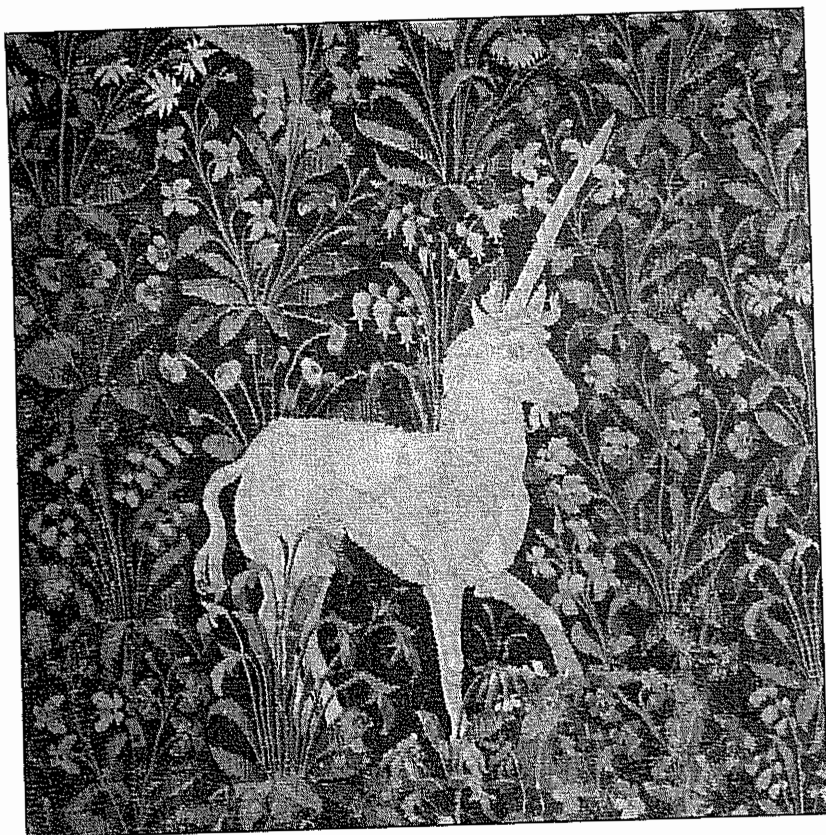

This is not a squirrel (see p. 44).
Detail from *Allegorical "Millefleurs" Tapestry with Animals*, c. 1530–45, Bruges, Belgium. *The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Gift of Mrs. C. J. Martin in Memory of Charles Jairus Martin.*

WORD ORIGINS

. . . and How We Know Them

Etymology for Everyone

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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 *fœr* (approximately "wool animal"; *œ* 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 *fœr,* 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

the bird and its name would have all but disappeared. This may be the reason the French word supplanted the native one.

Kite is universally believed to contain an imitation of the bird's cry, though here the situation is more complicated. The oldest form of *kite* must have been **kūtja,* and the name was probably applied to the screech owl (German *Kauz,* closely related to *kite,* means "barn owl"). The sound *u* is prominent in the cry of the owl. The Old English for *owl* was *ūle.* In French, the owl is called *hibou,* in German it was once called *ūwila,* and in Modern German it is simply *Uhu.* But what is the origin of *k* and *t?* Perhaps they came from the word *cat,* because the owl is often called "cat"; for example, French *chat-huant* is literally "screeching cat." However, *kūt-* resembles *ku-ku,* the English verb *caw,* French *chouette* (another word for "owl"; a diminutive of Old French *choe*), and the names of many birds with the sounds *ki, kit-* and *kiw-* in their roots. Once the name of the owl was transferred to the kite, famous for its graceful flight (compare Engl. *glede,* an archaic synonym of *kite,* that is, "glider") rather than for a shrill plaintive voice, and **ū* (as in Engl. *oo*) changed to the vowel of the modern word, the connection between the sound and the name of the kite was lost.

