A Word is Born

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With more than a million words, English has the largest vocabulary of any of the 3,000 or so languages being spoken in the world today. Thus it seems strange that, in spite of this, we often cannot find the right word to express what we want to say. Of course, just as we do not know all the people in our nation, neither do we know all the words in our language. But even if we did, there are still ideas for which no single word exists in English. For instance, what do you call the grating sound which you hear when someone is filing his nails; or the not-a-pain pain you feel when you bump your elbow; or your nauseous reaction when you are exposed to overscented lotion or cologne? And how does a person introduce someone with whom he is living, but to whom he is not married? My what? Not that I have ever had that problem; but a problem that has bothered me is how to start a business letter when I do not know the sex of the person to whom I am writing. "Dear Sir" or "Gentlemen" has a definite masculine ring to it. "To whom it may concern" is hardly appropriate. But what is? If you know, please tell me.

Words, like people, become more interesting as you know more about them, and every word has its own individuality, even such identical twins as "to start" and "to begin." You would never say, "I could not begin my car this morning." Don't ask me why; I don't know. But I do know that "begin" does not belong in that sentence.

Also, twin words have different dispositions. One person might call me petite; another would say I was a runt. They both express the same basic idea, but one is complimentary while the other is insulting. Did you ever notice that a group working for your advancement is an organization, but one working for your opponent is a machine? A citizen belongs to a country we respect as an equal; a native belongs to a country we look down on. A sect is a religious group we deem respectable; a cult is a religious group we regard with suspicion.

Henry Kissinger defined the difference between stupidity and diplomacy in this way:

> If I say to a woman that her face would stop a clock, that's stupidity. But if I say, "When I look at your face, time stands still," that's diplomacy.

Another thing that words have in common with people is that they are always in a state of change. Old words are laid to rest, and new ones come along. But the birth rate is much greater than the death rate, so that the number of words keeps growing. It is estimated that approximately 1,000 new words enter our language each year through medicine alone, besides all the words in our everyday life. Five years ago William Morrow and Company published a book of new words, which purports to include 8,500 words not yet in standard dictionaries.

How do these new words come into existence? They are not born like babies, after a nine-month incubation period. Most of them develop from a new combination of elements already existing in the language. For instance, tele-, meaning distant, is the element that has produced such words as telephone, television, telescope; and scope, an instrument for viewing, is a basic part of microscope, periscope, stethoscope. And, of course, there are the old faithfuls, "mania" ("a mad desire for") and "phobia" ("a morbid fear of").

But these elements in words -- where do they come from? The majority of them are adopted or adapted from other languages. Like the American people, the background of our vocabulary is extremely diverse. We have taken words like "child" and "goat" from the Anglo-Saxon; "paradise" from the Persian; "dungaree" and "pajama" from the Hindu; "mask• from the Arabic; "rug," "skull" and "sky" from the Scandinavian languages; "block," "kindergarten" and "poodle" from the German; "succotash" and such place names as "Ohio" ("beautiful river"), "Iowa" ("the drowsy ones") and "Texas" ("howdy, friend!") from the American Indian.

However, it is no wonder that most books on English word sources are written by teachers of Latin and Greek because, in spite of our absorbing words from everywhere, over two thirds of our vocabulary is derived from these two languages. Offhand, I could name you at least four Latin words who, if they planned a family reunion of their English derivatives, would each have to invite no less than 125 relatives. And 93% of the words in a large recent medical dictionary are from Latin and Greek, 60% of them pure Greek.

The parts of the body in medical terminology are regularly designated by their Greek names, such as osteo- for "bone" (osteopath), cardia- for "heart" (cardiogram), and masto- for "breast" (mastectomy). The Latin name for "breast," by the way is *mamma*, and the mammary glands are those that secrete milk, while a mammal is an animal that breast-feeds its young.

Also, endings indicating types of ailments for these body parts are Greek. *Rrhea* is a "discharge," like diarrhea or pyorrhea. *Itos* is an "inflammation" (dermatitis, hepatitis, appendicitis). -osis indicates a "diseased condition" (neurosis, halitosis). And -oma refers to a tumor, often malignant (carcinoma, sarcoma).

Among treatments are two from Greek that involve cutting and that come into English in the forms of -tomy and -ectomy. –tomy usually indicates simply an incision (tracheatomy), and –ectomy is a complete removal (appendectomy, hysterectomy, mastectomy).

But whole courses are offered on medical terminology. I'll not dump any more of this on you right now. Instead, let's just glance at a few of our words that have developed from Greek and Latin in unusual ways.

