Understanding English Homonyms

Their Origins and Usage

Alexander Tulloch

Introduction

It may seem rather odd, but there is currently no book available (as far as the present author has been able to ascertain) which explains the derivation of the many homonyms we have in English. There are books, of course, which deal with this feature of the language, but they are for the most part little more than word lists. Curious readers who wish to understand why, for example, we can 'file' our fingernails but also 'file' documents away for safekeeping and easy future access have to work patiently through etymological dictionaries, perhaps including those written in foreign languages, in order to satisfy their curiosity. The aim of the present volume, therefore, is to draw together a few of the linguistic threads behind many of the homonyms in daily use among English speakers and to acquaint the reader with etymological explanations for their existence. Teachers, lecturers, linguists, writers, and native and foreign students of English will hopefully find the following pages compelling and informative.

The Definition

There is a problem, however, with the stated aim of this book, as there is no absolute definition of what a homonym is. The strictly traditional view is that a word can be defined as a homonym if it is spelled and pronounced the same as another but has a different meaning. If we consider, for instance, the sentence 'Is the still still still?' (i.e., 'Is the apparatus for producing alcohol as motionless as it previously was?'), we can safely say that all three 'stills' are spelled and pronounced exactly the same but have totally different meanings. They can therefore be classed as homonyms.

Unfortunately, some authorities include homophones (words pronounced the same but spelled differently, e.g., 'gait' and 'gate') under the banner of homonyms, and this has tended to complicate matters a little. Then there is the question of homographs, and here too dictionaries can differ in the definitions they offer the reader. Some infer that homographs and homonyms are virtually interchangeable terms; others define homographs as words which have the same spelling but totally different meanings and possibly pronunciations, such as the 'winds' that blow as opposed to the road that 'winds'. Against this background

of apparent confusion, the working hypothesis adopted during the preparation of this book is that a homonym is a word which is simultaneously a homophone and a homograph.

This, however, is not quite the end of the problem as there is still the question of the distinction now made between *homonyms* and *polysemous homonyms*. The former group includes those words which are written alike, have totally different meanings, and are also descended from two distinct sources. The word 'bear' is a case in point. When it means 'to carry', it is allied to a reconstructed Indo-European root meaning both 'to carry' and 'to give birth'. On the other hand, when it denotes the dreaded beast of the forest, it is derived from a Germanic root meaning 'brown'.

Polysemous homonyms (i.e., homonyms with several meanings) occur where words have widely divergent usages but can be traced back to a common source. In such cases the explanation usually involves nothing more complicated than the passage of time and an imaginative manipulation of the language. A lady reading the latest edition of a fashion magazine and a soldier snapping the magazine into place on his rifle might not realize that the terms for the objects they are each holding in their hands share the same derivation, but they do. The original Arabic word, *makhzan*, meaning simply 'a store', made its way across the Mediterranean Sea centuries ago and has been adopted and adapted by several European languages to suit a variety of contexts. For the purposes of this book, no distinction has been made between the two types of homonym, as sufficient information is given under each headword for further comment to be redundant.

The Origins

The obvious question for anyone interested in the derivation of homonyms has to be: why does English have so many? The simplest answer is, of course, why not? English, like many or even most languages of the world, has been subjected to outside influences for centuries and ever-increasing contact with other societies introduced foreign words into these islands where they either coexisted with or replaced much of the native vocabulary.

Conquest brought the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons, the Danes, the Vikings, and the Normans to these shores. The Celtic ancient Britons, who had previously occupied the land, were pushed out to the edges of what became the British Isles, but they left traces of their languages in place names and a number of words which survive hidden away in everyday English, even if few people realize their provenance. In the world of religion, science, education, and the arts, words that had begun life in Latin, Greek, or Arabic also made their way into English. War, the scourge of Europe over the centuries, introduced words from all the nations we have fought against (and alongside) as our soldiers came into contact with their foreign counterparts on distant battlefields. Commerce, greater cultural contact, and Britain's expansionist colonial past meant that French, German,

Spanish, and Dutch words, as well as some from more exotic languages such as Russian, Hindi, Arabic, and Chinese, lodged themselves firmly in what we sometimes erroneously think of as *pure* English.

Nor should we forget the influence on the evolution of English homonyms exerted by the somewhat erratic development of a universally accepted system of spelling. In Chaucer's time, the orthography of the language was fairly chaotic. By Shakespeare's day a more stable complexion could be detected, but it was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the advent of dictionaries and more universal education, that genuine steps towards a standardized system of spelling became apparent.

Taking all these factors into consideration, it is hardly surprising that, metaphorically speaking, linguistic wires became crossed and meanings became confused to such an extent that written and spoken English was the unwitting victim. And in the midst of such a linguistic maelstrom, it should not come as a shock that the lexical combinations we refer to as 'homonyms' found their way into modern English.

