

THE SCIENCE OF ETYMOLOGY

BY THE

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'Whoever devotes himself to the study of so comprehensive a science must try never to lose sight of two virtues: conscientiousness and modesty.'—MAX MÜLLER, *Selects—Essays*, 1881, i. 199.

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PREFACE

THE object of the present volume is to draw attention to some of the principles that should guide the student of etymology in general, and of English etymology particularly; in order that any one who employs an etymological dictionary may be able to do so with some degree of intelligence and to some profit. It is much easier to accomplish this at the present date than it was some ten or twenty years ago. The steady progress of the New English Dictionary furnishes us with innumerable and indisputable instances of the actual usages of English words, so that the mistakes which formerly arose from a very imperfect knowledge of their history have largely been corrected, and much that was once obscure has been made plain. Meanwhile, the great gains that have resulted from the scientific study of comparative philology as applied to the Indo-germanic languages have been properly formulated and tabulated, to the explosion and exclusion of many hasty inferences that were both misleading and mischievous. It is now possible to introduce science where once there was little but guesswork.

Such science is founded, as all science should be, upon the careful observation of the effects of well-ascertained laws, which have been laboriously evolved from the comparison of innumerable forms of words in many languages. A large number of such laws can now be positively and safely relied upon, because they rest upon the sure foundations of a careful study of phonetics. This study enables us to concern ourselves with something that is far more valuable than written forms, viz. the actual sounds which the symbols employed in various languages actually represent. The most important

of these languages is Latin, because the Latin alphabet has been so widely adopted. Hence it is that all serious attempts to assimilate the lessons and results which have been secured by the strenuous labours of modern philologists must needs begin with a knowledge of the sounds which the Latin symbols denoted in the first century. The first requisite is, in a word, the correct pronunciation of classical Latin, and the lesson is simple and easy enough. When once acquired, there is very little more to be learnt in order to understand the pronunciation of Anglo-Saxon, and the remarkably musical sounds of the Middle-English period, especially as employed by Chaucer, who was as great a master of melody as the famous Dante.

A sufficient knowledge of the Chaucerian pronunciation will then afford some guide to the more difficult and somewhat uncertain pronunciation of Tudor English; from which we may reasonably hope to glean some of the reasons why we spell many words as we do. Most of our modern spelling, except in the rather numerous instances where meddling pedants have ignorantly and mischievously distorted it, rests upon the spoken sounds used in the time of our great dramatists by the best actors of that period.

The indifferent attitude assumed by the millions of English speakers with regard to the obviously important subject of spelling can only be accounted for by their almost universal ignorance of the subject. Not ten (or even less) in a million of English speakers recognize the fact that our spelling was, once at least, founded on phonetic laws, and that the object of our ancestors was not, as many suppose, to write in accordance with 'etymology'—except when it was too obvious to be missed—but to represent the sounds of the spoken words. And of course, the 'etymological' spelling of Latin words was really based upon spoken sounds also; so that the reverence paid to Latin written forms only carries us back to the phonetics of an earlier period, and furnishes one more

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argument for teaching every child what the Latin symbols implied. The strenuous attempts that are but too often made to evade this plain duty are deplorable for the pupil, and discreditable to the teacher.

Perhaps I may here usefully introduce a practical suggestion, viz. that the reader who comes across a word in this book which he does not know how to pronounce is more likely to approximate to its true sound by pronouncing it as Latin than as modern English.

It is, in fact, a very grave reproach to all who speak the English language and employ its present spelling, that they will neither, on the one hand, admit of any improvements, nor, on the other, make the slightest attempt to understand the forms to which they cling. How, for example, have we come to employ such a symbol as *ou* to represent the sound of the *ou* in *house*? I purposely select this as being a question that admits of a fairly easy answer.

The word *house* is one of immense and incalculable antiquity. The early Teutonic form was *hūs*, pronounced with a voiceless *s*, as at present, and with the Latin long *ū*, as in L. and Ital. *lūna*. We might spell it, phonetically, *huus*, denoting the length of the *u* by repeating the symbol; but our ancestors simply adopted the Roman *u*, and sometimes (by no means always) put a slanting stroke over it to denote vowel-length; in which case it appeared as *hūs*, or else (without the stroke) as *hus*; which was also the spelling in Norse and in Old High German, and remains to this day in Swedish. The sound of the *ū* was preserved till long after the Norman Conquest, and the spelling *hus* persisted till at least 1250; see the quotations in the N.E.D. Indeed the sound remained unaltered till very much later, and may be heard in the North to this day. But in the days of Edward I, the Norman scribes were extremely busy with their self-imposed task of editing and respelling the English language, which they studied with remarkable intelligence and zeal. They per-