The word "hypocrite" comes from the Greek base crit-, which means "to judge," and from which we get such words as critic. With the prefix hypo-, the Greek took on the meaning of one who answers questions, and then developed into a person speaking dialogue, especially an actor on the stage. It is an easy step from playing a role on the stage to playing a role in everyday life.

Then there is the word "metaphysics. *Physica* in Greek means "nature," and meta- sometimes means "after." Among Aristotle's manuscripts a book on natural science was followed by an untitled book on abstract philosophy, which naturally his disciples called *Metaphysica* – "the book after the one on natural science." What could be more logical?

One common word on campus which is very colorful is "sophomore." *Sophos* in Greek means "wise," and -more (from the same base as "moron") means "foolish." So a sophomore is presumably one poised between foolishness and wisdom.

Our months beginning with September, are named from Roman numbers, but their names are all wrong. September, October, November, and December should be months 7-8-9-10. You see, the Roman year began with March.

Also, our word "senator" is derived from the Latin word for "old man," the same word that gives us "senile." The older heads of the Roman households, respected for their experience and wisdom, were the statesmen. As the years go by, I find this respect for older people sounding more and more attractive. Today I suspect that some of our young senators would

resent the fact that their title means "old man."

Some very concrete Latin words have taken on abstract meanings in English. The Latin word *stimulus* means a "whip;" *index* was the word for "forefinger" -- the "pointing finger;: *focus* was the "fireplace,: the center of the Roman home; to "eliminate" something is really to throw it out the door; to "expedite" means "to take your foot out of the way", just as to "impede" is "to put your foot in the way."

Some words have lost prestige in this transfer between languages. "Prude" is from a word that means "sensible," which also gives us "prudent;" "villain" (related to the word "villa") was merely a "farmworker," which may tell us something about the honesty of ancient hired hands. But the opposite process also took place; some words became more respectable when they moved into our language. "Debate" is from a word that means "to fight or beat up," the same base word that we have in the phrase "assault and battery." And the words "pastor" and "minister" meant "shepherd" and "servant."

The term "Humanities" is something about which many college students and faculty members have only a vague idea. A Monmouth College faculty member once defined the "Humanities" to me as anything that did not fit into the social sciences or the pure sciences -- in other words, the curriculum garbage can. Far from it. *Humanitas* in Latin means "culture," and is related to the word "human." Therefore, the Humanities are those culture-related subjects (art, music, literature, philosophy, religion) which distinguish a human being from an animal or a robot.

A confusing point in English is that our word "man" is a translation of two totally different words in Latin, one of which means a "human being," and the other is the "male" in contrast to the "female." The first of these is the one in such words as chairman, spokesman, manslaughter. Sometimes feminists have been so zealous to eliminate discrimination that they have tried to abolish "man" wherever it appears, without differentiating between the sex word and the general term. This can lead to awkward language (e.g. chairperson, spokesperson). A letter to *MS Magazine* suggested that the word "man in our language be replaced by "peep" (probably a clipped form of people). Thus we would have policepeep, chairpeep, and presumably even peepslaughter. But then would a manhole become a peephole?

Caput, the Latin word for head, is taken from the Indo- European *kaput*, which meant "cup-shaped." This Latin word gives us quite a group of English words, many of which seem in no way related. Of course, there are such obvious derivatives as "captain," "capital," and "decapitate;" and don't forget "cabbage." But through the French *caput* became "chief," and a diagonally folded cloth covering for the head was known as a "kerchief." (The "ker•
here has the same meaning as the cur- in curfew, which means "to cover the fire"). Eventually, a square cloth resembling this head covering became known as a handkerchief, which has nothingto do with the head. Another group of derivatives developed from *caput* because a man's wealth was measured by how many "heads" of cows or oxen he owned. Therefore, they were called his cattle, and his money was his "capital;" and a further extension of this same idea produced "chattel."

Another Latin word that has given us a host of derivatives is the verb *amare*, meaning "to love." Among the English derivatives from this are the name "Amanda" ("one to be loved"), "amiable," and "amateur" – "one who does something not for pay but for the pure love of doing it." A clipped form of "amateur: is the term "ham" in such phrases as "ham actor" or "ham radio operator." Don't let the h- at the beginning bother you. That poor letter

wasn't even given status as a member of the alphabet by the Greeks; it was just a breathing mark. And the Romans also treated it very casually, sometimes putting it on a word and sometimes omitting it. Thus we have both "Hannibal" and "Annibal" for the same person, and "arena" and "harena" for the same thing. Even in modern Italian, the town named after Hercules, which we call Herculaneum, is called Erculano.

