This is not a squirrel (see p. 44).
Detail from *Allegorical "Millefleurs" Tapestry with Animals*, c. 1530–45, Bruges, Belgium. *The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Gift of Mrs. C. J. Martin in Memory of Charles Jairus Martin.*

WORD ORIGINS

. . . *and How We Know Them*

Etymology for Everyone

ANATOLY LIBERMAN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2005

or medical dimensions to the science I study. As is known, entomology is all about insects. Etymology also deals with them, but in its own way. For example, the origin of the word *bug* has bothered (one might even say bugged) researchers for decades. However, despite some overlap, etymology and entomology should be kept separate. I was surprised to discover how well everyone remembered what *entomology* meant and how they still thought that I was an entomologist. Ignorant of the causes of the confusion, I ascribed it to some twist of the Midwestern mentality, incomprehensible to an outsider. One can therefore imagine my joy when in looking through the journal *College English,* I ran into an article by James T. Barrs, who in 1962 was an Associate Professor of English at Northeastern University, Boston.[12] This is the beginning of his article.

> The title of one of my television lectures over Boston's educational station WGBH-TV back in 1958 was "Folk Etymology." But somewhere along the line the title was garbled, and it appeared on the Station's printed and circulated program as "Folk Entomology." Now, I don't propose to discuss on this occasion the place of insect-study in linguistics; but since the word *entomology* has appeared in the ointment, so to speak, let's look at it for a moment. Its main part is the Greek word *éntomos,* which means "insect" or, literally, "something cut in"—the main part, in turn, of *éntomos* is *tom,* whose root means "to cut or segment;" indeed, the *sect* of the word *insect,* from Latin, means "cut" too.

It appeared that at least on one coast, the confusion is the same as in the state of Minnesota. I realized that I was in good company. *Etymology,* like *entomology,* goes back to Ancient Greek. *Étumos* means "true," and *étumon* referred to the true, or original, meaning of a word. The noun *etumología* has also been recorded.[13] In the next chapter, it will be shown that the true, or original, meaning of a word is an ambiguous concept, but the etymological ointment contains no fly. Fortified with this knowledge, we can now turn to the history of etymology, its principles, and its methods.

Chapter Two

in which another important distinction, this time between words and things, is made, or

The Thing and the Sign

> The day's eye.—Adam in Paradise.—Plato in Greece.—Socrates, Cratylus, and Hermogenes have a talk.—The knowledge of things cannot be derived from their names.—The Greeks' ignorance of foreign languages.—Language and fashion.—"People create."—St. Cecilia and her name.—*Homo* and *humus, god* and *good.*

The word *daisy* first surfaced in a manuscript going back to the year 1000, that is, to the time about two centuries after the emergence of the earliest texts in the English language.[1] It had to be coined before 1000, of course, to get into the manuscript, but probably after 450, the date given for the invasion of Britain by Germanic (or Teutonic, to use an old-fashioned term) tribes, since no word like *daisy* has been recorded on the continent. During the period to which we now refer as Old English, people called the daisy *dæges ēage* (pronounced approximately as *'day-ez éay-e,* with *ea* as in the French name *Réamur).*[2] *Dæges ēage* was a phrase that meant "day's eye," either because the daisy resembles the sun (which is indeed the eye of the day) or because it covers the yellow disk in the evening and opens it in the morning.

Who coined this remarkable word? A child discovering the world and, Adam-like, creating naïve and beautiful metaphors?[3] Or a farmer who needed a new plant name and used the resources of his mother tongue? The poetry of the Anglo-Saxons and related tribes was full of circumlocutions like *day's eye* (sun); in medieval Scandinavia they were called kennings. But the person who was the first to say *dæges ēage* need not have been a poet: long exposure to kennings and the

abundance of compounds in conversational Old English would have made the task of producing such circumlocutions easy.

