The English language has a history full of heroism and tragedy, conflict and accommodation; it has been shaped by warriors, missionaries, scholars, and peasants. We draw from this history every day as we write and speak a language that has been evolving for more than 1,500 years. We use words centuries old without realizing it—but if we listen, these words have stories to tell.

Exploring etymologies—the origins and historical development of words—is the practice of listening to these stories. If you spend some time learning the history of words, you’ll have a better understanding of the English language, you’ll access new levels of meaning, and you’ll improve both your reading and writing abilities along the way.

The Poetry of Origins

In Nature, Ralph Waldo Emerson observes, “as we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry.” Etymologies reveal this poetry by taking us back through a word’s history and often allowing us to see an original concreteness. Emerson points out, for example, that “right means straight; wrong means twisted.”

Some words have origins that even sound like poetic expressions. For example, squirrel is from Greek roots that combine to mean shadow-tail. And daisy comes from an Old English compound word, dœgsage, or day’s eye. The word originally referred to a flower that closed its petals at night and opened them during the day, hiding and then revealing its figurative eye. Another flower, the dandelion, takes its name from the French dent de lion, or lion’s tooth, a reference to the jagged, tooth-shaped leaves of the plant. All of these words have origins that are really metaphors, figures of speech that attempt to capture the essence of one thing by describing it in terms of something else.

The etymology of bead reveals another figure of speech, metynymy, in which we refer to one thing by the name of another thing commonly associated with it. Bead derives from gebed, the Old English word for prayer. As the medieval Christian practice of “telling one’s beads”—using beads on a string to keep count of

etymology

noun

1. The study of the origin of words and the way in which their meanings have changed throughout history.

1.1 The origin of a word and the historical development of its meaning.

Origin: Late Middle English: from Old French ethimologie, via Latin from Greek etumologia, from etumologos ‘student of etymology’, from etumon, neuter singular of etumos ‘true’.
that was based so heavily in the physical world. The Old English vocabulary, which already included such words as *crop*, *field*, *plow*, and *rain*, grew to incorporate *angel*, *apostle*, *relic*, *martyr*, and other religious terms. The language now had words to describe both physical and spiritual experiences.

It wasn’t until about 200 years later that English met the first threat to its survival. In 793, the Vikings began invading the British Isles; by 850 they controlled nearly half of Britain. But in 878, in a surprise attack mounted by King Alfred of Wessex, the Vikings were defeated. Although this defeat ensured that Norse would not replace English as the language of Britain, Old English did take in about 900 Norse words. Since the two languages were quite similar, many of these words were cognates (words in different languages that share the same root and similar meanings) of Anglo-Saxon words. For example, the Anglo-Saxon *scyrte* and the Norse *şyrta*, both of which originally meant *shirt*, coexisted in Old English.

Had the story ended there, today we might be speaking a language similar to modern Dutch. But in 1066, the year of the Norman Conquest, English was forever changed. The French-speaking conquerors took over the high positions in the government, the courts, and the churches. English was spoken only by the laboring class. For generations after the Norman Conquest, language reflected this difference in class. But when the King of France forced the Norman nobles in England to choose between their properties in France and England in 1244, those who remained in England had a reason to learn its language. The Hundred Years War between England and France provided another reason to speak English rather than French, as did the Black Death of 1349–50, which, by making labor scarce, improved the status of the English-speaking working class. English had survived.

But it had changed—dramatically. Some Latin and French words replaced Anglo-Saxon words; some cognates coexisted; and some compound words, such as *gentleman*, were created from French and Anglo-Saxon elements. The result of this blending was Middle English, a language that, unlike Old English, is intelligible to modern readers.

The Renaissance, with its emphasis on classical scholarship, brought even more Latin and Greek words into English. And when new words were needed for inventions and discoveries during the Industrial Revolution, many were created from Latin and Greek roots. Words from all over the world came into English with the growth of the British Empire, and even today, English is evolving with advances in technology and increased exposure to the rest of the world.
Getting Back to the Roots

As a reader, you may already be aware of the benefits of knowing etymologies. If you’ve ever taken a class in French, Spanish, or Italian, you’ve probably noticed the similarities between English and the Romance languages (languages that developed from Latin, named for their link with Rome). You may have even been able to figure out meanings of unfamiliar words in English by remembering similar words in another language. Because so many English words come from Latin and the Romance languages, you can enjoy the same benefit by learning etymologies. While you may initially spend a lot of time with the dictionary, you’ll eventually spend less time looking up words and referring to footnotes for definitions.

You’ll also find that your readings of texts will become much richer and more precise. Especially in texts more than a century old, etymologies are your link to a layer of original meaning, which context alone might not make clear. For example, when you read in Andrew Marvell’s To His Coy Mistress, “My vegetable love should grow/Vaster than empires, and more slow,” you’ll know that Marvell isn’t referring to a garden but using vegetable in its original sense, as an adjective meaning alive, growing. Similarly, when Hamlet describes “an excellent play, well digested in the scenes,” you’ll know that he is praising the play for its order and arrangement, which you probably wouldn’t realize if you relied on today’s definition of the word.

Since a word’s significance in context often lies somewhere between its original and modern definitions, knowing the original meaning helps us define a frame of reference. Of course, you’ll still have to decide which meanings best apply in a given context, but you’ll have the full range of possibilities to choose from.

As a writer, you can become more precise in your expression if you know etymologies. If you’ve ever used a thesaurus to help you avoid repetition in a paper for school, you’ve seen many different ways to express the same idea. But do all of those words listed under see, for example, really mean the same thing? Or are there shades of difference in meaning between view, behold, perceive, and observe? Careful word choice means paying attention to the slight distinctions, which etymologies can help clarify.

If you write poems, stories, plays, speeches, or editorials, these distinctions may exist at the level of sound as well as meaning. Take for example the Anglo-Saxon words climb, kingly, sad, and their Latinate synonyms ascend, sovereign, and melancholy. Similar in meaning, the word pairs have quite different sounds, which a thoughtful writer can use for effect. It might make more sense for a character who speaks in monosyllables to say that he’s sad instead of melancholy; in a line of poetry that needs hard consonant sounds, you’d probably want to use climb instead of ascend. Carefully choosing words from one source or the other, or intentionally blending them, can have subtle but powerful effects on your audience.

Learning etymologies takes time. Some students make lists or use note cards to help them remember common roots; others learn as they read. No matter what your strategy, by studying etymologies, you’ll improve your ability to use and understand the English language. You’ll see history at work—even in a single word. And if you’re attentive, you’ll see the flash of poetry, you’ll hear the stories behind the words.

Melissa Hartman was editor of Imagine for 20 years and is now managing editor of Hopkins Bloomberg Public Health. This article was reprinted from an earlier issue of Imagine.

Selected Resources for Exploring Etymologies

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