PEJORATION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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CHAPTER I

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF SEMANTICS

Change is an inherent characteristic of language, for language is so plastic a medium for the expression of thought that it may be said to adapt itself to the needs, intellectual and material, of the persons who use it. Such facets of words as the spelling, pronunciation, and particularly the meanings, uses, and values, are highly susceptible to modification. Although change of meaning takes place in all languages, it does not proceed at the same rate even in related languages. The fact that English owes its vocabulary to a large variety of sources may explain why in comparison to French, Dutch, and German, which have retained their Romance or Germanic character more purely, the English language, with its large admixture of Latin, French, and Scandinavian elements, is more conspicuous for its development of meaning than any of these.


3 Hindrik Schreuder, Pejorative Sense Development in English (Groningen, 1929), p. 45.
The science of meanings, called semantics or semasiology, is an historical and psychological study and classification of changes in the significance of words, viewed as normal and vital factors in linguistic development. One of the most common and readily observed semantic changes is that of pejoration. Pejorative change, according to Margaret Schlauch, means a "degeneration in meaning from a comparatively noble and exalted significance to one of lower, if not downright contemptible or obscene, connotation." Pejoration is operative, not only in words which once had definitely commendatory or at least neutral meanings, but in words which were once in high social standing, and also in superlatives that no longer retain their intensity.

As the particular problem with which this study is concerned is pejorative change in meaning, application, and value of words in the English language, a thorough discussion of general semantics lies outside the scope of this work. However, as Schreuder has noted, the first question to be asked in a given instance of pejorative sense development is not why the word degenerated in meaning, but why it changed its meaning at all. The phenomenon


5 Schreuder, op. cit., p. 57.
must be incorporated within the system of general change of signification before special reasons for development in an unfavorable direction may be ascertained. Therefore, in order to place pejoration within the frame of linguistic change, a brief discussion of semantics in general will not be amiss.

What actually happens when a word is "born" is that a certain notion or meaning becomes attached to a particular cluster of sounds; then other meanings may add to, fall away from, or replace the original one. Both the meaning and the word which serves to express it are founded on and borne by the object, which is the stimulus for the formation of the conception. The meaning of a word in actual speech is the user's subjective apprehension of the referent denoted by the word. This apprehension, or as Schreuder describes it, "mental composite photograph of the object-conception," differs for each individual and at various times. Theoretically, a change of signification would occur with each new experience, for no two experiences, even with the same object, are exactly alike. However, a word-sound does not correspond to a single experience, but to a conceptual whole.

6 Margaret M. Bryant, Modern English and Its Heritage (New York, 1948), p. 321.

7 Schreuder, op. cit., p. 28.

8 ibid., p. 29.
of which the component elements may vary without necessitatin-
g the creation of a new word. Over a period of time the
recurrence of variations will alter the reference or meaning
of the word. For the purposes of this paper, a change in
meaning involves the habitual modification of the traditional
semantic signification of a word in the standard language.

Schreuder has made a valuable distinction between what
he terms the intellectual content of meaning, which is the
mental grasp of the essential meaning, and the associative
and emotional elements in meaning. Schreuder is
confirmed in the conviction of the truth that the
habit of qualifying things is deeper rooted in the
human soul than the habit of identifying things.
At bottom we are not so much impressed by the
identity of things as by the way in which they
strike us; how they present themselves to us and
what we can do with them. This explains why words
must, beside their matter-of-fact meaning, gradu-
ally acquire connotations of subjective reactions. 11

These associative and emotional elements are of the
greatest importance in the development, especially the
pejorative development, of words. Stern says something of
the same nature when he states that deprecative speciali-
zation is more exclusively emotive in character than the
appreciative type, and is caused by "the circumstance that

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9 Ibid., pp. 30-31.

10 Robertson, op. cit., p. 233.

the speaker apprehends one or more characteristics of the referent as disadvantageous, contemptible, or ridiculous." The subjective factor is thus prominent.

The major causal factors for semantic change are two: environmental change, which involves outward circumstances and the progressive changes of civilization and culture; and the psychological nature of a people. These complex elements may best be demonstrated by individual instances of linguistic change, for there is no way to chart the manifestations of such complicated factors. In fact, changes in the meanings of words themselves do not follow definite laws that may be detected. It has been impossible to discover any semantic patterns parallel to the sound patterns that have been found to exist. However, change of meaning frequently follows certain paths. There are two general types of sense change, one conscious and voluntary, the other unconscious. Transference of meaning is an example of conscious development of signification. For some reason such as picturesqueness, expressiveness, or characterization,


a word is transferred from one sense to another, as when runt, the name for a tree stump, came to be applied to a short, stumpy man. If this transferred application is repeated often enough, that new meaning sticks. Other changes in meaning are so gradual that the speaker himself is unaware of the change that is taking place, and it is difficult to trace the different steps of the process.

Within the frame of conscious and unconscious linguistic change, there are several routes a word may travel in the modification of its sense. In addition to transfer of meaning, which has already been mentioned, methods of semantic change include specialization, generalization, euphemism, hyperbole, irony, amelioration, and of course, pejoration. Specialization is a narrower or more exclusive reference for a former broad, inclusive meaning; the opposite process is generalization. For instance, liquor, once synonymous with liquid, is now definitely specialized, whereas butcher, one who slew goats, has become generalized. Euphemism is the method of avoiding a direct word with some pleasant, neutral, or even meaningless substitute, as when pass away or expire is substituted for die, or limb replaces leg. Hyperbole, or exaggeration, is the use of superlatives or strong words in a language situation where such intensity is not warranted or where over-use causes the words to lose

15 Robertson, op. cit., p. 245.
force. Thus it is that such adjectives and adverbs as grand, gorgeous, horrible, and dreadfully lose strength. Irony is the sarcastic use of words in a sense opposite that of their lexicographical meaning. Almost any word may be used ironically; an example is "my worthy wife" when spoken with contemptuous tone. Just as pejoration is the degeneration of meanings, its opposite, amelioration, is the elevation of meanings which at one time denoted something unpleasant or neutral. Puritan and Methodist are well-known examples of names once contemptuous but now dignified.

The usual view of pejoration and amelioration is that degradation is by far the more common. McKnight is of the opinion that the two processes balance each other; according to him, "There are few instances of words which have degenerated in meaning which cannot be matched by words that have been elevated in a corresponding way." Despite McKnight's protest that elevation has been less noticed simply because it is less dramatic, there seems, as Robertson says, to be every reason to agree with the general

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16 Ibid., p. 244.

17 George H. McKnight, English Words and Their Background (New York, 1923), p. 290.

18 Ibid., p. 292.

19 Robertson, op. cit., p. 244.
verdict; for when a word may be applied in two possible ways, one favorable and the other not, it is extremely likely that the specialization will be pejorative. Even Van Dongen, author of *Amelioratives in English*, recognizes the predilection for pejorative development. Jespersen's comments on the change in language in general hold true for semantic change and are particularly applicable to pejoration:

But those linguists who do pronounce such a judgment as to the value of language changes nearly always take the changes as a retrogression rather than a progressive development. "Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degenerate," said Dr. Samuel Johnson in the Preface of his Dictionary, and the same lament has been often repeated since his time. It appears that degradation has been more noticed not because it is more spectacular but simply because it is omnipresent, as elevation is not.

The study of this prevalent process of degeneration in meanings is therefore valuable not only for the sake of a fascinating knowledge in itself, but for the light it sheds on the nature of man. In the discussion of pejorated words in the following chapters, then, particular mention will be

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23 Robertson, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
made of the psychic processes that appear to be involved in the degeneration. However, since such an elusive factor as human psychology cannot always be determined with precision, another classification of these semantic changes has been devised. In order to determine what type of words degenerate, the examples of pejoration discussed in this paper will be grouped according to their general area of thought.\textsuperscript{24} Thus Chapter II will deal with terms which owe their sense development to changes in social and cultural conditions and conceptions; Chapter III will treat words for human abilities and conditions; Chapter IV will comprise words for ethical or sexual conceptions and words which owe their change of meaning to ethical or sexual views; Chapter V will contain words which have potential development either for pejoration or amelioration; and Chapter VI will discuss miscellaneous terms that do not readily fall into the other classifications.

In many cases, it is possible to include the same word in different groups, since it may be the result of several tendencies. Semantic and etymological information cited in this study has been drawn first of all from standard lexicographical references,\textsuperscript{25} and supplemented by pertinent material from

\textsuperscript{24} With some modification and invention, Schreuder's grouping of socio-cultural words and what he terms "middle words" has been followed in two major classifications.

\textsuperscript{25} Wilfred Funk, \textit{Word Origins and Their Romantic Stories} (New York, 1950).
general semantic literature. In most instances no specific documentation is provided for non-controversial information taken from these sources.

After the discussion of individual instances of pejoration under these classifications, the final chapter will attempt to draw some conclusions such as whether any particular period of time is especially conducive to pejoration, who seems to be responsible for semantic degeneration, the noteworthy methods in unfavorable sense changes, and the fundamental cause of the pejorative process.

25 Continued


Bryant, op. cit.
James Bradstreet Greenough and George Lyman Kittredge, Words and Their Ways in English Speech (New York, 1920).
McKnight, op. cit.
Robertson, op. cit.
Schreuder, op. cit.
Stern, op. cit.
CHAPTER II

SOCIO-CULTURAL TERMS

The socio-cultural group comprises words whose sense development is occasioned by changes in social and cultural conditions or conceptions. Words drawn within the vortex of social and political and religious movements are particularly liable to change.

Social Conditions and Contrasts

Few words in the English language show such complete and swift degeneration as does churl. Originally there was no idea of reprehensible rudeness or ill-breeding, for in early Anglo-Saxon ceorl meant "a male human being," "man in general." In poetry it was often equivalent to "king, hero, prince," as when applied in Beowulf to King Hrothel: "Gomelum ceorle." About 800 ceorl was used in the more specific sense of "married man, husband," as a correlative of wif. About the same time ceorl developed the limited meaning, noted in the Old English constitution, of "a man simply without rank, a member of the third or lowest rank of freemen" in the early English community.

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1 Schreuder, op. cit., p. 71. Schreuder has a particularly valuable discussion of the degeneration of churl.
This term, originally one of respect, is today one of reprobation. A specific cause of the degeneration in meaning is to be found in the great contest between the nobility and common people. In the process of social leveling under Angevin legislation following the Norman conquest, the churl lost most of his rights. As most of the churls were reduced to positions as tenants in pure villeinage, the term ceorl became equivalent to "servant, serf, bondman" in the contemporary literature.

A second potent factor in sense degeneration of the term lies in the war of scorn fought between the town and country. Since the work of the churl, when not fighting for a lord, was connected with the soil, ceorl became synonymous with "countryman, peasant, rustic." Hall's Chronicle speaks of "The Peisants or Chorles of the countrey." In connection with country life and under the influence of Norman contempt for Anglo-Saxon manners, the churl of the country became the accepted type of a low-born, ill-bred and stupid fellow:

(Godard salde: "Grim) wiltu ben erl?
Go hom swipe, fule, drit-cherl!
Go hepen and be evere-more
-Dral and cherl, alsuper wore!" Havelock, 681-4.  

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2 As quoted in Scheuder, op. cit., p. 69. Citations appear as quoted in the source materials.

3 Ibid.
By this time the word had lost its original, intellectual content at the expense of a baser and emotional connotation. Consequently the term again became generalized in meaning and soon not only denoted one of low birth, who was unacquainted with ways other than those connected with the soil, but was morally applied to character, disposition and manners: "For vileyns sinful dedes make a cherl." (Cant, F. D., 1158). The use of churl as a term of disparagement or contempt meaning "base fellow, villain" is somewhat lessened in usual modern usage as "rude, low-bred fellow, bumpkin."

After a process of generalization it is not an uncommon phenomenon for a word to become specialized again. The word churl has also developed a special by-meaning, that of "one who is sordid, 'hard,' or stingy in money matters; a surly miser; niggard." The Coverdale version of Isaiah 32:5 reads, "There shall the nyggerde be no more called gentle, nor the churle lyberall." The application of churlish to Nabal in the Bible has apparently done much to make "evilly grasping" a prevalent modern sense. King Hrebel would be mightily offended at being called a churl in its present sense.

4 Ibid.

5 N. E. D. The reference is to I Samuel 25:3. "The man [Nabal] was churlish and evil in his doings."
Contempt, scorn and hatred generated by a sense of superiority or inferiority among social classes are tools of high potential in degrading words. Two words which reflect the reaction of the lower classes to their self-importance so often exhibited by upper classes are jaunty and scurrilous. Jaunty owes its origin to the French gent or gentil and once meant "well-bred, poised, easy of manner." Then the easiness became too easy and began to be associated with carelessness and impudence. By the beginning of the nineteenth century a slattern could be jaunty, which would have seemed absurd in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when fashion was described as ganty or jauntee. A jaunty manner today infers a pert insolence rather than a modest grace. Already degenerated before it entered the English language, scurrilous has undergone further depreciation in this tongue. The Latin adjective scurrilis, derived from scurra, which first meant "fine gentleman, gallant," was later borrowed to mean "jester, buffoon." Further tainted with moral implications, scurrilous now means "containing low indecency or abuse, coarsely opprobrious, obscenely jocular."

Another group of degenerated meanings is the result of contempt for the "great unwashed." Vulgar, from Latin

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vulgar, "belonging to the throng," now refers to the common people as distinguished from the cultivated or educated and means "offensive to good taste or refined feelings, low, coarse," and even "obscene, profane." Similarly, rascal, once meaning "the rabble of an army or of the populace, persons of the lowest class," has come to mean in addition "one of low birth or station," "a low, mean, unprincipled or dishonest fellow; a rogue, knave, scamp." The process of associating inferiority with loose morals is operative here. Bourgeois, once describing one who lived in a bourg or town, is becoming a term of reproach after serving proudly the aspirations of a proud new class. The word has current scornful implications of mediocrity, stemming from the sense of "resembling the middle classes in appearance and ways of thinking." Disdain for the abilities of the herd is responsible for the depreciatory connotations of such terms as common, ordinary, mean, average, and middling. Common has two other derogatory meanings: "habitual or notorious" as in the phrase "common thief," and "without refinement." Base and low, originally terms expressing physical position, were apparently transferred to the social realm to indicate social station. Second Corinthians 10:11 calls Paul "base among his brethren"—that is, socially humble. Since the King James version of 1611, the word base has degenerated in accordance with the previously noted tendency to correlate
social lowness and moral degeneration. Thus base means "low in the social scale, of lowly condition; illegitimate, bastard; low in natural rank, in the scale of creation; low in the moral scale, without dignity of sentiment; reprehensibly cowardly or selfish, despicably mean; opposed to high-minded; and befitting an inferior person or thing; degraded or degrading, unworthy, menial." Low runs a similar gauntlet of meanings from "humble in rank or estimation" to "inferior in quality, character or style" to "abject, dissolute, coarse, vulgar, not socially respectable."

A number of words have degenerated because of disdain for the servant class. The moral associative factor is again at work, for a word which has once come to express servitude is apt to pass into an ethical sphere where it is exposed to further deterioration. A set of unfavorable associations then groups itself around the word--trickery, roguishness, petty mischief, deceitfulness, dishonesty; these associations are gradually considered as forming the essential part of the meaning at the expense of the original constituent elements. 7

Knave is an excellent example of this process. The principal idea expressed by Anglo-Saxon cnafa was that of youth or parental dependency. Just as ceorl was the

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7 Schreuder, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
correlative of wif, so was onafa that of maed: "Pam
gesæligum maedenum and pam clænum cnapum." (Assmann's
Homilexia, III, 432.) The word is even applied to Christ
to characterize His filial relation to God: "Her is min
onafa." in Matthew 12:18. The first traces of a change
in signification are to be found in an idea of servitude
added to that of youth and dependency. The transition
youth-dependency-servitude is quite natural and arises
partly from objective causes. As a rule boys entered the
service of a lord; therefore onafa came to refer to a lad
employed as a servant, from the habit of calling servants
"boys" perhaps, and hence to a male servant or menial in
general. Then, by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,
an element entered into the word which made people lose
sight of the fact that knave had something to do with "youth"
or even "servitude." Irrespective of age or position, it
came to denote a person given to unprincipled manners and
dishonorable or deceitful practices. The main sense is now
"a base and crafty rogue."

