

**SEMANTIC DRIFT AND CULTURAL MEMORY: A DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS OF  
KEY TERMS IN MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN TEXTS**

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**Abstract:** Semantic change is a central concern in philology, offering insights into the shifting cultural, intellectual, and social landscapes in which texts were produced and transmitted. This study investigates the semantic drift of three culturally significant terms—virtus, honor, and fama—across selected medieval European Latin and vernacular texts from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries. Through a diachronic analytical framework that combines lexical-semantic theory, historical linguistics, and cultural memory studies, the research traces how these terms acquire expanding, contracting, or fundamentally altered meanings over time. The corpus includes theological writings, chivalric romances, legal documents, and historiographic chronicles, allowing examination of semantic variation across genres and socio-cultural contexts. The analysis demonstrates that virtus, originally denoting masculine bravery and martial prowess, underwent moralization during the High Middle Ages as ecclesiastical discourse shifted its semantic core toward spiritual fortitude and ethical conduct. Honor, initially a status marker tied to social hierarchy, became increasingly individualized and internalized, reflecting broader transformations in medieval social structures and personal identity. Fama, once associated with literal reputation and public renown, gradually expanded to encompass notions of narrative authority and textual credibility, especially in historiographic writings.

By revealing the interplay between linguistic change and cultural memory, the study illustrates how evolving communal values, religious ideology, and literary practices shaped the meanings of foundational terms. These shifts were neither uniform nor linear; instead, they arose from complex interactions among authors, audiences, and institutions. The findings underscore the importance of contextualized philological inquiry for understanding medieval intellectual history and demonstrate that semantic drift serves as both a linguistic and cultural phenomenon. Ultimately, this research advances broader discussions about how language records, preserves, and transforms the collective memory of past societies.

**Keywords:** Semantic drift, medieval philology, cultural memory, Latin lexicon, diachrony, lexicology, medieval literature, intertextuality, historical linguistics, textual culture.

### **Introduction**

Philology, with its focus on language, textual traditions, and cultural history, provides an essential framework for exploring how meanings shift across time. In medieval Europe, where linguistic continuity coexisted with profound political and religious transformations, semantic drift offers a unique vantage point for understanding how communities conceptualized and re-

conceptualized central cultural values. Terms such as *virtus*, *honor*, and *fama* appear ubiquitously across medieval texts, yet their meanings vary widely depending on authorial intent, genre, and historical moment. These variations are not mere lexical curiosities; rather, they reflect deep shifts in worldview, moral emphasis, and social organization.

The study of semantic drift in medieval contexts is especially relevant because medieval culture relied heavily on inherited classical terminology. Latin remained the primary medium of scholarly and ecclesiastical communication, even as vernacular literatures flourished and introduced their own semantic nuances. As medieval authors adapted classical terms, the meanings of these words evolved, responding to new theological priorities, emergent social structures, and changing literary conventions. Thus, examining these terms diachronically can illuminate the dynamic negotiation between tradition and innovation that characterizes medieval intellectual life.

This article focuses on three key terms because each encapsulates a major dimension of medieval values: moral virtue (*virtus*), social standing (*honor*), and public reputation (*fama*). These concepts structured interpersonal relationships, shaped political ideology, and governed literary representation. More importantly, they existed at the intersection of language and cultural memory. Their meanings were not simply semantic but symbolic, encoded with layers of collective experience, institutional authority, and intertextual transmission.

The analysis presented here draws on texts spanning six centuries and multiple genres. By comparing theological treatises, chivalric romances, legal codes, and historiographic works, the study demonstrates how semantic shifts mirror broader cultural realignments. The overarching goal is to reveal how linguistic change can serve as a record of evolving social and intellectual practices. The article aims to contribute both to philological scholarship and to interdisciplinary conversations about memory, identity, and cultural continuity.

### **Literature Review**

Studies of semantic change in medieval texts have a long pedigree within philology, though recent scholarship has increasingly integrated cultural memory theory and interdisciplinary approaches. Classical explorations by scholars such as Paul Zumthor and Ernst Robert Curtius laid the foundation for understanding medieval textuality as a site of inherited classical forms undergoing continuous reinterpretation. Their work emphasized intertextuality, the persistence of rhetorical traditions, and the adaptive use of classical vocabulary.

