

WRITTEN IN STONE

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE STONE AGE AND
THE ORIGINS OF MODERN LANGUAGE

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Bha, to speak

If you have something worth saying, say it out loud. The Neolithic word for speaking has the sense of a proclamation – when a man spoke, others listened. In English, the word that comes closest to this meaning is *banns*, the announcement of a wedding that must be read three times.

In modern English, a *ban* is a prohibition, but in the Old Germanic languages, a *ban* was a call that went out to everyone, a summons to convene or to fight. That's why *banal* means something that everyone does. To *abandon* someone is to leave them beyond reach of the ban, and to *banish* them is to send them so far away that they couldn't hear even if you called.

In Ancient Greek, the sound was softened. *Pheme* meant a voice and *phasis* was speech – so a *euphemism* is literally a good word, though a mealy-mouthed one. *Blasphemy* is speaking against the gods, which might provoke the gods to strike you dumb with *aphasia*, the loss of speech.

A clear voice in Greek was *phone*, which gives us *phonetics*, the symbols that record vocal sounds. If prehistoric man had developed a system of phonetics, we would have a much clearer idea of the grammar that strung these early words together – but history starts when civilisations begin writing things down, which is why the Stone Age tribes of the steppes were prehistoric in the first place.

Thanks to *phone* we have the *telephone*, which enables 'speaking at a distance', and the *gramophone*, which began as the *phonogram* but was preceded by the *phonograph*, literally meaning

a clearly written voice. Early gramophone records used to split *symphonies* onto six or eight discs; nowadays, you can cram 1,000 symphonies onto a *mobile phone*.

Alexander Graham Bell's device changed the world; at least, one of them did. He also developed the *photophone*, which used light to transmit sounds. Bell called it his greatest invention; the public was sceptical, and in 1880 *The New York Times* asked sardonically: 'Does Prof. Bell intend to connect Boston and Cambridge with a line of sunbeams hung on telegraph posts, and, if so, what diameter are the sunbeams to be? Will it be necessary to insulate them against the weather?' Though his invention was the forerunner of wireless radio, scientists couldn't find a reliable way to send messages on sunrays. The clouds kept getting in the way.

The Roman word for speaking was *fantem*; the past tense, spoken, was *fatum*. It's obvious that *Fate* is the voice of destiny, but more unexpected is the derivation of *infant*, a child too young to speak – and *infantry*, the common soldiery who fight the battles but have no say in the strategy or politics of war: 'Theirs not to reason why.' Not everything can be expressed in words, of course: some things are *ineffable*.

'Let us now praise *famous* men': that syllable *fa* talks its way into all sorts of concepts. A word before the main speech is a *preface*. A chap who is easy to speak to is *affable*. A story that speaks for itself is a *fable*, and a man *confesses* his sins by speaking them.

A *bandit* isn't likely to confess, but then his etymology is a bit more obscure. He might be *banned*; on the other hand, he might be part of a *band*, and that comes from **bhand** – the original Indo-European word meaning to *bind*.

Thatched roofs are made with *bundles* of straw, but grass and branches can also be woven together by *bending* them. The strip of cloth that ties the bundle is a *riband* or a *ribbon*. Knot a ribbon round your head and it's a *bandana*; tie it around a wound and it's a *bandage*. Wind one round your waist and you have a *cummerbund*.

With a soft 'f' sound, **bhand** is the root of all *faith*, which binds us together, and *federation*, which is a bundle of states or countries all tied up with ribbon ... or red tape.

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Dik, to point to

When the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez created the fictional village of Macomba in his masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he imagined it at first as a collection of mud huts on a riverbank: 'The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point.'

For the original speakers of Indo-European, that is how their universe was. They pointed, and made up names, and in many cases those names have stuck for 8,000 years. But even the act of pointing had to have a word: **dik**. In our civilised era, it's rude to point, so we say *indicate*.

We point with our fingers but we also count with them – that's why *digit* has a double meaning. Toes are digits too: that

linguistic quirk carries a strong suggestion that our ancestors used to count on their feet as well as their hands. The paradox is that *digital* machines don't count in tens but in twos, using the binary system of 1s and 0s.

The Gothic word for a foxglove was *fingerbut*, meaning a hat for your finger. The Romans called it *digitalis*, which is the name that the eighteenth-century physician William Withering gave to the heart medicine he extracted from foxgloves after noticing that herbal cures containing the plant helped patients who suffered from dropsy. People tend not to get dropsy nowadays, but that isn't due solely to the effectiveness of *digitalis*: it's also because doctors now call it oedema, or swelling of the extremities caused by congestive heart disease.

Digitation is pointing things out, but when a conjuror misdirects his audience, then – hey presto! You get *prestidigitation*. *Preste* is French for nimble.

A *dictum* is a saying, an opinion set down as an aphorism, and a *dictery* is a witticism. The *dictionary* of Dr Johnson was full of both. Anything beyond the description of words is *indicable*. And the one thing a dictionary doesn't need is an *index*. (How is index a *dik* word? Well, it's Latin, and the plural is *indices*.)

