

Folk etymology

Data d'edició: 11 de Març de 2014

Autoria: Emilia Castaño

Revisió: Ignasi-Xavier Adiego

Folk etymology (from [English] “folk” and Greek *etymología* -?????????- ‘true or original sense of a word’) is defined as a change in the form and /or meaning of a word, which results from the incorrect assumption that it has a certain etymological origin. This supposition is triggered by some associations of form or meaning between the changing word, unfamiliar to the speakers, and a more familiar term.

Content

[Explanation](#)

[Related concepts](#)

[Basic bibliography](#)

[Complementary bibliography](#)

Explanation

In historical linguistics, folk etymology is usually described as a type of false [analogy](#), which alters the form or meaning of an unfamiliar term so as to reflect the connection that speakers think that exists between it and a better-known or better-understood word. As a result, the target expression begins to be spelt, pronounced or used in a manner that is consistent with the false etymological origin that speakers ascribe to it. This phenomenon, therefore, can be interpreted as an attempt at de-obscuring words that speakers feel to be opaque because they are not used to their form, pronunciation or meaning.

Folk etymological changes usually affect borrowings and old compounds whose morphological constituents have become obscure throughout of time. Chaise lounge, for example, was borrowed from French (*chaise longue* "long chair"). The first word

Folk etymology

Publicat a Diccionari de lingüística on line (<http://www.ub.edu/diccionarilinguistica>)

being pronounced like *chase* in English did not undergo changes but the final element of the borrowing was replaced with a more recognizable English word, *lounge*, whose spelling was similar to that of the original French word and was semantically plausible, since a *chaise longue* is intended to lounge.

Female is another clear case of a folk-etymologised loanword. In the 12th century, English borrowed the word *femelle* from French, which was a diminutive of *femme* “young woman”. Two centuries later English speakers, unfamiliar with suffix *-elle*, altered its spelling by assuming a connection with the word *male*, which seems to have been reinforced by the fact that both words, *femelle* and *male*, used to appear in contrast; and by the existing parallelism with *mann* ‘man’ and *wim+man* ‘woman’

As regards native compounds, among those that have become opaque and have undergone transformations triggered by misconceptions concerning their etymological origin are words such as *bridegroom* and *hamburger*. The former derives from Old English *brydguma* “suitor” (from *bryd* “bride” + *guma* “man”), which evolved into *bridegome* during the Middle English period. However, by the 16th century an intrusive ‘r’ was inserted in the second morpheme and the word developed into *bridegrome* or *bridegroom* — the other alternations correspond to general spelling conventions. This change seems to have been motivated by the influence of the word *groom* “young man”, “servant”, a term more familiar than *gome* to the Middle English speakers. In the case of *hamburger* (from *Hamburg-er* “native of Hamburg”), the association with the word *ham* “cured meat” due to phonetic and graphemic resemblances, led to the insertion of a new morphological boundary: *ham- burger* and, in turn, to new creations, such as the blends *cheeseburger* or *fishburger*, where *burger* has come to mean “bun”.

All in all, as stated by Malkiel, folk etymology refers to a complete absorption, on associative grounds, of one lexical unit by another more frequently used or better protected. For this phenomenon to be successful, the assumed etymology must be shared by a large number of speakers after its initial development by some individual.

Related concepts

[Analogy](#)

[Etymology](#)

Folk etymology

Publicat a Diccionari de lingüística on line (<http://www.ub.edu/diccionarilinguistica>)

Opaque

Blend

Basic bibliography

Algeo, J. - Pyles, T. (2004), "The Origins and Development of the English Language", 5th, *Wadsworth Publishing*.

Campbell, L. (2004), *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction*, 2nd ed, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

Campbell, L. - Mixco, M. (2007), *Glossary of Historical Linguistics*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

Coleman, J. - KAY, J., eds. (2004). *Lexicology, semantics and lexicography*, BN by N. S, Dash, 80, 2, 341–42.

Mish, Frederick C., ed. (1991), *The Merriam-Webster New Book of Word Histories*, Springfield, Mass., Merriam-Webster.

Complementary bibliography

Malkiel, Y. (1954), 'Etymology and historical grammar'. *Romance Philology* 8–1955, 187–208.

Hock, H. (1991), *Principles of Historical Linguistics*, Berlin and New York, Mouton de Gruyter.

Keller, Rudi (1994), *On Language Change. The Invisible Hand in Language*, London and New York, Routledge.