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# *On buses and burgers: In defense of folk etymologies*

### *Abstract*

*Instead of condemning folk etymologies for their wrongness, we can regard them as creative efforts at satisfying one's need to understand. When faced with unfamiliar words, listeners tend to explain them by using similar and familiar words or phonemes. This process bears some similarity to eggcorns and mondegreens. Several examples illustrate the underlying creative processes.*

*Keyword:*      *folk etymology; creativity; eggcorns; mondegreens.*

"The creation of meaning is part of the human adventure", wrote the philosopher Carneiro (2006). An important aspect of this endeavor concerns the need to understand, undoubtedly related to the need for control. This need clearly manifests itself in endless superstitions[1] concerning the forces of nature, and extends to curiosity about cognitive matters, as well. I shall illustrate this quest by one of its many varieties: Etymologizing, in general, and the offering of so-called folk etymologies, in particular.

While not as ancient as superstitious beliefs, the question of "where do our words come from?" has interested both scholars and lay thinkers for many generations.[2] In an account of philosophical discussions between India's etymologists and grammarians Matilal (1990) mentioned Sakatayana, an 8th c. BCE Sanskrit scholar, to whom later Indian academics attributed the view that all nouns derive from verbs. Some three centuries later we find two more sources that attempt to identify the source of both language in general and of selected words, in particular: Socrates in Plato's *Cratylus* discussed several views, such as

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1. The superstitious "cling to supernatural explanations, mysteries, cataclysms, and miracles… The fanatic is unable to stand still aright in the presence of the unknown, and desires to have a definite creed regarding all things unseen" – see Forlong (1964), Vol. 3, p. 381.

2. This process resembles the unending search for the meaning of some obscure idioms. See, e.g. Quinion (2013), who listed 17 different (and most probably wrong) speculations about the source of "the whole nine yards".

onomatopoeia, sound symbolism, divine origin, or convention, while the *Pentateuch* explains the source of some 80 Hebrew proper nouns (Marks, 1995). In the 12th century Halevi in the *Kuzari* took an eclectic position: He described language "as conventional in the sense of God-made and as natural in the sense of expressing the nature of things" (Wolfson, 1965, p. 234). In his discussion of various views on the origin of language, Wolfson (1965, p. 236) found that in *Moreh Nevuchim*, Harambam may have been of the same opinion as Halevi.

Modern, and a bit more scientific, etymology dates back to the 18th century, when etymologists first found connections between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin (and their derivatives in modern European languages), as well as between Hungarian and Finno-Ugric languages.[3] Philosophers – among them Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault – have occasionally found it necessary to support their theses by invoking an etymological explanation (not necessarily a verifiable one). While their efforts appear to have had an ideological foundation, folk etymologies rest more on the above mentioned need to understand. Thus, by today's standards, we would call most of the Biblical interpretations of names folk etymologies: Moshe (Moses), rather than Hebrew 'drawn from the water', originates in Egyptian Mose = son, so named by Pharaoh's Egyptian speaking daughter, while Babel = Akkadian Bab-Il, the gate of god, rather than Hebrew 'confuse'.

Folk etymologies have two facets. On the one hand, they err. A folk etymology constitutes "a popular but false hypothesis for a word derivation" (Winer, 1992, p. 238), and provides a "derivationally incorrect construction" (Rundblad & Kronenfeld, 2000; see also de Saussure, 1915/1966, pp. 173-176, Kedar-Kopfstein, 1963, and Moore, 2002). On the other hand, many have realized that in addition to their inherent erroneousness, folk etymologies have redeeming qualities, as well, hence such references to them as "poetic etymology" (Marks, 1995), "fictional creativity" (Dusanic, 1996), "creative mishearing" (Quinion, 2009), or "shrewd analogy" (Rundblad & Kronenfeld, 2000). The authors of these appellations do not stand alone in their appreciation of the positive aspects of errors. Consider, for example, Roberts' recent volume on *The Necessity of Errors* (2011; see also Moore, 2013), which looks at the productiveness of errors and mistakes, as well as the related phenomenon of "creative misprision" in Bloom (1997), well exemplified by this excerpt from Joyce (1932, p. 196): "Bosh! Stephen said rudely. A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery".