Moo turned up in an English text only in the sixteenth century. Surely, it is older, but no contemporary of Kind Alfred or Chaucer recorded it, for where does such a word occur outside children's stories and essays on etymology? Both genres were sadly underdeveloped in Medieval English literature. The German for "cow" is *Kuh* (pronounced *koo*); its Dutch and most of its Scandinavian cognates (that is, related forms going back to the same parent) sound like the German word (in English, *cow* goes back to *cū*), and it has been suggested that *moo* arose under the influence of *Kuh* and so forth. Indeed, we hear *mmm* rather than *moo* from cows, but since a word, however primitive, must contain at least one syllable, some vowel had to follow *m.* The consonant *m* is produced by compressing the lips, and people protruded them, in order to finish the word. Besides this, *mū* describes lowing in a number of languages in which the name of the cow bears no resemblance to *kū.* Most likely, *moo* is a true imitative word and owes nothing to the rhyme *mū* ~ *kū.*

The *Oxford English Dictionary* informs us that even *miaow* is possibly of French origin. The spelling *miaow* may owe its existence to French. Other than that, neither cats nor French speakers had to be imported from the continent to teach the English the sound the cat makes. Words based on the imitation of natural sounds are called onomatopoeias (from Greek *onomatopoiīā: ónoma* "name" + *poi-* [make,] as in *poet,*[1] literally "maker"). For the adjective *onomatopoeic* James A. H. Murray, the main editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary,* coined the synonym *echoic.* Onomatopoeias (echoic words) play a noticeable role in our vocabulary. It is not due to chance that the name of the bird whose cry we associate with *ga-ga* (that is, with gaggling) begins with *g-. Goose, gander,* and *gannet* are closely related because the earliest form of *goose* was **gansaz,* and the German for *goose* is still *Gans.* Likewise, the noun *crow* is from the verb *crow* (Old Engl. *crāwan*); *caw-caw, kar-kar,* and *kra-kra* are the usual renderings of the crow's voice. *Rook* (Old Engl. *hrōc*) has a similar history. The difference between *crā(w)-* and *hrōc* is small. Neither the crow nor the rook is a warbler; hence the raucous combinations *kr-, hr-. Crane, grackel,* and the verb *crack* are three more siblings of *crow* and *rook.*

The consonants and vowels of human speech cannot do justice to animal cries. People try their best but come up with different results. For *cock-a-doodle-do* German has *kikiriki,* Russian *kukareku,* and French *cocorico.* The ear of English speakers missed *r* here (as it did in *caw*). The same happened to the rendering of the dove's note. Most languages use syllables like *gir(r), gur(r),* and *kur(r)* for this purpose. English, however, resorted to *coo,* which cannot have been the first attempt at imitating the dove, for, like *miaow,* it goes back to the seventeenth century. The voices of French doves and pigeons are described by the verb *roucouler.* It is a native verb. Only English cuckoos and cats are sufficiently genteel to express themselves in a foreign language.

Geese gaggle, hens cackle, pigs, rather uncharacteristically, say *oink-oink,* and little pig Robinson, the hero of Beatrix Potter's long story, when he was kidnapped by sailors, cried in despair *wee-wee,* "like a little Frenchman."[2] The witty simile is her own, but the source

of the cry is easy to guess: "This little pig said, 'Wee, wee! / I can't find my way home.'" The situations in the book and the nursery rhyme ("This Little Pig Went to Market") are similar. Usually the pig's grunt, when people attempt to reproduce it, begins with *gr-* or *khr-*. One cannot expect consistency or precision in such matters, but in naming the inhabitants of the animal world humans make the widest use of onomatopoeia. Bird names depend heavily on it.[3] The same is true of many verbs denoting our own utterances and multifarious noises. *Croak* and *creak* resemble *crow* and *rook. Squawk* (to give a loud harsh cry), *squeak, squeal, screech, scream* and *shriek* make up a distinct group, and so do *whine, whinny,* and *whimper.*

The origin of words that reproduce natural sounds is self-explanatory. French or English, *cockoo* and *miaow* are unquestionable onomatopoeias. If we assume that *growl* belongs with *gaggle, cackle, croak,* and *creak* and reproduces the sound it designates, we will be able to go a bit further. Quite a few words in the languages of the world begin with *gr-* and refer to things threatening or discordant. From Scandinavian, English has *grue,* the root of *gruesome* (an adjective popularized by Walter Scott), but Old Engl. *gryre* (horror) existed long before the emergence of *grue-*. The epic hero Beowulf fought Grendel, an almost invincible monster. Whatever the origin of the name, it must have been frightening even to pronounce it.