Another word which originally meant "boy," then special-
ized in the sense of "servant" and later developed into a
contemptuous epithet for "saucy fellow" is varlet. The word

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8 As quoted in Schreuder, op. cit., p. 16.
is an Old French diminutive of vassal, "man." Similarly to the development of knave, vassal came to be applied to a lad or man acting as attendant or servant—a menial or groom. The W. E. D. cites as an example, dated 1647 from R. Stapylton's Juvenal, 94: "She calls out to the varlets she doth keep. . . Braine the dog's master first, and then the cur." The latest stage of development was reached when the word acquired a moral implication of "a person of a low, mean, or knavish disposition; a knave, rogue, rascal." The word vassalage specialized in two directions, toward pejoration and amelioration. Schreuder notes that the vicissitudes of a word like vassalage, which meant "splendid service at war" at one time and "servitude" at another, cannot be the result of ordinary exercise of speech. 9 Its meanings are conditioned by the various positions of the vassal and the appreciations others held of him. 10 Here the change of meaning lies in objective causes, the progressive changes in culture and civilization. On one hand, vassalage had the meaning of "valorous deeds, prowess of arms," inevitably the meaning in Chaucer; on the other, the sense sank to "servitude" since the vassal was his lord's inferior. Both

9 Schreuder, op. cit., p. 23.

10 Ibid., p. 23.

11 Ibid., p. 80.
meanings are found in Shakespeare, but the degraded one is current in modern English.

A third parallel to the sense development of knave and varlet is that of cad, apparently an abbreviation of cadee, caddie, cadet. French cadet meant "younger son" or "officer," for in olden days upper-class sons were usually in the army. From France, cadet traveled to Scotland with the spelling intact and still with the military sense. Then the word began to change; cadet came to mean "an errand boy or messenger" who hung around waiting for odd jobs. By change of spelling it became caddie. In England the word cadet followed a similar downward trend and soon was the name for hangers-on around Oxford who provided the Etonians with anything necessary to assist in their sports. An example of this usage is seen in Hone's Year Book, 670 (1831): "Preceded by one or two bands of music in two boats, rowed by 'cads.'" The term cadet was applied by collegians to town-lads of the same description, then contemptuously to townspeople in general, and then to anyone whose manners or conduct were like those of the class in question, that is, fellows of low, vulgar manners and behavior. These traits are apparent in the current meaning of "a person without gentlemanly instincts,


13 As quoted in the N. E. D.
a bounder." An interesting restriction of caddie has occurred in America. The term is almost exclusively applied to one who carries golf bags for golfers. And then to show how a once respectable word can end in the gutter, cadet can now mean in American slang a pimp who lives on the earnings of a prostitute.

Groom is from Middle English grome and some, "young man, lad, stripling"; however, the sense of "servant" is almost as early. Gower's use in "Als well the maister as the 14 grome" shows the latter development. As the groom usually attended his master on his travels and had charge of his horse, the word was restricted to its present sense of "horse-groom" or "stable-groom." Groom in the compound bridegroom has remained unpejorated.

About as graphic a picture as can be drawn of the downward traveling of a word is that of henchman. 15 The original sense of henchman was "horseman," but this sense appears to have become obsolete by 1650. The word followed the etymological definition of groom and meant "a page or an attendant," as in A Midsummer Night's Dream, II, 1,120-121: "I do but beg a little changeling boy,/To be my henchman."

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14 As quoted in Schreuder, op. cit., p. 58.

The page was usually a young man of high rank in attendance on a prince or great man. From a parallel meaning of "right-hand man or chief gillie of a Highland chief," henchman came to mean generally "a trusty follower or attendant who stands by the side of his chief or leader and supports him in every case of need." Gradually it came to mean "a stout political supporter or partisan," and then "a self-seeking political supporter." Now in its tainted political connotation, henchman means a mercenary adherent, a venal follower.

Unfavorable ethical associations may again be seen at their contaminating work in the history of blackguard. There is some uncertainty about the original application of the word. Meanings listed by the N. E. D. are (1) "the lowest menials of a royal or noble household, who had charge of pots and pans and other kitchen utensils, and rode in the wagons conveying these during journeys from one residence to another; the scullions and kitchen knaves," and (2) "a guard of attendants, black in person, dress, or character; a following of black villains." The N. E. D. further states that it is possible that these two senses began independently of each other; or the one may have originated in a play upon the other, black being taken in a different sense; it would be difficult in either case to assign priority. It is even possible that there may have been a guard of soldiers at Westminster called the Black Guard, or that the attendants or
torchbearers at a funeral, or the linkboys of the streets, may have had this name. At any rate the term originally had a collective meaning. Upon application as an individual noun meaning "a corrupt scoundrel," the word shifted from level stress, after which the second part may have become associated with the pejoration suffix -ard, -art. 16

Other words connected with household employment which degenerated through disdain for the servant position include menial, maid, domestic, and help. Menial was once only an adjective expressing the quality of belonging to a household (Anglo-French meinie, "household"). Contemptuous use did not begin until the eighteenth century. 17 Maid, from Old English maegden, maidan, Middle English magden, magde, in poetical phrase still retains its old nobility, but its common use is "servant." In early English there was not a trace of the word's being used to denote a female servant; in fact, two sets of associating ideas connected with "young girl" were holiness, purity, and chastity; staunchness, innocence, meekness, and naivete. The word domestic is tainted with scorn, and even the innocent help in one sense refers to domestic servants and farm hands.

16 Schreuder, op. cit., p. 79.

17 McKnight, op. cit., p. 285.

18 Schreuder, op. cit., p. 81.
Two words that are colored by implications of excessive toil are *labored and *drudge. *Labored is used to denote that which is "wrought, produced, or accomplished with labour; highly elaborated," hence in a deprecatory sense," performed or accomplished only by the expenditure of excessive toil or tedious elaboration," and consequently "showing indications of heaviness or want of spontaneity." The derivation of *drudge is obscure. The forms and sense would both seem to be satisfied by an Old English substantive *dryczea, "laborer," from *dreogan, "to work"; or by an Old English verb *drycozan, West German *druggien, *drugian from the same verb; but of these no actual trace has been found either in Old English or Middle English. Currently, to *drudge means "to perform menial tasks," hence "to toil at anything difficult or monotonous."

The distinction made in the Middle Ages between people who lived "in the city" (French *deiz la cite') and "outside the city" (hors la cite') gave rise to a temporary degradation of the word *citizen, of which the seventeenth-century clipped form was *cit, which meant "a pert, low tradesman." 

More words, however, reflect the town or city dwellers'

19 Leo Spitzer asserts in "Anglo-French Etymologies," Modern Language Notes, LXI (April, 1944), 249, that *drudge is from the dialectal French *druger, "to run to and fro, to move briskly." Even if this is correct, the pejorative process is still evident.
scorn for the country. So it is that **peasant**—from French, meaning "countryman"—now conveys the idea of lower social classes. The word was a term of abuse as early as 1550.

People in the provinces (outlying territories) lagged, especially before means of communication or travel were developed in the locality, in hearing of or adopting metropolitian manners and fashions; and consequently, in the eyes of people living in the centers of learning, they appeared to lead old-fashioned lives. Because of prejudice against unfamiliar things and ways of doing things, these people acquired the reputation of being unpolished. Such psychology is responsible for the deterioration of many meanings, among them **provincial**, its equivalent, **countryed**, and **outlandish**. A **provincialism** is an expression, mannerism, word, or way of thinking that is peculiar to any given outlying district.

**Outlandish**, Anglo-Saxon **Utlændisc**, first meant "foreign, not native or indigenous." To the English mind something foreign and unfamiliar was bizarre, barbarous, or uncouth. In addition to that connotation, **outlandish** later meant "out-of-the-way, remote, far removed from civilization," usually in a derogatory sense. Hence the present meaning of **outlandish** is "weird, strange."

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20 Arona Erickson, "Word Depreciation Since Shakespeare," *Words*, III, No. 9 (December, 1937), 194.
Clown is another country-tainted word. It is of contested etymology: the N. E. D., Skeat, and Weckley assume its relationship to several Scandinavian or Low German words, as Icelandic klunni, "country-lout," Swedish clunn, "clumsy fellow," Danish cluntet, "clumsy, unwieldy," Middle English clot, clotte, cloide, "lump, cloid," and Middle Dutch kleun, kloen. Whatever the origin of the word, which cropped up towards the second half of the sixteenth century, it does not originally appear to have had pleasant connotations. It meant a peasant or countryman, as distinguished from one educated in cities. The word oscillated between the meanings of "countryman" and "boorish fellow." The origin of the present meaning lies in the domestic customs of the sixteenth century. It was the custom among the rich to have as one of their inmates a fool or yokel who had to amuse them by his drollery and broad jokes. These fools or jesters were also found in the country families, where they apparently were called "clowns." In the early drama they were employed to act the fool and thus to relieve the more didactic parts of the performance. In this connection Nares' observation about the clown is noteworthy:

The fool was the inmate of every opulent house, but the rural jester or clown seems to have been

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21 As quoted in Schreuder, op. cit., p. 74.
peculiar to the country families. There was in him a premeditated mixture of rusticity and bluntness which heightened the poignancy of his jests.

Pagan has the same root as French pays, "country," from Latin paganus, "villager, rustic," and originally meant "belonging to the country." It at first had no religious significance, but designated the dwellers in hamlets and villages as distinguished from the inhabitants of towns and cities. The ancient deities were still retained in rural districts after Christianity became the generally accepted religion of the towns. Partly because culture and Christianity were slower of adoption in the country, pagans, or "villagers," came to be applied to all the remaining votaries of the old and decayed superstitions, although not all, but only most of these worshipers were such. In an edict of the Emperor Valentinian, A.D. 368, pagan first assumed this secondary meaning. Heathen has generally been assumed to be a direct derivation of Gothic heip, "heath," with a supposed meaning of "dweller on the heath," but there are chronological and etymological difficulties. If the generally accepted original sense is correct, heathen degenerated to mean "godless, irreligious,


23 Funk, op. cit., p. 384, says the Old English form was heathen and the word for heath was heath, which seems proof enough. Skeat concurs.
uncultured, uncivilized." Perhaps one reason this degeneration in meaning came about was the common identification of goodness with outward religious conformity, with the notion that if one did not go to church he was wicked. One drawback in living in the country, in addition to the fact that one had little knowledge of city interests and fashions, was that one could not attend church very easily. Savage originally meant "a dweller in the woods," from Latin silva, "forest." In the seventeenth century it was spelled salvage, the l in silva being retained. In addition to meaning "uncivilized, barbarous," a current sense of savage is "unpolished, rude."

In even closer connection with the land than words previously discussed are terms for the farmer himself. One such instance, villain, is a prime example of pejoration, although the major degeneration did not take place in English. The word was ultimately derived from Latin villanus, from villa, "farmhouse." Thus villain defined the social status of a farm laborer long before it came to denounce his morality. But because people are wont to attribute moral degradation to the socially low, and because of its farm association, villain became a term of contempt for those who did not belong to the

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gentry and was then applied to "low fellow" in general. From this to implied moral reprobation has simply been a process of intensification, until the word now means "an unprincipled or depraved scoundrel capable of great crime." From Dutch boer, "a tiller of the soil," and Anglo-Saxon gebur, Modern English boor is now associated with bad manners and with implied lack of refinement. Even the term farmer itself is sometimes jocularly applied to a "greenhorn" or to a person who has made himself ridiculous, particularly by awkwardness or stupidity. If the English language were not so fixed by the conservative forces of literature and education, it is not impossible that farmer would go the way of its predecessors.

In addition to pejoration of words connected with making a living from the soil, there has been sense degeneration in numerous terms for other occupations. For instance, the word (h)ostler, from Old French hostelier, derived from hostel, itself shows that it originally denoted the innkeeper. The current application, established by the sixteenth century, is to the man who looks after the horses at the inn. The association with the stable in general and horses in

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25 Greenough and Kittredge, op. cit., p. 284. Greenough and Kittredge are representative of those scholars who seem to consider the word as one of the stock examples of sense degeneration in English. Schreuder, op. cit., pp. 71-72, however, points out that both the primitive and more developed senses were borrowed at the same time from Anglo-French. Once in English the sense degeneration may have been furthered by mistaken association with the unrelated Middle English word vile, "foul."
particular is due to the fact that the stable formed so im-
portant a part of the inn that the innkeeper's duties often
employed him there, and secondly to a similarity in sound be-
tween hostler and horse. Chapman, from Anglo-Saxon ceapman,
"merchant," is now obsolete except as a proper name. Its ab-
branch, chap, showing contempt for a saucy person, seems
to have come into vulgar use in the last of the sixteenth
century, but is rare in books, even in the dramatists, before
1700. In 1818, Todd said it usually designated a person of
whom a contemptuous opinion was entertained; but it is now
merely familiar and not dignified, being applied to a young
man. Merchant originally designated any trader in goods not
manufactured or produced by himself. At one time merchant was
a common term of contempt for an objectionable person. The
associative quality of the word was not of the best during the
Middle Ages. The merchants usually appear in Piers Ploughman
as "public enemies, skilled in lying and in cheating their
customers by using false weights and unsealed measures or by
misusing the measures sealed and approved by the local au-
thorities." The meaning of "fellow, chap" was still com-
mon in Shakespeare's time: "I pray you, sir, what saucy
merchant was this, that was so full of his ropery?" (Romeo
and Juliet, II, iv, 152-153). The derogatory meaning is

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26 N. E. D. 27 As quoted in Schreuder, op. cit., p. 43.
further shown by the expression "to play the merchant with," meaning "to get the better of a person, to cheat," as used by Rowley in Woman Never Vext, IV, i, 51. In later centuries merchant has entirely dissociated itself from its former implications.

The name for a class or group of people often has associated with it the traits which the outsider feels are characteristic of those people, particularly the displeasing traits, imagined or real, which he may be able to ferret out. Such an association is demonstrated by the sense development of pedant. The Italian source word pedante meant "tutor." Pedantry is now associated with contempt and stands for misdirected learning, such as ostentation or undue emphasis of minutiae. Hypocrite is a continuation of a derogatory sense begun before the word entered English. In its Greek sense the word meant "actor" and from there came to mean "pretender, dissembler."

Leech, from Anglo-Saxon læce, "physician or healer," came to mean "one who clings to another to draw gain from him," probably from the association with the læches used in that profession to draw blood. In Anglo-Saxon the term had a much wider meaning than that of modern physician or doctor, as it could also be used with reference to soul curers, or those who

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28 Ibid., p. 44.

29 McKnight, op. cit., p. 176.
healed the afflictions of the soul. In Middle English _leche_ was still used in this sense: "The hevenliche leche seinte Poul nimep gem of ure saule sicness." **Scavenger**, an altered form of _scavager_ with an intrusive _g_, is connected with the Anglo-Saxon verb _seeswian_ and Old French _escauwer_, "to examine, inspect." Once the name of a customs inspector also intrusted with the care of the streets, the word came to be the name of one intrusted with only an ignoble part of his original duties or one who collects filth, does "dirty work" and is dishonorable.

