Grant-in-Aid of Research, Artistry and Scholarship

An Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology
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CATEGORY 5
External funding for dictionaries is hard to get. So far, NEH has not been supportive of my project. With the publication of Volume 1 and the bibliography by the University of Minnesota Press my chances are expected to increase. I am also investigating private sources of support and NSF.
Anatoly Liberman

Abstract

AN ANALYTIC DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH ETYMOLOGY

I seek funding for continuing work on the first analytic dictionary of English etymology. This dictionary will do justice to the studies that have appeared in the course of four centuries in more than 20 languages. With support from a database containing the aforementioned studies, it will defend the best hypotheses proposed so far and offer new convincing solutions. Work on the dictionary began 21 years ago and has reached a critical stage. The database and the first “showcase” volume of the dictionary offering discussion of some of the etymologically most obscure English words will be published in a few months, and the University of Minnesota Press expects submission of further volumes in quick succession. The money, if awarded, will cover the salaries of undergraduate, graduate, and research assistants who will screen the latest journals and books, prepare entries for publication, and do the computer work.
PROPOSAL: AN ANALYTIC DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH ETYMOLOGY

THE PROJECT: ITS HISTORY AND PRESENT STATUS

I am applying for the maximum allowable sum to continue work on an analytic dictionary of English etymology. This work began 21 years ago with the view to producing the first up-to-date comprehensive etymological dictionary of Modern English. The dictionary was to contain original entries based on a survey of everything ever written on the origin of English words (regardless of the language of publication) for about four centuries. Analogues of such dictionaries, even if not so detailed, exist for Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Gothic, French, Spanish, Russian, Icelandic, and others, but, strangely, not for Modern English, the best-researched language in the world. English etymological dictionaries available to the modern user are a rehash of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 1884-1928) by James H. Murray and others, which is excellent but outdated (besides, its focus is history, not etymology, and the post-WWII Supplement does not deal with the origin of "old" words). The last original book on English word origins, by Walter W. Skeat, was published in 1910. Skeat, the OED, and all the works derived from them, are dogmatic, that is, they say only what their authors think is right, without much attention paid to the disregarded and rejected solutions (which are not necessarily bad!), and they almost never give references to their predecessors. Therefore, to complete my project, I had to avail myself of the immense literature on the subject. Only with a comprehensive database could entries be written.

The dictionary was not conceived as a guided tour of a museum of old and recent scholarship, but without an exhaustive overview it would have been impossible to defend new solutions and offer a state-of-the-art compendium to linguists, historians of ideas, archeologists, and all those who need semantics and the history of words in the study of societal issues. The literature on word origins is enormous but extremely hard to find. Specialists spend innumerable hours in search of relevant publications, always overlook something of importance, and are doomed to proposing the same etymologies over and over again, with those that have been shown to be wrong figuring prominently among the conjectures.

Two decades later I can say that the project has materialized. With the help of about fifty paid assistants and as many volunteers a database containing over 17,000 titles of articles and reviews written in languages ranging from Slovenian to Welsh, have been found, entered into the computer, and marked for over 15,000 English words. On the basis of this collection I have written over fifty articles that appeared in the most prestigious journals and miscellanies in the United States and abroad. A "showcase volume" of the dictionary discussing the origin of some of the etymologically most intractable words in English will be published by the University of Minnesota Press in December (I have already read the proofs), and a two-volume bibliography (the entire database) will appear several months later. This bibliography has no analogues in Indo-European studies. Work on the dictionary has been noticed and appreciated. Oxford University Press (OUP) commissioned me to write a book on word origins. It came out two years ago and has been received very well. OUP has also invited me to write a blog called "The Oxford Etymologist." My posts appear on its website every Wednesday. I am a regular guest on
To make the project feasible, I divided the vocabulary of English into several categories: 1) words without any cognates outside English (such as boy, girl, heifer, horehound, slum, and so forth). 2) words with cognates only in one or more related Germanic languages (such as, for example, dwarf, god, and wife). 3) words with connections everywhere in Indo-European (such as the numerals from one to ten and kin terms), and 4) borrowed words (although English vocabulary is indebted to nearly every language of the world, most of non-Germanic words, that is, such as have not come to it from German, Dutch, or Scandinavian, are from Latin and French).

