

# FOLK - ETYMOLOGY: HOW TO MAKE WORDS WITH THEIR FALSE COUNTERPARTS

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This paper aims towards an analysis of the process known as folk etymology which is considered to be an important source of linguistic invention and new word creation. This phenomenon is perceived as a creative process rather than a misinterpretation of the original word grounded on traditional speech.

Investigation and critical study of folk etymology process gives us an opportunity to answer some questions dealing with the origin of words functioning in standard English language like the following: CANNIBAL, MOHAIR, COCKROACH, etc. This kind of word formation process includes word association links and analogy.

We suggest this phenomenon to be included in all grammar books.

## *1. Introduction*

Every language changes as long as it is spoken. The process known as folk etymology is one way, among many others, which shows how language changes. For the most part, these changes escape our attention as they occur. Although this phenomenon is usually considered to be minor or irrelevant to 'serious' linguistic research, it shouldn't be neglected because of the fact that multitude of words owe their present form, or present

meaning to the influence exercised upon them by popular misconception and modification.

This article aims to give a brief description of folk etymology or false etymology from linguistic point of view. Our projected plan is to make a sample of words which have been modified under the influence of false derivation, or have in some way been altered from their original form or meaning by false analogy. It is our intention to point out phonetic and semantic changes which such words undergo.

In this study folk etymology is not seen as a corruption, but more as an enrichment of a language. Such words are assumed to be a part of a creative use of language. It might be said that people in speech communities very often distort their language, manipulating it to create new expressions. Folk etymology is often applied to loan words to make them resemble familiar, native words. The tendency to give strange words a familiar form has been so constantly at work that it has made the search for the true origin or etymology more difficult than it would otherwise been.

Thus RAVENOUS has nothing to do with RAVENS.

PANTRY is not connected with PANS but with BREAD (Old French PANETERIE = where bread was kept < lat. PANIS = bread)

BUTTERY had originally no connection with BUTTER, its origin being Middle English BOTERY < Old French BOTEILLERIE = a place of bottles > BOTTLERY.

It is evident that conditions in which folk etymology flourishes are basically connected with language borrowing. Normally, when a word is borrowed it is made to fit the phonological system of the borrowing language. According to Palmer (1969; IX): "These words will be regarded with suspicious till they put on an honest English dress and begin to sound familiar." So what is not understood it should be converted into what we know. Actually, the word is transformed until it could be understood, Associations with other words can bring about a change in the form of a word.

Investigation and critical study is needed especially in this area of language because of the following reasons:

- Multitude of words, (**canibal, admiral, mohair, carnival, Jerusalem artichoke, rosemary, cockroach, rhyme, reindeer, etc.**) considered to be a well-established part of a standard language, owe their present form or present meaning to the influence exercised upon them by the popular use, misuse and favourable associative links. Their true origin is possible to trace only via the process of folk etymology.

It is evident that many words and phrases might be explained only if we take into consideration a phenomenon known as folk-etymology.

## 2. *Basic features of folk etymology*

Dealing with definitions one is always faced with the same problem: different approaches, different definitions.

According to The New Grolier Webster International Dictionary (1976; 379) folk-etymology is: "Modification, through extended popular usage of an unfamiliar word to give it an apparent correlation with familiar or better understood word, often as a result of misconception of the word's source and derivation." Thus ASPARAGUS so oddly Latin in its appearance, became SPARROW GRASS, especially among speakers of dialects.

As Palmer (1969; VII) suggests: "By folk-etymology is meant the influence exercised upon words, both as to their form and meaning, by the popular use and misuse of them. In a special sense it is intended to denote the corruption which words undergo, owing either to false ideas about their derivation, or to a mistaken analogy with other words to which they are supposed to be related."

Webster's definition is taken as a starting point of this work because it includes *modification* through the exchange of unfamiliar word with familiar one. This view corresponds to general attitudes towards the production of new words. E. Partidge (1948; 151) said: "There is a constant tendency, sometimes unconscious, sometimes deliberate and humorous, to give strange words a familiar form, to link the unknown with the known."