The composer Frederick Delius *dictated* his compositions after he went blind from the effects of syphilis. Delius was a ferociously short-tempered man, and behaved like a *dictator* to his young assistant, Eric Fenby, who ended up nursing the old man through his final illness – an awkward *predicament*. Fenby's faint consolation, apart from having a hand in several great pieces of music (one, *Fantastic Dance*, is *dedicated* to him), was that he had to cope with only one tyrant: it is rare to find a gathering of dictators, but when it does happen, there's a word for it – a *dictature*.

To point something out before it happens is to *predict* it, to countersay something is to *contradict* it and to lay charges against a suspect is to *indict* him – it's pronounced 'indite' because the Middle English word was *enditen*, to write down.

After that comes either *vindication* or a *verdict*. The evidence will be examined by a member of the *judiciary*, who will *adjudicate* or *judge* the case without *prejudice*.

A blessing is a *benediction*; a curse is a *malediction*; a mumble is bad *diction*. That's enough to make anyone *vindictive*, from the Latin *vindicta* ... which in Italian became *vendetta*. The Latin *vindicare* was pronounced *venchier* in Old French – a useful word in the Middle Ages and one that the English adopted eagerly. We used it with a *vengeance* in *vengeful*, *avenge* and *revenge*.

Another Latin word, *predicare*, meant to proclaim or declare, to issue an *edict*. It became *prescher* in Old French, which is where our *preacher* comes from. It is likely that *teacher* is derived in a similar way: the Latin *dicere* is to say, which became *zeikhan* in Old High German and *teikn* in Old Norse. By the time it reached Middle English, the dialect of the Chaucer era, it was pronounced *techen*.

If you want to say something in song, that's a *ditty*. If you want to say it again, that's *ditto*. We could go on forever with this, because it's *addictive*.

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Es, to exist

Everything that *is* must *exist*. 'I think, therefore I am,' said the philosopher Rene Descartes, and so he *was*, but Neolithic man had reached that conclusion millennia before him. That's why *es* had a double meaning – to be, and to be true.

In Latin, to be was *esse*, an *essential* verb. Ancient wisdom held that the universe was composed of four elements – earth, wind, fire and water – but some mystics claimed there had to be something binding and vivifying them all, a life force, a godhead ... a fifth *essence*. The Greeks believed it was the air that the gods breathed, permeating all matter. Fifth was *quinta*, so metaphysicians spoke of the *quintessence*. Victorian scientists believed it was an invisible substance that transmitted light and radio waves, and called it the ether. These days, physicists use the word quintessence to cover some unknown sort of dark energy that drives the accelerating expansion of the universe.

Ether isn't there, of course. It is entirely *absent*. *Ab* in Latin means away, so *ab-esse* gives us *absence*. The opposite is to be right in the middle of things, or *inter-esse*, which is an

interesting thought. Einstein said that compound *interest* was the 'greatest mathematical wonder of all time' and 'the eighth wonder of the world ... He that understands it, earns it. He that doesn't, pays it.' Don't be fooled by his wit: Albert was clever with equations but terrible with cash. To afford a divorce from his first wife, he had to promise her every penny of the Nobel prize money that he hadn't even won yet.

For complex reasons of Latin grammar, *prae-esse*, which means before being, becomes *praesens* when it's a participle. (A participle is a verb that is pretending to be a noun, such as a 'happening' ... as opposed to a participator, which is anyone who loves to join in and is generally a bit of a party animal.)

Praesens means the *present*, the here and now. *Presently* doesn't; it means soon, all in good time; at least that will give us a chance to make ourselves *presentable*. *Presence* can be impressive demeanour and charismatic *presentation*. The *presence-chamber* of a palace was the grand reception room where the king met ambassadors and *representatives* of the people – not so that they could be *presented* to him, but so they could be admitted into his august presence. On the other hand, a *presence* can be something ethereal: an incorporeal being that hovers on the edge of the senses. And in a spookily confusing way, a *presension* doesn't even derive from the present: it's a foreboding, a pre-sense of what hasn't yet happened.

Then there is *pro-esse*, to be in favour of something, which survives in English as *pro-ess*. To make the word easier to say, it gained a consonant, became *prodesse* and turned into *prosper* as well as *proud*. *Pride* goes before a fall, because it's one of the deadly sins – and *sin* is an *es* word too. *Esse*, to be, equates to *sinfulness*: thanks to Adam and that apple, our mere existence is a state of *original sin*.

The Greek word for *existence* is *ontos*. It gives us *entity*. *Ontology* is the study of being. The *ontological argument* is a theoretical proof of the existence of God: the very fact that we're here and capable of imagining a supreme deity means that there

has to be one. Untology, logically, ought to be the opposite, the study of unbeing and atheism, but it isn't.