In other countries, people called the daisy or a plant like it "earth apple" (such as Greek *khamáimelon),*[4] from which, via Latin and French, English has *c(h)amomile,* or even "gooseflower" (such as German *Gänseblümchen). Dæges ēage* could not have been the first name of this flower, but it suppressed its synonyms and stayed until today. Can we imagine a golden age when all the words were young and as transparent as "day's eye"? If such an age existed, it was one of perfect harmony: things revealed their nature in words, and words captured the most salient features of things. Happy cave dwellers exchanged nosegays of day's eyes, and no one needed lessons in etymology.

The question about the first human words has occupied philosophers and linguists since antiquity. Greek scholars often discussed it, as follows from the extant documents. The most famous of them is Plato's dialogue *The Cratylus,* which has come down to us intact. Two opinions clash in it. Cratylus believes in a bond between language, thought, and reality and insists that words reflect some properties of things. We remember the history of *daisy* and tend to agree with him. Cratylus's opponent Hermogenes maintains the opposite view. According to him, the names of all things are the result of convention, and again we agree, for, if all words are natural, why are things called differently in different languages, and why do the same groups of sounds have divergent meanings in one and the same language? English, for example, has thousands of homonyms. We would also like to know how *day* and *eye* got their names and whether all words are, like *daisy,* contractions of longer units.

Hermogenes invites Socrates to resolve the dispute. All of them—Socrates, Cratylus, and Hermogenes—were Plato's teachers. Socrates sides with neither opponent but applies his dialectics to rise above both rigid formulations ("all words are natural" versus "all words are conventional") and reconciles them by offering a deeper truth. He begins by pointing out that since words are instruments with whose help we teach and separate things, they must be treated like all other instruments and tools, for example, a borer, a sail, or a loom. First of all, they must be functional or usable (a point for Cratylus). Secondly, they must be (or must have been) "made" by specialists. A smith forges swords, while a wordsmith coins words. Socrates has great respect for wordsmiths and calls them lawgivers. A lawgiver suggests names that bring out the essence of the thing named (another point for Cratylus). However, a smith need not make swords of the same iron; likewise, different legislators will use different syllables for naming the same object. Every word, if it serves its purpose, is usable, which is not the same as natural; it is not predestined to have the form we happen to know. At last Hermogenes scores a point. Moreover, smiths may be skillful or inept, and some lawgivers come up with inappropriate names. As time goes on, words deteriorate, and many of them lose their former clarity. Words, we are given to understand, are natural only insofar as they reflect the first lawgivers' vision of the world. The knowledge of things cannot be derived from names (let us remember this statement).

Socrates assumes that all names owe their existence to legislation and that lawgivers had prior knowledge of reality. Hermogenes's standing is now as good as Cratylus's. It should be borne in mind that the three men are discussing language, but they mean only Greek. Barbarians also speak, but what kind of speech is it? The very word *barbarian* means "someone who says *bar-bara,* a babbler or a stammerer producing unintelligible gibberish." The Greeks must have learned some Phrygian from their slaves, the more so because the two languages were rather similar. Aeschylos cited a few exotic words from other countries, and Aristophanes reproduced the Phrygian accent in his comedies, but their contemporaries did not value the mastery of foreign languages, nor did they think much of Latin.[5]

Hermogenes, a down-to-earth man, is not content with abstract theorizing, and Socrates (or Plato, Socrates's mouthpiece) satisfies his curiosity and explains the origin of numerous words. Today we are confident that his derivations are fanciful, for we know more about the origin of Greek than the ancients did. This is a fact, not hubris. Socrates believed that one could separate a Greek word into elements, add a sound (he said *letter*), subtract a sound, or scramble the letters a bit and arrive at a word's true, original meaning, as the lawgivers had intended us to see it. Greek words are sometimes very

long. Socrates would have been puzzled by a sentence like *come and have a look at my cats and dogs*. Even centuries ago, when most native English words were di- or trisyllabic, they never had the length that would be enough for a Germanic Socrates. Nor did such a thinker ever live among the Anglo-Saxons. Although Socrates's explanations were not fully dependent on contraction and trickery, for the moment we will pass over his other methods of etymologizing.[6]

