FLARR Pages   Journals

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FLARR Pages #47: Etymology in the Foreign Language Classroom

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"Etymology in the Foreign Language Classroom," Richard Stanley, Concordia College

Why etymology?

- It shows vividly how language changes over time.

- It helps students make connections to other languages and their own.

- It provides some basic knowledge of linguistics.

How to use etymology:

- Keep discussions of etymology brief (less than 3 minutes).

- Use interesting words that hold student attention.

- Employ methods that help students explore etymology on their own.

Below are three different ways I use etymology in the classroom:

1. INDO-EUROPEAN ROOTS

*bheudh = to be aware

The asterisk preceding the root *bheud-* indicates that this root is a reconstructed form postulated on the basis of comparisons among I-E languages. I explain the basic meaning of the

root, as it appears in the *America Heritage Dictionary*'s appendix[1], and its various permutations. Here the primary meaning of the root is "to be aware," but some cognates mean "to make aware."

I then explain forms listed under the root (usually from Latin, Greek, Old English, and Sanskrit, etc.) These can be reproduced for students, written on the board, placed on an overhead projector, or presented in PowerPoint. In my Latin classes I concentrate on derivatives into English but often include other languages. This presentation can be varied according to the goals of the instructor. What is important is to keep students making connections. Have students explore connections between lists of words (e.g., "science, nice, shin, schism, and shit" from *skei-* or "guest, enemy, hospital, and xenophobia" from *ghosti-*).

Old English

Forbeadan > forbid (Note the negative prefix *for-* that makes this mean "bring to attention a taboo." It helps to explain basic roots, prefixes, and suffixes that occur in English and/or Latin)

Bodian > to bode (as in "it bodes well,")

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[1] The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th edition. Houghton Mifflin, 2002. The AHD publishes an excellent introduction to Indo-European by the eminent linguist Calvert Watkins (pp. 2007-2015), a list of sound correspondences on pp. 2018-2019, and the list of roots on pp. 2020-2054. Also interesting is the introduction to "Proto-Semitic Language and Culture" by John Huenergard and the list of Semitic roots on pp. 2062-2068. This listing would be very useful resource for those teaching (or learning) Arabic, Hebrew, or other Semitic languages.

Bydel > beadle (an official who maintained order and attention during church services—such words open up possibilities for brief discussions of similar modern social practices)

Old High German

Farbiotan > verboten (cf. OE with OHG)

Old Norse

Unbodhsmader > ombudsman (Discussion Nordic influences on English through the Viking invasions in the 800s and 900s AD)

Sanskrit

Bydel > beadle (an official who maintained order and attention during church services—such words open up possibilities for brief discussions of similar modern social practices)

Bodhati = "he wakes" (cf. –*t* 3rd person sing. in Latin with –*ti* in Sanskrit) Such words offers the opportunity to discuss wanderings of Indo-Europeans peoples into Europe and Asia.

Bodhih, Buddha, and Bodhisattva (These forms allow for a brief discussion of the Buddha and his enlightenment under the bodhi tree).

2. LATIN VERB ROOTS

A second method that we use on a regular basis in our Latin classes at Concordia is Latin verb roots. Dr. Ed Schmoll pioneered this method for helping students to acquire Latin and English vocabulary. We adapted the extensive list of Latin verb roots that Dr Schmoll collected into worksheets for students to list derived words. As part of our regular departmental self-assessment regimen, we plan to administer a verb-roots test to help determine how well students are making the connections between Latin and English vocabulary.

3. SPANISH-LATIN ETYMOLOGY

A third technique that I employ is Spanish-Latin vocabulary. Since many students have taken Spanish in high school and few have any prior knowledge of Latin, they are able to increase their Latin vocabulary more efficiently when they connect Latin words with Spanish they know. I introduce Latin-Spanish vocabulary through a word-list and a steady emphasis on Spanish derivatives.

A basic knowledge of a few sound changes from Latin to Spanish makes comparison easier. For example:

f > j (*furnus* > *horno*).
x > j (*dixit* > *dijo*
gn > ñ (*lignum* > *liño*)
cl > ll (*clamare* > *llamar*)
ct > ch (*nocte* > *noche*)
t > d (*totus* > *todo*)

metathesis (transposition of letters):

periculum > peligro
peregrinus > pilgrim (English)

RESOURCES:

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th edition. (Houghton Mifflin, 2002

Calvert Watkins. *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

Stewart Edelstein. *Dubious Doublets* (John Wiley and Sons, 2003).

Chantrell, Glynnis, ed. *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Word Histories* (Oxford, 2003)

Harry Murutes. *Easy Key to Spanish Vocabulary: A Mnemonic List with English Cognates* (Canton OH, 2001) and *A Key to German Vocabulary: A Mnemonic List with English Cognates* (Canton OH, 1995)