Ontologically, existence is truth, because anything that is truly real. If that doesn't make immediate sense, say it slowly, like a tranced-out hippy ... truly real, man. *Es* is truth, or *sooth*. *Forsooth* means truly, though it always was a sarcastic word, and a *soothsayer* is a charlatan who foretells the future. But a *soothfast* man is loyal and truthful, and to *soothe* was originally to prove a fact. It came to mean the opposite, convincing people that a falsehood was actually true, and by extension *soothing* became flattery and cajoling – which is how it came to mean mitigating pain and calming the nerves.

Because *ontos* was existence, the connected word *eteos* meant reality, and *etumon* was the true or literal meaning of a word. And that is your actual *etymology*.



Gn, to beget

In the *beginning*, there was either *Genesis* or *genes*, depending on your views about human *origins*. What is certain is that the Indo-European root **gn** has *generated* hundreds of words about creation – far more than can be examined here.

Take the three dozen words ending with *-genesis* as a suffix: there's *oogenesis*, the process by which an egg is formed, and *schizogenesis*, which is reproduction by splitting in two like an amoeba, and *palingenesis*, which literally means born again – *palin* means again in Ancient Greek: hence, a *palindrome* is a word that reads the same backwards and forwards, such as *eve* or *rotor* (but not *Bolton*. As Monty Python's John Cleese told Michael Palin, 'A palindrome of Bolton would be Notlob ... it don't work!')

There are even more words that simply end in *-gen*. *Allergens* produce allergies, *hallucinogens* produce hallucinations and *gases* produce gases ... but the exception to the rule is *hydrogen*, which produces water, not hydras. When everything produced is the same, it's *homogeneous*.

In the Book of *Genesis*, Adam begat Seth and Seth begat Enos, and that was the *genealogy* of mankind ... it's bad luck on Seth, who is everybody's ancestor, that he's overshadowed by his more famous brothers, Cain and Abel. The British aristocracy had the same problem with *primogeniture*: the oldest son inherits the title, even if he's a *degenerate*, while the younger ones are pushed to the side. The *original* meaning of *gentle* was the first-born: in Latin, *gentilis* meant from a respectable family, and *gentil* was an Old French word that survives in English as *genteel*. A *gentleman* was a son of good breeding, a member of

the *gentry*. A lady, strictly speaking, doesn't have to be well-born, so long as she's good at baking bread: the word is derived from the Old English *blaef-diger*, meaning loaf-kneader.

In *general* (from the Latin *genus*, a group of things), **gn** starts everything. It's in our *genetics*, which come from our *progenitors*; even our *gender* is proclaimed by our *genitals*. *Pregnancy*, *progeny*, *congenital*, *indigenous*: **gn** is *regenerated* whenever language plays the *Generation Game*.

But it goes far beyond that. Our *genius* is the spirit that attends each one of us from birth – it is rarely intellectual, and much more likely to influence our moods, desires and destiny. Far more of us have a genius, say, for idleness or gluttony than for cinema, which is why for every great movie there are 20 bad ones in the same *genre*.

In French, *gens* are people, so *gens d'armes* are men-at-arms – and *gendarmes* are policemen. The Latin *gens* means a clan, and the word was adopted in Hebrew. That's why non-Jews are *Gentiles*: they are foreigners, not part of the group.

Ingenuous is a **gn** word: *in gens* is within the clan, and so trustworthy, frank and honest. An *ingenue* in the theatre is an artless, innocent girl. *Ingenuity* is another **gn** word, signifying a native wit bred in the bone. But *genuine* is a wholly unrelated word. Like *genuflect*, it's all about the knee. The Roman word for a knee was *genu*, and *genuinus* meant that certainty a father feels when he sits his own son on his knee. It takes an expert to identify what's authentic, but everyone possesses a natural instinct for the genuine article.

As with gnats and gnus, the 'g' in front of the 'n' is sometimes silent. That's why *gnaive* and *gnatal* are not the accepted spellings, and why the angels didn't sing '*Gnoel Gnoel*' at the *Gnativity*; they are all **gn** words, though. The 'g' disappears in *nation*, *native*, *nature* and *innate*, but it stays stubbornly in place at the end of *benign*, even though we don't pronounce it. *Benign* used to mean well born, and *malign* was the opposite – the 'g' makes itself heard in *benignant* and *malignant*.

That errant 'g' comes and goes in words based on the Greek *gnosis*, meaning *cognition* – the higher thoughts that are born in the mind. *Agnostics* use the 'g', for example, but *gnostics* don't; *prognosis* and *diagnosis* do, and *knowledge* doesn't. The verb to *know* has two senses: it can mean mental comprehension but also sexual familiarity. 'Adam *knew* his wife, Eve, and she conceived' ... and we're back to Genesis.

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Kwi, to live

To get the first fact over with *quickly*: *quick* doesn't only mean fast. Its original meaning was alive, and it's that sense which we invoke when we talk about being *cut to the quick* – right to the heart and down to the soul. The quick is also the tender skin at the base of the fingernail, the place where the cuticle stops and living flesh starts. In pregnancy, *quickening* is the stage when the unborn child first starts to kick.