Ancient lawgivers must have been endowed with the power of articulate speech, but we are left in the dark as to who taught them to speak. Socrates did not realize the tremendous complexity of the problem he approached. We do; yet we still wonder how the first words were coined. We again turn to the child (farmer, poet, scholar?) who examined a yellow flower and called it day's eye. That person was not a lawgiver and could not make other people adopt the new name. Language is like many other human institutions—for example, fashion. The news of an invention spreads, and acceptance or rejection follows. Every novelty must be an act of an individual, despite the fact that in language, anonymous tradition reigns supreme, and inventors of the past may not have been aware of their input. In literature, the concept of individual authorship also developed late, and originality is a recent virtue.[7]

Ages of recitation could polish tales like the *Iliad* because there was something to polish. Jacob Grimm, whose name graces the first page of this book, used to say: "People create."[8] The question is how they do it. If every word is the product of an individual act of creativity, wordsmiths, it is reasonable to assume, did not use the material at their disposal haphazardly, though we notice with surprise that the origin of some words launched within the last decades, *glitch* and *nerd* among them, is no less obscure than that of *come* and *look*, which have existed from time immemorial. We could have enlightened Cratylus and Hermogenes on many things, but not on the process of original word creation. Even Rudyard Kipling fails us here. Two of his charming and edifying *Just So Stories* are entitled "How the First Letter Was Written" ("Once upon a most early time was a Neolithic man. He was not a Jute or an Angle, or even a Dravidian, which he might well have been, Best Beloved, but never mind why.

He was a Primitive, and he lived cavily in a Cave, and he wore very few clothes, and he couldn't read and he couldn't write and he didn't want to, and except when he was hungry he was quite happy") and "How the Alphabet was Made" (the characters are again the Neolithic man and the author's daughter). As ill luck would have it, no story exists about the creation of the first words.

Socrates's most important conclusions are two: (1) words are hallowed by convention, but they are not "natural," and (2) the knowledge of things cannot be derived from their names (a thesis emphasized above). Both of his conclusions were forgotten or rejected in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Cratylus's arguments are attractive, and it is no wonder that later generations have reinvented them time and again. At a certain stage, etymology lost its cognitive value altogether and became part of the science of things rather than words. Here is the introduction to Chaucer's tale of the Second Nun, translated from the original Latin:

> *Cecilia* is as though "lily of heaven" *[celi lilia]* or "way of the blind" *[cecis via]* or from "heaven" *[celo]* and "Leah" [lya]. Or *Cecilia* is as though "free of blindness" *[cecitate carens]*. Or she is named from heaven *[celo]* and *leos*, that is, "people." For she was a "lily of heaven" because of her virgin chastity. Or she is called "lily" because she had the white of purity, the green of conscience, the odor of good fame. She was "way of the blind" because of her teaching by example, "heaven" for her devoted contemplation, "Leah" for her constant business. Or she is called "heaven" because, as Isidore[9] says, the scientists have said that heaven is swift, round, and burning. So also she was swift through her solicitous work, round through her perspicuity, burning through her flaming love. She also was "free of blindness" because of the brilliant light of her wisdom. She was also "heaven of people" *[celum + leos]* because in her, as in a heaven, people wanting a role model might in a spiritual way gaze upon her sun, moon, and stars, that is, the far-sightedness of her wisdom, the greatness of her faith, and the variety of her virtues.