ceived that the form *hus* was indefinite ; there was nothing to show whether the *u* was short or long ; and they had decided (except in the case of *i*) to abandon the A. S. method of using a sloping mark above a vowel. They reserved the *u* for the short sound, as in *full*, full, *pullen*, to pull ; and then they cast about for a symbol for the long sound. The most obvious symbol was *uu*, but this was open to the practical objection that it consisted of four consecutive downstrokes, and was liable to be indistinct ; it might be read as *un*, or *un*, or *nu*, or even as *im* or *mi*, if the *i* was not clearly marked with the sloping stroke which they frequently retained (from A. S.) for that purpose. Moreover, in words like the A. S. *dún*, a down, a hill, the matter was still worse ; they would have to write *duun*, which would be easily mistaken for *dunu* or *dunn*. In this dilemma, they naturally adopted the French symbol *ou* ; and I pause for a moment to notice how characteristic this symbol is of French usage. It not only occurs, over and over again, in English words as spelt by Norman scribes, and in French itself, but even in such words of comparatively late introduction into English as *soup*, *group*, *rouge*, *roulette*, *routine*, *tour*, *trousseau*, &c. And wherever else it occurs, it is still French. Thus *caoutchouc* and *toucan* are French spellings of Brazilian words ; *tourmaline*, of a Cingalese one ; *patchouli*, of an Indian one ; *marabout*, of an Arabic one ; and so on.

Moreover, when the Norman respelt *hus* as *hous*, he only altered the symbol. The sound remained the same as ever, until the day came when every Middle English word written with *ou* acquired a new sound, and changed imperceptibly, through infinitely small gradations, till it acquired the sound which it now usually has in the standard speech, a sound which has not been altered for some time past. We may hope that it will be permanent ; but it is a simple fact that East Anglia influences the speech of London, and even the speech of the empire. I say no more.

We now know, accordingly, the whole story of *house*.¹ The *ou* really meant *ū*, and was adopted solely for phonetic and graphic reasons; but the pronunciation has since changed. The same explanation applies to the A. S. *thū*, thou; *ūre*, our; *sūr*, sour; *fūl*, foul; *sūth*, south; *mūth*, mouth; *lūs*, louse; *mūs*, mouse; *thūsend*, thousand; *ūt*, out; *lūtan*, to lout (bow down); *clūt*, clout; *abūtan*, about; *prūt*, proud; *hlūd*, loud; *scrūd*, shroud. But at the end of a word the scribes often wrote *ow*; hence we have *hū*, how; *nū*, now; *cū*, cow; *brū*, brow; *būgan*, to bow. Or they wrote *own* for *oun*, for distinctness; as in *tūn*, town; *brūn*, brown; *dūn*, down. Also (but at a later date) *ower* for *our*; as in *scūr*, shower; *būr*, bower. In the A. S. *un-cūth*, E. *uncouth*, the old sound of the *ou* remains to this day.

By similar processes, the reader who has any regard for his native language may learn many things regarding spelling that are of high interest and value, and he may easily discover the solutions of such simple problems as the following, viz. why *oak* is spelt with *oa*, whilst *broke* has *o*; why *sea* differs from *see*; why modern English does not permit a *v* to end a word (except Slav), but insists upon *have*, *love*, which are not distinguished, as to their vowel-sounds, from *brave* and *grove*; why *height* is written for *hight*, and *eye* for *ie* or *ye* or *y* (all once admissible); why the German *binden* has a short *i*, whereas the English *bind* has a long diphthong; with innumerable other problems of a like kind. Perhaps it is worth while to add that the only safe guide to modern English grammar is Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer, supplemented by a moderate knowledge of the habits of Middle English.

The study of comparative etymology has, in fact, during the last thirty or forty years, made such great advances that the subject is already almost too vast to be fully compre-

¹ All but the final *e*. The M. E. form was *hous*; but at a later period a final *e* was added, to assimilate the final *-se* to the final *-ce* in many words of French origin, such as *silence*, *offence*, and the like.

hended ; indeed, the only book that deals efficiently with all the Indo-germanic languages is the Comparative Grammar by Brugmann. And even this does not contain all that is required for the study of English ; we further require books by experts in their particular departments, such as the Anglo-Saxon Grammar by Sievers, or the Old English Grammar by Wright, the Historical French Grammar by Toynbee, and very many more ; seeing that, at every turn, we require exact particulars as to the operation of special phonetic laws. The object of the present volume is merely to point out some of these particulars, and to indicate some modes of solution ; so that the student who actually undertakes to consult the various standard books may have some previous useful information, whilst those who are content to take etymologies on trust from good authorities may at least have some general notion as to what is being done.

In order to give greater unity to the results here indicated, I consider them all from an English point of view. My exact inquiry is, accordingly, how does this or that result illustrate or admit of comparison with modern English ?

