

## The Origins of English Words

Earlier this year, the Johns Hopkins University Press published Joseph T. Shipley's "discursive dictionary of Indo-European roots," a rich compendium of words from our lost mother tongue. English and more than 100 other "daughter languages" can today trace their origins back to Indo-European. Shipley's thousands of entries, each an eclectic *mag* of fact, anecdote, and deft quotation, reveal the author's *ksero* wit, eye for the *ozd*, and sheer love of *dinghu*. We present some selections here, following an introduction by the author.

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*by Joseph T. Shipley*

The most widespread of all language families is the Indo-European, of which English began as a minor branch but now is the largest in vocabulary and in number of native speakers. Today, English is the world's most popular language.

From tongues in western Asia some 4,000 years ago, the Indo-European forms moved south in various Indian languages, including Sanskrit. Other branches spread across Europe and ultimately to the far ends of the Americas.

Along the Mediterranean Sea, they grew into Greek and Latin. From Latin, the speech of Rome, came the Romance languages—Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, French.

Westward through Europe came the Celtic and Germanic branches; northward turned the Scandinavian; and eastward spread the Baltic and

Slavic, including Russian.

English, which in its earliest form was Germanic (Anglo-Saxon), developed as a mingling of branches, as first the Celts, then the Saxons, Danes, and Normans, took hold upon the island.

Sir William Jones (1745–1794), while a judge in Calcutta, declared that no philologist could examine Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin "without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists." He was right: The original speech, the primal Indo-European from which over 100 languages have flowered, was unwritten and therefore left no records.

It was almost a century and a half later that philologists, by a backward coursing—comparing the different developments in Sanskrit, Greek, and the Slavic, Celtic, Ger-

लवहार॥१७॥ कीनेउकोरीकजनीन॥ अबक  
 हैकाढेकांन। मोमन मोहनरुपमिलि। पां नीमि  
 कोलुंन॥१८॥ लणोसुमन कौदेसफला॥ आत  
 परोसनीवार। वारी२॥ आपती। सिविमुरुदयता  
 वार॥१९॥ अज्योतरुनाइरदो॥ श्रुतिसेवनइ  
 करंगानाकवासवेसरलदो॥ वसिमुकत  
 नकेसंग॥२०॥ जमकरिमुरुतर हरपसे।  
 ॥ यहधरहरचितलाइ॥ विषयटषापरीअ।  
 ज्यो। नरहरकेगुनगाय॥२१॥ पलनुपीकअ  
 जनुअधरो॥ धरेमाहावर जाला॥ आजमीले  
 सुनलीकरी॥ जलेबनेहोलाल॥२२॥ लज  
 गरबअलसउमग जरेनेनीमुसकाति र।



A 17th-century Indian religious text, written in Sanskrit. The discovery of Sanskrit by European scholars paved the way for the modern study of linguistics.

manic, and Romance branches, and identifying family likenesses and regular shiftings of sounds—were able to set forth confidently a large number of Indo-European roots from which current words proliferated. The differences among, say, Hittite, Phrygian, Minoan, Sumerian, Tocharian, Persian, Pashto, Annamese, Oscan, Latvian, Wendish, Ukrainian, and English—all members of one family—make them mutually unintelligible; yet by tracing vowel and consonantal changes, by separating prefixes, suffixes, and midfixes from the basic stems, scholars have been able to follow seemingly quite different words back to a single root.

The original Indo-European words were fashioned to denote material objects or specific events that impinged directly upon the senses or immediate emotions. It may have

been centuries before these terms were extended from physical to mental activity, from the concrete to the abstract. Finally, perhaps, they were given figurative uses and applications. Thus, the language grew with the growth of its makers and users—from nomads to farmers to the citizen and his civilization; from immediate concerns to general principles; from observation to speculation; from myth and magic to religion, philosophy, and science. The process, of course, continues.