Linguistic Prehistory

In 1786 the English orientalist Sir William Jones noticed that many words occurring in Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit bore a remarkable similarity, not only to each other but also to their English equivalents. In particular, the numerals and terms denoting family relationships in the different languages seemed to resemble each other far too closely for it to be the result of pure chance. He therefore put forward the theory that at some point in history there must have been a parent language from which subsequent ancient and modern languages of Europe and parts of Asia developed. Various terms for this parent language were proposed, but eventually linguists settled on Proto-Indo-European, although this is now frequently referred to simply as Indo-European.

Where and exactly when this archaic, unrecorded language existed nobody knows for certain; the generally accepted view is that it was possibly spoken somewhere in the region of eastern or central-eastern Europe as long ago as 3000 BC, but the theories concerning this parent language are based more on a mixture of educated deduction and speculation rather than hard evidence or fact. One leading French etymologist, Antoine Meillet (1866–1936), did go so far as to state that anyone wishing to hear what the original Indo-European language sounded like need do no more than engage a Lithuanian peasant in conversation. His studies had led him to the conclusion that modern Lithuanian preserves more of the original Indo-European sound system than any other living language.

If we consider the language map of the world today, however, there is little need for doubt or even discussion. Centuries of historical migrations from somewhere in the region of the Black Sea to all corners of the earth have ensured that

the descendants of the postulated original Indo-European language (including English) are now more widely spoken throughout the world than those of any other language group.

When the early etymologists had gleaned all the data they could by analysing available texts written in Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit, they continued their research by what is now termed 'linguistic reconstruction'. They compared existing languages, sought patterns in sound shifts (i.e., observed how the vowels and consonants changed as words moved from one language to another), and attempted to establish what the historical form of a given word might have been. A good example of the method employed would be their examination of the modern English word 'lie' (as in 'assume a horizontal position') since it has clearly discernible relatives in the Latin and Greek words for 'bed', *lectus* and *lekhos*, the modern French *lit* and Spanish *lecho*, as well as the closely related Russian verb *lech'* ('to lie down'). By analysing these words and working backwards through history and linguistic change, etymologists have concluded that an original Indo-European form close to **legh* must have existed at one time. Such reconstructed forms are now, by convention, preceded in textbooks and dictionaries by an asterisk to indicate that they are unrecorded, and the practice has been adhered to throughout this volume. The same marker is also used in the case of words which should exist in otherwise well-attested languages, such as Old English and medieval Latin, but have not been documented.

The corpus of historical information now at the disposal of linguists means that they have a useful, if debatably theoretical, basis from which to work when attempting to understand the derivation of words in ancient and modern Indo-European languages. These reconstructed forms frequently proved an invaluable reference guide to the present author when selecting those homonyms with the most interesting histories for inclusion in this book.

Sound Shifts

One of the most important observations made by the nineteenth-century linguists was that certain consonants change in a more or less consistent pattern as they move from one language (or group of languages) to another. In essence this meant that, for instance, the sound represented by the letter 'p' in Greek and Latin frequently became an 'f' in the Germanic languages: *patēr*, *pater*, *father*; the sound represented by 'ph' or 'f' became a 'b' (*pherein*, *ferre*, *bear*). Under certain circumstances, a Greek 'p' could also become a 'b' in English, hence the correlation between the Greek *peithesthai*, Latin *fidere*, and Old English *bīdan* ('to trust'). The change from an unvoiced 'f' to its voiced equivalent 'v' is also seen in a comparison of the word *fan* and its Latin cognate verb, *ventilare* ('to fan').

Another change which the early etymologists identified was that from a Greek aspirate 'h' to a sibilant 's' in other European languages: *helios/sun*, *huios/son*, *hals/salt*.

   Under the headword WAGE readers might find that yet another consonant change (w–g) needs some clarification. The simplest explanation is that words of Germanic origin frequently altered an initial 'w' to a 'g' or 'gu' sound as they moved into French (and other Romance languages), thus: *wage/gagier*, *war/guerre*, *ward/garde*, and *wardrobe/garde-robe*.

Macrons

Macrons (i.e., diacritics indicating the lengthening of a vowel sound) have been preserved in words of Old English or Norse origin for the sake of consistency with reference works consulted during the preparation of this book.

   In Greek words, the macrons indicate vowel lengthening as represented by different Greek letters. Hence the letter 'e' equates to the short epsilon (ε) and 'ē' to the long eta (η). The letter 'o' equates to the Greek short 'o' or omicron (ο) and 'ō' to the Greek long 'o' or omega (ω).

Greek Transliteration

Readers should note that in Greek, the first 'g' in the combinations 'gg', 'gk', and 'gkh' is pronounced as an 'n'. Consequently, *aggelos* ('angel') and *aggelia* ('message') are pronounced *angelos* and *angelia* respectively.

The Letter Eth (ð)

Again, for the sake of consistency with other sources, the letter eth (ð) has been retained in words of Old English, Icelandic, and Old Norse origin. In modern English, eth equates to the combination 'th', pronounced as in both 'father' and 'thinner'.

Dates

Unless otherwise stated, the dates given in the following pages refer to the year, decade, or century for which there is written evidence of a given word. It is possible (or even highly probable) that many words existed in spoken form prior to being written down, but any attempt to specify the original date of oral usage would be little more than speculation.

