Latin Lessons 15-16

The goal of Latin Lessons 15 and 16 is to examine another set of linguistic processes: the change from abstract to concrete (and the reverse), as well as weakening and hyperbole. Then in the accompanying audio recording we'll address the suffixes and bases introduced in these lessons. Please listen to that recording when you're done here.

We've seen that semantic change can take place for all sorts of reasons: specialization, generalization, degeneration, elevation. In this presentation we'll study four more, beginning with a closely related pair: the change from abstract to concrete, along with its reverse (the change from concrete to abstract). Understanding these processes and the others governing semantic change should begin helping you make the metaphorical leap necessary in interpreting the meanings of some words through their etymology.

Let's start by defining the terms we're going to use here, first, abstract which means "expressing a thought apart from any material or particular object." Words like "beauty, truth, justice" are abstract. An easy way to determine that a word is abstract is to ask yourself if you can touch it. If you can*not*, it's abstract. It's not possible to touch things like beauty or truth or justice ─ or quickness or clarity or incompetence ─ that's because all of them are abstract concepts. The opposite of abstract is concrete, meaning "having a material, perceptible existence." If something is tangible, if you can touch it or point at it, it's concrete. Most nouns, indeed the vast majority, are concrete.

One type of semantic change involves words which shift their meaning by taking on an abstract or concrete sense they didn't have originally. If you think about it, this is actually a subcategory of generalization because the word's meaning is expanding to encompass a broader range of connotations. But because it's such an important type of generalization, we're going to give it its own name. Please use the term generalization only if the change does not involve adding a concrete or abstract sense.

So let's define those processes, starting with concrete-to-abstract, which is "the process by which a word which is concrete in meaning comes to have an abstract sense, without the addition of a suffix." In other words, the form of the word doesn't alter in any way, only its sense. A common way this happens is with parts of the body which are naturally concrete ─ you can touch your ears ─ but they can become abstract when they're associated with a particular type of sensitivity. For instance, "She's got a good *ear* for music." Ear, here, meaning "sensitive hearing," is clearly an abstract concept. Here's another example: "The tennis player has a good *eye* for the ball," meaning good eyesight or perception. Eye is concrete; eyesight is abstract. Here's another example: if you talk about the *hand* of a painter ─ for instance, Rembrandt's hand ─ what you really mean is his control of the brush; thus, hand (concrete) assumes a new abstract sense, painting style. One final example, a person can give you *lip*, meaning "to speak in a rude fashion." Here, lip means "sassy speech." Lip is usually a concrete term, except when it means this type of speech. Then it's abstract.

Another way words tend to change from concrete to abstract is with types of drama. "Tragedy" is technically a play of a certain kind, usually sorrowful, but an event that's not a play can also be

called a tragedy if it's sorrowful in nature, an airplane crash, for instance. Thus, the word "tragedy" has expanded its meaning from a concrete concept ─ a play and you can touch those, although I can't imagine why anyone would want to touch sweaty actors ─ to an abstract principle, the sad feeling produced when you hear bad news. Likewise, the word "farce" which refers to another type of drama, usually something absurdly comical, can also be used to describe the ridiculous quality of anything which doesn't make sense. Classes which teach you nothing are farces, but not this one.

It's worth noting that the change from concrete to abstract is relatively rare, unlike its counterpart, the change from abstract to concrete, "the process by which a word which is abstract in meaning comes to have a concrete sense <again> without the addition of a suffix." This type of change is very common, for the simple reason it's easier for most people to speak about real, concrete things than generalized, intangible concepts. Besides that, even when people are inclined to talk in abstract terms, there are a number of abstract-forming suffixes at hand: in Latin, for instance, suffixes like -*imony* meaning "the state of," as in matrimony (literally, "the state of motherhood") or -*ity* as in propensity (literally "the quality of being inclined toward something"). With all those abstract-forming suffixes on our linguistic tool belt, why employ the process of concrete to abstract?

Nor is our repertoire of such suffixes limited to what we've inherited from Greece or Rome. English itself has a number of abstract-forming suffixes like -*hood* as in "childhood" or -*dom*, as in "freedom." Put simply, the large number of options for creating abstract nouns by applying suffixes reduces the need for making direct concrete-to-abstract changes. The reverse, however, is less true. There are fewer concrete-forming noun suffixes, endings that mean something like "the result of" or "the product of," and often those which exist are actually the result of abstract-forming suffixes which have undergone the change from abstract to concrete. The point is, few suffixes begin as concrete-forming because most bases are already concrete. There's no need to "concretize" them.

