In the fifth century B.C., Empedocles of Acratas, the Greek philosopher, proclaimed that the universe is composed of four primal elements: fire, air, water, and earth. While not, perhaps, the most scientific descriptive cosmology, this doctrine nevertheless dominated Western philosophical thought for twenty-one hundred years and is today still favorably regarded by born-again astrologists. But it did not fully satisfy Aristotle, who, writing a century later, explained that while these four material elements could define all earthly substances, a fifth immaterial element must define all heavenly phenomena. He called this element pempteousia, or FIFTH BEING.

Nearly two millennia later, the medieval philosophers, busy transmuting lead into gold and discovering the elixir of life, sought to translate this expression into Latin. But Latin has no present participle meaning BEING. Fortunately, Cicero had long ago solved this problem by taking the existing Latin infinitive esse—an almost exact counterpart to einai, the Greek infinitive governing ousia—and extrapolating from it the hypothetical Latin present participle base essent— to create the neologism essentia, which corresponds to the Greek ousia. Some fifteen hundred years later, the medieval philosophers prefaced this word with the Latin quinta, FIFTH, an ordinal number equivalent to the Greek pempte, thereby establishing the medieval Latin phrase quinta essentia; and these two words eventually coalesced and passed into English as QUINTESENCE. In this linguistic process, the medieval philosophers had unearthed, seemingly without knowing it, a means of transmuting the lead of a dead language into the gold elixir of living discourse.

Philo logically, this occurrence in which the Greek pempteousia was translated, element by element, into the Latin quinta essentia is known as a loan translation or calque, a word derived from the French calque, meaning 'an imitation or tracing' (one language is imitating or tracing the elements of another language into its own elements). The French calque, in turn, is fashioned from the French verb calquer 'to trace or copy,' which is derived from the Italian verb calcare 'to trace or transplant,' the earlier Latin verb calcare 'to tread or trample,' and ultimately, for our purposes, the Latin noun calx 'heel,' as that part of the foot that does the trampling. As such, calques may very well be the philosopher's stone of discourse, the elixir or mother's milk of living language, an archeology of knowledge, transmuting the violent trampling of translation into the intercourse of loan.
Much can be discovered in this archeology. The ancient Romans, as well as the ancient Greeks, have provided English with a pot-pourri of picturesque calques. Even at the very dawn of Roman culture, as a Tiberine she-wolf (Acca Larentia?) suckled Romulus and Remus, some inhabitant of the Italic peninsula may have looked up to the sky one moonless night and fancied that faintly luminous band of stars overarching the heavens to be a road or way of milk, or via lactea, a phrase which was translated into Middle English as melky waye (Chaucer) and thence MILKY WAY, ultimately passing into Modern English where it became a candy bar. Or instead, I would tender, the Romans may have partially translated their via lactea from Eratosthenes' kyklos galaxias 'circle of milk,' from which we derive our GALAXY, now a generic term for the Milky Way, though formerly our specific term; and kyklos galaxias may further be the source of what would then prove to be our obsolete English calque, LACTEOUS CIRCLE. In any case, the Latin lac is cognate with the Greek gala and the English MILK, all three words having evolved from a common prehistoric Indo-European base mel₉-to stroke, to rub off, to milk,' whence we derive such modern terms as LACTOSE, LACTEAL, GALACTOSE, GALACTOSEMIA, MILCH, MILCHING, and LETTUCE.

But the Romans and Greeks are by no means our sole legators of calques. In 1891, Friedrich Nietzsche completed Also sprach Zarathustra in which he elaborated upon his conception of the Ubermensch, that rationally superior person who spurns conventional Christian "herd morality" and transmutes himself, like a triumphant alchemist, so as to fully realize human potential and creative mastery. Yet in a further transmutation, Nietzsche's Ubermensch is popularly misconceived as a man of extraordinary physical strength with a juggernaut-like "will to power" over others. And to culminate the misconception, twelve years after Zarathustra George Bernard Shaw, in attempting to popularize and recast Nietzsche's philosophy, took the task of translating Ubermensch into English. But, evidently, he did not find the native rendering of OVERMAN or BEYONDMAN sufficiently mellifluous and instead translated the first element über into its Latin equivalent, creating for his new play and all posterity that immortal, hybrid calque...SUPERMAN!