As you read the selections that follow, it will help to bear several rules in mind. One concerns consonants, which sometimes shift over time. Many of the consonantal variations have been set into a pattern known as Grimm's Law, laid down in 1822 by Jacob Grimm, compiler, with his brother, of the well-known fairy

tales. Words that in earlier times began with one of the sounds listed below may later have changed to the next sound to the right:

Gutturals: g, k, kh (h), g

Dentals: d, t, th (f), d

Labials: (v) b, p, ph (f), b (v)

Thus the root *pleu* (meaning "flow") through Greek and Latin gave English *pluvial* and *plutocracy*; from Germanic *flug* came *flow*, *flee*, and *flight*. The *k* to *kh* sound shift appears in Spanish *caballo*, French *cheval*, English cavalry and *chivalry*.

A similar sort of shift often occurs with vowels. And there are other curiosities. Metathesis is the transposi-

tion of a sound, as when Old English *bridd* became our *bird*. Spoonerisms (as in, "It is kisstomary to cuss the bride.") result from metathesis.

The sound *n* varies frequently, either dropping out of words or, more often, creeping in to aid pronunciation or as a result of nasalized diction. *Message* gave rise to *messenger*. Sometimes the *n* sound shifts between two words. The Fool in *King Lear* calls the King "Nuncle," for "Mine Uncle." An umpire was originally a non-pair, the odd man out, asked to referee.

So much, then, for a few essential tricks of the tongue. Now on to the words themselves:



## aug

Increase. Greek, *auxesis*. Latin, *augment*, *auction*, *auxiliary*, *author*, *authority*, *authorize*. *augur*, from whom the celebrant hoped divine increase; *augury*; *inaugurate*. *august*: favorable; the month was named for Augustus Caesar. Germanic, *eke*; a nickname was "folkchanged" from an *eken* name. *wax*: to grow, opposed to *wane*. *waist*—too often seen to expand.

The young Nathaniel Hawthorne (born in 1804) wrote to his mother: "I don't want to be a doctor, and live by men's diseases; nor a minister, to live by their sins; nor a lawyer, to live by their quarrels. So I don't think there's anything left for me but to be an author."



## bhudh

Bottom. Latin, *fundus*: bottom. *to found*: "lay the bottom" of; start. *foundation*, *profound*, *founder*. *to fund*: supply means for the start. *fundament*, *fundamental*. Germanic, *bottom*.

Among the 19 definitions of *bottom* is one, common in Shakespeare's time: "a clew or nucleus on which to wind thread," that makes appropriate the name *Bottom* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for the man is a weaver. And when *Bottom* is transmogrified into an ass, it seems likely that Shakespeare is still playing on the name, although the first recorded (i.e., written) use of *bottom* for what the *Oxford Eng-*

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lish Dictionary (OED) calls "the sitting part of a man" is by Erasmus Darwin in 1794.

It was on April 20, 1761, that Samuel Johnson, in mixed company, remarked: "The woman had a bottom of good sense." To the immediate titling he responded: "Where's the merriment? I say the woman was fundamentally sensible." His almost farcical attempt to rectify the situation may still amuse us.



## dinghu

Tongue. Latin, *lingua*: tongue; mother tongue. The change from *d* to *l* may be due to the Romans' Sabine wives, or to the link with Latin *lingere*: lick, the tongue being the licking organ. *lingo* is usually contemptuous of another's tongue. In 1820, Coleridge coined *linguipotence*, rarely used since. OED has 26 *lingu* words, all relating to the tongue or to speech. French, *langue*: tongue. Old English used *langage*, etc., but by about 1300, the *u* had crept into such words from the French.

"Tongue: well that's a wery good thing wen it an't a woman's," says Mr. Weller in Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*. In Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Stephano sings tipsily, "... she had a tongue with a tang." In his *Troilus and Cressida*, Ulysses scornfully says of Cressida:

Fie, fie upon her!  
There's language in her eye, her  
cheek, her lip,  
Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton  
spirits look out  
At every joint and motive of her  
body.



## ert

Ground. Germanic, *earth*, *earthenware*. OED gives 15 columns to earth and its compounds, such as *earthworm*. *earthling* was used around the year 1000 for a cultivator of the soil. Via Dutch come *aardvark* (*vark*: pig) and *aardwolf*.

"I am earth, overtaking all things except words. They alone escape me. Therefore I lie heavy on their makers," writes Rudyard Kipling in *A Book of Words* (1914).



