

SIGNAL ELEMENTS WITHIN ENGLISH WORDS*

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The Phenomena that I wish to deal with in this paper have often gone under the name of 'folk etymology'; but that frame of reference has usually carried with it a contempt for so-called 'mistakes' of so-called 'illiterates'. However, in recent decades, research into the mechanism of conditioning has provided grounds for the assumption that all of us are subject to these tendencies. For the sake of reasonable communication, we select what is relevant and discard the irrelevant. Probably all of us are affected by Klang association, but we have established an inhibition against it. We tend to disapprove of the fuzzy-mindedness of the old lady in the following incident. A captain introduced an acquaintance to his old aunt, saying, 'This is my friend Jones; he lives in the Canary Islands.' 'How interesting,' she murmured, and gathering all her wits added, 'Then, of course, he sings.'¹ Here the word canary, even in a place name, was a signal, by Klang association, for a response relating to singing.

I shall not deal here with the well-known instances in which a form has been altered in order to carry an intelligible meaning (the bell in belfry, the groom in bridegroom, the sand in sandblind, etc.); but I wish to take up a subtler and more speculative problem. It is apparent that in a number of English words the totality of meaning has been influenced by the presence of an interior element, historically intrusive, which carries over a meaning from contexts where it has been used independently. A 'parasitic word', as it were, influences the tone, color, flavor, connotation, or pragmatic effect of the host word. For a number of years I have been jotting down instances in which these buried elements have had an effect, I believe, in my own usage.

A number of words of exotic origin, not analyzable within English, have had their meaning modified by a fragment that can be used elsewhere independently. Thus in tycoon, from a Japanese word meaning 'great lord', is heard the element coon, making the full word jocular in American figurative use. In pundit, from a Sanskrit word meaning 'learned man', is heard the element pun, causing the word in English to be somewhat contemptuous and belittling, as of a mere player with words. In fakir, from the Arabic, is heard the

English fake, making it unduly opprobrious, so that Churchill's reference to Gandhi as a 'half-naked fakir'² has a decided sting. In goulash, from the Hungarian, meaning 'meat of a herdsman', is found the element ghoul, from the Arabic, so that the food so named suffers in the esteem it might otherwise have. Likewise taboo, from the Tongan, contains the element boo, used to scare children or to express contempt.

Certain words of Latin origin are affected. Scabrous, from scaber, 'rough', now usually figurative in the sense 'risqué' or 'salacious', is strengthened by the presence of scab, of Scandinavian origin. Ebullient, from e + bullire, 'to boil', is similarly affected by the element bull. Perhaps bull is also active in the word bulwark. At least at the convention of the Democratic party in 1948 a delegate from Georgia proclaimed that the South is 'the last bulwark of states' rights,' and a voice commented lustily from the floor, 'Bull is right!'³ I hear a bust in robust, a devil in devolution, an imp in impious, a peck in impeccable, and a spew in spurious. In guttural is heard gutter, figuratively signifying low life, and hence the popular impression that 'guttural sounds' are objectionable is reinforced. The adjective livid has historically referred to purple or black-and-blue, but the presence of live in it has caused it to shift popularly to the meaning 'bright' as in a 'livid sunset'

In the modification of words from the French, buoyant has boy, with its flavor of boyishness, bourgeois is denigrated by bour (from the Germanic), and noisome contains noise. Thus a writer in PM described a film actress as 'skiing down a vast open side of a valley, with clear expanses of snow on all sides (a less noisome place would be difficult to find).'⁴ The word denizen, going back to the Old French preposition denz, 'within', signifies in English an additional restriction because of the element den, 'small room'.

