

How the meaning of words has changed over time

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

A number of people have asked me what I think about the word decimate. I'm not sure I think anything very much about it, but here are a few things I do know.

The word was originally borrowed into English from Latin and used as a technical term when writing about Roman history, with a very specific meaning. The first record of it being used in English comes from 1591, when it was employed in the context of the Roman practice of executing every tenth soldier, chosen by lot, as a punishment for desertion. The Latin word was *decimare*, which was derived from the Latin word for 10, *decem*.

Quite soon afterwards, in 1626, it was being used in English in a more general, non-Roman sense of removing or destroying one in every 10 of anything. And very soon after that, from 1660 onwards, we find it being used in English in an even more general sense which is not precisely connected to the number 10, where the meaning is something like "to reduce or destroy drastically" or simply "to devastate or ruin". This is now, as the Oxford English Dictionary says, "the most usual sense" of the word in modern English.

The reason people ask me about



■ The word 'decimate' was borrowed into English from Latin - but its meaning has changed quite considerably.

decimate is because this "most usual" meaning is a usage which supporters of the etymological fallacy do not like. They reckon that it is wrong to talk of, say, fishing stocks in the Wensum being decimated unless you have carried out a scientific study which shows that 10pc, no more and no less, of the fish in the river have been lost.

But this is not what decimated means any more - and has not meant for more than 300 years. The fact is that words mean what they mean, and you cannot change that by appealing to what they

used to mean in Latin 2,000 years ago. Even the supporters of the etymological fallacy still call the last month of the year December, even though it isn't the tenth month.

All English speakers know what decimate really means. If we hear reports that the Ipswich Town squad have been decimated, we are much more likely to suppose that many of them have been struck down by flu rather than that one tenth of the squad have been chosen by lot and executed after losing 5-1 at home to Norwich City.