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INTRODUCTION

The Times (and Meanings of Words) They Are a-Changin'

ALTHOUGH IN THE MIDDLE AGES it is unlikely that gold fetched over $1,500 an ounce, we should still pity the alchemists of the time who laboured futilely to turn lead into gold. All they had to do to perform such a metamorphosis (at least semantically) was to create a simple series of synonym chains. Let me explain how this black art can be completed. For example, to turn "black" into "white" we follow these steps: *Black*–dark–obscure–hidden–concealed–snug–pleasant–easy–simple–pure–*White*. Macbeth's witches must have been on to something when they realized that "fair is foul and foul is fair" because, in the same manner, the word "ugly" transmogrifies into "beautiful": *Ugly*–offensive–insulting–insolent–proud–lordly–majestic–grand–gorgeous–*Beautiful*. This legerdemain doesn't appear quite so impressive when we reveal that the word "pretty" originally meant "cunning" and it came to mean "beautiful" through the following stages: *Pretty*–cunning–clever–fine–nice–

Beautiful. In fact, we can empirically "prove" the veracity of the relativism of postmodern theory by showing how "true" is indeed "false": *True*–just–fair–beautiful–pretty–artful–artificial–fake–*False*.

In fact, many words have undergone changes in meaning that allow us to trace a similar process. The word "nice" (see page 29) originally meant "foolish" or "stupid" in the 14th century. Since then it has gone through the following progression in meaning: *Nice*–loose–mannered–foolish–wanton–lazy–effeminate–tender–delicate–shy–refined–fine–agreeable–kind–*Pleasant*. The word "shrewd" (see page 32) originally meant "foolish" and went through this semantic transformation: *Shrewd*–depraved–wicked–naughty–abusive–calculating–artful–cunning–*Wise*. Similarly, "sad" (see page 18) went through this metamorphosis: *Sad*–satiated–settled–mature–serious–*Unhappy*. Also, the word "gay" (see pages 41–43) went through a transformative process from its original sense of "happy" to today's prevalent sense of "homosexual."

It can even be explained how a particular word can evolve contradictory meanings. With the word "fast" we start off with a sense of "immovable" or "firm" as in "standing fast." From the sense of "standing fast" we developed the concept of "running fast," and hence the "rapid" sense of the word. Similarly, "fine" originally denoted something "slender," and this led to a sense of "highly finished," which in turn led to a sense of "beautiful." In situations where large growth is appreciated, the word "fine" can be seen as "large," notwithstanding that the word started its life as "slender."

In his book *The Broadcast Word* (1935) Welsh linguist Arthur Lloyd James commented, "A language is always changing: we are not looking at a lantern-slide, but at a moving picture." To demonstrate the turbulence in word meanings, I have concocted the following alphabetically arranged *über*-short story, which I have entitled *The Admiral and the Juggler*. (The italicized words represent the original meaning of the word.)

"The admiral (*emir*), while visiting Bedlam (*Bethlehem*), captivated (*captured*) a divan (*council of state in Turkey*) and entreated (*treated*) the fickle (*treacherous*) grub (*short person*) to a spectacle by an honest (*comely*), impudent (*immodest*) juggler (*jester and musician*). The juggler, while but a knave (*boy*), was able to make lingerie (*linen items*) disappear and meat

(*food*) appear out of thin air. He then had the emir's niece (*granddaughter*) occult (*hidden*) as a prank (*malicious trick*), and the bereft admiral, thinking his niece had been quelled (*killed*), was about to order a raid (*military foray made on horseback*) to make a sample (*example*) of the juggler's perfidy. The knave, however, had no talent (*inclination*) to challenge the admiral and ended his uncouth (*malicious*) performance and had the virgin (*unmarried girl*) re-appear. The mollified admiral advised the lad in future to be witty (*sensible*), and the relieved performer, with a yawn (*open mouth*), devoured some zest (*orange peel*)." Apparently there is no word in English beginning with "x" that has changed its meaning significantly.

Unfortunately, the constant state of flux in word meanings has not been widely recognized, even by many intellectuals. Some two decades ago I reviewed a book by a Canadian woman named Victoria Branden entitled *In Defence of Plain English* in which she made some preposterous statements. She asserted that the word "livid" doesn't mean "angry"; it means of a bluish leaden colour. She also claimed that "demise" should only be used as a legal term associated with the transfer of property. Why? Because these were the original meanings of these words?

By the time Branden wrote her book this attitude toward words was becoming moribund, but it was quite common in earlier eras. Hence, writer Ambrose Bierce (1842–1913) argued that the term "dilapidated" could only be used for a stone structure because that was the original meaning. (*Dilapidare*, in Latin means "to scatter as if throwing stones.") Even nowadays some members of the literati supply specious reasoning on the "real" meanings of words. Around ten years ago I remember reading in William Safire's "On Language" column in the *New York Times*, a quote from the eminent scholar Jacques Barzun, who stated, the word "synergy . . . belongs to physiology and relates to the working together of muscles, etc. Applied to the merger of . . . firms . . . it is ridiculous . . . since technically the meaning is 'greater effect than the sum of the efforts.'" Not so according to the *Oxford English* Dictionary, the *summa cum laude* of dictionaries, which relates that one of the definitions of "synergy" is "increased effectiveness, achievement, etc., produced as a result of combined action or co-operation." The citation for this sense goes back to 1957.

