# Latin Lessons 19-20

The goals of Lessons 19 and 20 are to examine two more types of semantic change: folk etymology and clips. Once you've watched this presentation, you should listen to the audio portion of this lesson about the suffixes and bases in these lessons.

The first linguistic process we'll address here is folk etymology, "the process by which a word changes form through a mistaken assimilation of that word to another word or form which it resembles." In other words, speakers of a language misinterpret the elements of a word and alter it under some false belief about its etymology. There's actually a technical term for this, paronomasia, literally "false word creation." It's also used to describe punning, but there's an important difference between a pun and a folk etymology. People making puns *know* that they're playing with the word and distorting it somehow; with folk etymology speakers are unaware of what they're doing. To put it another way, ignorance plays a central role in folk etymology. You have to be poorly informed about history and the elements of words to become susceptible to a folk etymology.

A good example is the word momento, a misunderstanding of the real word memento. Memento in Latin means "Remember!" It's a command not to forget something important. But because mementos are often associated with significant moments in people's lives, the word was changed to momentos. It helps that we often use "moment" in phrases describing critical events, like "the big moment," "the moment of truth," or "of great moment." The adjective momentous, meaning "very important," also paved the way for this particular folk etymology.

Another examples is laxadaisical. Originally the word comes from an expression "Alack the day!" ─ Shakespeare uses it ─ an old way of expressing dismay. Today we're more likely to say "Holy (something or other)!" By the seventeenth century lackaday had spawned the humorous adjective lackadaisy, which later became lackadaisical, meaning "prone to affected sentiment." You know, the kind of people who put their hand on their forehead and lament loudly. Since people like that tend to be rather languid and inactive, the word took on a sense of "vapid, listless, showing little interest." And because people who sink back on their swoon couches and complain of having the vapors look relaxed or just lax, lackadaisical was misdiagnosed in the popular mind as containing a -lax- base and the word became laxadaisical. Do you see the principle at work here? Stupidity.

Ever heard someone say "He's the spitting image of his father"? Ever wonder why who's spitting? The answer is … no one. The original phrase is "spirit and image," meaning "both inside (spirit) and outside (image)." It's another way of saying totally. But when spirit was contracted to spit ─ remember syncope, the shortening of a word by the removal of a syllable, like gen'ral or ev'ry ─ once spit replaces spirit, the phrase became confusing. It sounded like someone was spitting, and because there is the custom of spitting into your hand and shaking when you swear a solemn, serious vow, spit seemed to refer to this habit. Thus, "spit and" turned into "spittin'." Your spitting image.

Ever seen a chaise lounge, one of those long comfortable chair you can put your feet up in? No, you haven't. You've seen a chaise longue. Longue is the French word for "long" ─ the chair is

long like a recliner — but because you "lounge" in it, folks mis-etymologized the term as chaise lounge. Another folk etymology. [So where did "lounge" come from? Fascinating word! It comes from the Latin adjective *longis* ("drowsy") and later came to be an insult meaning "lout, laggard," a lazy fellow. In the Middle Ages the name based on this adjective Longinus was given to the centurion in medieval plays who watches over Christ at the crucifixion. Longinus falls asleep which alone Christ to sneak off the cross unseen. Because Longinus stretches out and snoozes, to "longinus" came to mean to "lounge."]

Have you ever heard the expression "eat humble pie"? It's not humble; it's umble. Umbles are the entrails of an animal. "Umble" comes from the Latin word *lumbulus* ("loin") which became *nombles* in medieval French and English. Later, a/numble was misconstrued as an/umble. That process is called metanalysis. It gives us words like "orange" (originally, a/norange, where the initial n- was lost) and "nickname" (originally, an/ekename, where an n- was added). In the same way, numble became umble. At medieval banquets, the umbles of a deer were cooked and served in a pie to servants. Imagine what that tasted like. Not really as good as the meat which is what the lords ate! So "to eat umble pie" was to get the bad end of the beast. But umble sounds like humble, and humble people (servants and the like) are the one who ate umble pie. Thus, folks changed the phrase to "humble pie."

