

Latin and Greek Elements in English

Lesson 15: Abstract to Concrete, and Vice Versa

- another lesson in semantic change
 - to provide help with interpreting the metaphors in Latin words
- **ABSTRACT**: “expressing a thought apart from any material or particular object”
 - e.g. beauty, truth, justice
- **CONCRETE**: “having a material, perceptible existence”
 - anything specific which is tangible or can be pointed at

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- the change in meaning between abstract and concrete is a sub-category of generalization
 - i.e. the meaning of a word is widened to include a broader range of connotations
- use “generalization” only if a change does not pertain to “abstract-to-concrete” or “concrete-to-abstract”

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- **CONCRETE-TO-ABSTRACT**: “the process by which a word which is concrete in meaning comes to have an abstract sense, without the addition of a suffix”
 - e.g., the association of a particular type of sensitivity with a part of the body:
 - ear (hearing): She’s got a good “ear” for music.
 - eye (seeing): The tennis player has a good “eye” for the ball.
 - hand (control of an instrument): Rembrandt’s “hand” was clearly evident in the painting.
 - lip (sassy speech): Don’t give me any more “lip”! Just do your homework!

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- **CONCRETE-TO-ABSTRACT**: “the process by which a word which is concrete in meaning comes to have an abstract sense, without the addition of a suffix”
 - e.g., the association of a type of drama with an event which is typical of that genre
 - tragedy (a sorrowful event): The plane crash was a horrifying “tragedy.”
 - farce (a ridiculous exercise): Classes which teach you nothing you can use in real life are “farces.”
 - n.b. this type of change (abstract-to-concrete) is not very common!

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- **ABSTRACT-TO-CONCRETE**: “the process by which a word which is abstract in meaning comes to have a concrete sense, without the addition of a suffix”
 - a *very* common type of change!
 - because people find it easier on the whole to speak about concrete things rather than intangible abstracts
 - also, when we need to create an abstract noun, we have many abstract noun-forming suffixes at our disposal, e.g.
 - Latin: -imony (matrimony), -ity (propensity)
 - English: -hood (childhood), -dom (freedom)
 - but the reverse is less true: we have far fewer concrete noun-forming suffixes (“the result of,” “the product of”)

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- **ABSTRACT-TO-CONCRETE**: “the process by which a word which is abstract in meaning comes to have a concrete sense, without the addition of a suffix”
 - allowance: “indulgence, the act of apportioning” > “the portion given, money handled out regularly”
 - vice: “the state of committing a sin or crime” > “the crime itself, the police department dedicated to the investigation of such crimes”
 - generation: “the act of begetting offspring” > “the actual offspring, a stage in the succession of natural descent”

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- **ABSTRACT-TO-CONCRETE**: “the process by which a word which is abstract in meaning comes to have a concrete sense, without the addition of a suffix”
 - **ordnance**: “the act of giving an order” > “the thing ordered, weaponry, artillery”
 - comes from the Latin base ORDIN- (“put in order, arrange”)
 - n.b. syncope of the base: ORDIN- > ORDN-

Latin and Greek Elements in English

Lesson 16: Hyperbole

- **HYPERBOLE**: “exaggeration”
 - literally in Greek “over-throw”
 - often used for emphasis or humorous effect
 - i.e. it’s not meant to be taken literally but to get attention
 - hyperbole is a natural extension of human exuberance and love of comedy
 - works on the same principle as the rule that “bigger is better”
 - in this case, a point becomes clearer and more interesting when it is overstated

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Lesson 16: Hyperbole

- examples of hyperbole, from the world of theatre
 - She couldn't act her way out of a paperbag that was ripped on three sides and had exit signs.
 - She also had the emotional range of a poached egg.
 - But her sugar-daddy had money to burn.
 - So don't invite them over to your house, because together they have the energy of a dead battery and the manners of a vacuum cleaner.

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Lesson 16: Hyperbole

- examples of hyperbole
 - sizes of olives in a Texas grocery store:
 - they start at “medium”
 - then large
 - then giant
 - then colossal, and then . . .
 - MAMMOTH! -- Is it hairy? Does it have tusks?
 - What’s next? Humongous, Awesome and Texas-sized?
 - with ONE olive in a can?

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Lesson 16: Hyperbole

- examples of hyperbole
 - sizes of burgers at the Chow-Now Drive-in in Boise, Idaho:
 - Jumbo (one patty)
 - Giant (two patties)
 - Hugo? (three patties)

Latin and Greek Elements in English

Lesson 16: Weakening

- the overuse of hyperbole leads to the weakening of a word's meaning, as is seen often in sports commentary
 - he made a “titanic” effort to cross the plane of the goal line
 - with the score tied at the end of this set, it's now time for “sudden death”

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Lesson 16: Weakening

- **WEAKENING**: “the process by which a word with a stronger sense acquires a weaker one”
 - the constant fireworks in language can lead to boredom
 - that boredom then creates a need for even more extreme language
 - and that new extreme language suggests that the older, now less extreme language is merely the normal or unexaggerated way of saying something
 - this is why certain Latin prefixes came to represent mere intensification (ad-, con-, de-, ex-, etc.)
 - they were stronger forms that were “weakened” in later Latin

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Lesson 16: Weakening

- examples of weakening:
 - mortify: originally, “kill” (lit., “make dead”)
 - > “humiliate, shame, embarrass”
 - unique: originally, “being one of a kind, standing as the only example of something” (from UN-, “one”)
 - > “very different, special”
 - atom: originally, “a thing that is unsplitable” (lit. “not-split”)
 - > “a thing that is very small”
 - thus, “splitting the atom” is technically an oxymoron!