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FOLK ETYMOLOGY: ESCAPE FROM THE UNKNOWN, THE OBSCURE AND NOTHING MORE?

Abstract: The mechanism of folk-etymology has received considerable attention from both laymen and those scholars that are busy analyzing natural languages, and although much has been said about the issue of determining the scope of the phenomena the mechanism encompasses, and the way the instances of its operation can be classified, many questions remain unanswered. In linguistic tradition, folk etymologizing is usually viewed as being motivated by the natural human wish to escape from what is illogical and obscure, and so it is viewed by, for example, Rundblad and Kronenfeld (2000). Yet, we are convinced that one may point to other motivating forces operative here, the forces that lie within the scope of broadly-understood ideology and provincialism-shunning aesthetics.

Key words: folk etymology, obscurity in language, change of form, provincialism-shunning aesthetics

1. Introduction

From the moment we begin to speak a language, be it in our native or foreign tongue, we somewhat intuitively and subconsciously divide the words we encounter into those that may be classified as ones that sound and look familiar, and – on the other hand – those that sound and look unfamiliar and alien, and hence need good breeding towards domestication. The words whose looks we find unfamiliar are on various occasions subject to creative intervention, the aim of which has been traditionally determined to be a way to escape the air of unfamiliarity, illogicality and obscurity. This is done by means of *folk etymology* that – in speaking in layman's terms – consists in bending and twisting words with the objective of making them sound and look logical and familiar to our

ears and/or eyes, though language – much to the chagrin of us all – is by all means far from being logical, and obscurity is if not its second name, then at least one of the major characteristics. In linguistic tradition, the application of the mechanism of folk etymology is usually viewed as being motivated by the natural human wish to escape from what is illogical and obscure, and so it is viewed by, for example, Rundblad and Kronenfeld (2000), which till this day remains one of the most interesting works on the subject published in recent decades. Yet, we feel that one may point to other motivating forces operative here, the forces that lie within the scope of broadly-understood ideology and provincialism-shunning aesthetics.

2. Behind folk etymology: The motivating forces

The concept of folk etymology is one of the oldest in linguistic science; it was first popularized by a German linguist Ernst Förstermann in the middle of the 19th century in the first volume of his *Über die Volkesetymologie* (1852). As recently pointed out by Ziegler (2015), till today the concept remains one of the most poorly defined ones in linguistics, as – apart from being used synonymously alongside with the term *popular etymology* – it is frequently used interchangeably with such qualifiers as *unscientific etymology* or *false etymology*.

A long time ago Sturtervant (1947: 118-119) stressed that one of the main reasons why we all tend to analyze and reanalyze words we hear is that our analysis of lexical items is an essential part of understanding what we hear, and although this kind of analysis in no way determines the meaning of words, such analysis is nothing else but habitual with all language users, and is, therefore, likely to mislead us at any moment. Fair enough, one of the motivating forces behind folk-etymologizing is the desire for maintaining successful communication, but – as we shall try to show further on – one may point to other extralinguistic somehow hidden motivations, namely those that may somewhat justifiably be argued to come under ideological and doctrinaire anti-provincialism labels.

Obviously, the use of obscure words and expressions may impair language communication, and – as argued by Rundblad and Kronenfeld (2000) – the ultimate *causa movens* behind folk-etymologising should be sought in the maxims formulated within Keller's (1994) invisible hand theory which singles out two general maxims of action that guide and influence our linguistic behaviour, that is:

Maxim 1: Talk in such a way that you are not misunderstood,

Maxim 2: Talk in such a way that you are understood.

Note that *Maxim 1* and *Maxim 2* are in no way equivalent because being misunderstood is not the contradictory opposite of being understood (see Keller

1994: 94). Rundblad and Kronenfeld (2000: 31) argue that the main reason why folk-etymologies occur is that language users, for reasons of clarity and efficiency, make every attempt to adhere to the maxims in order to be certain that what they are trying to communicate will be both understood and not misunderstood. The ultimate roots behind the operation of folk etymology are summarized by Rundblad and Kronenfeld (2000: 19-20) in the following way:

Folk-etymologies often begin as highly individual constructions, but yet seem to conform to some kind of collective reality; because of this language users can accommodate to folk-etymologised words with apparent ease. [...] Folk-etymologies also facilitate the elimination of the confusion and obscurity often introduced by the individual and historically accidental processes used in the construction and usage of words [...].

