

## ETYMOLOGY

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Etymology is the study of the history of words and how their form and meaning have changed over time. For languages with a long written history, etymologists make use of texts in these languages, and texts about the languages, to gather knowledge about how words were used at earlier stages, and when they entered the languages in question. Etymologists also apply the methods of comparative linguistics to reconstruct information about languages that are too old for any direct information to be available. By analyzing related languages with a technique known as the comparative method, linguists can make inferences about their shared parent language and its vocabulary. In this way, word roots have been found which can be traced all the way back to the origin of, for instance, the Indo-European language family.

Even though etymological research originally grew from the philological tradition, nowadays many etymological researches are done on language families where little or no early documentation is available, such as Uralic and Austronesian.

Etymology of "etymology".

The word "etymology" (/eti'mɒlədʒi/) derives from the Greek ἐτυμολογία *etumologiā*, from τύμον *étumon*, "true sense" + -λογία *-logía* "study", from λόγος *lógos*, "speech, account, reason". The Greek poet Pindar (b. approx. 522 BC) employed creative etymologies to flatter his patrons. Plutarch employed etymologies insecurely based on fancied resemblances in sounds. Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* was an encyclopedic tracing of "first things" that remained uncritically in use in Europe until the sixteenth century. *Etymologicum genuinum* is a grammatical encyclopedia edited at Constantinople in the ninth century, one of several similar Byzantine works. The fourteenth-century *Legenda Aurea* begins each *vita* of a saint with a fanciful excursus in the form of an etymology.

Etymologists apply a number of methods to study the origins of words, some of which are:

- Philological research.
- Making use of dialectological data.
- The comparative method.
- The study of semantic change.

Types of word origins.

Etymological theory recognizes that words originate through a limited number of basic mechanisms, the most important of which are borrowing (i.e. the adoption of loanwords from other languages); word formation such as derivation and compounding; and onomatopoeia and sound symbolism, (i.e. the creation of imitative words such as "click").

While the origin of newly emerged words is often more or less transparent, it tends to become obscured through time due to sound change or semantic change. Due to sound change, it is not obvious at first sight that English *set* is related to *sit* (the former is originally a causative formation of the latter), and even less so that *bless* is related to *blood* (the former was originally a derivative with the meaning "to mark with blood", or the like). Semantic change can also occur. For example, the English word *bead* originally meant "prayer", and acquired its modern sense through the practice of counting prayers with beads.

Most often combinations of etymological mechanisms apply. For example, the German word *bitte* (please), the German word *beten* (to pray), and the Dutch word *bidden* (to pray) are related through sound and meaning to the English word *bead*. The combination of

sound change and semantic change often creates etymological connections that are impossible to detect by merely looking at the modern word-forms.

#### English language

English derives from Old English (sometimes referred to as Anglo-Saxon), a West Germanic variety, although its current vocabulary includes words from many languages. The Old English roots can be seen in the similarity of numbers in English and German, particularly seven/sieben, eight/acht, nine/neun and ten/zehn. Pronouns are also cognate: I/mine/me ich/mein/mich; thou/thine/thee du/dein/dich; we/wir us/uns; she/sie. However, language change has eroded many grammatical elements, such as the noun case system, which is greatly simplified in modern English; and certain elements of vocabulary, some of which is borrowed from French. Though more than half of the words in English either come from the French language or have a French cognate, most of the common words used are still of Germanic origin. For an example of the etymology of an English irregular verb of Germanic origin, see the etymology of the word go. Days of the week are derived from old Norse: Monday [Moondæg] Tuesday [Twiesdæg] .

When the Normans conquered England in 1066 , they brought their Norman language with them. During the Anglo-Norman period which united insular and continental territories, the ruling class spoke Anglo-Norman, while the peasants spoke the vernacular English of the time, as well as the native Celtic languages. Anglo-Norman was the conduit for the introduction of French into England, aided by the circulation of *Langue d'oïl* literature from France. This led to many paired words of French and English origin. All these cognate words, French and English, refer to the meat rather than to the animal. This relationship carries over into the names for farm animals where the cognate is with modern German. For example swine/Schwein; cow/Kuh; calf/Kalb; sheep/Schaf. The variant usage has been explained by the proposition that it was the Norman rulers who mostly ate meat (an expensive commodity) and the Anglo-Saxons who farmed the animals. This explanation has passed into common folklore, but has been disputed.

English has proven accommodating to words from many languages. Scientific terminology relies heavily on words of Latin and Greek origin. Spanish has contributed many words, particularly in the south-western United States. Examples include buckaroo from *vaquero* or "cowboy", alligator from *el lagarto* or "the lizard", rodeo and savvy; states names such as Colorado and Florida. Cuddle, eerie and greed come from Scots; albino, palaver, verandah and coconut from Portuguese; diva, prima donna, pasta and umbrella from Italian; adobe, alcohol, algebra, orange, safari, sofa and zero from Arabic; honcho, sushi, and tsunami from Japanese; dim sum, gung ho, kowtow, ketchup, and typhoon from Cantonese Chinese; behemoth, hallelujah, Satan, jubilee, and rabbi from Hebrew; taiga, sable and sputnik from Russian; galore, whiskey, trousers and Tory from Irish etc..

#### What's the Difference Between a Definition and an Etymology?

A definition tells us what a word means and how it's used in our own time. An etymology tells us where a word came from (often, but not always, from another language) and what it used to mean. For example, according to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, the definition of the word disaster is "an occurrence causing widespread destruction and distress; a catastrophe" or "a grave misfortune." But the etymology of the word disaster takes us back to a time when people commonly blamed great misfortunes on the influence of the stars.

#### Why Should We Care About Word Histories?

If a word's etymology is not the same as its definition, why should we care at all about word histories? Well, for one thing, understanding how words have developed can teach us a great deal about our cultural history. In addition, studying the histories of familiar words can help us to deduce the meanings of unfamiliar words, thereby enriching our vocabularies. Fi-

nally, word stories are often both entertaining and thought provoking. As any youngster can tell you, words are *fun*. Learning the etymology of words we can learn the history of mankind.