

# An Etymological Analysis of English Words

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to describe loan words in English and etymology of English words. 'Etymology' as defined by *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (2010) is the study of the origin of words, historical perspectives, and modification in the meanings of these words. The etymological analysis of the words helps one recognize that words originate through a limited number of fundamental parameters such as borrowing the words from other languages; formation of words such as derivation and compounding; and onomatopoeia and sound symbolism. Of course, the English vocabulary consists of two types: the native and borrowed words. Interestingly, the number of borrowed words from different languages and sources is greater than the collection of native words.

**Keywords:** loan words, Etymology, English vocabulary, sound symbolism

## Introduction

Etymology can be defined as the systematic study of the birth, historical perspective, and time-to-time changes in the forms and implications of words (Ross, 1962). The study of the etymology of the English words is an interesting and useful area. According to *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (2010), most of the English words have been derived from other primitive languages such as Latin and Greek. Similarly, many other words are formed by adding prefixes and suffixes.

This study provides information about the borrowed words and their etymological analysis. It also helps the students increase their vocabulary regarding etymological approaches in English. Moreover, it helps the students develop their interest in the etymology of English words. This may assist the ESL teachers to provide effective guidelines in the classroom. The major objective of the study is to find out different words borrowed from different languages and secondly to describe the etymology of the most commonly used English words.

Knowing about the origin of the English words can be a valuable asset for L2 learners; it could benefit L2 instructions too. Moreover, the knowledge about the historical perspectives and changes in the forms of the English language words helps understand the real spirit of the English language learning and can make it a meaningful learning (Ausubel, Novak, & Hanesian, 1968). In fact, 30% words of the English language are native; however, they are being used frequently in English in spite of the smaller number. Moreover, these words possess a broad range of lexical and syntactic structures (Klein, 1966). Sometimes, it is difficult to differentiate between a native word and a borrowed word that had been borrowed very long ago unless the word is analyzed etymologically.

It is natural that languages influence each other if they have a contact for a long period. Some words are first taken for a temporary use, but later are adapted by

other languages for a permanent use. This is the process that is called borrowing. In addition, these borrowed words are deemed as an essential part of the language. As we peep into the history and the background of the English words, we came to know that English remained in contact with many other languages of the world such as Greek, Latin, French and Old Norse. Many other colonial languages, where the British ruled over a long period, had a contact for centuries with the English. There are multifarious reasons accounting for borrowing of words from other languages (Katamba, 2005). No specific reason for borrowing words is valid in this context. In addition, no limit for borrowing words from other languages is pertinent.

Shipley (2001) mentioned that the most important factor in borrowing words from other languages is an automatic transfer of words during the contact period with other languages. It is a natural phenomenon that the users of English take and adopt the words from other languages unconsciously while interacting with other people. The source of borrowing and the origin of borrowing words have significant importance; therefore, they should be distinguished while analyzing the English words. The close interaction between the languages is a rationale for borrowing words (Barfield, 1967). The words of English can be categorized into different classes such as loan words and semantic loans.

According to surveys conducted by Finkenstaedt, Wolff, Neuhaus, Herget (1973), and Williams (1986), modern English language has derived many words from different languages. The percentage figures of Latin (including words used only in scientific/medical/legal context), French, Germanic, Greek and other languages are 29%, 29%, 26%, 6%, and 10% respectively. According to Skeat (1892), the English language consists of 178 Anglo-Saxon root words and 280 others, and the majority of them are borrowed from Latin or Greek. Henry (1993) reported that twelve (12) Latin and two (2) Greek roots, besides 20 other most frequently used prefixes

generated about 100,000 words. Latin loans are classified into the subgroups: here is a brief list of words that have been borrowed from other languages and now they are commonly used in English.

### Words Borrowed by English from other Languages

Ad hoc, Bona fide, Calendar, Pro-forma, Verbatim (Latin); Artist, Bureau, Chef, Diplomat, Justice, Gallop, Précis, Restaurant (French); Cookies (Dutch); Bangle, Bungalow, Curry, Jungle, Loot, Pyjamas, Shampoo, Yoga (Hindi); Democracy, Eureka, Plethora (Greek); Gestalt (German); Fog (Danish); Guitar (Spanish); Lemon (Farsi); Mafia, Opera, Piano, Pizza, Studio, Solo, Traffic, Umbrella, Volcano (Italian); Paper (Egyptian); Robot (Czech); Sputnik, Troika (Russian); Ski (Norwegian); Tsunami (Japanese); Y o-yo (Tagalog); Yoghurt (Turkish); Zero (Arabic)

### Etymological Analysis of the Words

Algeo (1980) Stockwell and Minkova (2001) stated that words are formed with the help of different methods and processes. They mentioned the most important processes of the formation of words which are noted below:

(a) Borrowing. (b) Shortening or Clipping. (c) Functional Shift. (d) Back-formation. (e) Blend . (f) Acronyms Formation (g) Transfer of personal or place names. (h) Imitation of sounds. (i) Folk Etymology .(j) Combining Word Elements

According to Stockwell and Minkova (2001), and Webster (2006), etymology is useful for students to expand their vocabulary. We discuss below some of the most commonly used words in English with their etymological analysis.