Faster than a speeding bullet!
More powerful than a locomotive!
Able to leap tall buildings at a single bound!
Look! Up in the sky!
It's a bird!
It's a plane!
It's Ubermensch!

Yes, it's Ubermensch, strange visitor from another philosophast. Yet anyone who has ever had the pleasure of listening to that scholarly radio serial of the 1940s featuring Bud Collyer or of watching that intellectual television series of the 1950s starring George Reeves (not to be confused with that interloper of late, Christopher Reeve, of no relation) could not help but be struck by the discrepancy between the relatively tame words of this announcer and the pretternatural, quasi-omnipotent feats that this star character could (and did) perform. TV commentators do little more than raise tremendous -- all of which is relatively -- into something of a hyperbolic period of time.

But few can period of time generally assimilate the atom of the Jews, GOAT, which was leaping away the Jews.

An informer generally assimilates the atom of the Jews, SCAPEGOAT, which is rendered as the ENGLISH calque...SUPERMAN.

Faster than a speeding bullet!
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could (and
did) perform. Indeed, according to the 1938 "magazine" (as the TV commentator liked to call it) this Pimpernel incarnate could do little more than "hurdle skyscrapers...leap an eighth of a mile., raise tremendous weights...[and] run faster than a streamline train" -- all of which brings him a lot closer to Nietzsche's original, misunderstood Ubermensch. In short, what began linguistically as a relatively accurate calque for a German concept transmogrified into something quite alien -- an example, if you will, of semantic hypertrophy.

But few calques have varied so preposterously in so short a period of time. Religious calques, for example, have remained relatively stable over the millennia, many of them deriving from the Hebrew or Aramaic language, the former the language of the Old Testament, the latter the language spoken when Christ lived.

An informative religious calque is SCAPEGOAT. Though not now generally associated with anything religious, it does in fact epitomize the atonement of Yom Kippur in which Aaron, the high priest of the Jews, confessed the sins of his people upon the head of a goat, which was then allowed to "escape" into the wilderness, carrying away those sins.

But the goat...shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:10).

SCAPEGOAT actually encompasses two calques and is an example of those words which I call doublecalques (with "double" pronounced "dooble", as in the French manner). SCAPEGOAT was coined by William Tyndale for his 1530 translation of the Pentateuch as a calque of the Late Latin (Vulgate) caper emissarius 'emissary goat,' itself a calque of the Hebrew 'azazel, the name of a desert demon which, etymologically, was understood as 'azazel 'goat that leaves' -- whence EMISSARY GOAT, whence SCAPEGOAT, whence any person, place, or thing who bears the blame for others.

A more complex doublecalque is HOLY GHOST. This phrase is derived from the Middle English halig gost, which itself is derived from the Old English halig gast -- elements which can be traced, respectively, to the Indo-European kaiolo- 'whole, uninjured' and gheis-, an uncertain element expressing awe or fright. However, in ancient Hebrew, a Hamito-Semitic language, ruah ha-godesh meant HOLY SPIRIT, a phrase which was later translated into the Greek pneuma hagion and thence the Latin spiritus sanctus. But not until the Roman missionaries brought spiritus sanctus to the British Isles in the latter half of the first millennium, did the English combine halig with gost to form a coherent phrase. Thus, while halig gast is a doublecalque of spiritus sanctus and pneuma hagion, and spiritus sanctus is a doublecalque of pneuma hagion and ruah ha-godesh, I christen HOLY GHOST a multiple doublecalque. (It has been suggested that HOLY GHOST be called a triplecalque; however, such a neologism would needlessly compound the terminology.)
In contemplating multiple doublecalques, we must not overlook parallel doublecalques. GROUNDHOG, for example, is in all probability a calque of the Dutch aardvark, which dissects into aarde 'ground, earth' and vark 'hog, pig.' But, interestingly, a second calque representing an entirely different animal, the South African anteater (Orycteropus afer), is also translated from these same Dutch elements, though in this context it is reconstructed from its alternative English counterparts, EARTH and PIG. So GROUNDHOG and EARTH PIG are parallel doublecalques of the Dutch aardvark, which not incidentally yields, through its seventeenth-century off-spring language, Afrikaans, our more learned term for the earth-pig anteater, AARDVARK.