BEAR

Examples: a) The load was too heavy for the wall to **bear**.
                  b) The hunters trapped the **bear** in a large net.

a) One of the interesting points about this word is the way in which it is used in all the Germanic languages to mean both 'carry' and 'give birth'. The very word 'birth' is itself a cognate, as is the word 'born' and the dialect word for a child, 'bairn'. And even further afield, we find the Russian cognate words *bremya* ('burden') and its derivative adjective *beremennaya* ('pregnant').

The Indo-European root here is **bher*, which is also seen in Old English *beran*, Middle English *bēre*, and Gothic *bairan*. It also produced the Greek and Latin infinitives *pherein* and *ferre* 'to carry' which have given English such words as 'to transfer' (to carry across), 'to defer' (to put off), 'to prefer' (to bring to the front), phosphorus (bringer of light), and many more. Even the word 'fertile' is cognate, basically meaning 'able to bear' fruit, crops, etc.

In most contexts in English the word has been replaced by 'to carry', although it survives in many set expressions. We talk about a 'load-bearing' wall, the 'bearings' of an engine, and 'ball bearings', not to mention the figurative uses in expressions such as having 'a cross to bear' and 'to bear a grudge'.

b) The traditional name for the 'bear' in English folklore is 'Bruin', and the appellation 'Bruin the Bear' is tautological. 'Bruin', 'bear', and the adjective 'brown' are all cognates derived from the Indo-European root **bhere* ('bright' or 'brown'). The Old English term for the animal was *bera*, directly descended from the Proto-Germanic **beron* ('the brown one').

The word for a bear in Greek was *arktos* (Latin had *ursus*), also used by the Greeks to denote the constellation known as the Great Bear. As this was seen mainly in the northern hemisphere, *arktos* acquired a more general meaning of 'the north' and eventually came to define the earth's most northerly region, the Arctic.

But the history of words associated with 'bear' contains a curious twist. No descendant of the Greek *arktos* made its way into the Germanic languages (or if it did, it is now lost) because of a superstitious belief that the mere mention of the animal which was the scourge of the northern climes would be enough to make it appear. Consequently, alternative terms were used, such as 'the brown thing', in the hope that such a periphrastic reference would prevent its appearance.

A further point worth noting involves the Celtic languages. Irish Gaelic retains *béar*, cognate with the Germanic term, but Welsh has retained *arth*, cognate with the Greek *arktos*.

BLAZE

Examples: a) The house was on fire, and the **blaze** could be seen for miles.

b) Her horse had an unusually large **blaze** on its forehead.

c) They were determined to **blaze** the leader's name abroad.

a) This word has some of the most surprising connections in terms of the historical development of English. It entered English meaning 'to burn vigorously' in about 1200 as a derivative of the Old English *blæse* ('torch' or 'lamp'). Its roots lie in the Proto-Germanic **blas* ('shining' or 'white') and the Indo-European **bhel* ('to shine', 'to flash', or 'to burn'). The same root also produced Old English *blæcan* ('to bleach' or 'to whiten') and the Proto-Germanic **blakaz* ('burned'). This in turn produced the word *blāc* ('white'), as well as, almost unbelievably, *blaec*, the modern English word 'black'! In other words, the modern English terms 'black' and 'to bleach' (i.e., to whiten) share a common ancestry.

b) The 'blaze' on a horse's head is derived from the same Indo-European root and is so called because it is white and probably shiny. A surprising cognate adjective here, however, is 'bald'. This now always implies a lack of hair, but the original meaning of this adjective was 'white'. Evidence of this survives in the bird of prey known as the 'bald eagle'. It is certainly not 'bald' but more often than not flaunts a luxuriant display of glistening white plumage.

'Blazing a trail' is a reference to the pioneers in eighteenth century America who would hack their way through a forest and strip the bark off a tree or leave a white mark on the trunk to indicate to those following on behind which route they should follow.

c) The now somewhat archaic use of the word to mean making something public is derived from the Indo-European **bhle/*bhel* ('to blow' or 'to inflate'). It dates from a fourteenth century use of the word associated with blowing a trumpet and making people sit up and take notice whether they wanted to or not.

As a postscript, it is worth mentioning that the jacket known as a 'blazer' owes its origins to Cambridge University. In 1880, members of the Lady Margaret Boat Club (attached to St. John's College) took to wearing bright red jackets which soon became known as 'blazers' because of their conspicuously eye-catching appearance. Within a relatively short time, the name was applied to any similarly styled jacket, even if its colour was more muted.

EGG

Examples: a) They had a boiled **egg** for breakfast every morning.

   b) She **egged** him on to steal the money.

a) The spelling of the word 'egg' has changed considerably over the centuries, which must have caused a certain amount of confusion and misunderstanding in the Middle Ages. Until the sixteenth century it was spelled *eye* (plural *eyren*), although a northern dialect form, *egge*, had existed since the fourteenth century.

