

Essay on the meaning of words in thomas paines common sense

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The meaning of words changes over time. Like all types of evolution, the evolution of language is affected heavily by the geographical location and the experiences of those speaking the language. During the late eighteenth century, language was frequently used in ways that it is not used today. Some words that have modern meanings and have evolved and changed with the times were used very differently in the past. Thomas Paine is no exception to this rule, using a variety of different words in "Common Sense" that are still in use today. However, many of these words are used in ways that are not common today; the differences between the use of the words in Paine's time and the current usages of the words can be quite stark. One of the words that Paine uses in "Common Sense" is the word "designs." In today's language, design can generally be a verb or a noun, usually referring to either "a plan or drawing produced to show the look and function or workings of a building, garment, or other object before it is built or made" or, if it is used as a verb, as: "decide upon the look and functioning of (a building, garment, or other object), typically by making a detailed drawing of it" (Simpson and Weiner). However, neither of these definitions truly grasps the meaning behind Paine's use of the word "designs." In "Common Sense," Paine writes: "Men of all ranks have embarked in the controversy, from different motives, and with various designs; but all have been ineffectual, and the period of debate is closed" (Paine). In this context, the word "designs" is not really referring to the type of designs used for a garment or a building. Instead, Paine's use of the word "designs" can be more accurately be defined as an individual's plans and intentions for a certain situation. It is easy to see how the older, more

archaic version of the word is linked to the modern version of the word “ designs;” indeed, there is nothing to suggest that the word “ designs” was not used in the past to describe fashion or building plans. However, Paine’s usage of the word is not common in today’s language, but it was very common all the way through Victorian literature and speech; the word has experienced a narrowing in its common usage (Simpson and Weiner). In Paine’s time, the word “ design” or “ designs,” when used as a noun describing an individual’s intentions, had a neutral connotation. Someone’s design on a situation could be good or bad, depending upon the modifier used to describe the intention. In Paine’s case, there is no signifier to suggest that Paine is discussing positive or negative designs.

However, not all words have a neutral connotation, and not all words require a modifier to express positivity or negativity. In “ Common Sense,” Paine writes: “ On the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense: and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader, than that he will suffer his reason and his feelings to determine for themselves that he will put on and generously enlarge his views beyond the present day” (Paine). In this case, the word “ suffer” is used in an obsolete way; although the word “ suffer” is common in American English to this day, the way Paine uses the word has fallen out of favor in everyday spoken and written American English. In the common parlance, “ suffer” expresses that an individual is experiencing some kind of discomfort or pain. The Oxford English Dictionary writes that “ suffer” is a verb that is when someone or something “ experience or be subjected to (something bad or unpleasant)” (Simpson and Weiner). However, in Paine’s more dated

usage of the word, suffer means that the individual will tolerate a certain experience. Perhaps the experience will be painful or unpleasant; however, commonly, suffer in the context that Paine utilized it was a polite way of asking the reader for patience. In this context, Paine was asking the reader to tolerate his discourse and accept his premises until the end of the treatise, where the reader will be invited to agree or disagree with his statements. Suffer, both in its previous and its current usage, has a negative connotation; at best, it indicates discomfort, but at worst, it indicates pain. There is a narrowing that this particular word has experienced over the years, and the use of the word in the way Paine utilizes it has largely dropped out of favor.

One word that has largely stayed the same over the years is the word “resource.” Resource is an interesting word in and of itself, because it has a vast array of meanings that are widely accepted as proper usage. In “Common Sense,” Paine writes: “Arms as the last resource decide the contest; the appeal was the choice of the King, and the Continent has accepted the challenge” (Paine). In this case, Paine is using the word “resource” in a similar way as the current-day version; in his treatise, the word “resource” is used as “an action or strategy that may be adopted in adverse circumstances” (Simpson and Weiner). In this case, Paine is discussing arms or violence as the last stand against the King.

The changes in the way the word “virtually” is used between Paine’s time and today are very subtle. Paine writes, “Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time, by the proceedings now” (Paine). In

this case, Paine uses the word virtually to mean nearly all; nearly all of history and all of the people in the United States are involved in the proceedings. While the usage of the word today is slightly different grammatically, “virtually” can be used for the same meaning.

One word that has completely shifted its meaning from Paine’s time until today is the word “engross” or “engrossed.” Today, the word is used to describe something that is very interesting, or something that takes up all of a person’s attention; however, Paine uses the word very differently. He writes, “that she hath engrossed us is true, and defended the Continent at our expense as well as her own, is admitted; and she would have defended Turkey from the same motive” (Paine). In this case, Paine is using the word “engross” in the same way that the word “engulf” is used today: he is using it to mean that England and the crown have completely taken over the country.

It is easy to see that words change meaning over time. However, the differences between usages are often subtle differences, and the subtlety of these differences are what makes reading old texts difficult for some. With a basic understanding of the way words change, however, it becomes much easier to parse texts like Paine’s “Common Sense.”

Works cited

Paine, Thomas. *Common sense*. Lancaster [Pa.]: Printed by Francis Bailey, in King's Street., 1776. Print.

Simpson, J. A and E. S. C Weiner. *The Oxford English dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. Print.