'He shall come to judge the quick and the dead,' warns the Book of Common Prayer, and that implies that everyone, living and dead, will face the heavenly accounting procedures. The phrase became a favourite of cowboy pulp novelists, who took it to mean that there were two kinds of gunfighters ... Louis L'Amour, the biggest-selling Western writer ever (200 million copies and rising) named one of his novels *The Quick and the Dead*; it was also the title of a cowboy movie with Sharon Stone in 1996.

When a dry stream *quickened*, it began to flow; *quick* coals were burning; a quick mind was lively; a quick disposition was hasty and hot-tempered – and it was not until the mid-1500s that quick came to mean rapid or swift.

The greatest *quick-change* performer ever was Leopoldo

Fregoli, a Victorian music artiste who could swap costumes so fast that he had to allow journalists backstage to prove his act was not done with identical twins. He could run off one side of the stage in the rags of a street musician and, in the time it took him to emerge on the other side, be transformed into a drag act wearing full lace and bustle. A rare delusional condition called Fregoli syndrome is named after him: sufferers believe that various people are really one and the same, cunningly disguised.

In Latin, the 'w' sound is hardened, and *kwi* became 'vi'. *Vivus* meant life, and in Romance countries (that is, former Roman colonies where Latin was spoken) a shout of *viva* still means long live. *Viva voce* meant by word of mouth. Anything that can support life is *viable*. Living creatures can be nurtured in a *vivarium*, which nowadays are glass cases where colonies of fish or insects are bred for study. The Romans used *vivaria* to fatten up fish and fowl, right up to the moment when they landed fresh on the table.

Some snakes lay eggs; others give birth to live young, which is called *viviparation*. That's where *vipers* get their name from. Viper is also a name for the lowest kind of human being – but not because snakes crawl in the dust. And it's not a *vivid* allusion to the snake's poisonous fangs, or to the story of Adam and Eve. A viper was believed in the sixteenth century to be the most malignant of all creatures, because it was said to kill its own mother at birth by eating its way out of her body.

A *vivandier* makes his living selling *victuals* to the army. If he's a Shetlander, he might supply *vivda*, which is meat dried in the air without being salted; most Scots would prefer *vivers*, the dialect name for general provisions and eatables. However you label it, food is *vital*; we need it to *survive*. And if you're half dead, *aquae vitae*, the water of life (what the Scots call whisky), will *revive* you.

In Ancient Greece, *kwi* hardened to a 'guei' sound; *su-gueiyes* meant living well. The goddess of health was *Hygeia*, whose name itself is *hygienic*. She is usually depicted as a young woman

with a live snake in one hand and a goblet in the other – sometimes the snake is drinking from the cup. Whether it's a viper, and whether it's whisky, the classicists cannot say.

Perhaps ironically, life is not derived from *vivus* but from the Germanic root *liv*, which comes from the Indo-European word **lip** – to be sticky. To the early farmers, life was something to cling to, like glue. Fat is also sticky, which is why *lipoma* are fatty tumours and *liposuction* is a quick way to lose weight by vacuuming fat away. Perhaps that's why diets never work for long – etymologically speaking, fat is a fact of life.



Ma, mother

If this book arrived from *Amazon*, be grateful it was only the postman who brought it. A visit from the warrior women dubbed *Amazonides* by the Ancient Greeks was a terrifying business, whether it was plunder they wanted or something else. Three thousand years ago, this all-female tribe that farmed and hunted on the banks of the Thermodon, in modern-day Ukraine, went annually in search of men. Some they enslaved, but most they bedded and, quite often, killed. The morning after the night before could be a nasty business with an *Amazonian* girlfriend. When their babies were born, all the boys were strangled; the girls were taught to read, plough and fight, and when they reached puberty their right breasts were burned off, the better to hurl a javelin or fire a bow. That's why the Greeks called them *a-mazos*, meaning without a breast.

In 1542 AD, the conquistador Francisco de Orellana was exploring the rainforests of Brazil when he was attacked by a party of long-haired, bow-wielding natives ululating in high-pitched shrieks. He escaped, but by the time he returned to Spain, the tale had grown; Orellana's stories usually did, since a good yarn helped him secure investment for future expeditions. He told the Spanish emperor Charles V that the South American jungle was ruled by warrior women ... and that's why the river and the 5.5m square kilometres (2.1 square miles) of forest surrounding it are known as *Amazonia*. Nearly half a millennium later, a Seattle businessman launched an online shop from his garage, and because he wanted a brand name that began with an 'A' and sounded big, he called it *Amazon*.

Ma meant *mother* 8,000 years ago, because the sound evoked a baby's cry. Both the Romans and the Greeks called their mothers *mamma*; the English upper classes say *mama*, the French say *maman* and the Irish get back to basics with *ma*. An Indian wet nurse is an *amah*.

Prehistoric man regarded the sky as father of humankind and the earth as mother. The Tatars, a nomadic people who have lived north of the Black Sea for at least 1,500 years, call the earth *mama*. Sometimes they dug up skeletons or even whole corpses, preserved in peat or permafrost, of huge creatures that they called *mammonts* – 'the monsters that burrow in the earth'. French explorers misheard the word, and that's where *mam-moths* came from.