But few calques have the vainglory of being doublecalques. In fact, a substantial number of them can hardly be called calques at all. X-RAY, for example, is a partial rendering of Wilhelm Roentgen's X-strahl, in which the German Strahl translates into the English RAY, but the X, being an international algebraic symbol for the unknown, remains unchanged. ANTINOVEL, likewise, is an incomplete translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's antiroman (though the French term was used at least as early as 1627 by Charles Sorel) in which the French roman is rendered by the English NOVEL, but the anti remains unchanged. Such words, then, in which at least one major element is not translated from the original I designate as dericalques. And certain of these words, for example TALL OIL, which is a dericalque of the German Talöl, which itself is a demi-calque of the Swedish tallolja are, in fact, doubledericalques.

But an even more intriguing class of calques — my favorite — is that in which at least one major element is mistranslated from the original. I call these calques catachresticalques from the Greek-derived rhetorical term catachresis, which means, in part, an incorrect use of a word, either from a misinterpretation of its etymology or a folk etymology.

SCAPEGOAT, as we have seen, is an example of a doublecalque, but it is also a catachresticalque insofar as the Late Latin caper emissarius (of which SCAPEGOAT is Tyndale's English translation) is, in fact, a mistranslation of the Hebrew proper name 'azazel. And the Greek tragos apopompaios 'goat sent out' of the Septuagint is also a catachresticalque of 'azazel. So SCAPEGOAT and tragos apopompaios are, in reality, parallel doublecatachresticalques of the Hebrew 'azazel.

But there are more colorful catachresticalques reaching into the English language. At about the time the Hebrews were completing the Torah, the Greeks were coining the phrase ourion oon 'wind egg' to refer to certain eggs which do not hatch, presumably because they are conceived by the wind. Subsequently, this phrase was translated into Latin as ovum urinum, with the same meaning. But somewhere along the way, the Latin urinum 'wind' became confused with the Latin urinae 'urine.' So what began, etymologically, in Greek as a wind egg was transmuted, in Latin, into a urine egg. Moreover, in Old English the word for urine was adel, which contracted to adel in Middle English; and the old English word
not overlook all probabilities into aarde, a second South African term, these same calques translated from its 18th-century offshoot aardvark, earthdew. In German, aardvark, aardwolf, Groundhog, the Greek kalpax and tragis which transmutes material as heavy as lead and as light as the wind into the golden immaterial elixir of living language.

FAMILY WORDS

In his $6.95 paperback, Family Words (Addison-Wesley, 1988), Paul Dickson explores a linguistic byway that has attracted little previous attention: words coined within a family group and only used among its members. He claims "it is all but impossible to find a family that does not have at least one family word," suggesting that the corpus of such words may well exceed unabridged dictionaries in size (even assuming many inadvertent duplications among the 50 million families in this country). By quizzing friends and relatives, and appealing for examples on radio talk shows, Dickson has collected more than three thousand, of which perhaps one-third appear in this book.

These examples give the zany flavor of what he has found:

TOAD CLOTH a dishrag that has gotten too wet to use
OLD MAIDS unpopped kernels of popcorn
HOMESTEAD to stop your car and wait for a parking spot to be created
FLINKUS an unidentifiable object left in the garage by the former owner of your house
CLUNK-WAA a child falling out of bed in the middle of the night
SNICK a droplet of saliva expelled while talking
HA-HAS eyeglasses (from the sound made when you breathe on them for cleaning)
GHOST POO white styrofoam packing pieces
OIK the webbed space between two fingers

If you don't find this book delightful, you are really hard to please!