

Word Origins

AND THEIR ROMANTIC STORIES

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I The Story Begins

EVERY WORD was once a poem. Each began as a picture. Our language is made up of terms that were all originally figures of speech.

Sometimes the pictures can be rediscovered and restored so that their beauty will once more be seen. At other times the attrition of the ages has worn the images away and obliterated them so that no trace is left.

It can't surprise us that our language began with metaphors. Words are being made today under our own eyes in precisely the same fashion. Witness the terse and vivid terms that the gangsters coin: gun moll, for the racketeer's girl-friend; hot seat, for the electric chair; stool pigeon, for the traitor who acts as a spy for the police.

There are those colorful ones that we use in our daily speech, such as redcap, bellhop, back number, cold snap, fireplug, ticket scalper; and those other expressions that the California gold rush gave us: strike it rich, pay dirt, pan out, tenderfoot.

Such terms as these may not all live of course, but they still show us language in the making. A few hundred years from now other etymologists will be researching to unearth the early stories behind such of these words as survive, even as we are now doing with the words of long ago.

It is unfortunate, in a way, that we learn words when we are

so very young, for as we become adult we take these strange symbols for granted. By then there is little of mystery in them for us. We are apt to think vaguely that words just happened and were always so. We have no sharp feeling that they were born much as babies are born. That they are vibrant with life and are always changing. That they grow up and often, like us, take on the greater responsibilities that go with maturity. And that, by the end of their days, for die they often do, they will frequently have life histories as long and distinguished as human biographies in a copy of *Who's Who*.

To know the past of an individual helps us to understand him the better. To know the life history of a word makes its present meaning clearer and more nearly unforgettable. And besides all this, the stories in and of themselves are often packed with romance and adventure and lead us far away into the fields of mythology and history and of great names and great events. Words truly are little windows through which we can look into the past.

In English we have a beautiful word, *bouquet*, that we borrowed from the French. Bouquet literally means "a little piece of woodland," and so, by inference, the flowers that go with it. This figure of speech applies more nearly than any other I can think of to the present volume. This book is really a bit of woodland staked off in the illimitable forests of the American language. It cannot and could not be complete. Our speech is too prodigal for that.

The American language is the richest in all history. The vast tributaries of our English inheritance have poured into it. The streams of all nations have fed it. Our own dramatic years have enriched it. In its wide reaches we discover the sweep of our mighty rivers, the majesty of our mountains. It is salty with the rugged epithets of the early west. It echoes to the war whoop of the Indians and is musical with the melodies of the Negroes. It is strong with the curiosity and the daring of the pioneers, and it has inherited their restlessness, their impatience of the past, their disdain of the dead hand.

"English has its bases broad and low, close to the ground" as Walt Whitman once said. "Into it are woven the sorrows, joys, loves, needs and heartbreaks of the common people." And it is these same common people who have given us so much of our

language and who have filled it full of the poetry that we sometimes call slang.

To try to gather any representative showing of these fabulous word-treasures into a book will always be difficult, almost impossible. The choices of what to include must, in the end, be arbitrary, even sometimes accidental. There will be innumerable omissions—many by design and some, I am sure, by inadvertence.

I have thought that if this enormous mass of disorganized material were shaped into chapters, and if it could be grouped under natural subject headings, it might help the reader and save him from confusion. I hope that I have not been wrong.

The chances of error in the realm of word histories are appalling. There have already been too many books about books in this field where mistaken etymologies have been passed on and perpetuated. My effort has been to avoid these petty crimes as far as it is humanly possible. Questionable etymologies have been left out, except in a few cases where the stories are of unusual interest. Such stories are identified and the reader is put on guard.

