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Language and values are in a constant state of flux, and meanings of words are ever changing. Alas, even many of the seven deadly sins are no longer seen as particularly pernicious, and this has also had an effect on the meaning of words. For example, pride is now seen by virtually all to be a positive quality. Thus to express disparagement about some aspect of pride, one must use the word "hubris."

As such, we find words whose senses have almost reversed. Some words that were once not necessarily complimentary have ameliorated over the years to denote positive personality characteristics. For example, "noble" once merely referred to an accident of birth and did not imply high-mindedness.

The opposite is also true, and in this section I will look at words that we now regard as complimentary (or at least carry a somewhat positive connotation) that originally bore an insulting meaning. You will discover why, etymologically speaking, it might not matter to Santa whether you're naughty or nice.

✑ NICE

I remember this sophomoric joke from the 1960s: What's the difference between a good girl and a nice girl? Answer: The good girl goes to a party, goes home then goes to bed whereas the nice girl goes to the party, goes to bed then goes home. Etymologically, this depiction of the nice lass is correct because the word "nice" carried a connotation of wantonness and lasciviousness many centuries before acquiring a sense of something pleasant. The word derives from the Latin *nescius*, "ignorant"; the first sense of the word at the beginning of the twelfth century was ignorant or foolish. By the end of the twelfth century this foolish behaviour could be deemed to be morally inappropriate and it acquired the sense of lasciviousness. Starting with the fourteenth century the word acquired many other senses including "extravagant," "scrupulous," "coy," "dainty" and "refined." Shakespeare in *As You Like It* (c. 1600) has Jaques speak of the lady's melancholy as being "nice," meaning fastidious. It isn't until the beginning of the eighteenth century that we see a full semantic inversion, when the word started to be used as a synonym for "respectable." By the end of the eighteenth century, Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* has Henry Tilney making fun of Catherine Morland for her overuse of the word: "'Very true,' said Henry, 'and this is a very nice day, and we are taking a very nice walk, and you are two very nice young ladies. Oh! It is a very nice word indeed! — It does for everything. Originally perhaps it was applied only to express neatness, propriety, delicacy, or refinement; — people were nice in their dress, in their sentiments, or their choice. But now every commendation on every subject is comprised in that one word.'" I am afraid that Henry's teasing did not do much to change the overuse of "nice." "Nice" is still the preferred adjective for anything lovely or beautiful or fine or . . . .

✑ NAUGHTY

While being called "naughty" for the morally upright is not complimentary, its sense has definitely become less pernicious. It has come to mean

"badly behaved" and it might be used to describe a child who has disregarded his or her parents' wishes. Or an actress who has done something titillating. Although its original sense in the early thirteenth century was of being needy i.e., "having naught," within fifty years the sense of being bad was not like the present one — innocuous — and it referred to a wicked or vicious person. This is the manner in which it is employed in the King James Bible, in Proverbs 6:12: "A naughty person. A wicked man, walketh with a froward mouth." This same sense is used in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* when the King, speaking to Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, says of Jesus: "whiles here He lived / Upon this naughty earth." By the beginning of the fifteenth century, the word had acquired more than a soupçon of licentiousness and the story is told that when Samuel Johnson published his famous dictionary in 1755 he was complimented by two biddies for omitting "naughty words" in his tome. Naughty Johnson replied, "What! My dears! Then you have been looking for them!"

✒ TORY

The term "Tory" is really an anglicized spelling of the Irish *tóraidhe*, "pursuer," and originally denoted an Irish guerilla who, to revenge being ousted from his land by the British, took to plundering Ireland's occupiers. The *OED* highlights this origin in its first definition of "Tory": "In the seventeenth century, one of the dispossessed Irish, who became outlaws, subsisting by plundering and killing the English settlers and soldiers." It quickly became a term to refer to any Irish Papist, and by the middle of the seventeenth century the word was often used by British commentators as a synonym for "bandit," as in this mid-seventeenth century reference by Bulstrode Whitelock: "Eight Officers . . . riding upon the Highway [in Ireland], were murder'd by those bloody Highway Rogues called the Tories."

At the end of the seventeenth century the word was applied to a group of English politicians who had originally opposed the deposing of

Roman Catholic King James and his replacement with the Protestant duo, William and Mary. Eventually, this loose assortment of politicians became regarded as a political party, the Tories. Even later, however, we find the word used as a derogation of the Irish. Catharine Macaulay, in *The History of England*, written in 1849 writes, "The bogs of Ireland . . . afforded a refuge to Popish outlaws, much resembling those who were afterwards known as Whiteboys. These men were then called Tories."

