**Content**

Introduction

1. Etymology as a branch of linguistics

2. Folk etymology as a productive force

3. Instances of word change by folk etymology

4. Other languages

5. Acceptability of resulting forms

Conclusion

References

**Introduction**

Folk etymology is a linguistic phenomenon whereby borrowed or archaic phrases are reinterpreted according to analogy with other comon words or phrases in the language. Etymology refers to the origin of words. For example, the etymology of etymology can be traced through Old English and Latin to the Greek roots etymo, meaning 'true', and logos, meaning 'word'. In folk etymology, speakers af a language assume the etymology of a word or phrase by comparing it to similar-sounding words or phrases that already exist in the language.

A word or phrase is typically considered a folk etymology only if it has changed from its original borrowed form as a result of the reinterpreted etymology. If speakers assume an "incorrect" origin of a word or phrase, but its pronunciation and/or spelling are unchanged, then the term is not referred to as a folk etymology. For instance, some people assume that the English word history is a combination of the words his and story, but the word actually can be traced through Old French and Latin to the Greek root historia, meaning 'knowledge through inquiry, record, or narrative'. While the interpretation "his story" is a folk etymology, the word history is not properly referred to as such, as the reinterpretation does not affect its form.

Folk etymology is a term used in two distinct ways:

A commonly held misunderstanding of the origin of a particular word, a false etymology.

"The popular perversion of the form of words in order to render it apparently significant"[1]; "the process by which a word or phrase, usually one of seemingly opaque formation, is arbitrarily reshaped so as to yield a form which is considered to be more transparent."[2]

The term "folk etymology", as referring both to erroneous beliefs about derivation and the consequent changes to words, is derived from the German Volksetymologie. Similar terms are found in other languages, e.g. Volksetymologie itself in Danish and Dutch, Afrikaans Volksetimologie, Swedish Folketymologi, and full parallels in non-Germanic languages, e.g. French Étymologie populaire, Hungarian Népetimológia; an example of an alternative name is Italian Pseudoetimologia.

1. **Etymology as a branch of linguistics**

The etymology of a word refers to its origin and historical development: that is, its earliest known use, its transmission from one language to another, and its changes in form and meaning. Etymology is also the term for the branch of linguistics that studies word histories.

So, what's the Difference Between a Definition and an Etymology?

A definition tells us what a word means and how it's used in our own time. An etymology tells us where a word came from (often, but not always, from another language) and what it used to mean.

For example, according to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, the definition of the word disaster is "an occurrence causing widespread destruction and distress; a catastrophe" or "a grave misfortune." But the etymology of the word disaster takes us back to a time when people commonly blamed great misfortunes on the influence of the stars.

Disaster first appeared in English in the late 16th century, just in time for Shakespeare to use the word in the play King Lear. It arrived by way of the Old Italian word disastro, which meant "unfavorable to one's stars."

This older, astrological sense of disaster becomes easier to understand when we study its Latin root word, astrum, which also appears in our modern "star" word astronomy. With the negative Latin prefix dis- ("apart") added to astrum ("star"), the word (in Latin, Old Italian, and Middle French) conveyed the idea that a catastrophe could be traced to the "evil influence of a star or planet" (a definition that the dictionary tells us is now "obsolete").

Is the Etymology of a Word Its True Definition?

Not at all, though people sometimes try to make this argument. The word etymology is derived from the Greek word etymon, which means "the true sense of a word." But in fact the original meaning of a word is often different from its contemporary definition.

The meanings of many words have changed over time, and older senses of a word may grow uncommon or disappear entirely from everyday use. Disaster, for instance, no longer means the "evil influence of a star or planet," just as consider no longer means "to observe the stars."

Let's look at another example. Our English word salary is defined by The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language as "fixed compensation for services, paid to a person on a regular basis." Its etymology can be traced back 2,000 years to sal, the Latin word for salt.

If a word's etymology is not the same as its definition, why should we care at all about word histories? Well, for one thing, understanding how words have developed can teach us a great deal about our cultural history. In addition, studying the histories of familiar words can help us to deduce the meanings of unfamiliar words, thereby enriching our vocabularies. Finally, word stories are often both entertaining and thought provoking. As any youngster can tell you, words are fun.

1. **Folk etymology as a productive force**

Folk etymology is particularly important because it can result in the modification of a word or phrase by analogy with the erroneous etymology which is popularly believed to be true and supposed to be thus 'restored'. In such cases, 'folk etymology' is the trigger which causes the process of linguistic analogy by which a word or phrase changes because of a popularly-held etymology, or misunderstanding of the history of a word or phrase. Here the term 'folk etymology' is also used (originally as a shorthand) to refer to the change itself, and knowledge of the popular etymology is indispensable for the (more complex) true etymology of the resulting 'hybridized' word.

Other misconceptions which leave the word unchanged may of course be ignored, but are generally not called popular etymology. The question of whether the resulting usage is "correct" or "incorrect" depends on one's notion of correctness and is in any case distinct from the question of whether a given etymology is correct.

Until academic linguistics developed the comparative study of philology and the development of the laws underlying phonetic changes, the derivation of words was a matter mostly of guess-work, sometimes right but more often wrong, based on superficial resemblances of form and the like. This popular etymology has had a powerful influence on the forms which words take (e.g. crawfish or crayfish, from the French crevis, modern crevisse, or sand-blind, from samblind, i.e. semi-, half-blind), and has frequently been the occasion of homonyms resulting from different etymologies for what appears a single word, with the original meaning(s) reflecting the true etymology and the new meaning(s) reflecting the 'incorrect' popular etymology.