Conceptions expressing misery or that which ought to excite pity are often seen to pass into those expressive of abjection and moral degeneration. It is only too human a propensity—though not a humane one—to aggravate a person's misery or misfortune by a suggestion that his own sinfulness or meanness is the cause of it. **The Anglo-Saxon _wraecce_, "exile, stranger, wretched one," became Modern English _wretch_. Already in Anglo-Saxon there were signs which indicated the direction the word would most probably take. It is characteristic of the hard lot of exiles that two conceptions having little to do with each other—exile and misery—should coalesce in the same word; the objective state of the exile,

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30 Schreuder, _op. cit._, p. 92.

compulsory absence from his native country, and the subjective condition of such a person, feelings of loneliness and misery, meet in the word \textit{wretch}. The latest stage of development was reached when the word acquired an implication of moral worthlessness and vice. The process was already completed before Chaucer's time. An exquisite illustration of the truth that "miserable" and "morally bad" are closely related in people's minds is afforded by the history of the word \textit{caitiff}.\textsuperscript{32} The Old French word originally meant "captive" or "poor creature exciting either pity or contempt." From "exciting," the meaning changed into "deserving" pity or contempt. English borrowed the term in both its literal and developed meanings; the following example illustrates the first use:

\begin{quote}
For certes, lord, ther nis non of us alle
That she hath been a duchesse or a queene;
Now be we caitifs, as it is wel sene.
\textit{Canterbury Tales}; à 922 - 24.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

and this example shows the latter:

\begin{quote}
Vile captive! vassal of dread and despayre,
Unworthy of the commune breathed ayre!
Why livest thou, dead dog, a lenger day,
And dost not unto death thyself prepayre?
\textit{Faerie Queene}, II, iii, 7.
\end{quote}

\textit{Caitif}, later specialized in the particularly odious sense of "coward," is now obsolete in common language, though it is one of those curious words which many know but few use.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., p. 85.
\textsuperscript{33}As quoted in Schreuder, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 85.
\textsuperscript{34}Greenough and Kittredge, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 287-288.
National, Ethnological, and Political Relations

As in the case of words descriptive of social conditions, expressions in the realm of national, ethnological, and political relations are also particularly apt to become blemished. Two processes are especially active in this group of words: gradual sense shifts in the direction of a set of associations clinging around a word, and transference of meaning.

As has been previously pointed out, there exists a strong tendency for the name of a people to become associated with a characteristic trait. The name of almost any nationality may become derogatory when scornfully used; some of these connotations are temporary and some become established in speech. Hun formerly was defined as "one of an Asiatic race ravaging Europe in the fourth and fifth centuries." It is easy to see how by gradual sense change the meaning came to be a "reckless, wilful destroyer of the beauties of nature or art, an uncultured devastator." Then by transfer the term was applied with contempt to Germans or Austrians. The name Turk is sometimes used contemptuously for a Mohammedan and also for a ferocious man or unmanageable child. In various dialects the word is used for "savage fellow." In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was a vague term for any non-Christian: "Jews, Turks, infidels, and heretics" (Collect for Good Friday). The pejorative connotations of Tartar may be due to the terror, roused by the Tartar invasion into Europe in the thirteenth century, which imparted secondary meanings to the
word, as appears in expressions such as "to be a Tartar," meaning "to be a person of fierce, irritable temper." Two examples from Dickens show application to both sexes: "The old man was an awful Tartar (saying it, I'm sure without disrespect to his memory)" (Our Mutual Friend); and "'Do they use you ill here? Is your mistress a Tartar?' said Quilp" (Old Curiosity Shop). The meaning has undoubtedly been influenced by the word Tartarus, "place of torture in Hell."

Greek in the sense of "sly fellow, card sharper, cheat, knave" is from the French, where it can be used in the same meaning. Even before the Revival of Learning the word was used in unfavorable applications, perhaps because of the differences in people of the east and west, in which the word Greek had a vague sense. The Greek need not necessarily have been a native of Greece, no more than a Turk of Turkey. There was during the Middle Ages a confusion with regard to nationality, which accounts for many terms of an indistinct geographical description. But also in a national sense the word was not entirely spotless. The Greeks have always had the reputation of being a jolly race that leads a merry life and likes a good dinner. These facts may have occurred to Nicholas Udall when he gave the name of Matthew Merrygreke to one of the principal characters in Ralph Roister Doister. The Greek characteristic of jolliness appears in Shakespeare's frequent use of "the Merry Greeks," and in the expression "as merry as a Grig" which was well known in those days. A Philistine is described by the
N. E. D. as one of the "unenlightened or commonplace people; a person of narrow views; one deficient in liberal culture." The present meaning is especially due to Matthew Arnold, who adapted it from the German Philister, used in student slang for "townee, outsider." Some of the nouns and adjectives developed from national names often show highly derogatory secondary senses. In some phrases Dutch has the meaning of "sham, false, unreal." "To talk like a Dutch uncle" means "to grumble or administer a paternal lecture." "Dutch consolation" means "thank God it is no worse," and a "Dutch feast" is one where the host gets drunk before his guests. The slighting attitude toward the Dutch in the dramatic literature of the seventeenth century is striking; for instance, Dutch widow was a synonym of "courtesan." The attitude of one nationality toward another is seen in slighting use of Jew, and even more in slang terms such as Dago and Spick.

A word that designates an adherent or associate of a party based on a school of thought has a meaning composed of ideas of theory and action all subject to qualifying in the course of national and world experience. For purposes of economic and political argument at a given time, these words as then

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35 This and the following examples are found in Schreuder, op. cit., p. 101.

36 Alfred D. Sheffield, "But Isn't He a Communist?" ETC, VI, No. 2 (Winter, 1949), 81-83.
generally understood compose a meaning true enough in its general reference to serve in a profitable communication. But at a time of inflamed feelings a stereotype is evoked out of its wild-cot extremes, and the term becomes a smear word. Such innuendo is responsible for the current degeneration of bolshevist, socialist, and capitalist. So it is that real thinking stops when communist becomes a smear word. The present conflict between Western and Russian systems is responsible for the depreciation of comrade, originally "one who shares the same room, a chamber fellow." Most contemporary Americans are instantly prejudiced upon hearing the term red, which denotes one politically radical or revolutionary, especially a communist. The tainted sense first evidently occurred in the adjective, and the noun followed suit.

Politician is not seldom used in a sinister sense as "a shrewd schemer, a crafty plotter or intriguer." It is not improbable that this development started in the adjective politic, used in a disparaging sense of "scheming, crafty, cunning," though the exact development cannot be ascertained. In ancient times a demagogue was a leader of the people, expressing their cause against any other party in the state. In a derogatory sense demagogue names a leader of a popular faction, a political agitator who appeals to the passions and prejudices of the mob in order to obtain power and further his own interests, or an unprincipled or facetious popular orator. An example of pejoration that is taking place currently is
collaborator, formerly a word of dignity, which now means "one who works in conjunction with another." College professors were once glad to be collaborators in the writing of important textbooks, and scientists were proud to be known as collaborators in some new technique or discovery, but during World War II the word was used chiefly for reproach or denunciation of anyone who assisted the Nazis in their conquest of Europe. Currently applied in such phrases as "Red collaborator," the derogatory meaning may become the dominant one, but perhaps it is only a temporary aberration in the language.

Legal and Judicial Uses

Several terms have become restricted, at least in one application, to the legal and judicial sphere. Sentence is from Latin sententia, "opinion." This was also the Middle English sense: "That all the rewers seyn of his sentence." (Nun's Priest's Tale, 4167). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the sense shifted to "advice or judgment," and in this latter sense the word was restricted in the form of a declaration of punishment. Such was the case with doom, Anglo-Saxon dom, which formerly meant judgment and now always connotes condemnation. Sometimes a word shows deterioration in some of its uses, but maintains itself in others. Execute first meant "to

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37 Bryant, op. cit., p. 332.

38 As quoted in Schreuder, op. cit., p. 122.
follow out into effect, carry out." In special sense of "putting to death by legal process" the judgment of a court is executed, the process is called an execution, and the man is executed as well as the sentence. 39 It is not clear whether the use "to do execution upon" was a special sense which developed early in French and Medieval Latin, or whether it represents the etymological notion of Latin exsequi, "to pursue to the end." Middle English libel meant "brief bit of writing," from Latin libellum, "little book." As a law term it means now "any false or defamatory statement in conversation or otherwise." To harbor has adopted a secondary meaning almost exclusively. It formerly meant generally "to receive as a guest, to give shelter to, to entertain, to keep in safety or security, to protect." Through association with criminals, perhaps, the word has come to mean "to give secret or clandestine entertainment to noxious persons or offenders against the laws." In a figurative sense one speaks of harboring evil thoughts, but not of harboring good thoughts. 40 From Latin finis, "end," Middle English fyn, "end, conclusion,"

39 Greenough and Kittredge, op. cit., p. 293.

fine generally referred to the conclusion of a war. Thus the expression "made his fin" meant "made his peace." In legal language fine came to mean the end or settlement of a dispute, which often consisted of an imposition of a sum of money as penalty.

Religious and Philosophical Movements

The words brought together in this section have a common starting point in religious and philosophical conceptions. Often associations other than those connected with religion and philosophy group themselves around a word and cause its dominant sense element to shift into another sphere.

Demon first meant "supernatural being" and then specialized to become "evil spirit." The process whereby this Greek word for a divinity came to stand for a person of preternatural malignity and cruelty shows "the whole history of European Christianity involved in the conflict with classical 41 paganism." In this course, the meaning of the word changed from "a heathen divinity" into "a Christian devil," and then by way of metaphor into a person of the aforesaid qualities.

"Lerned and lewed" was once synonymous with "clergy and laity." Old English læswede, of difficult etymology, meant "lay, not in holy orders, not clerical." An example of how the original distinction between priest and layman has been

entirely lost sight of is found in Milton where he mentioned "lewd hirelings," by whom he meant the priests of the church:

So climb this first grand Thief into God's fold;
So since into his Church lewd hirelings climb.

Paradise Lost, IV, 192-3.

Then since only the clergy were learned, the term came to mean "unlearned, unlettered, untaught." Further progression of the depreciative sense brought the meaning "ignorant, foolish, ill-bred, ill-mannered, base, worthless," and finally the surviving sense "lascivious, unchaste."

A miscreant was formerly one who differed from another in theology. Then the word meant more strongly "a unbeliever, heretic, an unbeliever, infidel." With immoral contamination it then implied "an unscrupulous or villainous character, a vile wretch." Profane, based on Latin profanum, "temple," once meant "secular, lay, civil as distinguished from ecclesiastical," and was applied to persons or things regarded as unholy or as desecrating what is holy or sacred. Said of the rites of an alien religion, it meant "ritually unclean, heathen, pagan." Later profane came to be characterized by a disregard of or contempt for sacred things, especially in later use by the taking of God's name in vain, and so became synonymous with "blasphemous, ribald, impious, irreligious, and wicked."

42 In his commentary on the term, Stern, op. cit., p. 41, says it is natural for the learned class, speaking contemptuously of the unlearned, to determine the development in the standard language.
Enthusiasm originally meant "full of God," in the eighteenth century connoted "religious fanaticism," and later meant "full of spirit." The current sense is "rapturous intensity of feeling in favor of a person, principle, or cause; passionate eagerness in any pursuit, proceeding from an intense conviction of the worthiness of the object." Fanatic and its clipping fan are related in form to the archaic word fane, occurring chiefly in poetry, and meaning, like their common source, the Latin fanum, "altar." An altar attendant at a temple was fanaticus; and he was fanatical because he was full of religious enthusiasm (full of God). Nowadays a fanatic is one who is moved by a frenzy over something. Crusade had its earlier meaning in the Crusades of medieval history, but now any social or political movement characterized by special zeal on the part of its proponents can be a crusade.

unction was originally "an anointing with oil as a religious rite or symbol," and further, "a spiritual influence acting on a person, deep spiritual feeling, or the manifestation of this in language or utterance; a manner suggestive of religious earnestness or appreciation of spiritual things." In later use it is frequently deprecatory, implying that the

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43 Jerome Hixson, "Religious Ruins in Words," Words, IV (December, 1938), 133.

44 George L. Kane, "Words Can Lose the Faith," Catholic World, CXLVII (July, 1938), 465.
feeling or manner is superficial or assumed, or is tinged with obvious self-complacency. 

unction also means "the action of anointing or rubbing with an ointment or eol as a lubricating or preserving substance." Perhaps this development has been assisted by association with related words such as unctuous, "of the nature or quality of an unction or ointment; oily, greasy."

From meaning "Christian love" charity came to refer without any specifically Christian associations to "love, kindness, and affection, especially with some notion of generous or spontaneous goodness." In present-day usage it is coming to suggest a patronizing attitude and is yielding its earlier meaning to benevolence. In its original meaning of "good tidings," gospel was a literal translation of the Greco-Latin evangelium, and for more than two thousand years it has served to designate the message of Christ and the books written by the four evangelists. Today it is not uncommon for the word to be found in such company as "greed" and "hate"; for example, "preaching the gospel of greed and hate," and "spreading the gospel of inequality." The word conventicle was in the fourth century applied by the Roman Christians to their meetings or to their places of meeting and worship. In the Middle Ages the

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45 Stern, op. cit., p. 412.

46 Kane, op. cit., p. 464.
word assumed a disparaging sense from being applied to illicit or heretical assemblies. The word is not much used now, unless as an historical term.

Detected hypocrisy is responsible for the degradation of several terms, as moral pretense is always open to ridicule. Sanctified, sanctimonious, and saint, from Latin sanctimonis, "holiness," to modern ears often carry the implication of hypocrisy. Sanctified may be used in an unfavorable sense, as signifying "affecting holiness, sanctimonious." Sanctimonious has altogether lost its original good meaning, "possessing sanctity," being used now only for "pretended or assumed sanctity or piety." Saint is sometimes used for a person "making an outward profession of piety."

Atonement properly means the state of being at one with. The underlying idea of reconciliation has been replaced by that of satisfaction and penance. This change of meaning is undoubtedly owing to the frequent use of the word in connection with the sufferings of Christ. Synonyms are now "propitiation, expiation, amends." The depraved word gossip had such noble ancestors as God and sib, which in combination meant "related in God" and were used to designate a sponsor at baptism: "The parents being so poore that they had provided no gossips."

(Evelyn, Diary, II, 16). Today the connotation is a "person,


48 as quoted in the N. E. D.
usually a woman, of light and trifling character, especially one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler." An aspersion, "a sprinkling," once also signified "a blessing" because before the Reformation, benediction was usually accompanied by the sprinkling of holy water. It is no longer used in that sense, but implies "a spreading (sprinkling) of false reports, damaging imputations, false and injurious charges, or unjust insinuations."

Derived from English colloquial pronunciation of St. Maudlin, a contraction of Magdalen, maudlin denoted at one time a sinner deeply penitent. Then it was jeeringly used as "foolishly and tearfully affectionate, gushing, super-sentimental," even "befuddled by use of intoxicating liquor." 49 Read originally meant "a prayer"; after rosaries came into common use as a means of counting prayers, the word easily transferred itself from the prayer to the small globular object. A pejorated Greek meaning is carried on in the English language in the form of anathema. The Greek originally meant "a thing devoted," but in later usage, "a thing devoted to evil, an accursed thing." The "accursed" signification was probably furthered by the church Latin anathema, meaning first the curse of excommunication, and then extending to any curse

49 Benjamin F. Musser, "Good Words Gone Wrong," Catholic World, CXVIII (January, 1924), 493.
or to anything loathed or hated, because these ecclesiastical
anathemas were given so freely at one time.