Some years ago I read an article by American cultural commentator

David Bentley Hart in which he stated that he was annoyed by the use of "transpire" to mean "happen." To be fair, many people object to the use of "transpire" when "happen" will do the job equally well and in less space. But Hart's complaint was that *transpire* can't mean "to happen" because its Latin segments, *trans-* and *-spire*, mean "to breathe across." As you will read in the final chapter (see "transpire," page 150) this word has been employed to mean "happen" for over two hundred years.

When Sigmund Freud was investigating hysteria he was informed by some of his erudite colleagues that since the word "hysteria" derived from the Greek word for "womb," the concept of male hysteria was a contradiction in terms. Watching political conventions where hysteria frequently dominates, and where the men outnumber the women, one can see that women don't have a monopoly on hysteria.

It is easier to see the inanity of this view of the immutable nature of the meaning of words by examining statements made in another century. The 19th-century poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge despised the word "talented." He fulminated, "I regret to see that vile and barbarous vocable talented, stealing out of the newspapers into the leading reviews and most respectable publications of the day. Why not shillinged, farthinged, tenpenced, etc." Coleridge was protesting the use of "talented" to mean "of great ability" rather than "money" — notwithstanding that this usage had been entrenched for at least two centuries (see "talent," page 67). Similarly, writers Jonathan Swift and Joseph Addison lobbied vehemently against the word "mob" when it entered our lexicon at the end of the 17th century because it was a slang word — from the Latin *mobile vulgus*. More recently, lexicographer and usage commentator H.W. Fowler had a long list of words he considered barbarisms. These included "bureaucrat," "coastal," "climactic," "electrocute," "gullible" and "pacifist" — all of which most of us are happy to use.

Most of these aforementioned esteemed writers and scientists are suffering from what is referred to by linguists as the "etymological fallacy": that the etymology of a word determines its meaning. 'Tis not so. Current usage determines meaning. If etymology determined meaning, then "nice" would still mean "foolish," and "sad" would still mean "satiated."

We must make a distinction between the fields of etymology and

semantics. Etymology is the study of the origin of words and how they have arrived at their current form and meaning, whereas semantics concerns itself with the actual meaning of words. Here are some examples to explain this distinction: although the words "assassin" (see page 116) and "hashish" are etymologically, related, they are separate words, and anyone who claims that nowadays any assassin must use hashish is definitely smoking something illegal. Similarly, while it might be interesting to know that the word "lord" derives from the Old English *hlafwear*, which means "guardian of the bread," when the word was first used in English before the year 1000 it simply meant "master." Also, although "peculiar" derives from the Latin *pecu* or "cattle," cows have never featured in the meaning of "peculiar." While there may be an etymological connection between the words "bishop" and "spy" (both words are related to the Greek *skopein*, "to look") no sane person would claim that a spy is necessarily a bishop or a bishop a spy. Finally, although it might be interesting to know that etymologically both "nostalgia" and "hangnail" derive from words for pain (nostalgia derives from the Greek *nostros* "a return home" and *algos* "pain," and "hangnail" comes from the Anglo-Saxon *angnaegl* or "painful corn on the foot"), in fact neither word features pain in its definition. In any case, you won't receive any more sympathy from your spouse by explaining that your hangnail is connected etymologically to your angst.

Let us take it as settled: the meaning of words is dictated by popular usage, and words are always changing meanings through a variety of processes. The first of these is *metaphor*, which involves a change with the addition of meanings due to a semantic similarity or connection between the new sense and the original one. The change of "grasp" from "seize" to "understand" can be seen as a leap across semantic domains — from the physical sphere, "grasping," to a mental one, "comprehending." In the same way, when we refer to a person as a "rock" or a "pillar of the community," we are using the words in a metaphorical fashion. Similarly, football adopted the term "blitz," a sudden massive military attack, to refer to a sudden charge into the offensive backfield by defensive

players. The word "broadcast" (see page 99) originally meant "to cast seeds out," but with the advent of radio and television, the word was used metaphorically to refer to the transmission of audio and video signals. (In agricultural circles, the original sense of "broadcast" is still employed.) The word "magazine" originally referred to a storehouse (still prevalent to refer to ammunition), and the periodical sense of "magazine" sees the word as a storehouse of words and information. The word "myopia" surfaced in 1693 to refer to an inability to see distant objects clearly. By 1821, poet Charlotte Smith used it metaphorically in the phrase "myopia of the mind." Similarly, while "galaxy" may have had an astronomical birth, within centuries the word was being used to refer to any brilliant assemblage, such as a "galaxy" of movie stars.