As regards English etymology, the most important category is the first. It is the stepchild of historical linguistics. Despite countless efforts to explain where boy, heifer, etc. have come from, they are traditionally dismissed with the verdict "origin unknown": most slang, old and new, belongs here. Their isolation makes them relatively uninteresting to specialists with a broad focus on Germanic and Indo-European but intensely interesting to students of English, and it is precisely such words that are now at the center of my attention. If one disregards obscure regional words (of which there are thousands) and exotic or volatile slang, about 1200 such words have to be included in the prospective dictionary. Several hundred of them have already been dealt with. I have often been able to offer new convincing solutions because my database gives an overview of previous scholarship, with both its fruitful and useless conjectures: I can profit by the ideas buried in little-known publications, as well as multiple editions of the same dictionaries, and am warned against following false leads. The words whose origin I have uncovered go all the way from such innocuous-looking adverbs as ever and yet to nouns like adz and bulldozer, "funny" coinages like catawampus, curmudgeon, gawker, and skedaddle, and even the notorious F-word, an object of much misdirected public curiosity. Their origin is supposed to be unknown: however, this is no longer true.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT SO FAR
At this stage, I can say with confidence that in the foreseeable future the dictionary will be completed: the University of Minnesota Press will publish the entire work. As already noted, I have had many helpers. Despite the fact that the value of the prospective dictionary was recognized at once, my financial situation has always been precarious. Three grants-in-aid from our Graduate School about twenty years ago allowed the project to get off the ground. The then President Nils Hasselmo and Vice President Ettore Infante gave me $10,000 each. But the main event in the financial history of the project was my meeting Mr. and Mrs. David Fesler. That meeting resulted in instituting the Fesler-Lampert professorship (I was its first recipient) and a grant that allowed me to live frugally but securely for many years. Later I got a private foundation ("Salus Mundi") interested in the dictionary. So far, I have had no luck with NEH, but now that the first volume and the bibliography have very nearly passed from "forthcoming" to the category "published," my chances have probably improved, and I may apply again. I am also allowed to reapply to "Salus Mundi" (but only next year) and there seem to be other
foundations whose guidelines hold out some promise. The money that I still have will be used up in a few months.

As happens to everybody, I have run into unpredicted expenses. The database needed reprogramming several times, and the bills from computer people were high. The Press will publish both the showcase volume and the bibliography in camera-ready form, and I had to employ a fulltime assistant to do huge amounts of technical work. He has been with me for over two years and will stay at least until the books are perfectly ready. At the moment (end of August) we are putting together indexes of words, names, and subjects—a mammoth task. One grant-in-aid will not save the project from bankruptcy, but it will allow me to do the most urgent things and tide over the moneyless period. I have no doubt that I will be able to use the grant as seed money and get external support from someone who cares about the study of English.

THE WORK TO BE DONE
The dates on the bibliography to be soon published are 1699-1999. Several hundred post-1999 works have also been included, but no systematic screening of later journals and collections of articles has been undertaken. The most urgent task is to send several undergraduate students to screen recent journals with the instructions to make me aware of the articles on the history of English words and their cognates. As I know, undergraduate students are equal to this task. The journals are sometimes popular (like The Atlantic Monthly), sometimes special (like Modern English Notes), and sometimes a combination of both. German and Scandinavian majors can do some reading in "their" languages. I already have a candidate with a good knowledge of Swedish. The most difficult journals will have to be done by a graduate student. "Exotic" languages (Dutch, Faroese, Czech, Irish, Finnish, etc.) will remain my responsibility. A great lot of information pertaining to the origin of English words is hidden in journals devoted to French philology. Some of them have been screened, but the volumes of the French Academy and a few less famous journals are still waiting for an attentive reader. Once the articles have been spotted, I usually go to the library and select those that are really worthwhile. Over the years, I have spent hours copying them. It would be more profitable to relegate this work to a student.

Another pressing task is to examine all the printed and online bibliographies from 2000 on and select the titles of interest. Many articles will have to be ordered through Interlibrary Loan. I constantly need someone at the computer whose duty is to enter the articles brought from the library, including the words marked for inclusion, and prepare entries for publication. The person whom I mentioned above is our recent alumnus. He is excellent (as I said, he has been working for me for over two years). If the conditions of the grant allow it, I would like to retain him for another year, even though he will cost a bit more than the other assistants: anyway, he can devote only ten hours a week to my project. Next August he will begin graduate studies at Wisconsin. (I may mention the fact that his decision to study library sciences is the result of his work for the dictionary. This is the third case of this type. Also, several of our former undergraduates became our graduate students for the same reason.) Until 2005 the typing of the entries was done at
A&M University, Texas, under the direction of my former colleague. He has run out of support: it is now Minnesota from beginning to end.

All the volumes of the dictionary will be published in camera-ready form. Before writing an entry I have to open about 200 books assembled in my carrel and write a digest of the existing opinions. The work is easy but time-consuming. For instance, there are four editions of Skeat: I have to know whether he changed his opinion on the origin of any given word from edition to edition. The same holds for many other dictionaries. Many books have been indexed for the project, and indexing still continues. Someone must open them and find out whether the word under discussion is mentioned there, and, if it is, what the author says. So far, "someone" has always been me. Now that the Press expects me to submit one volume after another in quick succession, I need help in preparing entries. The more time I will be spending on thinking of solutions and writing etymologies, the sooner I will finish the work. Finally, I need some money for supplies: copy cards and perhaps one or two computer bills. I use up about ten forty-dollar cards a year. The result of copying is not unimportant; for not only do I have the only exhaustive database of English etymology, with colleagues from England to Japan asking me for information; I also have all the articles in one place (in my office), just as I have all the main books on etymology in my carrel. In a way, the University is now the seat of something like an Institute of English Etymology. The aim of my proposal is not to let this "institute" languish.