The Latin name for the Roman Catholic Church’s Congrega-
tion or College for the Propagation of the Faith, a committee
of cardinals having the care and oversight of foreign missions,
is “Congregatio de Propaganda Fide,” and this is the source of
the English word propaganda, which now refers to any associa-
tion, systematic scheme, or concerted movement for the propa-
gation of a particular doctrine or practice. Not originally
deprecatory, tawdry was born with the fine laces sold at fairs
of St. Audrey. When these lovely laces began to be made in
quantity for the country wenches, the quality became cheap,
so that tawdry came to mean “cheap, showy, pretentious, without
either taste or elegance.” Although the etymology and applica-
tion of carnival is contested, Kane asserts that the word was
first applied to the celebration and feasting immediately pre-
ceding the Lenten season of fast and abstinence, and that
carnival later succumbed to modern paganism.

Cynic formerly referred to one of a sect of philosophers
in ancient Greece, founded by Antisthenes, a pupil of Socrates,
who scorned luxury and thought that a love of virtue was the
highest good. The philosophy of the school degenerated,

50 Funk, op. cit., p. 49.

51 Kane, op. cit., pp. 465-466.
however, into a spirit of ignorant and insolent self-righteousness and ostentatious contempt for the enjoyments of life. These traits offended the public and gained for the followers the nickname cynics, from the Greek kynikos, which meant "like a dog." In English the word first denoted a person disposed to rail and find fault. Now it usually means "one who shows a disposition to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions, and is wont to express this by sneers and sarcasms." Another pejorative development begun in ancient Greece is seen in sophist. It meant "one engaged in the pursuit or communication of knowledge," especially one who undertook to give instruction in intellectual and ethical matters in return for payment. Greenough and Kittredge state that the term owes its evil sense to the dialogues of Plato, in which the reasoning of these professors was attacked by Socrates. 52 By the sixteenth century it meant one who makes use of fallacious arguments, a specious reasoner.

Dunce was coined in reference to the followers of the great Scholastic philosopher Duns Scotus, who were noted for hair-splitting distinctions. The deprecative meaning is no doubt due to those who considered themselves superior to the Dunces. 53 However, the disrepute of the Dunces was perhaps due to progress

52 Greenough and Kittredge, op. cit., p. 289.

53 Stern, op. cit., p. 414.
in philosophy as well. At any rate dunce became a synonym for "caviling sophist," whence it degenerated rapidly to its present meaning of "ignoramus." Holinshed's Chronicles state "But now in our age it is growne to be a common proverbe in derision, to call such a person as is senselesse or without learning a Duns, which is as much as a foole." 54

The Indian word hashshashin, "hashish-eaters," entered Medieval Latin as assassinus, and so into English as the word assassin. The word named an Asiatic tribe, certain Moslem fanatics in the time of the Crusades who were sent forth by their sheikh, the "Old Man of the Mountains," to murder the Christian leaders. Before the mission the assassins intoxicated themselves with a sort of Indian hemp called hashish. The term generalized to mean one who undertakes to put another to death by treacherous violence. The word retains so much of its original application as to be used chiefly of the murderer of a public personage, who is generally hired or devoted to the deed, and aims purely at the death of his victim.

The words grouped as socio-cultural terms have shown a great deal about human psychology and the development not only of language but of civilization itself. These sense changes have paraded such factions as the nobility versus the commoners, town versus country, nation versus nation, race against race,

54 As quoted in the N. E. D.
and ideology opposed to ideology. They provide a window into human personality through which to see class consciousness; the scorn of those who have for those who have not; the tendency to associate loose morals with inferiority, and abjection and degeneracy with misery. The deterioration which words undergo is a concrete epitome of the contempt different social classes feel for each other, or the hatred between nations and races; the brutal intolerance of the crowd or the fanatic's lack of respect for others. . . Men hate, pursue, despise, abuse, deceive, or see evil in each other, and language faithfully records the traces of these continual misunderstandings. 55

CHAPTER III

ABILITY-CONDITION TERMS

The preceding chapter has demonstrated the susceptibility to pejoration of terms associated with social, political, legal and religious conditions and conceptions. Chapter III will deal with the deterioration of descriptive terms for various human abilities and conditions. The words treated here all denote a quality or a state that is in itself blameless or even praiseworthy, but the intensification of which results in an unfavorable response.

(Intellectual Sharpness and Skills)

With some reason, perhaps, the English language reflects a definite distrust of human intelligence, as shown in the history of various words indicating mental quickness and power. Intellectual sharpness is an admirable trait, but when used as a means to guard or further one's own interests, it appears in an unpleasant light to those whose interests suffer correspondingly. The degeneration of words naming intellectual qualities or attributes shows not only the envy evidenced by persons of less ability but also something of

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1 Bryant, op. cit., p. 323.
the tendency to take advantage of others so often exhibited by those who possess outstanding capacities. As Funk expressed it, "... in this sordid world so many of us are dishonest that words which concern cleverness are apt to take on sinister meanings." 2

While wise, Old English wis, has held to its good meaning except in certain phrases such as "worldly wise," other terms have come to indicate unscrupulous use of knowledge or skill. Cunning, from Anglo-Saxon cunnan, "to know," originally meant "knowledge, learning, skill," as in Wyclif's Bible, "the tree of kunnyng of good and yvel," and the King James version's "the hand had not forgot her cunning." From about 1599 on, 3 cunning has designated "skill employed in a secret or underhand manner, or for purposes of deceit." The "knowing" man became in the course of time endowed with the suspicion of knowing too much for his neighbors. 4 Thus, knowing degenerated from "informed, intelligent" and "having or displaying discernment" to a connotation of offensive superiority or excessive intimacy. Craft, Old English craeft, first signified "strength, power, might" and then "a great

2Funk, op. cit., p. 96.


number, host." By transfer from physical strength to mental strength, craft came to denote "power of mind, wisdom, knowledge, skill." Frequent association with deofol and feond developed the sense "device, wile"; and association with searo, "skill, cunning," which resulted in the compound searo-craeft, took on the meaning "deceit." The chief modern sense is thus "deceit, guile, fraud," except for the transference to "a skilled occupation." Similarly, crafty was once synonymous with "strong, powerful, mighty," but came to mean "skillful in devising and carrying out underhanded or evil schemes." Crafty had already reached its latest stage of degeneration before the end of the sixteenth century.

Another word once complimentary is sly, originally meaning "skillful, clever, dexterous; knowing, wise." The idea of skill and cleverness was at an early date associated with that of prudence or caution, not necessarily in a reproving sense. Then sly came to mean "wary, cunningly experienced," and in the fourteenth century, "artfully dexterous in doing things secretly." In Modern English the word, applied to persons, has a worse moral implication than in Middle English. It often suggests a decided inclination toward meanness.


Two words also discussed elsewhere may be included in this group with reference to distrust of brains. Deft originally meant the same as deft—"skillful, apt, clever"; and clever, retaining today its primary meaning of "possessing quickness of intellect; skillful, talented," may also be used in New England to mean "gullible" or "stupid." 7

Through gradual deflection from its original meaning, quaint has almost reached the opposite sense. Going back to Old French counte, from Latin cognition, "well-known, famous," quaint in Old English meant "skillful, knowing, clever." Now it signifies "curious, unusual, odd," or even "scrupulously exact, fastidious, prim." Cute, the apetic form of acute, meant "clever, keen-witted, sharp." The word now appears in such derogatory senses as "That was a cute trick he pulled on me." Smarty and smart are likewise often used to denote supposed cleverness or knowledge. Curiosity, from Latin cura, "care," and inquisitiveness, literally "inquiring," have come to be names of objectionable qualities because the original meaning of "interest" has expanded to an interest in things with which one has no concern. An amusing incident showing distrust of brains is furnished by the group of presidential advisors who were given, in jest or earnest, the title of "the 8 Brain Trust." It was soon apparent that the name was not one of respect, and the group itself had but a brief existence.

7Menner, op. cit., p. 73.

8Bryant, op. cit., p. 323.
If a person has difficulty in grasping a concept, he is not likely to look with unalloyed favor on one who easily understands it. This sentiment is reflected in the current degeneration of the word *abstract*. *Abstract* and *concrete* were first coined to express a distinction which is really necessary to thought, but it is only for the very highly educated that they still do so. In popular language *concrete* now means something like "clearly defined and practicable"; it has become a term of praise. From its proper association of dealing with a subject in its theoretical considerations, *abstract* has come to be a term of reproach meaning "vague, shadowy, unsubstantial." The process may have been aided by the "phonetic infection" of *abstruse*.

Once meaning "art," *artifice* came to imply "workmanship, handicraft," as in Cudworth's "The material universe... is the artifice of God, the artifice of the best Mechanist." From the inference of ingenuity and skillful contriving, the word degenerated to signify "trickery, guile, stratagem."

Adopted from French *artificiel*, *artificial* once meant "artful, ingenious, skillful." It also meant "feigned," but "fictitious, spurious, or counterfeit" were once not synonyms.

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9 C. S. Lewis, "The Death of Words," London Spectator, CLXX (September 22, 1944), 261.

10 Ibid.

11 As quoted in Schreuder, op. cit., p. 163.
as they are now. The oldest meaning of artful was either "performed with art" or "versed in the (liberal) arts, learned, cultured." From the first-named meaning have evolved those of "artful, dexterous," and also "cunning, sly."

(Frequent degeneration is apparent in words connoting abilities, traits, and conditions other than ones specifically intellectual. The words grouped here apply to some ability or state, perhaps commendable in itself, that becomes derogatory when modified in some way.

Implications of rascality have proved forceful in coloring such words as pirate, swindler, and counterfeiter. In the original Greek sense a pirate was merely one who adventured or tried; the word had attracted its unpleasant connotation before it entered the English language and has always meant "sea robber" in English use. Again, swindler in the German from which the English language got it named one who entered into dangerous mercantile speculations, without implication of fraud. Counterfeit meant literally "imitate, copy"; thus a counterfeiter was an imitator or copyist. To copy a man's hand or seal, or to imitate the national coin, was felony, and counterfeit soon acquired the sinister association which always attends it today.

Although contrive has not superseded its original good or neutral sense of "devise, plan, invent," it is especially
used of evil devices. Fabricate once meant merely "build, construct," as in "God fabricated the earth." In its bad sense the term means "make up, frame or invent," as a lie or legend, and "forge," as a document.

Once meaning "to sift and pick out the best," garble corrupted to mean "sorting for purposes of creating a false impression or mutilating with a view to misrepresentation," as in "garbled account" and "garbled text." Voluble, which was originally said of things in the sense of "easily revolving," as in "the voluble earth" (Paradise Lost, IV, 594), came in a figurative sense to be applied to the nimbleness of the tongue and the fluency of the speaker or his speech. It had not, at first, an insinuating suggestion of "glib, garrulous, talkative." To mouth once meant simply "to speak." The sense is now "to mouth one's words; to use a pompous or affected oratorical style of utterance." Carp began as meaning merely "speak, talk." The original sense took on the additional connotation of "talk censoriously, querulously, or captiously; find fault, cavil." Apparently the word was spoiled by association with Latin carrere, "to pluck," figuratively "to slander, calumniate, revile." Prose and proser do not convey moral condemnation, but they are

12 "Words That Have Lost Their Reputation," Mentor XVI (October, 1928), 67.
certainly not complimentary. Once the antithesis of "to versify," to prose was "to express in prose." Now it means "to talk or write heavily or tediously, without spirit or animation." Prosaic, from Latin prosa, "prose," first meant "pertaining to prose," but now means "dull, commonplace, humdrum." Grandiloquent, Latin grandiloquus, from loqui, "to speak," has degenerated to the sense of "pompous, bombastic."

Bold, dapper, and stout once expressed the admirable characteristic of "bravery," but have now generally lost that meaning. Bold meant "stout-hearted, courageous, daring, fearless," the opposite of "timid, fearful." Then in such phrases as "to make (so) bold" and "to be (so) bold," it signified "to venture, presume so far as, take the liberty." Thus tainted, it needed only a step to become "audacious, presumptuous, too forward" and become an antonym of "modest." Dapper was apparently adopted at the end of the Middle English period, from Flemish or another Low German dialect, with a modification, perhaps ironical or humorous, of the sense "brave, sprightly." In English it meant "neat, trim,

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14 The word is not found in Old or Middle English but has a Germanic background; cf. Middle Dutch dapper, "powerful, strong, brave," Middle Low German dapper, "heavy, steady, persevering, unsuited," Old High German tapfer, Middle High German tapfer, "heavy, firm," Modern German "warlike, brave."
smart, spruce in dress or appearance," formerly in an appreciative sense but now more or less deprecative, with associations of littleness or pettiness. When *stout* was borrowed from Old French *estout*, a cognate of German *stolz*, the senses already existing in Old French, "proud, haughty, fierce, brave," were brought with it; but the references of Middle English *stout* were extended to include "firm in resolve, unyielding."¹⁵ This sense degenerated into "obstinate, stubborn, rebellious." Then in a more physical sense, "strong, sturdy" slid into "thick in body, inclined to corpulence." The only really common meaning of *stout* in standard English today, except in isolated terms such as *stouthearted*, is "fat, corpulent."

A change of fashion was partly responsible for the degeneration of *doughty*. Derived from the Old English noun *duguth*, *doughty* was the native English equivalent for the later French derivative *court*. It expressed courtly ideals, but the present meaning reflects the Norman contempt for Anglo-Saxon ideals. There is now an archaic flavor and often humorous application of its definition, "brave, stout, formidable." Heretofore a man could speak of the animosity or "spiritedness" of his horse with no inference that the animal displayed "active and vehement enmity," as the word is now translated. *Flighty* once meant "swift, quick, fleet":

¹⁵ *Menner, op. cit.*, p. 70.
The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
Unless the deed go with it.

Macbeth, IV, i, 145-146.

A secondary meaning of "given to flights of imagination, caprice; guided by whim and fancy," led to the current meaning of "fickle, frivolous, inconstant." In a thirteenth-century Scotch and northern dialect, rash meant "active, quick, brisk, eager." Its current implication is one of haste, impetuosity, and recklessness without due consideration for consequences.

Bland was once a complimentary adjective which has lost its first meaning and become contemptuous or ironic. Formerly it meant "smooth and suave, gentle, soothing." In the sixteenth century, smug, a cognate with German schmuck, meant "trim, neat." The original sense is found in Shakespeare:

And here the smug and silver Trent shall run
In a new channel, fair and evenly.

I Henry IV, III, i, 102-103.

Its connotation today is one of contemptible self-complacency.

Sad, Old English saed, from German satt, once meant only "satisfied, sated, full of," and these meanings persisted until the middle of the fifteenth century. In the early fourteenth century there had meanwhile arisen the sense "settled, steadfast, firm," perhaps because satisfied and well-fed people are apt to be of stabler mentality than others, and the word often translated the Latin solidus, firmus. Slightly

16
Ibid., p. 64.
later the sense "orderly, regular, grave, serious" appeared, and sad was often accompanied by such adjectives as "wise" and "discreet." Meanwhile there arose in Chaucer's time the sense "sorrowful, mournful," which has persisted as the chief meaning of sad to the present. However there are several degenerate applications, one the jocular and colloquial sad in "sad dog," N. E. D.'s sense 6, "deplorably bad." Sad may also mean "immoral, evil, indecent, risqué," and in current slang, "poor quality, defective."

The sense sequence of pitiful is "(1) pious, (2) compassionate, merciful, (3) exciting pity, piteous, deplorable, lamentable, and (4) to be pitied for its littleness or meanness, despicable, contemptible." From "pious" to "contemptible" is rather a thorough depreciation. From Latin familia, "family," familiar once meant "of or pertaining to a family; domestic," and then, naturally, "closely acquainted or intimate," still in a blameless sense. From that connotation, familiar degenerated to mean "unduly or wrongly intimate, bold." In the words parsimony and parsimonious there was originally no suggestion of stinginess: "Parsimony: thriftiness, good husbandry," as defined by Cockeram's Dictionary, 1623. Johnson said of the adjective, "It is sometimes of a good, sometimes

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of a bad sense, "but the debased meaning of "niggardly" is prevalent today.

