

Concerning the Explanations of Word and Phrase Origins Seen in Dictionaries

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Introduction

There are a lot of elaborate works in the field of linguistics, it is true, but the author has a tendency to cover too wide a range for a single person to make his writings perfect, or at least, free from mistakes. Thus it is possible for the readers, who can concentrate on a given item, to detect errors quite easily because they can investigate more thoroughly than the author himself as to the individual items. Written by a reader of dictionaries or, more strictly, reference books on linguistics, the present thesis seeks to point out examples of such defective accounts in some very popular books written by the world-famous scholars and writers.

It was in 1983 that John Ciardi brought out *A Second Browser's Dictionary*. This book includes an article entitled 'spook etymology' in which the author writes:

In these notes, I use this term to label etymologies invented by language spooks who thrive on free association with no regard for attestation. (An alternative term might have been "guess etymology.") Spook etymologists have long haunted the language, and have been shamelessly ingenious in making up nonfacts in support of their inventions. ...

And in closing the article he stresses that

Spook etymology is not to be confused with folk etymology, the common and often poetic process...

The case of *love* (in tennis), Ciardi says, is one of the 'specimen spook ety-

mologies'. Here is the article:

love In tennis. Zero, No score, [A simple and undramatic extension from *love* with sense "nothing." So *all for love, not for love nor money, love's labor lost.*]

HISTORIC. A common spook etymology asserts this term to be from Fr. *l'oeuf*, the egg, prob. by association with Am. slang *goose egg* for "zero." But French has never used *egg* in this sense. The spook etymology is perhaps a bit more dramatic than the true one, and pretends to a more learned awareness of language, but spook etymologists always prefer drama and false learning to the truth.

It will be better to quote another instance of spook etymology from the same book in order to illustrate more fully what Ciardi means by this term. The item *grapefruit* contains the following passage.

... [The name is from a persisting error. Some, including NWP, 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.

In 1814 the botanist John Luhan, in his *Hortus Jamaicensis* (*The Garden of Jamaica*), mentioned a variety of this fruit that tasted like grapes. Perhaps. Or perhaps Luhan's taste buds were added. In any case, *grapefruit* came off his tongue and into ours.]

Thus the careful readers of reference books on word and phrase origins can also find typical instances of so called 'spook etymology' even in the writings of world-famous lexicographers and writers.

smog

It is a well known fact that in *O.E.D.* there is a précise description about who coined this word and when it was:

1905 *Globe* 27 July 3; The other day at a meeting of the Public Health Congress Dr. Des Voeux did a public service in coining a new word for the London fog, which was referred to as 'smog', a compound of 'smoke' and 'fog'.

So there should be no room for other theories on the origin of this portmanteau word. However, Isaac Asimov, author of *Words of Science*, and Mr. and Mrs. Morris, famous for their *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, give 'specimen spook etymologies' in explaining the origin of this word although they are all, in a sense, specialists in this field of study.

In the item 'Cumulus' Asimov refers to 'smog':

...In some industrial areas, such as Los Angeles, smoke may mix with persistent fog, and a combination word, *smog*(*smoke-fog*) has been invented to describe this and popularized by Hollywood comedians.

His account is so ambiguous that it can possibly lead casual readers to a misunderstanding; they may think that the word *smog* was coined in the U.S.A. in order to describe the mixture of fog and industrial smoke of Los Angeles.

On the other hand, *Morris Dictionary* introduces a totally different origin of the word, which is also quite misleading:

smog, a blend of "smoke" and "fog," was, according to one account, invented by Hubbard Keavy, one-time Associated Press news executive. When he worked on the *Des Moines Tribune* in 1923 the city was virtually under siege in winter by polluted air caused by heavy burning of soft coal and fog rising from the river. He wrote a headline involving "smoke" and "fog" for a front-page story but it would not fit into the space

allowed. So, out of desperation or inspiration, he wrote this head. SMOG HITS/CITY ANEW. The managing editor called it a monstrosity, but the public seemed to approve.

Asimov and Mr. and Mrs. Morris have one thing in common: they all have an erroneous notion that the word was coined much later than it really was.

southpaw

'Southpaw' is a word of American descent coined to denote a left-handed pitcher of baseball. It is quite natural that the British scholars, who are not familiar with the game, should be puzzled about the origin of the term. Thus Eric Partridge quotes the letter of an American correspondent of a Mr. John Moore's in *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English (vol. II: The Supplement)*.

An American correspondent of Mr John Moore's has sent him this convincing explanation. 'On regulation baseball fields, the batter faces East, so that the afternoon sun won't be in his eyes ; the pitcher, therefore, must face West, which in the case of the left-hander puts his throwing arm and hand (or "paw") on the South side his body.'

Morris Dictionary gives a fuller account of the word by quoting the words of Finley Peter Dunne, Jr., the son of the man who coined the word:

"According to the best authorities I know, including Prof. Elmer Ellis, who wrote my father's biography (Mr. Dooley's America), it was Finley Peter Dunne who originated the expression. The Chicago ballpark faced east and west, with home plate to the west, so a left-handed pitcher threw from the south side. My father, who covered sports for the Chicago News, and Charles Seymour of the Herald were credited with having introduced the modern style of baseball reporting, concentrating on the dramatic moments in the game and giving character to the players. According to Ellis,

both Dunne and Seymour were using *southpaw* in 1887. My father was 20 years old — and it was not until six years later that he started on the humorous pieces about Mr. Dooley that made him famous.”