However, borrowing from other languages is not our only source for new words. Sometimes we take two existing words and
simply solder them together as one word, as the Germans often do.
This is the ancestry of such words as "ashtray," "sawdust," "rainbow,"

"bookends," "washcloth," and "football" (or "basketball," or "baseball").

On the other hand, we sometimes take a longer word and, clipping off a section, make it a word in its own right, a kind of verbal shorthand. College slang is full of this: After "psych" class, you talk with your "prof" for a few minutes before going to the "gym" for a "phys ed" class. Then you go back to the "dorm," turn on your "hi-fi" or "stereo," glance over your "lit" notes, and settle down to study for your "math" "exam." Twelve words in this statement are clipped words. And many completely respectable words have entered our language by this route: "bus" is a clipped form of omnibus; "canter" is the gait horses had as they carried pilgrims to Canterbury; "fender" is a clipped form of "defender;" and we cut "taxicab" in two and use either half.

Sometimes, instead of cutting one word into two, we telescope two words into one. Some examples of this are "brunch" ("breakfast" + "lunch"), "moped" ("motor" + "pedal"), medfly ("Mediterranean fruit fly"), "goodbye" ("God be with ye"), "smog" ("smoke" + "fog"), and the pilot's "wilco" is "I will comply."

Within the last few years we have heard a good deal about "Reagonomics" and "Amerasian" children. And you can buy "Crunchewy" dog food for your "chickapoo," "cockapoo," or "peekapoo" -- cross breeds of a chihuahua, a cocker spaniel, or a pekingese with a poodle [That poodle must have got around]. And an animal recently developed in a French zoo is called a "ligron" or a "tigron" (the offspring of a lion and a tiger, with the first letter indicating whether the male parent was a lion or a tiger). Even the words "none" and "never" belong in this family of words ("not one," and "not ever").

This family, of course, is first cousin of the acronym family. We Americans seem to have a special fondness for initials. Our presidents include FDR, JFK, and LBJ. We turn on the TV, tuning into ABC, CBS, or NBC, where we might watch a rerun of MASH ("motorized army surgical hospital"). We gladly contribute to the YMCA, and reluctantly write a check to the IRS. We gripe about the activities of the FBI, and have mixed feelings about the UN. ERA has a different meaning to a baseball fan and to a feminist. And this mistaken identity in terms extends much further than acronyms. A minister one day went into a bank to cash a rather large check. The teller opened her cash drawer and inquired, "What denomination?" His answer: "Presbyterian."

Also, some of these initials, like breakfast cereals, seem to be always getting "improved." What used to be called DMVI ("driving a motor vehicle while intoxicated") got shortened to DWI ("driving while intoxicated"), and it is now known as DUI ("driving under the influence" -- they don't say of what). Many of these abbreviations give us new pronounceable words, called acronyms.

In government news we read of OPEC, NATO, NASA, and SALT. In business and industry we find ARMCO steel, NABISCO, and AMOCO filling stations. I have a NOW account in a bank that is a member of the FDIC. Gertrude Stein called the Yale University Press YUP. Webster's New World Dictionary acknowledges the fact that the word "slang" may be an acronym for "slovenly language." "Radar" is a shortened form of "radio detecting and ranging"; "scuba" is "self-contained underwater breathing apparatus;" and "laser" = "light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation."

The word "jeep" is a pronounceable spelling of the letters GP, which were stamped on the general purpose vehicles of the army. Special interest groups deliberately search for an acronym as a name -- MADD and SADD ("mothers and students against drunk driving").

Our two most prestigious professions stand at opposite ends of this development. A large proportion of medical speech has slipped into this condensed vocabulary. AIDS is, of course, "acquired immune deficiency syndrome." And your prescription will say t.i.d. (*ter in die*) for three doses a day, or h.s. (*hora somni*) for take at bedtime.

Law, on the other hand, is the last bastion of verbosity. That is why I had to sign a four-page document, written by Mrs. Pratt, in order to say simply: "If ever I become incapable of signing my own checks, I would like this friend of mine to have the right to do so."

Incidentally our dollar mark is really an acronym. It is US, with the U superimposed on the S, and then the bottom part of the U dropped. And our question mark is the Latin word *quaestio*. The Romans used the first and last letters of this word to indicate a question. The last letter was put under the first. Eventually the o became a dot, and rapid writing altered the shape of the q until we got what we have today.

Another term that more or less belongs to this family is Ivy League, which has nothing to do with vine-covered buildings. The four original schools in the Ivy League (perhaps an athletic conference) were Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and Brown. They were designated by the Roman numeral for four, which is, of course, I and V. As they say on Sesame Street: I-----V, I---V, IV.