*Pragmatical* once meant "engaged in action, busy, energetic." Now to call a person "pragmatical" implies not merely that he is busy, but *over*-busy, officious, self-important, and pompous to boot. *Officious* has undergone the same sort of pejoration. Formerly an officious person was one prompt in offices of kindness and not, as now, an uninvited meddler. Again, *busybody* originally denoted a busy person, but now one who interferes with what is not his concern.

Although the adjective *precious* may still be applied to jewels and virtues, a deprecatory reference is also possible. In Shakespeare's day scoundrels and varlets could be designated as precious; when Iago stabbed Emilia, Othello called him "Precious villain." Later another idea of something affected and pretentious grew steadily. Thus *precious* today is often used unflatteringly to suggest the prig or the poseur, and *preciosity*, which once meant "value," now refers only to a mincing and finicking type of culture. *Specious* once meant "beautiful, fair, lovely" but means at present "ungenuine; deceitful; having a fair or attractive appearance or character, calculated to make a favorable impression on the mind, but in reality devoid of the qualities apparently possessed." *Fair*, which has such favorable meanings as "beautiful; free from blemish; benigh," can also be used to express moderate commendation: "pretty good, passable, average, mediocre, and
inferior." The determined optimism or innate courtesy which led to the use of *fair*, rather than a direct expression of discontent, has had the effect of permanently lowering the meaning of this word.

Many words have been affected by a tinge of irony. Among them is *worthy*; Anglo-Saxon *wearbig* and Middle English *worthi* conveyed to the minds of the early English people the idea exclusively of moral and physical virtues deserving the highest respect. By the eighteenth century the word had a generally acknowledged ironical connotation. Johnson made special mention of it: "*worthy* 4. Not good. A term of ironical commendation--

'My worthy wife our arms mislaid
And from beneath my head my sword convey'd
The door unlatch'd and with repeated calls
Invites her former lord within my walls.'

Dryden." 19

The substantive *worthy*, which was also once taken in a serious sense, now seldom implies a compliment to the person who is thus designated. Its contemporary contemptuous tinge may be seen in such a phrase as "the worthies of the city council." *Plausible* originally meant "praiseworthy, laudable," from Latin *plausibilis*, "deserving applause," and *plaudo*, "to clap the hands." It degenerated to "pleasing,"

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18 As quoted in McKnight, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

19 As quoted in Schreuder, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
then to "superficially fair, reasonable, or valuable; apparently acceptable or trustworthy." Plausible usually implies reasonableness at first sight with the hint of the possibility of being deceived. Formerly decent signified "suitable, seemly, fitting," and "in accordance with the general standard of propriety or good taste." Its blemished meaning is "satisfying a fair standard; passable, good enough in its way." Used in a negative way, decent implies a lack of morals. Respectable was also once a term of positive honor, but is now apologetic.

Does it not show something about man's mind that an unknown, unfamiliar person should come to be thought of as rude and boorish? The history of uncouth reflects such a situation. From Anglo-Saxon uncūth (derived from cūth, the past participle of cūnan, "to know"), which meant "unknown," uncouth assumed the connotation of "savage," perhaps because the unknown had for the masses an aspect of wildness. Because the unknown often proved not only strange but also perplexing and alarming, uncouth finally came to mean "grotesque." Today it is used to describe persons who are odd, awkward, ungainly, boorish, and unrefined. Just as there is no innate evil in something unknown, neither is there in something old. However, antic, formerly a doublet of antique, has changed considerably. From meaning simply "ancient," it acquired the sense of "quaint, odd, bizarre" and was applied to grotesque work in art or to a fantastic disguise. This meaning
seems to have come about through application of Italian
*antico*, "old," to the curious and weird posturings of the
figures carved on the walls of the baths of the Roman Emperor
Titus. From meaning "grotesque" then, *antic* came to refer to
a buffoon, and afterwards the sense was transferred to the
capers of a buffoon. Although there is no derogatory connota-
tion in *length*, *lengthy* has taken on the meaning of "tedious."

The idea of poor quality now overshadows the original
meaning, "inexpensive," of *cheap*. To *cheapen* meant "to offer
to buy, to bargain for": "She would make a puritan of the
devil, if he should cheapen a kiss of her." (*Pericles*, IV, vi,
9). It is probable that bargaining has always consisted in the
lowering of prices, and therefore *cheap*, as a verb, eventually
meant "to become lower in price." Possibly because to the fas-
tidious there has always been something despicable in bargain-
ing, or it may be because someone was deluded in what he
thought was *cheap*, the word gradually acquired the meaning
"to become lower in esteem." Now to cheapen a thing means
to degrade it. A shortening of *good cheap* in its adjectival
and adverbial uses, *cheap* as an adjective is not found before
the sixteenth century. Because something inexpensive, "not
dear," involved little trouble and was hence of little worth,
the connotation of "worthless, paltry" grew up. Brought into
contempt through being made too familiar, *cheap* may also ex-
press immorality, as in "cheap woman."

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Flaunt once referred to plumes and banners and the like, "to wave gaily or proudly," and to plants, "to wave so as to display their beauty." Applied to persons, it assumed the meaning of "to walk or move about so as to display oneself in unbeknownstly splendid or gaudy attire; to obtrude oneself boastfully, impudently, or defiantly on the public view." Grandiose also means "vulgarily showy, flaunt" now, but formerly the word meant "characterized by largeness of plan or nobility of design," and when applied to speech or deportment, "characterized by formal stateliness." Pretentiousness has resulted in the word's being colored to mean "aiming at an effect of grandeur, pompous."
The original sense of wrangle was "to keep on pressing, to urge," not a derogatory idea in itself. However, the word quickly degenerated to mean "argue vehemently." Instead of "acting as a patron to," patronize now mostly means "to assume the air of a patron towards; to treat condescendingly."

Simplicity of Mind, Modesty, and Guilelessness of Manners

The distrust of intelligence and special ability is, as has been demonstrated thus far, a frequent characteristic of man. Conversely, he tends to scorn inability and naivety; people who are not smart enough or experienced enough, not sufficiently versed in the tricks and turns necessary to make their way in life, will appear of inferior intelligence to others who are better equipped in this respect. Similarly, a modest virtue frequently lends itself to scorn.
Stupid, originally meaning "amazed, dazed, stupefied," now applies to a permanently dazed state, "wanting in or slow of mental perception; slow-witted, dull." Daft, Middle English dafft, in addition to its meaning of "skillful" also meant at one time "modest, gentle, meek." It degenerated to become synonymous with "silly, foolish, stupid," and then came to mean "of unsound mind, imbecilic, idiotic, insane" and also "wildly frolicsome, wanton." Etymologically, simple means "sincere, straightforward, unaffected." But although simplicity keeps this meaning, simple is now seldom used except to mean "deficient, silly, easily deceived," and simpleton names a person of limited or feeble intelligence. Silly, Old English sælig (the same as German selig), meant "blessed, happy, fortunate," and Middle English seeley was so used in Wyclif's translation of the Bible. Then silly came to mean "plain, simple, rustic, rude"; on down the ladder of degeneration it meant "simple-hearted," next "weak, frail," and finally "foolish," either in a pitying or a contemptuous way. Examples of its meaning "inane, trivial" occur from the time of Shakespeare. Idiot had its origin in Greece, where it was applied to a private person—one not engaged in any public office. It did not signify that he was particularly incompetent to officiate, but merely distinguished an ordinary citizen from officials. In time, however, the impression was gathered that an idiot was not competent, and the word began its slide downhill. Formerly ninny was a

21 "They Don't Always Mean What They Imply," Mentor, XV (June, 1927), 63.
pet form of the proper name Innocent; through innuendo ninny has come to mean a fool or simpleton. It has been mentioned heretofore that in New England, clever may mean "(1) good-natured, (2) good-natured but stupid, (3) good-natured but shiftless and irresponsible, (4) foolishly obliging, so good-natured as to be at the mercy of others, (5) gullible or spineless, (6) ignorant, (7) stupid, and (8) worthless." What a degradation for a word meaning "skillful, talented, quick of intellect."

Frank is no longer synonymous with "free, unrestrained," except in the highly specialized sense of "franking a letter," but rather has a much more particularized meaning. Neither does it generally connote "bountiful, liberal," as it did in Shakespeare's day. It does mean "candid, open, ingenious," as formerly, but there is some question whether being frank is necessarily a virtue, for especially in reference to speech it means "candid, outspoken, unreserved." Frank is an instance of a word in process of pejorative change. Demire, from Old French demurer, "to stay," had an early meaning of "quiet, settled." It was next applied to conduct and speech with the meaning of "sober, grave, serious, reserved, or composed in demeanor," which sense shifted to "affectedly or constrainedly grave or decorous;

Skeat, however, attributes ninny to imitative origin from the repetition of the syllables, ni, ni, or na, na, in humming or singing children to sleep. (Cf. Italian ninno, "child," Spanish nino, nene, "infant").
serious, reserved or coy in a way that is not natural to the person or to one of his years or condition." From Middle English *apert*, *pert* meant "open, unconcealed." Then it deteriorated to mean "forward in speech and behavior, bordering on 'cheeky,'" and its opposite, *malapert*. *Pert* may now mean "brisk and lively," but with a very distinct subaudition, which once it had not, of sauciness as well. It is said usually of children, young people, or persons of inferior position who are considered to be too "uppish" or forward in their address.

*Homely* used to mean "that which belonged to a home or was produced or practiced at home," "simple, unadored." Sometimes approbative, as connoting the absence of artificial embellishment, *homely* became more often used deprecatively or apologetically for "unpolished, rough, rude; lacking refinement, polish, or grace." From a persistent euphemistic attempt to apply a pleasant term to one not possessed of good looks, *homely* degenerated to the meaning "ugly." *Plain* is rapidly following the same course. Likewise, *unsophisticated*, literally meaning "unadulterated, unspoiled," is almost always a term of contempt at present. *Prude* is either a back-formation from Old French *prudefemme*, "a good and worthy woman," or a later feminine form of *preux*, a word related to *proud* and *prowess*. Its original laudatory sense was "virtuous, modest, respectable," but the word seems to have entered English tainted with excess. Trench's comment on this degeneration is interesting:
A "prude" is now a woman with an over-done affectation of a modesty which she does not really feel, and betraying the absence of the substance by this over-preciseness and niceness about the shadow. Goodness must have gone strangely out of fashion, the corruption of manners must have been profound, before matters could have come to this point. . . the word abides, a proof of the world's disbelief in the realities of goodness, of its resolution to treat them as hypocrisies and deceits. 23

Relative Maturity

The immaturity of childhood and the weakness of old age are responsible for degeneration of several terms. Childish and puerile both mean properly "pertaining or proper to a child or to childhood; childlike, youthful." The depreciative sense of these terms is "exhibiting unduly the characteristics of childhood; not befitting mature age; immature, trivial, silly." Green, being the color of unripe fruit, came to mean "unripe, immature, undeveloped" and then "untrained, inexperienced," and ultimately, "gullible, raw." Naughty, meaning "good for nought," was once in dignified use, but through association with childish conduct has become a general synonym for "bad," applicable to morals. Petty, from French petit, once signified a small boy. In English it carried the idea of "smallness" into a sense of "small importance, inconsiderable, insignificant, trivial." Imp formerly referred to

23 Trench, The Study of Words, p. 65.

a young shoot of a plant or tree and was transferred to denote "scion, offspring, child (usually male)." From this name of dignity and honor, imp degenerated to mean "a mischievous child (having a little of 'the devil' in him) a young urchin." Etymologically, brat probably is "one clothed in a brattach"—that is, an infant in a diaper. The word often suggests an illegitimate child. The German hube, whence may have come English booby and booby, was a term of affection applied to any small boy. In English booby has always meant "a dull, stupid fellow, a dunce." Wag, for "boy," with no implication of facetiousness, is Tudor English. Later, playfulness crept in. The modern notion of a wag, as a fellow of any age who eternally strives after quips and puns, is quite different. Terms such as varlet and knave, previously discussed in their social context, deserve mention in this group also. The weakness of old age permits scornful use of senile and senility. Senile means "belonging to, suited for, or incident to old age." Boyle, in Style of Script, wrote "A

25 "How Changing Words Go Downhill," Literary Digest, CXII (March 26, 1932), 20. The origin of brat is not certain. Wedgwood, E. Müller, and Skeat think it the same word as Celtic brat, "a cloth used as an overgarment," but evidence of the transition of sense has not been found.

26 N. E. D. does not agree, and states that connection is hardly possible. Funk says Latin balbug, "stammering," passed into Spanish as boba, "fool," and gave us our "booby," who is also a stupid fellow. Weekley concurs.
Person in whom Nature, Education, and Time have happily Match'd a Semile Maturity of Judgement with a Youthfull Vigour of Phansie." Then the word degenerated to mean "exhibiting the weakness of old age."

Isolationism

Perhaps the fact that man is generally happiest as a social being makes him distrust anything that suggests apartness. Whatever the cause, several words reflect such a sentiment. Peculiar means "that set apart" and "what is one's own." Applied to a person's manners, speech, movements or taste, it denotes that these manners are different from those of others. Colloquially it means "eccentric, queer." Odd had a large number of meanings in Middle English. One idea associated with the word was that of unevenness, from which came "not divisible into equal numbers" and then "forming an exception to general rules of calculation." From these it was only a step to "not belonging to the majority," "holding a unique position," and "eccentric, strange, grotesquely incongruous." Sullen is a variant form of solemn, Middle English solein, solain, which originally meant "solitary" and then "hating company, morose."

27 As quoted in the N. E. D.

28 The interchange of these two words is interesting. Shakespeare describes the curfew as solemn, Milton as sullen, while mourning dress is described as solemn black (Hamlet) and sullen black (Richard II).
Egregious etymologically means a person apart, a sheep out of the flock, and first connoted "remarkable" in a good sense. Then egregiously came to denote "remarkable" in a bad sense: "gross, flagrant, outrageous." Aloof first meant "away to the windward" and then "apart from or away in any sphere." The word is presently tinged with disinterestedness and haughtiness. The phrase ivory tower was used for centuries as a symbol for the Virgin Mary, and it occurs in the "Song of Solomon," but Sainte-Beuve first applied it to literature. The term has come in again recently in a derogatory sense as a synonym for "escapism."

Rascality, envy, scorn, excesses, and general distrust of others are appallingly evident as causes of decadence of words. This chapter may be summed up with this statement: "It is in the nature of human malice to take pleasure in looking for a vice or for a fault behind a quality."

29 "Words That Go to the Bad," Living Age, CCXXXIX (November 21, 1903), 508.

30 N. E. D. says that the bad sense does not belong to Latin egregious, "towering above the flock," but probably arose from ironical use of the good sense, although the earliest quotations afford no evidence of this.


CHAPTER IV

ETHICAL-SEXUAL TERMS

The previous chapter has illustrated the frequent degradation of terms associated with outstanding abilities and originally blameless conditions. The next group consists of words for moral and sexual conceptions as well as words which owe their contamination to ethical and sexual views.

Moral Inference

In the field of morals, word after word has degenerated. Almost any term of reproach or word that suggests inferiority may come to imply moral badness. Attention has been called to moral inference in the discussions of individual words in previous chapters; therefore as a rule, words discussed elsewhere are not specifically mentioned here.

