

## Anatoly Liberman. *An Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology: An Introduction*

### Preliminaries

The volume under review is the first installment and a sample volume of *An Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology*, whose publication is due to follow. The dictionary is based on a research project initiated by Anatoly Liberman in 1987. Of course, it is not the first product of the author's work on English etymology. He has published several articles on methodology, which prepare the ground for the forthcoming dictionary (e.g. Liberman 1994, 2000, 2002b, and 2005a), as well as studies on particular words, which disclose some of his results (e.g. Liberman 2001, 2002a, and 2007). Moreover, he has published a valuable introduction to methodology in etymological research aimed at the lay reader (Liberman 2005b). Last but not least, the present newsletter has witnessed publication of five sample entries—*fag*, *heather*, *lass*, *ragamuffin*, and *stubborn*—from the forthcoming dictionary, accompanying the author's survey of problems related to producing it (Liberman 2006). Nevertheless, the reviewed volume is the first work released under the official title of the project.

The idea for the new dictionary rests on the premise that etymological dictionaries fall into two categories: analytic and dogmatic. Within the first group we find, for example, the dictionaries by Feist and Lehmann (GED), Vasmer (REW), or von Wartburg (FEW). An entry in such a dictionary features a critical survey of derivations suggested so far, supported by references to relevant literature and concluded with the author's final verdict on whether any hypothesis is more convincing than others. Dogmatic dictionaries usually present etymologies as either firmly established (i.e. with only one possible derivation) or completely unknown (with the commentary frequently reduced to the statement 'of obscure/unknown origin'). No discussion or alternatives are offered, nor any literature cited. In the former case the reader has to believe the solution that is provided, whereas in the latter he or she is left with the impression that nothing can be nor has been said of the word in question. The reason for such a situation is the misconception that an etymological dictionary is meant for a mass audience rather than for specialists (see the introduction to the work under review, especially pp. xi–xiii), thus scholarly discussion is considered too technical by the authors and is eliminated.

According to the author (Liberman 2005b: 161–162), the etymological dictionaries of English published before the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century tended to be analytic, whereas practically all published ever since have been dogmatic, including the fourth edition of Skeat and the OED, the peaks of English etymology according to him. Early dictionaries were prescientific, and therefore part of being a careful etymologist was to list all the hypotheses that the author was aware of. Later scholars became equipped with the strong methodological tool called sound laws, which made them more self-conscious than conscientious.

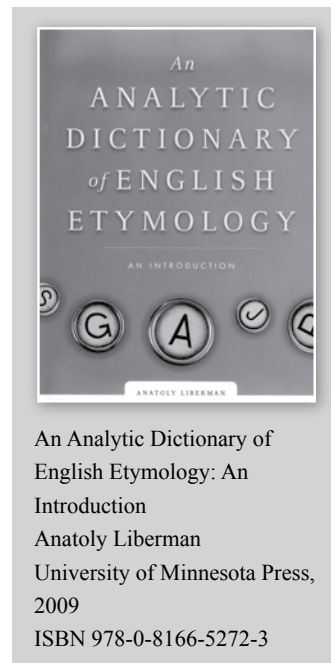
The aim of the new publication is to introduce the concept of the analytic dictionary of etymology, formulate the methodology used for the research and advertise the merits of the forthcoming dictionary by the presentation of 55 sample entries.

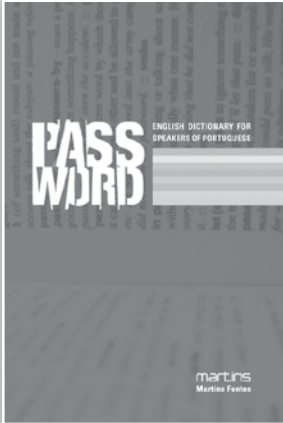
### The structure of the volume

The volume under review consists of the following sections: 1. Contents (p. vii); 2. Abbreviations of Linguistic Terms and Names of Languages (pp. ix–x); 3. Introduction: The Purpose and Content of a New Dictionary of English Etymology (pp. xi–xxxii); 4. The Etymologies at a Glance (xxxiii–xlvi); 5. An Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology (pp. 1–231); 6. Bibliography (pp. 233–312); 7. Index of Subjects (pp. 313–316); 8. Index of Words (317–348); 9. Index of Personal and Place Names (pp. 349–359).