The Ancient Greek for mother is *meter*, and the mother city Athens was their *metropolis*. A *metroscope* was a tool for listening to a child in the womb; a *metrotome* was a surgical tool used in Caesarian sections. Anything to do with the *metropole* was naturally *metropolitan*, including a city's underground railway or *Metro*.

In Latin, *mater* is mother, but not all mothers – only the kindly, nurturing, *maternal* types. All *mammals* suckle their young, but *motherhood* is more complicated for human females: first comes *matrimony*, next the *marital* bed and then the *maternity* dress, as a baby grows in the *matrix* or womb. A *married* woman with experience of childbirth is a *matron*. To *matriculate* usually means to have your name inserted in the rolls of your college or *alma mater*, but *matriculation* can also mean to adopt a child.

To the Greeks, *Mother Nature* was Demeter; at her annual festival it was the custom for her devotees to whip themselves with the bark of trees. The bark was symbolic of how the life force, anchored in the trunk of the tree, reached out every spring through the branches and twigs to its tips, and put out buds. The tree is the mother of its own leaves – the *mater* and the *material*. All life, according to the *materialist* viewpoint, is merely *matter*. Anything *immaterial*, of course, doesn't matter.

The Roman word for wood is *materia*. In Portuguese, the word is similar but slightly more nasal, which is why the thickly wooded archipelago of islands north of Tenerife, and the sweet strong wine that is casked there, are called *Madeira*.

Mother's ruin, in the nineteenth century, was gin, whereas *mother's milk* was brandy. *Mother's blessing* was laudanum, a mixture of brandy and tincture of opium. In the 1960s, *mother's little helper* was the tranquiliser Miltown, a dangerously addictive muscle relaxant, or perhaps the sedative Valium ... as well as the title of a top-ten hit in 1966 for the Rolling Stones.

Numerare in Latin was to count. As well as *numeral*, it gives us *supernumerary*, which used to mean left over or surplus to numbers; these days, thanks to a touch of bureaucratic legerdemain, it means an employee who is not, strictly speaking, on the books but who can be called into action when required ... one of many *anomalies* in the modern office. *Nummary* is dealing in coins, because *numismatics* is the study of money.

The Greek *nemein* means to distribute. Never slow when it came to handouts, the medieval English turned that into *nimel*, to take – though they had to be *nimble* to get anything. That was shortened to the slang *nym*, a thief. His *nimbles* were his light fingers. If the city guards laid hold of him, he'd met his *Nemesis*: she was the goddess of vengeance who distributed men's fates. Like a dark angel, Nemesis had wings so that she could swoop down to mete out justice all the faster. One of her duties was to defend the memory of the dead from insults. Some accounts say that Nemesis, and not Leda, was the real mother of Helen of Troy ... but that was probably a *misnomer*.

The past tense of *nimel* is *nume*, which means taken. Take away all feeling and we're left *numb*. A *numb hand*, in Dickens's London, was a clumsy oaf. *Numskull* is such a stupid word that it has lost its own 'b'. What a dimwit ... a real *numby* ... not deserving of any other name.



Numbers

Early Indo-European speakers counted in tens, as we do. Their names for numbers have changed little as new lan-

guages evolved: look how similar the French *un deux troix* or the German *ein zwei drei* are to **oino dwoyh trih**. That suggests Neolithic man understood the concept of an abstract number system, in which ten could mean ten horses, or ten humans, or ten anything. It would be thousands of years, however, before Indian mathematicians started to write down the decimal system, and so took the credit for inventing it. When counting was first invented, very early in the Stone Age, man probably counted in fours, at least up to twelve – that's why eleven and twelve have their unique names, whereas thirteen, fourteen and so on are really three-and-ten, four-and-ten, etc. According to this theory, we counted on our fingers (not using our thumbs) up to eight, and then began again, which explains why **newn**, the word for *nine*, is also the word for *new* ... and why *novem*, the Latin nine, is so much like *novel*.

1 – oino

One is one and all *alone*, which is another way of saying *lonely*. If you have just one apple, you have *an* apple; the indefinite article in English was always 'an' until about 1200 AD, when it was shortened to *a* in front of words that began with a consonant. If you eat the apple, of course, you'll have *none* – you won't have *any*. And if the apple wasn't yours in the first place, you'll have to *atone* for your theft: atone is a contraction, meaning to reconcile or put things *at one*. You'll *only* do that the *once*. In Latin, one is *unus*, which gives us *unity*, the *universe*, *unisex* hairdressers and the *unicycle*.

2 – dwoyh

Two is *double*, though it's also written as *twain* – and twain ten is *twenty*. The Greeks made it *di*, which is why anything cut in two is *divided*; the Latin prefix changed 'd' to 'b', making *bi*, which gives us *bisected*. We can thank the Greeks for *diverse*,

different and *diploma* (which originally meant a paper folded double; see **plak**). The Romans, on the other hand, gave us *bipeds*, *bigamy* and *binary* numbers. Computers measure information in *bits*, which is an elision of *binary digit*. The Latin for two retained the 'd', though: it was *duo*, as in *duplicate*, *duplicious* and *dubious*, meaning in two minds.

