

## Latin Lesson 14

The goals of Lesson 14 are to examine another pair of linguistic processes: elevation and degeneration. Then in the audio counterpart of this video presentation, we'll look at the suffixes and bases introduced in this lesson. Don't forget to listen to that when you're done here.

The first concept we'll cover in this presentation is called degeneration, "the process by which a word comes to mean something more objectionable or contemptible than it did before." Our word "intercourse" is an excellent example of degeneration. Etymologically, it means nothing more than "go/run between" and so could be used of any type of interaction (conversation, dancing, football), but that's not the way things turned out. Because it came to be associated with sex, the sense of "sexual intercourse" took over and the word degenerated. Well, I suppose that depends on your attitude toward sex, but in many people's minds it degenerated. You object? Fine, just try saying "intercourse" in front of your friend's grandmother and I think you'll see that it has by some mysterious means gained an objectionable sense. You'll be able to gauge that by how fast she throws you out of her house.

Another example of degeneration is "monster," originally a Latin word *monstrum* meaning "omen, marvel." But because a *monstrum* is usually large and eye-catching — how often is a small fish an "omen" but a six-hundred-pound tuna? O mighty Caesar, that's a *monstrum*! — the word eventually came to connote big and scary things, which are often horrifying, sometimes cruel, thus monsters.

The word "rococo" is another example of degeneration. It comes from the French word *rocaille* "rockwork" — *roche* means "rock" in French — and because rockwork is often ornate, sometimes overly ornate, the work "rococo" came to mean "florid and tasteless." It's now applied often to silly and useless decoration.

"Demon" is another word which has undergone degeneration. In ancient Greek the word *daimon* meant "god." The philosopher Socrates claimed he had a *daimon* which warned him when he was about to do something wrong. Clearly that's a good thing to have. But with the advent of Christianity *daimones* like Socrates' were seen as devilish spirits who possessed a person, and *daimon* developed into demon. Quite a fall there, Mr. Satan.

Here's another example of degeneration worth noting: "innocuous." Originally meaning "not harmful" (*in-* + *NOC-*, as I'm sure you recognize), "innocuous" later came to denote not things that were harmless but "bland, insipid, boring."

Finally, here's one more example of degeneration: "precocious." Do you know what "precocious" means? Well, if not, here's its history. The Latin word *praecox* means "ripening early" — it's composed of the prefix *prae-* ("before, early") plus the base *COQU-* ("cook," or in this case "ripen") — the Romans called apricots a *praecox* fruit, which anyone who's had an apricot tree will immediately understand. Apricots ripen rather early in the year, late June, early July, long before apples which are usually ready to be picked closer to fall. So an apricot, a *praecox* apple, is an "early ripener." Now have you ever met a child who's an "early ripener," who's read *War and Peace* before kindergarten, who does calculus for fun, who can list all the

American presidents' dogs? That child is "precocious." Thus, the journey from early ripening fruit to under-age intellectual show-off is a rapid descent into degeneration.

The opposite of which is elevation: "the process by which a word comes to mean something more pleasant or lofty than it did before." "Eutopia," for instance, originally meant "no place," from the Greek *u-* ("no") and *TOP-* ("place") and was not spelled with an initial *e-*. In his witty and wise satire the renaissance writer Thomas More used this term to refer to an imaginary land where there was harmony among all citizens and no religious conflict. Because this place seemed so nice, the word came to betoken "an idyllic locale" and the initial *e-* was added, changing the prefix from *u-* ("no") to *eu-* ("good"). Those are Greek forms we'll study later in the course. Thus, utopia (literally "no-place"), a satirical reference to our seeming incapacity as humans to avoid conflict, was elevated in sense and became eutopia with an *e-* on the front ("good place"). By the way, the prefix *u-* is still seen in some English words like *uchronia* ("no-time"), the principle that underlies novels which imagine impossible pasts based on premises such as "what if Hitler had won World War II?"

"Angel" is another example of elevation. Deriving also from ancient Greek where it meant "messenger," under the influence of Christianity "angel" came to mean "a messenger from God, a heavenly herald," and ultimately "a savior."

Finally, even very simple words can show elevation, like "progress." It really just means "walking forward," but because we associate forward motion with advancement, betterment, success, "progress" underwent elevation and came to mean something good. But is "progress" progress if you're standing on the edge of cliff looking down at waves crashing on rocks below? In that case, forward movement might not represent betterment. The reverse is also true. "Regress" ("backwards motion") is an example of degeneration, because to us "backwards" is bad.

Can you see the pattern here? When you're asked to identify a group of words which have undergone elevation, they'll all mean something good. The opposite is true of degeneration. The words all mean bad things. So you shouldn't have too much problem identifying these terms on quizzes and tests, right? Say "Right!" Good. That's progress.

As is this: video presentation over. You thought that was quick? Try the audio presentation for Lesson 14. It'll be cooked and on the table before you know it — how's that for a yummy metaphor — but not if you don't go do it. So go do it! Now! You know where it is. On the course web site. Happy ... good-bye.

## ASSIGNMENT

This is the audio presentation for Lesson 14. Let's look at the suffixes and bases assigned here, starting on page 91.

The noun-forming suffix *-ity*, which can show up as *-ety* or just *-ty*, means "the quality of, the state of." To these meanings add "the condition of," as in "timidity" (the condition of being fearful). Note that, when another suffix follows this one, the final *-y* goes away and *-ity* turns into

just *-it-*. That makes it disturbingly identical to the verb-forming suffix *-it-*. Frankly, it won't make much difference in your etymology. Pick the *-it-* you think is best and you'll probably get it right. If not, I'll tell you and I won't deduct any points. We both know the rules.

The next suffix is *-tude* or *-itude*. It means the same thing as *-ity*: "the quality of, the state of." The suffix, however, changes quite a bit when another suffix is appended after it. It becomes *-itudin-*. For example, *multitude* becomes *multitudinous*. The reason for this goes back to Latin nominative versus base forms which I mentioned back in Lesson 2 ... oh, never mind! Just memorize it.

Finally, *-acy* is yet another noun-forming suffix, this one meaning "the quality or state of being or having." Note that, when you see an adjective with the suffix *-ate* — You know it! You learned it in Lesson 10! It means "possessing, being." — an adjective with the *-ate* suffix tends to use *-acy* when it becomes a noun: *accurate/accuracy*, *confederate/confederacy*. Nifty little pattern to know, huh? And that's it for suffixes in this lesson.

Now let's end this presentation by looking at the bases in Lesson 14, about which I have uncharacteristically little to say, other than "Start memorizing them!"

The next-to-last one, *STRING-/STRICT-/STRAIN-*, originally had the sense "pulled tight." Let's add two meanings here: "tie, bind."

Be careful not to confuse *VER-* ("true") with another base we've studied, *VERB-*. What does *VERB-* mean? That's right: "word." Or with *VERT-*! What does that base mean? Good! "Turn."

And that's it for this audio recording about Lesson 14. Talk about brevity! Do it! Come on, etymologize brevity: "the state of being (*-ity*) ... short (*BREV-*)." Oh, you don't know that base? But you know the word "abbreviation," a shortened form of something. Well then, maybe I should add *BREV-* to your list of bases to memorize. Okay, maybe not. Yeah, yeah, I feel your pain.

Happy etymologies, O brevous ones!