The introduction begins with a survey of opinions on the purpose and methodology behind the production of an etymological dictionary. This is followed by a discussion of the choice of words and the number and type of borrowings to be included. All the aspects are illustrated by the author's critical overview of English etymological dictionaries. Worthy of special attention are the author's methodological principles (pp. xxv–xxvi; also cf. a similar, though not identical, list in Liberman 2005b), which have a direct bearing on the treatment of words in the dictionary section.

As its title suggests, the section entitled 'The Etymologies at a Glance' provides brief summaries of the etymologies discussed in the dictionary. However, the number of summaries is larger than the number of entries featured in the dictionary section. This is a consequence of the author's approach to etymology, which involves





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identifying families of related words that can be explained in a single hypothesis. Certain words are sifted out in the process and interpreted in alternative ways. Thus 'The Etymologies at a Glance' provides a convenient summary of the major word forms discussed in the dictionary, whether they appear as separate entries or are discussed only as part of another entry.

As mentioned above, the dictionary section contains only 55 entries, but considering that they occupy 230 pages, the average entry is 4 pages long with two columns of text per page. The longest one, dwarf, is 12 pages long, whereas the shortest, drab, occupies about three quarters of a page. Each entry begins with a brief summary and description of its content. The most important points are highlighted using bold font. Each entry has its own structure determined by the problems posed by the word(s) discussed in it.

Given the small number of entries, I will allow myself to list them here. These are: adz(e), beacon, bird, boy, brain, chide, clover, cob, cockney, cub, cushat, doxy, drab, dwarf, eena, ever, fag/fag(g)ot, fieldfare, filch, flatter, fuck, gawk, girl, heather, heifer, hemlock, henbane, hobbledehoy, horehound, ivy, jeep, key, kitty-corner, lad, lass, lilliputian, man, mooch, nudge, oat, pimp, rabbit, ragamuffin, robin, skeddaddle, slang, slowworm, strumpet, stubborn, toad, traipse, trot, understand, witch, and yet.

The list in the Index of Subjects features references to the linguistic topics discussed in the dictionary, references to word groups according to their semantics (e.g. diseases refers the reader to column 52a containing examples of words denoting diseases probably related to dwarf), and lists of entries where various kinds of relationship between words are mentioned (e.g. "words (allegedly) borrowed from Arabic").

The Index of Words includes "over 6000 words in over 80 languages and periods" (p. 317). Alphabetic lists of word forms are grouped according to the period in the history of a given language in reverse chronology (e.g. Modern English precedes Middle English precedes Old English) and language names are arranged into language families.

The Index of Personal and Place Names includes not only personal and place names but also other kinds of proper names that occur in the entries, such as titles of literary works (e.g. the Eddas, *Germania* etc.).

### Evaluation

The author's assumption is that the writing of a new dictionary of etymology is a sensible enterprise as long as it makes advances in the discipline. The main asset of the sample

volume of the forthcoming dictionary is that it indeed promises a major improvement compared with many of its predecessors, especially those devoted to English.

The list of entries given above points to the unique character of the dictionary. At first sight, the selection may seem random, as the list includes a wide diversity of words. Some are of high frequency, while others are rare, or even obsolete. There are some colloquialisms as well as slang and dialectal words. They also differ in age, with some of them attested since Old English (e.g. *bird*, *dwarf*, *heifer*, *slowworm*, *yet*) and others coined fairly recently (*jeep*, *lilliputian*). What they all have in common is the difficulty they pose to scholars seeking to explain their origin. Such words are usually shrugged off with the phrase "origin obscure/unknown" in etymological dictionaries of English. By choosing these words the author highlights several blanks of English etymology and attempts to fill them in using a careful methodology. Even if no satisfactory conclusions can be reached, a valuable starting point for future research is established, which is what a good etymological dictionary should constitute.

