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Decoding the Source Code of Language: Etymological Premises in the English Language

Apurva Bakshi

Abstract

Etymology is defined as the study of origin, formation and development of words in any language. As a field of academic study, it seeks to find, comprehend and analyze the meaning of words from their genesis or birth, thus affording us the possibility of much better understanding of the language. The present paper looks at crucial aspects of etymology: its role in understanding the life-cycle of a word, its utility in fields such as history, science, etc., and the nature of roots.

Introduction

Etymology is defined as the study of origin, formation and development of words in any language. As a field of academic study, it seeks to find, comprehend and analyze the meaning of words from their genesis or birth, thus affording us the possibility of much better understanding of the language as also various linguistic forms of expression. It helps in channelizing our understanding not only towards connotations of a given word, but also its meaning in reference to different subjects.

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The Life of a Word

Different words have entered the English language from different languages. Consider a few examples. Bangle, bungalow, cheetah, Pundit, guru, bazaar, pyjamas, curry, jaconet, jungle, thug come from any one of the Indian languages (Hindi/ Urdu/ Sanskrit); art, table, force, machine originate from French; senor, senora, senorita come from Spanish; from Italian come crescendo, spaghetti, risotto and pizza (of course!). The language from which a word has arisen, be it French, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, Sanskrit, Chinese, or just Old English, often gives us an idea about the milieu or environment in which the word has shaped up, and the same also tenders important information about a word's way of pronunciation whenever it stands disputed. Etymology may thus be described as the science that explores or seeks to explore many inherent aspects of the word, which may ordinarily have remained hidden. It may be treated as the life-science that studies the life of a word, by suitably examining and dissecting it. Thus etymology takes into account the history and geography of the word; it therefore enables us to comprehend the maximum information out of a word. It estimates/ uncovers/ establishes the life-cycle of a word (possibly through various stages) and helps to assess properly the significance of each stage. This also testifies that a word actually passes through many stages, be they temporal or spatial. Its meaning may remain same in these stages, but mostly it varies, and the word thus tends to acquire many meanings and connotations. Thus the final form in which a word stands is a result of many circumstances it has been through and many phenomena that have metamorphosed it into its present form. The study of etymology thus stands as an analytical, absorbing and entertaining pursuit.

A Multi-disciplinary Stretch

To say or think that etymology is of importance only to the linguist, in our case the English language scholar would be incorrect. This is because etymology spreads itself and its uses in many directions, in many subjects. Consider history. Etymology has helped to solve many problems that have often provided many vital clues. It was quite unknown to historians who the 'Aryans' were, were they Indian or foreigners who came to India, or a nomadic tribe. This clue was provided by the Etymological aspect of the word 'haathi' in Hindi, which was the name given by Aryans to the elephant. Now elephant was a native creature of the Indian plains, but Aryans called it 'animal with a hand' (haath-i). It was they saw a trunk hanging

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down its front. Thus they incredulously called it 'haathi', which means that they were new to the Indian plains. Also, their fondness for horses meant they were not Indian people, since horses were not native creatures of Indian plains. It was finally inferred that Aryans were not Indian people but had migrated from central Asia. A considerable part of this theory was based on etymological premises. Similarly in sciences such as physics and chemistry, a lot can be known or assessed about various technical terms and names by studying and understanding the roots that make them up. For instance, you can easily guess what a gyroscope does or how a gyrocompass works if you know that the root gyro- stands for revolving or spiraling. Alternatively, knowing that alti- stands for height, you can probably guess what an altimeter is. Sciences can thus be better understood in their technical and casual nuances by studying these etymologically. Thus, mathematics, physical sciences, life sciences and humanities, specialized sciences such as medicine and engineering and virtually any field of human scholarly endeavor can be made more enriched by using etymological premises and references as and when required.

Roots

Structure can be better understood and analyzed by knowing and examining the building blocks that make it. This is as true for anything as for words. By studying the building blocks or constituents that make up words, words can be understood and their meanings grasped in many connotations. The building blocks that make up words are roots. A root is any part of a word that holds a meaning or idea that is characteristic to it, and conveys the same or largely similar meaning in all words. These roots are often descended from old words in other languages from tracing these meanings to the old languages, a lot can be learnt about the meanings or implications embedded in these roots.

Conclusion

Etymology is thus a very crucial aspect of language and a significant tool for the linguist. Not just that, it can help in better understanding of other fields of study such as history, sciences and mathematics, or for that matter any other field of scholarly learning. A study of the common roots that take up among themselves a huge chunk of words in the English language can thus be quite helpful and rewarding for anyone who wishes to understand the basics of words and for guessing meanings of words. However, etymology is not a definitive science

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since the vast ocean of ‘root-words’ has been enriched by various streams. At best it can be described and used as an indicative and predictive guide to understanding the genetics of words!

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