Writing the Lives of Words

Steven Connor

A talk given for the University of London Research Skills Intercollegiate Network (ReSkIN), Courtauld Institute of Art, March 1st 2008.

In the end, this will turn out to be not much more than a thinly dissimulated hymn of praise to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and the work of thought it makes possible.

I want to do four things. Firstly, I will briefly describe the coming into being of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as one of the most representative expressions of the age of historical linguistics. Secondly, I will briefly scan the history of reasoning by etymology, from its beginnings in the West in Plato's *Cratylus* through to its recent era of discredit. I will try to particularise these issues with some examples of etymological argument from some contemporary writers. Thirdly, I will try to frame my own account of the place of etymology and word-history more generally in cultural historical research, giving some examples from work I have done. Finally I will offer some reflections on the relations between etymology and magic.

Some time back in the mid 1990s, I was in the usual trouble regarding a lecture I had volunteered to give about James Joyce. I decided to go down a path of little resistance, and write about Joyce's ventriloquism. This was a term that was common enough in literary studies to be a comfortable cliché, used to account for the relations between the voice of the author and the voices, actual or implied, of his various characters, so I was confident that it was the kind of lecture that didn't need so much to be written as simply written out. In a sudden and utterly untypical access of scruple, though, I thought that I would just check on the derivation and uses of the word ventriloquism. I had enough dog-Latin, dog-eared though it undoubtedly was, to be able to construe the elements of the word – *ventus*, stomach or belly, and *loquor*, to speak, hence belly-speaking, or tummytalk. But how did this get to mean throwing the voice and all the associated dummy-stuff?

The first thing I found was that there was a kind of enigma encrypted within the very word 'ventriloquism'. The first citation given for the word was from the 3rd edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1797), informing its readers that 'It is with no great propriety that..their art [is called] ventriloquism, since they appear more frequently to speak.. from the roof or distant corners of the room, than from their own mouths or their own bellies'. This was

paired with a remark recorded in Walter Scott's diary for 1826 that '[Charles] Mathews..confirms my idea of ventriloquism (which is an absurd word), as being merely the art of imitating sounds at a greater or a less distance'. So the earliest appearances of the word 'ventriloquism' documented by the *OED* are there in order to make the point that the word does not mean what it seems to mean, namely (the immediately following definition) 'The fact or practice of speaking or appearing to speak from the abdomen'.

I made a note to myself that it might be worth while trying to figure out how speaking in the bottom of the belly got to be something like the opposite, how excavation became projection, how a pathologically interiorised voice became an ecstatically exteriorised one, an interior distance from the seat of speech became an exterior distance.

The other thing that struck me forcibly was the range of different kind of source on which the *OED* entry drew to illustrate the different meanings of the word 'ventriloquism', along with related words like 'ventriloquist' and 'ventriloquial'. There were citations not just from accounts of recent practitioners of the art of ventriloquism but also, over a period of 400 years, from theological writings, works on the history of magic and divination, physiological textbooks, literary criticism and, most remarkable of all, works of natural history, making reference to the apparently ventriloquial powers of birds, notably the corncrake, and other animals. Why did nobody seem to have this word in their keeping? Who was supposed to be in charge of it?

I realised that I not only had a research topic, I had mapped out for me a research programme and method. I had a distributed field of meanings and usages; I had an arc of development; and, most importantly, I had an energising and an orientating problem: how and why did bellyspeaking turn into voicethrowing? How and under what circumstances did the archaic signification of bellyspeaking continue to rumble through later usages of the term 'ventriloquism'?

I was the beneficiary of the determination of the compilers of the *OED*, under the leadership of James Murray – and, since this is turning into one of those sentences in which it is almost compulsory for the word 'redoubtable' to make an appearance, let me gladly bow to the inevitable – under the *redoubtable* leadership of James Murray – to make available, not just a series of definitions for all the words in the English language, but also a biography of each of these words – where it was born, of what parents, who looked after it in its early years, who it knocked around with, how it made a living, the years of its prosperity and pomp, then, all too often, the circumstances of its decline into debt and dissipation, leading to an unremarked death and an unmarked pauper's grave.

It had been recognised for centuries, even millennia, that words have histories, often quite complex histories. But the idea that words were susceptible to something like the writing of biographies had to wait until the nineteenth century. Dictionaries in particular came to be seen as part of a larger enterprise of writing the biographies of words.

The idea of the word 'biography' encodes certain expectations about the curve of a word's career (that it has a 'curve' at all, for example), that its origins are defining, that it has a moment of maturity, that it moves irreversibly in one direction through time – and, perhaps most dubious of all, that it is a substantial unity. Friedrich Max Müller, was himself the author of a book called *Biographies of Words* (1888) wrote in his Gifford Lectures on *Natural Religion* that 'As the biography of a man may be called his best definition, what I call biographies of words are perhaps the most useful definitions which it is in our power to give.'

The idea that the meaning of words might need to be accounted for historically comes to the fore with Samuel Johnson's Dictionary, which is distinguished by the number of illustrative quotations it provided to fill out and particularise its definitions, though it offers no effort at systematic biography of words. The first dictionary to attempt this in English was Charles Richardson's *New Dictionary of the English Language* (1835-7).

