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LITERAL VS. FIGURATIVE: A STUDY OF MEANING TRANSFORMATION IN THE USE OF THE WORD *KELAS*

Surmawati Sumardin[1*], Subhan Rahmat[2]
[1]*English Education Department, Tarbiyah and Teacher Training Faculty, Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia*
[2]*Engine Department, Politeknik Pelayaran Barombong, Indonesia*
*Email: watiuma38@gmail.com

Abstract

Language is a dynamic system that continuously evolves in response to the social, cultural, and cognitive development of its speakers. These changes are particularly evident in shift of word meaning, both literal and figurative, in everyday language use, this study examines the transformation of the meaning in the use of the word ''kelas'' in modern Indonesian, focusing on its shift from a literal meaning as a level or classroom to a figurative meaning used to express evaluation, quality, status, and emotion in informal communication. This research employs a qualitative approach within semantic and pragmatic frameworks to analyze how to meaning of ''kelas'' is constructed and interpreted across different social and situational contexts. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaire and examples of everyday speech, and were analyzed using a descriptive interpretative method to capture speakers' perceptions, intentions, and social functions. The findings indicate that the word ''kelas'' functions not only as a denotative marker but also as an evaluative expression and a symbol of social identify in informal discourse. Its figurative use serves to intensify expression, foster social closeness, and reflect linguistic creativity, although it is generally considered inappropriate in formal context. This study highlights the flexibility of language in adapting to modern communicative needs and contributes to semantic and pragmatic studies of the Indonesian language.

Keywords: *Semantics; pragmatics; literal meaning; figurative meaning; the word kelas*

INTRODUCTION

Language is not a static system; rather, it continuously develops in response to social interaction and communicative needs. Words that originally carry concrete and literal meanings often undergo semantic expansion as they are repeatedly used in new contexts. This phenomenon reflects the dynamic relationship between language, culture, and society, where meaning is shaped not only by lexical definition but also by usage and interpretation. As noted by Saussure (1983), linguistic signs are arbitrary and gain meaning through social convention, making semantic change an inherent characteristic of language.

One linguistic phenomenon that illustrates this process is the coexistence of literal and figurative meanings within a single lexical item. According to Lyons (1977), literal meaning refers to the basic, denotative sense of a word, while figurative meaning emerges when a word is used beyond its original reference through metaphorical or associative extension. Such transformations are common in everyday language and play an important role in enriching communication by allowing speakers to express evaluation, attitude, and social meaning more efficiently.

In Indonesian, the word "kelas" provides a clear example of semantic transformation. Literally, kelas refers to a physical space or level within an educational system, such as a classroom or grade level. However, in contemporary usage, "kelas" is frequently employed in a figurative sense to describe quality, excellence, or social status, as seen in expressions such as kelas dunia or orangnya memang kelas atas. This shift demonstrates how a word rooted in institutional and structural meaning develops an evaluative and expressive function in everyday discourse.

From a semantic perspective, this transformation reflects a process of meaning extension, where a concrete concept expands into abstract domains (Ullmann, 1962). Pragmatically, the figurative use of "kelas" depends heavily on context, speaker intention, and shared cultural understanding. As Levinson (1983) argues, meaning in language cannot be fully understood without considering situational context and communicative purpose. The figurative use of "kelas" thus functions not only to convey information but also to express judgment, stance, and social positioning.

Although studies on semantic change and figurative language are well established in linguistic literature, research focusing on specific Indonesian lexical items remains limited. Most previous studies tend to discuss semantic transformation in general terms without closely examining how everyday words shift meaning across contexts. Consequently, the word "kelas", despite its frequent use in both literal and figurative forms, has received little focused scholarly attention. This gap highlights the need for a detailed analysis of how "kelas" operates semantically and pragmatically in contemporary Indonesian usage.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the transformation of meaning in the use of the word kelas, with particular attention to the distinction between its literal and figurative meanings. By employing a semantic approach supported by contextual analysis, this research seeks to explain how meaning is constructed, extended, and interpreted in real language use. The findings are expected to contribute to semantic studies by illustrating how lexical meaning evolves through everyday communication and by enriching the understanding of meaning transformation within the Indonesian language.

METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the transformation of meaning in the use of the word kelas, focusing on the shift from literal to figurative usage in contemporary Indonesia language practices. This approach is chosen because the research emphasizes the interpretation of meaning, linguistic function and the role of social context in shaping speakers' understanding, rather than hypothesis testing or numerical measurement (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The data sources consist of informal spoken discourse and written texts, including everyday conversations as well as digital discourse such as social media post and online comments. Digital platform is considered productive linguistic spaces for the emergence of meaning variation and figurative language, particularly among younger speakers. Language use in these domains reflect spontaneous interaction and plays a significant role in constructing social meaning and linguistic identity (Crystal,2019; Zappavigna, 2020).

Data collection was carried out through observation and documentation. The researcher observed the use of the word kelas in various informal communicative context

and documented relevant utterances or text as research data. These techniques allow for the collections of natural and contextualized data that accurately represent language use in social life (Miles, Hubermen, & saldana, 2014).

Data analyze employed a combination of semantic and pragmatic analysis. Semantic analysis focused on identifying shift from denotative to connotative evaluative meanings, while pragmatic analysis examined how the figurative meaning of kelas is influenced by situational context, interpersonal relationships, and communicative intentions. This combined approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the social functions and meanings of the utterances (Yule,2020; Hung, 2017).

To enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, this study applied theoretical confirmation by comparing the analytical results with established theories of semantic change and language use in social context this step ensures that the interpretations are theoretically grounded and academically accountable (Tracy, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interview data indicate that all respondents understand the word kelas as a term that originally carries a literal meaning, namely a classroom or a place for learning. This understanding appears consistently, particularly among respondents who define kelas as a formal educational space or a level within the educational system. Nevertheless, the interview findings also reveal a shared awareness that the word kelas has undergone a development in meaning in everyday usage.