The verb to scarify, going back to the Greek σκάρφασθαι, 'to scratch', has had its meaning modified by the English scare, so that a soldier in his reminiscences described his first attempt at solo

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flying as 'Yes, truly a scarifying experience.'⁵ In ballistics, from Greek βάλλειν, 'to throw', probably most speakers of English hear the Germanic ball, 'round object'. However, I can report a true incident in which the element ball referred to 'an assembly for social dancing'. When Dr. Bernhard von Bothmer, a well-known Egyptologist, was about to be drafted into the Army, he brushed up his mathematics in order to be useful to the artillery in the field of ballistics. At the reception center at Fort Bragg he was interviewed about an assignment to duties, and I now quote from the account printed in the Army newspaper of Camp Beale, California:

[The interviewer asked him:] 'What do you want to do in the army?'

'Well,' said the brand-new G.I. across the table, 'I know something about ballistics, and I'd like to —'

The interviewer gave a short, sharp, sarcastic laugh. 'Ballistics?' he said. 'What I want to know is what branch of the army you want to be in. Get me? We don't have any ballroom dancing branch. See?'

The raw recruit was flooded. He had wanted to say that his knowledge of ballistics might possibly qualify him for a try at anti-aircraft artillery work. But ballistics was ballroom dancing to the interviewer, and — by golly — he was going to stand no non-sense from any green-as-grass G.I.

So Pvt. Bernhard von Bothmer was sent packing to QM basic.⁶

There he was set to driving a truck.

These active elements frequently have a pejorative effect on the total word. The word junket, which originally meant cream cheese, then a feast or banquet, has in America taken on an opprobrious sense of 'an outing at the public cost'. I think that this development was due largely to the presence of the element junk. The borrowing Junker, popularly pronounced [dʒʌŋkə], has suffered on this account. In America the word Ratskeller or [rætskelə] has a decidedly jocular tone because of the element rat. An American traveler who visited England in 1941 recorded in his memoirs: 'This church stands near a typical little English "river", the Itchen, which deserves a better name than this.'⁷ Evidently the element itch was present for him in the name. I imagine that most people isolate the element grease in ambergris and wag in scalawag. The element mist is heard in mysticism — as in Bergen Evans' statement: 'The mist of mysticism has always provided good cover for those who do not want their actions too closely looked into.'⁸

In the name Dutchess County in New York, the archaic spelling is preserved partly, I believe, because the ethnic name Dutch is held in high esteem. The old word idiotism for 'idiom' was in active use from 1588 through the eighteenth century, but it was probably driven out because of the presence of the element

idiot. A word popular in Kansas about 1880, exoduster, referring to Negroes who took part in an 'exodus' from the South, was revived in the 1930's to apply to people who fled because of the dust storms, and the revival may be attributed to the element dust.⁹

In cases where a buried element is under a taboo, or partial taboo, it is most likely to make itself actively felt. One of my students has reported that an elderly woman of his acquaintance was annoyed when the word legacy was mentioned in her presence, and she insisted on using the word inheritance. Evidently she heard the element leg. In the word harass or [hə'ræs], I believe that the uncertainty in stress is related to the presence of a tabooed buried element.¹⁰ A friend reminds me that a rump is usually heard in rumpus and a stern in sternum: 'Try sternum on any lay group and half of them think it has to do with the rear of the anatomy.' I imagine that in titillate most people hear the element tit and in bellicose, belly. As another example, in John Hargrave's novel Young Winkle, we find the young hero looking up unknown words that he came upon in the Bible, and on finding shittim wood he exclaimed, 'I bet that's rude.'¹¹ A colleague in a sister university recalls from his college days that the assistants in the department of astronomy were much embarrassed by the planet name Uranus: the choice of stress left either urine-us or your anus. People who specialize in the double-entendre are very adept in finding buried words of this type,¹² and the lore of 'dirty stories' is rich with them.