This view of language depended upon the development of historical linguistics. This had been inaugurated by William Jones's demonstration in 1786 that Sanskrit shared a common ancestor with Persian, Greek, Latin and German, Following Jones, Franz Bopp began a systematic investigation of the affiliations between the languages in 1816 with his thrillingly-entitled *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache in Vergleichung mit jenem der griechischen, lateinischen, persischen und germanischen Sprachen* (Bopp 1975), the text which is held to inaugurate the discipline of comparative philology.

The claims of this new historical linguistics, which radiated widely through the nineteenth century, gathering huge esteem and authority, were large. Because language shaped and conditioned mind, it believed, language could also provide direct and immediate evidence of the evolution of mind, which had previously been a subject fit only for speculation and reverie. Language seemed to provide what was lacking in other disciplines in the physical and historical sciences, a cognitive fossil-archive of incalculable range and richness. The most influential exponent in England of the cognitive genealogies made possible by the new master-discipline of comparative philology was Friedrich Max Müller, the first Professor of Comparative Mythology at Oxford (I'm not actually sure how many more there were). Insisting on 'the inseparableness of language and thought', Müller

maintained that 'all thoughts which have ever passed through the mind of men must have found their first embodiment, and their permanent embalment, in words… Our poets make poems out of words, but every word, if carefully examined, will turn out to be itself a petrified poem' (Müller 1888, ix, x).

This view broached a fascinating, if unnerving problem. If words had been shaped by influences and exigencies of which we, and they, were only semidemiaware, what did this imply for the relation between mind and language? It seemed to open up the possibility that our words might exceed or escape us. Among some, the practice of tracing the prehistory of words and meanings back engendered the illusion of pure and transpicuous beginnings, when language said what it meant and meant what it said – the 'Aryan' epoch of human history, characterised by clear and unmuddied perceptions. Müller devoted much energy to showing that mythology was the result of a 'disease of language', in which the original significations of words had been lost, and fabulous confabulations generated to plaster over the gaps. In his earlier work, Müller hoped that the science of language would help purge the lingering traces of mythological thought, by revealing the earliest meanings. In his later years, however, this seems to give way to a resigned materialism, which aims to show that there is no mental conception, however seemingly spiritual or exalted, that is not contaminated by the physicality of words. Despite the fact that 'not only philosophers only, but philologists also, nay, even comparative philologists, seem to have a kind of feeling that there is something disheartening in the confession that language is entirely of the earth, earthy', Müller asked his readers to accept that '[w]hatever words we take which now express the most abstract and spiritual concepts, they have all passed through their infancy and early youth, and during that time they were flesh and bone, and little else' (Müller 1888, 29).

The *OED* entries on 'ventriloquism' seemed to offer interesting verification of these ideas. Here was a word which had slipped its own leash, its references to the most scandalously embodied utterance (scandalous in truth, for consultation of writings of several Church Fathers would reveal to me that 'belly' really meant 'cunt') embodying a kind of enigma or amnesia as to its 'real' meaning. But how was it possible for the compilers of the *OED* to know so much about a topic that would take me six years of research and writing to unravel, which is to say six years trying to make explicit the connections and disconnections that lay buried within this collection of definitions and citations? Even so, I dramatically missed a trick. It is only going back to these entries that I realise how prominent in them is the question of animal ventriloquisms, a topic which would certainly be worthy of much closer and more sustained attention than it occurred to me

to give it in *Dumbstruck* (Connor 2000). How could the compilers of this entry not only have known in advance what the structure of my book on ventriloquism would have to be, but still, more than six years this side of finishing the book, continue to have the jump on me?

If I was comprehensively pre-empted in my understanding of ventriloquism, I could claim a distinguished predecessor in this. The etymological excursus that begins Freud's essay shows the Möbius strip structure of a collection of words in which antonyms turn out to be synonyms, in which 'canny' and 'uncanny' can mean both the same as and the opposite of each other – the whole thing an intricate allegory of the relations between the conscious and the unconscious (Freud 1985, 342-7) But it was Daniel Saunders's *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* (1860) and the Grimm's' *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1877) that provided Freud with the structure of his argument in 'The Uncanny'.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* had its beginnings in a couple of lectures given in 1857 by Richard Chevenix Trench to the Philological Society in London, which lamented the failure of existing dictionaries to give a full account of the development of the language. His urgings to a new and improved dictionary that would profit from the historical advances in linguistics that had been achieved in Germany resulted in a preliminary period of hunting and gathering which lasted almost twenty years. It was not until 1879 that an agreement was reached with the Oxford University Press that they would publish the 'dictionary on historical principles' that the new work aimed at being. When the 10 volumes of the *Oxford English Dictionary* were finally completed in 1928 (ahead of its rivals the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* and the Dutch *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*, even though work had begun on them earlier), it became immediately clear that it was already out of date. Indeed, its very appearance provoked huge correspondence, supplying new words, amended and expanded definitions and earlier citations (Brewer 2007, 8-9). These engendered two substantial supplements, the first of which appeared in 1933, and the second, in four volumes, between 1972 and 1986. These supplements were themselves eventually digested into a second edition of the dictionary in 1989. Since then it has become clear that the only way to handle the continuing evolution of the dictionary is as an online database. Although a complete revision of the entire work has been under way since 1993, there are unlikely to be any new printed editions.