The term "folk etymology", as referring both to erroneous beliefs about derivation and the consequent changes to words, is derived from the German Volksetymologie. Similar terms are found in other languages, e.g. Volksetymologie itself in Danish and Dutch, Afrikaans Volksetimologie, Swedish Folketymologi, and full parallels in non-Germanic languages, e.g. French Étymologie populaire, Hungarian Népetimológia; an example of an alternative name is Italian Pseudoetimologia.

1. **Instances of word change by folk etymology**

In linguistic change caused by folk etymology, the form of a word changes so that it better matches its popular rationalisation. For example:

Old English sam-blind ("semi-blind" or "half-blind") became sand-blind (as if "blinded by the sand") when people were no longer able to make sense of the element sam ("half").

Old English bryd-guma ("bride-man") became bridegroom after the Old English word guma fell out of use and made the compound semantically obscure.

The silent s in island is a result of folk etymology. The word, which derives from an Old English compound of īeg = "island", was erroneously believed to be related to "isle", which came via Old French from Latin insula ("island").

More recent examples:

French (e)crevisse (likely from Germanic krebiz) which became the English crayfish.

asparagus, which in England became sparrow-grass.

cater-corner became kitty-corner or catty-corner when the original meaning of cater ("four") had become obsolete.

Other changes due to folk etymology include:

buttonhole from buttonhold (originally a loop of string that held a button down)

Charterhouse from Chartreux

hangnail from agnail

penthouse from pentice

sweetheart from sweetard (the same suffix as in dullard and dotard)

shamefaced from shamefast ("caught in shame")

chaise lounge from chaise longue ("long chair")

straight-laced from strait-laced

When a back-formation rests on a misunderstanding of the morphology of the original word, it may be regarded as a kind of folk etymology.

In heraldry, a rebus coat-of-arms (which expresses a name by one or more elements only significant by virtue of the supposed etymology) may reinforce a folk etymology for a noun proper, usually of a place.

The same process sometimes influences the spelling of proper names. The name Antony/Anthony is often spelled with an "h" because of the Elizabethan belief that it is derived from Greek ανθος (flower). In fact it is a Roman family name, probably meaning something like "ancient".

1. **Other languages**

See the following articles that discuss folk etymologies for their subjects:

belfry (architecture)

blunderbuss

Brass monkey

Brent Goose

Caesarean section

chaise longue

Ducking stool

crawfish

gringo

Jerusalem artichoke

poll tax

Rake-hell

serviceberry

sincere

Welsh rarebit

The French verb savoir (to know) was formerly spelled sçavoir, in order to link it with the Latin scire (to know). In fact it is derived from sapere (to be wise).

The spelling of the English word posthumous reflects a belief that it is derived from Latin post humum, literally "after the earth", in other words after burial. In fact the Latin postumus is an old superlative of post (after), formed in the same way as optimus and ultimus.

Medieval Latin has a word, bachelarius (bachelor), of uncertain origin, referring to a junior knight, and by extension to the holder of a University degree inferior to Master or Doctor. This was later re-spelled baccalaureus to reflect a false derivation from bacca laurea (laurel berry), alluding to the possible laurel crown of a poet or conqueror.

Olisipona (Lisbon) was explained as deriving from the city's supposed foundation by Ulysses, though the settlement certainly antedates any Greek presence.

**5. Acceptability of resulting forms**

The question of whether the resulting usage is "correct" or "incorrect" depends on one's notion of correctness; at any rate it is a separate issue from the question of whether the assumed etymology is correct. When a confused understanding of etymology produces a new form today, there is typically resistance to it on the part of those who see through the confusion, but there is no question of long-established words being considered wrong because folk etymology has affected them. Chaise lounge and Welsh rarebit are disparaged by many, but shamefaced and buttonhole are universally accepted.

The term "folk etymology", as referring both to erroneous beliefs about derivation and the consequent changes to words, is derived from the German Volksetymologie. Similar terms are found in other languages, e.g. volksetymologie in Dutch, Afrikaans volksetymologie, Danish folkeetymologi, Swedish folketymologi, and full parallels in non-Germanic languages, e.g. Hungarian népetimológia, French étymologie populaire and Israeli Hebrew etimológya amamít (popular etymology). Examples of alternative names are Italian pseudoetimologia and paretimologia (<paraetimologia), as well as English etymythology. The phenomenon becomes especially interesting when it feeds back into the development of the word and thus becomes a part of the true etymology. Because a population wrongly believes a word to have a certain origin, they begin to pronounce, spell, or otherwise use the word in a manner appropriate to that perceived origin, in a kind of misplaced pedantry. Thus a new standard form of the word appears which has been influenced by the misconception. In such cases it is often said that the form of the word has been "altered by folk etymology". (Less commonly, but found in the etymological sections of the OED, one might read that the word was altered by pseudo-etymology, or false etymology.) Pyles and Algeo give the example of "chester drawers" for "chest of drawers"; similarly, "chaise lounge" for "chaise longue".

**Conclusion**

There are many examples of folk etymology in common English words and phrases. For example, penthouse is derived from the Old French apentiz, meaning roughly, 'that which is appended to', but English speakers reinterpreted the word to include the English house, since a penthouse is a place where someone lives. Similarly, primrose, a type of flower, was reinterpreted by way of folk etymology to include the English name of another flower, rose, although the word was originally borrowed from Old French primerole.

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