Things that are grim do not bode well, either. *Grumble* is a lighter, less menacing variant of *growl,* and *grouch* is its next of kin. *Grouch* surfaced only in the twentieth century in American English, but *grutch,* arguably from French, was recorded 700 years earlier. A doublet of *grutch* is *grudge,* originally again "to murmur, grumble." Another synonym of *grudge* (to grumble) is *grouse.* The first example of it in the *Oxford English Dictionary* has the date 1892 and is marked "army slang." The verb was known so little in the eighteen-nineties that even the extremely complete *Century Dictionary*[4] missed it. Later dictionaries call it informal. Regardless of whether *grouse* is related to *grouch, grutch,* and *grudge,* it looks like one of them. A grin is today a mischievous smile, but in older days to grin meant "to scowl, to show the teeth as a sign of anger," the way a wild beast does. Likewise, *grimace,* which did a lot of wandering from language to

language before it reached English, has the same root as *grin.* Finally, there is *groan,* another loud deep sound of grief and pain, and *grief* in its definition reminds us that fright, pain, and distress go together. Therefore, coming across Old English *grorn* (sorrow) and *grētan* (to weep) causes no surprise. From *grētan* we have Scots *greet* (the same meaning) and via French *regret. Greet* (to salute) once meant "to call upon, cry out, assail" (so in the languages related to English), and it may ultimately be of the same origin as *greet* (to weep).

We arrive at the conclusion that *hr-* and *gr-* tend to occur in numerous words whose meaning can be understood as "(to produce) a nonsonorous sound (of discontent)." An association between *kr-, khr-,* and *gr-* with a growl or low roar is universal. French *crier,* from which English has *cry,* is, most likely, an onomatopoeic verb despite its resemblance to Latin *quirītāre* (to cry aloud, wail). It compares easily with English *grate* (as in *grating sound,* another wanderer, like *grimace,* from Germanic to Romance and back to English), Russian *krik* (shout) (noun), and Welsh *crych* (raucous); for completeness' sake, Icelandic *hrikja* (to creak) may be added. *Gr-* made people cower in the nineteenth century, as it did in the days of Grendel and the "grinning" warriors of old. When David Copperfield decided to flee from his stepfather's business (a firm called Murdstone and Grinby!) and seek the protection of his aunt, he covered the distance from London to Dover on foot. Along the way, he sold most of his clothes to ragmen. One of the shopkeepers bargained furiously, and nothing dismayed David more than the old man's repeated shout "Goroo, goroo," with which he concluded every offer.

The criteria for calling a word echoic are not clearly defined. *Grunt* is an onomatopoeia. A grumpy person may be prone to growling and grousing, though even without *gr-* in his or her name such an individual would be equally obnoxious. Consider *hump,* which rhymes with *grump* and means "a fit of ill temper," its soft sound texture notwithstanding. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* suggests that this sense of *hump* is rooted in the idea of humping the back in sulkiness.[5] Whether such a conjecture deserves credence is a matter of opinion. Kipling had a similar explanation of the origin of

the giraffe's humps; his giraffe was irascible and spiteful. Another grumpy growler is the cur. Old Icelandic *kurra* means "to grumble." The chances that *cur* is an onomatopoeic word are good but not overwhelming.

Gr-gr represents not only the sound of growling and grumbling. A grinding wheel also goes *gr-gr*. The most important product of grinding is flour, and several *gr-* words denote small particles; *grit* (sand) is one of them. *Grits* is merely the plural of *grit*. Dictionaries pass by the origin of *nitty-gritty*, a word that became known some 40 years ago (the earliest citation is dated 1963), but it would be strange if the person who coined *nitty-gritty* on the analogy of such pairs as *willy-nilly* did not think of grit. *Groats* and its partial synonym *grouts* mean "hulled grain"; like *grit*, *groats* is traceable to Old English.