The information required to constitute the dictionary was assembled through a network of participating readers, who sieved and riddled early English texts, noting down interesting or informative uses of words. This network was huge, and their labours prodigious. In 1881, there were already 754 collectors who were in the process of reading and excerpting 1,568 books (Mugglestone 2005, 17). At one point, Murray was receiving 1000

citations a day at his house in Mill Hill. It was a piece of mass participant-observation, observation of a mass phenomenon undertaken on a mass scale by participants in it – a wiki. As Lynda Mugglestone has recently shown, the process of transforming this raw material into the actual dictionary entries was painful and passionately contentious.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* was from the very beginning a metalanguage that started to take on the dimensions and properties of its target language, the catalogue of a museum that promised to overtake all the available space of the museum itself. Nowadays, the *OED* may be supplemented by many other kinds of historical corpus and database, and in particular the magic trinity, that itself sounds like some kind of magical incantation, of EEBO, ECCO and LION (*Early English Books Online*, *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* and *Literature Online*).

The Ideology of Etymology.

The practice of etymology has a very long history, and an equally long history of being reviled. The earliest sustained etymological reflections in the European tradition are contained in the dialogues between Socrates and Hermogenes in Plato's *Cratylus*. At issue here, as in most other etymological writings for the next two thousand years, is the ambition to specify the original and therefore true meaning of words, especially names, and in particular the names of the gods. At one point Socrates declares that 'of the Gods we know nothing, either of their natures or of the names which they give themselves; but we are sure that the names by which they call themselves, whatever they may be, are true' (Plato n.d.). Perhaps all etymology effects and suffers from the Socratic prejudice, that there can be true and false names, that names were once more tightly locked on to their meanings than now, and that etymology can help us to tune words to things. The most influential etymological work of the medieval world was the *Origenes*, known as the *Etymologiae*, of Isidore of Seville. Near the beginning of the work Isidore gives us a statement of faith: 'Nam dum videris unde ortum est nomen, citius vim eius intellegis. Omnis enim rei inspectio etymologia cognita planior est' – 'For when you have seen whence a word has originated, you understand its force more quickly'. Indeed, one's insight into anything is clearer when its etymology is known' (Isidore 2006 I.xxix.2, 55). Etymology traditionally gives support to the prejudice that 'origin defines essence' (Rothstein 1990, 332), and that therefore the origins of words must be taken seriously, as exercising a continuing, if concealed, force during their afterlife. The authority of etymology was maintained well into the seventeenth century in Europe (Borchhardt 1968).

The *OED* prided itself on its accurate and historical etymologies, based not upon mere surmise, but on the patterns of language diffusion and law of phonetic change made apparent by the discoveries of historical linguistics. This they opposed to the 'wild' or fanciful etymologies practised by previous generations, finding meaning in horizontal resemblances between contemporary words (the kind practised by Socrates in *Cratylus*, when he says that the body (*soma*) is so-called because it is the grave (*sema*) of the soul, or by Isidore, when he, rather beautifully, says that the hare (*lepus*) is so-named because it is *levipes*, light of foot, or says that we are called healthy, *salus*, because 'nothing is better for us than salt and sun' ('nihil enim utilius sale et sole') – this being the reason why sailors have such vigorous, hardened bodies (Isidore 2006, XII.i.23, 249, XVI.ii.6, 318).

However, Isidore also recognises the possibility and the dangers of such wild etymology:

> Non autem omnia nomina a veteribus secundum naturam inposita sunt, sed quaedam et secundum placitum, sicut et nos servis et possessionibus interdum secundum quod placet nostrae voluntati nomina damus. Hinc est quod omnium nominum etymologiae non reperiuntur, quia quaedam non secundum qualitatem, qua genita sunt, sed iuxta arbitrium humanae voluntatis vocabula acceperunt.

> However, not all words were established by the ancients from nature; some were established by whim, just as we sometimes give names to our slaves and possessions according to what tickles our fancy. Hence it is the case that etymologies are not to be found for all words, because some things received names not according to their innate qualities, but by the caprice of human will. (Isidore 2006 I.xxix.2-3, 55)

But not only is wild etymology irresistible, there is an element of the wild even in historical etymology. This is in part because of something like an etymological force in word construction itself – words are formed and associated in part as a result of the same kind of magical intuitions that produce wild etymology. Yakov Malkiel points out, for example, that the derivation of French *fermer*, to lock, from Latin *ferrum*, iron, would have been condemned as a silly error in the face of the nineteenth-century demonstration of its derivation from Latin *firmare*, to make firm or close. But the late development of the meaning 'to lock' means that the association with a specifically iron lock or bar is perfectly likely, making *ferrum* a plausible 'secondary etymon' or 'collateral evolutionary factor' (Malkiel 1993, 7).

