

press. Whatever other error they may make, they will not be led astray by the plausible jingle of similarity. But even for boys who will never study Latin, this law has a great value. It will prevent them from trusting entirely to an etymological dictionary for the discovery of the meanings of words, and will throw them upon their own resources—I mean upon their own knowledge of idiomatic English.

(2) *The law of extension.*—When a technical word is introduced from one language into another, the narrow technicality, after being preserved artificially by the learned for a time, must soon be impaired, and finally destroyed. Thus, “influence” was once a technical term of astrology, to denote the mysterious power that flowed from the stars upon the destinies of men. Now, it means any modifying power, and not merely that of the stars. The word “triumph” is not now confined to a procession celebrating a victory over a conquered enemy; “ovation” has been widened till it has been applied to a favourable reception of any kind. “Civil” has preserved its technical sense as opposed to military; but it has also been affected, in one of its meanings, by the law of extension, and, in the sense of “courteous,” even a military man may now be called “civil.” The same law may be illustrated by *decimate, impediment, pomp, privilege, legion, province, prejudice, prevaricate, idea, and fine.*

(3) *The law of contraction.*—Words that are not technical, when imported into English, often contract instead of extending their signification. In the influx of French and Latin words into the English language during the sixteenth century, many were introduced to express ideas that either could be, or were already, expressed in the existing vocabulary. These words were at first used by English authors in their Latin sense. Thus, “speculation,” in a well-known passage of Shakespeare, is used for “power of seeing.” But there was no reason why our native word “sight” should be expelled by the Latin intruder. “Sight,” therefore, retained its place; and “speculation,” finding the broader room which it had once filled in its native Italy, pre-occupied in England, contented itself with retiring into a narrower meaning, “the sight, or looking, or watching after gain.” In the same way, “extravagant,” though used by Shakespeare in the sense of “wandering,” now means a particular kind of wandering, a wandering beyond the bounds of economy. “Exorbitant,” in Latin, meant “out of the way;” in Elizabethan English, “uncommon”: now, it is only applied, in a narrower signification, to that which is “uncommonly expensive.” The same law may be illustrated by *aggravate, journal, advertise, capitulate, fable, corroborate, modest, and ferocious.* The law of contraction is naturally more general than the law of extension. As words are multiplied, their meanings become narrowed and defined. This especially applies to all words denoting measurement. The words *pole, rood, and yard* speak for themselves; and the law is confirmed by the derivations of *acre, (a field), furlong (furrow-long), and peck (poke, or bag), and others.*

(4) *The law of metaphor.*—It is scarcely necessary to say that when a derived word loses its meaning, it very often adopts a meaning connected with its original meaning by metaphor. Thus *bombast*, which once meant “cotton stuffing,” now means padding composed of words. *Aggravate*, instead of meaning, to add to a burden that can be borne, means, to add to a burden of sorrow or vexation. This law is very common.

(5) *The law of deterioration.*—The natural politeness of mankind, and perhaps a deficiency in the moral sense, induces men to give a good name to moderately bad men. Hence the good names are dragged down with the bad men. Thus, the misuse of *cunning* and *craft* has degraded them from

a good to a bad sense. *Impertinent*, which once meant “not to the point,” now involves a more serious charge; *officious*, which meant “exact in the performance of duty,” is now applied to a bustling busy-body; and a *libel* no longer means and innocent “little book.” This law is still in force. “A sharp fellow” is not always a term of praise and no one speaks with approval of “sharp practice.” Historical influences may here be frequently traced; as in the words *villain, churl, and boor*, which express the contempt of the higher classes, for agricultural labourers, and probably in *brats, knave*, which show how the vocabulary of the lower class was selected for abuse.

(6) *The law of amelioration.*—It is rare, indeed to find a word improved by time. Occasionally a great moral influence, like Christianity, steps in, and raises a word like *humility*, from being a contemptible fault, to the level of a virtue; or, in quite a different way, words that once expressed faults are sometimes used in jocose manner to imply cleverness, as *shrewd*; much as *imp* and *devil* are still occasionally used. Party terms sometimes exemplify this law. There is nothing that succeed like success. *Whig* and *Tory* were once terms of contempt; they are not now, I think; nor, probably, is the word *Radical*. *Christian* has now a far nobler meaning than when the nick-name was first invented by the populace of Antioch

Such are some of the laws that regulate the changes of the significations of words. They ought, I think, to be shortly and clearly brought before the attention of our pupils; and whenever a derivation is asked by the teacher, the answer should refer to some one or more of the above laws. That will give definiteness to the answer; and will afford some kind of landmarks by which the journey of exploration can be guided. The answer can be written, and then either read in class, or looked over by the class-master, and I believe the exercise would be found practicable and valuable.

But side by side with, or rather, I am inclined to say, before, this exercise, is another, which is perhaps of still greater importance. To determine the present meaning of a word from the meanings which the sources of the word had nineteen centuries ago, is, as I said above, a very difficult matter. I think we may say it is impossible. The derivation may mark out certain limits, within which the modern meaning may be looked for; but it can do no more. Modern custom must be summoned to our aid, if we are to draw the boundary line still closer. Here the great advantage of an English lesson comes prominently out. Boys can experimentalize with it. Boys who speak English pretty well carry about them, as it were, their chemicals, and in kind of apparatus for the analysis of the meanings of words. Take the word *oppress*. A boy who spoke English idiomatically would know very well that when Gibbon speaks of “an army was *oppressed* by the enemy,” he is using the word wrongly. *Oppression* is not warfare on equal terms, or indeed warfare at all. When two boys fighting, there is no oppression, even though one be much the stronger. *Oppression* implies non-resistance, at all events for some time, on one side. Here we get one boundary line. Could *oppression*, then, be used of one army butchering another non-resisting army? No: the word does not mean destruction, nor active violence, so much as injustice, relying on superior force. Here we draw another line. Then, if a highwayman, relying on his pistol, takes your purse, is that *oppression*? No: it must be systematic injustice, continued over a long time, and relying on superior force. Here we draw the boundary still closer, and may be said to have defined the word. Now, if boys have what I may call a scheme of elimination like this carefully drawn up for them, and illustrated by a few clear examples, I cannot