Linguistics

Task

How do words and phrases change in meaning or significance over time?

Brief explanation

You'll be aware that language constantly evolves. It is shaped by its users. For instance, words and phrases can change in meaning over time: they can shift in meaning, take on new meanings, lose original meanings, become a part of jargon or slang, transfer across languages, and carry private meanings for specific groups such as families or school classes.

In this task, we'd like you to draw up a shortlist of words or phrases in a language of your choice – no more than ten, but it could be just one. These words and phrases should be interesting to you for some reason – for instance they could be words or phrases that you use in a particular way, they might have recently changed in meaning in some way, or they might relate to current affairs or historical events.

You can then explore how your chosen words and phrases have been used in the past (perhaps how they originated if that is known), how they are currently being used, and what that tells us about language and its relation to social, cultural and political issues. We give some suggestions for online resources below, but you could equally well explore books of your own or in a library.

The task is to write an essay of up to 1000 words about your chosen words and phrases: why did you choose them, what is interesting about them, and what did you discover during your research.

Helpful resources

You can explore the way that people search the internet with Google Trends, which includes analysis of search over time, by region, and by topic: https://trends.google.com/
If you find search terms in a language you don't know, you could try to translate them online, e.g. with Google Translate https://translate.google.com/ or DeepL https://www.deepl.com/
You can look at how the frequency of words and phrases has changed over time with the Google Books Ngram Viewer https://books.google.com/ngrams and you can see how English words and phrases are used in context with the English Corpora site https://www.english-corpora.org/ (free registration required) – similar sites may exist for the language(s) you choose to work with.