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 *hot* 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* when he said that Presidential candidate Kerry had chosen John Edwards, "a political hottie" as his running mate. The word *cool*, which used to be the opposite of *hot*, has also expanded so that it means "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 "verray, 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. **TFL**

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