Latin and Greek Elements in English

Lesson 17: Changing Concepts

• **CHANGING CONCEPTS**: “the process of semantic change resulting from changes in the understanding of the world around us”

  – to grasp this, you have to have some sense of how things have evolved over the course of Western Civilization

  – e.g. the humors theory of medicine

  • see Ayers, pp. 102-3

  • **sanguine** (“full of blood”): “cheerful”

  • **melancholy** (“state of black bile”): “depression”

  • **choleric** (“having [yellow] bile”): “angry”
Latin and Greek Elements in English

Lesson 17: Changing Concepts

- e.g. the classical gods
  - volcanic: lit. “p.t. Vulcan (god of fire and the forge)”
    - “related to intense geological activity”
  - plutonic: lit. “p.t. Pluto (god of the dead and the underworld)”
    - “formed deep in the earth’s crust, usually by intense heat”
  - uranoplasty: lit. “the act of shaping ‘Uranus’ (god of the dome of the heavens)”
    - “surgery on the soft palate”
Latin and Greek Elements in English

Lesson 17: Changing Concepts

- modern ideas can also change words
  - e.g. feminism: chairman > chair
  - also, psychology
  - and computer terminology
- interface: exchange data
- bug: problem
- crash: suddenly stop working
- loop: run in circles
- virus: program designed to infect and ruin other systems

JOAN! NOT YOU TOO!! YOU'RE SPEAKING JARGON!!!

RELAX, JOE, YOUR PARENT IS JUST REACTING TO YOUR CHILD.

JARGONOIDS
THEY'RE EVERYWHERE.
Lesson 17: Changing Concepts

• Shakespeare’s *Hacklet*:

To boot, or not to boot, that is the query:
Whether ‘tis faster in the CPU to buffer
The viruses and glitches of pre-released software
Or to code fixes against a sea of instabilities
And by downloading, zap them. To loop, to crash
No more; and by a crash to say we disable
The keyboard and the thousand opcodes
That silicon is heir to: ‘tis an enhancement
Devoutly to be tweak’d. To loop, to crash!
To crash? perchance to dump. Ay, there’s the bug.
Latin and Greek Elements in English

Lesson 18: Euphemism

• literally in Greek “good-speaking”

• EUPHEMISM: “the act of replacing a word which is more disagreeable or unpleasant with one that is less so”
  – also, “the more pleasant word which replaces the less pleasant one”

• n.b. “a euphemism”: example of abstract-to-concrete change
Lesson 18: Euphemism

• e.g. Eileen’s Lingerie Catalogue featuring Apparel for the “Full-Flowered” Woman
  – i.e. Sizes 14-26
  – small, medium and . . .
  – **majestic**!

• the doctor who says, “This is going to **sting** a little.”
  – in other words, this is going to hurt really bad!
Latin and Greek Elements in English

Lesson 18: Euphemism

• euphemism is a very old feature of language
  – associated with word-magic, the notion that words themselves have power
  – e.g. knowing someone’s name gives the power to control them or their destiny
    • Odysseus and Polyphemus: Call me “No-one”
    • cf. Captain Nemo
  – the names of some Classical deities are euphemisms
    • the god of the dead = Hades (“The Unseen One”)
    • the Furies = Eumenides (“The Good-Minded Ones”)
Lesson 18: Euphemism

• today, euphemism is most often found around those things with which we are uncomfortable, e.g. death
  – killing:
    • to do away with
    • to put down
    • to put to sleep
  – dying:
    • to pass on/away
    • the dear departed
    • the late
Lesson 18: Euphemism

- today, euphemism is most often found around those things with which we are uncomfortable, e.g.
  - sex
    - to have an affair
    - to see someone
    - to do it
    - to be expecting
    - to fix, e.g. the cat
Lesson 18: Euphemism

- today, euphemism is most often found around those things with which we are uncomfortable, e.g.
  - toilet
    - “to do #1”
    - “to take a rest stop”
    - “to go to the bathroom”
Latin and Greek Elements in English

Lesson 18: Euphemism

• the point is not to call unpleasant details to the attention of one’s listeners or to conjure up vivid images in their minds – so what’s the reverse process? “dysphemism”?
  • i.e. to cause as much discomfort as possible (and laughter!)
  • e.g. death: “to kick the bucket,” “to bite the big one”
  • sex: “to test someone’s oil”
  • cf. Shakespeare (Othello): to “make the beast with two backs”
Lesson 18: Circumlocution

- the same drive to keep one’s listeners from envisioning unpleasant details leads often to circumlocution

- **CIRCUMLOCUTION**: “an indirect or lengthy way of expressing a simple or concrete idea”
  - n.b. the point of circumlocution is to avoid the obvious or literal, often to cover up or disguise a truth
  - e.g. from psychology: “His family is dysfunctional.”
  - from sports: “He was a little shaken up on the play.”
Lesson 18: Circumlocution

- military language is full of circumlocution
  - “neutralize” = kill
  - “visit a site” = bomb it
  - “firepower assets” = artillery
  - “verbal counselling” = yelling
  - “dividends” = hitting something
Latin and Greek Elements in English

Lesson 18: Circumlocution

• military language is full of circumlocution
  – “target-rich area” = a good place to bomb
  – “collateral damage from incontinent ordance” = accidentally killing civilians
  – “philosophical disillusionment” = cowardice
  – “non-duty non-pay status” = being fired
  – “confidence building measures” (aka CBM) = circumlocutions of this very sort!