

“The *Meanings*, deduced logically from the Etymology”

Abstract

The *Canones Lexicographici* of 1860, a foundation document of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, propose an intimate logical connection between the etymology and the meaning of a word. This characteristic feature of nineteenth-century philology underpins the etymological fallacy, and is at odds with the principles of the dictionary, but has influenced certain aspects of its structure. It might be argued that an erroneous principle has been built into *OED*. However, the structural results of the proposed connection between etymology and meaning can be justified on pragmatic grounds; and the prominent role which etymologies play in the dictionary is not only pleasurable and instructive, but also makes it possible for the revised dictionary to locate English in a broader context of world language and culture than has been possible before.

Once the members of the Philological Society of London had decided that a *New English Dictionary* should be prepared, they appointed a committee to prepare the rules which should be observed by its editors. This committee met in December 1859 and January 1860, and the rules which its members drew up were revised at three meetings of the society early in the latter year. They were then printed as a little pamphlet of twelve octavo pages, with the title *Canones Lexicographici*. This pamphlet is one of the texts by which the *Oxford English Dictionary* was shaped.

The *Canones* begins with an outline of the plan of the proposed dictionary. It was to comprise a main section or dictionary proper, a second section divided between a vocabulary of technical and scientific words and an onomasticon, and an etymological appendix divided between a dictionary of proto-Indo-European roots and a list of English affixes and combining forms. This plan was, of course, to be revised before the publication of the dictionary. The technical and scientific vocabulary went into the main body of the dictionary, as did the affixes and combining forms, and the onomasticon and (for the most part) the proto-Indo-European material were excluded altogether. These were wise revisions.

The guidelines laid down by the *Canones* for the arrangement of the main section of the dictionary begin by explaining which words should

be admitted to it. These criteria, with the exception of that which excludes “purely technical or scientific” material, are basically those which still determine the lexical scope of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, except that they do not recognize that the rarest items in some specialized classes of vocabulary, such as slang, might properly be excluded from a general dictionary. They then set out the structure of each article, as follows:

1. The Word to be explained.
2. The *Pronunciation* and *Accent* ..
3. The *Various Forms* assumed by the word, and its principal grammatical inflexions ..
4. The *Etymon* of the word, so far as its *immediate* relation to the latter is concerned ..
5. The *Cognate Forms* in kindred languages.
6. The *Meanings*, deduced logically from the Etymology, and so arranged as to show the common thread or threads which unite them together.

Then come constructions, idiomatic or proverbial phrases, and lastly the quotations themselves.

Now, it will at once be evident that this is in effect the layout of entries in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and indeed in the dictionary today. The only major difference between theory and practice is that the quotations are actually arranged in paragraphs immediately after the senses which they illustrate, rather than being lumped together at the end of an entry. Items 1, 2 and 3 are called the ‘headword group’ in the electronically tagged text of the second edition of the dictionary; items 4 and 5 are called the etymology; and the etymology is followed by senses and quotation paragraphs.

The succession of items 4, 5 and 6, and particularly the reference at the last of these to the logical deduction of meanings from etymology, is remarkable. ‘Deduced’ means ‘brought down’ rather than ‘inferred’; nevertheless, the members of the Philological Society who were responsible for the *Canones* evidently had a sense of etymon and derivatives, including the English word in question, as a *logical structure*. They returned to this point right at the end of their instructions for the layout of the article: item 4 was to be ‘reserved for the exhibition of *results* which .. must necessarily be exhibited there in order to furnish a logical origin for the further developments contained in 5.’ The etymon at 4 might be a reconstructed form:

...the Etym. of *go* shall be given in this manner – ‘*Etym. GA*’; that of *join* – ‘*Etym. Fr.* ‘*joindre*,’ see YUG’; that of *conjunction* – ‘*Etym. Lat.* ‘*conjunctio*,’ see YUG.

The capitalisation of reconstructed forms referred readers to the appendix. It will be noted that no attempt to establish a link between, for instance, *joindre* and its inferred ultimate etymon was suggested. The *New English Dictionary* went far beyond the *Canones* in this respect. For instance, its treatment of the etymology of JOIN v.¹ is:

ME. a. OF. *joign-* stem of *joindre* (= It. *giugnere*):– L. *iungĕre* to join: root *jug-* = Gr. ξυγ-, Skt. *yuj-*, Indo-Eur. *yug*, whence OTeut. *juk-*, Eng. *yoke*.

In the sketch of etymology in the *Canones*, and its meticulous realization in the *Dictionary*, the principle was the same, however. The etymon was to furnish a logical origin for the cognates. Likewise, the senses were to relate logically to each other, united by their common thread or threads. This image occurs in the *Proposal for the Publication of a New English Dictionary by the Philological Society* which had been published in the year before the *Canones*:

... we shall endeavour to show more clearly and fully than has hitherto been done, or even attempted, the development of the sense or various senses of each word from its etymology and from each other, so as to bring into clear light the common thread which unites all together.