We assume that *misconception* and *corruption* can't be taken as defining characteristics of folk etymology. In this work folk etymology is considered to be a process which implies *transformation* and *adaptation* of lexical items via associative links and analogy. The attempt to explain the puzzling, the unknown, by the well-known, and even the known by the better known, is seen in the form of many English words. Folk etymology process is a phase of the very general tendency, manifested among the learned and the unlearned. It usually affects foreign words, technical terms or rare words. Some examples may be given of the operation of popular etymology in English words:

## a) Individual lexical items:

**BUZZARD** < Old French **BUSART**, through the influence of **BUZZ**, became **BUZZARD**.

**SOVEREIGN** < Old French **SOVERAIN** through the influence of **REIGN**.

**ADMIRAL** < Old French **AMIRAL** < Arabic **AMIR** = a prince, chief.

The **D** is due to confusion and association with the word **ADMIRE**, as we see in the Low Latin form **ADMIRALIS**.

**GILLYFLOWER** is from Old French **GIROFLE** blended with **FLOWER**.

**JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE** is from Italian **GIRASOLE** (turning with the sun) and Italian **ARTICIOCCO**.

**MONGOOSE** is from Marathi **MANGUS**: It's assimilation to **GOOSE** has occasionally caused it to be given a wrong plural.

**STANDARD** is from Old French **ESTENDART** and is related to **EXTEND**.

Association with **STAND** has affected both spelling and meaning.

**WALNUT** originally had no connection with **WALL**. It is from OE **WEALH** (foreign) and is related to **WELSH**.

## b) compounds - tautology

In many instances, folk etymology has led to a compound in which the second part or element means the same as the first part or, more often renders the total meaning **TAUTOLOGICAL**, e.g.

The second element of **TUTRLE-DOVE** is redundant, since **TURTLE** is from Latin **TURTUR** = dove.

Old English **HRAN** (**HREINN** is its Norse cognate or perhaps original) signified **REINDEER**, but because it was used as a beast of burden (draught horse) **HRAN** became **REIN** and **DEER** had to be added.

Similar situation happened with the word **SALT-CELLAR** < lat. **SALIARIA** (receptacle for salt) was associated with the word 'cellar' and it was added to 'salt'.

- Folk etymology is not always the work of uneducated speakers. Even the learned have fallen into folk etymology, e. g. 16th and 17th century writers often spelt **ABOMINABLE** as **ABHOMINABLE** on the assumption that it came from Latin **AB HOMINE** - from man.

On the other hand Old Eng. RIME has become RHYME on the analogy of RHYTHM.

- Intentional 'misconception' of words (in order to achieve humouristic effects), e.g.

**The best Doctors are Dr. Diet, Dr Quiet, and Dr. Merryman.**

Croatian proverbs:

**Bježanova majka pjeva, a Stojanova plače.**

**Ako neće Nećo, a ono hoće Hoćo.**

Above mentioned examples show that modification is primarily based on analogy and associative links between words. It is in fact by analogy and 'metanalysis' that many new words come into use.

In order to fulfill the needs of such an explanation we have analysed this phenomenon in the framework of the linguistic sign and associative links.

### *3. Folk etymology - production through association*

Dealing with words we have to pay attention to semantic and phonological information. According to F. de Saussure (1955) the relationship between the form (phonetic structure) of the word and its content (semantic structure) is arbitrary (apart from a small number of onomatopoeic words). But this hypothesis can't be applied on folk-etymology terms. Such words can't be viewed as arbitrary linguistic signs because they are motivated by some other words of similar phonetic structure, e.g.

COCKROACH < Spanish CUCARACHA, modified in form to make it resemble to English words COCK and ROACH.

ROSEMARY < Latin ROS MARINUS (sew-dew) was modified by English words ROSE + MARY.

French word TETE; Italian TESTA < Latin TESTA = pot

It might be concluded that arbitrariness is not dominant feature of the linguistic sign called folk etymology. Such words can't be treated as isolated linguistic signs because they owe their form (phonetic structure) to the associative links with other words. They can be considered as *relatively motivated* linguistic signs closely linked with other signs of similar phonetic structure.

Their origin can be traced via associative links and analogy.