Inclusion of such words in the sample volume was a good choice for yet another reason. It is exactly such cases that reveal with the utmost clarity the inadequacies of the etymological dictionaries that the author has been highlighting in his publications. It seems reasonable to present the advantages of a new methodology on the basis of the data that helped shape it. Of course, as a consequence of that, discussion of some words will be familiar to those who have been following these publications. In fact, the careful reader may occasionally recognise certain passages repeated without major changes, although the author writes in his introduction that none of the etymologies were left intact and the new entries "cancel" his earlier publications.

It is in terms of the content of the entries that the dictionary reveals its incomparable character. Each entry features an extensive overview of all the etymologies of the word and related forms in English offered so far, as well as an exhaustive discussion of their putative Germanic or Indo-European cognates. This means not only references to the etymological dictionaries for the relevant languages but, more importantly, a remarkable array of other sources, ranging from widely known articles to footnotes in obscure journals whose availability frequently verges on the impossible. Access to these sources has been made possible by two decades of research conducted as part of the project. The author's aim was to include all the information ever written or printed

about each word, and judging from his meticulous references it is easy to believe he has achieved this. This approach enables the author to acknowledge the original proponents of certain hypotheses, whether correct or fanciful (previous authors of English etymological dictionaries did not bother to mention their sources) and trace the development of the research into the history of each word. Moreover, he manages to salvage numerous forgotten but inspiring ideas which cast a new light onto the problematic words (cf. e.g. various etymologies of Germanic words for 'brain' on p. 21, or the ingenious suggestion discussed on pp. 54–58 and originally made by Kluge [EWDS1: *Zwerg*] that the *-r-* in the Germanic words for 'dwarf' is a product of rhotacism).

The author is not only a mere reporter of what he has read. He offers critical remarks on the cited derivations and supplements them with his own ideas. His approach to etymology rests not only on his outstanding expertise in Germanic linguistics but also on a number of methodological principles outlined in his introduction, an idea reminiscent of Skeat's cannons of etymology (see e.g. the fourth edition of Skeat: xxviii–xxix). Writers of etymological dictionaries seldom formulate their theoretical assumptions explicitly and it was a very fortunate decision on the part of the author to do so. Let us have a closer look at three of these principles which, in my view, have the strongest impact on the entries.

The first two principles state that an etymologist has to identify all the cognates of the word in question in the target language and in related languages and attempt to explain them by a single etymology (cf. also Skeat's Canon 10). This means that the entries in the new dictionary often discuss clusters of look-alikes in order to assess the probability that they are related (see e.g. *fuck* for Germanic words of the structure *f(l)r* + vowel + stop, and *nudge* for various *gn-*, *kn-*, *hn-* and *sn-* words). In doing so the author makes use of the full repertoire of Germanic and Indo-European linguistics to make original comparisons (e.g. *cob* is compared with English *sheaf* ~ German *Schober* etc., which could be interpreted as a form with *s*-mobile; cf. also *dwarf*, which features a clever elaboration on Kluge's proposal, see above). In traditional alphabetically arranged dictionaries such relationships, whether hypothetical or factual, may only be expressed through cross-references, which does not contribute to the clarity of the picture.

The sixth principle has equally strong bearing on the author's etymologies.

According to it, sound correspondences are decisive in the majority of cases, but occasionally language forms result from ludic formations based on onomatopoeia or sound symbolism, which are seldom subject to regular sound change. The suggested balance, which does not undermine the basis of historical linguistics, does justice to the prescientific tradition in etymology, not equipped in sound laws, which nevertheless was also capable of producing creative results. What the author seems to be suggesting is that sound correspondences are the indispensable framework for historical linguistics, but at the same time they may confine the scholar's imagination (although one should remember that there also exist scholars whose imagination is not restricted by any sound laws, and the results are not the desired ones; some of these scholars are mentioned and criticised by the author). A good illustration of this principle are the entries *boy* (words in various languages of the shape *b/p* + vowel + stop and denoting an object of fear) as well as *cockeney* and *ragamuffin* (both discuss neological compounds built around unetymological *-a-*).

The balance between constituent parts of the dictionary is perhaps unusual. Nearly half of the volume is devoted to the introduction, the summary of etymologies, and the indexes. The introduction may seem especially lengthy, but it should be remembered that the volume is not a self-contained entity: as the full title suggests it is an introduction to the dictionary proper, whose publication will hopefully follow soon. The section entitled 'Etymologies at a Glance' may seem redundant, as similar summaries are offered at the beginning of each entry. However, unlike the latter, the former features words that do not constitute separate entries and are only mentioned in other entries.

