

Some Mistakes Scholars Make

— A Study of Words and Their Origins, Chiefly English —

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Introduction

It is true that some linguists tend to cover too wide a range for a single person to make his writings perfect, or at least, free from mistakes. Thus, it is sometimes quite easy for the readers to detect erroneous descriptions in their elaborate works because careful readers can investigate more thoroughly than the author himself as to the individual items. Sometimes it is rather surprising to find conflicting views on a simple subject. The present thesis, which was written as a sequel of *Concerning the Explanations of Word and Phrase Origins Seen in Dictionaries*, also seeks to point out some examples of such defective accounts in some popular books written by famous scholars and writers, and, at the same time, to correct their errors as much as possible.

Mario Pei

In a passage of an article entitled *The Language of Colors Is Not International*, the Chapter 3 of his readable book *What's in a Word*, the late professor Mario Pei compared the naming of the police wagons of two different countries.

... Our police wagon, “Black Maria,” is in Austria *der grüne Heinrich*, “green Henry” (here there may be reference to the actual color of the vehicle; the shift of gender is interesting)¹.

It is almost certain that he did not know the world-famous masterpiece of a nineteenth-century Austrian writer Gottfried Keller (1819–1891), *Der grüne Heinrich*. Otherwise, he would have found the change of gender quite natural.

(As to the title and outline of the novel, see Note 1.)

In the Chapter 4 of the same book, entitled *What's in a Name*, there is a passage containing two mistakes. Here the professor tries to summarize the features of Japanese personal names.

Japanese names are often descriptive of virtues, like Tadeshi, "Righteousness." Others are numerical, like Ichiro, "First Boy." Girls' names often end in -ko, "child," or are of poetic nature, like Tori, "Bird."¹

It is true that the Professor Pei was very successful in defining the typical features of Japanese personal names, but any Japanese reader can detect two erroneous accounts in this short passage. First, Tadeshi should be substituted by Tadashi, of course. Maybe he misheard the pronunciation of his Japanese instructor. Second, there is no such female name as Tori in Japanese. Rather, it should be substituted by Hana, "Flower" or something like that.

Cinderella's slipper

There exist two theories in regard to Cinderella's slipper, one of which says that the glass slipper originated from the misrendering of Perrault's text into English. But there is a dignified book whose author strongly suspects the authenticity of the mistranslation theory. Thus, two opinions are head-on in conflict.

The glass slipper has been conjectured as a fur or sable slipper, supposedly from *pantofle de vair* not *de verre*.

Perrault's text of 1697 has "*de verre*", which is more in keeping with the story.²

Here the author of the book declares that Perrault's text of 1697 has "*de verre*" (of glass). So, if it is true, there can be no more room for presenting a different theory. But...

In Perrault's story the slipper was of fur, but the English translator con-

fused *vair*, the French word for fur, with *verre*, the French for glass. That is why our Cinderella wears glass slippers. Glass slippers usually are prettier than fur ones, so the mistake was a good idea after all.³

Even Mr. and Mrs. Morris, the authors of the famous *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* include the item *Cinderella's slipper*, in which they assert as follows.

...The slipper wasn't really glass at all — it was made of fur. The whole mix-up resulted from one of the most horrendous mistranslations in literary history. The French phrase was *pantoufle en vair* — “slipper of fur or sable” — and the translator read it as *en verre* — “of glass.”⁴

Beside the difference of *vair* and *verre*, there arises another textual problem. Which of the prepositions did Perrault use in his original manuscript, *de* or *en* ?

guillotine

As to the derivation of the word *guillotine*, the following passage can be cited as an example of flawless accounts of the word origin including an interesting sequence of the event.

“At half past 12 the guillotine severed head from her body.” So reads the statement containing the first recorded use of *guillotine* in English, found in the *Annual Register* of 1793. The word occurs in a context clearly illustrating the function of the guillotine, “a machine with a heavy blade that falls freely between upright guides to behead a condemned person.” Ironically, the guillotine, which became the most notable symbol of the excesses of the French Revolution, was named for a humanitarian physician, Joseph Ignace Guillotin. Guillotin, a member of the French Constituent Assembly, recommended in a speech to that body on October 10, 1789, that executions be performed by a beheading device rather than by hanging, the method used for commoners, or by the sword, reserved for the nobility. He argued that

beheading by machine was quicker and less painful than the work of the rope and the sword.

In 1791 the Assembly did indeed adopt beheading by machine as the state's preferred method of execution. A beheading device designed by Dr. Antoine Louis, secretary of the College of Surgeons, was first used on April 25, 1792, to execute a highwayman named Pelletier or Peletier. The device was called a *louisette* or *louison* after its inventor's name, but because of Guillotin's famous speech, his name irrevocably associated with the machine. After Guillotin's death in 1814, his children tried unsuccessfully to get the device's name changed. When their efforts failed, they were allowed to change their name instead.⁵

So the device for beheading was called, at first, *louisette* or *louison* after the name of the surgeon who designed it. It must be a historical fact since practically every encyclopedia gives almost the same description. Surprisingly enough, however, there exists a book containing an entirely different account, introducing a total stranger named Schmidt in place of Dr. Antoine Louis.