Etymology can operate as a fraudulent power, the power of fraud: but untrue etymologies are not necessarily unreal, and they can indeed become true, form part of the field of possibility within which a word may function. This became apparent to me recently in the course of writing an essay about the history of X-ray vision. The occasion for this was a film made by the artist Phillip Warnell about a young Russian girl called Natasha Demkina, who, for over 10 years, has been claiming the power to see inside bodies and make diagnoses on the basis of them. In the course of my essay, I referred to her claims as either 'hoax or hallucination', which provoked from the artist a delicate piece of remonstration about the seemingly black and white judgement that might be implied by the word 'hoax'. This set me wondering about this word, and its force.

Hoax is usually explained as a late eighteenth-century contraction, via *hocus*, a trick or deceit, of *hocus pocus*. In turn, according to John Tillotson's influential surmise, 'those common *jugling* words of *hocus pocus* are nothing else but a corruption of *hoc est corpus,* by way of ridiculous imitation of the Priests of the Church of *Rome* in their *trick* of *Transubstantiation*' (Tillotson 1684, 34). So the hoax of *hocus pocus* is that of seeming to name and disclose a body – 'this is the body' – that is not really there. It also involves an interference between seeing and saying. Hobbes described it 'a word devised…to juggle a difficulty out of sight' (Hobbes 1656, 297), while Thomas Ady explains that 'Hocus pocus' was a name used by a Jacobean conjuror

> because that at the playing of every Trick, he used to say, *Hocus pocus, tontus talontus, vade celeriter jubeo*, a dark composure of words, to blinde the eyes of the beholders, to make his Trick pass the more currantly without discovery, because when the eye and the ear of the beholder are both earnestly busied, the Trick is not so easily discovered, nor the Imposture discerned. (Ady 1655, 29)

Of course, since the violently anti-Catholic Tillotson is our principal source for this explanation of hocus pocus, it may itself be a bit of jugglery – in other words, or the same, a hoax. The movement from *hocus pocus* to *hoax* may seem plausible, but the OED is forced to acknowledge the puzzling lack of evidence for the word through most of the eighteenth century. German *hexe*, hag, or female demon, yielding *hexen*, to charm or curse, made popular in the US by German immigrants, may for example have exerted a retroactive influence.

So the history of the word *hoax*, or at least its putative history, seems like a *mis-en-abîme* or rehearsal in little of the very issue in play in what I was

writing. Does 'the girl with X-ray eyes' see into the interior of bodies or does she not? Is there a body in the picture, a picture of the body, or is there not? Is there a 'hoc est corpus' in hoax, or is the 'hoc est corpus' a hoax in the first place? Is the explanation of the hoax trustworthy, or is it itself hoaxical (my coinage, I believe), a piece of confabulation?

Thinking Through Words

Etymology has undergone a marked decline in status among twentieth-century linguists – who, for more than a century, have preferred to concentrate on systemic structures and functions within existing languages rather than the historical evolution of individual language elements. Saussure regards etymology as a trivial pursuit or hobby, having little to do with serious linguistic enquiry. Nevertheless, etymology has maintained continuous popular fascination and prestige, not least in certain influential modes of argument in critical and cultural studies.

Notoriously, etymology has become not just a source of support, but something like a manner of thought in Heidegger, for example in his elaborate association of the ideas of building, abiding and being in his essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking'. The word *bauen*, to build, he sees, really means to dwell, abide or remain in a place, traces of it being preserved in the German *Nachbar* and English *neighbour*. What is more, he says, this dwelling is bound up in a fundamental way with being and existence as such, since the German *ich bin*, I am, *du bist*, you are, are also linked to *bauen*. Thus 'What then does *ich bin* mean? The old word *bauen,* to which the *bin* belongs, answers: *ich bin, du bist mean:* I dwell, you dwell. For Heidegger, the formula is not *cogito ergo sum*, but *ich bin, also baue ich.*

Heidegger has a curious conviction of the tendency of language to conceal or withdraw meaning from its users. Understanding is therefore as much a matter of interpreting the silence of language as making out what it actually says:

> That language in a way retracts the real meaning of the word *bauen,* which is dwelling, is evidence of the primal nature of these meanings; for with the essential words of language, their true meaning easily falls into oblivion in favor of foreground meanings. Man has hardly yet pondered the mystery of this process. Language withdraws from man its simple and high speech. But its primal call does not thereby become incapable

of speech; it merely falls silent. Man, though, fails to heed this silence. (Heidegger n.d.)