Old French *gruel*, the etymon of Engl. *gruel*, goes back to **grūt-* with a diminutive suffix. Gruel is a thin porridge made from oatmeal, chiefly used as an article of diet for invalids, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains. On this article of diet Oliver Twist and his cheerless companions lived for years in the workhouse. According to Mr. Bumble, the villainous beadle, liquid food prevented the boys from rebelling. Dickens must have known the idiom *to get one's gruel* (to die). (From some such phrase the verb *gruel* [exhaust, disable] was coined in the middle of the nineteenth century; hence *grueling experience*.) The most unexpected sibling of *grit* is *great*. In Old English, it meant not only "bulky" but also "thick" and "coarse," presumably, "coarsely ground," "gritty." Later the sense "big" overshadowed and ousted all others.[6]

It may seem that we wield a key to the etymology of innumerable words. However, reality is less rosy than it appears to an enthusiastic beginner. Each word mentioned above has been the object of intense research. We know when *grim*, *grin*, *grit*, and so forth were first recorded in English, what they meant at that time, and how some of the old senses yielded to new ones. A net has been cast broadly for words in other languages in the hope of finding reliable cognates. Various look-alikes have been examined and often discarded as irrelevant. For example, *coarse*, *crass*, and *gross*, despite their *cr-* ~ *gr-* and reference to things rough and thick, did not enter into the picture. They are borrowings from Latin, in which their traces are lost.

Gross, a close synonym of *great* (thick), seems to be an especially attractive candidate for comparison. A "thick" coin is called *groot* in Dutch (borrowed as *groat* into English), and the Dutch for *great* is also *groot*. The same coin gained currency in Germany *(Groschen)*. Opinions are divided on whether *groot*$_1$ and *groot*$_2$ belong together. Most recent dictionaries keep them apart. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* accepted the nearly incontestable etymology of Engl. *great* from "coarsely ground" with reservations. On the other hand, some language historians connect *grue(some)* and *grate* (to rub). They gloss the Germanic root as "recoil" and derive it from the meaning "to be offended, to be grated on by."[7]

Even if ties between *great* and *grit—groats—grout* and between the three of them and *grue(some)* were more obvious, the problem of their etymology would not have been solved by classifying them with onomatopoeic words. In some general way, *growl*, *grumble*, *grin*, and *groan* belong together, but their common "echoic" part is only *gr-*. The other sounds also need an explanation. Then there is the question of chronology. *Growl* has been known from books only since the eighteenth century; its similarity with late Middle Engl. *grolle*, *groule*, and *gurle* may be accidental. *Grumble* turned up first in the sixteenth century. Its predecessor, without the suffix *-le*, was *grumme*. In the absence of *grumme*, we might have supposed that *grumble* is *rumble*, with g- added under the influence of other vaguely synonymous *gr-* words. *Grin* and *groan* were well established in Old English and have bona fide counterparts elsewhere. The late attestation of *growl* and *grumble* is no proof of their young age, but since not all words have existed forever, both may have been coined approximately when they made their way into books.

Words sharing an onomatopoeic combination of sounds are like children living in the same foster home at the same time: they form a close-knit group without being related to one another. Such words can appear at any time, because *gr-* will always evoke a mental image of a muted roar and a scraping noise. They may arise in any century and in any community, provided speakers have *g-* and *r-* in

their language. When we label *cry, crow, growl,* and *grit* onomatopoeic, we clarify the sought-for connection between words and things but leave many questions unanswered. *Oink-oink* is an easy item for an etymologist, *grunt* is more complicated, while the origin of *growl* and *grumble* requires a serious investigation. Plato, about whose ideas of word origins more will be said later, dismissed onomatopoeia as insignificant, though he believed that the letter ρ (rho) was "a good tool for [expressing] all kinds of movement." Our task is not to reject the existence of onomatopoeia (this would be counterproductive) or minimize its role (this would be incautious), but to show its place in etymological pursuits.

