

**Languages do not stop changing. Sometimes they change gradually over centuries and sometimes change is introduced abruptly. How does language change work?: The role of 'dead metaphors' in language change.**

Metaphors are best known for their role in poetry, used to conjure vivid, emotive images and express a vast array of ideas. However, in his book, 'The Unfolding of Language,' Guy Deutscher argues that metaphors are more than just the ornamentation of a language, but actually a fundamental part of its foundations. He explores the idea that in being used metaphorically words are able to be moved from their original, concrete sense (usually to-do with physical attributes), into a more abstract realm. Eventually, once used enough, they become commonplace, and having 'lost their evocative power, are dismissed as 'dead metaphors''. At this point they are no longer immediately recognisable as metaphors but retain their new meaning, becoming part of 'ordinary' language (Deutscher, 2005). This is a continuous process and is one of the core impetuses for language change<sup>1</sup>.

It is no secret that new words and phrases constantly emerge as people (especially the young) seek new ways to express themselves. Finding new, metaphorical uses for words and phrases is one of the most significant ways in which this can be done. A prime encapsulation of this – and one that has made a particularly recent emergence – is the phrase 'gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss'. This is a satirical phrase, popularised on the internet (in particular on TikTok and Twitter), and used ironically to critique 'toxic, usually white, feminism' (VOX, 2021). The idea of a 'girlboss' was popularised in 2014 in Sophia Amoruso's biography, endeavouring to empower young women in the workplace with 'countless hopes, dreams and gleefully hard-nosed aspirations'. Originally designed as a feminist rallying chant, it has been labelled patronising and infantilising (BBC Worklife, 2020), while others point to it as an opportunity for (and symptom of) white women 'co-opting empowerment and feminism for profit, with no intention of lifting anyone else up' (VOX, 2021). At best it is seen as belittling and a product of 'benevolent sexism', at worst a picture of hypocrisy and selfish white feminism. Hence the term has become an object of mockery on the internet, morphing into an alliterative tricolon: 'gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss'. The alliteration itself adds to the humour, as it is designed to mock the idea of the 'girlboss'. The changing perception of the word 'girlboss' is in itself an example of how fluid language is, but the phrase as a whole is in many ways a linguistic curiosity, and illustrates how new metaphorical uses for words bring language change.

Both 'gaslighting' and 'gatekeeping' first existed in relation to physical things. Used metaphorically, they are used to describe far less tangible concepts, being transported ('to carry across' is of course the literal translation of the Greek word 'metaphor' (Deutscher, 2005, p. 117)) from the concrete to the abstract. Although only popularised relatively recently, the term 'gaslighting' originated in the 1938 British play and subsequent film, 'Gaslight', in which 'a husband drives his wife to near insanity by convincing her that she is a kleptomaniac and that she has only imagined the sounds in the attic and the dimming of the gaslights in their house, which were actually the result of his searching for her aunt's missing jewels' (Britannica, 2017). This play (somewhat simplistically) embodied the 'persistent denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying to make the victim feel unsure of their own sanity' (Metro, 2018), that has come to be known as the psychological abuse of 'gaslighting'. Although this probably found particular resonance because of the image of invisible gas burning (the victim cannot see the abuse as it causes destruction) it most clearly refers to the fictional, physical

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I have focussed on their role in the English language, but the principles are relevant in any living language.

gaslights that the husband convinced his wife were not dimming. In this we can see how abstract psychological abuse has come to be described by physical imagery<sup>2</sup>. This is similar to the idea of 'gatekeeping'. A 'gatekeeper', in its original and most physical sense, denotes 'an attendant employed to control who goes through a (physical) gate' (Oxford Languages, n.d.). Although it is not a new term, it has more recently taken on its more abstract definition, and, in recent years, its popular usage has 'exploded' (VOX, 2021). On a literal level, it refers to someone who only allows certain people through a physical gate or other barrier. In its metaphorical sense, 'gatekeeping' means withholding, somewhat arbitrarily, resources from others, and has become almost interchangeable with 'discrimination'<sup>3</sup>. In the context of 'gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss', both of these terms are used somewhat ironically to criticise the idea of the 'girlboss', which is the climax of the rising tricolon. In particular, it condemns those (especially corporations) who embrace it without irony, and promote a simplistic form of feminism that sees putting women in charge as being the solution to all problems women face in the workforce (VOX, 2021). Thus an ironic phrase thrown around social media is an illustration and example of how people drive linguistic change through ascribing new metaphorical meanings to words in order to express new ideas.

None of the terms in this tricolon can yet be described as 'dead metaphors', but it is not improbable that they soon will be. Currently, both 'gaslighting' and 'gatekeeping' retain a sense of their original, more physical meanings, and have not entirely assimilated with the English language. They still feel quite nouveau and somewhat out of place – this lends to their popularity and humorous use on the internet where, as previously mentioned, they are primarily used by the young. However, history presents to us countless examples of words and phrases which were used to describe the abstract initially for emphasis or to express a new idea. Over time, however, they have not only lost their glamour but also their original ties to the physical. Sustaining their new meanings, they have assimilated into the English language. Deutscher suggests the ideas of 'ground-breaking plans' for 'tough new legislation' as examples for words that, although originally used metaphorically have now become comparatively bland features of everyday language. 'Ground-breaking' is done with a shovel, not a plan, and 'tough' can be used to describe durable materials like leather (Deutscher, 2005, p. 119). In their origin they referred exclusively to the physical, but through their metaphorical use they were transported into the realm of abstraction. It is natural that people use metaphor to express themselves, and 'metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action (Johnson, n.d.)'. 'Gaslighting' and 'gatekeeping' are two emerging examples of a principle that we can see happening throughout the history of the language.

