



Games with sound shifts and etymologies

by Gernot Neuwirth

At the time of the conquest of England by William the Conqueror in 1066, Old English (= "Anglo-Saxon") was still an overwhelmingly Germanic¹ language. William and his entourage brought with them Norman-French, which eroded the Anglo-Saxon language base considerably. Only several thousand Old English words survived in modern English (after the appropriate sound changes), as opposed to tens of thousands of French words and many from other languages. However, the basic grammar structure and most of its building blocks such as pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs hail from Anglo-Saxon, as do many household words². A case in point are the names of domestic animals such as ox, cow, calf and sheep. The animals were raised by the Anglo-Saxon serfs, but their meat was eaten - and named - by their Norman masters as beef, veal, mutton, etc.

It is fascinating to look at some of the original Anglo-Saxon words still present in the English language and to compare them with, say, their German equivalents. The sound changes that led to the separation of English and German appear to have been of an uncanny regularity. A comparison can therefore be turned into an investigative game.

1. Playing with loam and foam

If one takes a word like soap, it is pretty obvious that its German translation, Seife, is somehow related to it. In most Austrian dialects, *Seife*³ turns up as *Soaf*⁴, in Viennese as *Saf*. By chance, the Viennese vowel happens to be the same as in Old English *sap*. All these forms ultimately stem from Germanic **saipon*, the asterisk denoting that the word has never been seen by a linguist. It had to be inferred because Germanic has not left us any written texts.

What is intriguing is that a whole array of other words follow exactly the same pattern in the pronunciation of their vowel (or diphthong) if not always in their spelling. Two examples are loaf and stone:

Old English	English	German	Austrian dialects	Viennese dialect
<i>hlaf</i>	<i>loaf</i>	<i>Laib</i>	<i>Loab</i>	<i>Lab</i>
<i>stan</i>	<i>stone</i>	<i>Stein</i>	<i>Stoa(n)</i>	<i>Sta(n)</i>

Thus, even if you don't know any German, you can now probably deduce the English etymological⁵ twins of *Bein*, *allein*, *Leid* (German *d* ~ English *th*), *Reif* (in the latter, com-

1 Germanic is the language which evolved into English, German, Dutch, the Scandinavian languages, and Gothic (which became extinct with the Goths).

2 In fact, the most frequent 100 words in English are of Anglo-Saxon origin, as are 83 of the second most frequent 100.

3 German *ei* and *ai* are pronounced like *i* in English *life*.

4 This *oa* is pronounced approximately like the diphthong in English *Noah*.

5 Etymology is the discipline which studies the derivation of words. For our purpose, "etymological twins" are words in two languages which go back to the same root, such as English *water* and German *Wasser*, which both derive from Germanic **watar*.

pare *Seife* for the English equivalent of German *f*). Incidentally, in the course of the centuries, the semantic contents of one and the same word in different languages can have diverged, the German word *Reif* meaning hoop, but its English etymological twin meaning cable. Got it? In the case of *Leid*, the German word means suffering, whereas its English etymological twin means to feel disgust. Should you still be at a loss, you can find the solutions at the end of this article.

Where there seem to be exceptions, there is usually a plausible explanation:

Old English	English	German	Austrian dialects	Viennese dialect
<i>lam</i>	<i>loam</i>	<i>Lehm</i> ⁶	<i>Loam</i>	<i>Lam</i>
<i>fam</i>	<i>foam</i>	-----	<i>Foam</i>	<i>Fam</i>

Shouldn't *Lehm* be *Leim*? Well, in past times it was indeed. Good old Goethe still used an *ei*-form. But more recently, the word for soil of clay and sand was re-introduced into standard German from a German dialect as *Lehm* and monopolised one of the original two meanings of *Leim*, which retained the meaning of glue. In Vienna, though, we still have a *Laimgrubengasse* (loam pit lane) and a *Laimäckergasse* (loam field lane).

Feim, on the other hand, has to all intents and purposes disappeared from standard German. Even the dialect forms (which my mother still used when she was doing the laundry the old-fashioned way) are no longer recognised by many of my students, although some report that they still use them for beer froth. And yet, even in standard German, there is a trace of foam, so to speak: An *abgefeimter Schurke* is an utter scoundrel, a seasoned criminal, like a beverage from which all froth has been removed.

The fact that like sounds in different words undergo exactly identical developments, or in other words, that language systems are subject to mechanistic laws of nature like any technical apparatus, surely worried some people in the nineteenth century.

2. The Grimm Brothers as a cultural shock

To most of us, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm are known as collectors of popular tales. In fact, their work as comparative linguists was probably more important. They were the first to systematically explore, among other things, certain sound shifts from Indo-European⁷ into Germanic (Grimm's Second Law, Germanic Consonant Shift, Erste Lautverschiebung) and from Germanic into German (Grimm's First Law, High German Consonant Shift, Zweite Lautverschiebung). The former occurred several centuries B.C., the latter several centuries A.D., but the exact dates are controversial.

Grimm's Second Law states, among other things, that Indo-European *p*, *t* and *k* turned into Germanic *f*, *th* and *h* respectively, i.e. (ex)plosive sounds turned into fricatives which were, however, formed in the same places in the mouth as their respective predecessors were.

This explains why Indo-European **ker-* turns up in Latin (which retained the old consonant) as *cornu*, while English has *horn*. Latin *tres* corresponds to *three*, *pater* to *father*. Note that none of these English words derive from Latin ones. Rather, the English and respective Latin words go back to identical Indo-European roots.

⁶ German *eh* is pronounced like a lengthened version of the vowel in English *red*.

⁷ Indo-European, variously also termed Indo-Germanic, Indo-Celtic, or even Aryan, is the mysterious lost language from which most European and some Asian languages derive, e.g. the Germanic, Romance, and Slavonic languages as well as Greek, Persian, Hindi, etc.

