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
Lesson 15: Abstract to Concrete, and Vice Versa

• 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”
Lesson 15: Abstract to Concrete, and Vice Versa

- **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!
Lesson 15: Abstract to Concrete, and Vice Versa

- **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”
Lesson 15: Abstract to Concrete, and Vice Versa

- **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-
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
Latin and Greek Elements in English

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.
Latin and Greek Elements in English

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?
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)
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”
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
Latin and Greek Elements in English

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 unsplittable” (lit. “not-split”)
    • > “a thing that is very small”
    • thus, “splitting the atom” is technically an oxymoron!