Tracing through the process of folk etymology, therefore, is likely to shed light on the organization of the various components in the human word-store. As it is not a subject of our concern we can only rely on the following supposition based on J. Aitchison's (1987) views.

If we are faced with the foreign or strange word we are always seeking for the apt word among the various possibilities in our mental lexicon. People usually recognize unknown, foreign or strange words by choosing the 'best fit': they match the portion they have heard with the word in their mental lexicon that appears to be the most likely 'candidate'. They frequently choose a word matching with sounds or meanings. We suggest such words to be called activation models.

e. g. MOHAIR < Arabic MOKKHAYYAR (a cloth made of goat's hair) → transformation being made under the influence of English word 'hair'. This word served as activation model.

We suggest the process of transformation and modification to be presented in the following way:\*

activation model  
Eng. COOCK + ROACH

original word  
Sp. CUCARACHA

folk etymology  
COCKROACH

This is what appears to happen in word production through association. When we hear 'strange word', we are trying to activate all known words from our mental lexicon. We usually choose a word matching with sounds and meanings. Words which sound similar, particularly at their beginnings and ends, are those which are most closely linked.

It is evident that formal and semantic associations of words are initiated with similarity factor. We have considered various kinds of links found between words based on the similarity, or shared units. The following are the links between interchangeable words:

- similarity of meaning (Lat. TUTRTUR - Eng. DOVE = TURTLE-DOVE

- words having sounds in common: (Sp. CUCARACHA - Eng. COCK-ROACH = COCKROACH)

- similarity of sounds structure and meaning (BELFRY < French BEFFROY = tower; BELFRY because BELLS were in it)

The tendency to give a meaning and form to adopted words via modification based on association and analogy has exercised a permanent and appreciable influence on every language, e. g. Old French SOURDITE > adj. SOUFFRETEUX because of associations with SOUFFRIR; German DURCHBLAUEN = to beat < BLIUWAN, the meaning of this word is connected with the word BLAU = blue, because of the bruises. This process is continually at work in the creative use of language.

#### *4. Conclusion*

Folk etymology seems to be an important source of linguistic invention and new word creation. The process is the same as any other innovation in language. Hundreds of examples can be found in English language and some of them are considered to be international words, e. g. **carnival, cannibal, admiral**, etc. They are probably adopted in English language as words which have already been modified in the donor language. The most frequent source of such English terms are Latin and French language.

On the other hand the vast majority of words are clearly modelled after the existing English morphemes in a fairly transparent manner and in accordance to English linguistic system.

To summarise, folk etymology employs linguistic virtuosity while still operating within the general framework of a language's rules.

Folk etymology happens only in specific conditions and it mainly refers to unfamiliar, foreign or 'barbaric words'. In this case the notion 'barbaric' corresponds to the original meaning of the word BARBARIAN (Gr. BARBAROS > Lat. BARBARUS, one whose language is unintelligible, a foreigner). It seems that 'barbaric words' are the main source of folk etymology.

In conclusion, we can say that linguistic approach to the analysis of folk etymology process helps us to explain the origin and formation of many English words. We suggest this phenomenon to be included in all grammar books.

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### Danica Škara: PUČKA ETIMOLOGIJA: TVORBA RIJEČI UTEMELJENA NA KRIVOJ INTERPRETACIJI

#### S a ž e t a k

Osnovna je namjera ovoga rada upozoriti na postojanje i nastanak riječi koje su poznate pod nazivom pučka etimologija. Ova se pojava promatra u okvirima tvorbe riječi i kreativnih mogućnosti jednog jezika, a manje kao izdvojena problematika koja se pripisuje jeziku tradicije i krivom tumačenju izvornika.

Analizom pučke etimologije moguće je dati odgovor na neka pitanja vezana uz riječi koje funkcioniraju u standardnom jeziku, primjerice: CANNIBAL, MOHAIR, COCKROACH, i dr. Tvorbeni proces u kojemu su nastale navedene riječi uključuje prisustvo asocijativnih veza i analogije.

Zadatak je ovoga rada potaknuti razmišljanja o ovome specifičnom tvorbenom procesu koji još uvijek nije našao svoje mjesto u gramatikama.