In the essay 'Logos' of 1951, Heidegger reads a fragment of Heraclitus to argue that *logos*, knowing, is interpreted by some minor senses of the word *legen* as a gathering together: 'Thus exists Logos as the pure assembling gathering laying'. Heidegger thought that there were strong links between Greek and German, since, as he wrote in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, '[a]long with German, the Greek language is (in regard to its possibilities for thought) at once the most powerful and the most spiritual of all languages' (Heidegger 1959, 57). Heidegger goes even further than this, establishing what Nicholas Rand, following Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, calls a 'cyptophoria' (Rand 1990, 443) between Greek and German, arguing that German performs a unique office as a kind of 'crypt' or safekeeping of the possibility of recognising this primordial meaning of the Greek (which Greek itself could not yet fully recognise): it is the responsibility of German to reawaken the essence of Greek. One can easily understand the weariness of Arthur Adkins who, in the midst of an account of Heidegger's etymological conjurings, remarked 'At this point it may seem simpler to go off and play backgammon, lest the mind give way' (Adkins 1962, 230).

Derrida's interest in allowing himself to be argued through language is certainly encouraged by his close and continuous absorption in Heidegger. One can instance, for example, his identification of the original signification of the word 'archive', as not just a collection of documents, but a particular place of power.

> Let us not begin at the beginning, nor even at the archive.
>
> But rather at the word "archive" – and with the archive of so familiar a word. Arkhē, we recall, names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence* – physical, historical, or ontological principle – but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given – nomological principle… (Derrida 1998, 1)

Derrida uses the etymology of the word *archive* to carry his conviction that the idea of the archive, from the very beginning, is bound up with place – with the place of the law and the law of place. This helps him announce his concern 'with this topo-nomology, with this archontic dimension of

domiciliation, with this archic, in truth patriarchic, function, without which no archive would ever come into play or appear as such. To shelter itself and, sheltered, to conceal itself' (Derrida 1998, 3). This seems an honest and illuminating enough point, for, indeed, *archeon* does originally in Greek signify a place, a public office (the English word 'office' itself usefully combining the idea of function and position). At the same time, Derrida's injunction not to begin at the beginning is a tease, since it depends upon, even itself wields the force of a well-established, but highly dubious authority of the early – the traditional etymological claim that origin determines essence. Derrida's thought often functions according to what might be called the principle of 'encapsulated preformation', a name for the doctrine that all of creation is rolled up immanently within it from the beginning. This emerged during his famous debate about performativity with John Searle. Searle had argued that the force of a word was determined by its context. Derrida maintained that the fact that a word not only can have different meanings in different contexts, indeed must be able to have different meanings in different contexts, means that in a sense all these possibilities are implicit or foreshadowed in each instance of the word, as premonitions.

Derrida is not above more impetuous flaps of faux-etymology, as, for example, in the remark he made during a debate with Stanley Cavell about the latter's discussion of Cukor's *Gaslight*: 'Breath and spirit, Gas and ghost, they're the same thing!' (Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 2004, 73). Irresistible though this association might seem, one can in fact in this case affirm with an unusual degree of certainty that Derrida is mistaken. This is because the word *gas* was in fact invented by Jan Baptista van Helmont, as he explains in his posthumously published *Ortus medicinae*: 'Ideo paradoxi licentia, in nominis egestate, halitum illum, Gas vocavi, non longe a Chao veterum secretum' (Van Helmont 1648, 73) - 'by the Licence of a Paradox, for want of a name, I have called that vapour, Gas, being not far severed from the Chaos of the Ancients'. And yet Derrida is not alone, for it is surprising how little credence commentators have given to Van Helmont's assertion. Despite Van Helmont's explicit reference to the Greek 'chaos', Antoine Lavoisier thought gas derived from Dutch *ghoast* (spirit), while the German physician Johann Juncker defended Van Helmont against those who thought his word 'barbaric', by claiming that it came from German *gascht*, or *gast*, ferment, froth or foam (Juncker 1730, 365). F. Lachman has gone as far as claiming that Van Helmont's own explanation is a rationalisation after the fact – surmising that he formed that word as a rhyming twin to another word he invented at the same time, *blas*, from Dutch *blasen* to blow, and only noticed the link with *chaos* after he had formed it (Lachman 1953, 177-8).

Michel Serres is another energetic and unabashed practiser of augury through etymology:

> The Greeks had the exquisite wisdom to combine in a single word order and ornament, the art of adorning and that of ordering. 'Cosmos' designates arrangement, harmony and law, the fittingness of things; there are world, earth and sky here, but also decoration, embellishment or fitting out. Nothing goes as deep as décor, nothing goes further than the skin, ornament has the dimensions of the world. Cosmic and cosmetic, appearance and essence issue from the same source. (Serres 1998, 33-4; my translation)

One might also instance Foucault's elaboration through his work of the process whereby the allegedly freely self-constituted subject is brought into being by operations of pleasure and power from the outside, so the individual is 'sub-jected' to his subjectivity. Here, one might say that the etymology is not 'original', but actually rests latently in an apparent anomaly in the field of the word 'subject' – the original designation of which was as that which lies beneath appearances – like the term *hypostasis*, which is its etymological mirror.