Here's another folk etymology" the big cheese, used in reference to "the most important person in the room." Your boss is the big cheese. But is he cheese? No, he's *chiz*, a Persian (later Urdu) word for an important thing. When that true origin of the term was forgotten, *chiz* changed to cheese, even though one cheese is not more important than another. But something appealed to English speakers about assigning relative status of cheeses — perhaps because it just sounded silly? — and the "big cheese" was born.

If you want to see a few more examples of folk etymologies, open your textbook to exercise IV on page 116. There you'll find ten more. You can look up the true etymology — that's redundant, isn't it? — of words like belfry (no bells), curtail (no tails), hangnails (nothing's hanging), penthouse (not a house), shamefaced (no faces), sovereign (no one's reigning) and surround (nothing round about it). I'll let you pursue the full truth. All I'll ask you to know is that these words have the form they do because they're folk etymologies.

In Lesson 20, Mr. Ayers looks into another way words can change. In this case, a word can be clipped down, cut into a smaller word. To have this happen a word must be used a lot, inspiring the need to abbreviate it. Linguistic call this type of abbreviated word a clip, meaning "a word which has lost its initial or final part (or both) but retains the same general meaning."

Computer jargon has introduced quite a few clips recently. To "boot" up your computer is a shortened version of "(apply a) bootstrapping program, or bootstrap loader," the program which loads the rest of the operating system. It's a metaphor drawn from skiing, where skiers strap on his boots before they ski.

Medicine also gives many clips: prep for prepare (as in "prep for surgery"), doc for doctor, and premie for "premature baby." Automobiles import clips, too: gas for gasoline, lube for lubrication, and semi for semi-trailer. Among other clips found in English are memo for

memorandum, con for convict, pen for penitentiary, phone for telephone, dis for disrespect and, one of my favorite, patter (like the patter of rain on a window) from … *Pater noster*, the first words of the Lord's Prayer in Latin (*Pater noster qui es in caelis sanctificetur nomen tuum …*). Because people who are absolving their sins are often told by their priests to recite the Lord's Prayer several times and they do so as quickly as possible, saying "*Paternosterquiesincaelis…*" at top speed, because of this habit the verb patter developed from the sound of this rapid speech. I wonder if God likes clips.

And that's it for the linguistic principles in these lessons. There's one other thing, however, I want to call to your attention. Starting with the next quiz (Quiz 3) the definitions you'll write in the last part (where you define a word in a sentence) will be worth two points: one for the etymological definition and one for the contextual definition. By now you should be able to make a good guess at the metaphor ─ if there is one! ─ underlying the meaning of a word in a sentence. That is, by looking at the context of a sentence you should be able to make the metaphorical leap from the etymology of a word's elements to the meaning of the word in its current usage. I'll give you full credit for a good guess even if you don't hit the nail on the head. Get the metaphor?

Let's end this video presentation by practicing clips and doing Exercise IV on page 119. Can you see the full word which has been shortened to create the clips listed there? The first one is bus. That's a tough one because this is a clip of a Latin word, omnibus, which means "for everybody." Why would buses be called that? Of course, they're public transport meant "for everyone" to ride. Next is cab, as in taxicab. Originally that was a taximeter cabriolet, a carriage that bounced around a lot (cabriolet -- the base is also seen in caper) and could be measured for the distance it traveled (taximeter). Can you see now why we like and use clips? Imagine having to yell "taximeter cabriolet" every time you wanted to hail a taxi.

As for the other clips in this exercise, I'll let you research them in your dictionary. If you have any questions about them, or about clips in general, please don't hesitate to contact me. With that, we've come to the end of this video presentation. In the accompanying audio presentation for Lessons 19 and 20, we'll look at the bases and suffixes to be memorized here. You'll find a link to that audio presentation on the course web site.

Happy etymologies!

ASSIGNMENT

This audio presentation covers the exercises in Lessons 19 and 20. Please turn to page 113 where Mr. Ayers lists the prefixes to be memorized in Lesson 19. As always, I'll comment only on the suffixes and bases here about which there is something I want to call to your attention, but you are responsible for memorizing all the suffixes and bases in these lists.