A large and long-term correspondence, of course, has been necessary in the attempt to gain accuracy. The War Department was questioned as to what English words were used in order to detect Japanese spies who could not pronounce them properly. The list was furnished. Gelett Burgess, the author, described the circumstances that led up to his invention of the words "blurb" and "bromide." Oscar of the Waldorf confirmed the entertaining story of the creation of the popular dish "Eggs Benedict." Other similar inquiries about modern words were made of people who were still alive and who could either verify or correct the histories of the words in question. As to the words of the past ages, each line of this volume has been checked and rechecked by etymologists and by ranking linguistic scientists.

In spite of these precautions there will still be errors for which apology is now given. I trust the slips may not be too many, for romantic stories about words are not well told if they are not true.

A few technical points must be mentioned that the uninterested reader can easily skip if he likes.

With some of the Latin nouns in the body of this book, I have used the nominative and genitive cases. One example would be *pes, pedis*, meaning "foot," which appears in such English words

as *pedal* and *pedestrian*. It was my feeling that as the genitive form *pedis* had the letter *d* in it this Latin form could be more easily seen in the English words. With the Latin verbs I have sometimes selected the first person singular of the present tense; at other times the infinitive form, when this seemed to make the meaning more clear. And, incidentally, long vowels are marked only in Old English.

One further note. In this book you will find references to Old English and to Middle English. The Old English period extends roughly from the 5th century A.D. to a century after the Norman invasion in 1066; the Middle English from that time on to about 1500 which dates the beginning of Modern English.

I dare hope that this volume may interest the serious student of language. But I have particularly tried so to write it that it can be enjoyed by those members of the general public who may be only casually familiar with this fascinating subject of word histories. My particular interest lies with these people for I, myself, can lay little claim to scholarship.

In the end this book has one main intent. I can only wish that the reader might be encouraged to walk among words as I do, like Alice in Wonderland, amazed at the marvels they hold.

2 Origin of Words of Speaking and Writing

IN A SENSE, man began to communicate as soon as he used his limbs. The frown, the smile, the raised eyebrow, the pointed finger are all akin to writing and to speech and today these symbolic gestures eke out our faulty language.

We have so many ways of expressing ourselves without words. School bells and church bells call us to exercises, whistles remind us of factory hours or warn us of the danger from trains. Human whistles can command a dog or express surprise or invite a girl. Red lights and green lights say stop and go. There's a white flag for surrender, a yellow flag for disease, a red one for danger. The nod or shake of a head is eloquent of yes and no. A raised hand asks attention, or, in baseball, the spread and lowered hands of the umpire say safe. There are the applauding hands of approval and the stamping feet of impatience. A crossed finger can be a wish for luck. A wink is almost anything you wish. And a thumb could be a request for a ride or, properly applied to the nose, a dramatic gesture of derision.

Sign language can be eloquent. Should you be in a foreign city and ask some uncomprehending stranger directions, he will shrug his shoulders in polite despair to show you that he can't understand you. Then he may stretch his hands outward with the palms turned towards you to offer his apologies and to indicate

that he would be so willing to help you if he only could. You nod your head and smile your thanks. No intelligible word has been said yet all has been understood.

The start of spoken language itself is buried in mystery and in a tangle of theories. The history of written language also disappears in the jungles, into the deserts and far fields of unrecorded time. But at the least the words that have to do with writing tell us much about the early beginnings of the art and of the utensils that were used to record the written symbols.

The word *write*, spelled *writan* in Old English, first meant to scratch, and scratch the primitives did on their birch-bark or shingles with sharp stones and other pointed instruments. In the more sophisticated lands that surrounded the Mediterranean the pulp of the papyrus plant was pressed and dried into their type of paper and was used instead of the bark of trees, and the Latin term *papyrus* gave us our word *paper*. *Pen*, in its Latin form *penna*, meant a feather and we still have quill pens, at least as collector's items. And this *pencil* that we hold inherits its name from the Latin *penicillum*, meaning "little tail," and this refers to the time when writing was done with a tiny brush that did look like a little tail.

