Q: I am interested in the expression: “My bad,” in which the word bad becomes a noun. I believe that this is the only expression in which bad is used as a noun instead of an adjective.

A: You make an interesting point about words changing categories, although the phrase “my bad” is not the first illustration of bad as a noun. In just a few contexts, bad has been acceptable as a noun in sentences like, “There’s good and bad in us all.” (Only time will decide whether the noun phrase my bad will remain slang, become standard, or disappear.)

That phrase has expanded in two ways: (1) grammatically (as the reader noticed), by becoming a noun as well as an adjective; and (2) semantically, by adding another meaning. As an adjective, bad means “unfortunate, painful, sad”; as a noun, bad means “error or fault.”

English speakers tend to expand the meaning of some words and narrow others, tending more often to expand than to narrow. A few current examples: The word bot used to refer mostly to temperature. It still does, but it can also mean “spicy,” “sexy,” and “popular” (“a hot item”). Libertarian Chairman Ian McCarthy coined a word from Hot, has also expanded so that it means cool, temperature. It still does, but it can also expand. Remember when “popular, “pleasant,” and “admirable.”

Words tend to lose their force as they expand. Remember when unique meant “the only one of its kind”? It came into English during the 17th century as a direct translation of the Latin word unicus. Then people began to add intensifiers to it, like “very, somewhat,” and “completely.” Propped up by these adjectives, the meaning of unique weakened and now means “unusual.” A similar loss of force is currently occurring in awesome, a fad word of young people. Readers could probably add other words—like the word fabulous—to the list.

A good illustration of expansion is seen in the noun venue, which entered English during the Middle English period (from 1100–1500). Spelled visné, it was a judicial writ directing the sheriff to “cause to come together at court twelve good and lawful men” as a jury. Then the term venue expanded to include the area from which the jury was summoned. That meaning is still listed in a modern dictionary, but venue has now expanded to indicate almost any locality.

The word segue has similarly expanded. Once a specific musical term meaning “to make a transition between two sections or themes,” it has rapidly become a fad word with the broader sense of smooth movement from one thing to another. The previously narrow scientific term parameters has also become a public favorite synonymous with perimeters.

Perhaps the best example of expansion in meaning is the word thing, whose numerous meanings now cover more than an entire dictionary-column. But in Old English (before 1100), the noun thing had only one meaning: “an assembly of men for legal purposes.” Then, during the Middle English period, thing expanded to mean any court, and through the centuries, it has continued to expand. An omnibus word, it can now mean “every thing,” “some thing,” “any thing,” or “no thing.”

The extent of that expansion is seen in a New York Times item about a cabdriver and a woman passenger. The passenger directed the driver to take her to a meeting via the Brooklyn Bridge, not the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. But the driver headed directly toward the tunnel. The woman repeated her desire to travel via the bridge, but the driver continued toward the tunnel. Exasperated, the woman finally said, “Driver, I told you not to drive through the tunnel; I have a ‘thing’ about tunnels. Sheepishly, the driver turned and said, “Sorry, lady, I have a ‘thing’ about bridges!”

Although English speakers often tend to expand the meaning of words, we sometimes narrow their meanings. You may recall Chaucer’s knight in his “Canterbury Tales,” whom Chaucer described in Middle English as a “ver-ray, parfit, gentil knight.” In Modern English, that translates to a “genuine, perfect, gentle knight.” Chaucer’s adjective verray (“genuine”) is our word very, now only an intensifier emphasizing the adjective it precedes in phrases like “very happy,” “very pretty,” and “very capable.”

The word very is perhaps the most drastic example of semantic narrowing, but there are others. In John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats writes that Ruth, having faithfully followed Naomi to a new land, “stood in tears amid the alien corn,” “sad in heart” and “sick for home.”

Today those poignant lines evoke an image of Ruth surrounded by tall stalks of corn. But when Keats wrote, corn meant “grain,” including wheat, oats, barley, and rye. At that time, also, a forest was any broad area of land in the country that could accommodate hunting. So New Forest in New Hampshire has large treeless areas.

The verb starve derives from the Middle English sterven, which meant “die.” Now it has narrowed to indicate a specific kind of dying: from lack of food. The word meat had the broad meaning of “food,” as it does in the biblical phrase “meat and drink.” (So in Modern English we have “mincemeat,” which contains apples and raisins, but no meat.) The word deer referred to any animal (and still does in Modern German tier). In English it has narrowed to describe only one animal.

The poet Emily Dickinson expressed it well:

A word is dead when it is said, some say.
I say it just begins to live that day.

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