In pursuit of clarity and communicative ease, language users either tend to refrain from using the opaque lexical elements, or they make every attempt to ease the troublesome opaqueness of the word. To use the wording of Kamboj (1986), one may say that the main driving force behind the operation of folk etymology is the desire to motivate what is, or has become opaque in language. The attributive element *folk-* that is the constitutive element of the terminological unit is applied here in the sense ‘relating to or originating among the (common) people’, as evidenced by such English combinations as *folk art*, *folk dance*, *folk medicine* and *folk tale*. Let us stress that we are all affected by the power of folk etymology that in its essence may be defined as a type of gravitational pull towards a familiar or logical spelling and/or sound. The common conviction is that similarity in sound plays the most important role in the mechanism of folk etymology (see, for example, Wundt 1900, Stern 1931, Sturtevant 1947, McMahon 1994, Ziegler 2015). The mechanism discussed here is usually discussed in the context of analogy defined by McMahon (1994:70) as a:

[a] process primarily concerned with the link between sound and meaning, which combine to express particular morphemes or meaningful units. The task of analogy is then to maintain this link by keeping sound structure, grammatical structure and semantic structure in line, especially when sound change might have made their relationship opaque.

The history of research in diachronic semantics shows that – depending on the linguist and/or the linguistic orientation – the mechanism of folk etymology has been regarded as a type of formal innovation and/or semantic innovation. In his seminal work *Meaning and the Change of Meaning* Stern (1931) discusses folk etymology as part and a type of analogy, and the author lists analogy as one of the seven categories of his typology of meaning alterations. Ullmann (1962) includes folk etymology among his changes brought about by linguistic innovation along with other mechanisms, such as metaphor, metonymy and

ellipses. More recently, Waldron (1979:140) treats cases of folk etymology as one of the types of change of form which may lead to change of meaning.

Truly, one of the consequences of false etymology is the fact that the re-analysed and phonetically and/or morphologically reshaped words may change their meaning, because after the form of a word has been altered into another, which resembles that of a familiar word, it is easy to endow it with the meaning of the latter, and the semantic re-shaping follows *route de suite*. For example, Russian *verstak* ‘carpenter’s bench’, that ultimately goes back to German *Werkstatt*, received its present-form by analogy with Russian *verstat* ‘to arrange typeset pages in order for printing’, while Latin *vagabundus* ‘strolling’ yielded Spanish *vagamundo*, under the influence of the Spanish word *mundo* ‘world’, and was construed as ‘he who wanders/goes around the world.’¹ As recently pointed out by Seiciuc (2017: 89), sometimes we see folk etymology affect the same word in different ways in different languages, albeit entirely unrelated. The author discusses the historical meanderings of the Latin word *veruculu* ‘a small iron bar’ in various Romance languages. The original Latin words became *cerrojo* ‘latch’ in Spanish, by association with the verb ‘to shut’ or ‘to lock’, and *ferrolho* ‘latch’ in Portuguese due to contamination with the noun *ferro* ‘iron’. In both cases the analogy is fairly obvious since the iron device served the purpose of locking a door or shutting a gate.

Linguistic literature provides evidence for the operation of the process of folk etymology in various languages of the world. Yet, one has grounds to suppose that in the history of English the operation of the mechanism targeted here has been particularly frequent. If so, one of the reasons why English vocabulary items have been subject particular to the process of folk-etymologizing is its in no small part highly irregular orthography which rather vaguely corresponds to pronunciation. Fair enough, seemingly nonsensical spelling conventions frequently do make English downright bewildering, to foreign learners and native speakers alike. Hence, in a certain understandable way the acts of folk-etymologizing may open the door to orthographic and/or semantic modification, but a permanent change that leads to either (or both of these) is not always the result of intervention. In the words of Rundblad and Kronenfeld (2000):

To be successful, linguistic innovations have, thus, to be easily learned and used by those other than their creators. The more easily generalisable or productive they appear to be to some class of “appropriate” situations, and the more they serve to facilitate some facet of actual communication (whether content, attitude toward the content, or relevant social facts), the more likely they appear to be to take hold.

¹ The two examples have been taken from <https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/False+Etymology> (accessed on January 3rd 2019).