As yet, the concepts of 'gaslighting', 'gatekeeping' and 'girlboss-ing', have not assimilated and would not be seen as 'serious' English by many. They are unlikely to appear in a political speech in the same sense that they are used on TikTok or Twitter. However, other words which have followed a similar route are seen as standard, respectable English. In the pandemic the phrase 'key-worker' (ie 'critical worker') has seen an explosive emergence into common parlance, as the distinction between 'key-workers' and other workers became particularly relevant in the context of lockdowns. There was no shame in using this phrase, and it was used in official government writing. For example, in May 2020, the Office for National Statistics, an official government body, published a lengthy article titled

---

<sup>2</sup> Vice argues that the idea of 'gaslighting' has become conflated with lying, and has become an inflated term, making it less effective in describing the behaviour to which it originally referred (Vice, 2021). This is perhaps another interesting linguistic point on how meanings of words shift through use.

<sup>3</sup> It has a secondary meaning of policing what other people like, and urging them to prove an interest (Vice, 2021). For example, Jeremy Corbyn has said that he enjoys James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and was in response challenged by a commentator to a *Ulysses* debate (New Socialist, 2019). In its secondary sense this can be seen as a form of gatekeeping.

'Coronavirus and key workers in the UK', with setting out to provide 'estimates of the numbers and characteristics of those who could be considered as potential "key workers" in the response to the coronavirus' (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Although the fact that it put the term 'key workers' in inverted commas suggests that it is still seen as slightly out of place and has not fully assimilated, its use in official documents is evidence that it is a respected term and has successfully adopted its abstract meaning. 'Key' only crossed into abstraction in 1913<sup>4</sup>, when it came to be used as a synonym for 'crucially important' (etymonline, n.d.). This works on a metaphorical level, as a key can be seen as vital in its role of opening doors and providing access. However, its move from the physical to a more abstract assertion of importance was reinforced by the idea of a 'key move' in chess which, from 1827, was used to describe a move which allows a player to 'open the way' (ie unlock, like with a physical key) to see how a solution to a set problem will develop (etymonline, n.d.). This can naturally be seen as a particularly important move, helping 'key' to become an adjective describing importance. Thus, the three steps in which 'key' developed a totally new meaning is illustration of how language changes and takes on new metaphorical senses. A relatively recent example, it shows how meanings of words change and are gradually accepted into 'respectable' language. As they are used increasingly frequently and in a wider variety of situations, it is plausible that the words 'gaslight' and 'gatekeep' will follow a similar pathway to 'key', and their metaphorical uses will eventually become part of standard English. They will have lost their impact and novelty, and will thus become 'dead metaphors'.

'Gatekeeping', 'gaslighting' and 'key' and all relatively recent examples of words crossing from the physical into the abstract. However, it is a principle with a long history, made evident in the way that many Latin words have entered the English language. Like the more modern examples, a key way in which they have done this is by taking on more abstract, metaphorical meanings. For example, 'discover' had a now obsolete meaning of 'to uncover' (Deutscher, 2005, p. 125), originating from the Latin 'discooperire' (literally 'the opposite of' + 'to cover over'). It was only in the 1550s that it obtained its modern sense, with a metaphorical meaning of 'to obtain the first knowledge or sight of what was before not known' (etymonline, n.d.). Not only has 'discover' lost its literal sense, it has also lost any emphatic or emotive value, and is simply seen as standard, slightly limp, English. Other examples include 'rival', which came from 'rivalis', meaning someone who shares the same river (Deutscher, 2005, p. 125). This related to competition to physical resources, and only took on its more metaphorical meaning in the 1570s, when it came to include 'an adversary in love' in its meanings (etymonline, n.d.). Again, it has lost any sense of its original meaning, and is not particularly emphatic. Thus these examples highlight a pattern which surrounds us in language, demonstrating that new metaphorical applications to the physical brings lasting linguistic change. These metaphorical terms – the predecessors of 'gaslighting' and 'gatekeeping' – are so common in language that they are integral to the foundations of our language.

Thus history provides a precedent for the route that 'gaslighting' and 'gatekeeping' may take in becoming ordinary, unremarkable parts of the English language. Today they are broadly relegated to the internet fringes of the English language, used most notably to react humorously against the 'toxic' brand of 'girlboss' feminism. However, it would not be surprising if, through repeated use, they lose their status as quirky metaphorical terms and assimilate into standard English. After all this happens continually in language, and is one of the main forces of language change. This dynamic is perhaps varied through the nature of the internet, but in principle it remains the same: words newly

---

<sup>4</sup> This does only refer to its first recorded written use, and it is likely that 'key' was to mean 'crucial' informally and in speech prior to this date.

ascribed a metaphorical meaning gradually lose their vitality and 'die' becoming part of the 'dead metaphors' that make up so much of our language.

## Bibliography

### Books

Deutscher, G., 2005. *The Unfolding of Language*. s.l.:s.n.

### Articles

BBC Worklife, 2020. *'Girl boss': When empowerment slogans backfire..* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

Johnson, G. L. a. M., n.d. Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language.

Metro, 2018. *What is gaslighting? The meaning and origin of the term explained..* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

New Socialist, 2019. *Corbyn, Joyce and Ulysses..* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

Stein, L., 2020. *The End of the Girlboss is Here.* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

Vice, 2021. *Unpacking what it means to 'gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss'..* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

VOX, 2021. *The death of the girlboss..* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

### Miscellaneous Online Sources

Britannica, 2017. *Gaslighting.* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

etymonline, n.d. *discover.* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

etymonline, n.d. *key.* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

etymonline, n.d. *rival.* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

Office for National Statistics, 2020. *Coronavirus and key workers in the UK.* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

Oxford Languages, n.d. *gatekeeper.* [Online]  
[Accessed 07 2021].