Abstract (from Latin word 'abstractus' meaning 'to draw away')

Aeroplane (from Greek 'aero' meaning 'air' + French 'planer' meaning 'to soar')

Alberta (from Canadian Princess Louise Caroline Alberta)

Algebra (from Arabic word 'aljebr' meaning 'to recollect the broken pieces')

Alma Mater (from Latin 'alere' means 'to nourish'+ 'mater' means 'mother')

America (a person named 'Americus', claimed to navigate and discover America)

Anarchy (from French word 'anarchie' meaning 'leaderless' or 'rulerless')

Anatolia (from Greek 'anatole' meaning 'the east')

April Fool (from Old Norse 'gaukr' meaning 'a cuckoo')

Badminton (from place name 'Badmyncgtun' meaning 'an estate of Baduhelm')

Baseball (from American words 'base' and 'ball' meaning 'the game of rounders')

Boycott (from a British tiller named Capitan Charles C. Boycott)

Catharsis (from Greek word 'katharsis' meaning to 'purify', or to make clean)

Chocolate (from Spanish word 'xocolatl' or 'xococ' meaning 'to make bitter')

Coffee (from Turkish word 'caffé' or 'kahveh' and from Arabic word 'qahwah')

Daisy (from Old English words 'dægesege' meaning the 'day's eye')

Dead Sea (from Hebrew word 'yam hammelah' meaning 'water with no life')

December (from Latin 'December' meaning the 10th month the year)

Dengue (from Spanish word 'dengue' meaning a severe pain/stiffness in the body)

Dichotomy (from Greek word 'dichotomia' meaning 'a cutting in half')

Dilemma (from Late Latin and Greek 'dilemma' meaning 'double proposition')

Dollar (from Low German 'daler' and 'taler' meaning a big silver coin)

Egypt (from French 'Egypte'/Greek 'Aigyptos' meaning 'the river Nile')

Encyclopedia (from French 'Encyclopédie' meaning a collection of words)

Equator (from Latin 'aequare' meaning 'to make equal')

February (from Latin 'februarius mensis' meaning 'month of purification')

Hague (from 'Du. Den Haag' meaning literally 'the court's hedge')

Hamburger (from German word 'burg' meaning 'fort')

Jean (from Italian city 'Genoa' where the cloth was made first as in blue jeans)

Kaaba (from Arabic word meaning 'a cube-shaped building')

Mosque (from modern French word 'mosquée' meaning place of mosquito)

Nicotine (from Latin 'Nicotiana', Jean Nicot who brought the seeds of tobacco)

OK (mistakenly derived word 'Oll Korrekt' meaning All Right)

Olympic (from 'Olympos', a town in Greece)

Paper (from Latin 'papyrus' meaning the paper plant)

Port (from Latin word 'porta' meaning 'gate' or 'door')

Portugal (from the name of person 'Portyngale'; the pioneer king of Portugal)

Sadism (from Fench word 'sadisme' meaning to feel pleasure in cruel act)

Sandwich (from Earl Sandwich, who used to eat the slices of meat inside it)

Tea (from Portuguese word 'chaa' or Persian 'cha' meaning a drinking beverage)

Tobacco (from Spanish, 'tabaco' meaning 'a roll of tobacco leaves')

Turkey (guinea bird' imported from Madagascar via Turkey)

Valentine (from Latin 'Valentinus', meaning 'strength')

Xylophone (from Greek 'xylon' meaning 'wood' and 'phone' means 'a sound')

### Conclusion

Etymology helps us learn a new language. The ESL students can learn new words easily and faster

using etymology through the comparison and contrast of each foreign word similar in their native language. In this way, the students create links between English words learned by the students and their native language. The students understand the similarities between languages and they try to get the meaning of the words. The research carried out by Zolfagharkhani and Moghadam (2011) shows that etymology has a positive impact on the ESL students. Etymology also improves one's reading speed and comprehension level. It helps to enhance the stock of vocabulary. It promotes and refines the quality of language in writing and speech. It helps to think clearly and effectively to communicate vigorously. In a nutshell, it can be said that etymology is a 'tool' to understand the un-known words encountered by the ESL students (Anttila, 2000).

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