Words are often taken from the names of people or places associated with them. China was first imported from that country, and tweed was originally made in homes along the Tweed River. A minister in Kentucky sold a specially distilled liquor which he had developed, and he named it after his home county, Bourbon. Jeans originated in Genoa, Italy; Levi Strauss first manufactured levis; and a French aerial gymnast, Jules Leotard, designed the garment that bears his name.

Many other people have given their names to what they invented or discovered, such as: Louis Pasteur, Louis Braille, Rudolf Diesel, and Joseph Guillotine, as well as Antoine Saxe and John Philip Sousa, who gave us the saxophone and the sousaphone. George W. D. Ferris of Galesburg, Illinois, invented a new form of entertainment for the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. It was, of course, the ferris wheel. And a General Burnside wore his hair growing down in front of his ears; people reversed the syllables of his name, and this style became known as sideburns.

Sometimes the character of a person causes others to be branded with his name. Chauvin was a soldier in Napoleon's army who despised all non-French -- the original chauvinist. Hooligan was the surname of a rowdy Irish family in London about 1900. And Elbridge Gerry, a governor of Massachusetts, redefined the state's voting districts to his advantage; thus gerrymandering was born.

One of the latest new words from a proper name was added to our vocabulary recently by Illinois congressman Henry Hyde, who was heard complaining in a Washington restaurant about a month ago about somebody "getting Borked."

Fictional people also have become sources of new terms. We refer to a person's Achilles heel, or a Herculean task, quixotic behavior, or a malapropism. This last one is named from Mrs. Malaprop, a character in a Seventeenth Century play, who had a talent for using words in the wrong places. So her name is used to designate such statements as:

The migrane workers who help harvest the crops,

or

His foot hit the exhilerator instead of the brake

Then there is the case of the little white boy and the little black boy who were comparing notes on the ailments in their family. The white boy said, "My grandmother suffers from very close veins," and the black boy retorted, "That's nothin'. My mother has sick-as-hell anemia." And my housekeeper said one day that her father had "old-timer's disease."

But my favorite comes from David Frost after his interviews with Nixon several years ago. He said, "Many allegations have been made, and I intend to find the alligators."

Some national or ethnic names have taken on unpleasant connotations: "to welsh on somebody," a "dutch treat," to "jew somebody down," a "scotch person," or an "indian giver." This last phrase developed from the Indian custom of "exchanging" gifts. If the first giver did not like the gift from the other one, he could take back his own.

Some words are merely Anglicized forms of foreign words, e.g. the distress call "mayday" has nothing to do with a month or a day. It is simply a phonetic spelling of the French *m'aidez*, pronounced mayday and meaning "Help me!" And "so long" is an English spelling of the Arabic *salaam*. Probably the strangest of these that I one that I cannot verify, but I have it on pretty good authority. As you know, the play "Oh Calcutta" came out during what was known as the beatnik period, when young people tried to speak a language which they hoped that no old fogey over the age of thirty could understand. This play has nothing to do with a city in India. I have been told that it is merely a phonetic spelling in English of the French "*Oh, quelle*..." I don't know the other words, but they translate into English as "Oh, what a cute behind you have."

Other words develop from a misunderstanding of a term in another language. One interesting instance of this comes from Australia. It has been said that Captain Cook pointed to a strange animal there and asked its name. The natives replied, "*Kangaroo*," which meant "I don't understand." But to Captain Cook this was the name of the animal, so --.

Then, of course, there is the case of the glass slipper in "Cinderella." This fairy tale was written in French, with the title, "La Petite Pantoufle de Vair." My pronunciation would make a Frenchman shudder, but the important word is the last one, and the title meant "the little slipper of fur." But the first English translator confused *vair* ("fur") with *verre* ("glass"), which are pronounced the same. So the impossible glass slipper became standard equipment in the English version.

A few English words are just picked out of thin air, e.g. the numerical word "googol." Not long ago a million was considered a very large number; a billion almost beyond

comprehension. Now references to the projected national deficit and the national budget casually mention trillions. After that comes quadrillion, quintillian, sextillion, etc. Finally, the young nephew of the mathematician Edward Kasner invented what has become the accepted term for a number 1 followed by 100 zeroes -- a googol.

Another word with no ancestry was created by a congressman from Texas as he was listening to his colleagues' meaningless chatter during a session of congress. He tried to think of a good word to describe their noisy nonsense. Then he remembered the turkey farms back home, and coined the word "gobbledegook."

If I go on any longer, that is the heading under which you will classify my talk. But I hope that what I have said will make you more interested in looking into the remarkable personalities of individual words, because each one has a unique and interesting biography.