Bill Bryson - *The Mother Tongue – English & How It Got That Way*

Excerpts from Chapter 5: Where Words Come From

*I*F YOU HAVE A MORBID FEAR OF peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth, there is a word for it: *arachibutyrophobia*. There is a word to describe the state of being a woman: muliebrity. And there's a word for describing a sudden breaking off of thought: *aposiopesis*.

If you harbor an urge to look through the windows of the homes you pass, there is a word for the condition: *crytoscopophilia*. When you are just dropping off to sleep and you experience that sudden sensation of falling, there is a word for it: it's a *myoclonic jerk*. If you want to say that a word has a circumflex on its penultimate syllable, without saying flat out that is has a circumflex there, there is a word for it: *properispomenon*.

In English, in short, there are words for almost everything. Some of these words deserve to be better known. Take velleity, which describes a mild desire, a wish or urge too slight to lead to action. Doesn't that seem a useful term? Or how about *slubberdegullion, a* seventeenth-century word signifying a worthless or slovenly fellow? Or *ugsome, a* late medieval word meaning loath-some or disgusting? It has lasted half a millennium in English, was a common synonym for *horrid* until well into the last century, and can still be found tucked away forgotten at the back of most unabridged dictionaries. Isn't it a shame to let it slip away?

Our dictionaries are full of such words—words describing the most specific of conditions, the most improbable of contingencies, the most arcane of distinctions. And yet there are odd gaps. We have no word for coolness corresponding to warmth. We are strangely lacking in middling terms—words to describe with some precision the middle ground between hard and soft, near and far, big and little. We have a word to describe all the work you find waiting for you when you return from vacation, *backlog,* but none to describe all the work you have to do before you go. Why not *forelog?*

And we have a large number of negative words—inept, *disheveled, incorrigible, ruthless, unkempt—for* which the positive form is missing. English would be richer if we could say admiringly of a tidy person, "She's *so* sheveled,"or praise a capable person for being full of ept or an energetic one for having heaps of ert. Many of these words did once have positive forms.

Ruthless was companioned by *ruth,* meaning compassion. One of Milton's poems contains the well-known line "Look homeward, Angel, now, and melt with ruth." But, as with many such words, one form died and another lived. Why this should be is beyond explanation. Why should we have lost *demit* (send away) but saved *commit?* Why should i*mpede* have survived while the once equally common and seemingly just as useful *expede* expired? No one can say.

So where do all these words come from? According to the great Danish linguist Otto Jespersen words are for the most part formed in one of four ways: by adding to them, by subtracting from them, by making them up, and by doing nothing to them. Neat as that formula is, I would venture to suggest that it overlooks two other prolific sources of new words: borrowing them from other languages and creating them by mistake. Let us look at each in turn.

1. WORDS ARE CREATED BY ERROR.

One kind of these is called ghost words. The most famous of these perhaps is *dord,* which appeared in the 1934 *Merriam-Webster International Dictionary as* another word for density. In fact, it was a misreading of the scribbled "D or d," meaning that "density" could be abbreviated either to a capital or lowercase letter. The people at Merriam- Webster quickly removed it, but not before it found its way into other dictionaries. Such occurrences are more common than you might suppose. According to the First Supplement of the *OED,* there are at least 350 words in English dictionaries that owe their existence to typographical errors or other misrenderings.

Many other words owe their existence to mishearings. *Button-hole* was once *buttonhold. Sweetheart was* originally *sweetard, as in dullard* and *dotard.* The process can still be seen today in the tendency among many people to turn *catercorner into catty-corner* and *chaise longue* into *chaise lounge.*

Sometimes words are created by false analogy or back-formation. One example of this is the word *pea.* Originally the word was *pease,* as in the nursery rhyme "pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold." But this was mistakenly thought to signify a plural and the word *pea* was back-formed to denote singularity. A similar misunderstanding gave us *cherry* (from *cerise).* Finally, erroneous words are sometimes introduced by respected users of the language who simply make a mistake. Shakespeare thought *illustrious* was the opposite of *lustrous* and thus for a time gave it a sense that wasn't called for.