Examples of that sort of change, abstract-to-concrete, include the word "allowance," which originally meant "indulgence, the act of apportioning," that is, access to some sort of right. But "allowance" has come to mean "the portion given through that right," in other words, the money itself that's handed out. Likewise, "vice" means at heart "the state of committing a sin or crime," but in another sense it means "the crime itself which proves the perpetrator's guilt," and then "those in the police department who investigate criminal activity," as in Miami Vice. By moving in meaning from "criminal intent" to "a criminal act" to "the police force investigating such acts," the word has changed from abstract to concrete. Here's another example. The word "generation" means etymologically "the act of begetting offspring," that is, "the process of having children," but when we talk about generations of people who live in successive ages, we mean the people themselves, not the action which created them. Abstract to concrete.

Finally, one last example: "ordnance" which originally meant "the act of giving an order" but came to mean "the thing that was ordered," and because the word tends to be used in a military context, it implies "weaponry," usually "artillery" which is what ordnance means now: bombs and missiles and the like. Note that ordnance comes from a syncopated form of a base you've

studied ORDIN-, meaning "put in order, arrange," which is a bit ironic, wouldn't you say, since bombs rarely make anything more orderly?

And that's it for the linguistics part of Lesson 15. Now let's look at Lesson 16 where Mr. Ayers discusses other processes which can affect the meaning of a word. The first of those is hyperbole, which means "exaggeration." Hyperbole comes from Greek and means literally "over- (*hyper-*) throw (BOL-)." Hyperbole is often used for emphasis or to create humor. We exaggerate not only to distort but also to get attention. Humans are, if anything, full of life. We enjoy excess and comedy. To us bigger is better, and when it comes to language, we operate under the clear belief that overstatement is not lying but merely a way to make your point clearer and keep your listener's interest.

Hyperbole has never been more at home than in those arenas of life where we expect an excess of excess, the theatre, for instance. Take the actress who couldn't act her way out of a paper bag that was ripped on three sides and had exit signs. Indeed, she had the emotional range of a poached egg, and a sugar daddy with money to burn. 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.

But the theatre is not the only human realm where excess hyperbolates. Why even in a grocery store you can find exaggeration. In my youth, when I was living in Texas, I was once sent to the store to buy olives and discovered that they come in an odd array of sizes. On the shelves of the Lonestar State, the smallest olives start at medium. From there they go up to large, then giant, then colossal, and then … mammoth. A mammoth olive? Is it hairy? Does it have tusks? What am I buying? How many are there? How many "mammoth" olives can you get in one can?

Later in life, I encountered a like hyperbole at a fast-food joint in Boise, Idaho, the Chow-Now drive-in. Chow-Now? I mean really, who could drive by that and not stop? As I discovered, the Chow-Now features three sizes of burger: Jumbo (one patty), Giant (two patties) and … I wasn't quite sure how to pronounce this … Huge-O? Hugo? Suddenly I wondered: was I about to devour a famous French author? Well, that just made me want to fall down on the floor and "Les Miserables."

An excess of hyperbole leads to another linguistic phenomenon, weakening, something you see often in the world of sports commentary, when a player makes a "titanic" effort to tie the score so now it's time for "sudden death." Sudden death? It sounds so permanent.

Weakening is "the process by which a word with a stronger sense acquires a weaker one." It's the result of natural human exuberance, our love for anything loud and eye-catching. But constant fireworks in language can lead to boredom, too. After all, if everything you hear is loud, nothing sounds loud, so in that context things have to be really loud to seem loud. In our now battered eardrums, the old loud will start sounding unimpressive and will soon be replaced by some sort of new loud language. Thus, what was once exaggeration and sounded extreme will quickly become boring and normal.

It's exactly this process that led to the overuse of prefixes in later Latin. To late ancient Romans, a prefix made a base sound stronger, so they stopped saying, for instance, the simple form "fill"

(PLET-) and instead used "fill completely" (*com-* + PLET-). Eventually those stronger forms displaced simpler forms, and then underwent weakening and became the normal way of saying the word. The result was that a form like "-plete" was displaced by its compound "complete," and that's why *ad-*, *con-*, *de-*, *ex-* and other prefixes sometimes have only an intensive sense ("very, very much").

Examples of weakening include the word "mortify," which originally meant "kill," literally "make (*-ify*) dead (MORT-)." But by being overused as a joke, the sense "kill" weakened into "humiliate, shame, embarrass." In other words, people deeply humiliated by something were thought to be "killed" ─ ha! ha! ─ but over time as the joke grew stale, "mortify" lost its deathly force.