Sometimes the resulting folk-etymologising innovation appears locally or dialectally, and poor spread may not eventually lead to putting down roots. The following examples from Polish are cases in point. In the history of the Polish language the common noun *koniak*, ultimately going back to the name of the famous French distillate-producing province *Cognac*, was in the 19th century popular belief related to *koń* 'horse', and identified with the sense 'horse vodka'², but the innovation never caught on and took root. One of the most recent examples of witty re-analysis of proper names in Polish is the formation *S/saundomierz* apparently formed on the basis of the name of the provincial town *Sandomierz*. The reanalysis of the name which gave the English touch to the name of the Polish provincial town – as argued by Chaciński (2007:277) – led to the rise of the sense 'those musicians and their concerts which are of both poor gusto, quality and sound', and it was undoubtedly motivated by the English word *sound* used in such contexts as, for example, *Cholera! Co za S/sandomierz!* ('Gee! That was a *S/sandomierz!*'), in which the name of the provincial town was anglicized to *S/soundomierz*, and came to stand for musical performances of doubtful artistic quality. While the former (attempt at) innovation, that is *koniak/Cognac* may be qualified as an example of chance identification of two words, the latter case *S/soundomierz* may be viewed as an act of creative and purposeful intervention and identification of two words that has resulted in making the homely Polish provincial town stand for musical performance of poor quality, especially in the circles of trendy music fans that have some command of English. Thus, the spectrum of the addressees (and potential users) of the innovation was almost inevitably restricted to modern music fans of young age which may have been the ultimate *raison d'être* of the short-lived nature of the formation. Historically, neither of the interventions resulted in the permanent change in language, and thus they must be counted among the body of innovation discards. Similar products of such intervention are sometimes referred to as *eggcorns* that may be defined as words or phrases which have been coined mistakenly, often due to an incorrect guess as to how a word is spelled, though incorrect innovative guess frequently makes some kind of sense, especially when we consider such innovations as *Old-Timer's Disease* for *Alzheimer's Disease* and *daring-do* for *derring-do*.

Language data shows that the mechanism analysed here is by no means restricted to one variety of language or words of any specific origin, and that the main trigger for the operation of the process is that the element subject to folk-etymologising would be either unknown or at least obscure. Its operation may change the looks and the meanings of words that belong to standard language, but also the process may operate within dialectal or jargon boundaries (see music-argot originating secondary sense of *S/saundomierz*), though in the

² See *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* (2006).

existing literature the mechanism has been primarily discussed in the context of adaptation of foreign material that – for various reasons – finds its place in the vocabulary of some other language.

Apart from the qualitative element of unfamiliarity and obscurity, one must necessarily point to the quantitative factor of length of lexical items that in equal measure may be claimed to provoke acts of folk-etymologising; the length of lexical elements is a parameter that correlates in some way with the probability of occurrence of the process. One observes that there is a tendency to see multisyllabic words as being constructed as compounds or derivatives, and – consequently – when faced with an obscure, complex-looking lexical item of some length, we tend to feel a need to find and isolate at least two meaningful elements in it, because the usage of patterns, and the search for patterns in language is one of the driving forces behind its functioning as a system of communication. In the words of Rundblad and Kronenfeld (2000: 29):

When first encountering an opaque word that is multisyllabic, speakers seek easily recognizable word parts. If no such already existing parts can be found in the word, they will try to determine where and how to split up the word into meaningful units. Similarly, if the word is found to contain one established meaningful component, the other part of the word is automatically treated as yet another, though still unknown, unit. That unit can, depending on its appearance, be in the form of either an independent word or an affix.

To be more precise, when encountering a multisyllabic opaque word, language users seek to find easily identifiable component parts, and – if no such already existing parts are at their disposal – they make an attempt to determine *where* and *how* to split up the opaque sequence into smaller meaningful constituents. It seems that one may distinguish two main types of the process, and now we shall turn our attention to the two categories of change distinguished in this paper.³

2.1. Type 1: Cases of reinterpretation of native material combined with a change of form

It is not accidental that in the history of English the operation of folk etymology has been especially frequent with compounds in which one of the components of Anglo-Saxon origin has become obsolete as an independent word. Take, for example, the compound *sand-blind* ‘half-blind, dim-sighted’, the word that is a distortion of Old English *sam-blind*, where *sam-* was a prefix meaning ‘half’. During the Mid.E. period the prefix became obsolete, and hence opaque and alien-looking to English speakers. That is the reason why it was reanalyzed and reshaped into familiar sounding *sand*, on the logical grounds that

