WAY/WORDS: ETYMOLOGICAL DEVIANCE

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The word etymology, taken from the Greek words etumos, meaning "true," and logia, meaning "one who speaks" -- the two words together referring to "the study of the true sense of a word ... according to its origin" (Klein 1966, I, 548) -- has become nearly a doggone lie when applied to English. Because of twistings, turnings, and outright trickery (Swift was an arch-villain in this regard), it is difficult if not impossible to know "the true sense of a word ... according to its origin," without discovering the actual breeding papers of the particular term and without considering its usage. Indeed, the paternity of many words is unknown. The day of sensibly coupled words, as Old English once enjoyed, has passed into a night of abstractions for many modern English terms. The tradition of "throwing together" words from foreign languages has prevailed. Spelling alone illustrates what a mongrel language English is!

A fitting example of our many lingual mutts is greyhound. "This dog is so swift that it has outrun its origin. Hound is common Teut., AS. hund, related to hunt, from AS. huntian, to hunt. The grey has no relation to color. One suggestion is that it is from AS. grig, bitch; another, that it is a translation of L. canis grae, Greek hound" (Shipley 1945, 171). Greyhounds may be tan, blue, yellowish-grey, white, or black. And yet, painting grey hounds on hundreds of buses, shamelessly dogging many a person's mind from the truth, the Greyhound Bus Company has perpetuated the myth that the dog's name is derived from a color.

Another word with indefinite parentage is freak. It may be from the ME. word frek, meaning "bold" or "quick," or from the OE. frec -- "gluttonous, greedy, bold, dangerous" -- frec having apparently been related to the ON. frekr, which meant "greedy, rough, severe." These various possible sources may come from the IE. base preg -- "greedy, violent, impetuous, bold" (Klein 1966, I, 620). Whatever the case regarding the derivation of this word, for clean-cut conservatists to apply it to retiring, commune-loving, emaciated hippies seems incongruous. If anything, the capitalists, the epitome of American conservatism, are not above being bold, violent, greedy, glutinous, and severe. One could argue through etymological ambiguities that freak should refer to normal people as well as deviants. Modern usage, however, has schizophrenically detached freak from its uncertain origin; and so, such broad application is unlikely.

As well-known as Shakespeare's words are, he did use terms steeped in local color and therefore misunderstood by many moderns who think they are the expression of the English. Miss Baker, in a Genevan part noze (G. Geno, 1, 748), would undoubtedly have been ailing. But to an Italian she is not only incomprehensible, but incommodary of the modern word.

Between the Scylla and Charybdis of a Latin past part finitive 

Equally un

If linguists were, they surely do.

From the Latin past part finitive creder...
Most people, including well-known artists, retain their territorial scents, but miss the sense of foreign provincialisms. To a Frenchman, the word Huguenot, "influenced in form by... Hugues Besancon, a Genevan party leader" and "compounded of eit (G. Eid)... and genoze (G. Genosse)," which together mean oath comrade (Klein 1966, I, 748), would pose no problem for identification and understanding. But to an Italian Papist, the idea of a Huguenot being an oath comrade is not only inconceivable but also anathema sit, unless, of course, the comradery of the French Protestant were with the Devil himself.

Between denotative and connotative meanings, a gap has widened, especially for words like creditor. This word was borrowed from the Latin past participle creditus, "having been trusted," or from the infinitive credere, "to believe" (Klein 1966, I, 370). Today's high interest rates for bank loans are indeed difficult to believe, and everyone finds it difficult to trust in many cancel-happy insurance firms. The Federal Reserve system and other so-called creditors, who swear no oaths of friendship or otherwise, make the etymology for the modern meaning of creditor hard to accept.

Equally unbelievable is the complete reversal in meaning for some words. "Bird names travel farther than the birds... The black-headed penguin gets its name from Welsh pen gwyn, white head---evidently by transfer from some other bird, after the original sense had been lost" (Shipley 1945, 266). Of course, we could maintain that names are arbitrary and that this discrepancy could be corrected by revamping our color system. This would probably be no more confusing than our present determination of the etymology for terms like the one cited (or rather uncited) above.

If linguists don't go nuts over the etymological oddities of penguin, they surely do over the numerous meanings for common words like nice. From the Latin ne -- "not" -- and scire -- "to know," this word became the adjective nescius, "not knowing, ignorant." Old French broadened the meaning of nice to "foolish." The ME. version included in its definition "not wise, foolish, wanton" (Klein 1966, II, 1045). If a painted whore showed up in an English cathedral in the fourteenth century, she would likely have been asked, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?!" About the time the inquirer was waylaid with a purse full of farthings (not a very nice trick), the word nice probably changed to mean "requiring precision" (OED). The term has since come to denote the following: "delicately sensitive," "carefully accurate," "scrupulous," "strict in matters of reputation," "refined," "coy, shy... reserved," "kind, considerate, or pleasant" (OED). Recently, however, nice has become, in the spirit of its
original meaning, derogatory, especially among young rebels. A nice movie is one that is disgustingly innocuous, and to be called a nice guy is an insult if one aspires to individuality. These illustrations show how words can return, without the aid of the philologist’s handbooks, to one or more of their earlier meanings.

What’s the difference between the hammer and the nail? Hammer comes perhaps from the Icelandic word hamarr, meaning “a rock” (Skeat 1961, 259). But nail has for one of its roots the Greek word onux, which meant both a claw and a stone (Klein 1966, II, 1026; Skeat 1961, 412). What a curious anticipation of the nail’s modern opposite, the claw hammer! Such different words having similar root meanings suggest that when Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel sing “I’d rather be a hammer than a nail,” they may well be saying, “I’d rather be a rock than a stone” — which certainly puts etymologists in a hard situation.

Indeed, etymologists know all too well the endless game of trying to pin the verbal tail on the donkey that runs like a racehorse and leaves a scanty trail. And, as if their task isn’t hard enough, people like Jonathan Swift make the donkey run faster by introducing a crop of word innovations. To have invented a word like Lilliputian was really small-minded of Swift. If he’d known the trouble he would cause future philologists struggling to learn that some word roots are lodged in no other place than human fancy, he would have repented, turned to triteness, and rested in peace as the Rod McKuen of Trinity College. But, as it was, he and other malcontents have never let the language rest.

Indefinite sources, special local-color meanings, foreign derivations, attitudinal blindspots, differences between denotative and connotative meanings, reversals in meaning, different words having similar root meanings, word innovations: these are only a few of the reasons for the waywardness of some English words and their backgrounds. So many terms refuse to either submit their birth certificates or proclaim themselves orphans. Their truant officer, Etymology, has so many irresponsible parents to locate for so many bastard offspring that he sometimes seems incapable of finding the true sense of words according to their origins.

REFERENCES

Walter W. Skeat, English Dialects from the Eighth Century to the Present Day (1911; reprint New York: Kraus, 1968)