The word sex as a buried element nearly always makes its presence felt. Thus Danton Walker reported in the New York Daily News: 'Raymond Scott features a quintet as part of his orchestra. Actually there are six men in the group, but Scott objects to calling them a sextet, because he feels it sounds "suggestive".'¹³ On one occasion a radio announcer explained that the next musical number would be 'The Tet from Lucia.'¹⁴ This hypersensitivity has actually extended to the dons of Cambridge University, England. The University formerly had a disciplinary body known as the Sexviri, but another member was added to make it the Septemviri. A fellow of King's College, A. S. F. Gow, has explained that this was done — 'largely because our cultured journalists, hearing that the Sexviri had been convened, immediately assumed that the charge into which they were enquiring was of a sexual character. (You may not believe this, but it is nevertheless perfectly true.)'¹⁵

The buried word can sometimes contain several syllables, like the religious in sacrilegious, where the spelling is often thereby altered. In consensus, from con + sentire, 'to feel together,' is often heard the element census, from censere, 'to value or tax.' This has led to the frequent addition in the context of the modifier of opinion, formerly regarded as unnecessary. Probably most people in the word

niggardly hear the element nigger. In this connection Thomas Wentworth Higginson records that a certain Dr. Hackett was annoyed by neighborhood boys who filled his keyhole with gravel. 'Such conduct,' he said, 'I should call, sir — with no disrespect to the colored population — niggardly.'¹⁶

The constituent elements dealt with so far have been free forms, but similar influences can become active with bound forms. In the word miscegenation, its history, from the Latin miscere, 'to mix,' is popularly ignored, and the prefix mis- is heard, causing the word to have a more disparaging effect than it would otherwise have. The prefix co- is so strong in the word cohort that it has recently been applied to single persons, parallel to co-worker. Thus from the New York Post: 'The Minneapolis Mayor . . . will run under the banner of independent progressivism rather than as a Truman cohort.'¹⁷ Or from the New York Times Book Review: 'Banting, [was] assisted by his young cohort, Dr. Charles H. Best. . .'¹⁸ In the English figurative use of Quisling, the second syllable is taken to be the diminutive suffix -ling, as in princeling.

Although I have definitely established, I believe, the active character of these intrusive elements,¹⁹ I am at a loss to explain why they are sometimes not active at all. No one, I think, would hear a poise in poison, a verse in adversity, or a dine in dynamite. Apparently the threshold of resistance to such buried elements varies unsystematically with each individual, according to his particular biosocial history. The late Professor Fred Newton Scott in his pioneer study of verbal taboo in 1912 found informants to whom mediocre contained ochre, lamentable contained lamb, and melancholy contained melon. To one informant the word surreptitious called up the picture of a sticky syrup jar.²⁰ I am myself oblivious of these elements.

The discovery of active constituents is not just a matter of report by a speaker; his behavior will actually be different in the presence of the word. If one observed the contexts of pundit long enough, one would find, no doubt, that there was avoidance of application to a really learned man, and one might hear sentences like, 'Him? Oh, he's not a pundit; he really knows his stuff.' The overt reports on buried words are merely short cuts in identifying them.

A final question remains. To what extent can the morphemicist take into account the matters here dealt with? Here indeed we have a complication in the analysis of 'immediate constituents'. Should we insist that the analyst recognize a coon in tycoon, a wag in scalawag, a bust in robust, etc.? Perhaps we can discriminate between synchronic and diachronic analysis. From the historical point of view, tycoon is not analyzable in English; and yet, with the passage of time, would not even the historian be obliged to recognize that a new factor has entered into the acceptance of the word? And is not the synchronic analyst, being without historical information at all, bound to label as a morpheme any element that influences the total meaning?

In the writings of James Joyce, an elaboration of buried elements has been carried to a high degree of complexity as a conscious artistic device. He has, in fact, left the single linear dimension, so that several layers of meaning are present at one time. In analyzing Joyce's work, the morphemicist would be obliged to construct diagrams in layers, piled one on top of another. We may have the same situation in a very rudimentary form in the material given in this paper. Perhaps new devices must be worked out to encompass the baffling complexity of semantic phenomena like these.

