

On Etymological Insults

Can etymology benefit anyone? Philologists, philosophers and others have spilt gallons of ink over the value of etymological inquiries throughout the ages. We can learn something about the attitude of the ancients toward this issue from the etymology of etymology: “true meaning”. In this age of post-modernist constructivism we view with skepticism such strivings after truth.

Indeed, how does it serve contemporary speakers that his clients *boycotted* Captain Boycott (Irish land agent, d. 1897), but that nobody *lynched* William Lynch (American vigilante, d. 1820). Or that nowadays one does not need wooden clogs (*sabots* in 19th century France) to throw into the machinery in order to commit *sabotage*? And what about popular etymologies (which we could paraphrase as the wrong true meanings of certain words; see de Saussure, 1915/1966, pp. 173-176), whose exposure shows that *crayfish* have as little to do with fish (from Old French *crevice*) as *Jerusalem artichokes* have with Israel’s capital (*gira-sole*, Italian, meaning "turns toward the sun", related to the common sunflower). The Hebrew Bible provides many additional examples, explaining that *Babel* (from Akkadian *bab-ilu* "Gate of God") derives from the Hebrew root b.l.l., confuse (*Genesis* 11:9), or that *Moses'* name means "drawn out of the water" (based on the Hebrew root m.sh.h.; *Exodus* 2:10) rather than on the far more likely Egyptian word *mes*, *mesu* 'child, son,' as in Ra-mses (see also Kedar-Kopfstein, 1963).

Though etymologies may not have much scientific value, looking into the distant past of

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some words provides at the least entertainment, and sometimes even insight. In the following, I shall concentrate on a particularly promising category: words derived from the names of countries, nations, or ethnic groups.

Many such words simply refer to the origin of the object mentioned, in a more-or-less adjectival manner; while such pedigrees may lack veracity, they certainly add an exotic touch to our everyday speech. A few examples follow: *Venetian blinds* (called *persienne* in French), *Spanish fly*, *Indian file*, *Russian roulette*, *crepe de chine*, *Irish stew*, *French kiss*, *French fries*, *Brazil nuts*, *African violets* (an entire continent, in this case), *Bermuda shorts*, *English cake*, *Turkish coffee*, *delight*, and *bath*, *Dutch door*. A brief look at a good dictionary will show the practical inexhaustibility of this list.

In a different construction, the country, nation or region name appears as a noun, rendering the ethnicity of the source more powerful: *Turquoise*, *arabesque*, *java* (Indonesian island, slang for coffee), *jerry can* (from *Jerry* for German), *cravat* (from Croatian, through French), *japonica*, *ulster*, *jerseys* (hail from Jersey), *kashmir*, *afghan*, *muslin*, *bikini* (after Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands), *panama*, *indigo* (from India), *tartar* (sauce, from Tatar), *holland* (a fabric), *malacca* (cane, from Malaya), *danish* (a pastry), *scotch*, *port* (a wine, from Portugal), *serendipity* (the 18th century author Horace Walpole invented this word, based on a Persian tale; ultimately from the Sanskrit name of Sri Lanka), *allemande* (a dance), *polonaise*, *flamenco* and *flamingo* (both from Flemish) and many, many more.¹

Naturally, these phenomena appear in other languages, as well. Consider the following: Arabic *burtikala* (orange) comes from Portugal; in Modern Hebrew *Arab work* stands

1. A few exceptions: *chili* has no connection to Chile, but rather to the Central American Nahuatl. *Polka* may sound Polish, yet it remains a Bohemian dance, with a dubious etymology. *Scot-free* has nothing to do with the Scot, neither does *honky* with Hungarian (more likely an alteration of *hunky*). *Muscovy ducks*, native from Mexico to Brazil, do not come from Moscow; their name represents a corruption of "musk duck". The word *jerry* - whether it means chamber pot or shoddy, as in *jerry-built*, does not come from *jerry* = German, but rather from Jerobam or Jeremy. *Denigrate* has a common root with *Negro* (black, in Latin), yet the former does not derive from the latter. In January 1999 *niggardly* caused a mini-scandal in Washington, D. C. An aide to the mayor resigned due to the furor caused by his use of this word, regarded by some as a racial slur (it means stingy, miserly, and has a Scandinavian origin, totally unrelated to *Negro*).

for shoddy work; the Arabs use the word *frangi* (French), to describe anything new fangled, strange, or non-Arab; while in Israel the term *Frank* indicates North African Jews. However, according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the same *Frank*, in Levantine use, indicates persons of Western nationality! Arabic *massari*, literally *Egyptian*, means money; Hungarian *angolpark* (English park) identifies an amusement park, *spanyol fal* (Spanish wall) stands for a folding screen (paravent), etc.