2. WORDS ARE ADOPTED.

This is of course one of the glories of English—its willingness to take in words from abroad, rather as if they were refugees. We take words from almost anywhere— shampoo from India, *chaparral* from the Basques, *caucus* from the Algonquin Indians, *ketchup* from China, *potato* from Haiti, sofa from Arabia, *boondocks* from the Tagalog language of the Philippines, *slogan* from Gaelic. You can't get much more eclectic than that. And we have been doing it for centuries. According to Baugh and Cable [page 227] as long ago *as* the sixteenth century English had already adopted words from more than fifty other languages—a phenomenal number for the age. Sometimes the route these words take is highly circuitous. Many Greek words became Latin words, which became French words, which became English words.

Garbage, which has had its present meaning of food waste since the Middle Ages, was brought to England by the Normans, who had adapted it from an Italian dialectal word, *garbuzo,* which in turn had been taken from the Old Italian *garbuglio (a* mess), which ultimately had come from the Latin *bullire* (to boil or bubble).Sometimes the same word reaches us at different times, having undergone various degrees of filtering, and thus can exist in English in two or more related forms, as with *canal* and *channel, regard* and *reward, poor* and *pauper, catch* and *chase, cave* and *cage, amiable* and *amicable.* Often these words have been so modified in their travels that their kinship is all but invisible. Who would guess that coy and *quiet* both have the same grandparent in the Latin *quietus,* or that *sordid* and *swarthy* come jointly from the Latin *sordere* (to be soiled or dirty), or that *entirety* and *integrity come* from the Latin *integritus* (complete and pure)? Often words change meanings dramatically as they pass from one nation to another. The Latin *bestia* has become variously biscia (snake) in Italy, *bitch (female* dog) in England, *biche* (female deer) in France, and *bicho* (insect) in Portugal. [Cited by Pei, page 151]

Although English is one of the great borrowing tongues— deriving at least half of *its* common words from non-Anglo-Saxon stock—others have been even more enthusiastic in adopting foreign terms. In Armenian, only 23 percent of the words are of native origin, while in Albanian the proportion is just 8 percent. A final curious fact is that although English is a Germanic tongue and the Germans clearly were one of the main founding groups of America,

there is almost no language from which we have borrowed fewer words than German. Among the very few are *kindergarten* and *hinterland*. We have borrowed far more words from every other European language, and probably as many from several smaller and more obscure languages such as Inuit. No one has yet come up with a plausible explanation for why this should be.

3. WORDS ARE CREATED.

Often they spring seemingly from nowhere. Take *dog.* For centuries the word in English was *hound* (or *hund).* Then suddenly in the late Middle Ages, dog-----a word etymologically unrelated to any other known word—displaced it. No one has any idea why. This sudden arising of words happens more often than you might think. Among others without known pedigree are *jaw, jam, bad, big, gloat, fun, crease, pour, put, niblick* (the golf club), *noisome, numskull, jalopy,* and countless others.

Other words exist in the language for hundreds of years, either *as dialect* words or as mainstream words that have fallen out of use, before suddenly leaping to prominence—again quite mysteriously. *Scrounge* and *seep are* both of this type. They have been around for centuries and yet neither, according to Robert Burchfield [The *English Language,* page *46*], came into general use before 1900.

Many words are made up by writers. According to apparently careful calculations, Shakespeare used 17,677 words in his writings, of which at least one tenth had never been used before. Imagine if every tenth word you wrote were original. It is a staggering display of ingenuity. But then Shakespeare lived in an age when words and ideas burst upon the world as never before or since. For a century and a half, from 1500 to 1650, English flowed with new words. Between 10,000 and 12,000 words were coined, of which about half still exist. Not until modern times would this number be exceeded, but even then there is no comparison. The new words of today represent an explosion of technology—words like lunar *module* and *myocardial* infarction—rather than of poetry and feeling. Consider the words that Shakespeare alone gave us, *barefaced, critical, leapfrog, monumental, castigate, majestic, obscene, frugal, radiance, dwindle, countless, submerged, excellent, fretful, gust, hint,* hurry, *lonely, summit, pedant,* and some 1,685 others. How would we manage without them?