At one period in the history of Old English the word *book*, then spelled *bōc*, meant "beech" for it was on the bark of that tree, or upon beechwood itself, that words then were scratched. The term *folio* that now refers to a book of the largest size is from the Latin word *folium*, which meant a "leaf," as on a tree; and *volume* comes through Old French from the Latin *volumen* which meant a roll of writing, that is, the roll of papyrus manuscript that was wrapped for convenience around a spindle. The term *letter*, as used to designate a letter of the alphabet, is thought to be akin to the Latin word *linere*, "to smear," which is a good description of some of the early writing. And it is interesting to note that the German for the word *letter* is *Buchstabe*, which literally means "beechstaff."

The history of the letters of our alphabet also goes back into extreme antiquity and disappears.

The Semitic languages, that family of languages now spoken in Syria, Arabia, Palestine, Egypt, and other North African countries is, so far, the earliest discoverable source although it is sus-

pected that some still earlier and probably exiled tribe gave us our beginning. However things may have started, the alphabet came down through the Phoenician, Greek, and Latin languages into modern European.

All writing, including our alphabet, grows out of a stylized form of drawing. We begin with a picture of an animal or person or other object. In the end the resemblance to the original object becomes unimportant and the picture turns into a symbol that represents a linguistic form of some sort. By this time rapid writing begins to be more urgent than picture-drawing and this often means a change of writing materials. It is partly for this reason that our alphabet was not derived from the Egyptian hieroglyphs that were carefully chiseled on stone. That was too slow a process. The modern alphabet came from the more rapid, flowing script which was done with a reed brush on papyrus. The representation of a complete word precedes the representation of a syllable. Words were broken up into syllables much later on, and it wasn't until the time of the Greeks that our alphabet reached the final stage where there was an attempt to have a symbol for each sound.

An important piece of evidence in the reconstruction of the history of the alphabet is the Moabite stone which was discovered in 1868 by Rev. F. A. Klein, a German missionary, who was traveling in the Trans-Jordan area. This was a block of black basalt with a 34-line inscription belonging to the 9th century B.C., the earliest representation of the Phoenician alphabet that can be dated with tolerable accuracy. When the Rev. Klein returned to Jerusalem he reported his findings. English and French scholars hastened to the spot, but were met with great hostility by the Arabs who had long cherished this stone as a fertility charm. Eventually the Arabs smashed the stone in pieces so that it wouldn't be further contaminated by foreign infidels and then distributed the fragments among their people as good luck talismans. Fortunately an impression of the stone had been taken. Later on, with great tact, the local French officials managed to recover almost all of the pieces. These were put together and this relic now reposes in the Louvre in Paris.

The first two letters of the Greek alphabet, *alpha* and *beta*, were joined together to form our word *alphabet*. Each letter of

our alphabet, in its early beginning started with a picture or drawing.

It may not have been an accident that the letter *A* became the first letter of all. In ancient Phoenicia some 3,000 years ago the letter *A* was called *aleph* and meant "ox." It was represented like a V, seemingly for the horns of an ox, and had a slanted bar across it; but the Greeks later turned it upside down, which is the way we know it. The ox, of course, served the ancient Phoenicians for food and work and shoes and clothing. A herd of cattle meant wealth to them. This could have been the reason that the ox, *aleph*, or *A*, stands as our first letter.

What is of next importance for survival? Shelter. And *B* in Phoenician was called *beth* and *beth* meant a tent or house. Their *B* originally looked like the primitive two-chambered, far-eastern house, with its one room for the men, the other for the women. *Beth*, the Phoenician name for *B* is preserved in the modern word *Bethlehem*, which means "the house of food."

The letter *H* is supposed to have been the picture of a fence; the Phoenician *L*, a more flowing figure than ours, was called *lamed*, the Phoenician word-sign for the "whip" with which they drove the camel; and *G* is thought to be the camel itself with its curved neck. This letter was called *gimel* in the Hebrew alphabets from which we have the source of *gamma*, the Greek name for *G*, and from *gamma* and *gamel* it is an easy step to our word "camel."