3 – trih

Three is the *trinity*, the *triangle* and the *triple* word score. It becomes *thirteen* and *thirty*, and – as Frankie Howerd used to say – 'nay, *thrice* nay!' In Latin, **trih** became *ter*, as in *tercentenary*, which is the 300th anniversary, and *tercet*, or three lines of poetry with one rhyme. Roman falconers believed the *third* egg in a nest would always hatch a male chick, which is why *tercel* means a male hawk. The Norse word for a third part of any land, from a field to a country, was a *thriding*: Yorkshire, which was governed by the Danes 1,200 years ago, was divided into *North Thriding*, *East Thriding* and *South Thriding*. The words were run together, until the county consisted of three *ridings*, which has nothing to do with horses.

4 – kwetwor

At first **kwetwor** looks little like *four*, but it is a lot like *tetra* (the Greek four was *tettera*) and quite a lot like *quad* (the Latin four was *quattuor*). *Quarters* are *fourth* parts but also the lodgings of soldiers or the cabins of sailors; to be *given quarter* was a stay of execution, but *quartering* was hacking the arms and legs from a victim. A *tetrapolis* is a region containing four cities, each ruled by a *tetrarch*; a *tetraglot* speaks four languages; a *tetralogy* is a set of four plays, three tragic and the last a satire; a *tetrapod* is an animal with four feet (unlike a *tripod*, which is a camera stand). In Old English, anything divided into quarters consisted of *feorthungs*, which became *farthings*: in pre-decimal coinage, a

farthing was a tiny coin, much smaller than the old penny – hence the *penny-farthing*, a bicycle with one huge front wheel and one miniature wheel behind.

5 – penke

It's hard to see the connection straight away between **penke** and *five*, even when the 'p' shifts to 'f'. But 'fenke' is very like *finger*, and of course there are five of them (counting the thumb) on each hand. It's obvious where the Romans got their *quinque*, written as V. In a *quincunx*, five objects are arranged in a square, four at the corners and one at the centre, like the spots on dice. *Quentin* was traditionally the name of a *fifth* son, and the *quingagesima* were the *fifty* days before Easter. The Greek five was *pente*, which gives us the five-sided US government building, the fiftieth day after Easter, the first five books of the Bible and a Roman slave galley with fifty oars – *Pentagon*, *Pentecost*, *Pentateuch* and *penteconter*.

6 – sweks

Noon, the *sixth* hour after sunrise, in Latin is the *sexta hora*, when Mediterranean folk sensibly choose to have a *siesta*. The Roman *sex* (we politely pronounce it as *six*) gives us *sextant*, an astronomical tool that can measure angles of up to 60 degrees; *semester*, which now means an academic term but originally referred to *sex menstis* or six months; and the *Sistine* Chapel, so called because it was Pope *Sixtus* IV who began building at the Vatican palace in 1473. Six in Greek was *hex*, and a *hexagram* is a six-pointed star – a favourite symbol of witches, who could use it to put a hex on victims. Insects, being six-footed, are categorised as *hexapods*.

7 – septm

September, unhelpfully, is the ninth month of the year; it used to

be the *seventh*, until Augustus Caesar inserted a couple of extras ... August, named after himself, and July, after his predecessor Julius. A river that splits and flows into *seven* branches is *septemfluus*; the Nile is a famous example, the River Lea on the Essex border a lesser one. The seven stars of the Plough in astronomy are the *septentrions*, because *septem triones* is Latin for the seven plough-oxen. The Greek *hepta* gives us *heptarch*, the seventh king. A *heptad* is a group of seven things, such as days in a week, and anything divided into seven parts is *heptamorous*. Logically, if you were 'heptamorous', you'd have sex once a week, but English isn't logical and the word doesn't exist.

8 – okto

Eight comes from the Old English *eahta*, which comes from the Old Saxon *ahto*, that is still some distance from the original **okto**. The Greeks and the Romans, on the other hand, didn't change it at all, which is why the *octopus* has eight legs, the *octangle* has eight sides, an *octastyle* building has eight columns and *octogamy* is having eight wives. An *octave* is a full musical scale of eight notes, but it is also an ecclesiastical word meaning an eight-day festival, and the name of a wine cask that holds an *eighth* of a pipe, which is 105 gallons (about 477 litres), or two hogsheads. Simple mathematics will tell you that this means there are four octaves to a hogshead. Yma Sumac, known as the Peruvian songbird, became famous in the 1950s for her four-octave vocal range; she claimed to be an Inca princess, and wore spectacular headdresses, though never an actual hogshead. In South America, there's a rat-like rodent called the *octodon*, because it has eight teeth.