Another method of change is *generalization*. For example, at one time the word "fabulous" meant resembling a fable; then it meant "incredible" because what is found in fables is incredible. Now it has weakened even more and you can use it to describe a particular dress that you like. "Awful" is another example. It originally meant "inspiring awe" but since what inspires awe isn't always so pleasant, it came to mean something negative. The original sense of awful — inspiring awe — doesn't even exist anymore (although you still understand its meaning when reading Milton's *Paradise Lost*). This process also works for nouns and verbs. Originally a "barn" was a place you stored barley; it was a compound of *bere* (barley) and *aern* (place). Now it can hold any number of agricultural items. A "mill" referred specifically to a place where you made meal, and now it can grind anything. Similarly, "manufacturing" was done by hand (*main*, in French); "saucers" held sauce; and "pen knives" were used exclusively to fix quill pens. Originally "assassin" and "thug" referred to murderers who belonged to Eastern religious sects only. Through the miracle of globalization, westerners too can be members of the fraternities of thugs and assassins.

Words can also transform through *narrowing*. The word "deer" once referred to any animal, "meat" to any food, "accident" to any incident, "actor" to any doer, "liquor" to any fluid, "hound" to any dog, "flesh" to any meat, "fowl" to any bird, "doctor" to any learned person, "garage" to any storage space, and "starve" just meant to die, not die because of lack of food.

Because of the capricious nature of people, words are subject to value judgements and go through the processes of *pejoration* and *amelioration*. Often this is the result of changes in society. So the word "knave" once meant any boy, but then through pejoration, or a downward movement, came to refer to a rascal. Similarly, "lewd" referred only to the laity, "boor" any peasant, and "vulgar" only meant common. The movement away from a feudal, agrarian lifestyle facilitated the deterioration of these words. The value of words is often determined by groups that possess power, and boors and knaves drew the short stick. On the other hand, the word "noble" — which at first referred only to the accident of being born into an aristocratic family — ameliorated, or moved upward, to imply one with a virtuous character.

Women, being relatively powerless through most of the English language's recorded history, have seen their share of the pejoration process. Observe the words "mistress," "governess," "majorette," to name just a few examples. They may have commenced as equivalent to "mister," "governor," and "major" but all have picked up negative or downmarket senses along the way.

Many words also go through what can be called a *weakening* process, in which the sense of the word is toned down. Examples of such are the adjectives "awful," "dreadful," "horrid" and "terrible." There are also verbs such as "annoy," "baffle," "bruise" and "confound." Thanks to Facebook, we also have the noun "friend."

Less often, some words *strengthen*. One sees this process with "censure," "disgust" and "gale." Originally "censure" meant any opinion, "disgust" merely meant "not like" and "gale" meant "light wind."

Reading how dictionaries have changed the definition of the word "marriage" over time is instructive. The *American Heritage Dictionary* (1982) defines "marriage" as "the state of being married," and then adds "the legal union between a man and woman as husband and wife." By 2002, this definition is extended by the phrasing: "A union between two people having the customary but usually not the legal force of marriage." The 1989 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "marriage" as "the condition of being husband and wife," but by 2002, in its evolving online edition, it adds the sentence: "The term is now sometimes used with reference to long-term relationships between partners of the same

sex." The six-year gap between the first and second editions of the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* is instructive about the pace of change for the concept of marriage in Canadian society. The definition in the 1998 edition is "the legal and religious union of a man and a woman in order to live together and often to have children." By 2004 this had metamorphosed into "the legal and religious union of two people." Similarly, the word "partner" was first used in the 13th century with the sense of one who takes part in an activity with another, but by the 18th century it was used to refer to a spouse. At least since the 1990s, it has been clear that the "partner" in a romantic relationship could be of the same sex. In fact, as far back as 1984, *Longmans Dictionary* defines "partner" as "a person with whom one is having a sexual relationship, a spouse, a lover."

I have excluded from my list certain categories of words: words that have no dominant meaning (such as "organic" which can mean carbon-based, grown without chemicals, etc.), and words such as "class," "nature" and "culture," which all possess myriad meanings. I have also excluded words that have always had separate meanings. For example, "coil" (pipe) is not related to "coil" (turmoil). Similarly, "set" (group) and "set" (the act of setting) are not connected.

Although I have consulted many sources in writing this book, one in particular stands heads and shoulders above the rest. I am referring to the multi-volume *Oxford English Dictionary* (now online), generally referred to as the *OED*, considered to be the greatest English dictionary, and perhaps the greatest dictionary in the world. Because it is a historical dictionary — one that lists words in chronological order (the oldest sense of a word appears first) — it facilitates the process of showing how one meaning of a word can develop from a previous sense. And because the *OED* records the histories and meanings of all words known to have been in use since the 12th century, as well as thousands before this date, it offers a virtual expanding universe of words in one compendium. With at least one citation per century for every different meaning of a word, the *OED* is the indispensable tool for anyone analyzing how words have changed in our language.