## gib

Humped. Latin, *gibbous*, *gibbosity*. Germanic, probably *hunch*, *hump*, *humpback*, *hunchback*.

To "have a hunch" may be related to the notion that rubbing a hunchback's hunch brings good luck.

*Hump* was first used in the 18th century; *humpback* was a change from *crumpbacked*, *crump-shouldered*. The Second Quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Richard III* has *hunch-backed*; the First Folio has *bunch-backed*.



## ieuos

Sacred, binding; hence, the law. Latin, *ius*, *iuris*: that which is binding. *iurare*: to take an oath. *juror*, *jury*, *juridical*, *jurisprudence*, etc.

With Latin, *dicere* (show, speak)

came *judicatory*, *judicious*, *jurisdiction*, *adjudicate*, *prejudice*. Spanish, *juramentado*: a Mohammedan who took an oath to die killing Christians. The state of early justice in Spanish America, especially along the U.S. border, may be judged from the fact that Spanish *juggado* (courtroom) became folkchanged into English slang *hoosegow* (jail).



## ksero

Dry. Greek, *xeros*. The medical terms *xeransis*, *xerasia*, *xeroderma*, etc. Several genera, such as *Xeranthemum*: thistle; *Phylloxera*: plant lice. The machine for dry reproduction, *Xerox*.

Latin, probably *sear*, *sere*, *serene*. *Non numero horas nisi serenas*: I count only the hours that are serene—instruction on many a sundial. Also French, *serein*: fine rain from a clear sky. *serenade*, its meaning influenced by Latin, *sera*: evening.

*Elixir*, from Greek via Arabic, was originally assumed to be a powder; it was the medieval alchemists' "philosopher's stone," which could transform base metals into gold, cure all human ills, and indefinitely prolong life. Fortunately, it was never found.



## leup

Strip off; bark. Sanskrit, *loot*. Greek, *lepein*: strip the rind. Latin, *liber*, *libri*: inner bark; hence, the writing thereon; hence, *library*, etc. *ex libris*: from the books of, used on a bookplate. French, *libel*: first, a little

book. Italian, *libretto*. *lobby* and its doublet *lodge*: first, a roof of bark, a bower. *lodgment*; *logistics*; French, *loge*; Italian, *loggia*; Germanic, *leaf*, *lift*, *loft*, *aloft*, *leaflet*.

From *The Tempest*: ". . . my library / Was dukedom large enough."



## mag

Knead; mix. Early houses were made of mixed earth; hence, *make*. *make* developed many definitions, which take 37 columns in *OED*, with 96 numbered divisions and many subdivisions, *make away with*, *make out*, etc. In addition, there are nine columns of compounds, such as *make-believe*, *making-up*, *makeless* (*matchless*), *makepeace*, *makeshift*.

"If you call a tail a leg, how many legs has a dog? Five? No, calling a tail a leg don't make it a leg." quipped Abraham Lincoln.

Greek, *magma*. Latin, *massa*: that which adheres like dough; *mass*. *macerate*. Germanic, *mason*, *match*, *matchmaker*; on a lower level, *mackerel*: pimp, he who makes other matchings. *mingle*; *mongrel*: mixed breed.



## ner

Below; to the left. Hence (facing the sunrise), north. (This formulation appears also in Arabic and Hebrew.) Germanic, *north*, *northern*, etc. *Nordic*, *Norman*, *Norse*, *Norway*, *Norwegian*. Sanskrit, *Naraka*: the lower regions, hell.

"Your Roman-Saxon-Danish-Norman English," says Defoe in *The True-Born Englishman* (1701), which begins:

Whenever God erects a house of prayer,

The Devil always builds a chapel there;

And 'twill be found, upon examination,

The latter has the largest congregation.



## ozd

Point, angle, triangle. Hence, odd number. Germanic, *odd*, *oddity*, and *the odds* (usually against), *odd-fellow*.

Shakespeare's Falstaff, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, avers: "There is divinity in odd numbers, either in nativity, chance, or death."