The more expressive human speech is, the more "echoic" words it contains. This is true of dialects, which give free rein to language creativity, and of children, when, overwhelmed by emotion, they hurry to describe a dramatic event they have witnessed. However, as the excursus on *gr-* has shown, traces of sound imitation are plentiful everywhere. In Standard English, we find *tap-tap-tap* alongside *rap, clap, flap,* and *slap, pat-pat, pit-a-pat,* and *bang.* Their origin, like that of *ding-dong* and *ping-pong,* is not in doubt. It seems that *splash, swish,* and *buzz* also render accurately the sounds made by an object falling into water, a whip moving forcibly through the air, and an insect humming as it flies.

People resort to onomatopoeias when they coin words for beating, falling, breaking, jostling, thrusting, crushing, crashing, and the like. But once such words become regular nouns and verbs, they often develop in unpredictable directions. For example, Medieval Latin *clocca* (bell, chime), possibly borrowed from Irish, may be an onomatopoeia (it reproduces the sound metal gives forth when struck). We will accept this etymology for the sake of the argument, though other derivations of *clocca* exist. The word was known in many countries, including the Netherlands. It is usually believed that in the fourteenth century, Flemish masters introduced clocks into England, and since bells had traditionally been used to mark time, Dutch *klocke* acquired a new meaning on English soil. The distance between "bell" and "clock" is not so long as to blur the picture entirely. But then we turn to French and discover, beside *cloche* (bell), its dialectal variants *cloke* and *cloque* that designated a bell-shaped garment. English borrowed *cloke* as *cloak,* and it is now totally divorced from its "echoic" past. (*The Century Dictionary* explains: "In the sixteenth century the cloak was an article of every-day wear, and was made with large loose armholes, through which the sleeves of the under-garment were passed, as is seen in portraits of Henry VIII. and the nobles of his court.") Equally removed from that past is Irish *clog,* which means "clock" as well as "blister" and "bubble" (because both are round; no connection with Engl. *clog*).[8]

The sounds of a word may also change beyond recognition. Engl. *laugh* was pronounced *hlahhian* about two thousand years ago, with *-hh-* having the phonetic value of *ch* in Scots *loch.* It was a word like *chuck(le), cough* (earlier *cohettan* [shout]), and *cluck-cluck,* an imitation of a deep guttural sound. Later, *h* before *l* was dropped, while *-hh-* changed to *f* (as it also did in *cough*), and only the spelling *-gh-* reminds us today of how things once stood. *Laugh* has stopped being an onomatopoeia, and we are fortunate that we can retrace its history (we were also fortunate in dealing with *clock* and *cloak),* because luck does not always attend rambles through language thickets.

We recognize the imitative nature of *tap-tap* and *pat-pat.* The order of consonants and the quality of the vowel between them are of little consequence, for *tup-tup, top-top,* and *pit-a-pat* would do equally well, and a pat *(p-a-t),* if dictionaries are right, is a gentle tap *(t-a-p).* The Latin for "foot" was *pes,* its root being *ped-* (as in *pedal* and *pedicure*). The Greek cognate of *ped-* is *pod-* (as in *podagra* [gout] and *podium*). *Ped* resembles Engl. *pad* (a hairy paw). Feet exist for walking, and, sure enough, *pad (footpad)* can mean "road" (as, for instance, in *gentleman of the pad* [highwayman]); *paddle,* too, consists of the root *pad* and the suffix *-le,* and paths are for pedestrians to pad-pad them.