✍ PRETTY

In Old English, *prættig* (the forbear of "pretty") possessed a negative sense, and was synonymous with "cunning" or "crafty." It was a derivative of the word *prætt*, "trick" or "wile," and it was only in the fifteenth century that "pretty" acquired the sense of "pleasing in appearance." Even in the eighteenth century it was often used in a negative sense, as in John Arbuthnot's *John Bull*: "There goes the prettiest Fellow in the World . . . for managing a Jury." Today, when one refers to a novel as "a pretty little book," the word "pretty" can take on two meanings, depending on the emphasis given: that the book is pleasing, or very small.

✍ ELEGANT

Originally, "elegant" carried a taint of being dainty or foppish. The *OED* notes that "in early Latin *elegans* was a term of reproach, 'dainty, fastidious, foppish,' but in classical times it expressed the notions of refined luxury, graceful propriety, which are reproduced in the modern English use." The negative sense of the word can be seen in Alexander Barclay's *Ship of Fooles*, written in 1509: "It is . . . not for man to be so elegant, To such toyes wanton women may encline." Today, it is almost always positive, except in those circumstances where anything elegant is regarded as elitist.

✑ SHREWD

The *Encarta World English Dictionary* defines "shrewd" as "good at judging people and situations." Compare this to the first definition in the *OED*: "Depraved, wicked; evil-disposed, malignant. Passing into a weaker sense: Malicious, mischievous." In *Richard II*, Shakespeare uses the word to mean "dangerous" or "harmful" when King Richard tells Aumerle, "For every man that Bolingbroke hath pressed / To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown." It is generally believed that the word comes from the mouse-like animal "shrew." During the Middle Ages many people feared this small insect-eating animal; they believed that it possessed a lethal poisonous bite and rendered cattle lame by scampering on their backs. The sense of "shrew" referring to a scolding woman comes from the image of a woman with an acid tongue and barking voice.

✑ LUXURIOUS

Alas, there has been a shift in values, and several of the seven deadly sins such as pride and lust are not held in the same contempt as they once were, when most people were God-fearing and hell-believing souls. We see this shift in the word "luxurious." "Luxury" was originally seen as a negative quality as it denoted sinful self-indulgence. Hence the first senses of "luxurious," in 1330, according to the *OED*, are "lascivious, lecherous, unchaste." The lascivious taint of "luxury" is seen in *Hamlet* when the Prince's ghost-father tells him that the "royal bed of Denmark" is being used as "a couch for luxury and damned incest." Even as late as 1630 it carried this same sense in R. Johnson's *Kingdom and Commonwealth*: "They are exceeding luxurious, by reason whereof the Countrey swarmeth with Whores."

Already by 1374, however, it had acquired another slightly less pernicious sense and could mean "outrageous, outlandish, excessive." By the seventeenth century, it had acquired a sense of habitual use of what

is choice or costly, and it wasn't until the nineteenth century that it obtained its modern sense of contributing to sumptuous living.

Now that the conspicuous consumption of unregulated capitalism is endangering our resource-depleted planet, perhaps one day "luxury" will regain its rapacious sense.

❧ PURCHASE

While in English we have the expression "buyer beware," in days of yore it was actually the purchaser who needed to be on guard. "Purchase" originally meant "to take by force." In Old French, *filz de porchaz* was a term for a bastard, and Geoffrey Hughes in *Words in Time* informs us that "For centuries *purchase* meant something far more rapacious and disorderly than the present transactional sense denotes. The old senses of *purchase*, dating in Middle English from circa 1297, were derived from *chase* and revolved around the actions of hunting and taking by force, whether the object was prey, person, plunder or pelf (stolen goods)."

❧ FOND

Originally "fond" meant "infatuated, foolish, silly," and is used often in this sense in Shakespeare's plays. When Hamlet resolves to avenge his father's murder, he vows, "Yea from the table of my memory / I'll wipe away all trivial fond records." The same sense applies in *Julius Caesar* when Caesar tells Metellus, "Be not fond, / To think that Caesar bears such rebel blood." In *King Lear*, Lear calls himself "fond" with the sense being "foolishly affectionate." In the middle of the seventeenth century, it began to be used to mean "cherished," even by the non-foolish strains of society. Today, the word seems to be dropping a notch or two, in that it is often used as a way of not saying "love." The verb "fondle" derives from "fond," and its first usage is found at the end of the seventeenth century.