4. WORDS CHANGE BY DOING NOTHING.

That is, the word stays the same but the meaning changes. Surprisingly often the meaning becomes its opposite or something very like it. *Counterfeit* once meant a legitimate copy. *Brave* once implied cowardice—as indeed *bravado* still does. (Both come from the same source as *depraved.)*

Crafty, now a disparaging term, originally was a word of praise, while *enthusiasm* which is now a word of praise, was once a term of mild abuse. *Zeal* has lost its original pejorative sense, but zealot curiously has not. This drift of meaning, technically called *catachresis,* is as widespread as it is curious. *Egregious* once meant eminent or admirable. In the sixteenth century, for no reason we know of, it began to take on the opposite sense of badness and unworthiness (it is in this sense that Shakespeare employs it in *Cymbeline)* and has retained that sense since. Now, however, it seems that people are increasingly using it in the sense not of bad or shocking, but of simply being pointless and unconstructive.

According to Mario Pei, more than half of all words adopted into English from Latin now have meanings quite different from their original ones. A word that shows just how wide-ranging these changes can be is *nice,* which was first recorded in 1290 with the meaning of stupid and foolish. Seventy-five years later Chaucer was using it to mean lascivious and wanton. Then at various times over the next 400 years it came to mean extravagant, elegant, strange, slothful, unmanly, luxurious, modest, slight, precise, thin, shy, discriminating, dainty, and—by 1769—pleasant and agreeable. The meaning shifted so frequently and radically that it

is now often impossible to tell in what sense it was intended, as when Jane Austen wrote to a friend, "You scold me so much in a nice long letter . . . which I have received from you."

This drift of meaning can happen with almost anything, even our clothes. There is a curious but not often noted tendency for the names of articles of apparel to drift around the body. This is particularly apparent to Americans in Britain (and vice versa) who discover that the names for clothes have moved around at different rates and now often signify quite separate things. An American going into a London department store with a shopping list consisting of vest, knickers, suspenders, jumper, and pants would in each instance be given something dramatically different from what he expected. (To wit, a British vest is an American undershirt. Our vest is their waistcoat. Their knickers are our panties. To them a jumper is a sweater, while what we call a jumper is to them a pinafore dress. Our suspenders are their braces. They don't need suspenders to hold up their pants because to them pants are underwear and clearly you don't need suspenders for that, so instead they employ suspenders to hold up their stockings. Is that clear?)

Sometimes an old meaning is preserved in a phrase or expression. Neck was once widely used to describe a parcel of land, but that meaning has died out except in the expression "neck of the woods."

Tell once meant to count. This meaning died out but is preserved in the expression *bank teller a*nd in the term for people who count votes. When this happens, the word is called a *fossil*.

Sometimes words change by becoming more specific. *Starve* originally meant to die before it took on the more particular sense of to die by hunger. A deer was once any animal (it still is in the German *tier)* and meat was any food (the sense is preserved in "meat and drink" and in the English food mincemeat, which contains various fruits but no meat in the sense that we now use it).

5. WORDS ARE CREATED BY ADDING OR SUBTRACTING SOMETHING.

English has more than a hundred common prefixes and suffixes- -able, *-ness, -ment,* pre-, *dis-, anti-,* and so on—and with these it can form and reform words with a facility that yet again sets it apart from other tongues.

We are astonishingly indiscriminate in how we form our corn-pounds, sometimes adding an Anglo-Saxon prefix or suffix to a Greek or Latin root *(plainness, sympathizer),* and sometimes vice versa *(readable, disbelieve).*

This inclination to use affixes and infixes provides gratifying flexibility in creating or modifying words to fit new uses. As well as showing flexibility it also promotes confusion. We have at least six ways of expressing negation with prefixes: *a-, anti-, in-, , im- ,* it-, *un-,* and *non-.* It is arguable whether this is a sign of admirable variety or just untidiness. Finally, but no less importantly, English possesses the ability to make *new* words by fusing compounds— airport, *seashore, footwear, wristwatch, landmark, flowerpot,* and so on almost endlessly. All Indo-European languages have the capacity to form compounds. Indeed, German and Dutch do it, one might say, to excess.

But English does it more neatly than **most** other languages, eschewing the choking word chains that bedevil other Germanic languages and employing the nifty refinement of making the elements reversible, so that we can distinguish between a houseboat and a boathouse, between basketwork and a workbasket, between a casebook and a bookcase. Other languages lack this facility.