A daring etymology explains Greek *pod-,* Latin *ped-,* Engl. *pad,* and Engl. *path* as developments of the originally onomatopoeic complexes *pat-pat, pad-pad.*[9] It is a tempting etymology, but it passes over some chronological difficulties, already familiar to us from the discussion of *grumble, grit,* and other *gr*-words. *Pod-* and *ped-* date

back to antiquity. *Pad* appeared in print in 1554, and its earliest recorded meaning was "a bundle of straw" and "a soft stuffed saddle." Perhaps wolves and foxes were known to have pads even then, but no occurrence of *pad* (paw) turned up before 1790. Northern German and Flemish have *patte* and *pad* (the sole of the foot); Engl. *pad* with reference to animals looks like a loan from the continent. *Path,* which traces back to Old English, is related to German *Pfad.* English vagabonds borrowed it in its northern guise as *pad* (road). In distant lands, a doublet of *path* occurs only in an old Iranian language. An etymology based on onomatopoeia presents its data as timeless and free from national and geographical borders, and the rather predictable character of imitating natural sounds in human speech makes the most dubious conclusions of this type look good. Perhaps *pod-, ped-, pad* (road), and *path* are imitative after all. This is the most one can say.

If an onomatopoeic word is an echo of some natural sound—from the growl of a disgruntled cur to an accelerated heartbeat—we expect it to resemble its source. *Gr-gr* satisfies that condition. *Bow-wow, yap-yap, bark-bark, hee-haw* (note the donkey Eeyore in *Winnie-the-Pooh*), and *quack-quack* are tolerable substitutes for animal cries.[10] Our consonants cannot capture the acoustic signal produced by slapping, bursting, and marching, and we make do with *pat-pat* and *tap-tap.* We follow the development of *cloak* and *laugh* and observe the well-documented changes they have undergone over time. But it is better to avoid bold steps that would make alleged echoes too distant from the original rumble.

Rudyard Kipling, our occasional guide through the jungle of word origins, wrote a story about Rikki-tikki-tavi, a mongoose, and his great war with cobras. One of the characters in his story is Chuchundra, a muskrat, a little beast that always crept by the wall and never had spirit enough to run out into the middle of the room. Not everybody is like Chuchundra. Some linguists place themselves at the center of their universe and detect onomatopoeia everywhere. Their vision is sharp, sometimes too sharp. Here is a case in point. *Bat* may be regarded as imitative of a heavy dull blow. Vowels, as usual in such syllables, vary. Beside *bat,* English has *beat,* Russian

has *bit'* (the apostrophe indicates a special pronunciation of *t*), and Latin had *battāre* (compare Engl. *batter, battery,* and *battle*). *Bat* (stick, club) seems to belong here, too. Difficulties arise when *bat* (bundle) (recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) and *bat* (river islet; short ridge; corner of a field) (recorded in Wright's dictionary)[11] are co-opted into the *bat-battāre* group.[12] *Pit* in *pit-a-pat* seems to be an unobjectionable onomatopoeia, and so does *pitter-patter. Patter* does not even need the support of *pitter* (compare *the patter of children's feet*). But *pit* (the stone of a fruit) and *pit* (a hole in the ground) are less clear. Did they acquire their meaning from *pit* (the sound of something small striking, as a raindrop), to quote a dictionary definition? A positive answer needs a good deal of proof.

It also happens that the sounds supposedly common to a group of "echoic" words are not understood as an echo of anything. In English, German, Dutch, and the Scandinavian languages, several dozen verbs and nouns either begin or once began with *gn-* and *kn-.* (In English, *g-* and *k-* were dropped before *n,* and only spelling occasionally hints at the earlier pronunciation.) Consider *gnaw, gnarl, gnash, knuckle,* and *knob,* among many others. They refer to various objects made of wood or bone (and a knuckle is just bone), to crushing bone with the teeth, gnawing and nibbling, and, more broadly, to knocking, notching, and nudging. The trouble is that *gn-* and *kn-* hardly convey the idea of processing a hard substance. One can imagine almost anything when hearing *gn-gn-gn* or *kn-kn-kn.*

How many onomatopoeic words exist in Modern English? The answer depends on the generosity of the teller. In any case, outside the *moo* group, reference to onomatopoeia may (and often does) clarify the connection between the world full of noises and their reflection in words, but it stops short of providing full-scale etymologies. The case of *growl* and *grumble* is typical. However secure the clue that the combination *gr-* may provide to the initial impulse behind language creativity, it fails to account for *-owl* and *-umble.*

