

Reading Horizons

Volume 16, Issue 4

1976

Article 11

JULY 1976

Amateur Etymologists at Play

Louis Foley*

*Babson College

Copyright ©1976 by the authors. *Reading Horizons* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

Amateur Etymologists at Play

Louis Foley

Abstract

Still around are some of us who attended high school through the years 1906-1910. In my case that was in Zanesville, Ohio, which periodically over the years has been portrayed in magazine articles as “the typical American town.” In those days high school principals did not seem to be chosen primarily as administrators specially skilled in management. The principal of a school was the principal teacher, supposed to be something of a scholar, often addressed as “professor.” He was expected to be familiar with the subject-matter of the curriculum as a whole. If a teacher had to be absent for a day or two, in most cases the principal could step in and temporarily take over the class.

AMATEUR ETYMOLOGISTS AT PLAY*

Louis Foley

PROFESSOR EMERITUS, BABSON COLLEGE

Still around are some of us who attended high school through the years 1906-1910. In my case that was in Zanesville, Ohio, which periodically over the years has been portrayed in magazine articles as "the typical American town." In those days high school principals did not seem to be chosen primarily as administrators specially skilled in management. The principal of a school was the principal *teacher*, supposed to be something of a scholar, often addressed as "professor." He was expected to be familiar with the subject-matter of the curriculum as a whole. If a teacher had to be absent for a day or two, in most cases the principal could step in and temporarily take over the class.

In our school the principal seemed rather especially interested in Latin. From time to time he would drop into our class for a few minutes and make some comment on the lesson of the moment. One day stands out particularly in memory. We were reading Caesar's account of his wars in Gaul. A word which was becoming familiar to us was the verb *educere*, which Caesar commonly used for "leading out" his troops. Our principal told us that the word *education* had come from the verb *educere*. From this he drew the interpretation that education is a matter of "leading us out" from darkness into light, from ignorance to knowledge. Though it had nothing to do with the actual facts of word-derivation, the idea seemed to us to make sense. For armchair etymology it is about as good as you get.

Over a long period of time, there has been perennial repetition of spurious argument in favor of certain methods of teaching on the basis of alleged derivation of the word *education*.

"Too often in the past," writes a university administrator, "we have insisted on *instruction* rather than *education*, on that mode of teaching which piles up facts (the root meaning of the Latin *instruere*) instead of that which educes or draws forth, brings out, develops from a latent condition. We have expected the student to extract from a mass of unrelated materials . . . something which he will find pertinent . . ."

Along with *educere* for "leading out" his troops, Caesar often used *instruere* for "drawing them up" in battle formation. From *instruere* came *instruct* and the noun *instruction*. *Instruct*, which is related to *construct*, as it came into English had a general meaning of putting in order, forming, or guiding. Then it became specialized in the sense of imparting knowledge or

* The basic substance of this article, in much more condensed form, "A Little Latin is a Dangerous Thing," by Louis Foley, was published in 1974 in *The Journal of General Education*, which has granted permission for its republication in the present more expanded version.

information, training in skill, teaching *methodically*. “*Instruction* has the imparting of knowledge for its object, but emphasizes, more than *teaching*, the employment of orderly arrangement in the things taught.”² Surely it does not mean merely “piling up facts,” or a hodge-podge of “unrelated materials.”

It is amazing how the fanciful use of alleged etymology as a means of argument carries on year after year. In one aspect it may be a result of the much simplified glossaries of elementary Latin textbooks, with their apparent implication that each word has only one meaning. In reality, with a much smaller vocabulary than we have in modern languages, a given word in Latin might have many diverse meanings in different contexts. In absorbing a word from a foreign tongue, what English has commonly done has been to take the word in *one* of its meanings, ignoring all other significations it could have in the other language.

Argument from etymology also reflects the Stoic doctrine of a time several centuries before Christ. It was believed that discovering the original or “true” meaning of a word would naturally give a better understanding of the thing which the word represented. *Etymology*, “the science of true meanings,” was conceived as something much more important than satisfying intellectual curiosity by tracing the history of a word’s development. It was thought to be the reliable means of gaining insight into ultimate reality, the true nature of that for which the word stands.

