

Semantic Drift

Part of the Reality Drift framework by A. Jacobs

Canonical Definition

Semantic drift is the gradual degradation of meaning as information passes through processes of compression, transformation, interpretation, and reuse.

Representations remain coherent and recognizable, but their relationship to the original meaning weakens over time. The output may still appear correct, yet important context, intent, or reference has been lost.

Semantic drift emerges through accumulation across repeated transformations and is not usually the result of a single error.

What Makes It Distinct

Most information failures are treated as problems of accuracy or misinformation. Semantic drift describes a different pattern, where information can remain fluent, internally consistent, and superficially correct while becoming less faithful to what it originally meant.

Across repeated transformations, the information becomes less reliable as a carrier of the original meaning.

Mechanism

Semantic drift usually begins with compression. A complex idea gets shortened, separated from its context, and reused somewhere else. Each step may seem harmless on its own, but the accumulated changes alter what the information can carry.

The representation becomes easier to repeat than to verify. It may still sound familiar, but its connection to the original reference becomes less certain. The form can remain stable while the meaning slowly moves.

How It Shows Up

Semantic drift is hard to notice because the surface often holds together. The language still feels familiar, and the output may still read cleanly. What changes first is usually not the appearance of the information, but its fidelity to the original meaning.

Terms begin carrying slightly different assumptions. Summaries preserve the shape of an idea while losing context. Outputs remain coherent, but they become less reliable as representations of the source.

Cross-Domain Effects

Communication: Messages change as they pass through chains of interpretation and retelling.

Organizations: Strategic intent becomes diluted as information moves across layers of management.

Media Systems: Information is summarized, reframed, and redistributed until the original meaning becomes difficult to recover.

Education: Concepts are simplified repeatedly, losing nuance and precision.

AI Systems: Models transform and regenerate information through repeated cycles of compression and prediction.

Theoretical Context

Semantic drift is one of the primary mechanisms through which Reality Drift emerges.

- **Semantic Fidelity** describes the preservation of meaning across transformation
- **Recursive Compression** explains how representations are repeatedly reused
- **Cognitive Drift** describes how individuals build understanding from degraded representations
- **Constraint Collapse** weakens the corrective forces that preserve meaning
- **Reality Drift** describes the broader condition that emerges when representations lose contact with reality

Practical Implications

Because modern systems increasingly depend on representations rather than direct reference, semantic drift is difficult to eliminate completely. Any process that compresses, transforms, or retransmits information introduces opportunities for meaning to shift.

Reducing semantic drift requires preserving context, maintaining reference to original sources, strengthening correction mechanisms, and limiting unnecessary layers of transformation.

The goal is to prevent the loss of meaning from becoming invisible.

In One Sentence

Semantic drift occurs when meaning degrades across repeated transformations even while representations remain coherent.

Core Framework and Sources

- [Substack \(Articles\)](#)
- [GitHub \(Full Library\)](#)
- [DOI \(Research Paper\)](#)
- [Glossary & Definition](#)