

Chapter V.

On The Natural History Of The Variations In The Meaning Of Terms.

§ 1. It is not only in the mode which has now been pointed out, namely by gradual inattention to a portion of the ideas conveyed, that words in common use are liable to shift their connotation. The truth is, that the connotation of such words is perpetually varying; as might be expected from the manner in which words in common use acquire their connotation. A technical term, invented for purposes of art or science, has, from the first, the connotation given to it by its inventor; but a name which is in every one's mouth before any one thinks of defining it, derives its connotation only from the circumstances which are habitually brought to mind when it is pronounced. Among these circumstances, the properties common to the things denoted by the name, have naturally a principal place; and would have the sole place, if language were regulated by convention rather than by custom and accident. But besides these common properties, which if they exist are *certainly* present whenever the name is employed, any other circumstance may *casually* be found along with it, so frequently as to become associated with it in the same manner, and as strongly, as the common properties themselves. In proportion as this association forms itself, people give up using the name in cases in which those casual circumstances do not exist. They prefer using some other name, or the same name with some adjunct, rather than employ an expression which will call up an idea they do not want to excite. The circumstance originally casual, thus becomes regularly a part of the connotation of the word.

It is this continual incorporation of circumstances originally accidental, into the permanent signification of words, which is the cause that there are so few exact synonyms. It is this also which renders the dictionary meaning of a word, by universal remark so imperfect an exponent of its real meaning. The dictionary meaning is marked out in a broad, blunt way, and probably includes all that was originally necessary for the correct employment of the term; but in process of time so many collateral associations adhere to words, that whoever should attempt to use them with no other guide than the dictionary, would confound a thousand nice distinctions and subtle shades of meaning which dictionaries take no account of; as we notice in the use of a language in conversation or writing by a foreigner not thoroughly master of it. The history of a word, by showing the causes which determine its use, is in these cases a better guide to its employment than any definition; for definitions can only show its meaning at the particular time, or at most the series of its successive meanings, but its history may show the law by which the succession was produced. The word *gentleman*, for instance, to the correct employment of which a dictionary would be no guide, originally meant simply a man born in a certain rank. From this it came by degrees to connote all such qualities or adventitious circumstances as were usually found to belong to persons of that rank. This consideration at once explains why in one of its vulgar acceptations it means any one who lives without labor, in another without manual labor, and in its more elevated signification it has in every age signified the conduct, character, habits, and outward appearance, in whomsoever found, which, according to the ideas of that age, belonged or were expected to belong to persons born and educated in a high social position.

It continually happens that of two words, whose dictionary meanings are either the same or very slightly different, one will be the proper word to use in one set of circumstances, another in another, without its being possible to show how the custom of so employing them originally grew up. The accident that one of the words was used and not the other on a particular occasion or in a particular social circle, will be sufficient to produce so strong an association between the word and some specialty of circumstances, that mankind abandon the use of it in any other case, and the specialty becomes part of its signification. The tide of custom first drifts the word on the shore of a particular meaning, then retires and leaves it there.

An instance in point is the remarkable change which, in the English language at least, has taken place in the signification of the word *loyalty*. That word originally meant in English, as it still means in the language from whence it came, fair, open dealing, and fidelity to engagements; in that sense the quality it expressed was part of the ideal chivalrous or knightly character. By what process, in England, the term became restricted to the single case of fidelity to the throne, I am not sufficiently versed in the history of courtly language to be able to

pronounce. The interval between a *loyal chevalier* and a loyal subject is certainly great. I can only suppose that the word was, at some period, the favorite term at court to express fidelity to the oath of allegiance; until at length those who wished to speak of any other, and as it was probably deemed, inferior sort of fidelity, either did not venture to use so dignified a term, or found it convenient to employ some other in order to avoid being misunderstood.

§ 2. Cases are not unfrequent in which a circumstance, at first casually incorporated into the connotation of a word which originally had no reference to it, in time wholly supersedes the original meaning, and becomes not merely a part of the connotation, but the whole of it. This is exemplified in the word *pagan*, *paganus*; which originally, as its etymology imports, was equivalent to *villager*; the inhabitant of a *pagus*, or village. At a particular era in the extension of Christianity over the Roman empire, the adherents of the old religion, and the villagers or country people, were nearly the same body of individuals, the inhabitants of the towns having been earliest converted; as in our own day, and at all times, the greater activity of social intercourse renders them the earliest recipients of new opinions and modes, while old habits and prejudices linger longest among the country people; not to mention that the towns were more immediately under the direct influence of the Government, which at that time had embraced Christianity. From this casual coincidence, the word *paganus* carried with it, and began more and more steadily to suggest, the idea of a worshiper of the ancient divinities; until at length it suggested that idea so forcibly that people who did not desire to suggest the idea avoided using the word. But when *paganus* had come to connote heathenism, the very unimportant circumstance, with reference to that fact, of the place of residence, was soon disregarded in the employment of the word. As there was seldom any occasion for making separate assertions respecting heathens who lived in the country, there was no need for a separate word to denote them; and *pagan* came not only to mean heathen, but to mean that exclusively.

