

SOME WORDS ABOUT WORDS

"Take care of the sounds and the sense will take care of itself", said Edward Lear, the English poet. Lear understood an important truth about language. Some linguists believe that language evolved figuratively by repeated slips of the tongue.

The commonest slip of the tongue is the blending or transposing of sounds in a word or sentence, which linguists call metathesis. Everyone occasionally makes such slips of the tongue but some people unfortunately make a habit of doing so. The Reverend William Spooner, Warden of New College, Oxford, at the turn of the century, was so prone to such slips that he gave our language a new word, spoonerism. Spooner once intended to give a sermon entitled "Our Lord is a Loving Shepherd", but when he announced the subject he said, "The Lord is a Shoving Leopard". On another occasion he asked the congregation to sing the hymn, "Kinkering Kongs their Titles Take", and he once told a visitor, "You are occupewing my pie." Legions of Oxford school boys recorded Spooner's mishaps for our enjoyment but Spooner never had an audience as large as that which heard the first coast-to-coast radio address by an American president. These listeners heard the announcer say, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States, Hoobert Heever!"

It seems slightly ridiculous to build a theory of the evolution of language upon spoonerisms, yet we do know that new words are created in strange ways. A famous mathematician working with large numbers realized that there was no name for the number one followed by one hundred zeroes. He asked his young nephew what it should be named and the boy promptly said, "Call it a googol."

Words change not only their sounds but also their meanings over a period of time. A "person" was once "persona", a mask worn by actors in Greek plays. The mask gave the actor character or "personality". The original connotations of person were thus play-acting or artificiality. Today the word "person" is used in the sense of "individual" and "genuine". "Person" is now being used as a suffix to replace man and woman. A political party led the way by replacing state committeemen and committeewomen with committeepersons. Its presiding officer is now a "chairperson". Some churches and other organizations have followed suit. There are those who say that the debasement of language is a small price to pay for long overdue justice to women, but it will be a long time before such expressions as "chairperson" come easily to the tongue or fall gently on the ear. Other words have gone as far or farther in reversing their original meanings. "Brave" comes from the same Latin root as "depraved" and originally had a similar meaning. It was used to describe a rascally fellow or scoundrel, a "bravo". But rascality required physical courage, so "brave" began to be used to describe courage and gradually acquired the additional connotations of good and worthy.

Even more remarkable is the permutation of the word "thing". If there is an all-purpose word in the English language it is the word "thing". We use it to refer to any unfamiliar, general, specific, or difficult-to-label object. We combine it with prefixes to produce "anything" and "nothing". The original use of the word "thing" was legal or legislative. The meaning was to cause something to be done in the sense of having been enacted by a legislature. The "thing" was also the judicial assembly itself. Legislatures in Scandinavian countries today retain the word "thing" in their names.

Indo-European languages contain words called cognates, that is, two or more words appearing in different languages with different meanings. Some are quite amusing. For example, the English "silly" and the German "selig" or blessed. In old English the word silly was combined with fool in the expression "silly (or blessed) fool" from the common idea in non-scientific societies that the mentally deficient are touched or blessed by God. Over time the English word lost the idea of blessedness and acquired the meanings of foolish or ridiculous while the German meaning remained unchanged.

The English word "Christian", the French "Chrétien", and the English and French words "cretin" are all from the same Latin roots. It apparently became a disparagement to call a man a Christian as evidenced by the meaning of the word "cretin".

German "Lust" is the cognate of the English "lust" but has the meaning of harmless pleasure. English "gift" with all its pleasant connotations has a German cognate with the same spelling which means "poison".

Other words which have changed their meanings with the passage of time are "constable", which first meant stable boy, then a high government official, and now a minor politician; and marshall, a "horseboy", which now has both high and low status meanings, a senior military officer and a small town lawman.

In Chaucer's time a "harlot" was a maidservant and "level" meant *merely* ignorant.

"Corn", which originally meant any grain, now means wheat to the British, oats to the Scots, and maize to Americans. Not knowing this, a U.S. agency during the war sent millions of bushels of our corn to starving Britains in answer to their plea for corn with consequences that were regrettable, and expensive to correct. All of which bears out George Bernard Shaw's observation that "England and America are two countries separated by the same language."

American colonists began to alter the language from the time of the earliest settlements. They adopted Indian names for animals and physical features, and they unaccountably began to change the use of words which they brought with them. In England the word "hawk" was applied only to falcons; the birds we call hawks were called "buzzards". The colonists, for some reason, applied the name "buzzard" to vultures, and they have been buzzards to us ever since. The name "hawk" was given to all predatory birds except the eagle and this usage is still followed.

In the same way what had formerly been "hares" in England became "rabbits" in America. All the "rabbits" in America are hares from a zoological viewpoint.

