Latin Lessons 17-18

The goals of Lessons 17 and 18 are to explore more of the linguistic processes which can affect the meanings of words. Here we'll first look at how "changing concepts" can leave behind words based on obsolete notions or discredited theories. Then we'll examine how principles like euphemism and circumlocution are often used to distort the way people describe a process or situation which makes them uncomfortable. After watching this presentation, you should listen to its audio counterpart where I'll discuss the suffixes and bases introduced in these lessons.

First, changing concepts is "the process of semantic change resulting from changes in the understanding of the world around us." This is a natural product of our growing and evolving human community. To see how this has affected English in particular requires some understanding of the general drift of Western civilization. For instance, medical treatment and knowledge of physiology have changed greatly over the last few millennia. Our bodies were once thought to consist of four "humors" ─ blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile ─ liquids which must be kept in balance to maintain good health. This "humors theory of medicine," which Mr. Ayers discusses on pages 102-103, centered on ensuring a person didn't have too much of one of these substances. For example, if you were deemed to have too much blood, you had to be bled, a job often performed in the early modern world by barbers, which is why barber poles have red stripes on them. It was an advertisement that you could be bled there.

According to this theory, each of these humors in surplus caused a person to exhibit certain symptoms. For instance, too much blood could cause a person to become overly cheery ─ think Santa Claus and his rosy cheeks! ─ and a doctor would diagnose him as "sanguine," a word which derives from the Latin for "blood." Today, sanguine still means "happy, contented." Conversely, the patient who suffered from an excess of black bile was deemed depressed due to melancholy, a word composed of the Greek roots for "black" (*melan-*) and "bile" (*-chol*). If, on the other hand, his body produced too much yellow bile, he easily became enraged and was diagnosed as "choleric," a term that is also based on the Greek word for "bile." All these words ─ sanguine ("cheerful"), melancholy ("depression") and choleric ("angry") ─ still exist with those definitions in English, even though we've long stopped treating patients according to their humors. Thank goodness! If I had to be bled every time I went to see a barber, I would certainly not be sanguine, and definitely very shaggy.

The classical gods of Greece and Rome represent a now defunct religion which has nevertheless left its footprint on our vocabulary. For instance, we have the word "volcanic" derived from the name of the Roman god of fire and the forge, Vulcan. The ancients believed that, when he was working in his smithy deep beneath the earth, he caused the rumbling and eruptions of lava seen in volcanoes, his workplace. Similarly, the Roman god of death, Pluto, has given us the word "plutonic." Because Pluto was imagined to live deep beneath the surface of the earth, his name has come to signify rock formations created far down in the crust, usually by intense heat. Hell and heat are a natural pair. Another, more exotic example of a word left behind by changing concepts is "uranoplasty," literally "the act of shaping 'Uranus' (the god of the sky, the personification of the dome of heaven)." Uranoplasty, however, does not refer to anything astronomical but surgical, an operation performed on the soft palate of the mouth. Indeed the

roof of your mouth is shaped like a little dome, making it comparable to the dome of heaven, at least according to doctors.

We should note, however, that changing concepts is not exclusively a historical phenomenon. Our changing world is affecting modern English vocabulary just as much, if not more, than archaic, discredited beliefs. The only question is: how long will the new vocabulary we invent last? For instance, will we continue to call the person who runs an academic department at a university a "chair," not a "chairman" as we once did, because to us it seems odd to refer to a woman as a "chair*man*." In other words, will the impact of feminist thinking continue to have enough sway to make the change from "chairman" to "chair" permanent?

But perhaps nothing has had a greater impact on modern English than the world of computing. Words like interface ("to exchange data"), bug ("a problem"), crash ("to stop working suddenly"), loop ("to run in circles"), and virus ("a program designed to attack other systems") are all the product of our constant exposure to computers and programming. Should this pattern continue ─ and does anybody believe it won't? ─ we'll incorporate more and more computer-based terminology, to the point perhaps where we'll have to rewrite the classics and include this type of language so people understand them. Recently I ran across one such experiment, a version of Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy translated into computer-ese:

> 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.

Brilliant! And terrifying! Let's move on.

In Lesson 18, Mr. Ayers discusses two other types of semantic change: euphemism and circumlocution. The first, euphemism, which means literally "good-speaking" ─ the word comes from Greek ─ is "the act of replacing a word which is more disagreeable or unpleasant with one that is less so." It can also be the more pleasant word or phrase itself. In that case, euphemism is an example of another type of semantic change we've studied: abstract to concrete. The abstract principle of "good speaking" has come to mean the actual "well-spoken" word.