A case still more familiar to most readers is that of the word *villain* or *villein*. This term, as every body knows, had in the Middle Ages a connotation as strictly defined as a word could have, being the proper legal designation for those persons who were the subjects of the less onerous forms of feudal bondage. The scorn of the semi-barbarous military aristocracy for these their abject dependants, rendered the act of likening any person to this class of people a mark of the greatest contumely; the same scorn led them to ascribe to the same people all manner of hateful qualities, which doubtless also, in the degrading situation in which they were held, were often not unjustly imputed to them. These circumstances combined to attach to the term *villain* ideas of crime and guilt, in so forcible a manner that the application of the epithet even to those to whom it legally belonged became an affront, and was abstained from whenever no affront was intended. From that time guilt was part of the connotation; and soon became the whole of it, since mankind were not prompted by any urgent motive to continue making a distinction in their language between bad men of servile station and bad men of any other rank in life.

These and similar instances in which the original signification of a term is totally lost--another and an entirely distinct meaning being first ingrafted upon the former, and finally substituted for it--afford examples of the double movement which is always taking place in language: two counter-movements, one of Generalization, by which words are perpetually losing portions of their connotation, and becoming of less meaning and more general acceptance; the other of Specialization, by which other, or even these same words, are continually taking on fresh connotation; acquiring additional meaning by being restricted in their employment to a part only of the occasions on which they might properly be used before. This double movement is of sufficient importance in the natural history of language (to which natural history the artificial modifications ought always to have some degree of reference), to justify our dwelling a little longer on the nature of the twofold phenomenon, and the causes to which it owes its existence.

§ 3. To begin with the movement of generalization. It might seem unnecessary to dwell on the changes in the meaning of names which take place merely from their being used ignorantly, by persons who, not having properly mastered the received connotation of a word, apply it in a looser and wider sense than belongs to it. This, however, is a real source of alterations in the language; for when a word, from being often employed in

cases where one of the qualities which it connotes does not exist, ceases to suggest that quality with certainty, then even those who are under no mistake as to the proper meaning of the word, prefer expressing that meaning in some other way, and leave the original word to its fate. The word 'Squire, as standing for an owner of a landed estate; Parson, as denoting not the rector of the parish, but clergymen in general; Artist, to denote only a painter or sculptor; are cases in point. Such cases give a clear insight into the process of the degeneration of languages in periods of history when literary culture was suspended; and we are now in danger of experiencing a similar evil through the superficial extension of the same culture. So many persons without any thing deserving the name of education have become writers by profession, that written language may almost be said to be principally wielded by persons ignorant of the proper use of the instrument, and who are spoiling it more and more for those who understand it. Vulgarisms, which creep in nobody knows how, are daily depriving the English language of valuable modes of expressing thought. To take a present instance: the verb *transpire* formerly conveyed very expressively its correct meaning, viz., to *become known* through unnoticed channels--to exhale, as it were, into publicity through invisible pores, like a vapor or gas disengaging itself. But of late a practice has commenced of employing this word, for the sake of finery, as a mere synonym of *to happen*: "the events which have *transpired* in the Crimea," meaning the incidents of the war. This vile specimen of bad English is already seen in the dispatches of noblemen and viceroys; and the time is apparently not far distant when nobody will understand the word if used in its proper sense. In other cases it is not the love of finery, but simple want of education, which makes writers employ words in senses unknown to genuine English. The use of "aggravating" for "provoking," in my boyhood a vulgarism of the nursery, has crept into almost all newspapers, and into many books; and when the word is used in its proper sense, as when writers on criminal law speak of aggravating and extenuating circumstances, their meaning, it is probable, is already misunderstood. It is a great error to think that these corruptions of language do no harm. Those who are struggling with the difficulty (and who know by experience how great it already is) of expressing one's self clearly with precision, find their resources continually narrowed by illiterate writers, who seize and twist from its purpose some form of speech which once served to convey briefly and compactly an unambiguous meaning. It would hardly be believed how often a writer is compelled to a circumlocution by the single vulgarism, introduced during the last few years, of using the word *alone* as an adverb, *only* not being fine enough for the rhetoric of ambitious ignorance. A man will say "to which I am not alone bound by honor but also by law," unaware that what he has unintentionally said is, that he is *not alone* bound, some other person being bound with him. Formerly, if any one said, "I am not alone responsible for this," he was understood to mean (what alone his words mean in correct English), that he is not the sole person responsible; but if he now used such an expression, the reader would be confused between that and two other meanings: that he is not *only responsible* but something more; or that he is responsible *not only for this* but for something besides. The time is coming when Tennyson's OEnone could not say, "I will not die alone," lest she should be supposed to mean that she would not only die but do something else.