Today any scholar should know better than that. Through association of ideas, a word may wander so far away from the signification of its ancient ancestor that one would never guess the connection if he did not happen to know. And this had already happened to many of our words of remote Latin ancestry before they were known in English. The overwhelming majority of the so-called “Latin” words in our language simply came into English from French (along with French words from other sources), with changes of meaning which had evolved through centuries. Sometimes the links of connection can still be seen, but often the steps in development—each understandable if one looks into it—have left the original connotation quite irrelevant to present-day usage.

An example, no better than many others, will illustrate the point. From the romances of the age of chivalry, we know of the “lists” or tournaments which were the great athletic events of the Middle Ages. This is, of course, only one of the various words *list* we have in English, completely different from each other in origin and meaning. This word *list* came from French *lice*, sometimes anglicized as *lisse*; the “t” probably got in by confusion with the totally different French word *liste*, as in a list of names. Its remote starting-point was the Latin *licium*, meaning thread. The plural *licia* came to mean rope, made by twisting many threads together. Through understandable association of ideas, it was used for the rope stretched around an enclosure, then the enclosure itself, and finally the contests which took place within it. Needless to say, the idea of “thread” is no great help in understanding the knightly combats of medieval tournaments.

As long ago as the turn of the century or before, more than one scholarly etymologist sought to dispose of the erroneous popular notion of the

derivation of the word *education*. *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia* of 1911 (first edition published in 1889) stated categorically: "There is no authority for the common statement that the primary sense of *educate* is 'to draw out or unfold the powers of the mind'."³ That notion which was a "common statement" in 1911 had already been deflated ten years before in a well-known book by two Harvard professors: "We may believe that the proper method of education is to draw out the latent faculties of the pupil, but we can find no suggestion of that method in the etymology of the word itself."⁴

Such clear statements by people who really knew their Latin appear to have had very little effect. The arbitrary popular notion was given great encouragement in 1923 by President Arthur Twining Hadley of Yale in his declaration that "to educate is to educe: to make something out of a man rather than to put something into him."⁵ The following year it was quoted with evident approval in the most widely read educational periodical.⁶ Year after year, on the strength of this alleged derivation, it has been urged that the efforts of a teacher should be devoted to "bringing out" the latent powers of children and youth, rather than injecting knowledge into them, because *education* signifies "drawing out."⁷ Again and again in pedagogical literature we have been given with varying turns of phrase the perennial message that "our word *education* comes from Latin *educō*, to draw out, implying the cultivation and systematic development of the natural powers."⁸ A recent article starts out by saying, "Education by hard, cold definition is a drawing or leading out process . . . from the Latin verb *educō*."⁹

At a Parent-Teacher Association meeting which received considerable newspaper publicity, the principal speaker was quoted as saying, "First you must distinguish between educating and rearing children . . . and leave the rearing to the adults."¹⁰ This assertion seems a good point at which to stop and consider the *real* etymology of "education" and see how our word got off the track.

Caesar's verb *edUcere* had other applications as well as his leading out of troops for warfare. One meaning, quite understandably, was to assist at birth as midwife or obstetrician. From that point on, however, the idea of "drawing out" had no bearing. The quite distinct verb *eduCAre*, from which "education" comes, applied to what went on from there. Meaning to nourish, rear, bring up, it was used for the raising of plants or animals as well as children. So far as etymology is concerned, the would-be contrast between "educating and rearing" completely misses the point, for rearing was precisely what "education" originally meant.

The essential idea of "nurture" is the supplying of food, material which the body receives from without, which it digests and assimilates, and which enables it to support life and growth. Only with this nourishment can it develop strength and skill through exercise. One may well believe that good teaching *results* in the bringing out of latent abilities which the pupil did not realize he possessed. The teacher is not operating, however, on the principle of a vacuum-cleaner. The putting in of mental nourishment is

necessary to give the potential abilities something to work upon.