"Unique" is another example of weakening. Etymologically it means "one of a kind," as you can see for yourself. The base UN- means "one." If there's only one of something, it's unique. But through weakening "unique" has come to mean merely "special, very different," which is too bad. I like having a word that means "without peer, all by itself." Sometimes weakening steals things we really ought to keep.

Finally, the word "atom" constitutes an interesting instance of weakening, not because it was corrupted by overuse or excess exuberance, but with changing times. Atoms were so named by an ancient Greek scientist because he saw them as pieces of matter that are "un- (*a-*) -splittable (TOM-). You can't cut them down any more than they already are. But now we know that atoms are just small bits of matter made up of even smaller bits because scientists have figured out how to "split the atom." In one swift stroke they created both an oxymoron and weakening.

That's the end of this video presentation on the linguistic principles covered in Lessons 15 and 16 of Ayers' textbook. Next you should listen to the audio presentation about the assignments in these same lessons, in particular, the bases you're asked to memorize there. You'll find a link to that audio presentation on the course web site.

Happy etymologizing!

ASSIGNMENT

This audio presentation covers the exercises in Latin Lessons 15 and 16 of your textbook. Please go to page 95 where you'll see the first suffix you're asked to memorize here, *-mony* or *-imony* ("the quality of, the state of"). Please add the meaning "the product of." This suffix is often involved in one of the linguistic process we just surveyed, the change from abstract to concrete. In this case, many words ending *-imony* and having an abstract sense originally later took on a concrete meaning. For instance, "testimony" which means at heart "the quality of being a witness" eventually came to represent "the words themselves spoken by a witness." Note also that the final *-y* will become *-i-* when another suffix is added after this one.

To the next suffix *-acity* ("the quality of being inclined to"), please add the meaning "the state of abounding in," as in voracity, meaning "gluttony, greediness in eating." If we gave noun-forming suffixes the same sorts of degrees we assign to their adjective-forming counterparts, this one

would be +2, the highest degree. It means there's a lot of whatever the base is: rapacity, "lots of seizing."

The next suffix *-y* is another one which often produces nouns that undergo the change from abstract to concrete. That's why Ayers has added to the suffix's original abstract senses ("the quality of, the state of") two concrete meanings ("the act of, the result of"). This *-y* suffix is responsible for the *-i-* often seen in between other word elements, so you'll find it hiding in many words. But for our purposes here, let's not go overboard. Instead, let's use this suffix only when it's the last suffix, in which case it will be spelled with a *-y*, not an *-i*. Also be careful not to confuse this Latinate *-y* with an identical Anglo-Saxon suffix *-y* which is used in several ways: (1) as a diminutive suffix meaning "little" as in Billy or kitty; (2) as a totally different suffix meaning "belonging to" as in homey, roadie ─ sometimes it's spelled *-ie* ─ and (3) yet another suffix meaning "like" as in smarty, like smarty-pants.

The last suffix in this chapter, *-ate* meaning "the office of, holder of the office of," is identical in form to the verb-forming suffix which means "to." But it's usually easy to tell these suffixes apart because the noun-forming variant has such a specific use. It's always related to government offices. And this noun-forming *-ate* generates far fewer derivatives than its verb-forming counterpart which is pervasive in Latin derivatives. All in all, if you see *-ate* and the word has something to do with government, choose the noun-forming option. Otherwise, assume it means "to."

The bases in this chapter start with CID-/CIS-, a word root which comes from two different but closely related Latin verbs. One means "cut" and gives us words like "incision, precise." The other means "kill" and produced words like "insecticide, suicide." The Romans actually had a third CID- base which means "fall." We've already encountered that in Lesson 12. So any time you see CID-, you'll have to ask yourself which sense ─ "cut" or "kill" or "fall" ─ works best for any particular word. Often the word itself makes it clear. "Suicide" is obviously killing yourself, not cutting or falling.

The next base is part of a system of bases which represent family relations. MATR-/MATERN- means "mother." PATR-/PATERN- means "father." So let's finish out the family and add the bases for "brother" and "sister." FRATER- (with or without the -E-) means "brother" ─ think fraternity, fraternize ─ and SOROR- means "sister" as in sorority. Two closely related bases on this list are PATRI- which means "fatherland, country," and PATRON- ("protector"). The sense of the first is "where your father lives" and the sense of the second is "acting like a father."

Remember that the S- on the front of SEQU-/SECUT- will disappear if it's preceded by the prefix *ex-*. Thus, "execute" will not have an -S-. This is not a matter of etymology but English spelling. Be careful! You have been warned!