The blunder of writing *predicate* for *predict* has become so widely diffused that it bids fair to render one of the most useful terms in the scientific vocabulary of Logic unintelligible. The mathematical and logical term "to eliminate" is undergoing a similar destruction. All who are acquainted either with the proper use of the word or with its etymology know that to eliminate a thing is to thrust it out: but those who know nothing about it, except that it is a fine-looking phrase, use it in a sense precisely the reverse, to denote, not turning any thing out, but bringing it in. They talk of *eliminating* some truth, or other useful result, from a mass of details.(220) A similar permanent deterioration in the language is in danger of being produced by the blunders of translators. The writers of telegrams, and the foreign correspondents of newspapers, have gone on so long translating *demand* by "to demand," without a suspicion that it means only to ask, that (the context generally showing that nothing else is meant) English readers are gradually associating the English word demand with simple asking, thus leaving the language without a term to express a demand in its proper sense. In like manner, "transaction," the French word for a compromise, is translated into the English word transaction; while, curiously enough, the inverse change is taking place in France, where the word "compromis" has lately begun to be used for expressing the same idea. If this continues, the two countries will have exchanged phrases.

Independently, however, of the generalization of names through their ignorant misuse, there is a tendency in the same direction consistently with a perfect knowledge of their meaning; arising from the fact, that the number of things known to us, and of which we feel a desire to speak, multiply faster than the names for them. Except on subjects for which there has been constructed a scientific terminology, with which unscientific persons do not meddle, great difficulty is generally found in bringing a new name into use; and independently of that difficulty, it is natural to prefer giving to a new object a name which at least expresses its resemblance to something already known, since by predicating of it a name entirely new we at first convey no information. In this manner the name of a species often becomes the name of a genus; as *salt*, for example, or *oil*; the former of which words originally denoted only the muriate of soda, the latter, as its etymology indicates, only olive-oil; but which now denote large and diversified classes of substances resembling these in some of their qualities, and connote only those common qualities, instead of the whole of the distinctive properties of olive-oil and sea-salt. The words *glass* and *soap* are used by modern chemists in a similar manner, to denote genera of which the substances vulgarly so called are single species. And it often happens, as in those instances, that the term keeps its special signification in addition to its more general one, and becomes ambiguous, that is, two names instead of one.

These changes, by which words in ordinary use become more and more generalized, and less and less expressive, take place in a still greater degree with the words which express the complicated phenomena of mind and society. Historians, travelers, and in general those who speak or write concerning moral and social phenomena with which they are not familiarly acquainted, are the great agents in this modification of language. The vocabulary of all except unusually instructed as well as thinking persons, is, on such subjects, eminently scanty. They have a certain small set of words to which they are accustomed, and which they employ to express phenomena the most heterogeneous, because they have never sufficiently analyzed the facts to which those words correspond in their own country, to have attached perfectly definite ideas to the words. The first English conquerors of Bengal, for example, carried with them the phrase *landed proprietor* into a country where the rights of individuals over the soil were extremely different in degree, and even in nature, from those recognized in England. Applying the term with all its English associations in such a state of things; to one who had only a limited right they gave an absolute right, from another because he had not an absolute right they took away all right, drove whole classes of people to ruin and despair, filled the country with banditti, created a feeling that nothing was secure, and produced, with the best intentions, a disorganization of society which had not been produced in that country by the most ruthless of its barbarian invaders. Yet the usage of persons capable of so gross a misapprehension determines the meaning of language; and the words they thus misuse grow in generality, until the instructed are obliged to acquiesce; and to employ those words (first freeing them from vagueness by giving them a definite connotation) as generic terms, subdividing the genera into species.

§ 4. While the more rapid growth of ideas than of names thus creates a perpetual necessity for making the same names serve, even if imperfectly, on a greater number of occasions; a counter-operation is going on, by which names become on the contrary restricted to fewer occasions, by taking on, as it were, additional connotation, from circumstances not originally included in the meaning, but which have become connected with it in the mind by some accidental cause. We have seen above, in the words *pagan* and *villain*, remarkable examples of the specialization of the meaning of words from casual associations, as well as of the generalization of it in a new direction, which often follows.

