

STUDIES IN ETYMOLOGY

CHARLES W. DUNMORE



Studies in Etymology

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Cover: Vase painting depicting instruction in music and grammar at an Attic school. [State Museums, Berlin]

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Preface

The purpose of this book is to serve as an introduction to the study of the etymology of the English language—that part of the language, that is, that has been derived from Latin and ancient Greek.

This introduction is by no means complete, as the achievement of an all-encompassing text on English etymology is far beyond the scope of any book of this size. Still, the principles of word formation are formulated, and, following the Introduction, which places the English language in its proper historical and linguistic context, the fascinating study of etymology commences. Students using this book should own a good college-level dictionary of English, one that gives the etymology of entry words.

I should like to acknowledge my debt to Rita M. Fleischer, Administrative Director for Foreign Languages at The Graduate School of the City University of New York, for her helpful suggestions, her painstaking reading of these pages in rough typescript, her help in the onerous task of proofreading, and, especially, for the better book that this has become because of her help and advice.

C.W.D.

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Foreword

English belongs to the Indo-European family of languages, so named because individual tongues of this great family are spoken across an area extending from the Atlantic coast of Europe in the West to India in the East, with some linguistic islands in between where non-Indo-European languages are spoken. Finnish and Hungarian, for example, belong to the linguistic family known as Finno-Ugric, and Basque, spoken in northern Spain, is unrelated to any other known language. Indo-European (abbreviated IE), also called Indo-Germanic or Indo-Teutonic, especially by German philologists, is but one of many language families spread across the globe. Other linguistic families include Semitic, named for Shem, the eldest son of Noah, of which Arabic, Ethiopic, and Hebrew are the most widely-spoken today, and the related group, Hamitic, named for Ham, Noah's second son, represented today mainly by the Berber, Cushite, and Galla languages of Africa, and, in antiquity, Egyptian, preserved to the present day in the liturgy of the Coptic Church. Sometimes these two groups are known collectively as the Hamito-Semitic or, often, the Afro-Asiatic family of languages. Chinese and Japanese in the Far East, the Bantu languages of Africa (the group to which Swahili belongs), the Polynesian languages of the Pacific, and the Amerind languages of the natives of North America are among other of the myriad non-Indo-European language families of the world.

The original Indo-European language itself, sometimes called Proto-Indo-European, seems to have been spoken at one time by peoples living somewhere in the area between central Europe to the west and the Black Sea to the east. In the light of present knowledge it is impossible to pinpoint the home of these people any more accurately than this. There are no records of this primitive Indo-European language since, by the time that its speakers became literate, they were spread across India and Europe, and the original language had become several different individual and mutually unintelligible Indo-European languages. However, by working "backward," and taking cognizance of the tendency to changes in sound that are governed by regular and rigid linguistic rules within each of the Indo-European language groups, a fairly substantial vocabulary of words in this Proto-Indo-European language, complete with their inflections and meanings, can be reconstructed. Languages that have developed from Proto-Indo-European are called *cognate languages*, and words in these various

cognate languages that have developed from a single Indo-European word are called cognate words, or simply cognates, from the Latin adjective *cognatus*, "sprung from the same stock."

About 3000 B.C., or earlier, the Indo-European peoples began to leave their homeland and to migrate, perhaps in search of food, in all directions. The end of these migrations is documented by the archaeological record in Greece and Italy at about 1100-1000 B.C., with the final entry of the ancestors of the Greek-speaking people into Greece, and of the ancestors of the historical Romans, and others, into Italy. By this time the migrations had carried Indo-European people into Iran and even farther, into India, forming the linguistic groups that later spoke Persian and Sanskrit, and people speaking Slavic, Celtic, and Germanic dialects of Indo-European were spread across the face of Europe. Of all these language families, descendants of Proto-Indo-European, it is the Germanic that is of the greatest interest to us, as the Angles and Saxons, the linguistic ancestors of English, spoke dialects of this group.