Syntactics

The prejudice against etymology among twentieth century linguists is part of a turn towards system and away from history – towards the synchronic (at the same time) and away from the diachronic (through time). The argument is that words have meaning not in themselves, but as a function of their position in a distributed field of differentiations. Thus the necessity that is routinely claimed by etymologists gives way to a kind to the contingency of the semantic field. But what does it mean to say that a word operates in a semantic field? Such a field is nowhere given in its entirety, least of all in a dictionary. It has to be assumed and reconstituted by every speech act. It is not just the field marked out by the dictionary – it is a field of proximities and probabilities, affinities and distinctions that are themselves neither fixed or absolute. This becomes clear when one considers closely the construal of historical etymologies themselves. The affiliations and connections constructed by etymologists are themselves only ever constructions – assisted rather than merely arbitrary and inspirational hunches. One can demonstrate the likelihood of the change of form *a* to form *b*, but the fact of the change itself, as always, escapes. As with evolution: nobody will ever be able to show evolutionary change actually happening – there is only ever the cinematic illusion of motion. Hence the difficulty of answering the

creationist's objection that there are gaps in the continuity of the species record. Close a gap in the fossil record, and you only ever succeed in creating two more, on each side of the new bridge. So the field of reference of a word is a matter of probabilities: different slopes, angles and gradients of possibility lead away from the word in every direction. To map these possibilities would require a multi-parameter calculus of almost inconceivable complexity – indeed perhaps language itself may be regarded as in itself just such a calculus.

Not only is nothing in the synchronic field ever simply present, the synchronic is not truly synchronic – because not everything in the synchronic system is up-to-date. There are words whose fortunes are dwindling and reviving, coming in and out of use. 'A dictionary is not merely a home for living words; it is a hospital for the sick; it is a cemetery for the dead', wrote R.W. Dale in 1878 (quoted Mugglestone 2005, 29). This may apply in fact to language itself. Some etymologies are truly cryptic, buried secrets, that are not readily apparent in the word's form and exert little pressure on its use: but other etymologies are part of the functioning, or assumed functioning (and an assumed function just is a function) of a word in the synchronic system. It is in this sense that the diachronic dimension can form part of the synchronic system. Paradoxically, perhaps nothing has done more to bring about this intermingling of the diachronic and the synchronic in the field of the synchronic itself than influential dictionaries like the *OED*, which bring to life, or at least make available for resuscitation, old or superseded meanings. The diachronic is brought into the field of force of the synchronic, creating the possibility of transtemporal conversations between the successive meanings of a word. While acting as a stay against wild etymology, the *OED* itself has effected a large-scale release into the synchronic wild of diachronic material, encouraging genetic modifications and reverse engineerings. As a single, simple example of this reawakening of latency, one might cite the word 'awesome' which came into use to mean marvellous or admirable among American teenagers, thus reviving the earlier reach of the term, for example in the famous remark of James II on seeing St Paul's Cathedral, that it was 'amusing, artificial and awful' – all of the words being intended to convey approval.

The prestige of the etymological origin is an illusion, and etymologies provide just the same kind of snare and a delusion as the claims made by the more incautious kind of evolutionary psychologist. All etymologies are in part 'fables of irrationalist power' (Struever 1983, 111). And yet it is unwise to think that the past of words is really over and done with. In a certain sense, words, and their histories, retain the possibility of reversion, of turning back on themselves. This is not because the words themselves contain genetic information privily encoded in them, but rather because the

formative environments in which words function contain echoes of their scattered genetics. Words have their genetic material outside them, not least in the habits, preferences and predispositions of speakers.

Language is metalinguistic: governed not just by its own internal rules, but by theories and assumptions as to its nature entertained by its speakers, or carriers. We use words as genetic material to pass on ideas, traditions; but in another sense we are the genetic material, the material carriers or media that words themselves use to make their play for persistence.

This is to say that the workings of language allow for some of the same kind of reflections on the complex intertwinings of past and present, ancient and 'up-to-date' that, in his *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour has suggested characterise any 'present'. Here he follows Michel Serres who, his book *Rome: A Book of Foundations*, asks us to think of history, neither as a line, nor as a circle (the false escape from linearity, since a circle is simply a line joined to itself), but as a dynamic volume. He invites us to imagine a lump of dough being kneaded by a baker. Take a point in the dough and mark its position; mark it again following the first fold; keep track on it through all the successive foldings to which it is subject, and the line you draw between these innumerable points will be the line of history. 'The system grows old without letting time escape; it garners age - the new emblems are caught up and subsumed by old ones; the baker molds memory...Time enters into the dough, a prisoner of its folds, a shadow of its folding over' (Serres 1991: 81).

It is fitting that Latour, who has assisted so powerfully in disseminating these Serresian arguments for the unpredictable foldings together of past and present, should himself have recourse to just such a reactivation for the vehicle of his argument about the necessity of making 'things' the centre of a new conception of world-construction. Of late, Latour has taken more and more interest in the kinds of political negotiations that might be constituted through the Parliament of Things. For Latour, the world is to be built through the necessary mediation of objects, through *Dingpolitik*. Latour prefers the word *Ding* to object, because he looks forward to the time in which 'Objects become things, that is, when matters of fact give way to their complicated entanglements and become matters of concern' (Latour 2005, 31). He reminds us of Heidegger's reminiscence of the etymology of the word 'thing': long before designating an object thrown out of the political sphere and standing there objectively and independently, the Ding or Thing has for many centuries meant the issue that brings people together because it divides them. The same etymology lies dormant in the Latin *res*, the Greek *aitia* and the French or Italian *cause*…Are not all parliaments now divided by the nature of things as well as by the din of the crowded Ding? Has the time

not come to bring the res back to the res publica? (Latour 2005, 13). There are no more mobile things, 'quasi-objects', that we light up as we use them, and that reciprocally bring us to light, than words in their historical dimensions.