It entails what we may call the genealogical model of lexical relationships. This suggests that words may be seen as belonging to families, in which one word begets another, or several others, whose relationships can be traced, not least by their striking family likenesses, and referred to a common ancestor. Genealogical models like this were of widespread importance in nineteenth-century thought. Biologists constructed phylogenies; textual critics constructed Lachmannian stemmata; minerals, and social institutions, and literary genres, were said to be related to each other by filiation. These models were directed towards the understanding of origins, or archetypes. They furnished aetiological narratives, which went back to remote progenitors, and these in their turn then furnished aetiological explanations. Learning about the past made it possible to explain the present.

The genealogical model and the etymological fallacy were, that is to say, closely related. When it was asserted, to take Ambrose Bierce’s example, that a wooden structure cannot be *delapidated* because *delapidation* must mean the loss of stones, *lapides*, the perceived

genealogical thread of descent from *lapis* through *delapidare* to *delapidation* is the basis for the statement that these words stand in a close semantic relationship. Sir James Murray's preface to the first volume of the *New English Dictionary*, which he wrote in 1888, provides an example of genealogical imagery and the etymological fallacy working together in a single sentence: 'Many of these words have no kin in other languages, but ... are more or less recent creations of English itself – instances of *onomatopœia* in its true etymological sense of "name-creation."' (This is, it may be noted, a very uncommon obsolete sense of *onomatopœia*.)

Now, the principles on which the etymological fallacy is founded are at odds with the historical principles on which the *New English Dictionary* was founded, and by which the *Oxford English Dictionary* is still governed. This opposition has an effect on taxonomy. Genealogical principles demand that the sense of a given English word closest to the sense of its etymon (and the sense of the etymon may well be assessed by reference to *its* etymon) must be treated as the primary sense, and must stand first in an account of the word, so that its descendants, united by the common thread of sense development, can be set out below it. Historical principles, on the other hand, demand that the first recorded sense of the English word should stand first in its history, whether or not it appears "logical" that it should do so, and that the possibilities of secondary and subsequent borrowing, of the semantic influence or formal coalescence of similar words in English or other languages, or of the presence of irresolvable complications or lacunæ in the historical record, must be allowed for. The first edition of the dictionary occasionally wavered between the two sets of principles. As Henry Bradley pointed out in the first of his reviews, the article ADVENT was historically arranged, giving the ecclesiastical sense first and the general senses afterwards, even though it might have been argued that the general senses were logically anterior to the specific one, whereas in the article ANNUNCIATION,

a different course has been followed, the etymological sense of the word being first given, and afterwards its applications to the church festival and to the event which it commemorates, although these technical senses are of earlier occurrence in English.

When Bradley himself came to edit the letter M early in the next century, he noted at the end of the etymology of MAKE v.¹ that "Materials are wanting for a genealogical arrangement of the senses; the order of the

main branches in the following scheme has been adopted on grounds of convenience.”

The senses of polysemous words are being arranged in historical order, or in historical order within historically ordered branches, in the course of the current revision of the dictionary. This has sometimes necessitated departures from their “logical” arrangement, for instance by putting a figurative sense before a concrete one. In this respect, the third edition of the dictionary will be more rigorously historical than either of the first two. This is related to a move in the revision towards greater descriptivism: although the advances in that direction which were made by Murray and his colleagues are very much to be admired, they were certainly prepared to use the words ‘corrupt,’ ‘corruptly,’ and ‘corruption’ in about a thousand of their etymologies, or to describe usages as ‘erroneous,’ or occasionally to explain how a word, for instance ‘Majesty,’ should be used. This prescriptivist material is being revised where it is appropriate to do so.

Another move towards historical rigour will be the virtual elimination of starred reconstructed forms such as proto-Indo-European roots, which, it will be remembered, played a prominent part in the scheme outlined in the *Canones*. Forms for which there is no direct historical evidence have, it may be argued, no place in a historical dictionary. It may not be a coincidence that the modern desk dictionary in which such forms are treated most fully, in an appendix like that envisioned by the Philological Society’s committee, is the prescriptivist *American Heritage Dictionary*, whose ‘usage panel’ was set up to give the enquiring reader the sound advice about ‘correctness’ denied by the third edition of *Webster’s International*.

There are, however, respects in which the revised *Oxford English Dictionary* will continue to embody the genealogical thought present in the *Canones*. Etymological criteria are still used to distinguish between polysemy and homonymy: the identity of a word or the distinction between two words is still supposed to depend upon its, or their, etymology. The etymologies in the revised dictionary still stand between the headword group and the first definition in each entry, as if they were the point from which the definitions originated. Their importance is being recognised by the thoroughness with which they are being revised and made fuller and more informative. To what extent, then, can it be said that a wrong principle has been built into the current practice of the dictionary?