I once encountered a mail-order catalogue for Eileen's Lingerie featuring "Apparel for the … Full-Flowered Woman." Wow, I didn't know they bloomed. The euphemism here stymied me until I opened the catalogue and saw that it centered on plus sizes (14-26). Then I realized Eileen ─ and I can tell she's a very nice lady ─ was trying not to say "overweight," which is why the lingerie she sold was sized small, medium and … majestic. Eileen may be targeting a hefty

clientele but she really doesn't want you to think about weight as such so she calls it majesty. Well, who can argue with that? Queen bees are bigger than their workers.

Ever been to the doctor, when he turns around, holding a syringe that's closer in size to a gas pump than a needle, and says "This may *sting* a little"? Why does he say this? Because he doesn't want to say "This is gonna be excruciatingly painful. My last patient tried to jump out the window." So he uses a nicer word, "sting." Beware of doctors bearing big needles and euphemisms, and when you go to visit them, bring a parachute.

As far as we can tell, euphemism is as old as language itself. One principle driving it is the notion that words themselves have power, "word magic." If you know the word for something, you can make it happen or change it. Think Harry Potter and spells. For instance, if you know someone's name, you can control their destiny by using that name to bewitch them. Ever heard Homer's story of the Greek hero Odysseus and his encounter with the one-eyed man-eating monster Polyphemus, the Cyclops? If you haven't, here it is. If you have, here's the linguist's version.

Midway through Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, after Odysseus has washed up on the shores of an island inhabited by a huge creature called a Cyclops, he realizes that this Cyclops who is named Polyphemus is not a very nice guy ─ Polyphemus eats several of Odysseus' men ─ so Odysseus lies to the Cyclops and says his name is "No One." [Sidenote. The Latin word for "no one" is *nemo* which is why Jules Verne named his captain in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Captain Nemo. He's the new "No One," a modern Odysseus.] Back to the Greek story. By giving the Cyclops a false name, Odysseus prevents the monstrous man-eater from using his name against him. But later after Odysseus has blinded the Cyclops and run away, he boasts saying, "If anyone asks you who blinded you, Cyclops, tell them it was Odysseus." Now the Cyclops has what he needs to curse Odysseus: his name. Odysseus ends up wandering the Mediterranean for ten years trying to get home. Homer's point is that knowing words, especially people's names, can be a very dangerous power.

So dangerous that some of the names for the classical gods aren't actually their names. The god of death, for instance, is called Hades, but that's not really his name. It's more of a title. In Greek, Hades means "the invisible one," which is a good way to address him if you think about it because, well, he *is* invisible. When someone dies, you don't see Death come but still they die so he must be there. If you were to pray to this god and use his actual name, he might come and what would you be? Dead! That's not what you're praying for, so better to refer to him by a euphemistic title, "Mr. Invisible," a designation he may recognize but won't necessarily answer to, which is good.

Perhaps the most euphemistic of the euphemisms for classical deities is the Eumenides, the so-called "ones who are good (*eu*-) minded (*men*-)." But this is just plain wrong. The Eumenides are anything but good-minded. They're ancient spirits of vengeance which rise from the blood of any parents who've been killed by one of their children. These "good-minded ones" have long sharp teeth, large staring eyes that drip blood, and they never sleep. By any standard, they are extremely unpleasant and not good-minded toward anyone. So why are these voodoo vengeance

demons called “good-minded”? Because you’d like them to be good-minded and by calling them that maybe they will be. And good luck there. I have another idea: don’t kill your mother.

Notice that people tend to euphemize things they’re uncomfortable speaking about directly, like death and killing. When we don’t want to say “kill,” we use other phrases like “do away with” ─ and that would be *far* away with, huh? ─ or “put down” ─ *way* down! ─ or “put to sleep.” But it ain’t sleep, is it? It’s the big sleep. And rather than say “die,” we talk about “passing on” or “passing away.” The dead aren’t dead; they’re the “dear departed.” News flash: departed and on a one-way trip. They’re not coming back. Or my personal favorite: “the late.” Just to be clear, they’re going to be *very* late.