First, most respondents stated that in addition to its literal meaning, the word kelas is now frequently used in a figurative context. Respondents (N, R) emphasized that kelas is no longer limited to referring to a classroom, but is commonly used to praise achievements, quality, style, or personal appearance. Expressions such as kelas banget are employed to describe something considered outstanding, impressive, or classy. This indicates that the word kelas functions as an evaluative expression in informal communication.

Second, the interview results reveal a shared perspective that the change in meaning of the word kelas is influenced by social context and generational development. Respondents (N, T, and S) stated that the figurative use of kelas has evolved alongside communicative habits within society, particularly among younger generations. Meanwhile, respondent (I) explained that this phenomenon represents a process of semantic extension or polysemy, in which a single word is used to represent multiple concepts, such as social hierarchy, category, and quality. This suggests that the semantic shift of kelas is not random, but rather formed through repeated use in specific contexts.

Third, the interviews also highlight the pragmatic function of the word kelas. In everyday interaction, kelas is used to evaluate, reinforce social identity, and construct a positive impression of a particular object or individual. Respondents (K and S) emphasized that the figurative use of kelas frequently appears in casual conversations and on social media, allowing the word to function as a marker of a modern and familiar linguistic style. Thus, kelas operates not only as a lexical item but also as a pragmatic strategy to intensify meaning and foster social closeness.

Overall, the interview findings demonstrate that the word kelas has undergone a transformation from a literal to a figurative meaning. This transformation is shaped by contextual, cultural, and generational factors, as well as by contemporary communicative

practices. These findings confirm that kelas serves as a clear example of linguistic flexibility in adapting to modern communication needs and highlights the close relationship between linguistic meaning and the social practices of its speakers.

The findings of this study indicate that the word kelas has undergone a clear transformation from a primarily literal meaning to broader figurative and pragmatic uses in contemporary Indonesian discourse. Although all respondents initially associated the word kelas with its literal meaning as a classroom or an educational level, the interview date reveal a shared awareness that the word now functions beyond its original denotative meaning. This confirm that lexical meaning is not static but develops through repeated use across diverse social context.

From a semantic perspective, the figurative use of the word kelas represent a process of semantic extension. Responded frequently used kelas to express evaluation, quality, achievement, or style, as refelected in expression such as kelas banget. This figurative usage does not replace the original meaning but coexists with it, resulting in polysemi. These findings aligh with theories o semantic change which argue that new meanings typically emerge gradually while retaining traces of earlier meanings. Thus, Kelas demonstrater hoe a common lexical item can expand its semantic range without losing its core referential function.

The interview results also highlight the role of social context and generational influence in shaping meaning transformation. Several respondents emphasized that the figurative use of kelas is more prevalent among younger speakers and it informal settings. This supports the view that language change is closely tied to interactional patterns and communicative practies within specific communities. The repeated use of kelas as an evaluation term in youth discourse strenghthens its figurative meaning and contributes to its normalization in everday communication.

From a pragmatic perspective, Kelas functional as an expressive and evaluative marker that intensifies the speakers' attitude toward and object or individual. In casual conversations and digital interactions, the word is used to convey admiration, approval, or positive judgement, thereby helping to build interpersonal closeness and shared values among speakers. This pragmatic function helps explain why kelas tends to be avoided in formal contexts, where such subjective and evaluative expressions may be considered inappropriate. The context sensitivity of kelas underscores the importance of pragmatic factors such as situation, audience, and communicative intent in meaning interpretation.

Furthermore, the figurative use of kelas reflect its role as a marker of social identity. By employing kelas in informal interactions, speakers signal alignment with contemporary linguistic trend and familiarity with youth oriented language styles. This sociolinguistic functions shows that kelas operates not only as a descriptive term but also as a social signal indexing modernity, informality, and group solidarity.

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that the transformation of kelas from a literal to a figurative meaning is a dynamic, context-dependent process. The findings reinforce the view that semantic change is shaped by semantic extension, pragmatic usage, and sociocultural factors. The case of kelas illustrates how everyday language adapts to communicative needs, enabling speakers to express evaluation and social identity more affectively in modern interaction.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the word "kelas" has undergone a significant transformation in meaning and function in contemporary Indonesian usage. While kelas originally carries a literal meaning referring to a classroom or an educational level, it is now widely used in figurative context to express evaluation, quality, style, and admiration, particularly in informal communication.

The analysis shows that the figurative use of kelas in dominant in everyday interactions, especially among younger speakers. Expression such as kelas banget illustrate how the word function as an evaluative and expressive marker rather than merely denoting an educational space. This shift indicates that kelas is increasingly associated with affective and interactional purposes, reflecting speakers' attitude and judgments toward people, objects, situations.

From a semantic perspective, the findings suggest that the transformation of kelas involves semantic extension rather than complete meaning replacement. The original literal meaning remains intact, but additional figurative meanings coexist with it, resulting in polysemy. Furthermore, pragmatic factors such as context, speaker intention, and social setting play a crucial role in determining how kelas is interpreted in communication.

Overall, this study demonstrates that kelas functions not only as a lexical item with multiple meanings but also as a pragmatic and social marker in modern Indonesian discourse. The transformation of kelas reflects the dynamic nature of language and its close relationship with social practices and generational change. This research contributes to semantic and pragmatic studies by providing empirical evidence of how everyday words adapt to contemporary communicative needs. However, future research with larger datasets or comparative approaches is recommended to further explore the use of kelas across different social groups and communicative contexts.

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