This "etymology" of Cecilia's name appears in the preface to Jacopo da Varagine's account of the life of St. Cecilia included in his mid-thirteenth-century anthology of saints' lives, *The Golden Legend*.[10]

Cecil goes back to Lat. *Caecilius*, the name of a Latin gens (patrilinear clan), in which *-il-* is a suffix, the second *-i-* a marker of the

declension, and *-us* an ending. *Cecilia* is a feminine counterpart of *Cecilius. Ceac-,* as in *caecus,* the root of *Caecilius,* means "blind." It need not concern us how the gens got its name and whether in the beginning it had any religious significance (contained the memory of ritual mutilation or was the cognomen of a blind god) or whether a non-fictitious blind man founded the clan. Suffice it to say that the connection between *Caecilius* ~ *Caecilia* and *caecus* is real and speakers of Latin could not miss it. That is why after her martyrdom Cecilia became a patron saint of the blind.

Jacopo da Varagine would have been unimpressed by this information and perhaps dismissed it as ignorant nonsense. Like his predecessors, he attempted to derive the knowledge of things from words. Proper names lend themselves to quasi-etymological exercises especially well, and the characters in Plato's dialogue also paid tribute to them. For many centuries linguistics constituted part of theology and philosophy and could not have an object of its own. Nor did Jacopo pursue a linguistic goal. Any of the combinations he offered seemed equally valid to him because he looked on the name *Cecilia* as a charade, and to the extent that the whole meant something good and pure he accepted the interpretation. By chance, not all of his guesses are wrong: "way of the blind" and "free of blindness" refer to the real root of Cecilia's name, though "blind" had to be twisted into "the way of blindness" and alternately into "free from, devoid of blindness," an opposite concept.

Such etymologies are easy to propose, especially when the elements are borrowed from several languages.[11] For example, where did the word *student* come from? Perhaps it is the sum of English *stew* and Latin *dent* (tooth), since students are usually poor and cannot afford steak. But students are tough and hardened young people, wholly devoted to learning *(stud + ent[ire]);* compare the title of James T. Farrell's novel *Studs Lonigan.* Still another venue opens up if we add *stud(y)* and *ent(irely).* In similar fashion, paper may be called paper because, when we buy it, we *pay per* sheet. Etymologies of this type do not presuppose verification; they exist to justify the name rather than find out its ancient meaning.

We have nothing to learn from Jacopo. But let us not hurry. Someone called a plant with a yellow disk "day's eye." That person was a

good wordsmith. There must have been others like him. About a dozen etymologies of Greek *theos*[12] and Latin *deus* (god) have come down to us from the Middle Ages (both words are familiar from Engl. *theology* and *deity*). It was taken for granted that *theós* and *deus* are different pronunciations of the same word (this idea proved to be wrong) and that the name of the Lord had something to do with His greatness, omnipotence, omniscience, and so forth—a reasonable conjecture on the face of it. Some fruits of medieval scholarship lacked juice even in their prime, as when *deus* was derived from *dans eternam uitam suis* ([the one] giving eternal life to his own.) Others were astute. For example, *theós* was compared with *théo* (to move fast), *thermós* (warm), and *áithos* (fire, flame),[13] among others, and Latin *homo* (man) was traced to *humus* (earth).

Today we believe that *theós* and *deus* meant "spirit" and "shining, glorious," respectively, though the origin of *theós* has not been fully clarified. Our solutions have the support of well-tested procedures; they are not fantasies, but our glosses do not differ in principle from "rushing," "flaming," or "aerial." *Homo* and *humus* are indeed related.[14] Unlike medieval scholars, we do not connect Engl. *god* and *good* and can prove our thesis, but even here our answers would have been acceptable to them: *god,* we think, is either "one receiving sacrifices" (the preferred derivation) or "one called upon." The etymology of *god* does not bring out the essence of the Godhead but gives a clue to why *god* is called *god.* People of the Middle Ages may not have appreciated this all-important difference but would have had no serious objections to our etymologies.

