compounds these systemic barriers by shaping how languages and linguistic features are perceived within broader society. Languages or dialects associated with marginalized groups often undergo semantic shifts that reinforce stereotypes, limiting their wider acceptance. Viola and Verheul (2020) observed that migration-related terminology acquired negative semantic connotations in polarized political discourse, an outcome that perpetuates exclusionary practices. When stigma becomes entrenched in linguistic systems, it creates feedback loops where semantic change reflects, reproduces, and amplifies social hierarchies. These dynamics reveal that semantic change is deeply implicated in issues of power, making it a crucial site for understanding how inequality is enacted and contested in everyday communication.

Policy recommendations within the literature emphasize the need for inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to language education and governance. Stratton (2022) advocates for curricula that integrate cultural perspectives into language teaching, thereby fostering greater appreciation for linguistic diversity. Such approaches recognize that semantic change is not merely a linguistic process but a reflection of cultural identity, requiring pedagogical strategies that allow students to critically engage with both their linguistic heritage and contemporary shifts. Similarly, government and non-governmental initiatives that support research into minority languages are vital for preserving and revitalizing semantic diversity. Aman et al. (2021) documented the significance of studying underrepresented languages such as Miriek in Sarawak, noting that targeted efforts to document and sustain minority languages provide crucial insights into the broader dynamics of semantic change.

Beyond educational reforms, community-based initiatives are essential for fostering inclusive linguistic practices. Viola and Verheul (2020) propose creating interactive platforms that facilitate dialogue across ethnic and linguistic boundaries. Such spaces not only reduce linguistic stigma but also encourage cross-cultural innovation in meaning-making. The potential for digital platforms to serve as both barriers and enablers of semantic change highlights the need for nuanced policy interventions that regulate harmful discourse while supporting inclusive practices. Encouraging the positive use of digital media in language education and intercultural exchange could mitigate the negative consequences of technological acceleration on semantic volatility.

The limitations of current research point to several areas requiring further exploration. While computational models, such as those employed by Hamilton et al. (2016) and Snefjella et al. (2018), provide valuable large-scale insights, they often abstract away from the lived experiences and cultural contexts that shape semantic change. Hills and Adelman (2015) acknowledged that statistical models capture broad trends but cannot fully account for the sociohistorical narratives underlying those patterns. This methodological gap highlights the need for integrative approaches that combine computational techniques with qualitative, discourse-based analyses. Bridging this divide would provide a more holistic understanding of how semantic change operates across different scales of analysis.

Another limitation arises from the geographic and linguistic focus of much of the existing literature. While studies on English and other major world languages have provided important insights, they risk universalizing findings that may not apply to minority or non-Western languages.

Aman et al. (2021) and Schneider (2022) underscored the importance of expanding research into underrepresented linguistic communities to avoid skewed perspectives. Minority and endangered languages offer unique opportunities to study semantic change in contexts of cultural resilience and rapid social transformation, yet they remain marginalized in academic inquiry. Addressing this imbalance is critical for developing theories of semantic change that are globally representative.

Finally, the interdisciplinary potential of semantic change research remains underdeveloped. While scholars such as Viola and Verheul (2020) and Stratton (2022) have incorporated sociological and educational perspectives, there is still limited engagement with related fields such as political science, psychology, and media studies. Given that semantic change intersects with issues of identity, cognition, and governance, a more robust interdisciplinary agenda would significantly enrich our understanding. For example, insights from psychology on cognitive framing could deepen interpretations of how concepts such as “wealth” and “poverty” shift semantically across contexts, as explored by Mukanova et al. (2024). Similarly, political science perspectives on discourse regulation could clarify the role of institutional language in shaping semantic trajectories. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, future research can address current limitations and extend the explanatory power of linguistic theories.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review demonstrates that semantic change is a multifaceted process shaped by conceptual frameworks, empirical patterns, and contextual influences. The results highlight that theoretical models such as semantic gradation and discourse-historical analysis provide valuable explanations for how meanings evolve, while large-scale quantitative studies reveal measurable patterns of lexical decline and the growing prominence of concrete vocabulary. Equally, the findings emphasize that contextual factors, including migration policies, cultural traditions, and digital communication, shape the specific trajectories of semantic change across societies. The discussion underscores that systemic barriers such as rigid education systems, inequitable access to resources, and stigmatization of minority languages exacerbate linguistic inequalities and accelerate homogenization. Urgent intervention is required to foster inclusive policies and culturally sensitive curricula that preserve semantic diversity and empower marginalized communities. Future research should expand into underrepresented languages, integrate computational and qualitative approaches, and foster interdisciplinary collaboration to capture the complexity of semantic change. Addressing these challenges is essential for advancing both theoretical understanding and practical applications in language education, policy, and cultural preservation.