Thud, like *bat,* perhaps suggests a dull heavy sound, but if the inconclusive data on the history of *thud* can be relied on, in Old English it had a vowel like French *u* or German *ü* (that is, it sounded

much "thinner"), had two syllables, and meant "to thrust, push," possibly, "to beat." In the full light of history (in the sixteenth century), *thud* first meant "blast" or "gust," so that its onomatopoeic character begins to fade. *Thump* rhymes with *dump, bump,* and *jump.* Even if *-ump* describes throwing things or moving with great force, the origin of each member of the group remains a mystery. Dictionaries tell us that *dump* and *bump* may have come to England from Scandinavia, the first in the fourteenth, the second in the sixteenth century. *Jump* is roughly contemporaneous with *dump* and resembles several words in other languages. *Hump* and *lump* are reminiscent of *bump* in that all three denote swellings, and it is not improbable that all of them once referred to protuberances, with the later development being "obstacle; colliding with, getting over an obstacle" and as a result "jump(ing)." If this reconstruction is right, setting up the onomatopoeic group *-ump* loses most of its appeal.

We may press the matter further. In Danish, *gumpe* (to ride on a bumpy road) has a synonym *skumpe; gumpe* also means " to jump." Hans Christian Andersen knew a story of Klumpe-Dumpe, who fell off the stairs but later married a princess and supposedly lived happily ever after. Several centuries ago, a German verb *gumpen* (to jump) was current, and a few verbs of the same type with initial *ts-, dz-,* and *j-* have been recorded in modern Italian dialects. In trying to make sense of this jumble, while stumbling and tumbling at every turn, one is prone to hear noises all over the place; yet the picture comes out blurred. If *bump* and *dump* are Scandinavian loans, at least in English they were not spontaneous creations, and the onomatopoeic association may have arisen because many similar words referred to falling and jumping. We are also left wondering whether Scandinavian, German, Italian, and English verbs emerged independent of one another and why people needed *jump* if they already had *hop* and *spring.* (The sixteenth century seems to have been prime time for jumpers: the verbs *bound* and *gambol* emerged at about the same time.) These are some of the questions facing the etymologists who realize that the road they have taken cannot be covered in one elegant leap.

By way of conclusion, we will examine briefly the history of *boy.* The earliest recorded example of this word goes back to 1240, though the proper name *Boi(a)* turned up much earlier. In literary works, it first designated servants and other persons of low ranks and was a term of contempt and abuse. *Boy* (executioner) may have existed, too. At present, only compounds like *bellboy* and the colonial or derogatory use of *boy* (servant) remind us of the otherwise forgotten medieval senses. The easiest thing would be to dismiss *boy* as a baby word, for *ba-ba* and *bo-bo* are the names infants give everywhere to those who take care of them. However, the meaning of "boy" does not quite fit "daddy," "mummy," and "granny."

B-words often refer to things and actions in some way connected with fright. The most primitive of them is the English verb *boo* (to hoot). Devils and devilish creatures regularly meet us here. Apparently, evil spirits used to strike fear in people's hearts by screaming *boo!* Identical words have been recorded in Sanskrit, Classical Greek, Latin, Slavic, and Celtic. For example, Russian *buka* is almost indistinguishable from Engl. *booga,* and their kin are Dutch *bui* (gust, squall), Russian *bui* (a violent man), and all kinds of bogeymen that boggle the mind, bug us (and our computers), and make us bow to their authority. A friendly version of booing is still present in the game known as peek-a-boo in America and bo-peep in England. Several occurrences of *boy* (devil) have been found in Chaucer.[13] German *Bube* displays the same unexpected blend of the meanings "scoundrel" and "a dear child."

It seems that two words—one from baby talk ("baby, brother") and one onomatopoeic ("booer, a noisy spirit")—met in English and produced the meaning *boy* (a person of a lower rank): neither a sweet baby nor a devil, rather an imp. The change to "a male child" happened later. If *boy* developed along the lines suggested here, it shows once again how much has to be done after we have detected an "echo" behind a common word.[14]