More recent linguists have focused on the mechanisms of semantic shift. Geeraerts, Traugott, and Blank have theorized semantic change in terms of grammaticalization, subjectification, and metonymic processes. Their frameworks illuminate how meanings evolve through usage, cultural relevance, and shifts in communicative needs. Meanwhile, medievalists such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Jacques Le Goff have highlighted how religious and social developments—particularly monastic movements, increasing bureaucratization, and the rise of courtly culture— Influenced conceptual vocabulary.

Latinists have offered detailed lexical studies, particularly on *virtus* as it transitions from classical martial valor to Christian moral virtue. Similarly, research on *honor* has underscored its dual function as social capital and personal identity marker. The study of *fama* has expanded in recent years due to growing interest in medieval information networks, authorship, and historiography. Scholars like Gabrielle Spiegel have argued that *fama* played a critical role in medieval epistemology, mediating between rumor, testimony, and textual authority.

However, existing scholarship often treats these terms in isolation or within narrow textual corpora. Less common are comparative diachronic studies across multiple genres. This article

builds on existing foundations by integrating linguistic, literary, and cultural frameworks, proposing that semantic drift becomes fully intelligible only when situated within the evolving collective memory of medieval European society.

## **Main Body**

### **The Semantic Evolution of Virtus**

In classical Latin, *virtus* derives from *vir* (“man”) and originally denoted masculine strength, courage, and particularly military prowess. This meaning persisted into early medieval Latin, especially in chronicles and heroic narratives. However, beginning in the ninth century, the term increasingly absorbed Christian moral connotations. The Carolingian renaissance, with its emphasis on ecclesiastical reform and spiritual discipline, encouraged reinterpretation of classical virtues within a theological framework.

In monastic writings, *virtus* came to signify inner strength, piety, and spiritual fortitude rather than physical bravery. Texts by writers such as Alcuin reframed virtue as adherence to divine law and moral rectitude. This shift reflected a broader cultural transition: as ecclesiastical authority grew, moral virtue overshadowed martial valor. Yet the older meaning did not disappear; chivalric literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries revived martial connotations, integrating them with Christian morality. Knights were expected to exhibit both courage and ethical conduct, demonstrating the coexistence of older and newer semantic layers.

### **Honor: From Public Status to Personal Integrity**

The medieval concept of honor is rooted in a hierarchical social world. In early medieval legal documents, honor functioned as a formal measure of rank, privileges, and land rights. It was quantifiable, hereditary, and public. However, as feudal structures developed and chivalric ideals began to spread, honor acquired a personal, moral dimension. In romances, honor was what a knight protected through deeds, loyalty, and self-control. The loss of honor was not merely a political insult but a personal tragedy.

This transformation corresponds to changes in medieval individualism. Increasing emphasis on personal accountability—promoted by penitential literature and evolving legal norms—encouraged internalization of social expectations. By the later Middle Ages, honor encompassed both external esteem and internal ethical identity. Civic documents likewise began to emphasize citizen “honor” as moral reliability rather than inherited privilege, anticipating early modern notions of reputation and character.

### **Fama and the Construction of Social Knowledge**

Perhaps the most complex of the three terms, *fama* straddles the boundary between public perception and narrative truth. In classical texts, *fama* could denote rumor, reputation, or renown. In early medieval writings, it retained the ambivalence of being both unreliable gossip and a measure of social visibility.

Over time, however, *fama* acquired an epistemological function. Historiographers used *fama* as a key source of legitimacy, asserting that widely acknowledged accounts—whether oral or written—possessed a kind of collective authority. The proliferation of written chronicles from the twelfth century onward further cemented *fama* as a mediator between oral tradition and written text. It became a hinge between memory and documentation, between community knowledge and official record.

By the fifteenth century, legal texts incorporated *fama publica* as a recognized form of evidence: public reputation could support judicial decision-making. This transition reflects increasing institutionalization of knowledge and the growing role of textuality in defining truth.

