THE SCIENCE OF ETYMOLOGY

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649079230

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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BY THE

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'Whoever devotes himself to the study of so comprehensive a science must try never to lose sight of two virtues: conscientiousness and modesty.'—MAX MÜLLER, *Selected Essays*, 1881; i. 109.

OXFORD

AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

1912

HENRY FROWDE, M.A.
PUBLISHER TO THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
LONDON, EDINBURGH, NEW YORK
TORONTO AND MELBOURNE

PREFACE

THE object of the present volume is to draw attention to some of the principles that should guide the student of etymology in general, and of English etymology particularly; in order that any one who employs an etymological dictionary may be able to do so with some degree of intelligence and to some profit. It is much easier to accomplish this at the present date than it was some ten or twenty years ago. The steady progress of the New English Dictionary furnishes us with innumerable and indisputable instances of the actual usages of English words, so that the mistakes which formerly arose from a very imperfect knowledge of their history have largely been corrected, and much that was once obscure has been made plain. Meanwhile, the great gains that have resulted from the scientific study of comparative philology as applied to the Indo-germanic languages have been properly formulated and tabulated, to the explosion and exclusion of many hasty inferences that were both misleading and mischievous. It is now possible to introduce science where once there was little but guesswork.

Such science is founded, as all science should be, upon the careful observation of the effects of well-ascertained laws, which have been laboriously evolved from the comparison of innumerable forms of words in many languages. A large number of such laws can now be positively and safely relied upon, because they rest upon the sure foundations of a careful study of phonetics. This study enables us to concern ourselves with something that is far more valuable than written forms, viz. the actual sounds which the symbols employed in various languages actually represent. The most important

of these languages is Latin, because the Latin alphabet has been so widely adopted. Hence it is that all serious attempts to assimilate the lessons and results which have been secured by the strenuous labours of modern philologists must needs begin with a knowledge of the sounds which the Latin symbols denoted in the first century. The first requisite is, in a word, the correct pronunciation of classical Latin, and the lesson is simple and easy enough. When once acquired, there is very little more to be learnt in order to understand the pronunciation of Anglo-Saxon, and the remarkably musical sounds of the Middle-English period, especially as employed by Chaucer, who was as great a master of melody as the famous Dante.

A sufficient knowledge of the Chaucerian pronunciation will then afford some guide to the more difficult and somewhat uncertain pronunciation of Tudor English; from which we may reasonably hope to glean some of the reasons why we spell many words as we do. Most of our modern spelling, except in the rather numerous instances where meddling pedants have ignorantly and mischievously distorted it, rests upon the spoken sounds used in the time of our great dramatists by the best actors of that period.

The indifferent attitude assumed by the millions of English speakers with regard to the obviously important subject of spelling can only be accounted for by their almost universal ignorance of the subject. Not ten (or even less) in a million of English speakers recognize the fact that our spelling was, once at least, founded on phonetic laws, and that the object of our ancestors was not, as many suppose, to write in accordance with 'etymology'—except when it was too obvious to be missed—but to represent the sounds of the spoken words. And of course, the 'etymological' spelling of Latin words was really based upon spoken sounds also; so that the reverence paid to Latin written forms only carries us back to the phonetics of an earlier period, and furnishes one more

argument for teaching every child what the Latin symbols implied. The strenuous attempts that are but too often made to evade this plain duty are deplorable for the pupil, and discreditable to the teacher.

Perhaps I may here usefully introduce a practical suggestion, viz. that the reader who comes across a word in this book which he does not know how to pronounce is more likely to approximate to its true sound by pronouncing it as Latin than as modern English.

It is, in fact, a very grave reproach to all who speak the English language and employ its present spelling, that they will neither, on the one hand, admit of any improvements, nor, on the other, make the slightest attempt to understand the forms to which they cling. How, for example, have we come to employ such a symbol as *ou* to represent the sound of the *ou* in *house*? I purposely select this as being a question that admits of a fairly easy answer.