While we're on this unpleasant tack we might as well include Dr. Joseph Ignace *Guillotin*. He proposed in 1789 that the privilege of decapitation should not be reserved only for the nobles of France. Furthermore, he suggested that some sort of machine should be constructed to perform the act quickly and humanely. His idea was accepted and a German mechanic named Schmidt put together a device that the officials adopted. But the French preferred not to say that the victims of the machine had been *schmidted* — no, it seemed more proper to use *guillotined*.⁶

If the author had known about Antoine Louis, he should not have omitted his name. Even if the story about the German mechanic is true, it is rather strange that he should not mention the name of the French surgeon at all.

cyclamen

It was John Ciardi that ridiculed the popular view as to the origin of the name **grapefruit**.

... [The name is from a persisting error. Some, including N W P, explain it by the “fact” that the fruit grows in grape-like clusters — one of those errors clerk-lexicographers borrow from earlier clerks. I have owned grapefruit trees and must insist that not even the crudest sense of metaphor could conceive the fruit to grow in grape-like clusters...] ⁷

As Ciardi pointed out, it sometimes happens that once a theory has been established, it is accepted as a right one without further reconsideration. The origin of the name cyclamen may be cited as another example of “those errors clerk-lexicographers borrow from earlier clerks.”

In his last years, the late botanist, Hiroshi Nakamura, published a series of remarkable books about the origins of animal and plant names. (See Note 2.) One of the books entitled *The Origins of Garden Plant Names* contains an item, *Cyclamen, A Flower Which Circles Round*. He writes in the article as follows:

The word cyclamen derives from the Latin meaning “to circle round” and has the same meaning as the English word cycle. As to the reason why the cyclamen is called by such a name, it is a common opinion to think that it derives from the round tuber of the plant. Dr. Makino’s *Illustrated Book of the World Flora* also contains the same explanation.

In recent years, however, gardening has become so popular that wild cyclamens have also been imported. Although they are not so attractive as the cultured ones, their small, humble flowers abound in rustic charm, and some people like to plant them in pots. This wild cyclamen’s stem starts to become twisted as soon as it bears a bud. Even after blooming, the spiral stems are remarkable. By observing the wild cyclamen, we can understand why the plant is called “circling round.” It is clear that the name cyclamen derives from its circling stem, not from the shape of its round tuber.

(Translated by the author of the present thesis from the original

Japanese text.)⁸

So far practically all English dictionaries associate the origin of the plant's name with the shape of its tuber. But Nakamura's theory seems to be very persuasive considering the fact that we are accustomed to giving names after the most distinctive features of things. Is the round tuber so conspicuous and unique as to be a distinctive feature of this particular plant?

Matilda

The reason why the Australian tramp's swag is called a "Matilda" is not known. Brewer's famous *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. Revised by Ivor H. Evans declares so in the item, *Waltzing Matilda*.

An Australian phrase made famous by the Australian poet A. B. (Banjo) Paterson (1864-1941). It means carrying or humping one's bag or pack as a tramp does. Henry Lawson (*The Romance of Song*) says, "Travelling with SWAG in Australia is variously and picturesquely described as 'humping bluey', 'walking Matilda', 'humping Matilda', 'humping your drum', 'being on the wallaby'..."

The reason for the tramp's roll being called a "Matilda" is obscure; to waltz conveys the impression of tramping along with one's pack jogging up and down with one's steps.²

It was Joseph T. Shipley that gave a precise answer to that question. His book, *The Origins of English Words* (1984) contains a paragraph referring to this particular female name. (See the item 'magh', an Indo-European root, of this book.)

The name *Matilda*: mighty in battle, well illustrates how a word may shift its meaning. Shortened to *Maud*. it was, says OED, "applied typically to a woman of the lower class." It developed the pet names *maukin* and *malkin*, usually used to a slattern or a wanton; from the 13th c. through the 18th, these were also applied to a demon or a witch; *Macbeth* begins: "I come,

Gray-Malkin!" (the witch's cry to her familiar spirit). By *l. r* shift came *merkin*, shifting from the lewd woman to her pubic hair...Finally, the pox having left so many prostitutes bald below, *merkin* came to mean "a wig for a woman's privy parts." The Australians still sing of "Waltzing Matilda."⁹

In order to illustrate how the name is still synonymous with 'a wanton or a slattern,' it will be better to add one more song, one of Harry Belafonte's favorites, *Matilda*: 'Matilda! Matilda! Matilda — she take me money and run Venezuela.' (See Note 3.)

Notes

- 1 Green Henry (so called because his frugal mother made all his clothes from a single bolt of green cloth) sets out to become an artist. After some success and many disappointments, he returns to his native city and wins some respect and contentment in a modest post as a civil servant. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1986)
- 2 Hiroshi Nakamura's books are still available because they are all included in the series *Tosho Sensho* published by Tokyo Shoseki. Of course, they are written in Japanese.
- 3 This chapter is a revision of **Waltzing Matilda**, a chapter of another thesis written by the author. See the **Introduction**.

Bibliography

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- 2 Ebenezer C. Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Revised by Ivor H. Evans, (Cassel, 1970)
- 3 *The Book of Knowledge*. (Grolier, 1966)
- 4 William and Mary Morris, *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, (Harper & Row, 1980)
- 5 by the editors of *The America Heritage Dictionaries, Word Mysteries & Histories*, (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986)
- 6 Eugene T. Maleska, *A Pleasure in Words*, (Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1981)

- 7 John Ciardi, *A Second Browser's Dictionary*, (Harper & Row, 1983)
- 8 Hiroshi Nakamura, *The Origins of Garden Plant Names*, (Tokyo Shoseki, 1981)
- 9 Joseph T. Shipley, *The Origins of English Words*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984)