In the following I shall offer several examples of folk etymologies. Though they may not qualify as "portals of discovery", they certainly reveal a large measure of creativity.

-- The development of bus, busman, busing, busboy has resulted from the (mis)understanding of the 'bus' ending in 'omnibus' (for all). From its humble status as a

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3 .   For an early treatise see Palmer (1890).

mere suffix (meaning 'for' in Latin), it has become a noun and a verb.

-- A more complicated process has taken place concerning hamburgers, originally named (for no obvious reason) after Hamburg, the second largest city in Germany. The etymology of 'Hamburg' itself remains unclear: While 'burg' means castle or fort, 'ham' or 'hamma' may refer either to a sharp turn in the river Elbe, or to the surrounding marshland. In either case, the 'burger' part in 'hamburger' comes closest to what we may call today a burgher. But look at what creative listeners, who treated 'burger' as a suffix, have come up with. Not only have they created such delicacies as burger, veggie burger, cheeseburger, beefburger and Monster Burger, just to mention a few varieties, but they have also shaped from it names for fast-food chains and restaurants, including Burger King, In-N-Out Burger, Fatburger, Burgerville, Back Yard Burgers, Lick's Homeburger, Smashburger, Bobby's Burger Palace, Frank-N-Burger, Murder Burger, and Redrum Burger.

-- Something similar has happened to '-gate' in 'Watergate'. Because of the scandal around the 1972 burglary of the National Headquarters of the Democratic Party, housed in the Watergate office complex in Washington, D. C., this noun has turned into a suffix that indicates scandal. Throughout the years it has given rise to a large number of –gate words; Wikipedia (2013) has a list of over a hundred such, stemming from all walks of life, and includes such memorable affairs as Monicagate, Murdochgate, and Contragate.[4]

-- Strictly speaking, folk etymologies should have their source in the anonymous folk, who have no awareness of a word's true origins. While we may have doubt about adherence to this condition in the previous cases, the mathematics and science writer Martin Gardner certainly knew that 'domino' does not contain a word that means 'two'. In fact, it derives from Latin 'dominus' (lord, master), itself traceable to Proto-Indo-European *domo (house, household). This, however, did not stop Gardner (1959, pp. 124-140) from creatively coining an entire series of domino-based mathematical/geometrical concepts: Domino gave rise to various polyominoes, among them monomino, triomino[5], tetromino, pentomino, hexomino, heptomino.

Unlike the previous entries, in which suffixes have turned into nouns and vice versa, the following folk derivations contain no such changes in morphology. Instead, in many cases words are creatively re-shaped in order to conform to a spurious origin.

-- Posthumous bears no relationship to Latin 'post humum' (after the earth, or after burial), but rather comes from Latin 'postumus', superlative of 'post' (after).

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4. We can observe a peculiar aspect of this English folk etymology in Joseph (1992), who has found German, Serbo-Croatian and Greek examples of its use.
5. Also a commercial game, consisting of triangular, domino-style tiles.

-- The British English appellation 'mad apples' for eggplants results from the translation of an Italian folk etymology: They thought 'melanzana' (Italian for eggplant) stood for 'mela insana'. When Wiktionary (2012) provides the etymology of mad-apple, it quotes another mistaken explanation, offered by Webster's 1913 Dictionary: "Because it was once thought to cause various diseases".

-- Old English 'bryd-guma' (bride-man) has become 'bridegroom'.

-- 'Shamefaced' results from 'shamefast' (caught in shame).

-- Some sources have tried to explain the source of 'tariff' as the town of Tarifa in Spain, but it comes from an Arabic root, meaning 'to know'.