Given the author's approach to etymology and his discussion of clusters rather than single words, indexes are indispensable. The Index of Subjects, not a very typical feature in an etymological dictionary, may prove very useful for drawing valuable examples of various phenomena frequently encountered in etymology such as migratory words, sound symbolism or vowel alternations due to ablaut or false ablaut. Interestingly, this index also contains a list of references to examples of pairs of vowels in Germanic being incompatible due to ablaut violation: given the high frequency of these curious pairs, this seems to be a suggestion for future research.

The dictionary is written in a lively, sometimes humorous manner. The author presents his views in a clear way. His



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criticism is frequently quite sharp and witty, which should not surprise those who are familiar with the author's earlier publications, but it always concerns the subject matter, i.e. etymology.

The entries have clear structure, although it is useful to reread certain passages several times not to lose track of the various threads of the argument, due to the multitude of word forms discussed and names of scholars mentioned. The feat of putting in order all these minute details and drawing creative conclusions from them is indeed remarkable and the author should be praised for being successful. He is in full control of his material, and never misses interesting comments on the links between the words he discusses even if he highlights them with caution (see e.g. his comment on the probable Scandinavian origin of *cafer-*, *clumsy*, *awkward*, and *gawky* on p. 134). On several occasions he offers elucidating digressions on secondary issues such as Germanic mythology or passages from Shakespeare (see e.g. entries on *dwarf* and *cockney*).

Perhaps it would be a good idea to precede the discussion of each word with a list of meanings in which it occurs in modern use. Their development is discussed within the entry itself, but it would be convenient for speakers of languages other than English to have a general idea about the word's semantics before they start reading the entry.

It is impossible to avoid mistakes in a work of this complexity. To be sure, those that I have been able to identify are of minor significance. Moreover, the selection does not pretend to be exhaustive and features only those errors I was able to spot in a random survey. I allow myself to list them here. I have identified four factual errors. Polish *figli* (col. 83a) is actually the genitive plural, the nominative singular is *figiel*, whereas the nominative plural is *figle*. Col. 99b seems to suggest that Polish *garlica* is a misspelling for *gardlica*, but both forms exist (see e.g. SP VIII: 278). In col. 229a the author quotes Berneker, who allegedly gives the Polish form *nedaktóry* (the same form is listed in the index to the reviewed dictionary as *nedaktory*). This is a misprint for the Polish dialectal *niedaktóry* and Berneker cites the correct form (1899: 157). Finally, the Middle English text *Ayenbite of Inwit* is a prose work and not a poem as suggested in col. 76b.

The remaining errors are technical in character. Two Polish words are wrongly indexed. *Fukać* and the erroneous *figli* occur in cols. 81b and 83a respectively, not in col. 89b. In the main body of the dictionary *Random House Historical Dictionary of*

*American Slang* is six times referred to as RHHDAS (in *jeep*) and twice as HDAS (cols. 87a and 189b; this abbreviation is not explained in the bibliography). Elsewhere it is always RHHDAS.

A comment is needed concerning the transliteration of Russian and Old Slavic. It seems to me that choosing one consistent system for both of them would be a better idea. The one used for Old Slavic seems a natural choice, as it is the standard among the majority of Slavists. The words are not numerous, but the inconsistent spelling of two cognates, Old Slavic *ešče* and Russian *eshche* obscures the fact that the pronunciation of the former most probably was very similar to the latter.

### Conclusion

The reviewed volume provides an interesting foretaste of the forthcoming dictionary. It combines the best features of the dictionaries which the author gives as his models with results of twenty years of meticulous research. Let us hope that the publication of the final work proceeds without obstacles. If it follows the trend initiated in its sample entries, it is going to surpass its predecessors and establish a very high standard for publications of this kind.

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#### Mateusz Urban

Instytut Filologii Angielskiej, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Kraków  
mateusz.urban@gmail.com

## English Learners’ Dictionaries at the DSNA 2009

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