



### Video 7 – Real Vocabulary: what does *decimate* mean?

Hi there! Have you ever wondered when it is appropriate to use the word *decimate*? Well, I've got the answer for you! Let's have a look at this example:

"In the 14th century, the population was *decimated* by crop failures."

Some people insist that *decimate* should only be used to mean "to kill one-tenth of a group of people". Their argument is based on the fact that this was the original meaning of the Latin verb (*decimare*) which *decimate* comes from. ("Decimation", incidentally, was a form of punishment used in the Roman army if soldiers rebelled against their officers.) But just because a word means something in Latin does not imply that it has to have exactly the same meaning in English.

The evidence of our corpus is that the dominant use of *decimate* is "to cause damage or destruction on a large scale", and there are hundreds of examples of populations, crops, livestock and industries being *decimated*.

Like most words which have been in the language for a long time, *decimate* has undergone some changes in its meaning, and this is a normal feature of how the language develops. The idea that a word should only be used in its original meaning is what we call the "etymological fallacy". It's an argument which prescriptivists often employ, but if English words were only ever used in their original meanings, well over half of our vocabulary would disappear.

So the traditional objection to *decimate* is based on a misunderstanding of how language works.

In my next video I will cover the question: what is the correct meaning of the word *transpire*?

Thanks for watching!