An etymologist, of necessity, shuttles between words and things. Words may be conventional, but we do not want them to be arbitrary, and for this reason the study of words is inseparable from the study of things. The question is not whether but how the two areas interact. Linguists planning to investigate the origin of *knife, sheep,* and *witch* cannot be experts in ancient weaponry, cattle breeding, and magic, but without going into prehistoric warfare, primitive economy, and superstitions they will not discover what kind of a tool a knife was (was it short or long, homemade or imported, meant for stabbing, cutting, or thrusting?), whether the animal called "sheep" got its name at the time when it served mainly as a provider of meat or wool (or

both), and whether a witch offered her services as a healer or was shunned as an evildoer. Only an exact knowledge of things will allow us to reconstruct the process of name giving.

People were satisfied with the ancestor of Engl. *ewe* for thousands of years, but something made them coin *sheep* (it had a different pronunciation then), whereas Scandinavians added *fær* (approximately "wool animal"; *æ* had the phonetic value of *a* in Engl. *bag,* and *ð,* it will be remembered, sounded like *th* in *this*) and *sauðr*[15] to their vocabulary; *sauðr,* which is akin to Engl. *seethe,* must have been food. Every time the function of the domesticated animal changed, it acquired a new name. According to one theory, *sheep* has the same root as *shave;* then, like *fær,* it belongs in the epoch of wool shearing, even though shave and shear are different things. The oldest meaning of *ewe* was probably "sheep with lambs," but this is only an intelligent guess. *Knife, sheep,* and *witch* are nouns. Verbs and adjectives present the same picture. To penetrate the origin of *kiss,* we must know whether the verb denoted ceremonial greeting or had erotic connotations and when people began to kiss. By comparison, the history of *hiss* and *piss* is easier.

Languages differ dramatically in their use of color terms, and associations that conjured up such terms also differ. Engl. *white* is akin to *wheat,* but it is wheat (or more probably flour made from it) that borrowed its name from *white,* not the other way around. To learn where *white* came from, we must go further afield (so to speak). *Green* was, in all likelihood, derived from the root of *grow* and designated the color of vegetation. Words name and classify things for the speaking individual *(homo loquens).* They do not merge with things, but it would be strange if the original meaning of words could be disclosed without recourse to the properties of the objects to which they stick.

Let us admire Socrates who was fluent only in Greek but understood so much about language and repeat the watchword of etymological research: original "names" were conventional (for other sounds could have expressed the same meaning) but not arbitrary (the speakers who chose those sounds had a reason to do so). The entire science of etymology is centered on finding that reason.

Chapter Three

which descends from philosophical heights to cooing doves and mooing cows and explains in passing that sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander and that boys will be boys, or

Sound Imitative Words

The *ku-ku* nest.—On kites and cows.—Onomatopoeic, or echoic, words.—Geese gaggle, hens cackle.—The horror and grandeur of *gr.*—A foster home for unrelated words.—From *clock* to *cloak.* — A few pedestrian etymologies.—Chuchundra's dangerous example.—*Jump—thump—dump.* Boys, bellboys, and devils.

If it is true that at the dawn of civilization, things were not named *pall-mall* and *beriberi* because it occurred to someone to use arbitrary groups of sounds to designate things, we may hope to penetrate the mental processes of our remote ancestors. "The namegiver," Plato says, "is the rarest of craftsmen among men." He "must understand how to render the naturally fitting name for each thing into letters and syllables . . ." *Naturally* is the key word in his dictum.

It is natural to hear *ku-ku* and call the bird saying *ku-ku* a *cuckoo.* Many words of this type must have been in circulation when the world was young. Their origin seems to need no explanation, but their simplicity is often misleading. About two thousand years ago, the cuckoo was called approximately **gaukaz* (*au* as in *Audi;* an asterisk means that such a form has not been attested but can be reconstructed). Icelanders still say *gaukur,* and earlier the root of this word had *ū.* From the beginning of creation, *cuckoos* have not changed their song, and people have always heard something like *koo(k)-koo(k)* or *goo(k)-goo(k)* in it. If Old Engl. *gēac* had survived, it would have been pronounced *yeak* today (rhyming with *beak*) and the connection between