9 – newn

If you're *dressed up to the nines*, you are in your finest clothes – perhaps a reference to an eighteenth-century proverb, that '*nine* tailors make a man'. *Nineteen* was the average age of US con-

scripts fighting in the Vietnam War, according to the intoned lyrics of a number-one hit by Paul Hardcastle in 1985. The Australian butcherbird, a sort of magpie, is known as the *nine-killer* because it catches insects and small lizards and impales them on thorns to impress its mate, often nine at a time. *Nona hora*, the church service traditionally held at 3pm or the *ninth* hour after dawn, was moved back to midday in the Dark Ages. Confusingly, 12 o'clock became *non* and then *noon*.

10 – dekm̄t

Decem is the Latin *ten*: hence *decimal*, *decade* and *decimate*, which was the Roman punishment of slaughtering every *tenth* soldier in a legion that had mutinied or shown cowardice. A *decuria* was ten men, and by the Middle Ages in England a *dicker* was ten fleeces or hides; *dickering* was bartering, perhaps trying to get an extra one thrown in for free. A *decima* was a tenth part, which is why anyone who looked like they could afford to give a starving man ten cents during the Depression of the 1930s was begged, 'Brother, can you spare a *dime*?' The Ten Commandments are sometimes referred to as the *Decalogue*, and the hundred tales written down by Boccaccio in the fourteenth century and supposedly told by ten people over ten days are the *Decameron*.

100 – kentm̄

Philologists, who study language, divide Indo-European tongues into two groups: the ones that have a soft 's' name for 100 such as *satem* in Sanskrit, and the hard 'k' languages that include Latin with *centem*. It's typical of philologists to pick a key word that makes a useless example because, although the Romans said 'kentem' with a hard 'k', it arrived in English as *centem* with a soft 's' in words like *century*, *percentage* and *centigrade*. The Greeks made matters worse by changing **kentm̄** to *hekatōn* – that's why a *hectare* is 100 ares, an 'are' being 100

square metres. A *hectograph* was an early carbon-paper device, invented in 1869, which could print multiple copies, though the name was an advertising gimmick: it couldn't manage 100 at a time. A *hecatomb*, now meaning the sacrifice of many victims, was once the slaughter of 100 oxen to appease the gods.

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Rud, red

The first painters used ochre, an iron-rich earth that was

mixed with saliva and animal fat before it was applied to cave walls. Some of the most ancient, depicting men, horses and bison, at the Chauvet caves in southern France, are over 30,000 years old. Ochre can vary from yellow to brown, but it is predominantly red – the most important colour in the Stone Age world.

Red is the colour of life and death, of blood, meat and the rising sun. *Ruddy* faces are signs of a *rude* constitution, because they attest to good circulation.

Rude usually means coarse, or ill-mannered. In the sixteenth century, a *rudesby* was an insolent, brawling troublemaker, whereas a *rudas* was a foul-mouthed drunken old woman. To be *rumbustious* is to be boisterous and boozed up – it's a punning mix of *robustious* and rum. Rude can also mean *robustly* healthy, but its original meaning was half-finished, because it comes from the Latin *rudis*, meaning raw – like red meat. *Robustus* in Latin was strength, sometimes in the sense of being hard as oakwood: the oak was *roboreus*, because of the hardness of its timber. To *corroborate* a story means to stiffen and strengthen it, literally to 'confirm' it. A *roborant* is a strengthening, invigorating medicine or tonic.

In Russian, *rabota* means hard work; in Old Slavic, it signified slavery. *Robot* in Greek, and *robot* in Ukrainian, is forced labour. It's the word that Czech playwright Karel Čapek was playing with when he invented *robots* for his 1921 play *RUR*. Čapek's storyline, about sentient metal humanoids that tire of being servants and decide to rule the world instead, has been part of the *rubric* (that is, the laws) of science fiction for a century. In Rome, the laws were the rubric, because they were written in red ochre. In today's civil service, rubric is red writing, highlighting a heading or passage.

A *red letter* is an important piece of news; a scarlet letter, on the other hand, was the brand that Hester Prynne, the heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, was forced to wear on her dress – a bright red 'A' for adultery. Red is the colour of shame, because it's the colour of blushing – the involuntary flush of blood to the face. The fear of blushing is *erythrophobia*, from *erythros*, the Greek for red.

Rubeus is the Latin word for crimson red, and so *rubescence* is another term for blushing. The French took *rubeus* and turned it into *rouge*, a fine powder made from dried safflower petals that *rubified* the cheeks and lips. To *raddle* your face was to paint it red. It's a common mistake to think that being *raddled* is to be worn out by excess and self-indulgence; it simply means to be badly and brazenly made up, like an elderly woman of low repute.

Rubella is German measles, which causes a bright red rash, and *rubeola* are the red pimples in measles and smallpox. A *rubefacient* is an ointment that causes a rash when you *rub* it in – again, rub goes back to the idea of red meat, because vigorous rubbing will chafe the flesh till it is raw.