Finally, Latin has two bases that look similar to SOL- ("alone"). One, also SOL-, means "sun" as in solar, and the other SOLUT- means "to free, loosen." From the latter we get words like "solution, dissolute." You won't be asked to learn the SOL- sun-base in this class, though I advise you to learn it; however, you will encounter the SOLUT- free/loosen-base in Lesson 16.

Since that base never takes the form SOL-, you should never confuse "alone" and "loosen." But be careful! While they're not identical, they look alike.

Now, on to the next lesson (Lesson 16), please turn to page 99 and put a big star next to the first suffix *-ion*. It is very common and shows up in a lot of Latinate words in English. Please note that it is not *-tion* as is often wrongly thought. If a *-t-* appears before *-ion*, it's most likely part of another suffix like *-at-* or *-it-*.

The other two prefixes in this lesson, *-ment* and *-men* mean the same thing ("the result of, the means of, the act of, the state of") because they're cognate, both being variations on the same suffix. These suffixes are only slightly less common than *-ion*, so put a couple of stars by them too.

The bases in this lesson begin with two important ones as well. To CRE-/CRESC-/CRET- ("grow") add another variation [CRU-] and put square brackets around it because this is the French form of the base. From the [CRU-] variant we get our word "accrue," meaning "increase." Be careful, too, that you take note of the form CRET-. We've already encountered another CRET- base back in Lesson 13: CERN-/CRET- meaning "separate." As I discussed there, the reason these two CRET- forms are identical is because they come from the same Latin verb. If you think about it, "grow" and "separate" are similar in meaning. When a plant grows, for instance, it separates from the ground. What you're really seeing here is two different metaphorical paths one Latin root followed.

The next base I-/IT- ("go") is a tricky one because it's so short. As I'm sure you remember from the last lesson, a single *i-* can be interpreted as a suffix, a variant of *-y*, and although I advised against ever doing that, frankly that's the way a lone vowel like *-i-* most often appears etymologically. The I- go-base is actually relatively rare.

Here's how I suggest you distinguish these word elements. If a word appears to have no base ─ and words *must* have bases! ─ look for an -i- element in the middle of the word. If you find one, then you probably have this I- go-base. However, if there's already a base in the word, then the -i- is all but certain to be a form of the suffix *-y* or a vowel variant in front of another suffix like *-ient*. Here's an example. Take the word "transient." It has a prefix *trans-* and what appears to be the suffix *-ient*. But if you diagnose it that way, you're left with no base, which is impossible. The prefix variants *tran-* and *tra-* don't help because there's no Latin base NS- or S- or SI-. The only way to break this word up etymologically is to assume that the base is I- and the suffix *-ent*, which is the correct analysis of this word's elements: *trans-* ("across") + I- ("go") + *-ent* ("-ing"). Transient means "going across," thus passing, momentary. Only use the base I- if you have to, and note that it all but never combines with another base.

Going on, I want to add another base which Mr. Ayers omits: LEG- meaning "law, bequeath" [bequeath means "to leave something to someone in your will"]. From this base we get words like "legal, legislate." I include this LEG- base here because it's identical in form to another base in this lesson, LEG-/LIG-/LECT- which means "choose, pick out, read." This second base is far more common in English derivatives so always try its meanings first. Usually the "legal" sense

of the first base, the new one I've added, stands out. For example, a word like "illegal" obviously contains a sense of "law."

Note also that the "choose" LEG- base has the meaning "read." As we noted in the metaphors lecture, to Romans "choosing" a book meant reading it. The metaphorical sense was probably originally "gather up" as in "gather up information." Indo-European languages in general do not have a common base for "read," because writing was not part of Indo-European culture before Indo-European groups separated and their languages began to drift apart. English "read," for instance, comes from a base that means "advise, explain," later "interpret." Greek used a base that meant "to know thoroughly." None of these bases are related linguistically. Likewise, words for "write" are often unrelated linguistically and come from a variety of roots usually meaning something like "scratch, etch, paint."

And finally I want to add one more base to this short list: TRIT- meaning "rub, wear (away)." Can you think of a word that means the slow wearing away of something and uses this base? Good! Attrition! But perhaps my favorite derivative from this base is "contrition," literally "the state of being very (*con-*) rubbed down (TRIT-)." An interesting metaphor developed here in Christian religion, the sense that, if you're "rubbed down," that is, "drooping," you're carrying the weight of great sin on your shoulders and it's bending you down. If so, you're "contrite," meaning that your guilt is obvious and now you're sorry for the terrible sins you've committed. Thus, you're seeking "contrition," God's forgiveness for those transgressions. What a metaphor to wear!

And that's it for this audio presentation. Go forth, my children, and sin no more! That's teacher for "Memorize your bases!"

Happy Etymologizing!