Many scholars say that the symbol *V* represented a hook to hang things on; *Y* a hand with the thumb held away from the other fingers; *Z* seems to have pictured a sword and a shield. Their *D* or *daleth* is taken from an Egyptian hieroglyph which meant door and looks like a door.

The mark used for branding the oxen was the Phoenician *teth*, our *T*; *O* was a human eye, and in some ancient alphabets it even had a dot in the center for the pupil. *Kaleph* in Phoenician was their name for *K* and meant "the palm of the hand"—originally *K* was the exact picture of a hand—and *I* itself was the human finger, while *Q* looks to be a monkey with its tail hanging down.

The Phoenicians were great explorers and dared the seas even to the coast of Spain. Their word for *M* was *mem* and meant "water," and this letter, much like ours in shape, merely represented the waves of the ocean.

One other small alphabetical oddity. We may have been mildly curious at times as to why *Z* is the last of our twenty-six letters. This wasn't always so, for in the ancient Greek alphabet it was the sixth. When the Romans took over they thought that they would have no use for *Z* so they dropped it. Later on they found that it was a necessary sound, but by this time *Z* had lost its old position and had to be put at the end of the line.

The stories of the other letters are too doubtful to record, but each one was originally a pictograph like the Chinese characters. They were, however, all formalized by the Greeks and the Romans and the pictures have long since disappeared.

In the pages that follow we will discuss some of the more important words that have to do with writing and with speech.

ADDRESS: *right to the point*

When a speaker makes an *address*, he gives thought to the "direction" of his points. When a person *addresses* a letter, he is "directing" it to a certain party and place. We received this word *address* through the French term *addresser*, originally from the Latin *ad*, "to," and *directus*, "straight" or "right," signifying "right to the point." The earliest meaning of *address* was "make straight," "prepare."

ALBUM: *meant white*

The word *album* that identifies the bound book in which you paste pictures is a Latin term that meant the tablet on which public notices were displayed in ancient Rome. It derived originally from *albus*, which meant both "white" and "blank," a page, that is, that hadn't been written on and so was unsullied. Just by the way, the autograph *album* was old stuff at the time of the dictionary-maker, Dr. Samuel Johnson.

ALLEGORY: *about something else*

Perhaps the most famous allegory in history is Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* where the characters are symbols and the moral has to be inferred. *Allegory* is from the Greek *allos*, "something else," and *agoria*, "a discourse." When an Athenian citizen wished to criticize a public officer, he would appeal to his fellow citizens in a long *allegoria*, "a discourse" apparently about

"something else," in which his criticisms were veiled in fiction but were easily recognized.

ANTHOLOGY: *bouquet of flowers*

This attractive word has a poem hidden in it. As we know, it means a collection of choice extracts from the works of many authors, sometimes from the writings of one author. The editor who gets up an *anthology* is actually gathering a bouquet of literary flowers, for the Greek word *anthologia* means "flower gathering" and comes from *anthos*, "flower," and *lego*, "gather."

BANALITY: *named from a mill*

In medieval days the lord of a manor was granted certain monopolies, as on game, timber, and such, which enabled him to control the economy of the village. He would issue *bans* or regulations. From this came the Old French word *banalité*, the name for the feudal arrangement by which tenants were forced to use the winepress, bake oven, farm implements, and the mill—or *banal* mill as it was then called—of the lord of the land, or the "landlord." With us a *banality* is something said or written that is trite and commonplace. And like enough this is the way that these olden-time boys and girls felt about the community *banal* mill.

BATHOS: *coined by a poet*

In the early part of the 18th century the British poet, Alexander Pope, together with those brilliant authors Swift, Gay, and Arbuthnot, was engaged in the lively sport of parodying the bad works of contemporary writers. Out of this game of wits Pope got the idea for the satirical verses that make up his famous poem the *Dunciad*. While he was composing this work, Pope found himself in need of a word to express a sudden descent from the sublime to the ridiculous, and he chose the simple Greek word *bathos*, "depth," to express this idea. We use the word *bathos* today to indicate false pathos, or a ridiculous drop from the lofty to the commonplace.