### **Intersections Among the Terms**

The evolution of these three terms was interrelated. Virtus informed the moral dimension of honor, while fama reflected communal acknowledgment of both. A knight's virtue (courage and moral quality) contributed to his honor, which in turn shaped his fama. In theological contexts, spiritual virtue enhanced divine fama—the spread of saintly reputation. These connections demonstrate how semantic fields evolve collectively, influenced by interdependent cultural concerns.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative, diachronic philological methodology. The core corpus consists of twenty medieval texts selected to reflect chronological breadth (ninth to fifteenth centuries) and genre diversity. Texts include monastic treatises, Carolingian reform literature, chivalric romances, civic legal codes, and historiographic chronicles. Selection criteria prioritized texts with significant influence or wide manuscript transmission.

Each occurrence of virtue, honor, and fama was catalogued and analyzed through contextual semantic interpretation. Meanings were coded according to established categories in lexical-semantic theory: denotational core, connotative extension, metaphorical use, moral dimension, and genre-specific nuance. Attention was given to syntactic patterns, collocations, and rhetorical function.

The analysis integrates cultural memory theory by examining how communities preserved and reinterpreted lexical meanings. This framework assesses not only semantic variation within texts but also how semantic layers accumulate across generations of authorship. Comparisons across genres allow identification of both convergent and divergent semantic trajectories.

Finally, the study incorporates insights from historical linguistics, considering broader social and institutional factors that may have influenced semantic development. While not quantitative, the methodology aims for systematic and replicable semantic mapping grounded in textual evidence.

### **Results**

The diachronic analysis revealed several consistent patterns. First, all three terms displayed layered meanings rather than linear semantic replacement. Classical senses persisted alongside medieval reinterpretations, producing hybrid meanings that varied by context.

For virtue, the dominant trend was moralization. While martial valor never fully disappeared, spiritual and ethical connotations increasingly dominated theological and didactic texts. Chivalric literature synthesized the two, maintaining dual semantic functions.

Honor demonstrated the most pronounced shift from public, hereditary status to internalized ethical identity. Legal texts emphasized its institutional dimension, while literary texts stressed personal integrity. The semantic field expanded rather than shifted entirely, reflecting structural changes in medieval social organization.

Fama exhibited the broadest diversification. Its role as a measure of reputation remained constant, but its epistemological function increased dramatically. Its appearance in legal and historiographic contexts as evidence of credibility indicates a transformation in how medieval societies validated knowledge.

Across all terms, genre proved a major determinant of meaning. Theological texts encouraged moral interpretation, legal texts institutionalized meanings, and romantic narratives personalized and emotionalized them. The results confirm that semantic drift is deeply intertwined with cultural memory processes and that meaning change reflects institutional, social, and intellectual transformations over time.

## **Conclusion**

The evolution of *virtus*, *honor*, and *fama* in medieval European texts provides a compelling case study of semantic drift as a cultural phenomenon. These terms, central to medieval moral, social, and intellectual life, demonstrate how language adapts to shifting values, institutional needs, and communicative practices. Rather than experiencing simple replacement of old meanings with new, the terms accumulated layers of significance, creating semantic palimpsests that preserved traces of earlier conceptual systems even as new interpretations emerged.

The study reveals that semantic change cannot be fully understood without considering cultural memory. Medieval society, grounded in reverence for classical antiquity yet profoundly shaped by Christianity, operated within a dual heritage. Language served as a bridge between these traditions, transmitting classical concepts while allowing for their Christianization and social reinterpretation. Semantic drift thus reflects not only linguistic processes but also the dynamic negotiation between past and present.

The findings highlight the importance of genre in shaping meaning. Theological texts promoted moralization; chivalric and courtly literature emphasized personal identity and emotional experience; legal and civic documents codified meanings within institutional frameworks. These genre-specific influences underscore that language change is fundamentally embedded in communicative practices and social structures.

Moreover, the interconnectedness of the three terms emphasizes the holistic nature of medieval conceptual vocabularies. *Virtus* supported *honor*, and both contributed to *fama*. Together, they formed a semantic constellation representing medieval ideals of moral character, social legitimacy, and public recognition. Their evolution mirrors broader developments such as the rise of monastic spirituality, the emergence of feudal and later civic systems, and growing reliance on textual documentation.

In conclusion, studying semantic drift in medieval philology provides more than lexical insights; it opens a window into the cultural dynamics of the past. By analyzing how communities transformed inherited concepts to meet contemporary needs, we gain a deeper understanding of medieval identity, values, and memory. This research affirms that language is both a repository and an agent of cultural change—preserving traces of earlier eras while continuously adapting to new intellectual landscapes.

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