In Old English the word was *æg*, a descendant of Proto-Germanic **ajja* or **ajjaz*, related to the Indo-European root **owjom* ('egg'). This is probably also the derivation of the Greek *ōon* and Latin *ovum* (cognate with the word 'ovary') and may be ultimately connected to the Sanskrit *vís* and the Latin word *avis*, both of which mean 'bird'.

'Eye', referring to the organ of sight, is totally unconnected with the earlier spelling of 'egg'. It is ultimately descended from the Latin *oculus* and the Greek *okkos*, both of which meant 'eye'.

b) 'To egg on' as a verb meaning 'to urge' or 'to incite' is a very close relative, linguistically speaking, of the noun 'edge'. Clear evidence of this can be seen in the Old English spelling and pronunciation: the word would have been written *ecg* in Saxon times and pronounced 'edge'.

Old English *ecg* meant both 'a point' and 'a sword', which provides a clue to the derivation of the modern expression. Originally, 'to egg on' was 'to prod somebody' with a pointed stick or the tip of a sword until they agreed to whatever was being demanded of them.

Old Norse had the word *eggja* ('to goad' or 'to incite'), which was a derivative of the Indo-European **ak* ('to be sharp'), a root that shows up in many European languages and in some surprising places. It accounts for the German *Ecke* ('corner') and several words which have arrived in English via Greek, including 'acid', 'acrid', and 'acute'. It is even related to the 'Acropolis' in Athens, a collection of monuments whose name translates as 'city on a peak'.

FAIR

Examples: a) The weather was **fair** when we set sail for France.
b) All umpires and referees are supposed to be completely **fair**.
c) Dad took the kids to the **fair**.

a) It was not until the mid-sixteenth century that 'fair' was used to describe a pretty young lady's light complexion. Prior to that, it had been used from about 1200 to describe pleasant, as opposed to unpleasant, weather. Much earlier, Old English had *fæger* ('beautiful' or 'sweet') which developed into *feire* in Middle English, also meaning beautiful. But the roots from which these words evolved were the Germanic **fag* and the Indo-European **pak* ('to join' or 'to combine'). The original meaning of 'fair', therefore, was 'well constructed' (i.e., well put together), an idea reflected in another cognate adjective, the Greek *pēgos* ('firm', 'strong', 'compact', or 'well constructed').

b) The association of fairness with an unbiased attitude is not unrelated to the example above. Such an interpretation attached to the word 'fair' from the mid-fourteenth century and stemmed from the conviction that umpires had to be firm and resolute in their impartiality.

In about 1600 the expression 'fair and square' was coined to described people, decisions, and actions seen to be totally honest and without bias. The origin of this expression is not entirely certain; it might have been a carpenter's term for furniture which was firm and perfectly constructed or it could be an echo of the time (i.e., the sixteenth century) when 'square' was used as a synonym for 'honest'.

c) 'Fair' as a place of fun and amusement has its counterpart in the French *foire* and *fête*, both of which can be traced back to the Latin *feriae* ('festival' or 'holiday'). This in turn is derived from the noun *festum* ('celebration') and the adjective *festus* ('festive' or 'joyful').

Other cognate nouns include 'feast' (although the connotation of a sumptuous meal was a later development) and 'festoon'. We now use this as a synonym for 'drape', as when we talk of 'draping' or 'festooning' a room with garlands. No doubt the association here is with halls lavishly decorated with flowers at holidays (originally 'holy days'), festivals, and feasts.

FAN

Examples: a) She sat by the **fan** in order to keep cool.

b) He is a great **fan** of Manchester United.

a) Whether handheld or powered by electricity, a 'fan' is the term for an artefact or instrument whose purpose is to generate a flow of air. The root of the word is the Indo-European *ua/*wan ('to blow'), which occurs in English and other languages in words connected with currents of air. It is the root, for instance, behind English words such as 'wind' and 'weather', and both of these are related to the Sanskrit *vata* ('wind'). Cognate words in other European languages include the French, Spanish, and Italian for wind: *vent*, *viento*, and *vento* respectively. We also find it in a more distant linguistic cousin, the Russian word *veter*, which also means 'wind'.

The word 'fan' in its present form actually came into English in the fourteenth century, but previously it had occurred in Old English as *fann*, derived from the Latin *vannus*. In both Old English and Latin, the original meaning of the word was 'an instrument for winnowing grain (i.e., separating the wheat from the chaff). And the Latin verb for this process was *ventilare*, which, of course, has also given us the verb 'to ventilate'.

b) When we describe the staunch supporters of football clubs, pop stars, or idols of screen and stage as 'fans' we are using a word of a totally different derivation. 'Fan', in such cases, is a shortened form of the word 'fanatic', the origin of which is the Latin *fanum* meaning 'temple'. The adjective derived from it, *fanaticus*, was originally used to describe people inspired by a divinity and, in extreme cases, fixated on a religious idea to the exclusion of all reason. In the sixteenth century it was even applied to those thought to be insane. In milder cases, such people might have been described as being merely 'enthusiastic', a term for almost the same idea. It is derived from two Greek words *en* ('in') and *theos* ('god') and defines someone who 'has a god within him or her'.

