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decay, n.

Pronunciation: /dɪˈkeɪ/

Forms: For forms see DECAY *v.*

Frequency (in current use):

Etymology: < DECAY *v.* Compare medieval Latin *decheium* in Du Cange.

1.

a. The process of falling off from a prosperous or thriving condition; progressive decline; the condition of one who has thus fallen off or declined.

c1460 J. FORTESCUE *Governance of Eng.* (1885) xvi The estate off þe Romans..hath ffallen alwey sythyn, into suche decay, þat nowe [etc.].

1558 BP. T. WATSON *Holsome Doctr. Seuen Sacramentes* i. f. iii He repayreth all our decaies in grace.

1587 J. HIGGINS *Mirour for Magistrates* (new ed.) Albanacte lxvi Discord brings all kingdomes to decay.

1611 *Bible* (King James) Lev. xxv. 35 If thy brother bee waxen poore, and fallen in decay with thee.

1718 *Mem. Life J. Kettlewell* III. §103. 439 Perceiving..a very Sensible Decay of his Spirits.

1856 J. A. FROUDE *Hist. Eng.* (1858) I. i. 9 At present, the decay of a town implies the decay of the trade of the town.

1874 J. R. GREEN *Short Hist. Eng. People* v. §3. 228 The decay of the University of Paris..had transferred her intellectual supremacy to Oxford.

†b. Formerly sometimes = Downfall, destruction, ruin; *poet.* fall, death. *Obsolete.*

1535 *Bible* (Coverdale) Psalms cv[i]. 36 They worshipped their ymages, which turned to their owne decaye.

1590 SPENSER *Faerie Queene* I. VI. sig. F6 In hope to bring her to her last decay.

- 1590 SPENSER *Faerie Queene* II. IX. sig. V4^v Fly fast, and saue yourselues from neare decay.
- 1594 SHAKESPEARE *Lucrece* sig. E1 To kill thine Honour with thy liues decaie .
- a1616 SHAKESPEARE *King John* (1623) IV. iii. 155.
- a1724 *Battle of Harlaw* xxv, in Ramsay *Evergreen* Grit Dolour was for his Decay, That sae unhappylie was slain.

2.

†**a.** Falling off (in quantity, volume, intensity, etc.); dwindling, decrease. *Obsolete.*

- 1636 H. BLOUNT *Voy. Levant* 46 The opinion of our decay in stature from our forefathers.
- 1662 E. STILLINGFLEET *Origines Sacrae* III. iv. §6 The decay of many of them [springs] in hot and dry weather.
- 1669 A. BROWNE *Ars Pictoria* (1675) 39 The shadows..being caused by the decay of the light.
- 1691 T. HALE *Acct. New Inventions* p. lxxxiv Complaints were brought to the Council-Board, of the great Decay of that River.
- 1815 J. SMITH *Panorama Sci. & Art* II. 62 The decay of sound has been supposed by some to be nearly in the direct ratio of the distances.

b. *Physics.* The gradual decrease in the radioactivity of a substance; hence, the spontaneous transformation of a single atomic nucleus or elementary particle into one or more different nuclei or particles. Also *attributive.*

- 1897 RUTHERFORD in *London, Edinb. & Dublin Philos. Mag.* 5th Ser. **44** 425 The intensity of the radiation varied widely, but in all cases the rate of decay was found to be in close agreement with theory.
- 1902 RUTHERFORD & ALLEN in *London, Edinb. & Dublin Philos. Mag.* 6th Ser. **4** 708 The decay-curve for a copper wire exposed 210 minutes inside the laboratory.
- 1905 *Nature* 13 Apr. 574/1 Different samples gave for the half-period of decay from 52 to 55 seconds.

- 1931 G. GAMOW *Constit. Atomic Nuclei* ii. 31 One of the most important characteristics of a decaying nucleus is its decay constant., giving the probability of disintegration per unit time.
- 1938 R. W. LAWSON tr. G. von Hevesy & F. A. Paneth *Man. Radioactivity* (ed. 2) xxiii. 223 Uranium Z..may be a decay product of a uranium isotope other than ²³⁸U.
- 1958 J. L. PERKIN in O. R. Frisch *Nucl. Handbk.* iii. 7 The decay of a nucleus via various excited levels of the final nucleus is shown diagrammatically.
- 1962 H. D. BUSH *Atomic & Nucl. Physics* iv. 81 The half-life of uranium I..is obviously too long to determine by measuring the decay of its activity.
- 1968 M. S. LIVINGSTON *Particle Physics* xi. 196 The most fundamental weak interaction is the decay of the neutron into a proton, an electron, and an antineutrino.
- 1969 *Times* 12 Mar. 4/7 The radioactive decay of uranium..has long been recognized as a means of fixing the ages of remote cosmological events.

c. A progressive diminution in the amplitude of an oscillation or vibration.

- 1906 J. A. FLEMING *Princ. Electr. Wave Telegr.* i. 15 Frictional resistance causes decay in the amplitude of the oscillations by dissipating their energy as heat.
- 1922 R. GLAZEBROOK *Dict. Appl. Physics* II. 111/1 The damping of the oscillations is determined by *b*..which is called the damping coefficient or the coefficient of decay.
- 1950 R. W. B. STEPHENS & A. E. BATE *Wave Motion & Sound* 357 This decay of amplitude is known as damping and the motion is referred to as damped harmonic motion.
- 1962 A. NISBETT *Technique Sound Studio* iii. 56 Some percussive instruments, such as tympani, continue to sound for some time, and have decay characteristics which are somewhat similar to that of reverberation.