As long as a language is spoken by living people it is a living language. When it ceases to be spoken and is preserved only in literary texts (if at all), it is called a dead language. Italian is a living language, and Latin is a dead language, despite the fact that it is used in certain rituals of the Catholic Church. Like any other living thing, language changes, but the change is so slow that it cannot be observed by any one generation, and it is only over longer periods that the change becomes evident. One need only to look at a page from one of the works of Shakespeare to see how the English language has changed in the four hundred years from Shakespeare's time to our own. Go back two hundred more years, to the time of Chaucer, and we see that his English, called Middle English, can be read only with some difficulty and with the assistance of notes. The epic of Beowulf, composed about A.D. 1000, in Old English, is in a tongue that is foreign to us and can be understood only by those who have studied this language, just as one studies French, Russian, or Chinese.

It is this tendency of language to change that caused the differentiation of the original Indo-European language into dialects, as various groups broke away and migrated to different areas and lost, for centuries, any contact with each other. By the time that these various groups had become literate, an achievement that took place at widely-spaced times, and left behind them records that we now can read, the individual dialects of Indo-European had become new and, in most respects, different languages. The same phenomenon was repeated much later, when Latin was carried to different areas of Europe, not by migrations, as was the case with Proto-Indo-European, but by Roman soldiers protecting the frontiers of the vast Roman empire and administering its laws. This time the change was from Latin to the various Romance languages, a change which took place during the early Middle Ages.

The reason or reasons why language changes in this way is not known. Physical separation between groups certainly has much to do with it. Witness the regional differences in American English spoken in the United States. Unless the tendency to change had been halted by improved means of travel and, especially, by the invention of radio and television in this century, the local speech of natives of Maine and Georgia, for example, probably would have come to be mutually unintelligible in another two or three hundred years.

Lesson 1

Quot homines, tot sententiae.

As many people, that many opinions. [Terence, *Phormio*]

Prefatory Remarks

ETYMOLOGY is the study of the derivation of words, including an account of their origin and subsequent linguistic history. In studying the etymology of English words that have been derived from Latin and Greek—the purpose of this course—the Latin or Greek source of each word is determined, including prefixes and/or suffixes, and the linguistic changes, if any, that have affected each of these words down to its present form are observed. Note is taken of the changes in the meaning of these words, if such changes have taken place.

The vocabulary of modern English consists of a large number of words whose origin can be traced to Latin or Greek, plus some that have been borrowed from other languages, all added to a substratum of vocabulary that has been inherited from the language, or dialects, of the Anglo-Saxon invaders of Great Britain in the fifth century A.D. These inherited words are called *native words* and are to be distinguished from *borrowed words*, those that have entered our vocabulary from other sources, such as Latin and Greek.

The earliest written documents of the Anglo-Saxon invaders date to the seventh century, and we call the language of these early documents Anglo-Saxon (abbreviated AS) or, more commonly, Old English (abbreviated OE). Changes in the spelling of individual words, undoubtedly reflecting changes in their pronunciation, can be observed in these documents through the centuries, and when the changes have become so profound as to represent sounds substantially different from those found earlier, the language is given a new name: Middle English (abbreviated ME). An arbitrary date of the beginning of the twelfth century, i.e., A.D. 1100, is usually accepted as the starting point for Middle English. Our language, English, is customarily dated from the sixteenth century. Thus, a word that is called Old English is one that is attested in written records from the seventh century A.D. to about 1100; Middle English words are attested in documents from the twelfth century to about 1500, and Modern English words date from the sixteenth century to the present.

The Anglo-Saxon invaders of Great Britain came from the northwestern part of Europe and spoke dialects of the Germanic family of languages, modern descendants of which include German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic. Etymologies for a few native English words will illustrate the linguistic changes that affected these words from the Old English period to the present. Related forms in Swedish and German are given for comparison.