The use of 'fan' to denote an 'avid supporter' originated in the United States in the nineteenth century.

FARE

Examples: a) '**Fare** thee well' used to be a common expression in English.

b) She paid the **fare** when she got on the bus.

a) There are several meaning of the word 'fare', and all are derived from the basic word meaning 'to go'. The Germanic root **fer* spawned Old English *faran*, Middle English *faren*, as well as the modern German *fahren*, all of which mean 'to travel'. The verb no longer exists with this meaning in English but it does survive in a surprising number of cognate nouns and set expressions. 'Fare thee well' is now considered archaic, but the shorter version 'farewell', if not very common, is still heard, particularly in songs or poetry. It was originally a term used on parting, when the sense was really 'may you enjoy a safe journey'. Another term for a traveller, 'wayfarer' is now hardly ever encountered and survives only in older forms of the language, but its nautical equivalent, 'seafarer', is still heard. Also in current use are expressions such as 'thoroughfare', a road; 'welfare', a synonym for well-being; and 'warfare', originally the practice of 'travelling about' waging war.

b) The concept of travel is preserved in other current uses of the word. To pay a 'fare' is to pay whatever is the requisite amount in order to be able to travel on a bus, train, etc. Over time, the word has come to refer not only to the money paid but to the person paying, although this usage now tends to be restricted to taxis, where a passenger is regularly referred to as 'a fare'.

Another extension of this use is associated with food. It is quite common to refer to victuals on offer at a particular establishment as 'fare'. 'Fine fare' or 'traditional fare' are not uncommon descriptions of good food provided by a restaurant or for sale in a supermarket. Originally, however, the 'fare' would probably have been food prepared in advance to sustain a traveller on a journey.

But the most surprising cognate is probably the word 'elver'. This is now used as a term to designate young eels and has been used in this form since the seventeenth century. In the sixteenth century the form 'eel-vare' appeared, a southern English pronunciation of 'eel-fare', the term for a brood of young eels. Originally, however, the term referred to the passage or journey of young eels as they made their way up a stream or river.

GROSS

Examples: a) She ordered a **gross** of eggs from the farmer.

b) The officer stood accused of **gross** misconduct.

c) He was offered a very attractive **gross** salary.

a) All the meanings associated with this word date back to about the fourth century AD. The adjective *grossus* did not exist in classical Latin but suddenly appeared in late Latin as an adjective describing anything excessively large, thick, or stout. All attempts to trace the word's origins further back in time have proven fruitless and the most that can be said is that *grossus* might have been borrowed from a Celtic source.

Its specific use as a noun to denote twelve dozen of anything dates from the fifteenth century and entered English from Old French which had the expression *grosse dozeine* ('fat dozen'), commonly in use among traders and merchants. As such traders normally dealt in bulk purchases and sales, they came to be known as *grossiers* (from the medieval Latin for 'wholesaler', *grossarius*), the origin of the modern English term 'grocer'. In modern English, the term applies to food retailers and is a particularly common designation for those who trade in fruit and vegetables, usually referred to as 'greengrocers'.

The idea of large quantities has given rise to a rather surprising related expression: 'to be engrossed in'. If we say that we are 'engrossed' in a certain activity, we are letting people know that whatever it is we are doing is taking up the 'bulk' of our time and energies.

b) Despite the fact that 'gross' is cognate with the ordinary French *gros* ('large'), its use in modern English has acquired overtones of coarseness, excess and always suggests unattractiveness. It is seldom used now to describe people, but has more figurative uses such as 'gross error', 'gross misjudgement', etc. More generally, if we describe something as 'gross' we are making a strong suggestion that we find it disgusting and totally undesirable.

c) Wages and salaries are frequently quoted as being either 'gross' or 'net'. In this context the use of the word 'gross' indicates that the sum quoted is the 'large' figure quoted before the normal deductions such as taxes and pension contributions have been taken into consideration.

INCENSE

Examples: a) A smell of **incense** filled the whole church.

b) She was **incensed** when she heard the news.

a) The Latin word *incendium* ('conflagration' or 'fire') was derived from the verb *incendere* ('to set on fire'). This had a secondary derivative noun, *incensum*, which could be applied to just about anything that had been burnt. It was adopted into French as *encens* and then, in the late thirteenth century, the word crossed the Channel and appeared in English in the form we know today.

A close relative here is the word 'frankincense', a combination of the Old French *franc* 'pure' and *encens* (i.e., incense of the highest quality). It is not recorded in English before the fourteenth century and yet most of us know of it only as one of the gifts taken to Christ as he lay in a manger in Bethlehem. The word used in the Greek version of the event is *libanos*, which is echoed in the resin's alternative name, Oil of Lebanon.