All of the above carry neutral information; the nation or ethnic group involved suffers no loss through the association created. Not so in the following list. Each of these terms carries derogatory (or at least not favorable) connotations, with some expressing prejudice toward long forgotten groups and places: *To welsh*, *to jew down*, *to gyp* (from *Gypsy*, from *Egyptian*), *to take French leave* (cf. French equivalent: *partir a l'anglaise*; same in both Czech and Hungarian), *excuse my French* (apparently same in Afrikaans), *to bugger* (from 11th century Bulgarian heretics), *indian giver*, *street arab*, *cretin* (from French *chretien*, Christian), *french letter* and *english cap* (names for prophylactic), *slave* and *slavish* (from the Slavs), *Mussulman* (starved inmates in concentration camps), *dutch* (meaning suicide), *double dutch* (meaning gibberish), *Italian strike*, *German measles* (another name for rubella), *philistine* (from Hebrew *p'lishtim*; c.f. Palestine), *vandal* (after the East Germanic tribe that invaded Western Europe in the 4th and 5th centuries), *lesbian* (from *Lesbos*), *bigot* (perhaps from Visigoth), *bohemian* (from Bohemia, alleged source of Gypsies), *tartar* (bad tempered, from Tatar).

I would like to pay special attention to nationality-based names of diseases and disorders. Some of these indicate origin (as in *Spanish*, or *Hong Kong*, or *Asiatic flu*), or some physical characteristic (as in *Mongoloid*), but in others, the national moniker reveals deep-seated prejudice: A book by Gibson (1978), entitled *The English Vice* has the subtitle: *Beating, sex and shame in Victorian England*. Compare this title with Cheyne's 1733 book, *The English Malady*, which deals with hypochondriasis. Arrizabalaga and others (1997) wrote a book about syphilis, the *French disease*, so called by the Italians of the 16th century. (One can discern a trace of this usage in

contemporary Hungarian). According to the authors, the French called the same affliction the *Italian disease* or the *disease of Naples*. (Some modern philosophers recently and mockingly use *French disease* to refer to structuralism or to Cartesianism.) Other sources identify syphilis as the *English disease*. (See also Hungarian *angolkór*, translatable as *English Disease*, meaning rickets).

Incidentally, not only nations carry the names of diseases. In April 2001 a group of Finnish doctors at the World Medical Association conference objected to the use of the names of persons, communities or regions for diseases, due to their insulting or negative impact. Their ire rose in connection with several disorders named after Finnish towns, such as *Salla*, *Kumlinge*, and *Pogosta*. A thorough discussion of city names would take us too far afield. In addition to the unpleasant connotations of the *Stockholm syndrome* (not the same as the *Finland syndrome*, and often misnamed as the *Helsinki syndrome*), let me just mention that people in Coventry used to call a hammer a "*Birmingham screw driver*"...

I will further illustrate the ethnocentricity inherent in such name-calling by a slight diversion. In Russian and other Slavic languages, the word for *German*, *nemec*, derives from the root for *dumb*. From Russian this usage traveled into Hungarian. The chauvinist nature of this term becomes even clearer when one notes that in the same language that calls another language/nation dumb, the verb *to explain* is rendered by *magyarázni* (roughly *to Hungarianize*; in a similar fashion, the German word for *meaning*, *Deutung*, derives from the same root as *Deutsch*, i.e. German). In a further variation on this theme, consider that the Greeks used the Sanskrit root for *stammer* to describe languages non-Greek or unintelligible: *barbarian*. The Romans imported this word to mean *non-Roman*, and attached it to a North-African tribe whose tongue they could not decipher: the Berbers. The latter have nowadays the doubtful honor of carrying a name synonymous with uncivilized, brutal, and inhuman. In other words: *we* represent civilization, the language *we* speak has meaning, but the foreigners we encounter speak gibberish and we regard them as nearly subhuman.

One can discern the inherent relativity of this phenomenon through the following expressions: "It's Greek, to me", as well as "it's all double Dutch to me", cited above, carry a message analogous to Russian (as well as both Modern Hebrew and Hungarian) "it's Chinese, to me", to Czech "to pro mně španělská vesnice" or literally, "it's all a Spanish village to me", and to the German expressions "es ist mir spanisch". Where does this xenophobia originate? Psychology in general, and social psychology in particular, have dealt extensively with the propensity to dichotomize our social environment into *us vs. them* (for an elaboration of several related processes see Moore, 1993, as well as Moore & Heskin, 1983, Moore & Tyson, 1990, and Kramer-Moore & Moore, in press). This basic tendency, often beneficial in that it provides an economical coping mechanism with overwhelming environmental diversity, has some inherent dangers, as well: it encourages ethnocentrism, jingoism, the belittling of the different. Notice that, in keeping with the underlying psychological principles, in most cases we do not target the distant or the exotic, but rather the next-door neighbor and the minority.

While one can argue that the above quoted ethnic, racial and national slurs are but a reflection of prevalent sentiments, I suggest that we also consider their harmful consequences. I especially refer to what George Steiner (1975) calls the "manifold reciprocity between grammar and concept, between speech form and cultural pressure" (also his "dialectic of interaction" and "reciprocal 'triggering'", p. 158). Kramer-Moore & Moore (2002) describe an analogous phenomenon when they talk of the circular process in which art imitates life, which in turn imitates art. Thus, the seemingly innocent use of several words and expressions does not only reflect reality but also shapes it; in addition to recording past prejudices, it also legitimizes future ones.

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