

6.4 Meaning Change

key words: language change, meaning, variation, style, dictionaries

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 4 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases.

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/4/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.3b Compare and contrast the varieties of English (e.g., *dialects*, *registers*) used in stories, dramas, or poems. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/3/b>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases.

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/4/c>

We all know, when we stop to think about it, that language changes. All languages change, and all languages are in a constant state of gradual change. When we are in the middle of change, it just seems like variation; we may hear one person pronounce a word one way and someone else in a different way. We may be uncertain about which is the “right” way. The only thing that determines which pronunciation becomes the standard one is the number of people who adopt a certain pronunciation. Once the majority does it in one way, we begin to feel like that must be the right way. Even dictionaries use this method to determine their “preferred” pronunciation. They listen to the speakers of the language; their usage – *our* usage – is what eventually determines how words are spoken and used and what they mean.

This method is clear when we look at how the meanings of some words have changed over time. For example, the word *bully* used to be a term of endearment, meaning ‘dear one’ or ‘darling.’

Or consider the word *dog*, spelled *dogge* in Old English, about 1000 years ago. At the time, it referred to a certain breed of dog, and now has a much broader meaning of dogs in general. The adjective *nice* used to mean ‘foolish’ or ‘silly’.

At the time that the meanings were changing, there must have been some arguments and possibly some confusion, as some speakers used the new meanings and others the old meanings. Similar changes are going on now.

Look up the following words to see how their meanings have changed over time. You should use a dictionary that offers thorough etymologies, such as the *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

addict

matrix

broadcast

nervous

cute

Now consider the following words and discuss their meanings together. Are you aware of varying meanings or uses? After you have discussed the words and their meanings, turn to a dictionary to see what it has to say about these words and their meanings.

literally

aggravate

anxious

nauseou