The practice of burning sweet-smelling herbs has long been associated with religion and the act of worship. In the 1880s the expression 'joss sticks' (i.e., Chinese incense) found its way into English; this was a corruption of the Javanese *dejos*, itself a borrowing from the sixteenth-century Portuguese *deos* or *deus* ('god') and ultimately cognate with the Greek *Zeus.*

There is, however, a further Greek connection with the practice of burning fragrant leaves for religious purposes. The verb *thuein* meant 'to worship', and the herb burned to help prayers rise to heaven was called *thumos.* This eventually made its way into Middle French as *thym* (pronounced 'teem') and then into English. This is the origin of the herb we now refer to as 'thyme'.

b) At some point early in the fifteenth century the verb 'to incense' acquired a figurative meaning synonymous with 'causing extreme anger'. The implication was that anger engendered heat and heat would make the person involved glow with fury. The original Latin verb *candescere* ('to glow white with heat'), related to *incendere*, also gave us the words 'candle' and, surprisingly, 'candidate'. The explanation for this is that in ancient Rome a citizen would normally wear a *candida toga* ('a gleaming white toga') if he was seeking office or election to an important civic post. Such a person would then be described as *candidatus* ('clothed in shining white'), and even though the custom of donning such a garment has been consigned to history, the derivative noun 'candidate' is still with us.

JAR

Examples: a) He took a swig from the earthenware **jar**.
           b) Her voice began to **jar** on my ears.
           c) When we arrived the door was on the **jar**.

a) This is one of a number of words used in English that can trace their origins back to Arabic. The Arabic *jarrah* was originally a container for holding water, and as Arab culture and learning spread across Europe the word found its way into languages such as French (which has *jarre*), Spanish (which has *jarra* and *jarro*), and then eventually English. Interestingly, the pronunciation of the letter 'j' in English is similar to the French form of the word, but in Spanish it has retained the Arabic 'ch' sound (pronounced as in 'loch').

b) The origin of the word with this meaning is the Old English verb *ceorran* ('to creak'). Over time the word came to be associated with any loud, unpleasant noise or even the actions that could result in one. This meant that collisions, shaking, or unpleasant physical or mental shock could result in 'jarring'.

    Another associated word is 'nightjar', a bird renowned for the raucous noise it has a habit of making during the night, 'jarring' on people's nerves and preventing them from sleeping.

c) A door which is said to be 'on the jar' (or, to use its more common equivalent, 'ajar') is slightly open and free to swing or turn on its hinges. It is derived from the Middle English expression *on char* ('on the turn').

    But there is an interesting further development here. When the Old English derivative verb *cierre* evolved into the Middle English *char* it retained its meaning of 'turn' but had acquired the additional meanings of 'a turn of work' and 'a period of duty'. This explains why cleaning ladies, who would come in to work for perhaps an hour or two, used to be commonly referred to as 'charwomen'.

    A parallel can be seen in modern English, which uses the Latin *rota* ('a wheel', i.e., something that 'turns') for a list of work to be done and personnel detailed to complete it.

PORT

Examples: a) The boat sank as it was leaving **port**.

b) **Port** and starboard are naval terms for left and right.

c) Colonel Smithers always enjoyed a glass of **port** after dinner.

a) All these usages share a common ancestor and can be traced back to the Greek word *peran* which essentially meant 'I pass through' and its associated noun *porthmos* ('ferry', 'strait', or 'crossing by ferry'). However, the verb *peran* had a secondary meaning of 'I carry goods beyond the seas for sale' and the goods so delivered were, more often than not, slaves. By the time the word was adopted into Latin it had produced two further nouns *porta* and *portus*, the former referring to city gates (and subsequently to any gate or door), the latter being used for a harbour or 'port'.

There is a fascinating linguistic link here: the adjective 'opportune' is derived from the Latin expression *ob portum veniens* ('coming towards port'). Any wind blowing in such a direction would have made it easier for ships to enter the harbour and would thus be considered favourable or, as we might say, 'opportune'. And this, of course, is also the origin of the noun 'opportunity'.

b) The two sides of a boat were originally referred to as the 'larboard' and 'starboard'. Larboard was the side on which goods were loaded (Middle English *laddeborde*), and the other side was where the paddle or other steering mechanism was housed. The term for this in Old English was *stēorbord*, which eventually evolved into 'starboard'.

In 1844 the Royal Navy decided to dispense with the term 'larboard' as it was so easily confused with 'starboard', particularly in a high wind when sailors would have had the greatest difficulty distinguishing between the two. The alternative term selected was 'port'.

c) The fortified wine, port, takes its name from its place of origin, Oporto (from *o porto*, Portuguese for 'the port') on the western coast of Portugal. And in fact, the country itself was known to the Romans as Portus Cale, a combination of the Latin *portus* and *Cale*, thought to be a Celtic place name. Some linguists suggest a possible connection with the Greek *kalos* ('beautiful').