Old English	Middle English	English	Swedish	German
<i>foeder</i>	<i>fader</i>	father	<i>fader</i>	<i>Vater</i>
<i>moder</i>	<i>moder</i>	mother	<i>moder</i>	<i>Mutter</i>
<i>sweostor</i>	<i>suster</i>	sister	<i>syster</i>	<i>Schwester</i>
<i>brodhor</i>	<i>brother</i>	brother	<i>broder</i>	<i>Bruder</i>
<i>sunu</i>	<i>son</i>	son	<i>son</i>	<i>Sohn</i>
<i>dohtor</i>	<i>doghter</i>	daughter	<i>dotter</i>	<i>Tochter</i>
<i>hus</i>	<i>hous</i>	house	<i>hus</i>	<i>Haus</i>
<i>leoht</i>	<i>light</i>	light	<i>lätt</i>	<i>leicht</i>
<i>riht</i>	<i>right</i>	right	<i>rätt</i>	<i>recht</i>
<i>hand</i>	<i>hand</i>	hand	<i>hand</i>	<i>Hand</i>

Spellings of individual words vary in the ancient manuscripts, and different English dictionaries may give different or alternate spellings for the Old English and Middle English forms.

Words in different languages that are descended from the same parent language like English *sister*, German *Schwester*, and Swedish *syster*, for example, are called *cognates*. In this instance, the parent language is one that we call Proto-Germanic. There are no written documents in this language, and the forms of individual words in it must be reconstructed, working backwards from the earliest written examples of Germanic cognates. Since both Latin and Greek are descended from a common parent language, called Indo-European (abbreviated IE), many cognates can be found in these two languages: Latin *mater*, *pater*; Greek *meter*, *pater*, “mother,” “father,” for example. The Romance languages are rich in cognates, as they are all descended from the same parent, Latin.

Latin Words in English

The great majority of words in the vocabulary of present-day English consists of those that have been borrowed from Latin and, to a lesser extent, ancient Greek. The reason for this enormous borrowing is simply that

these words represent objects and ideas for which there was no exact native equivalent. For example, while the early inhabitants of Great Britain brewed beer from grain (OE *beor*, ME *bere*), wine was unknown to them. When the Romans occupied Britain in the first century A.D. and brought *vinum* with them, the word was borrowed along with the beverage: Old English and Middle English *win*, English **wine**.

French Words in English

The influence of the French language was of particular importance in the development of the English vocabulary, and borrowings from this language became increasingly frequent following the period of the Norman invasion of A.D. 1066. The French language, like English, can be divided into three periods: Old French (OF), from the ninth to the fourteenth century A.D., Middle French (MF), from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, and French (F), from the sixteenth century to the present.

Of special importance is the dialect of Old French spoken in the region of Normandy. This was the language of William “The Conqueror” and his followers, and is called Norman French (NF). England was ruled by Norman kings for two centuries, and Norman French left its mark upon the English language.

During and following the Renaissance, words were borrowed in great numbers from Middle French, and a substantial part of our vocabulary can be traced through Norman French and Middle French back to Old French.

Old French was the language that resulted from the normal changes that Latin suffered through the centuries, and most French words, whether they come from the Old- or Middle-French period, can be traced to a Latin original.

The Renaissance

The period of the greatest borrowing from Latin began with the English Renaissance, after A.D. 1500, when new ideas required new words in which to express them. While Latin had been kept alive in the liturgy of the Church and as a vehicle for scholarly writing, study of the Roman writers of prose and poetry had long been abandoned. Now, with the rebirth of interest in the ancient writers, words were borrowed freely from the language of Vergil, Cicero, and others, either in their original Latin form or with slight changes in spelling, a process that has continued up to the present day.

DR. CHARLES W. DUNMORE, NYU Emeritus, taught for over thirty years, serving as chairman at the time of his retirement. He acted as consulting editor on Latin and Greek etymology in the preparation of the “World Book Encyclopedia Dictionary”, and is the author of *Studies in Etymology* and *Selections from Ovid* for Focus as well as other books.

STUDIES IN ETYMOLOGY covers Latin and Greek roots of words in the English language with exercises.

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