One answer to this question is that lexicography sometimes depends on the making of arbitrary decisions. It may be artificial to say that *mark* is ‘the same word’ when used of a boundary or of a written character, but

'a different word' when it is used of a unit of currency (this sense is from a slightly different Old English form). This distinction is certainly unlikely to be present in the understanding of many users of the word. However, it provides a convenient order for the information which the dictionary needs to present. The utility of the decision to order by etymology outweighs its theoretical instability. Similarly, since there is no necessary right place for the etymology in the structure of an entry, it may as well be adjacent to the pronunciation (which is itself conveniently placed where it may be compared with the spelling of the lemma) and to the first sense, both of which it may illuminate. This position originates in a mistaken view of semantics, but it is convenient.

Pleasure is served by the prominent role of etymologies in the dictionary. The dictionary-using public are delighted and intrigued by the origins of words. Etymological enquiries come steadily in to the Oxford English Dictionary Word and Language Service. Lord Macaulay's "every schoolboy knows" is not a phrase to use rashly, but most school-children probably do know the origins of, at least, a few proper names: a boy called Philip knows that his name means 'lover of horses,' a girl who lives in Swindon knows that the name means 'pig hill.' Curiosity concerning etymologies is manifested by the continuing vigour of the etymological fallacy. As the first draft of this paper was written, the President of the United States of America had just apologised for his use of the verb 'to welsh,' meaning 'to abscond to avoid payment of a debt,' because it may originate in an insult to the Welsh nation. If the dictionary can provide pleasure to its readers, and participate profoundly (and perhaps even usefully) in the linguistic life of the English-using world by the generous provision of etymological information, then it is achieving good and important ends.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the etymologies which have been revised or rewritten in the course of the revision of the *Oxford English Dictionary* have tended to exhibit a markedly less linear, or genealogical, character than their predecessors. Rather than tracing the ancestry of words, they have tried to contextualize them in the broad synchronic and diachronic structures of language.

So, for instance, the etymology of the noun MANE in the first edition of the dictionary stated that this word was the same as forms in Middle Dutch, Old High German and Old Norse, gave their common "Old Teutonic" etymon as a starred reconstructed form, and argued that the "primary sense" of this form must have been 'neck' by referring to its cognates in certain other Indo-European languages. The revised etymology as it stands (it will very probably be revised and emended further) is not radically different: it builds, after all, on a very good

foundation. But it is directed, not at providing the form and primary sense of a prehistoric ancestor, but at contextualising the English word in the Germanic languages of the middle ages and the present, and at providing a survey of the wider linguistic context of these Germanic words. The search for Teutonic origins no longer seems so important (or so innocent) as it did a hundred years ago. Starred Proto-Germanic forms are being removed, and the first edition's practice of identifying words as "Common Germanic" or "Common Teutonic" at the beginning of their etymologies is being questioned by revisers, and may well be discarded.

Another instance is the noun MACHINE: here, a serious oversight in the etymology (the derivation of classical Latin *māchina* from Ancient Greek μηχανή, the Attic-Ionic form, rather than the Doric μαχάνα) has been corrected, but more importantly, the fact that different senses of the word actually appear to be derived from a series of secondary borrowings rather than being related by filiation has been recognised formally. Part of the function of the etymology is now (although as before, further revision may well take place) to explain what the etyma of these secondary borrowings have in common. The word is no longer being explained simply by reference to a form in a learned language: that is to say, it is, like MANE, no longer being explained by the citation of an archetype.

In a large class of etymologies, material which bears on languages which the first edition did not attempt to cover is now being presented. African, Native American, Asian, Pacific and Australian etyma, which were often dismissed in the first edition as "Native word" or the like, are now being cited and, as far as possible, given a linguistic context. Dictionaries not available to nineteenth-century compilers, such as Burrows and Emeneau for Dravidian etymologies, have made in-house work on some languages newly feasible. The work of other lexicographers, for instance the editors of the *Dictionary of South African English* and the *Australian National Dictionary*, has been laid under contribution. A network of expert consultants to whom tentative solutions and intractable problems can be sent on paper or by electronic mail has been built up.

English is no longer seen as a language of Teutons, or of Aryans, enriched by the vocabularies of Ancient Greece and Rome. It is a language of the whole world. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is using its etymologies to contextualise English in the languages, history and culture of the world far more broadly than has ever been attempted before. This is being done on the basis of instructions nearly a hundred and fifty years old, and the fact that it is being done well is to the credit of the compilers of those instructions.