³ For other classifications of *folk etymology* see, for example, Rundblad and Kronenfeld (2000).

one is on the verge of blindness when sand is thrown into their eyes. A similar line of reasoning may have been responsible for the linking of the second part of the compound *nightmare* to the female horse that is mare. The constitutive element comes from Anglo-Saxon *maera* ‘incubus’, so *nightmare* means ‘evil spirit that haunts people at night by sitting on their chest and producing a feeling of suffocation’. It is highly probable that in the popular belief incubus took the shape of a she-horse that at that time was identified with evil forces, and that is how it was falsely connected with *mare*. In a likewise manner, Old English *utmest*, *innemest* and *northmest*, all of which contained a by now obsolete superlative ending *-mest* have been supplanted by Modern English *utmost*, *inmost* and *northmost* in which the familiar word *most* makes its presence.

2.2. Type 2: Cases of re-interpretation of foreign material combined with a change of form

Most frequently, the effects of the operation of folk etymology are visible in those sectors of vocabulary where borrowed language material can be ascertained. In the words of Rundblad and Kronenfeld (2000: 2), the historical inaccuracy of folk-etymologies helps undo some of the opacity produced by borrowing. For example, when the noun *asparagus* was introduced into English in the 16th century, its Latinate name was often nativized and rendered as *sparrowgrass*, which soon afterwards became domesticated to *sparrowgrass*, a compound of two native and familiar-looking English words that had nothing to do with either the actual plant or the original word. The noun *belfry* with the present-day English meaning ‘room in a church tower in which bells are hung’ derives from the O.F. *berfrei*, which in turn is – as indicated by the *OED* – a borrowing from the Proto-Germanic. **bergfrid* meaning ‘defensive place or shelter’. In English the fanciful connection with *bell* seems to explain the presence of *l*, and the ultimate influence on the meaning restricting it to a ‘bell tower’. From its very appearance in English the French loan *chaise longue* must have looked alien for most English speakers, and the resultant shift in American English to *chaise lounge* was of unimpeachable linguistic advantage of making the word both more English-like and more logical. Again, the word may have been altered by mistake, but the logical basis of the mistake does make intuitive sense – the understandability of the intervention by means of which *longue* was substituted by *lounge* is that lounging is what one really does on sofas, and the emergent translation ‘lounging chair’ – the effect of the intervention – makes perfect sense. Another Romance lexical item re-analysed in English is *cockroach* which is a folk reinterpretation of the Spanish *cucaracha*. Here, too, the English speakers associated the first part of the borrowed word with *cock*, and the second with *roach* without the slightest closeness in meaning between them.

The effects of folk-etymologising frequently bring permanent changes to the lexical items in standard language, but the mechanism discussed here is also operative on a dialectal scale, that is within the limits of geographical or professional language variants. Ardener (1971: 224-225) describes the process of how the speakers of Welsh English folk-etymologized the word *asphalt* as *ashfelt*. The apparently unfounded intervention may have been occasioned by the fact that the actual etymological roots of the word *asphalt* (< Latin *asphalton/-um*) were unknown to them and unconnected with their cultural knowledge. Once the word was there, instead of leaving it opaque and obscure, Welsh speakers recognised that the process involved in making the asphalt road was in some comparable way similar to a process of felting that was familiar to them. In other words, they seem to have presumed a meaning relationship between the two processes (i.e. felting and asphaltting), on the basis that the laying of a macadamized road was in some conceivable way equaled with the process of pressing or felting of ash, where *ash* is used in the sense ‘powdery residue, composed of earthy and mineral particles’.