In Latin, *vice* meant "flaw." The word already had a strong meaning of depravity or corruption of morals when it entered English. *Sensual* pertains to the senses or physical sensations; and pejoratively applied to appetites and pleasures, it implies the notion of something base or vicious, even lewd or unchaste. Similarly, *carnal* meant "corporeal, pertaining to the flesh or body." From meaning "not spiritual" in a negative sense, the word came to mean "not spiritual" in a privative sense: "unreconstitute, unsanctified, worldly."
Beastly was formerly synonymous with the adjectives "animal, physical." Wyclif's Bible translates I Corinthians 15:44 as "It is sowun a beasty body, it schal ryse a spiritual body." Quite naturally, beastly came to mean "obeying the animal instincts; resembling a beast in conduct," and later "abominable, disgusting; offensive, especially from dirtiness."

Demean originally connoted no moral qualities whatever, but meant "conduct, manage, deal with." Then the word specialized to mean "treat badly, maltreat." Now demean refers exclusively to conduct; "to demean oneself" means to behave badly. Err formerly signified "to ramble, roam, stray," and erring, "wandering." Now these terms are usually applied in a moral sense. Delly continued the meaning of Old French delier, "to converse, chat, talk idly." Then it drifted into the sense of "amuse oneself; toy, sport, play with in the way of amorous caresses; flirt," and later "trifle with under the guise of serious action." The usual contemporary sense is "spend time idly or frivolously; loiter, delay." Fiddle, a word of eminent dignity in earlier English and French, has degenerated through the influence of fiddle-faddle, a reduplicated form of the obsolete faadle, "to trifle." Now fiddle expresses only aimless or frivolous movements and idle toying.

Buxomness formerly meant "obedience, submissiveness; lowliness, humility." A buxom helmate was "obedient," buxom being cognate with German biegam, "flexible,
yielding." The modern sense is "comely plumpness." Debauch comes from an old French word meaning "to turn away from the workshop," and thus lead into idleness. The familiar connotations of idleness with sin followed, and debauchery now refers to indulgence in the sensual joys. The noun scamp for "a swindler and worthless fellow" is formed from the obsolete verb to scamper (Modern English to scamper, "to run away with speed"), which in its turn goes back to Old French eschamper, escamper, "to decamp."

Applied to persons, questionable at one time meant "one who may be interrogated, one of whom questions may be asked." This meaning is illustrated in the ghost scene, Hamlet, I, iv, 43-44: "Thou comest in such a questionable shape /That I will speak to thee." Now questionable, applied to conduct, insinuates "doubtful nature, character, or quality; and dubious goodness." Vile once meant "cheap," but followed the familiar pattern of "small account, low, worthless" to "morally base, wicked, sinful." In addition it may mean "unclean, repulsive, odious." Degraded, literally "reduced in grade or rank" (Latin gradus, "rank"), has also been associated with the idea of evil.

Sex and Body Processes

Words having to do with sex and body processes are even more tainted to mean moral depravity than those of the

1 Brown, op. cit., p. 47.
preceding group. Sex has proved a forceful magnet in the deterioration of words.

From its original meaning of "not customary," immoral has degenerated to mean "licentious," and specifically "unchaste." With frequent use in the sense of illicit sexual relations, illicit has slid a notch from its former meaning of "unallowed, not authorized." Fast in expressions like "to live fast," "a fast life," "a fast man" originated in euphemistic slang. The meaning of Anglo-Saxon faeste was "firm(ly), vigorous(ly)." A side idea from the development of "rapid" yielded the vague meaning of "extremely, intensely." Applied to a person's conduct or way of living, these meanings became synonymous with "extravagant." The slang expression "to live fast" got into literature in about 1700, but it must have been current some years earlier. Thence came the adjectival use implying immorality.

Suggestive now implies what is "improperly, indecently or evilly" suggestive, and a knowing look is suggestive. Likewise, a leer was once a look that contained nothing amiss. Leer formerly meant merely "a look, complexion, countenance," as in "He hath a Rosalind of better leer than you." (As You Like It, IV, 1, 69.) In Roman antiquity, libertine meant "freedman." The name was given to certain antinomian sects of the early sixteenth century, and later designated one who held free or loose opinions about religion. The "freethinker" sense further degenerated to mean "a man not restrained by
moral law, especially in relations with the female sex; one leading a dissolute, licentious life." *Wanton*, from Old English *wantogen*, "undisciplined, ungoverned," originally meant "untaught." The word was used euphemistically for "lascivious, lewd, unchaste," and soon the latter sense, through adequation, became one of the habitual meanings of the word. *Cupidity*, from Latin *cupidus*, "eagerly desirous," specialized to mean "inordinate desire" and then "avarice, covetousness, greed." Tracing to a Germanic word meaning "long for," *lust* once meant "pleasure, delight." Longings, however, often take a sexual direction, and as early as the year 1,000, *lust* began to refer to sinful and sensual appetites and low animal passions. The term now almost exclusively implies intense moral reprobation of libidinous desire. *Passion*, once indicative of tender love and ungoverned energy, anger, or will, is now applied especially to the sex drive, although in reference to the passion of Christ and to passion plays, the meaning of "suffering" is still current. As a noun, *pervert* once designated "one who had forsaken a doctrine or system regarded as true for one esteemed false, an apostate." Now both the noun and verb forms tend to be associated with "sex."

At one time *seduce* meant "lead away," as to persuade a vassal, servant or soldier to desert his allegiance or

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2 Funk, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
service. In a wider sense it came to mean "to lead a person astray in conduct or belief, to tempt to do something." The prevailing sense is "to induce a woman to surrender her chastity." Affair, from Old French a faire, originally an infinitive phrase a faire, "to do," still means "what one has ado with, business," but is becoming specialized to imply sexual relationship. Intercourse degenerated from "commerce, trade, exchange" to mean intimate connection or dealing with persons or nations and then to a highly specialized connotation of the sex act. The phrase sleep with alludes to sexual relation also. Hot may now mean "excited with sexual desire," and heat may convey "lust." Even expect may have a specialized meaning: "She is expecting" means "She is pregnant."

The name of no other primary color is used in so many transferred and metaphorical senses as is that of blue, and the development of meaning is preponderantly pejorative. Associative meanings, primarily those with sexual connotations, have strengthened the word and widened its applications. "To have the blues" is to suffer from depression of spirits or anxiety. In the sense of "indecent, obscene," blue seems, after an existence of 100 years, to be moving from the limbo of argot toward general usage, and blue gown


4 Joseph F. Roppolo, "'Blue': Indecent, Obscene," American Speech, XXVIII (February, 1953), 12.
names a prostitute. Fellow once meant "partner," from Anglo-Saxon fæolage, from Old Norse felage, "one who laid down his property (see) along with that of another." Hence the meaning of "companion" and then "idle companion" arose. In addition to being a general term for "man," the word may now also refer to one with a lack of sex drive. To call a man a fellow is not safe in some quarters nowadays outside of the campus of a university. Similarly, fairy and queer have come to designate a homosexual. Keep is often used in the sense of "to keep a woman as mistress." Lewd and sad have been discussed heretofore. Toilet at one time referred to the whole process of gowing and beautifying oneself for appearance in public. The word fell into disrepute because of one aspect of that preparation.

Women

Many words applied to women are the most thoroughly de-based in the English language. Throughout history, names for women have suffered slighting connotations, insinuating inferences, and rank and vituperative contamination. According to Margaret Schlauch,

5 "How Words Lose Reputation," Scientific Monthly, XVI (April, 1923), 445. "Fellow of a college" is a translation of socius; its academic isolation has preserved its dignity.

6 Margaret Schlauch, "Words: Their Rise and Fall," Science Digest, XII (August, 1942), 83-84.
Allardyce Nicoll reports that the society comedies of the Restoration period in England tended to vilify any and all words applied to woman, even the most sacred and dignified. To us innocents it must appear an incredible situation to find the words "sister" and even "mother" degenerated to pornographic significance as they were in the seventeenth century. 

_Girl_ has undergone almost every semantic change that a word with a female connotation can experience. First it was a term for a child of either sex; then it became specialized in the feminine gender. _Girl_ is used in the sense of "servant," "sweetheart," and in such phrases as "girl about town," "prostitute." Currently it is often used slightly and sometimes intimates "a mistress." _Maid_ and _maiden_ in poetical phrase still retain their old nobility, but the common usage of _maid_ is "servant." In Old English _maegden_, _maedan_, and Middle English _magden_, _magde_, there was no trace of denotation as a female servant; the various associating ideas were "holiness, purity, chastity," and "staunchness, innocence, meekness, naivety." By Gower's time, however, the word was used to express menial status. _Damsel_ originally denoted "a lady of gentle birth, a young woman of distinction." The degeneration clearly appears from the following quotation: "The clowns are whore-masters, and the damsels with child." (Johnson's _Dictionary_.) _Wench_ began its life as Anglo-Saxon _wanc__


wencel, wincel, an inoffensive term for a child of either sex. Then it became specialized in the female aspect and took the significance of maiden or damsel, then of servant, then of lustful strumpet, and in the United States, of a colored woman. In addition, then, to male prejudice, it became tinctured with racial prejudice.

In all but a very few instances, the word dame is used in an unflattering way about women; yet its history is one of dignity, for dame had its beginning in the Latin domina, "mistress." Its first English meaning was "a female ruler," "lady" as feminine of "lord." Later as a form of address it was used for a woman of position, the feminine corresponding to "sire." Gradually dame extended to women of lower rank and, after the sixteenth century, was left to them. Madam, literally "my lady," in derisive and opprobrious use means "an affected fine lady" and also "hussy, minx." With the Restoration in 1660 the word was so corrupted that it came to be applied to any kept mistress or prostitute, and even today madam can refer to the proprietor of a brothel. Mistress has a similar etymology to that of madam. It first meant "a woman who rules, or has control." Later it came to mean "sweetheart" and then "a woman who illicitly occupies the place of wife." Likewise, hussy once denoted the mistress of a household, a thrifty woman, a housewife. Then the term

9 Ibid.
became a rustic, rude, approbingious, or playfully rude mode of addressing a woman. The bad sense was at first mostly with qualification ("light hussy"), or contextual. Then hussy absorbed such disparaging adjectives as "impudent, idle, saucy, pert," and by the seventeenth century it meant "a bawd." The word woman itself may mean "a mistress." Person denotes "a human being." The word comes from Latin persona, which first meant "mask," then "actor," and then "human being in general." At one time, person had a shady meaning. It has been more or less employed as a euphemistic substitute for woman by those who did not wish to countenance the vulgar abuse and yet shrank from giving offence. The result was to give a comically slighting connotation to one of the most innocent words imaginable.

Queen, from Anglo-Saxon cwene, meant "woman." From early Middle English it was a term of disparagement or abuse; hence it has come to mean "a bold, impudent woman, a jade, hussy," and specifically, "a harlot, strumpet." Four hundred years ago, virago meant "a heroic woman." Now the term designates a bold, impudent woman, a termagant, and a scold. Harlot, from Old French herlot, harlot, erlot, once meant "a

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10 Ernest Weekley, The Romance of Words, p. 82.
11 Funk, op. cit., p. 256.
12 Greenough and Kittredge, op. cit., p. 326.
fellow of either sex." As a word of masculine gender, it was found early in the thirteenth century. Chaucer's use illustrates the meaning "lad, young fellow": "He was a gentil harlot and a kind." (Canterbury Tales, 649-647)." Shortly, though, that application was on its way downwards to mean "base knave, vagabond." The feminine gender appeared in the sixteenth century, and by the seventeenth, harlot was a euphemism for "whore." In Shakespeare the word is more often applied to women than to men:

Portia: Dwell I but in the suburbs Of your good pleasure? If it be no more, Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife. Julius Caesar, II, i, 285-287.

The feminine application is exclusively used today. Harlot was once a name applied without disparagement to a favorite. It very naturally drifted into meaning a lover or lady-love, a sense which degenerated with extensive contemptuous use to "a mistress, paramour." The term may also mean "low dependent" and "puppet." The etymological meaning of paramour is "lover." The word is from an Old French adverbial phrase, par amour, "by or through love," which from an early date was written as one word. The term came to be treated in English as a substantive in both the sense of "love" and "beloved." Then it began to designate an illicit or clandestine lover or mistress who took the place, without the rights of a

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As quoted in Weekley, Etymological Dictionary.
husband or wife. Now it names the illicit partner of a married man (or woman, sometimes).

**Beldam** first meant "a grandmother" and also generally "an aged woman, a matron of advanced years." Through specialization it acquired the sense of "a loathsome old woman, a hag, a witch; a furious, raging woman (without the notion of age); a virago." The word implied "hag" as early as Shakespeare, but he also used it in its first sense of "grandmother": Hotspur refers to "old beldam earth" and "our grandam earth" in the same speech. (I Henry IV, III, i).

Words, particularly those associated with sex and women, oftentimes preserve a striking record of the perversion of moral sense. "La donna è mobile," not only in opera, but in linguistics!  

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CHAPTER V

MEDIAL TERMS

Medial terms, or "two-way" words, are those whose fundamental meaning at one time lay on the boundary of two spheres of thought. Many of these words had originally neutral meanings and therefore possessed a potential for either favorable or unfavorable senses, or both. Often such words have become sufficiently tainted that a use in the good sense must be qualified by the phrasing. Other words treated here have restricted pejorative meanings in one or more senses.

The fundamental idea of accident is "what befalls, what happens unforeseen, occurrence," whether serious or not. Currently the general application restricts the term to an event of afflictive or unfortunate character. In early English, omen was occasionally used in the neutral sense of "a sign," good or bad. There are good omens as well as bad, but the word has become more or less specialized to mean a disastrous sign. Likewise, incident has the modern sense of "untoward happening, political contretemps." Casualty is from Latin casus, "falling, chance." Properly speaking, a casualty is therefore a mischance, a mishap, but as a war term it has acquired a much more serious sense of a fatal accident or disaster. Fatal once meant "destined, fated,"
and "necessary": "It was fatal to the king to fight for his money." (Bacon, Henry VIII). Now the word means "deadly, destructive, irreversibly ruinous." Predicament comes from Latin predicamentum, from a Greek word meaning "condition in general." From the vague meaning of "general condition," as illustrated in Tom Jones, "Irish ladies of strict virtue and many northern lasses of the same predicament," the word has developed into that of "situation," especially "bad situation." Flight as Old English pleit meant "state, condition," but is restricted to an unhappy situation now.

Plot, "plan," did not mean "bad plan" before the sixteenth century. The sense seems to have been definitely fixed after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Probably the restriction was influenced by complot. Designing means "planning," but now to design anything other than clothes and architecture carries evil connotations. Although contrive has not superseded its original good or neutral sense of "plan," "invent," the word is especially used of evil devices. In some applications, scheme means a crafty, unethical project, and an especially bad sense restricts the verb as well as the noun schemer. In league with is rarely used in a favorable sense.

Heretofore one could retaliate for benefits as well as injuries, since retaliate signified no more than "return like

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1 Schreuder, op. cit., p. 131. 2 Ibid., p. 135.
for like, render again as much as received." Resent originally meant "to be sensible of a thing done to one" without any sinister signification. Once a good man could be a faithful resenter of benefits, but the memory of benefits fades more quickly than that of injuries, and the word is confined almost exclusively to deeply reflective displeasure which men entertain against those who have wronged them.³ Retribution has been restricted in sense to "a recompense for evil done," but this limitation did not originally exist: "The king thought he had not remunerated his people sufficiently with good laws which evermore was his retribution for treasure." (Bacon, Henry VII).