-- We find another attempt to explain an incomprehensible Arabic root by English speakers in 'Jerusalem artichokes' (related to the sunflower), which neither hail from the Holy City, nor have anything to do with artichokes: Italian 'gira-sole' means 'turns toward the sun', while artichoke represents a distortion of Arabic "al-hursufa".[6]

-- Muscovy ducks do not come from Moscow (but rather, from Central and South America), and their name probably indicates a corruption of 'musk duck'.

-- When Stern in Tristram Shandy (iii: 14) suggests that the word 'filibuster' comes from Demosthenes' speech against King Philip of Macedonia, he kids you. The word derives from Dutch 'vrijbuiter'.

-- 'Avocado' ('lawyer' in Spanish) came about when Spanish speakers tried to make sense of the Aztec word 'ahuacatl'.

-- The emergency call 'mayday' has nothing to do with the month of May, but rather emerged from a corruption of 'm'aidez' ('help me!').

-- Similar erroneous yet surprisingly creative processes (which Quinion, 2009, has called "pattern-matching") lie behind 'gooseberry' from French 'groseille', 'crayfish' from French 'crevice', 'chestnut' from Latin 'castanea', 'woodchuck' from Algonquian 'otchek', 'cockroach' from Spanish 'cucaracha', 'marzipan' from Arabic 'mawthaban', 'pennyroyal' from French 'puliol real', and many more.

One can find two close relatives of folk etymologies in *eggcorns* and in *mondegreens*. The first one of these tropes received its name when Liberman (2003) referred to a case in which a woman wrote 'egg corns' for 'acorns'. Creators of eggcorns substitute a different yet both plausible and similar sounding word for one they do not understand – a process not unlike the one that occurs in folk etymologies. Yet Liberman made a case for distinguishing between eggcorns and some additional related tropes: "It's not a folk etymology, because this

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6.  A further instance of folk etymologizing occurred when speakers of Arabic, unaware of this word's ancestry, re-interpreted 'artichoke' as 'ardi-shoki' or 'ground thorny'.

is the usage of one person rather than an entire speech community. It's not a malapropism, because "egg corn" and "acorn" are really homonyms (at least in casual pronunciation), … It's not a mondegreen because the mis-construal is not part of a song or poem or similar performance" (Liberman, 2003). Waigl (2005) has collected hundreds of eggcorns, among them such pearls as 'mute point' for 'moot point', 'beyond approach' for 'beyond reproach', 'beknighted' for 'benighted', 'chaise lounge' for 'chaise longue', and 'sandscript' for 'Sanskrit'.

By their very nature, the second relative of folk etymologies, namely mondegreens, further support my thesis concerning the creative aspect of errors. According to Wikipedia (2013) "A mondegreen is the mishearing or misinterpretation of a phrase as a result of near-homophony, in a way that gives it a new meaning. It most commonly is applied to a line in a poem or a lyric in a song". Wright (1954) created this name, based on her description of mishearing a line from a 17th century ballad: "and laid him on the green" became "and Lady Mondegreen". Of the endless number of examples appearing in the literature, I'll use only the one quoted by Smith (2003): The line "The answer my friend, is blowin' in the wind" from Bob Dylan's song misheard as "The ants are my friends…" Connor (2009) has referred to mondegreens as "mishearings", which "are the wrenchings of nonsense into sense." He went on to say that "though mishearings may appear pleasingly or even subversively to sabotage sense, they are in fact in essence negentropic, which is to say, they push up the slope from random noise to the redundancy of voice, moving therefore from the direction of nonsense to sense, of nondirection to direction."

When discussing the development of 'Jerusalem artichokes' (see above) Quinion (2009) described the process as the "dumbing down" of the original. On the basis of the folk etymologies, as well as the related eggcorns and mondegreens cited in this essay, I prefer Rundblad & Kronenfeld's (2000) portrayal: "the primary force … that governs folk-etymology is people's constant striving not only to make sense of whatever opaque forms they may encounter, but also to ease the memory load in having to remember such opaque forms…"

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