The first suffix, *-ure*, meaning "the act of, the result of," can also mean "the thing used for," as in "denture" (a thing used for teeth), legislature ("a thing used to create law")." This is yet another example of the change from abstract to concrete. Boy, that happens a lot!

On the next page is the suffix *-or*, "one who does, that which does." It has a feminine counterpart, *-trix*, seen words like "executrix, dominatrix." I won't ask you to memorize that form since it's seen so little. But you should add a plural meaning for *-or*, "those who do," as in "electorate" (the legislative body of *those who* choose a politician for public office).

Take careful note of the next suffix, *-andum/-iendum* (with several variant forms, including the plurals *-anda/-ienda*). The essential sense of this suffix is "must be" and it's seen in relatively few English words but some very important ones, not just "agenda" and "memoranda" but also "propaganda, innuendo, dividend," all things which contain the sense "must be" in some way. Dividends, for instance, "must be" divided up among shareholders.

Now let's look at the bases in this lesson, starting with JAC-/JECT-, which means "throw." This base has also a figurative sense used metaphorically to express what happens when you use "throw" in reference to mental activity. What would you guess that figurative sense is? What are you doing when you "throw" out an idea? Are you targeting your thought precisely? Do you know exactly what you're aiming at when you "toss out" a notion? No, you're … guessing. From that sense we get our word "conjecture," meaning "a guess." So add the meaning "take a guess" to this base.

To the next base NOMEN-/NOMIN- add the form [NOM-]. It's the French form of this base and is seen in the French-based phrase "*nom de plume*," meaning "a pseudonym, a false name." Writers sometimes write under a false name to disguise their identity.

Be careful to remember that bases which start with s- like STA-/STIT-/SIST- can lose that s- when preceded directly by the prefix *ex-*. Thus, words like "extant" which is etymologically *ex-* + STA-, or "exist" which is etymologically *ex-* + SIST-, lose their initial s- to *ex-*. You have been warned!

Let's add a base here, as we do sometimes, in this case the base VIR-. VIR- goes back to two bases which look identical in Latin but have very different meanings. One means "man" and gives us words like "virile, virtue," and even "werewolf," literally "man-wolf." The other means "poison" and is seen in English words like "virus, virulent." I would like to stress that these bases are not related. Men are not poison, necessarily.

Proceeding to Lesson 20, you'll find on page 117 the verb-forming suffix *-esce*. It means "to begin, to become." Note that the final -e drops when another suffix is added so put that final -e in parentheses. It's optional. This suffix has a technical name, inchoative. I want you to learn that term. It means "a word or word unit denoting the beginning of an action, state or occurrence." All inchoatives in English which comes from Latin have *-sc-* in them and have a sense of "begin, become" in one way or another.

To end this lesson let's look at the bases on page 118. To the first base CAPIT- add the sense "chief." A capital is a "chief city." Capital can also betoken wealth as in "capital investments" from the sense of "principal (chief) funds." Because one's wealth was often associated with livestock, this base developed in a syncopated form into "cattle" which are to this day still counted by "head." Other financial words which stem from this base include "chattel"

(possessions, often used in reference to women as property) and "capitalist," literally "a man of money," originally a term of reproach coined during the French Revolution.

And speaking of French, let's add the form [LIEU-] to LOC-. [LIEU-] is the French form of this base as seen in our word lieutenant, literally "a place holder," someone who occupies the place of another, a substitute or deputy. Lieutenants originally stepped in for higher officers who were absent for some reason. Be careful not to confuse this base LOC- ("place") with LOCUT- ("speak").

The next base PUT- comes originally from a Latin base that means "prune," as in "prune a bush." It's hard to say why Romans saw thinking as pruning, other than it conforms with their larger metaphor that knowing is cutting, as we discussed in the metaphor presentation. I like to imagine that Romans saw the task of pruning bushes as a time for thinking about things. I do, but that's probably not a very likely etymology.

Finally, let's add one base here, MILIT- which means "soldier." We get words like "military, militant" from this base. So what do you think it means if the facts "militate" against someone's argument? They "argue against" it like little soldiers fighting it off. "Militate" ─ that's a good word to know.

And that's it for this audio presentation. Happy etymologizing!