The original meaning of incense was "to kindle or inflame any passion," good or bad. The present sense is restricted to the bad only. Imprecate comes from Latin imprecari, "to invoke by prayer, to call for good or evil upon oneself or somebody else." The N. E. D. gives as an example, "I wish and imprecate to your Imperial Majestie all happiness." Now imprecation is synonymous with "curse." Literally, provoke once meant "to call forth"; the context determined what was called forth and for what reason. At present it is frequently a person's irritating attitude which provokes the

³Trench, On the Study of Words, p. 81.

⁴As quoted in Schreuder, op. cit., p. 134.
anger of another, so that provoke is almost synonymous with "irritate, anger," but formerly the provocation might be caused by quite other things, as for instance, beauty: "Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than Gold." (As You Like It, I, iii, 109). One may still speak of provoking laughter, however.

Adoption means "an inclination to or a propensity for something." It took time and a great deal of blundering to restrict the word in a negative way. Today it may mean the pursuit of any habit, but in observable use it tends to mean devotion to a bad habit, especially devotion to the habitual use of drugs. Johnson defined propensity as "moral inclination, disposition to do a thing, good or bad." The word usually suggests an evil bent nowadays. Similarly bias means propensity or prepossession but is rarely used in a favorable sense. Prejudice had a neutral meaning of no more than "a judgment formed beforehand," favorable or otherwise. Now any favorable prejudice must be so qualified by context. Censure once did not have the connotation of blame or re-proof that it has today, but meant "to form an opinion of, estimate, judge," as "The mouth. . . censuring all that passes, by the taste." (R. Carpenter, Experience, I, xiii, 56)." The neutral sense was still current in the eighteenth

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6 As quoted in N. E. D.
century, but the present restriction is "to pronounce an adverse judgment on, criticize unfavorably, blame, condemn." *Doom* has been previously mentioned as narrowing from "judgment" to "condemnation." *Conceit* originally meant "conception" and then "opinion, estimation." From a favorable opinion of esteem, often implying "intelligence," as in "I know you are a gentleman of good conceit." (As You Like It, V, ii, 59), conceit became an overweening opinion of oneself, over-estimation of one's own qualities, and personal vanity or pride. *Critic* denotes one who expresses a reasoned opinion on any matter, involving a judgment of its value, truth, righteousness, or an appreciation of its beauty or technique. In common usage it means, however, "one given to harsh or captious judgment, a caviler or carper." Also *criticism* is generally used in its unpleasant sense. *Indifferent* was originally "without inclination to either side," as in the following:

> Set honour in one eye and death in the other,  
> And I will look on both indifferently.  
> *Julius Caesar*, I, ii, 86-87.

Here impartiality appears as a virtue, a sense which the word kept through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but now that impartiality has a connotation of apathy. The term may also mean "rather bad," as in "indifferent paintings." *Denunciation* was originally synonymous with "proclamation" and "declaration":
She is fast my wife,
Save that we do the demunciation lack
Of outward order.


Desert means literally "what is deserved." Its neutral sense implies the becoming worthy of recompense, *i.e.*, of reward or punishment, according to the good or ill of character or conduct. The word is now usually used in a bad sense, as "to get one's deserts." *Consign*, from Latin *consignus*, "very worthy, well merited," has since the end of the seventeenth century commonly been used only of appropriate punishment in such expressions as "consign punishment" and "consign vengeance." The use originated in the phraseology of Tudor Acts of Parliament. *Salvo*, "a saving clause, a reservation," shifted to the unfavorable sense of "a dishonest mental reservation, a quibbling evasion, a consciously bad excuse," probably in connections where one party tried to evade his obligations, and therefore in advance, or subsequently, provided himself with loopholes, which were viewed with disfavor by the other party.7

Notorious, meaning "well known," now implies one who is well known in an unfavorable sense. An *arch* woman is etymologically kin to an *archbishop*, both senses of *arch* descending from a Greek prefix meaning "beginning, first cause." As a prefix, *arch* was used in titles and descriptive appellations, meaning "chief, principal, great," such as

archduke. Therefore its adjectival use meant "chief, eminent." Occurring chiefly in such phrases as "arch enemy, arch heretic, arch hypocrite, and arch rogue," the word acquired a deprecatory sense of "cunning, crafty, roguish" and sometimes sportively "mischievous, waggish." From Latin praevinire, "to go before," prevent appears in the Psalms in its literal sense: "I prevented the dawning of the morning." (Psalm 119:148). Trench says of this word:

One may reach a point before another to help or to hinder him there: may anticipate his arrival either with the purpose of keeping it for him or keeping it against him. To prevent has slipped by very gradual degrees... from the sense of keeping for to that of keeping against, from the sense of arriving first with the intention of helping to that of arriving first with the intention of hindering and then gradually from helping to hindering. 8

Now to prevent means "to stop from doing, to frustrate."

Pretend, from Latin prae, "before, and tendo, "I stretch," literally means "to stretch out before one," as found in Dryden: "Lucagus, to lash his horses, bends/ Prone to the wheels, and his left foot pretends." 9 When something is held out before one, this may be done to protect, to cover something hidden, or to represent something as the truth, either in good faith, or to distract the attention from the real truth. "Feign, sham, and assume" are now synonyms of pretend.

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8 Trench, Select Glossary, quoted in Schreuder, op. cit., p. 139.

9 As quoted in Schreuder, op. cit., p. 141.
Apprehend, Latin apprehendera, means "to lay hold of." Applied to mental phenomena, the meaning becomes "to conceive by the mind." Frequent association with fear has yielded the pregnant sense of "to anticipate something adverse, to fear." To retract means properly no more than "to handle again, to reconsider." That primary meaning has degenerated to signify "withdraw." Adulterate, from Latin ad alterum convertere, meant "alter." Through innuendo it came to mean "corrupt, debase, make impure." In Middle English, sort meant "lot, chance" and "assembly." In Modern English the expressions "of a sort" and "of sorts" are always slightly contemptuous, and "to sort with" is always used in an unfavorable sense, as "to sort with thievies and rogues."

Catastrophe meant in Greek "an overturning" and owes its specific sense to its frequent use in connection with the drama as the change or revolution which produces the conclusion or final event. It was mostly used as the dénouement of a tragedy, so that its associations were as a rule with the tragic, but Shakespeare also speaks of the catastrophe of the comedy: "Pat! He comes like the catastrophe of the old comedies." (King Lear, I, ii, 147). The contemporary sense is "calamity, disaster."

Synthetic, from Greek synthetikos, in most senses means, opposed to analytic, "combining or organizing, involving synthesis, combination of parts or elements so as to form a whole."
From the idea of "formed by artificial synthesis," the sense of "not genuine, artificial, imitation" grew up. Stink and stench declined from a former neutral meaning, and smell and odor seem to be following suit. A current meaning of stink is "to show lack of excellence, to be in bad repute." Formerly meaning merely a smile, smirk has become polluted with affectation and specialized as a knowing or cynical smile.

Temper was formerly used synonymously with "temperature," the due admixture of humors in an individual's body. Milton spoke of a "gracious temper," but the word now signifies anger and fury. Traffic, or "business," now is blemished in denotation of shameful or illegal practices, but it was not always so. When Shakespeare talked of "the two hours traffic of our stage" he was not implying dirty fun or censurable themes. Modern usage frequently employs the terms "liquor traffic" and "dope traffic." Saloon originally meant "hall," at first a large apartment adapted for assemblies, entertainments, and exhibitions. Then it came to denote an apartment to which the public could resort for a specified purpose, as "billiard, boxing, dancing, shaving saloon." In the United States the term applies almost exclusively to a place where intoxicating liquors are consumed, a drinking bar.

The medial terms show the frequency with which general, indefinite, or neutral meanings become specialized in a pejorative way.

10Brown, op. cit., p. 124.
CHAPTER VI

MISCELLANEOUS TERMS

Chapter VI comprises those words which do not readily fit into the categories previously discussed. Terms for bodily and mental diseases, words expressing time, weakened intensives, unpleasant meanings which have become further degenerated, other miscellaneous words, and pejorative suffixes and sounds are treated.

Bodily and Mental Disease

In Middle English, disease was the name for any kind of inconvenience, uneasiness, annoyance, or discomfort, serious or trivial. The medical term was sekeness. The verb to disease meant "to trouble, to inconvenience," as illustrated in the Tyndale Bible, Mark 5:35, "Why diseasest thou the master?" Insane derives from Latin in plus sanus, "not well." Its present terrible meaning of "unsound in mind" may have come about through euphemism. Deranged originally meant "disordered," but the present meaning has been isolated from the expression "a deranged mind," so that the word is now synonymous with insane. The first sense of deranged is now replaced by disarranged. Previously discussed in another connection, idiot once denoted a person without learning, an ignorant, uneducated man. Then it came to name
a person so deficient in mental or intellectual faculty as to be incapable of ordinary acts of reasoning and rational conduct. *Idiot* is now applied to one permanently so afflicted, as distinguished from one who is temporarily "out of his wits" and who either has lucid intervals or may be expected to recover his reason. *Crazy* once meant literally "cracked, full of flaws." The verb to *craze*, "to break, burst," was not uncommon in the seventeenth century. An example from *Paradise Lost*, XII, 209-210, illustrates this usage: "God looking forth will trouble all his Host/ And craze their chariot wheels." Later the sense transferred to signify having the bodily health or constitution impaired: "indisposed, ailing, diseased, sickly." Then *crazy* became restricted to mean "of unsound mind, insane, demented." The etymology of *crank* goes back to Teutonic *krench*, *krench*, "bend, twist." In a somewhat colloquial expression in the United States, *crank* names a person with a mental twist, one who is apt to take up eccentric notions or impracticable projects. *Asylum* is an excellent example of contamination. The word was derived from Greek *asulos*, meaning "inviolable, free from right of seizure." Through constant association with *insane* and *orphan*, *asylum* now implies most frequently a place of confinement rather than a place of refuge.

Time

The human tendency to procrastinate, to be prompter with promises than with deeds, is illustrated by a group of
terms that once promised promptness. In Chaucer's time, by and by meant "side by side"; then the idea of adjacent place was transferred to time in the immediate future, and the phrase came to mean "immediately." At present by and by conveys the vague sense of "in a little while." Other late English adverbs once meaning "now, at once" such as presently, directly, soon, and anon, have also slid into a loose time sense.

**Weakened Intensives**

A feature of word deterioration which has rhetorical significance is the weakening or loss of intensives. A great many words have been so spoiled by exaggeration that they have lost strength. Afflicted originally meant "crushed, broken by grief"; it has lost much by being used out of context. Awful had three intense meanings of "awe-inspiring": (1) causing dread, terrible, appalling, (2) worthy of, commanding profound respect or reverential fear, and (3) solemnly impressing, sublimely majestic. Frequent overuse in a slang sense has developed the meaning "frightful, very ugly, monstrous, exceedingly bad," now often applied with little or no force. Horrid meant originally "rough, bristling" and therefore came to mean "causing horror or aversion,

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1 Bryant, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

revolting, abominable, detestable." Hyperbole and overuse have drained the color from that sense, and the word is now rather limp. Pathetic, from Greek pathētos, "subject to suffering," means "affecting or exciting emotion, especially the tender emotions, as pity or sorrow." Menner says, "The younger generation's indiscriminate application of pathetic to 'pitiful' or 'pitifully wretched' people makes it harder to use the word of the tender emotions in a wider sense..." 3 Miserable first meant "pitiful," then "wretched," and now frequently "paltry, sorry," as in "miserable dinner." Quite once meant "entirely, completely," but now means only "moderately." To be anxious to see someone merely means to wish to see him, but the word formerly showed a sense of extreme disquiet.

Unpleasant Meanings Further Degenerated

The words discussed above degenerated in intensity; the words in the present group intensified an already bad sense. Reckless once meant simply "careless," but it is often used currently as a synonym for "desperate." Mischief, from Old French meschief, "a bad result," from meschever, "to come to grief," had in Middle English and early Modern English the meaning of "misfortune, misery"; "They gaven the moste parte of theyre good unto pore peple that were in necessite and

3 Menner, op. cit., p. 75.
mischeef." (Caxton, *Knight of La Tour Landry*, p. 152). By Chaucer's time the meaning of "danger, harm, injury" occurred. The bad moral implication of today, "harm done with intention or from a disposition to work evil," dates from a time later than Shakespeare. *Abuse*, from French *abuser*, adopted from Vulgar Latin *abusare*, is properly "to misuse, not to make a proper use of." The sense of "reviling" first occurred in Shakespeare: "I am no strumpet; but of life as honest/ As you that thus abuse me." (*Othello*, V, i, 122-123). From Anglo-Saxon *recc*, *reek* first meant "smoke from burning matter," and then "an exhalation, a fume emanating from some body or substance." In modern use, it denotes a strong and disagreeable, even putrid or nauseous, fume or smell. *Plunder* was derived from a German substantive, *plunder*, meaning "rags," hence "trash, lumber, baggage." The word seems to have been introduced into English directly through the verb *plündern*, provincially, "to remove with one's baggage." It acquired a more intense meaning of "to plunder, pillage, sack, ransack" during the Thirty Years' War when much stripping of households was done. *Bereave* meant "to pillage and rob" before it specialized in a more terrible meaning of "to make orphans or remove kindred, make destitute." *Fiend* meant

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5 Schreuder, *op. cit.*, p. 179.
"enemy, foe" at first, but now means "a demon, devil, evil spirit, or diabolical being."

Miscellaneous Terms

An alphabetical arrangement of the material in the following section has been adopted.

Arrant meant literally "wandering, vagabond," so that the arrant thief is nearly related to the knight errant. The present usage as an intensive, meaning "out-and-out, confirmed, notoriously or pre-eminently bad," with opprobrious names is almost entirely the result of association with such expressions as "thief." Bombast, originally a name for cheap cotton cloth, especially cotton batting or padding, came to imply inflated or turgid language. Brigand slid from meaning "footsoldier" to "plundering soldier" to "bandit."

Buccaneer has a fascinating history. The N. E. D. says that the word originally designated one who dried or smoked flesh on a boucan, a cooking grill, after the manner of the Indians; the name was first"'given to the French hunters of St. Domingo, who prepared the flesh of the wild oxen and boares this way.' (E. B. Taylor, Early Historical Man, p. 261)." Another account is as follows:

The first buccaneers, far from being roistering, pirating drunkards, were actually ascetics. A Frenchman named Mission founded a Utopian state called

6 Weekley, The Romance of Words, p. 83.
Libertatia on the coast of Madagascar. He advocated freedom of conscience and common ownership of property, dressed himself and his followers in blood-stained rags and refused to permit any luxury in the settlement. Women were denied admittance for fear they would make the Libertatians soft and platonic marriages were celebrated among the men. The community lived by selling meat which was smoked on a gridiron called a "buccan" and the men were called "Buccaneers." When the Spanish government attempted to drive them off the Island of Tortuga, Mission and his men began to poach on the rich Spanish shipping and waylay the heavily-laden East-Indiamen. So successful was Mission in his pirating activities that the word "buccaneer" came to be synonymous with "pirate." 7

Capitulate, from Latin capitulatus, past participle of capitulare, "to distinguish by chapters," meant first "to draw up an agreement under heads; to treat, to bargain." The present meaning is "to make terms of surrender, yield."

Cheat, once an escheat, "property lapsing to the crown or lord of the fee by way or forfeit, fine, or when the owner died intestate," came to mean "any product of conquest or robbery; booty, spoil." As a verb it thus signified "confiscate" and now "cheat or defraud." Conventional can no longer be used in its first sense without explanation. It meant "relating to convention or general agreement; established by social convention." The disparaging sense of "in accordance with accepted artificial standards of conduct and taste; not natural, original, or spontaneous" is more commonly used. Daub comes from Latin dealbare, "to whiten

over, whitewash, plaster." Apparently the word was special-
ized in the building sense of "to coat or cover (a wall or
building) with a layer of plaster, mortar, clay, or the like"
when it entered English. Then it degenerated to mean "to
plaster, coat with some sticky or greasy substance, smear,"
and then "to coat or cover with adhering dirt; to bedaub,
soil."