Long ago in the minds of English-speaking people “education” became inseparably connected with the idea of *schooling*. In French, on the contrary, the cognate word *education* has kept close to the Latin sense, and therefore is not at all interchangeable with our word “education.” The French expression *bien educate* does not mean “well educated” in our sense (*bien instruit*); it means well brought up or “well bred.” It conveys the idea which we express when we say that someone shows “good breeding.” The French attitude appears clearly in the common remark that *instruction* is the business of the school, while *education* is the responsibility of the home. William James must have had much the same idea in mind when he defined education as “the organization of acquired habits of conduct and tendencies to behavior.”¹¹

Apparently for many people professionally involved in “education” in our everyday modern sense, “training” means something much less respectable. Here it seems that no one has thought of bringing up an etymological argument. The basic idea of *train*, to draw or drag along, which persists in the common French verb *trainer*, developed early in English the figurative meaning of leading by persuasion or enticement, and from that to the bringing up of children—in the *Latin* sense of “education.” The Bible tells us that we should “train up a child in the way he should go . . .”¹² This is clearly distinguished from *instruction*, which implies formal lessons taught in school: “Apply thine heart unto instruction, and thine ears to the words of knowledge.”¹³ Of course in modern times we use the term “training” very often for various kinds of specialized *instruction* which may come after a person has finished his formal schooling or “education.” College graduates commonly go through training periods with the companies for which they start to work. Similarly the professional educators who dislike the connotation of *training* are usually themselves products of “teacher-training” institutions and are familiar with “in-service training” for teachers, which they seem not to look down upon. Yet the unfavorable attitude toward anything called “training” persists in educational circles. Thus a recent letter to a newspaper from a concerned reader culminates with the lapidary declaration: “Animals can be trained. People should be educated.”¹⁴

In this reference to animals we may safely infer that what the writer had in mind was the teaching of them to do what *we* want them to do for our service or amusement (*le dressage*), as we do with domesticated animals. Suppose, however, we think of training—synonym of education in the Latin sense of bringing up or rearing—from the point of view of animals themselves, considering the ways of wild creatures in their natural state. Very little thought or observation is needed to realize that countless higher species of animals accomplish marvels in the bringing up of their children, in an extremely short span of time compared to what people require. Certainly they succeed remarkably well in teaching their young the things they need to learn. Not only are their offspring taught what they must know to survive in their environment, but they are imbued with a code of conduct

in dealing with others of their kind. And this code, naturally varying with the species and its way of life, is thoroughly inculcated. Occasional rascals who violate it generally meet their comeuppance.

Contemplation of some of the real *facts* of etymology may lead to conclusions rather different from the interpretations which have been wearisomely overworked. Our modern schools are not lacking in well-developed means and methods of *instruction*. Surely the greatest cause of frustration and discouragement for many devoted teachers of our time is their having to deal with considerable numbers of pupils who have not had the proper prerequisite preparation which *education* originally implied.

REFERENCES

1. Walter Coppedge, *The Phi Delta Kappan*, October 1970, p.77.
2. *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia* (1911), vol. V, p. 3125.
3. *Ibid.*
4. J. B. Greenough and G. L. Kittredge, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech*, New York, Macmillan (1901), p. 231; many subsequent reprintings over many years.
5. *Harper's*, 146:16, 1923.
6. Joseph G. Master, *Journal of the National Education Association*, December 1924, p. 319.
7. *Books Abroad*, University of Oklahoma Press, Spring 1939, p. 176.
8. N. Allworth Beach, *The American Citizen*, May 1940, p. 44.
9. Hazel Askin, "Is It New?", *Reading Horizons*, Western Michigan University, Spring 1968, p. 123.
10. *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 2, 1960.
11. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, (1906) p. 29.
12. Proverbs 22:6.
13. Proverbs 23:12.
14. *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 21, 1970.