REFERENCES

1. English Digest, Feb., 1945, p. 6.
2. Robert Bernays, Naked Fakir (London, 1931), p. 135.
3. New York Post, July 15, 1948, p. 38/4.
4. Quoted in the New Yorker, May 11, 1946, p. 100/2.
5. John M. Townend, Overture to Life (London, 1943), p. 50.
6. The Bealiner (Camp Beale, Cal.), July 20, 1944, p. 6/2. This account is corroborated in a personal letter.
7. William O. Stevens, Forever England (N. Y., 1941), p. 39.
8. The Natural History of Nonsense (N.Y., 1946), p. 274.
9. Dwight L. Bolinger, 'The Revival of "Exoduster,"' American Speech, XVI (1941), 317-8.
10. Also, as I have recorded in my study Lexical Evidence from Folk Epigraphy in Western North America (Paris, 1935), p. 10: 'I myself have heard an audience at Oxford, England, laugh uproariously at the following cinema caption: when a screen character was prodded in the buttocks, he burst forth, "Ouch, I have been assassinated!"'
11. John Hargrave, Young Winkle (London, 1925), p. 20.
12. Such furtive references have a long history: in one of his letters, Cicero (Ad Famil., ix, 22) advises against forming the diminutive of pavimenta, since pavimentula would suggest mentula.

13. New York Daily News, Feb. 27, 1941, p. 44/1.
14. Morey Amsterdam, as quoted in the New York Post, Jan. 25, 1947, p. 7/1.
15. A.S.F. Gow, letter of Jan. 17, 1941, in his Letters from Cambridge (London, 1945), p. 70.
16. Contemporaries (Boston, 1899), p. 346. Cf. the recent corroboration of this by Rossell Hope Robbins, 'Social Awareness and Semantic Change,' American Speech, XXIV (1949), 157: 'Even the word niggardly has lost its seventeenth-century etymology, and the hidden meaning of the first two syllables has placed it in the proscribed class.'
17. New York Post, April 23, 1948, p. 4/4.
18. Frank G. Slaughter, in New York Times Book Review, Jan. 26, 1947, p. 28/3. The reverse situation, in which the force of a prefix is ignored, is also possible: thus a newspaper columnist, Earl Wilson, reported in the New York Post, April 16, 1948, p. 52/5: 'Harry Hershfield tells of a cop who clubbed a spectator at a parade, calling him a Communist. "But I'm an anti-Communist!" the spectator protested. "I don't care what kind of a Communist you are!" said the cop. "Get outa here!"'
19. A contrary semantic influence may also be noted, by which a constituent element may take on a meaning from the longer word, as with queue, which in American English is an outland word borrowed from British English: an American woman reported that she thought it referred to a curved line. I suspect that this impression results from curlicue, containing queue.
20. Fred Newton Scott, 'Verbal Taboos,' School Review, XX (1912), 373-74.

We next went to the school of languages, where three professors sat in consultation upon improving that of their own country.

The first project was to shorten discourse by cutting polysyllables into one, and leaving out verbs and participles; because, in reality, all things imaginable are but nouns.

The other project was a scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever; and this was urged as a great advantage in point of health, as well as brevity. For it is plain, that every word we speak is, in some degree, a diminution of our lungs by corrosion; and consequently contributes to the shortening of our lives. An expedient was therefore offered, that since words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on. And this invention would certainly have taken place, to the great ease as well as health of the subject, if the women, in conjunction with the vulgar and illiterate, had not threatened to raise a rebellion, unless they might be allowed the liberty to speak with their tongues after the manner of their forefathers; such constant irreconcilable enemies to science are the common people. However, many of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by things; which hath only this inconvenience attending it, that if a man's business be very great, and of various kinds he must be obliged, in proportion, to carry a greater bundle of things upon his back, unless he can afford one or two strong servants to attend him. I have often beheld two of those sages almost sinking under the weight of their packs, like pedlars among us; who, when they met in the streets, would lay down their loads, open their sacks, and hold conversation for an hour together; then put up their implements, help each other resume their burthens, and take their leave.