The Write Stuff

Sound shifts

Again, long lists of corresponding twins could be given (for our purpose, please regard the initial consonants only), e.g. *centum* - *hundred*, *cor* - *heart*, *tonare* - *thunder*, *tegere* (to cover) - *thatch*, *pes* - *foot*, *piscis* - *fish*).

Grimm's Law worked for the bulk of the words to which it was applicable. However, there were a minority which all went in a different direction. Thus, English *seethe* and *sodden* should both have *th*, according to Grimm's Law. But apparently there was an exception. To note such seemingly inexplicable deviations from the rule was reassuring to people to whom Grimm's Law appeared dangerously deterministic. So language, the God-given differentiation between man and beast, the basis of all intellectual accomplishments, could not be pressed into a set of mechanistic rules, after all. The exceptions might even serve as proof that there was such a thing as free will.

Then, fifty years after Grimm's Law, a Danish linguist exploded such considerations. Karl Verner's Law proved that the exceptions solely depended on the position of the stress in the word. If it was immediately before the sound in question, it developed one way. If not, the other.

3. Playing with three tame doves

To return to more games here is one relating to Grimm's First Law, which deals with certain consonant shifts from Germanic into (High) German. (Low German like English retained the old consonants.)

Again, the sounds stayed close to their respective places in the mouth but changed their categories. For example, the Germanic dental or alveolar⁸ fricative *th* turned into the dental or alveolar plosive *d* (*three* - *drei*), the voiced dental/alveolar plosive *d* became the voiceless dental/alveolar plosive *t* (*dove* - *Taube*), and the old *t* turned into the alveolar fricative *s* or, depending on its position in the word, into *ts* (spelt *z* in German, cf. *tame* - *zahn*, *water* - *Wasser*).

Remembering the words *three tame doves* and their respective German etymological twins, viz. *drei zahme Tauben*, more etymology games can be played. No knowledge of German is required to guess the English opposite numbers of *zahn* (the opposite of wild) or of the numeral *zehn*, or of *Zinn* (a metal), *zu* (a preposition), *Zange* (a tool), *Zoll* (customs duty, with a meaning just slightly different from the present-day meaning of its English twin).

What may be found more exciting are the words whose semantic relationships are not immediately recognisable. Take *Zaun* (fence), which is clearly the twin of an English word with a different meaning today. Indeed, the original root word meant both the fence and the fenced-in area, i.e. a garden, or a village or the like. Got it? Similarly, the English etymological twin of *Zaum* (bridle) today denotes a pair of draught animals controlled by a bridle. If you have a problem with the vowel after the *t*, the reason is that the two *au*'s in *Zaun* and *Zaum* respectively are of different origin, the latter being of the same origin as in *Traum* (= images and sensations during sleep). Got those, too?

Zeit (= time) reveals its true English etymological twin when we look at it in the form of *Gezeiten* (= the ebb and flow of the sea). *Zeitung* (= newspaper) had an older meaning of message, news, and its somewhat literary English etymological twin is easier to

⁸ Alveolar = articulated at the upper front alveoli (sockets of the teeth)

guess if one knows that the German suffix *-ung* is the equivalent of English *-ing*. A *Zecke* (never mind the vowel after the Z - it has followed its own sound shifts) is a parasitic insect, which attaches itself to the skin from which it sucks blood, and can pass on diseases in Austria and in the Rocky Mountains.

For more revelations about the etymological twins of English words in other languages (or triplets etc., for that matter), the cheapest source is an old Concise Oxford Dictionary. Old because newer editions no longer list etymological twins etc., but limit themselves to the Anglo-Saxon root words.

4. Playing with money, animals and heads

When teaching business English for the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration, I never had much chance of squeezing a discussion of sound shifts and etymologies into the tight curriculum. However, I was usually able to sneak in a short linguistic consideration of something that is of considerable interest to business students and to all of us, viz. money.

While the word itself ultimately derives from *Moneta*, the second name of the goddess Juno, in whose temple an ancient mint was located, a comparison of some semantically related words is more exciting.

English *pecuniary* and German *pekuniär* are loan words from Latin *pecunia* (= wealth, money). *Pecunia* in turn derives from *pecus*, which denotes small domestic animals such as sheep, goats and pigs. *Pecuniary* thus mirrors a time when wealth was expressed in terms of animals rather than bank notes, shares or automobiles. The double meaning of animal and money must have been there in the pre-Latin, pre-Germanic, i.e. Indo-European root **peku*, which became *pecus* in Latin but **fehu* in Germanic according to Grimm's Second Law as discussed above. **Fehu* in its turn exists today in German as *Vieh* (= animal), with its *-ieh* pronounced like the vowel in English *see*. Its English etymological twin, however, has completely lost its animal traits and now means money only, viz. the charge we pay for admission or for the services of a doctor or a lawyer. Got it?

The animal-money tandem is also visible in another word that fascinates both business students and all of us, viz. *capital*. Like its German equivalent, *Kapital*, it ultimately goes back to Latin *capitalis* (= main, head, as columns of sums in Roman times had the total at the top). *Capitalis* in turn derives from *caput* (head) and thus from Indo-European **kaput*. While it is rewarding to quickly follow **kaput*'s somewhat complex ramifications into German *Haupt* (= head) and English *head* (better recognisable if we know its old English form was *heafod*), the animal connection comes in with *cattle* and *chattel*, which also go back to Latin *capitalis*.

And if your **kaput* spins by now, your doctor will be only too glad to help you for a moderate **fehu*.

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Solutions: bone - alone - loathe - rope, tame - ten - tin - to - tongs - toll, town - team - dream, tide - tidings - tick, fee