Formerly, *dilettante* designated a lover of the fine
arts, originally one who cultivated them for the love of
them rather than professionally. Now it has a scornful
connotation of an amateur dabbler, one who interests him-
self in an art or science merely as a pastime or without aim
or study. *Enormity* was formerly synonymous with "enormous-
ness." It has become limited through regular association
with crime and offense. In consequence one may not speak,
for instance, of the "enormity of Mammoth Cave." *Enormity*
has absorbed qualifying elements of meaning from associated
words and may now be defined as "monstrous wickedness, out-
rageous offence." Like *bombast*, *fustian* originally named a
thick, low-priced cotton goods, made in Fustat, a suburb of
Cairo. Now the word applies to inflated, turgid, or inap-
propriately lofty language, extravagant in sentiment and in
expression.

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8 McKnight, *op. cit.*, p. 260.
Literally *impertinent* means "not belonging to, not relating to, not to the point." What is not to the point seems often out of place; thus the word came to imply "irrelevant, unbecoming, unseemly, improper." Applied to persons, it now means "assuming to oneself what does not belong to one, being that which it does not belong to one to be," and further, "intrusive, insolent, meddlesome, unmannerly." *Obnoxious* once meant "exposed to harm; subject or liable to injury or evil of any kind," and also had a short-lived secondary sense, "liable to punishment or censure; guilty, blameworthy, reprehensible." Now *obnoxious* is applied to one who is an object of aversion or dislike, and is synonymous with "offensive, objectionable, odious." Sometimes it expresses even more force, as "giving offence, acting objectionably." These chief current uses were apparently affected by association with *noxious*. *Persnickety*, according to Spitzer, is a loanword from French, originally meaning "duty, obligation." Now the term means "haughty, uppity."

*Phaeton* was the name of a vehicle borrowed from the name of the son of Helios who tried unsuccessfully to drive his father's chariot. In the early nineteenth century, it applied to a high, light vehicle. The word later designated

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9 Leo Spitzer, "Anglo-French Etymologies," *Studies in Philology*, XLI (October, 1944), 534.
a low vehicle associated with ease and comfort, rather than with resplendence and speed. Render means "to give, deliver, transmit," as to render a message, and "to melt down, extract," as to render lard. Perhaps from a combined feeling of these two senses comes a specialized application in rendering company; this phrase names a service that picks up carcasses of livestock for delivery to a glue factory.

10 Runt possibly derives from a Germanic base, brung, meaning "thick, stout segment of a tree or branch." The English runt, with t suffix, shows restriction to a short segment of the tree, the stump. The earliest record of English runt goes back only to the beginning of the sixteenth century, and the oldest meaning on record is "old decayed tree stump." Derogation is obviously present, as it is also in such transferred senses as "ox or cow of small breed or size; small or inferior horse; small pig; stunted or undersized person; ignorant, uncouth, or uncultivated person."

Sapience originally meant only "wisdom, understanding," but this sense is now rare in serious use, and the word presently occurs depreciatively or ironically as signifying "would-be wisdom." The adjective sapient has undergone a similar development. Squander was first an intransitive

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10 The etymology of runt is uncertain, but Malone's theory appears to be valid. The discussion here is found in Kemp Malone, "On the Etymology of 'Runt,'" Language, XX (April-June, 1944), 38.
verb which meant "to be scattered." Flocks squandered. Then the verb became more active and meant "to disperse."
The current sense is "to spend recklessly, prodigally or lavishly, to expend extravagantly, profusely, wastefully."

*Tinsel* derived through French from Latin *scintilla*, "spark," and at one time was applied to glittering metallic substances. Under the influence of hinted contempt for the garish and gaudy, the sense has sunk.  

*Vandal* formerly designated a member of a Germanic tribe. A secondary meaning was attached with the actions of the Vandals, and now the word names a willful, ignorant, or barbarous destroyer of anything beautiful, venerable, or worthy of preservation. Certain applications of *yellow* are debased. *Yellowism*, or *yellow journalism*, is the unscrupulous or sensational character of news. A further development in the pejorative direction is the use of *yellow* for "craven, cowardly, treacherous."

**Pejorative Suffixes and Sounds**

Several suffixes are frequently active in degenerated words. The slighting connotation of *-ling* is seen in *hire-ling* and *weakling*. Schreuder mentions the pejorative

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11 McKnight, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

suffix -ard, -art, demonstrated in braggart, laggard, dullard, coward, and bastard. The suffix -ster, which as Old English -estre was a feminine suffix of agency, has a new use in such words as punster, gangster, and youngster. The present implication of -ish, is decidedly uncomplimentary, as evidenced by devilish, fiendish, foolish, mannerish, thievish, and womanish. The suffix -ist is similarly often belittling.

According to Schreuder,

that the meaning of a word may be influenced by the word-sound is beyond any doubt. An example is Ags. /Anglo-Saxon/ leemed. Its bad moral implication was certainly helped by its sound change, which procured it a place among other words of an unfavorable u-sound (lurid; to allure; lubricous; shrew; shrewd; putrid). The u-sound, especially in combination with l, seems to be predestined to form words with unfavorable senses.

Schreuder further notes that the initial sound bl- is frequently associated with some feeling of disgust or satiety. There is a great possibility that words are affected by analogy with other words in which the association is firmly fixed.

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13 Schreuder, op. cit., p. 79.
15 Schreuder, op. cit., p. 52.
16 Ibid., pp. 52-53.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

From the numerous examples of specific degradation cited in the foregoing chapters, one can see that pejoration is indeed at work on every hand. Several conclusions may be drawn concerning this linguistic process.

Although semantic changes follow no set rules, several general observations may be made in connection with pejorative change. Once a word acquires a reproachful, contemptuous or otherwise unfavorable connotation, the literal meaning tends to go out of use. The knave or villain in the old sense of the term refuses to answer to the discredited name. There is very definite evidence that the popular use gradually restricts the more learned. The layman, adapting his limited supply of words to his limited number of meanings, seldom hesitatest to pervert a word from etymological sense. Popular usage not being critical usage, the word may retain the perverted meaning indefinitely; often, in fact, it becomes strong in a negative sense. The younger generation, using

1Greenough and Kittredge, op. cit., p. 286.
3Ibid.
words in newer senses, unconsciously avoids using them in older and different ones. Such an observation naturally provokes the question of what particular persons are responsible for semantic change.

According to Jespersen, changes in the meaning of words, "like the corresponding changes in the sounds of words, are to be ascribed quite as much to people already acquainted with the language as to the new generation." He further elaborates that

as one of the factors bringing about changes in meaning, many scholars mention forgetfulness; but it is important to keep in view that what happens is not real forgetting, that is, snapping of threads of thought that had already existed within the same consciousness, but the fact that the new individual never develops the threads of thought which in the elder generation bound one word to another.

It has been previously noted that the English language is peculiarly liable to semantic change. While there is no conclusive evidence to support such a statement, there may be periods of time in which pejorated meanings are copiously spawned, particularly if social conditions are conducive to that sense change. Jespersen recognizes that particular periods are especially fertile in linguistic changes, and

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4 Menner, op. cit., p. 75.

5 Jespersen, op. cit., p. 174.  6 Ibid., p. 176.

7 However, Scott, op. cit., p. 31, maintains that changes in the meanings of words do not show particular tendencies in any one region or time as contrasted with any other.

8 Jespersen, op. cit., p. 260.
Schlauch states that at certain periods of history when the
dominant culture happened to be in the hands of a cynical and
dissipated group, many of the most innocent words suffered de-
generation. War situations and their aftermaths are also
apt to further pejoration. Mencken asserts that "the American
people, once the most prudish on earth, took to a certain de-
fiant looseness of speech during the World War, and when Pro-
hibition produced its antinomian reaction they went even
further." According to Breal,

in our modern societies, the meaning of words is more
quickly modified than was usual in antiquity and even
in the generations which immediately preceded us. Here-
in we see the effect of party warfare, of the mingling
of classes, of the strife of interests and of opinions,
of the diversity of aspirations and of tastes.

Another cause of acceleration lies in industrial
production: thinkers and philosophers have the privi-
lege of creating new words which arrest attention by
their amplitude, and by the learned aspect of their
structure. These words pass into the vocabulary of
criticism and so gain currency among artists; but once
admitted into the studio of the painter or sculptor,
they speedily come forth in order to spread through the
world of industry and commerce, which makes use of them
without measure or scruple.

Not only do words coined or applied in the language of adver-
tising, whether they undergo degeneration or not, gain im-
mmediate currency through modern communication systems, but

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9 Schlauch, op. cit., p. 119.

10 H. L. Mencken, The American Language (New York, 1936),
p. 300.

11 Breal, op. cit., p. 105.
those same communication media further such modifications as pejoration because the new uses appear before the public more rapidly than was formerly possible. One additional comment may be made on the time element involved in pejoration; a foreign word with an unpleasant tinge often undergoes with its introduction into English a stronger degradation. This is especially true when the word is associated with ill feelings toward the people with whom the word is indigenous.

In seeking special causes for pejorative development, one must keep in mind the fact that words have no inherent value, but only the value an individual speaker chooses to place on them. Benjamin Musser laments "reducing the purity of language by infusion of lower meanings into golden words." Words, however, contain no innate goldenness. The numerous meanings of any word subtly shift under cover of the sound and symbol that constitute the word. Neither is there any abstract purity in language. English lets the psychological moment dominate; the needs of the time outwear the prohibitions and the circumscriptions of the pedant. The

12 Schreuder, op. cit., p. 54.

13 Musser, op. cit., p. 493.


15 Alexander Francis Chamberlain, "Interesting Characteristics of the Modern English Language," Popular Science, LXXX (February, 1912), 158.
fundamental fact which makes words to be of changeable meaning is that there is no internal and necessary connection between a word and the idea designated by it, that no tie save a mental association binds the two together.\textsuperscript{16} Only with a consideration of this situation can the summary and consensus of the causes and factors involved in pejorative sense change be in valid perspective.

The array of pejorative examples discussed in this paper has demonstrated as methods of degeneration such processes as specialization; generalization; innuendo; transfer of meaning; the word form, particularly the sound; and contaminating association with disparaging words. Schreuder says that the working of euphemism is perhaps the most potent factor in the deterioration of sense.\textsuperscript{17} The influence of euphemism is twofold: the offensive word is avoided and thus receives an additional push in the pejorative direction, but the milder term is also affected because its regular application to the disagreeable or offensive idea drags it down from its originally higher position and firmly fixes the association with the bad idea. Other stylistic devices of special importance


\textsuperscript{17} Schreuder, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 60.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}
in pejoration are irony and hyperbole. Also the transition of a word from one group-language into another, often from the learned or literary language into common use but seldom the opposite, is operative in pejoration. A word frequently undergoes several of these processes, so that it may be seen that the various methods mutually influence each other. These processes are often termed as causes of pejoration, but actually they are merely ways in which degeneration may operate.

The major causes of pejoration are those two factors mentioned in the first chapter—environmental change and human reaction to that change. Changes in linguistic usage are called forth by the conditions under which speech is carried on. These conditions arise from the operation of social, cultural, religious, ethical and aesthetic phenomena on the mental predisposition of a speech community, or part of it. Goldberg concurs that when the average word changes in meaning, the change is attributed to new conditions in the environment and in the mind. That the pejorative tendency

19 Cf. p. 5, Chapter I of this study.

20 Cf. also Jespersen, op. cit., p. 260, "If we find a particular period especially fertile in linguistic changes (phonetic, morphological, semantic, or all at once), it is quite natural that we should turn our attention to the social state of the community at that time."

21 Ibid., p. 24.

22 Goldberg, op. cit., p. 250.
is closely allied to social changes has been amply demonstrated in the preceding chapters and particularly by words of the socio-cultural class.

Vital as it is in semantic change, the stimulus of environment would be sterile without the response of human nature. Pejorated words, like any others, reflect only those meanings that users place upon them; therefore, there seems to be a disagreeable commentary on human nature evident in this process. It has been suggested that there must be something groveling about human nature, since it has so often caused the besmirching of otherwise estimable terms. Trench goes even further in his belief that words often preserve the record of the perversion of moral sense:

... has man fallen, and deeply fallen, from the heights of his original creation? We need no more than his language to prove it. Like everything else about him, it bears at once the stamp of his greatness and of his degeneration, of his glory and of his shame. What dark and somber threads he must have woven into the tissue of his life, before we could trace those threads of darkness which run through the tissue of his language.

Then further I would bid you to note the many words which men have dragged downward with themselves, and made more or less partakers of their own fall. Having once an honorable meaning, they have yet with the deterioration and degeneration of those that used them, or of those about whom they were used, deteriorated and degenerated too.

23 Schlauch, op. cit., p. 117.

Bishop Trench heavily attributes the degeneration of language to the fall of man. C. S. Lewis has an interesting observation about the cause of pejoration:

It is certainly true that nearly all our terms of abuse were originally terms of description... Rather than say that a man is dishonest or cruel or unreliable, they [people] say that he is illegitimate, or young, or low in the social scale, or some kind of animal that he is a "peasant slave," a bastard, a cad, a knave, a dog, a swine, or (more recently) an adolescent.

The truth is not simply that words originally innocent tend to acquire a bad sense. The truth is that words originally descriptive tend to become terms either of mere praise or of mere blame. The vocabulary of flattery and insult is continually enlarged at the expense of the vocabulary of definition. As old horses go to the knacker's yard, or old ships to the breakers, so words in their last decay go to swell the enormous list of synonyms for good and bad. And as long as most people are more anxious to express their likes and dislikes than to describe facts, this must remain a universal truth about language. 25

A universal truth about the human nature responsible for pejoration is that descent is easy. Pejoration, with all of the methods that operate within it, is caused by the insecurity of man. The parade of degenerated words, rank upon rank and file upon file of them, shows this basic insecurity that results in distrust of intelligence, skill, and special


26 For instance, about euphemism, Bréal, op. cit., p. 100, says, "The so-called pejorative tendency is the result of a very human disposition which prompts us to veil, to attenuate, to disguise ideas which are disagreeable, wounding, or repulsive."
ability; fear of the unknown, the unfamiliar, and the apart; scorn for inability, naivety, modest virtue, the immaturity of childhood and the weakness of old age; the tendency to associate loose morals with inferiority, and moral degeneration and abjection with misery; and the propensity to look for vices and faults in others. Pejorated words mirror the clash between town and country, nation and nation, race and race, ideology and ideology, class and class, education and ignorance, rich and poor. Corrupted words are the result of man's disdain, scorn, contempt, hatred, superiority, inferiority, mediocrity, envy, intolerance, rascality, self-interest, hypocrisy, pretentiousness, bitterness, excesses, ridicule, thoughtlessness, and general mistrust. Pejoration is a rather damning commentary on human nature.

Viewing this aspect of semantics, most linguists have come to a conclusion such as this pessimistic one:

It is a dispiriting reflection that the whole trend of the language seems to be downwards. . . . What is to be the end of it? It clearly means that not in the very distant future there will be a much greater variety of words to apply to the lower side of life than to the higher, . . . a far greater choice of adjectives to be applied to the abnormal and the terrible than to the ordinary and the beneficent. . . . So in the ages to come we shall have a language rich in its lower strata, splendidly equipped for the exploitation of the ugly, the sordid, the wicked, but only passably supplied with material for epic or philosophy. 27

The answer to such a wail clearly rests with the users of the language.

27"Words That Go to the Bad," Living Age, CCXXXIX (November 21, 1903), 509.
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