3. Is the drive to folk-etymologising paved with (any) other intentions?

Although most frequently, the acts of orthographic or phonetic intervention are unintentional, and merely somewhat subconsciously guided by broadly-understood search for transparence, the history of the English language has witnessed cases of folk-etymologising that have been intentional and supported by some ideology and/or aesthetic convictions of what may be termed anti-provincialism hue. The history of the verb *doubt*, with a silent *b* may serve as a case in point that illustrates the former. Today, the lack of a bilabial stop in the pronunciation of the word becomes even more perplexing when we learn that, when the word first entered the English lexicon during the peak of the Middle English intake of French vocabulary, it was spelled *doute*, exactly the same as the French cognate from which the English word stems. To be more precise, the verb is a 13th century French borrowing *doute*, the ultimate roots of which go back to the Latin form *dubitare*. Once the word had become part of the English vocabulary, the 14th century grammarians, helped by the practice of English scribes familiar with Latin, started to reinsert the character *b* stimulated by the orthographic shape of the Latin original which was then considered to be an ideal language to be both appreciated and, wherever possible, imitated. Yet, one can find other, less detectable motivation for this early orthographic intervention. Namely, the presence of the letter *b* may have served to mark the bridge for connection of the verb to other related words, such as *dubious* and *indubitably* which were subsequently borrowed into English from the same Latin root. On the same tune, one has grounds to say that today the English noun *rhyme* is spelt

with the sequence *hy* on the supposition that it comes from the Greek *rhythmos*. In actual fact, there was a Anglo-Saxon word *rīm* meaning ‘number, measure’, and the present-day spelling of *rhyme* is merely a token of a pretentious and etymologically groundless attempt at making the English look as being derived from Greek, or – at least – making the native word look related to Greek on the assumption that it will thus look more scholarly.⁴

In the history of English, the quest for the ideal and the obsession with vaguely-defined correctness and broadly-understood anti-provincialism were given a fresh stimulus with the mission of the 18th century grammarians such as, for example, Bishop Robert Lowth and James Elphinston. The latter reformer, in his *English Orthography Epitimized* (1790), clearly speaks of the necessity of intervention into and adjustment of the English orthographic system when he says that:

Orthogrophy must employ symbols (or letters) nedher too manny, too few, nor inadequate (or misreprezenting); and must, by dhis rule, first adjust dhe consonants; on hwich in evvery language, espescially in ours, dhe vocal sounds often entirely depend.

The quest for the somewhat ill-defined, though much desired ideal was – to a large extent – based on the 18th century prominent notion that language is of divine origin and hence – though perfect in its beginnings – it is constantly in danger of corruption and decay unless it is diligently kept in line by the guardian angels personalized by those who write dictionaries and grammars of the day and update and upgrade what has become degraded limits that may be tolerated. It was Latin and Greek that were then regarded as having retained much of its original divine perfection; many of the 18th century changes introduced into the English language were the result its conscious idealistic regulation by those who managed to acquire authority as linguistic gurus and guardians of the time.

There are other tokens in other languages of what may be referred to as idealistic folk-etymologizing, such as avoidance of ill-conceived yet ever present provincialism and parochialism. For example, David (2009) discusses a number of cases of historical re-analysis of place names in the history of Czech. As shown by the author, layman’s reinerpretation of the place name *Volovice* resulted with the rise of the name *Olovnice* that substituted the former one which was considered to be painfully provincial and hence ill-sounding because it was felt to be etymologically connected with the root *vul* ‘ox’, hence the sense ‘a place where there are oxen’. The form *Volovice* was regarded as disapprovingly parochial and was changed to a neutral sounding *Olovnice* ‘a place where there is lead’ in the first half of the 20th century, contrary to the intentions of the instigators of the

⁴ The *OED* testifies, however, that the original form *rime* has never been discontinued and, in about 1870, its use was revived, especially by writers working on the history of the English language or literature.

S/soundomeirz innovation who anglicized the name of the provincial town to belittle the musical performances in their acts of reviewing their quality.

4. Concluding remarks

Folk-etymology has received considerable attention from both laymen and those scholars who deal professionally with natural languages, and although much has been said about the issue of determining the scope of the phenomena the mechanism encompasses, and the way the instances of its operation can be classified many questions remain unanswered or answered only partially. An important aspect of the ongoing discussion on folk etymology is how easily folk-etymologies are accommodated to the structure of language, and how they spread throughout the language-speaking community and eventually take roots. However, an equally interesting question that may be formulated is that of the causes of why certain folk-etymologising novelties are rejected and never adopted for good. Rundblad and Kronenfeld (2000) are certainly right in stressing that although folk-etymologising innovations start as individual constructions, they must conform to collective cognitive reality because language – being a social phenomenon – must conform to various shared communicative patterns. Apart from having dealt with some of the much discussed aspects of folk-etymologising, we hope to have shed some light on the triggers that initiate the mechanism, such as human striving to make sense of what is opaque and obscure but, as pointed out, some other factors may have some (serious) bearing on the process, too.

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