Sages of Lagado conversing

From Gulliver's Travels, A Voyage to Laputa, by Jonathan Swift.

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AN EXTENSIONAL BASIS FOR ENGLISH GRAMMAR*

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Every student of general semantics realizes that no map can be absolutely similar in structure to its territory, though it may be perfectly adequate — that is, accurate to the limit of the available instruments for measurement — for the limited purpose for which it was intended. Thus a camper or an artillery officer, finding a certain map trustworthy for his purposes, might say that it was perfect, while a geologist might find it of little value, and a meteorologist of less. Since any map is an abstraction, constructed to show the relations between certain selected features of the territory, and neglecting others, it follows that an indefinite number of perfectly 'good' maps may be made of the same territory, one to show roads, another, relief, a third, crops, etc.

The important thing in making an 'honest' map is to indicate as accurately as possible the particular, selected relationships with which it purports to deal. The important thing in reading one is to remember what the maker had in mind to convey, as well as any limitations in either his knowledge of the territory or his medium. Thus a road map made twenty years ago may well be deceptive, and a map of Greenland, made on the Mercator projection, must be read with the fact always in mind that east-west distances near the poles are greatly exaggerated.

It is precisely at this point that a great many people fall into a serious error by assuming that both of these maps can be improved by the same general process. You can correct an outdated or otherwise faulty road-map by new observations and measurements. But you cannot correct a Mercator projection so that east-west and north-south distances will be shown on the same scale throughout.

Any map, verbal or pictorial, must be based on a definite projection, which inevitably distorts some aspects of the territory. No amount of knowledge or care can prevent this distortion; the only corrective is to understand and allow for it. Thus the Mercator projection, with all lines meeting at right angles and the poles apparently as long as the equator, is still the best for navigation, because directions are indicated consistently, although certain distances are greatly exaggerated. A conic projection is much better for planning bomber missions, since it represents most faithfully the radial distances from the center, on which fuel and loads must be calculated. But if we were to trace the outlines of the six continents from a map made on the Mercator projection, and try

to copy them off on a piece of paper prepared for a conic, the result would be a hopeless mess.

This is about what happened when early grammarians tried to explain the phenomena of the English language on the principles of Latin grammar. Latin is what is called a synthetic language — that is, one in which the relations of words are shown largely by their inflectional endings. You simply cannot communicate effectively in Latin without paying close attention to these endings. 'Marcus vidit Quintum' and 'Marcum vidit Quintus' have exactly opposite meanings, although the basic words and their order are the same. Moreover, a Latin verb had over a hundred distinct forms, each one sharply limited as to its application. The only way to master these forms without years of association and unconscious absorption is to make a systematic analysis and memorize it like the multiplication table.

It was largely because of this multiplicity of forms that Latin words were classified into eight parts of speech. Each part consisted of words which either varied their forms in similar ways, or influenced the forms of the words that followed them. Thus nouns have five cases, physically different; and some prepositions are followed by the ablative, others by the accusative. The classification therefore has a physical basis in the phenomena of the language, and is not dependent on a metaphysical attitude.

In the eighteenth century this same classification was transferred, with one slight and largely accidental modification, to the English language. Unfortunately, the physical basis for it had largely disappeared in English, and it could be justified only on some rather mystical assumptions which have long since been abandoned. Since linguists and anthropologists have completely disproved the theory that one 'universal' grammar underlies all languages, however imperfectly exhibited in their current phenomena, the a priori reason for supposing that English must have the same parts of speech as Latin, or even that it must have parts of speech at all, has disappeared.

The contrast in this respect between the two languages can be shown by comparing a Latin passage with its English translation. In the first ten lines of Ovid's Metamorphoses there are seventy-two words, all but two of which can be recognized, even if printed separately on cards, as belonging definitely to one or

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