But if there’s a sphere where we are particularly uncomfortable, it’s … sex. You just can’t go around talking about sex with strange people, so we say they’re having “an affair,” she’s “seeing someone,” or they’re “doing it.” If you don’t specify what “it” is, we all know what “it” is, because everyone’s thinking about “it” but no one wants to talk about “it,” certainly not envision “it” in graphic terms. Oh, now I need to wash my brain. And if you’re doing “it,” be careful or you’ll soon be “expecting.” And if what you’re “expecting” is peace and quiet, you’re going to be very disappointed. Here’s my favorite sex euphemism: “fix” as in “fix the cat.” You know what I’m talking about: taking the cat to the veterinarian and having it “fixed.” Now let’s think about that for a second from the cat’s perspective. He was perfectly fine before he went to the vet who did not “fix” him. Indeed, exactly the opposite. Now he needs repair. But we’d rather say something completely wrong than think about what the vet just did. Yuck.

Another common site for euphemism is the bathroom. We’re just very uneasy when it comes to discussing the later stages of digestion, so we talk about “doing number one or number two.” What do you suppose number three would be? Or when you’re on a long drive, “taking a rest stop.” Oh my gosh, have you ever been to an interstate “rest stop.” For heaven’s sake, don’t lie down and take a nap in there. Or we talk about “going to the bathroom.” Think about it. How many “bathrooms” ─ say, in airports ─ have baths? And if you went in one of those and someone was taking a bath, wouldn’t you call the police? But we’d rather call the room after a piece of equipment which it doesn’t contain than say what actually happens in there. The truth is, lies are sometimes preferable to the truth, and that’s when we seek out euphemism.

Why? Because we don’t want to call up vivid, literal images of certain activities in the minds of our fellow humans. It’s just impolite. It’s distasteful. Unless, of course, you like being crude and graphic, as some people do, in which case you indulge in the reverse of euphemism, “dysphemism,” that is, overly literal and explicit language designed to cause as much discomfort as possible, often to get a laugh. Dysphemists call dying “kicking the bucket, biting the big one.” Sex is “testing someone’s oil.” I’ll never see a dipstick the same way again. Among famous dysphemers, Shakespeare who has his very crude character Iago refer to sex as “the beast with two backs.” Thanks, Will. Really didn’t need that picture.

The same drive to keep a listener from envisioning unpleasant details can be born, not of decorum or an effort to be polite, but from more nefarious and insidious motivations, the wish to hide the truth behind a veil of murky and unclear language. That is called circumlocution, “an indirect or lengthy way of expressing a simple or concrete idea.” It means literally “speak

(LOCUT-) around (*circum*-),” that is, not directly addressing the subject. The point is exactly that, to avoid saying what’s obvious, to cover over, if not up, the truth. Circumlocution is a way of lying without actually lying.

For instance, if you talk about a family as “dysfunctional,” when the truth is they all killed each other in a gun battle over who owns the big screen TV, then you’re employing circumlocution. You’re not calling them what they are: crazy and murderous and it’s probably a good thing their DNA is no longer in the gene pool. Suppose you’re watching a sports event and a player is severely injured ─ everyone could see his foot fell off ─ but the announcer says, “He looks a little shaken up on the play,” stand up and shout “Circumlocution!” The announcer is obviously trying to make you see the horrific injury as a momentary problem because he doesn’t want you to turn away in disgust and change the channel. If you did, you might miss the next commercial.

Circumlocution is all around us but nowhere more than in the military. The Pentagon is a veritable circumlocution factory. You’ve probably encountered many of their terms for “speaking around” the truth. Let’s test that. I’ll give you a military circumlocution. You tell me what it’s actually referring to. In Pentagonish, what does “neutralize” really mean? If they “neutralize” the enemy, what have they actually done? Killed them. What if the army “visits a site”? Are they having a picnic? No, they’re bombing it. What are “firepower assets”? That’s right: artillery. Assets? Sounds so positive. What about “verbal counselling”? Want some of that? Not unless you like being yelled at. And what are “dividends”? “There were dividends from the missiles we launched.” You got it. We hit something.

So it was a “target-rich area.” Meaning? A good place to bomb, except for the “collateral damage from incontinent ordnance.” Sounds like all you need is mop, but no! That means you killed innocent civilians. Oops. And what if a soldier suffers from “philosophical disillusionment”? That pair of five-syllable monsters adds up to “cowardice”? And that philosophical disillusionment led to “non-duty, non-pay status.” Right. They fired him. Which is why the Pentagon needs “confidence building measures.” Now what would those be? Higher pay? Better working conditions? Every other Friday off? No, “confidence building measures” is the Pentagon’s term for … circumlocutions. Yes, they have a circumlocution for circumlocutions, because who wants to say outright you need to use those? Hiding your intentions and the truth of what you’re doing, that’s the point of circumlocuting. So here’s a little verbal counselling from me to you: learn to recognize circumlocution or you’ll be college collateral damage. Get it?