I begin, accordingly, by considering some general principles and useful Canons, as in Chapters I and II. In Chapter III, I deal with Romanic types, and the forms which they assume in the various Romance languages, and I give a few examples of Romance etymologies in Chapter IV. In Chapter V, I deal with old Teutonic types, and the resulting forms in various Teutonic languages. In Chapter VI, I consider the still wider subject of Indo-germanic types, with particular reference to such English words as are of native origin ; followed, in Chapter VII, by particular examples in which English throws a valuable light upon other languages ; for, indeed, it is high time that we should be awake to some sense of its great importance. Chapter VIII is chiefly occupied with examples of 'false analogy', by way of caution as to the snares that await the heedless. Chapter IX is meant to

remind us of the important Low German and Scandinavian words which we have borrowed to supplement those of native origin.

Chapter X contains an attempt to show the value of the Celtic languages, and to enumerate the most important of the Celtic words that are cognate with English.

Chapter XI deals, similarly, with Lithuanian and Slavonic, and Chapter XII with Armenian, Albanian, and Persian; in order that the reader may gain at least a few useful general notions as to the kind of help which we may expect from consulting them, and as to their nature. Chapter XIII institutes a comparison between English and Sanskrit.

Chapter XIV, which I call A Philological Ramble, is, purposely, of a somewhat desultory character, and is meant to illustrate some of the ways in which the various Indogermanic languages throw light upon each other, and to show how many really valuable lessons can be drawn from considering even a single English word from various points of view.

Chapter XV contains a list of some of the more important English words that have cognate forms in several other languages, and must therefore be considered as being of an extraordinary and unknown antiquity. Nearly all are of the highest interest, and the various forms which they assume, according to the language which employs them, are of very great importance from a phonetic point of view. Each language has its own ways and peculiarities, and we can here quite easily compare them.

In Chapter XVI I give a few general results, and make a particular comparison between English and Hindi, in order to show explicitly that many words exist to this day in modern India, which have a common origin with words in use in modern England.

The attempt to explore, for purely etymological purposes, several languages with which my acquaintance is necessarily

slight, such as Irish, Lithuanian, Slavonic, and the rest, may seem to many to imply rashness; but it is rather in appearance than reality. For all my illustrations, without exception, are fairly well known, and are merely repeated from others who have given them already. I trust that I have nowhere advanced anything that is new, but only such things as are vouched for by experts who can be trusted. With very slight modification of language, I can say, like the immortal Chaucer when writing the preface to his treatise on the Astro-labe—'Considerere wel, that I ne usurpe nat to have founde this werk of my labour or of myn engin; I nam but a compilatour of the labour of others, and have compiled it in myn English only for thy doctrine; and with this swerd shal I sleen envye.'

Moreover, I have been so fortunate as to obtain some assistance from masters of their subjects. Mr. Quiggin, Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, has been so good as to read my proofs of Chapter X, which treats of the Celtic languages. My account of Persian has been perused by Professor Browne, and my account of Sanskrit by Professor Rapson; and to all of these I am heartily obliged, though their attention was chiefly directed to the correction of obvious mistakes in spelling and the like, as the proofs were already in an advanced state before I submitted them. This of course implies that the responsibility is rather mine than theirs, and all blame for errors must fall solely upon myself.

My good friends, Mr. Henry Bradley, and the Rev. A. L. Mayhew, have kindly read the proof-sheets throughout, and made many useful suggestions. The interest which they have taken in the work has been a great encouragement.

For the Index of Words, which I have carefully revised, I am indebted to my daughter, Clara L. Skeat.

CAMBRIDGE, *Jan.* 10, 1912.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND SIGNS

A. F.—Anglo-French. Alb.—Albanian. Arm.—Armenian. A. S.—Anglo-Saxon. Av.—Avestic. Bret.—Breton. Corn.—Cornish. Dan.—Danish. Du.—Dutch. E.—English. F.—French. G.—German. Gael.—Gaelic. Gk.—Greek. Goth.—Gothic. Icel.—Icelandic. Idg.—Indo-germanic. Ital.—Italian. L.—Latin. Lith.—Lithuanian. Low G.—Low German. M. E.—Middle English. N. E. D.—New English Dictionary. O.—Old. O. F.—Old French. O. H. G.—Old High German. O. Ir.—Old Irish. O. Merc.—Old Mercian. O. N.—Old Norse. O. Pers.—Old Persian. O. Pruss.—Old Prussian. O. Sax.—Old Saxon. O. Slav.—Old Slavonic. Pers.—Persian. Pol.—Polish. Port.—Portuguese. Russ.—Russian. Skt.—Sanskrit. Span.—Spanish. Swed.—Swedish. Teut.—Teutonic. W.—Welsh.

* prefixed to a word indicates that it is a theoretical form, evolved according to known principles of development. It is chiefly used to denote primitive Romance, Teutonic, and Indo-germanic types.

NOTE ON INDO-GERMANIC GUTTURALS. These are denoted in Walde by the following symbols. Palatals: \hat{k} \hat{g} \hat{gh} . Velars (without labialization): q g gh . Velars (with labialization): q^* g^* gh^* . For these I substitute the following, as being easier to write and print. Palatals: \hat{k} g gh . Velars (without labialization): q $g(w)$ $g(w)h$. Velars (with labialization): qw gw gwh .

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