Our store of words owes a lot to the Spanish and Dutch settlers in America. One of our most interesting words is "filibuster" which came into the language from the Dutch by way of the Spanish. A Dutch pirate was called a "vrijbuster", or in English "freebooter". The Spanish victims of their attacks called them "filibusteros" from which we derived filibuster. The word was first used in the Senate early in the last century in a scathing attack on a speaker who refused to yield the floor. The term seemed so appropriate that it immediately came into popular use.

Another common expression was also adopted from the Dutch - the children's counting rhyme used in choosing sides - "eeny, meeny, miny, moe". These words were simply one, two, three, four, in the Dutch vernacular.

The colonists also ended the distinction which the English made between "rock" and "stone". "Rock" had always meant a large mass while "a stone" described a pebble or object small enough to hold in the hand. The Englishman never threw a rock; he always threw a stone. Speaking of rock abstractly, however, Americans and English alike will generally use the term "stone", but speaking specifically the American will probably say "rock" in preference to "stone".

What H. L. Mencken called the "American Language" is of course English modified by many events and forces. Mencken was a well-known and popular journalist and humorist, but he

was also a dedicated scholar of American speech. Among the traits Mencken observed and described is the tendency of American speech to preserve pronunciations and expressions and to adopt words and phrases to current use long after their origins have been forgotten by most people. This preservation has gone on at the same time that other words were being *altered*.

For instance the expression "the Life of Riley" has been in use for years and its source is forgotten and is unknown even to scholars. Other expressions we can trace. Much has been said lately about oil companies earning "windfall" profits from the fuel crisis. This is an old English expression which originated from the fact that all standing timber in the country was reserved for the use of the Royal Navy, Britain's first line of defense. A land owner could not cut a tree, but he was allowed to use any trees which fell in a windstorm.

We often use the expression "robbing Peter to pay Paul". Peter and Paul are not the apostles as we might guess but churches. In the English Reformation King Edward VI confiscated most of the lands belonging to churches and monasteries. St. Peter's Cathedral at Westminster was particularly wealthy and the seat of a bishop who opposed the reformation. The revenues taken from St. Peter's were used to rebuild St. Paul's church whose bishop was more amenable to the king.

Having often been told to "mind my p's and q's", I know that it means to be alert and industrious, but why? This expression goes back to the days when a tavern keeper would write

P or Q on a patron's bill to indicate how much ale he had been served. Reckless drinkers would be warned to mind their pints and quarts.

In just a few weeks summer will arrive and soon after will come the "dog days". The "dog days" begin when Sirius, the Dog Star, is visible at sunrise. This is the time madness was said to be prevalent and dogs would run wild. Actually this seems to have been the time when rabies was most common.

We still hear the expression "cutting didoes" to describe a sharp trick or shady deal. This saying refers to the legend that Dido, Queen of Carthage, was offered all the land that she could enclose within a bull's hide by the North African natives who wished to prevent the Carthaginians from settling down in their territory. Dido cut the hide into strings and enclosed an enormous territory.

No survey of American expressions would be complete without a look at the unique Americanism - the one expression which has become known the world over - O. K. It is surprising the amount of research that has been done over the years on the origin of the expression. It was not until about 1941 that scholars considered that they had finally exhausted the various theories of its origin and traced its beginning for certain.

One theory held that O.K. came from the initials of Obadiah Kelly, a freight agent who installed bills of lading. Another theory attributed it to a popular Indian known as Old Keokuk for whom Keokuk, Iowa, was named. One theory held that O.K. was derived from a Choctaw Indian word meaning "it is so".

Supporters of this view tried to dignify the expression by spelling it out -"okeh". Woodrow Wilson subscribed to this view and used to write "okeh" on presidential papers. ~~Many more far-fetched but quite interesting suggestions were offered which could not be substantiated,~~ but painstaking research has tied the term to another Democrat, Martin Van Buren. O.K. first appeared in print in the New York New Era on March 23, 1840, in the name of the Democratic O.K. Club, supporters of Van Buren for another term in the White House. Van Buren was known to his contemporaries as the Kinderhook Fox from the New York village where he was born. He was also called the Sage or Wizard or Magician of Kinderhook, and eventually Old Kinderhook. The 500 members of the Democratic O.K. Club made a name for themselves and entered a new expression in our language by invading a Whig political rally and breaking it up, using O.K. as a kind of war cry. The term so pleased the American fancy that its use spread rapidly. By summer it was current in Philadelphia, and after the election it lived on, shorn of its political associations, to become the most popular American idiom.

Now the time has come to bring this paper to a close and to say "So Long", as it were. But of course we ought to know why we say "so long" whenever we want to say goodbye. We can thank the New England whalers who sailed the Pacific for bringing this expression home. They borrowed the Malay word "salong" from the Malay sailors they met on their voyages, but the Malays in turn had taken their word from the Arabic "Salaam", which means appropriately enough "Peace be with you".