REFERENCE

- Aman, R., A.H., S., & Mohammed, S. (2021). Rekontruksi dalaman varian miriek (internal reconstruction of miriek variant). *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 21(1), 166-185. <https://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2021-2101-10>

- Epps, B., Carling, G., & Sapir, Y. (2021). Gender assignment in six north scandinavian languages: patterns of variation and change. *Journal of Germanic Linguistics*, 33(3), 264-315. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1470542720000173>
- Hamilton, W., Leskovec, J., & Jurafsky, D. (2016). Cultural shift or linguistic drift? comparing two computational measures of semantic change. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/d16-1229>
- Hills, T., & Adelman, J. (2015). Recent evolution of learnability in American English from 1800 to 2000. *Cognition*, 143, 87-92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2015.06.009>
- Lantto, H. (2014). Conventionalized code-switching: entrenched semantic-pragmatic patterns of a bilingual Basque–Spanish speech style. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 19(6), 753-768. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006914552830>
- Mukanova, D., Mazhitayeva, S., & Issina, G. (2024). Language representation of the concept of "wealth" and "poverty" in Kazakh, Chinese and English. *rEFLections*, 31(3), 1090-1103. <https://doi.org/10.61508/refl.v31i3.277186>
- Schneider, G. (2022). Systematically detecting patterns of social, historical and linguistic change: the framing of poverty in times of poverty. *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 120(3), 447-473. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-968x.12252>
- Sneffjella, B., Génèreux, M., & Kuperman, V. (2018). Historical evolution of concrete and abstract language revisited. *Behavior Research Methods*, 51(4), 1693-1705. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-018-1071-2>
- Stratton, J. (2022). Intentional and incidental vocabulary learning: the role of historical linguistics in the second language classroom. *Modern Language Journal*, 106(4), 837-857. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12805>
- Viola, L., & Verheul, J. (2020). One hundred years of migration discourse in *The Times*: a discourse-historical word vector space approach to the construction of meaning. *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frai.2020.00064>
- Krenca, K., Hipfner-Boucher, K., & Chen, X. (2020). Grammatical gender-marking ability of multilingual children in french immersion. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 24(5-6), 968-983. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006920912011>
- Li, Y. (2025). The effects of genres on the development of multifaceted linguistic complexity in chinese learners of german: a longitudinal corpus analysis. *Plos One*, 20(6), e0326250. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0326250>
- Liu, X., & Escudero, P. (2023). How bidialectalism affects non-native speech acquisition: evidence from shanghai and mandarin chinese. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 44(6), 969-990. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0142716423000371>

- Liu, Y., Qi, R., & Biase, B. (2020). Cross-linguistic influence of L2 on L1 in late Chinese-English bilinguals. *Journal of Second Language Studies*, 3(2), 290-315. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jsls.00014.liu>
- Lorenz, E., Bonnie, R., Feindt, K., Rahbari, S., & Siemund, P. (2018). Cross-linguistic influence in unbalanced bilingual heritage speakers on subsequent language acquisition: evidence from pronominal object placement in ditransitive clauses. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 23(6), 1410-1430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006918791296>
- Lorenz, E., & Siemund, P. (2019). Differences in the acquisition and production of English as a foreign language: a study of bilingual and monolingual students in Germany., 81-102. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21380-0_6
- Matusevych, Y., Alishahi, A., & Backus, A. (2018). Quantifying cross-linguistic influence with a computational model. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 8(5), 561-605. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lab.16038.mat>
- Mayr, R., & Siddika, A. (2016). Inter-generational transmission in a minority language setting: stop consonant production by Bangladeshi heritage children and adults. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 22(3), 255-284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006916672590>
- Meir, N., & Janssen, B. (2021). Child heritage language development: an interplay between cross-linguistic influence and language-external factors. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.651730>
- Mesch, J., & Schönström, K. (2020). Use and acquisition of mouth actions in L2 sign language learners. *Sign Language & Linguistics*, 24(1), 36-62. <https://doi.org/10.1075/sll.19003.mes>
- Otero, J. (2022). Bidirectional cross-linguistic influence on DOM in Romanian-Spanish bilinguals. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 26(6), 710-731. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13670069211063606>
- Otwinowska, A. (2023). Cross-linguistic influence and language co-activation in acquiring L3 words: what empirical evidence do we have so far?. *Second Language Research*, 40(3), 765-783. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02676583231176371>
- Stahnke, J., Gil, L., & Müller, N. (2021). French as a heritage language in Germany. *Languages*, 6(3), 122. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages6030122>