The *OED* can be seen as a seismometer for the unconscious of language: the web of affinities, analogies and possibilities of which language is constituted, or may still possibly turn out to have been constituted. Such dictionaries provide capsule research projects: compressed archives ready to be exploded into sense. They provide not just the history or biography of words, but rather something like a geology, even a topology. For the dictionary reveals faultlines, slow shifts, steady-states and sudden saltations, evolutions and eruptions, catastrophes

Etymomagical

Etymology gives us the truth of the untruth of words, a veritable and verifiable account of the wayward and untrustworthy divagations of words. Etymology can just as easily show dehiscence as cohesion. But in can also demonstrate the force of the desire to etymologise in the old sense. It can provide the evidence of the work that people have done on words, the work people have wanted words to do. For language is in large part formed and sustained by this kind of pressure, a pressure to make language confirm with itself. This pressure may be equated with the 'force' or the 'vis' spoken of by Isidore, except that it is no longer an original force, a gravitational pull exercised by the putative origin. It is the force of the very will-to-force, exercised on the word by other words.

Etymology has often been associated with a kind of magical thinking. Etymology is both the practice and the demonstration of this kind of word-magic. One can never be quite sure whether in bringing it to light, one is not in some wise succumbing to it.

This may be illustrated by considering the etymology of etymology itself. It is formed from *etumos*, the truth, and *logos*, knowledge, hence 'knowledge of the truth'. In one sense it is true (this is what 'etymology' originally meant). In another sense, it is a superseded fable, since the investigation of the origin of words does not give you their original truth; rather it gives you the truth that they no longer mean what they used to mean, it gives you the truth of what they have been used to mean.

Etymology, or word-histories, offer evidence, not of the singular core truth of words but of the dynamic fields of possibility that they constitute. As the lexicographer of Greek Franz Passow declared in 1819, 'every word should be made to tell its own story' (quoted Mugglestone 2005, 5) – so, we are involved not just writing in the lives of words, but ghost-writing their autobiographies. For word-histories are not self-interpreting, any more than biographies or autobiographies are. If they represent surviving evidence both of the work done by words, and the work done on them by usage, they do not predetermine the outcome of the questions they frame, or the final and necessary shape of the field they constitute. That can only be done by us, even though we are ourselves part of, even though we presently *are*, that field.

There often seems to be good reason to condemn the exercise of etymology and word-history as a kind of word-magic – in particular the sympathetic magic according to which resemblance in signs determines resemblance in the things they signify (Bronkhorst 2001) – as, for example, in Isidore's salty salutation. Magical and occult traditions make extravagant use of this kind of etymological proof, and the annals of psychosis and obsessive-compulsive disorder swarm with patients who insist on taking words for things.

We may perhaps safely follow Freud in defining magic as the overestimation of thoughts, or the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts. On this account, the magical thinker has a mistaken belief in the power of thoughts, or the words which embody them, to act on the world. And, for the magical thinker, words are thoughts, precisely because of the magical power of thoughts themselves to impress themselves directly in language. For the magical thinker, thoughts are words are things.

But, given this understanding, what are we to make of magical thinking about language itself? Here it is not clear whether words are on the side of thoughts or of reality. Certainly, etymology can often look compellingly like a species of word-magic. But what if one's object is precisely to demonstrate the incitement to magical thinking contained in and constituted by words, to demonstrate, in other words (but at all events, in words) that thought is so entangled in its words, that it cannot but accede if not fully succumb to their magic? To demonstrate the power of words to form and constitute thought is surely to demonstrate that all words are in a sense magic words. This would then constitute a demonstration of the magical power of words to persuade us to mistake them for reality. But then we can no longer be certain that this is simply a mistake. For there certainly is a reality to which words readily attest, namely, the reality of the fact that words exercise magical power. In which case, how are we to decide whether this kind of demonstration is an intensification of magical power or an antidote to it? Is

it an instance of the power we have to do things with and to words, for example constraining them to disclose an understanding of what they do to us? Or is it rather an instance of the power that words persuade us we have to do things with them?

Let me try to spread this out for you in more personal terms, if you can bear it. I don't believe in magic. Because I don't believe in magic – the power to turn water into wine, for example, or to raise the dead – I also *a fortiori* do not fear its effects, for of course I believe it to have none. And yet I am filled with dread that I, my children, or those dear to me may succumb to magical thinking, and so I lose no opportunity to deride and warn against it. But why? It's starting to look very much as though I do indeed believe that magic has effects. To be sure, the effects of magical thinking that I fear (stupidity, cruelty, selfishness, rigidity of mind, unreasoning terror) are not the same effects as those its adherents or practitioners crave or claim, and to which I serenely attach no credence. For me, in other words, more other words, the power of magical thinking lies not in the magic you think you have, but in thinking that you have got it. I do not fear the devil, but I fear the effects of belief that there is a devil. In fact, I supect them of being little short of devilish.