The word *house* is one of immense and incalculable antiquity. The early Teutonic form was *hūs*, pronounced with a voiceless *s*, as at present, and with the Latin long *ū*, as in L. and Ital. *lūna*. We might spell it, phonetically, *huus*, denoting the length of the *u* by repeating the symbol; but our ancestors simply adopted the Roman *u*, and sometimes (by no means always) put a slanting stroke over it to denote vowel-length; in which case it appeared as *hús*, or else (without the stroke) as *hus*; which was also the spelling in Norse and in Old High German, and remains to this day in Swedish. The sound of the *ū* was preserved till long after the Norman Conquest, and the spelling *hus* persisted till at least 1250; see the quotations in the N.E.D. Indeed the sound remained unaltered till very much later, and may be heard in the North to this day. But in the days of Edward I, the Norman scribes were extremely busy with their self-imposed task of editing and respelling the English language, which they studied with remarkable intelligence and zeal. They per-

ceived that the form *hus* was indefinite; there was nothing to show whether the *u* was short or long; and they had decided (except in the case of *i*) to abandon the A. S. method of using a sloping mark above a vowel. They reserved the *u* for the short sound, as in *full*, full, *pullen*, to pull; and then they cast about for a symbol for the long sound. The most obvious symbol was *uu*, but this was open to the practical objection that it consisted of four consecutive downstrokes, and was liable to be indistinct; it might be read as *uu*, or *un*, or *nu*, or even as *im* or *mi*, if the *i* was not clearly marked with the sloping stroke which they frequently retained (from A. S.) for that purpose. Moreover, in words like the A. S. *dún*, a down, a hill, the matter was still worse; they would have to write *duun*, which would be easily mistaken for *dunu* or *dunn*. In this dilemma, they naturally adopted the French symbol *ou*; and I pause for a moment to notice how characteristic this symbol is of French usage. It not only occurs, over and over again, in English words as spelt by Norman scribes, and in French itself, but even in such words of comparatively late introduction into English as *soup*, *group*, *rouge*, *roulette*, *routine*, *tour*, *trousseau*, &c. And wherever else it occurs, it is still French. Thus *caoutchouc* and *toucan* are French spellings of Brazilian words; *tourmaline*, of a Cingalese one; *patchouli*, of an Indian one; *marabout*, of an Arabic one; and so on.

Moreover, when the Norman respelt *hus* as *hous*, he only altered the symbol. The sound remained the same as ever, until the day came when every Middle English word written with *ou* acquired a new sound, and changed imperceptibly, through infinitely small gradations, till it acquired the sound which it now usually has in the standard speech, a sound which has not been altered for some time past. We may hope that it will be permanent; but it is a simple fact that East Anglia influences the speech of London, and even the speech of the empire. I say no more.

We now know, accordingly, the whole story of *house*.[1] The *ou* really meant *ū*, and was adopted solely for phonetic and graphic reasons; but the pronunciation has since changed. The same explanation applies to the A. S. *thū*, thou; *ūre*, our; *sūr*, sour; *fūl*, foul; *sūth*, south; *mūth*, mouth; *lūs*, louse; *mūs*, mouse; *thūsend*, thousand; *ūt*, out; *lūtan*, to lout (bow down); *clūt*, clout; *abūtan*, about; *prūt*, proud; *hlūd*, loud; *scrūd*, shroud. But at the end of a word the scribes often wrote *ow*; hence we have *hū*, how; *nū*, now; *cū*, cow; *brū*, brow; *būgan*, to bow. Or they wrote *own* for *oun*, for distinctness; as in *tūn*, town; *brūn*, brown; *dūn*, down. Also (but at a later date) *ower* for *our*; as in *scūr*, shower; *būr*, bower. In the A. S. *un-cūth*, E. *uncouth*, the old sound of the *ou* remains to this day.

By similar processes, the reader who has any regard for his native language may learn many things regarding spelling that are of high interest and value, and he may easily discover the solutions of such simple problems as the following, viz. why *oak* is spelt with *oa*, whilst *broke* has *o*; why *sea* differs from *see*; why modern English does not permit a *v* to end a word (except Slav), but insists upon *have*, *love*, which are not distinguished, as to their vowel-sounds, from *brave* and *grove*; why *height* is written for *hight*, and *eye* for *ie* or *ye* or *y* (all once admissible); why the German *binden* has a short *i*, whereas the English *bind* has a long diphthong; with innumerable other problems of a like kind. Perhaps it is worth while to add that the only safe guide to modern English grammar is Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer, supplemented by a moderate knowledge of the habits of Middle English.

The study of comparative etymology has, in fact, during the last thirty or forty years, made such great advances that the subject is already almost too vast to be fully compre-

[1] All but the final *e*. The M. E. form was *hous*; but at a later period a final *e* was added, to assimilate the final *-se* to the final *-ce* in many words of French origin, such as *silence*, *offence*, and the like.