POST

Examples: a) He hung his hat on a **post** fixed in the ground.
            b) She worked in a **post** office all her life.
            c) The police asked for a **post**-mortem on the body.

a) The consensus among etymologists is that the derivation of this kind of 'post' is somewhat unclear and that the most likely linguistic association is with the Latin *postis* ('doorpost'). It has further been suggested that this word is itself derived from the preposition *pro* ('in front of') and the verb *stare* ('to stand'), suggesting that the original Latin 'post' simply 'stood in front' of the house. On the other hand, there is also the suggestion that the word is a straightforward development of *positus*, the passive past participle of *ponere* ('to put'), and thus is basically nothing more than a length of timber that has been 'put' into the ground.

b) The association with letters, packages, etc., that have to be delivered from one part of the country to another is essentially military in nature. As the Roman Empire expanded and it was deemed necessary to protect all lines of communication, soldiers would have been stationed at various places along the roads to protect travellers and traders on their journeys. Such protection units would have been 'posted' at regular intervals and expected to remain at their 'posts' until ordered to leave. Over the centuries these places developed into 'staging posts' where travellers (civilian as well as military) could have a meal, rest, and change horses before continuing on their way. It was presumably not long before somebody had the idea of asking such wayfarers travelling between 'posts' to deliver important letters or documents to residents in other parts of the country, and thus the first 'postal' service came into being.

c) In modern English it is quite common, if not the norm, to talk about a 'post-mortem' as if it were a noun. This is, strictly speaking, incorrect since *post mortem* in Latin means 'after death' and is used as an adjectival phrase; the full expression should be 'a post-mortem examination'.

   The Latin *post* ('after') has been adopted into many English expressions and is used frequently in everyday language: to 'post-date' a cheque'; a 'postgraduate' student; a 'postdoctoral' thesis; an award can be granted 'posthumously' (literally 'after the recipient has been buried in the ground'); and, of course, if we write a letter and then think of something to say after the main body of the writing is finished, we add a PS, the conventional abbreviation for *postscriptum*, the Latin for 'written after'.

POUND

Examples: a) She paid a **pound** for a **pound** of beans.

b) The stray dogs were taken to the **pound**.

c) She began to **pound** the mixture to a soft paste.

a) A 'pound' as a unit of weight and a 'pound' as a unit of currency share a common linguistic origin. Its association with weight is derived from the Latin *pondo*, meaning 'by weight' from the noun **pondus* ('weight') which occurs only rarely in the nominative. The verb associated with these words is *pendere* ('to weigh' or 'to hang'), which produced a more figurative verb *ponderare* ('to weigh up'), the origin of the modern English verb 'to ponder'.

Our word 'pound' is further connected with the Latin expression *libra pondo* ('a pound by weight') where *libra* originally meant the scales in which money, grain, etc., would have been 'weighed out'. And *libra* is the origin of our abbreviation for the pound as a unit of weight, 'lb'.

The Latin verb *pendere* has also given us words such as 'pension' (an amount of money 'weighed' or 'assessed' as adequate for a person's needs) and 'pendant' (an article of adornment 'hanging down' from somebody's neck).

b) As an enclosure (originally for cattle), 'pound' is thought to be related to the word 'pond', which is a similar kind of enclosure, albeit one in which water is contained by the surrounding land. The Old English term was *pund*, and this in turn was connected to *punfald*, a tautological term combining 'pen' and 'fold', both of which can refer to small enclosures where animals can be kept. A closely related English term is 'pinfold', derived from the Old English verb *pyndan* ('to shut up' or 'to confine').

c) In the word 'pound' meaning to beat, the final 'd' is a later addition, as the original Old English word was *punian* and the Middle English *pounen*, both of which meant 'to bruise' in a mortar. Interestingly, at least one authoritative etymologist (Walter Skeat) suggests that the same word is the origin of the word 'pun' (a play on words). The reasoning here is that a pun is an attempt to 'beat' additional meanings out of a word or expression.

PUNCH

Examples: a) He could **punch** like a man half his age.

  b) A couple of glasses of **punch** and she was all tipsy.

  c) Every seaside town used to have a **Punch** and Judy show.

a) There are two meanings of the verb 'to punch' as it is used in modern English, although ultimately they share the same origin. The use of the word to mean 'striking somebody with a clenched fist' dates from around the 1570s and is related to the Latin *pugnare*, which is also the origin of the English adjective 'pugnacious'. Prior to this date 'to punch' was more associated with piercing, prodding, etc., with a pointed tool known as a 'puncheon'. This appeared in the mid-fourteenth century as a borrowing from the French *ponchon*, derived from the Latin *pungere* ('to prick' or 'to stab'). Other common English words related to this are 'puncture' (to make a hole in) and 'punctuate' (to make marks in a manuscript which resembled little holes).

b) 'Punch' as an alcoholic beverage was introduced to England in the seventeenth century by travellers and tradesmen returning from exotic lands such as India. The word is supposedly derived from the Hindi *panch* ('five') as the drink contained five ingredients: sugar, water, lemon juice, alcohol, and spice. And the Hindi *panch* combined with the Persian *ab* ('water') in the name of the area known in its anglicized form as the 'Punjab', literally the land of the 'five waters' or rivers: the Beas, Chenab, Jhelum, Ravi, and Sutlej.

c) Mr Punch and his wife, Judy (who, incidentally, was originally Joan), are products of the sixteenth-century form of Italian entertainment known as *commedia dell'arte*. The seventeenth-century diarist Samuel Pepys describes what is probably one of the couple's first appearances in England, in London's Covent Garden in 1662. The name 'Punch' is a shortened form of Punchinello, the anglicized version of the Italian *Pulcinella*, thought to be a corrupted form of *pollecena*, 'young turkey'. This is a possible reference to the puppet's nose, likened by many to a bird's beak.