Similar specializations are of frequent occurrence in the history even of scientific nomenclature. "It is by no means uncommon," says Dr. Paris, in his *Pharmacologia*,(221) "to find a word which is used to express general characters subsequently become the name of a specific substance in which such characters are predominant; and we shall find that some important anomalies in nomenclature may be thus explained. The term {~GREEK CAPITAL LETTER ALPHA~}{~GREEK SMALL LETTER RHO~}{~GREEK SMALL LETTER SIGMA~}{~GREEK SMALL LETTER EPSILON~}{~GREEK SMALL LETTER NU~}{~GREEK SMALL LETTER IOTA WITH OXIA~}{~GREEK SMALL LETTER KAPPA~}{~GREEK SMALL LETTER OMICRON~}{~GREEK SMALL LETTER NU~}, from which the

word Arsenic is derived, was an ancient epithet applied to those natural substances which possessed strong and acrimonious properties; and as the poisonous quality of arsenic was found to be remarkably powerful, the term was especially applied to Orpiment, the form in which this metal most usually occurred. So the term *Verbena* (quasi *Herbena*) originally denoted all those herbs that were held sacred on account of their being employed in the rites of sacrifice, as we learn from the poets; but as *one* herb was usually adopted upon these occasions, the word *Verbena* came to denote that particular herb *only*, and it is transmitted to us to this day under the same title, viz., *Verbena* or *Vervain*, and indeed until lately it enjoyed the medical reputation which its sacred origin conferred upon it, for it was worn suspended around the neck as an amulet. *Vitriol*, in the original application of the word, denoted *any* crystalline body with a certain degree of transparency (*vitrum*); it is hardly necessary to observe that the term is now appropriated to a particular species: in the same manner, *Bark*, which is a general term, is applied to express *one* genus, and by way of eminence it has the article *The* prefixed, as *The bark*; the same observation will apply to the word *Opium*, which, in its primitive sense, signifies *any* juice ({{~GREEK SMALL LETTER OMICRON WITH PSILI~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER PI~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER OMICRON WITH VARIA~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER FINAL SIGMA~}}, *Succus*), while it now only denotes *one* species, viz., that of the poppy. So, again, *Elaterium* was used by Hippocrates to signify various internal applications, especially purgatives, of a violent and drastic nature (from the word {{~GREEK SMALL LETTER EPSILON WITH PSILI~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER LAMDA~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER ALPHA~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER UPSILON WITH OXIA~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER NU~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER OMEGA~}}, *agito, moveo, stimulo*), but by succeeding authors it was exclusively applied to denote the active matter which subsides from the juice of the wild cucumber. The word *Fecula*, again, originally meant to imply *any* substance which was derived by spontaneous subsidence from a liquid (from *fax*, the grounds or settlement of *any* liquor); afterward it was applied to *Starch*, which is deposited in this manner by agitating the flour of wheat in water; and, lastly, it has been applied to a peculiar vegetable principle, which, like starch, is insoluble in cold, but completely soluble in boiling water, with which it forms a gelatinous solution. This indefinite meaning of the word *fecula* has created numerous mistakes in pharmaceutic chemistry; *Elaterium*, for instance, is said to be *fecula*, and, in the original sense of the word, it is properly so called, inasmuch as it is procured from a vegetable juice by spontaneous subsidence, but in the limited and modern acceptance of the term it conveys an erroneous idea; for instead of the active principle of the juice residing in *fecula*, it is a peculiar proximate principle, *sui generis*, to which I have ventured to bestow the name of *Elatin*. For the same reason, much doubt and obscurity involve the meaning of the word *Extract*, because it is applied *generally* to any substance obtained by the evaporation of a vegetable solution, and *specifically* to a peculiar proximate principle, possessed of certain characters, by which it is distinguished from every other elementary body."

A generic term is always liable to become thus limited to a single species, or even individual, if people have occasion to think and speak of that individual or species much oftener than of any thing else which is contained in the genus. Thus by cattle, a stage-coachman will understand horses; beasts, in the language of agriculturists, stands for oxen; and birds, with some sportsmen, for partridges only. The law of language which operates in these trivial instances is the very same in conformity to which the terms {{~GREEK CAPITAL LETTER THETA~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER EPSILON~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER OMICRON WITH OXIA~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER FINAL SIGMA~}}, *Deus*, and *God*, were adopted from Polytheism by Christianity, to express the single object of its own adoration. Almost all the terminology of the Christian Church is made up of words originally used in a much more general acceptance: *Ecclesia*, *Assembly*; *Bishop*, *Episcopus*, *Overseer*; *Priest*, *Presbyter*, *Elder*; *Deacon*, *Diaconus*, *Administrator*; *Sacrament*, a vow of allegiance; *Evangelium*, good tidings; and some words, as *Minister*, are still used both in the general and in the limited sense. It would be interesting to trace the progress by which *author* came, in its most familiar sense, to signify a writer, and {{~GREEK SMALL LETTER PI~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER OMICRON~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER IOTA WITH OXIA~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER ETA~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER TAU~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER ETA~}}{{~GREEK SMALL LETTER FINAL SIGMA~}}, or *maker*, a poet.

Of the incorporation into the meaning of a term, of circumstances accidentally connected with it at some