The question I have been asking with respect to the kind of magical thinking we call etymology is: how can I be sure that my thinking about magical thinking is not itself a species of the overestimation of the power of thought that I have used to define magical thinking in the first place? When does a fear of superstition start to become superstitious (literally an 'over-standing' rather than an understanding), and when does an obsession with magical thinking become the exercise of it?

We need the miraculous, magical resource of the *OED* along with related dictionaries and databases if we are to be able to work on thought in a way that is mindful of the work unwittingly done on thought by words, and thereby to demonstrate the workings of word-magic. But is this demonstration not in part an acknowledgement of the power of the very magic one is eschewing? With the use of etymology, writes Isidore, *citius vim eius intellegis* – you will soon know the force of a word. Know, that is *intellegere*, meaning 'gathering between', from '*inter* between, within + *legere* to bring together, gather, pick out, choose, catch up, catch with the eye, read'. 'Everything happens in the middle', writes Bruno Latour, '…everything happens by way of mediation, translations and networks' (Latour 1993, 37). Perhaps this is the force of which Isidore gives us intelligence, a force not radiated from the origin, but distributed through the interminable interim of the life of words, a force of which one will always have this at least to say, that it is with us.

References

Adkins, Arthur W.H. (1962). 'Heidegger and Language.' *Philosophy*, 37 (1962): 229-237.

Ady, Thomas (1655). *A Candle in the Dark Shewing the Divine Cause of the Distractions of the Whole Nation of England and of the Christian World* ... London: for Robert Ibbitson.

Bopp, Franz (1975). *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache: in Vergleichung mit jenem der griechischen, lateinischen, persischen und germanischen Sprache*. Ed. Karl Joseph Windischmann. Hildesheim and New York: G. Olms.

Borchardt, Frank L. (1968). 'Etymology in Tradition and in the Northern Renaissance.' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 29, 415-29.

Brewer, Charlotte (2007). *Treasure House of the Language: The Living* OED. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Bronkhorst, Johannes (2001). 'Etymology and Magic: Yaska's *Nirukta*, Plato's *Cratylus*, and the Riddle of Semantic Etymologies.' *Numen*, 48 (2001): 147-203.

Connor, Steven (2000). *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Freud, Sigmund (1985). 'The Uncanny'. In *Art and Literature* (The Pelican Freud Library, Vol 14). Ed. Albert Dickson. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 335-76.

Heidegger, Martin (1959). *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Oxford University Press.

Hobbes, Thomas (1656). *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance Clearly Stated and Debated Between Dr. Bramhall, Bishop of Derry, and Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*. London: for Andrew Crook.

Isidore of Seville (n.d.). *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*. Online at
<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/isidore.html>
Isidore of Seville (1911). *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*. Ed. W. M. Lindsay. 2 vols. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
Isidore, of Seville (2006). *The* Etymologies *of Isidore of Seville*. Trans. Stephen A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach and Oliver Berghof. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Juncker, Johann (1730). *Conspectus Chemiae Theoretico-Practicae*. Halae Magd.: Impensis Orphanotrophei.

Lachman, F. 'Van Helmont's Gas.' *Modern Language Review*, 48 (1953), 177-178.

Latour, Bruno (1993). *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
------------------ (2005). 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik: or How to Make Things Public.' In *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. Karlsruhe: ZKM Center for Art and Media: Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 4-31.

Malkiel, Yakov (1993). *Etymology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Müller, Friedrich Max (1888). *Biographies of Words and the Home of the Aryas*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.

Mugglestone, Lynda (2005). *Lost For Words: The Hidden History of the Oxford English Dictionary*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Plato (n.d.) *Cratylus*. Internet Classics Archive. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. Online at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/cratylus.html>

Rand, Nicholas (1990), 'The Political Truth of Heidegger's "Logos": Hiding in Translation.' *PMLA*, 105, 436-447.

Richardson, Charles (1835-7). *A New Dictionary of the English Language*. 2 Vols. London: William Pickering.

Rothstein, Marian (1990). 'Etymology, Genealogy, and the Immutability of Origins.' *Renaissance Quarterly*, 43, 332-47.

Serres, Michel (1991). *Rome: The Book of Foundations*. Trans. Felicia McCarren. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
------------------ (1998). *Les cinq sens*. Paris: Hachette.

Struever, Nancy (1983). 'Fables of Power.' *Representations*, 4, 108-27.

Tillotson, John (1684). *A Discourse Against Transubstantiation*. London: for Brabazon Aylmer and William Rogers.

Van Helmont, Jan Baptista (1648). *Ortus Medicinae, id est, initia physicae inaudita…* Amsterdam: Ludovico Elzevirium