And that’s the end of this video presentation on the linguistic principles covered in Lessons 17 and 18 of Ayers’ textbook. Next please listen to the audio presentation about the assignments in these same lessons, in particular, the bases and suffixes you’re asked to memorize there. You’ll find a link to that audio presentation on the course web site.

Enjoy your etymological assets!

ASSIGNMENT

This audio presentation covers the exercises in Latin Lessons 17 and 18. Please open your textbook to page 103. At the bottom of the page, Mr. Ayers introduces the first in a series of

diminutive suffixes. So let's begin by defining diminutive: "pertaining to a suffix ─ or sometimes the noun it's attached to ─ indicating small size and sometimes the quality or state of being loved, lovable, pitiable or contemptible." "Loved, lovable, pitiable or contemptible"? Can one suffix say all that? Does that mean we confuse the things we love and despise? Do I love my students, but despise them too? I sure do, you little monsters! Especially when you don't study ahead of time and try to cram a whole bunch of suffixes into your brain the hour before the quiz! Then you can bet I love you and lament you at the same time, ya little brats! "Little," get it? Little is both cute and contemptible.

So *-cule*, *-el* (on the next page), *-il*, *-ole* and *-ule* all mean "little," which can betoken actually little or have a "belittling" sense. Be careful not to confuse the diminutive suffix *-il* with *-ile*, a suffix we've already run into twice: one that means "pertaining to" (Lesson 9) and another that means "able to be" (Lesson 11).

The bases in this lesson are quite straightforward so I'll only remind you that you need to learn them. One thing to note, however: be careful not to confuse the SECT- form of the last base in the list (SEC-/SEG-/SECT- meaning "cut") with a base we learned in Lesson 15, SEQU-/SECUT- ("follow"). SECT- means "cut"; SECUT- means "follow."

Also, as I've done before, I want to add a base to Ayer's list here: JOC- which means "joke." From this base we get words like jocular and jocund. Both mean "cheerful, jokey."

Finally, let's turn to Lesson 18, starting on page 110. There you'll find a few more suffixes to memorize, the first of which is *-ance/-ancy/-ence/-ency*, meaning "the quality of -ing, the state of -ing." That is, this suffix is usually attached to a base that has a verb sense to which should be attached -ing, for instance, "sequence" which literally means "the act of following." Note also this suffix often undergoes the change from abstract to concrete. In other words, it moves from its original abstract sense ("the quality or state of -ing") to a concrete sense ("that which"). Sequence is a good example of this. Sequence means etymologically "the state of following," but we use it more often to mean "the actual things which follow other things," as in a sequence of suffixes to memorize. Very concrete!

The next suffix *-or* ("the state of, the result of") obviously does the same: "state" is abstract; "result" is concrete. Note that this suffix has a close relative, another *-or* meaning "one who," which we'll study in the next lesson.

The bases in this lesson include some very important ones you'll see in many English derivatives. For instance, the first base AG-/IG-/ACT- comes from a widely used Latin verb which means "do, drive." The sense of that verb was "to put into motion, to move" as in "intransigency," literally "the state of (*-ity*) not (*in-*) moving (-IG) across (*trans-*)." Intransigency is the product of a stubborn refusal to negotiate or change position.

If you look further down this list, you'll find another important base with a closely related meaning, GER-/GEST-, which means at heart "to process, to run (as in 'run a machine,' not run with your legs)." The Latin verb this base comes from means "to make something do what it's supposed to do so you get what you supposed to get from it." For example, if you GEST- your

food after you eat it, you digest it. That is, you process it which is what you're supposed to do with it. If, on the other hand, you GEST- a baby, you don't eat it ─ that's not what you're supposed to do with a baby ─ it gestates. It grows in its mother's womb. Gestation is literally "baby processing."

Be sure to take note of other important verb bases in this list: COG-/COGIT- ("think, reflect, consider"), DIC-/DICT- ("say"), MIT(T)-/MIS(S)- ("send, let go") and VAL-/VAIL- ("be strong, be worthy"). These bases are found in many English words and are well worth memorizing. Put stars next to all of them.

And that's it for this audio presentation.

Happy etymologizing!