## p(e)ug

Fist; strike, prick, pierce. Greek, *pugme*: fist; also a measure of length, elbow to knuckle of closed fist; hence, *pygmy*, *pygm(a)ean*. Latin, *pugnare*: fight, first with fists. *pugilist*, *pugnacious*, *impugn*, *inexpugnable*, *oppugn*, *repugnant*. Via French, *poniard*. Possibly *prick*, played upon by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*: "The bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon"; and in Sonnet 20, a rebuttal to those claiming he was homosexual.

Latin nasalized *pungere*, *punctum*: punctual. *pivot*; *poignant*; *point*,

made by pricking. *appoint*; *appointment*; *reappoint*; *disappoint*, first meant to remove from office; *pointilism*. *pun*, probably from Italian, *puntiglio*: a fine point. An earlier English form was *pundigrion*, from which *pun* evolved.

Swift, who in 1716 wrote *A Modest Defense of Punning*, less modestly called Thomas Sheridan "the greatest punner of this town next myself." Sheridan (grandfather of playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan), in his 1719 *Ars Punica*, gave 34 rules for the art. Rule 32, "Never speak well of another punster," became the general practice.



## reup, reub

Snatch, break. *rip*, *reave*, *bereave*. A prisoner of war, or a victim, was usually stripped; persons being beheaded often left what they were wearing to the executioner on his promise of a quick, clean stroke. From a garment as booty came *robe*. What is left of the spoils is *rubble*. Hence also, *rob*, *robber*, *rover*. *usurp*: to snatch the use of. *abrupt*, *corrupt*, *disrupt*, *erupt*, *interruption*, *irruption*. *bankrupt* is from the broken (or confiscated) bench of the unsuccessful Italian moneylender.

*Roture*, *rout*: to break the enemy ranks; also a broken-up group. *route*: a way broken through. *routier*, *routine*: following a beaten path. *rupes-trian*: consisting of broken rock. *rupture*, *rutter*. *rubato* is "stolen time" in music.

Gibbon, in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), pictured the plague of all democracies: "Corruption, the most infallible symp-

tom of constitutional liberty." In a letter of 1904, the First Baron Acton set the idea in an (often misquoted) epigram: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."



## sag

To sense, seek. Hence, take, know. Greek, *exegesis*, *hegemony*, *hegumen*: head of monastery of Eastern Orthodox Church. Latin, *sagacious*, *sagacity*, *presage*. Germanic, *sake*, *forsake*, *seek*, *sought*. Former legal terms of tenure: *soc*, *socage*, *soke*, *soken*. Old Norse, *ransack*.

"Eli, Eli, lama sabacthani!" (My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?)—last cry of the man Jesus on the cross, before he resumed his godhead.

"Forsaking all others, keep only unto her, as long as ye both shall live," comes from *The Book of Common Prayer* and is defied by the divorce rate.



## treb

Build, beam, dwelling. Latin, *trabs*, *trabis*: beam. *trabea*: state robe in ancient Rome, adorned with "beams" (horizontal stripes). *traveated*, *trabea-*

*tion*, *trabecula*, *trave*. Via Italian, *architrave*: basic beam. By metathesis, Latin, *taberna*: tent, booth, hut. *tabernacle*, *tavern*, *contubernal*: companion of the tent.

Germanic, *throp*, *thorp*: gathering place; hence, hamlet. *thorpe*, still used in names of places, such as *Allthorpe*, *Allerthorpe*.

Also *troop*; French, *troupe*; hence also French, *de trop*: too many. Italian, *troppo*, in music.

John Henry (later Cardinal) Newman, a close friend of R. H. Froude at Oxford and after, wrote in a letter of 1835: "Dear Froude is pretty well, but is languishing for want of his Oxford contubernians."



## uak

Cow. Latin, *vacca*. *vaccinus*: of a cow. Dr. Edward Jenner, of Gloucestershire, noticing that dairymaids who had once had *vaccinia* (cowpox) did not get the then-endemic smallpox, in 1796 inoculated eight-year-old James Phipps, thus achieving *vaccine* and *vaccination*—for which Parliament granted him £30,000. Hence the spread of *vaccinotherapy*.

Spanish, *vaquero*: cowboy; folk-changed in the American West to *buckayro*, *buckaroo*. *OED* has three columns of *vacc* words, including *vaccicide* and *vaccimulgence*: the milking of cows.