

THE TRANSMUTATION OF LANGUAGE

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In the fifth century B.C., Empedocles of Acragas, 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 *pemptē ousia*, 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 participial 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 *pemptē*, 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.

Philologically, this occurrence in which the Greek *pemptē ousia* 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 trample,' 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 *melg-* '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 Übermensch, 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 Übermensch 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 Übermensch 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 Übermensch!

Yes, it's Übermensch, strange visitor from another philosophaster. 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 preternatural, quasi-omnipotent feats that this star character 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 *Übermensch*. 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 *doo'·bluh*, 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 'azāzēl, the name of a desert demon which, etymologically, was understood as 'ēz ōzēl '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 *holi gost*, which itself is derived from the Old English *halig gast* -- elements which can be traced, respectively, to the Indo-European *kailo-* '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 *gast* to form a coherent phrase. Thus, while *halig gast*, morphologically, is of Indo-European composition, semantically it is of Hamito-Semitic ancestry. Moreover, since *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 offspring 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 demicalques. And certain of these words, for example TALL OIL, which is a demicalque of the German *Tallöl*, which itself is a demicalque of the Swedish *tallolja* are, in fact, doubledemicalques.

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 'azāzēl. And the Greek *tragos apompaios* 'goat sent out' of the Septuagint is also a catachresticalque of 'azāzēl. So SCAPEGOAT and *tragos apompaios* are, in reality, parallel doublecatachresticalques of the Hebrew 'azāzēl.

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* οὐριον '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 *adela*, which contracted to *adel* in Middle English; and the old English word

for egg became, in one of its forms, *eye* in Middle English (pronounced in two syllables). So the compound *adel-eye* emerged in Middle English, of which the *eye* later dropped out yielding, once again, a solitary Middle English *adel*. And this word passed into Modern English as *ADDLE*.

So the next time you call someone *ADDLEBRAINED* or *ADDLEPATED*, smile to yourself, for you are really saying far more about that person than that person might ever suspect. And smile again, for you're articulating an alchemical calque, that quintessence of loan 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!