3.

a. Of material things: Wasting or wearing away, disintegration; dilapidation, ruinous condition.

- 1523 J. FITZHERBERT *Bk. Surueyeng* i. f. 1 Those castelles..that be fallen in decay and nat inhabyted.

- 1609 SHAKESPEARE *Sonnets* xiii. sig. B3^v Who lets so faire a house fall to decay ?
- 1757 tr. J. G. Keyssler *Trav.* II. 135 That edifice, by length of time, fell to decay, and lay in ruins.
- 1839 T. KEIGHTLEY *Hist. Eng.* II. 41 The decay of these sacred edifices.

†**b.** *plural.* Dilapidations; *concr.* ruined remains, ruins, debris, detritus. (Rarely in *singular.*) *Obsolete.*

- 1582 in W. H. Turner *Select. Rec. Oxf.* (1880) 427 The Bayliffs..shall..make relation unto this howsse what the decayes are.
- 1615 G. SANDYS *Relation of Journey* 176 Beyond are the decayes of a Church.
- 1632 W. LITHGOW *Total Disc. Trav.* v. 200 The decayes whereof being much semblable to..the stony heapes of Jericho.
- 1655 T. FULLER *Church-hist. Brit.* III. 82 Jehoiada was careful to amend the decayes of the Temple.
- 1777 G. FORSTER *Voy. round World* I. 313 A vegetable mould, mixed with volcanic decayes.

figurative.

- 1608 SHAKESPEARE *King Lear* xxiv. 292 What comfort to this decay may come, shall be applied.
- 1663 R. SOUTH *Serm. preached Nov. 9, 1662* 15 And certainly that must needs have been very glorious, whose decayes are so admirable.

c. *fig.* The gradual 'wearing down' of words or phonetic elements in language.

- 1874 A. H. SAYCE *Princ. Compar. Philol.* i. 18 Contraction and decay may be carried so far as to become an idiosyncrasy of a particular language.
- 1877 T. L. PAPILLON *Man. Compar. Philol.* iv. 56 The principle of 'Phonetic Decay', which plays so large a part in the history of language.

4.

a. Decline of the vital energy or faculties (through disease or old age); breaking up of the health and constitution;

formerly also (with *plural*), effect, mark, or sign of physical decay.

- 1609 SHAKESPEARE *Sonnets* xi. sig. B3 Age, and could decay .
- 1611 B. JONSON *Catiline* II. sig. D2^v Shee has beene a fine Ladie..and paints, and hides Her decayes very well.
- 1720 R. WODROW *Corr.* (1843) II. 498 Notwithstanding my great age and decays, I am able to preach..in the largest meeting-house in Boston.
- 1752 JOHNSON *Rambler* No. 203. ¶12 In the pains of disease, and the languor of decay.
- 1860 W. F. HOOK *Lives Archbps.* (1869) I. vii. 421 The archbishop..had begun to show symptoms of decay.

†b. *spec.* Consumption, phthisis; ‘a decline’.

- 1725 N. ROBINSON *New Theory of Physick* 150 A perfect Hectic, which inseparably accompanies Wastes, Decays, and Consumptions.
- 1746 G. BERKELEY *Let. Tar-water* §23 Dropsies, decays, and other maladies.
- 1818 SCOTT *Heart of Mid-Lothian* vi, in *Tales of my Landlord* 2nd Ser. II. 165 Her son that she had left at hame weak of a decay.

5. The destructive decomposition or wasting of organic tissue; rotting.

- 1594 H. PLAT *Diuers Chimicall Concl. Distillation* 42 in *Jewell House* One day, or two, before you feare the decay of your decoction, set the same on the fire.
- 1748 *Acct. Voy. for Discov. North-west Passage* I. 138 Such Wood as is upon the Decay, but not yet become rotten.
- 1771 J. HUNTER *Nat. Hist. Human Teeth* 122 Fill the hole with lead, which prevents the pain and retards the decay.
- 1775 J. HARRIS *Philos. Arrangem.* The body ceases to live, and the members soon pass into putrefaction and decay.
- 1860 J. RUSKIN *Mod. Painters* V. 159 The decay of leaves.
- 1878 L. P. MEREDITH *Teeth* (ed. 2) 115 The teeth will come together, and further decay will almost infallibly result.

†6. A cause of decay; the 'destruction' or 'ruin of' anything.

Obsolete.

- 1563 *2nd Tome Homelyes* Homily x. Pt. i Som worldly witted men think it a great decay to the quiete and prudent gouernynge of their commonwealthes to geue eare to the simple and playne rules..of our Sauour.
- 1584 H. LLWYD & D. POWEL *Hist. Cambria* 21 This partition is the very decaie of great families.
- 1609 SHAKESPEARE *Sonnets* lxxx. sig. F^v My loue was my decay .
- 1668 J. CHILD *Brief Observ. Trade* 23 Trade; to which the high rate of Usury is a great prejudice and decay.
- 1674 A. WOOD *Life & Times* (1892) II. 300 The decay of study, and consequently of learning, are coffy houses.

†7. Failure of payment or rent; arrears. *Obsolete.* [medieval Latin *decasus redditus, decatum.*]

- 1546 in J. T. Smith & L. T. Smith *Eng. Gilds* (1870) 199 The possessiones of the Guyld, wyth the decayes, ben yerly valued at [etc.].
- 1546 in J. T. Smith & L. T. Smith *Eng. Gilds* (1870) 199 Decayes and defautes of Rentes.
- 1546 in J. T. Fowler *Memorials Church SS. Peter & Wilfrid, Ripon* (1888) III. 31 One Annuall Rent..in decay and not payde.