Rubor is any kind of *redness*, and *rubification* is heating a substance till it glows red. Oxidation can also turn some metals red, with *rust*. *Russus* is another Latin word for red – the *rosy*, *russet* shade. *Rutilus* is yet another, a golden red, and *rufus* is one more, a more ginger colour. William II, the son of William the

Conqueror, was nicknamed *William Rufus* because of his red face. Squat and strong, with a pot belly, he never married and took little trouble to hide his homosexuality. He had a *rudimentary* sense of humour – his idea of a joke was emptying a chamberpot over his brother from a balcony. The incident sparked three years of civil war.

A *rosarium* in Latin was a *rose garden*, called a *rosery* in English. This flowery title was taken for Tudor prayer books, especially the *Rosary of Our Lady*, which contained a set of devotions or repeated prayers. To help the pious keep count, 165 beads strung on a thread is a *rosary*, and 55 beads make a *lesser rosary*.

Roseate means *ruby-red*, whereas a *rosette* is a knotted bunch of *ribbons* like a *rose*. We know ribbons were once always red, because the Old Germanic word is *ruban*.

Ruddle is an ochre, used by farmers for marking their sheep and by house-proud Victorians for polishing out the scuffmarks on their stone doorsteps. A *rowan* tree has red berries – rowan seems a long way from **rud**, but in Norse it was *raun*, and before that *rugn* – its name might literally mean red one.

The root word **rud** has survived unchanged into English as the name for a deep-bodied freshwater fish with red fins and tail – the *rudd*.

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Streg, to squeeze

Note to readers of an anxious disposition: some of the ideas here are gory, brutish and quite *distressing* ...

Mr Spock started the trend in *Star Trek*, with the Vulcan

nerve pinch, a martial-arts technique that rendered a victim unconscious with one tweak to the base of the neck. He also patented the Vulcan death grip, with the heel of the hand to the base of the nose, inducing an instant coma. Action heroes such as Jason Bourne and Jack Bauer took it a stage further with the 'military neck break' – a quick twist of the head that was silently lethal. But what no leading man ever does is to wrap his fingers around a minion's neck and slowly squeeze the life out of him. Only a villainous seven-foot henchman would ever do that. For one thing, it requires callousness, even sadism. And for another, *strangling* demands great *strength*.

Death by *strangulation* was a form of ritual killing in prehistoric times. The mummified corpse of an Iron Age man was found in peat bogs on the Jutland Peninsula in Denmark in 1946: at first it was assumed he was a recent murder victim, because his corpse was so well preserved. In fact, he had been dead for 2,400 years – *strangled* by a thin length of *string*.

The rope around the neck was not generally used for killing, however. The Greek *strangale* means a halter, of the kind still used in Mediterranean countries to lead donkeys. For early farmers, a noose was probably an effective method for subduing and taming wild horses, or even dogs – in much the same way that the gauchos of the Wild West used the lasso to round up steers.

The basic implication of *streg* is that something is pressing hard against flesh. In Rome, where the citizens loved baths but had not invented soap, a bone scraper like a window-cleaner's squeegee was used to sluice sweat away: it was called a *strigil*.

The Latin word *stringere* means to draw tight. In English, *stringent* rules are rigorously binding, and *astringent* cleansers make the pores close up – much better than dragging a *strigil* over your face. The opposite of *stringere* was *distringere*, to draw things apart and separate them. That's where the concept of *districts* comes from. But being pulled to pieces is an upsetting experience, and *distringere* is also the basis of *distress*.

In Old French, *stringere* became *estraindre*, or *streynan* in medieval English, meaning to draw something tight, such as a bowstring. That's why an athlete *strains* every fibre – until he pulls a muscle, which is also called a *strain*.

When a prisoner was bound in ancient times, he was *restrained* (from *restringere*, or bound back) and placed under *constraints* (from *constringere*, or bound together). He might also be blindfolded: in Latin, that is *praestringere oculos*, which literally means to bind the eyes beforehand. That came to refer to blinding, by having the eyes gouged out or burned away with red-hot coals, and this in turn gave rise to a ghoulishly comic word – *praestigiousus*. It meant blindingly brilliant, like the sun or, indeed, a red-hot coal. That's where we get *prestigious* and *prestige* from.

Sleight of hand can also dazzle the eye, if the conjuror is clever enough. A magician's tricks were called *prestigiae*, which gives us *prestidigitation*. *Hey presto!*

Early Indo-European had a related word, **snar**, which translates as to pull tight. Its meaning has barely changed with snare. In northern Europe it lost the 's' and became *narwa* in Old High German, which means a scar – where a wound was pulled tight with needle and thread. That's the origin of *narrow*. The Old German *narke* is related, meaning numbness – the way a limb loses its feeling when it is tightly bound with a tourniquet. *Narke* became *narcotic*, a medieval word meaning any substance that induces sleep or unconsciousness. *Narcosis* is a state of drugged insensibility, which is much better than a tourniquet if someone is about to sew up a gaping wound.

Snar became *neuron* in Greek, which originally meant a tendon but that is now a cell in the brain that transmits information along a string of other cells. The plural of neuron is *neura*, which is why people of a *nervous* disposition are said to be *neurotic*. Which, after all that bloodshed, you would be entitled to be.