BILLINGSGATE: *a city gate*

This particular gate of London is supposed to have been named after some gentleman named *Billing*. Who he was no one knows. The fish market that grew up in the vicinity was reputedly the

center of some pretty foul and abusive language, and the fishwives and their fishmongering husbands got a reputation for their lusty and lurid eloquence of speech. So today when we speak of *billingsgate*, we mean any kind of profane and abusive talk.

BLURB: *coined as a gag*

The word *blurb* was invented by Gelett Burgess, well-known author and perpetrator of that classic quatrain "The Purple Cow." In 1907 at a dinner given by the Retail Booksellers Association, a copy of Mr. Burgess's new volume, *Are You a Bromide?*, had been placed by the plate of each guest. Now the book jackets of those days carried raves about the author and the merits of his novel. As an antidote to this, Burgess selected a sickly sweet girl for the jacket, called her Miss Belinda *Blurb*, and, as he writes, "had her pictured blurbing a blurb to end all blurbs, I fondly hoped." The invention stuck, and that's why we speak today of publishers *blurbs*, those sometimes extravagant notices of new books. Incidentally, Mr. Burgess's volume *Are You a Bromide?* gave us the word *bromide* as applied either to a very tiresome person or to one of his very trite remarks.

BOWDLERIZE: *from a reformer's name*

Away back in the year 1818, Thomas *Bowdler*, an English physician, published a complete edition of Shakespeare's works. Here is the way his title page read: "The Family Shakespeare; in ten volumes in which nothing is added to the original text; but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family." The poet Swinburne thought that this was a splendid idea. "Now," he said, "thanks to Bowdler, innocent little children could read the greatest authors without harm." But others treated the whole affair as a grand joke, and they began to use *bowdlerize* as a synonym for "expurgate."

CLICHÉ: *at one time, a printer's term*

Once this word was used as a technical name for a stereotype plate; that is, a solid plate for printing made from a papier-mâché mold of a page of composed type. The word "stereotype" itself had been coined as a name for this process by Firmin

Didot, one of a family of well-known French printers. These two mundane printer's terms gave us two valuable words. *Stereotyped* and *cliché* mean "cast in metal from a mold"; hence, fixed firmly and unalterably. Therefore a *stereotyped* expression is one that is conventional and has no originality, and similarly *clichés* are fixed forms of expression, such as trite remarks and hackneyed phrases.

CLUE: *ball of thread*

Clue is a native English word, but its figurative meaning parallels Greek mythology. It seems that a dreaded monster, half man, half bull, called the Minotaur was held in a labyrinth on the island of Crete. The hero Theseus offered to enter and kill the beast. Ariadne, daughter of the King of Crete, was in love with Theseus and gave him a thread—in Middle English a *clewe*—to guide him out of the labyrinth after he had slain the monster. From this the word *clewe*, now *clue*, came to mean anything that guides us through a perplexing situation. We discover the *clue* to a puzzling crime; we "thread" our way through an involved plot.

COMMA: *piece cut off*

A host of our terms in rhetoric and grammar originated in Greece. The punctuation mark we call a *comma* began with the Greek word *komma*, which meant "a piece cut off," and so a mark that sets off a phrase. The word *colon* is from *kolon*, a limb or joint, and hence that piece of a sentence called a "clause," then the *colon* mark to indicate the division of the clause. Our word *period* was originally *periodus*, a going around, a cycle, as of years. By the end of the 16th century it meant the point of completion of any action, then a full sentence or the pause following one, and finally the dot that marks the end of a sentence.

CONCISE: *cut it short*

When you cut down a sentence you make it brief and *concise*, which is exactly what the Latin word *concisus* means. *Conciscus* derives from *con-*, "with," and *caedo*, "cut." A number of English words have sprung up from the root *cis*, all with the idea of "cut" in them: the *incision* the doctor makes when he "cuts