The descriptive phrase 'as pleased as Punch' is usually interpreted as a reference to Mr Punch's unfailing ability to get the better of anyone who opposes him.

PUPIL

Examples: a) Jane was considered the most gifted **pupil** in the school.

b) The **pupil** of one eye was dilated.

a) The association between a classroom and a 'pupil' did not occur until the middle of the sixteenth century. Prior to that, 'pupil' was a term applied to orphans or children who for one reason or another were being brought up by a ward or guardian. The word came into English from the Old French *pupille*, which in turn was a derivative of the Latin *pupillus* ('an orphan boy') and *pupilla* ('an orphan girl'). Both of these nouns were derived from the normal terms of endearment for boy and girl, *pupus* and *pupa*, as simple alternatives to the standard words *puer* and *puella*. The Indo-European root from which the Latin terms are derived is **pu/*pup/*peu* ('to swell', 'to inflate', and 'to beget').

Modern cognates include: 'pupa', an insect at the stage of development when it is also referred to as a chrysalis; 'puppet', from the French *poupette* and the Vulgar Latin *puppa* ('doll'); and the word 'puppy'. The Old English for a young dog was *hwelp* (modern English 'whelp') and the term 'puppy' at the time it entered into English in the fifteenth century referred to what we now think of as a 'lapdog'.

b) It was also in the fifteenth century that the idea of a little boy or girl was adopted to define part of the eye. And once again, it would seem the custom crept into English from Latin via Old French. The Romans noticed that if we stand close enough to another person to see a reflection in their eyes, what we see is a diminutive form of ourselves. In other words, the image we see resembles a *pupilla*, or little doll.

RAPE

Examples: a) In most countries **rape** is considered a very serious crime.

b) **Rape** is a valuable crop in some parts of the world.

c) A **rape** is an old land measure in southern England.

a) 'Rape' as a criminal offence is now almost always associated with sexual violence, but a brief look at the history of the word shows that this was not always the case. In fact, the word only acquired its present meaning around the sixteenth century; previously, it signified theft by force, particularly if committed with speed. A good clue to this interpretation is the fact that 'rape' is cognate with the adjective 'rapid', and both words are derived from the Latin *rapere* ('to grab') and the Indo-European root **rep* ('to snatch'). Another surprising link is with the noun 'rapture', which since the early seventeenth century has had the sense of 'captured by' or 'carried away by' in a spiritual or emotional, rather than physical, sense.

b) The beautiful yellow crop known as 'rape' (or rapeseed), which is such an economically important commodity in many countries of the world, has nothing to do with snatching or sexual aggression. It is linked etymologically with the Latin *rapum* ('turnip'), which in turn is distantly (and somewhat puzzlingly) with three Greek vegetables: the *rhaphē* was the ancient Greek term for a 'large radish'; a *rhaphanis* was a 'small radish'; and a *rhaphanos* was a 'cabbage'. In the modern world a turnip in Russian is a *repa*, and the Italian dish known as *ravioli* is an additional cognate.

'Rape' is also used in the winemaking industry as the term for the pulp left over after the juice has been squeezed out of the grape. But there appears to be no linguistic connection between the words 'rape' and 'grape', and the derivation of this usage of the word is unclear.

c) Mainly of interest to historians, a 'rape' in the southern English county of Sussex was a specified unit of land. Until the nineteenth century the county was divided into six 'rapes', and the usual explanation of the term is that it is linked linguistically with the Old English *rape*, meaning 'rope'. The common assumption is that the areas so designated were cordoned off from each other by ropes (or perhaps rope fences) for legal and administrative purposes.

ZEST

Examples: a) This recipe requires the **zest** of three lemons.
  b) He was depressed and lost his **zest** for life.

a) Since the 1670s the word 'zest' in a culinary context has referred almost exclusively to the top layer of peel on an orange or lemon, pared off in extremely thin slices and added to a dish for extra flavour or piquancy. In Middle French, however, it was the term applied to the thick membrane dividing the kernel of a walnut. The word is thought to be a borrowing from Latin *scindere* ('to split') and the Greek *skhistos* ('divided'), from the verb *skhizein* ('to split' or 'to cleave'). If this is the correct etymology of the word, it makes it cognate with other nouns dealing with separation, division, and cutting such as 'scissors', 'scythe', 'schism', and the prefix 'schizo-' in terms such as 'schizophrenia' (a divided mind) and 'schizoid' (possessing characteristics resembling those of a schizophrenic mind).

b) There is no definitive explanation for the word 'zest' being used as a synonym for 'enthusiasm' or 'eagerness'. It has, however, been used in this way since around 1790, and the most likely derivation of the usage is the sharpness associated with a slice of a citrus fruit being compared to a person's character. A man or woman described as having a 'zest' for living is likely to be characterized by a certain sharpness and a distinctive personality. Much the same could be said about a slice of lemon.