Generally speaking, newer dictionaries are better than old ones since their contents have been revised and improved. John Ciardi’s *A Browser’s Dictionary*, published in 1980, seems to give the best account of this baseball jargon at present.

southpaw A lefty. Originally a left-handed pitcher. By extension, any left-handed person and especially an athlete. [From the self-elaborating impulse of sportswriting that call a baseball a *spheroid* and the home team *the local aggregate*. This one coined in 1880’s by Finley Peter Dunne, who was then a young sports writer for the *Chicago News*. This whimsy is based on the fact the Chicago ball park was then laid out with home plate to the west. Hence, a left-handed pitcher would be hurling the spheroid with the “paw” on his south side. But despite the self-conscious artfulness of this sort of thing, *northpaw* has never come into use.]

Notice that Ciardi points out that the word *southpaw* is an example of whimsical ways of expression which sportswriters like to use.

waltzing Matilda

Brewer’s famous *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. Revised by Ivor H. Evans has an 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 trap’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.

Once a jolly swagman camped bý a billabong
Under the shade of a coolibah tree,
And he sang as he watched till his billy boiled,
"You'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me."

The author of the item confesses that the reason why the bushman's swag is called a "Matilda" is obscure. Joseph T. Shipley, author of *The Origins of English Words* (1984), unknowingly give the precise answer to this question in a passage of the item 'magh' (an Indo-European root):

The name *Matilda*: mighty in battle, well illustrate how a word may shift its meaning. Shortened to *Maud*, it was, says OED, "applied typically to a woman of the lower classes. "It developed the pet names *mawkin* and *malkin*, usually used of a slattern or a wanton : from the 13th c. through the 18th, these were also applied to a demon or 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 so many prostitutes bald below, merkin came to mean "a wig for a woman's privy parts." The Australians still sing of "Waltzing Matilda."

After You, My Dear Alphonse

Eric Partridge's *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English, Vol. II* : *The Supplement* includes the following item:

after you, Claude — **no, after you, Cecil!** A c.p. since ca. 1940; by the end of 1946 slightly ob. Ex the B.B.C. programme 'Itma'. E. P. 'Those Radio Phrases' in the Radio Times, Dec. 6, 1946, an article reprinted in *Words at War: Words at Peace*, 1948.

after you, Claude. The Canadian version—by May 1959, slightly ob. —

is **after you, my dear Alphonse—no, after you, Gaston.** (Leechman.)

A Dictionary of Catch Phrases by the same author gives a fuller detail of the item:

after you, Claude—no, after you, Cecil! Characterizing an old-world, old-time, courtesy, this exchange of civilities occurred in an 'ITMA' show, produced by the BBC in (I seem to remember) 1940. Although it was already, in 1946, slightly obsolescent, yet it is still, in the latish 1970s, far from being obsolete. The Canadian version, as Dr Douglas Leechman informed me in 1959, is **after you, my dear Alphonse—no, after you, Gaston,** with variant **after you, Alphonse** (Leechman, January 1969. 'In derision of French bowing and scraping')—and was, by 1960, slightly obsolescent, and by 1970, very; current also in US, where, however, it often took the form, **you first, my dear Alphonse** (or **Alfonso**). Note that all of them were spoken in an ingratiating manner. Cf:

after you I come first is an American variant of **after you, Claude**(Berrey.)

Here. Partridge, totally relying on the instructions given by 'an authority on Canadiana' Dr. Douglas Leechman, notes that the phrase **after you my dear Alphonse—no, after you my dear Alphonse—no, after you, Gaston** (including its variants) is the Canadian version of **after you, Claude—no, after you, Cecil!** a catch phrase originated in an 'ITMA' show probably in 1940. On the other hand, the already mentioned *Morris Dictionary* has the following item in it: (As to the 'ITMA' shows see Note 1.)

an Alphonse and Gaston comes from an old comic strip featuring two Frenchmen who tried to outdo each other in politeness. Each strip would end with them saying to each other: "After you, my dear Alphonse!" "No, after you, my dear Gaston!" When a sports-caster reports that players have "pulled an Alphonse and Gaston" he is referring to a play in which two outfielders running to catch the same fly each pull back to let the other make the play—with the result that the ball falls safe between

them.

So it is clear that phrase originated in the U.S.A. (not in Canada), separately from the British phrase, and much earlier in date, because it comes from an old comic strip entitled *Alphonse and Gaston* (1902) by an American cartoonist, Frederick Burr Opper (1857–1937). It should be remembered that a score of expressions in the American vocabulary are derived from the comic strips, and that such national idioms as ‘jeep,’ ‘hot dog,’ both derived from the comic strips, are now world-famous.

Furthermore, there is a reliable evidence that this catch phrase was still current as late as 1940’s. Shirley Jackson (1919–1965), author of *The Lottery* (1948), the sensational story, wrote a very short piece entitled *After You, My Dear Alphonse* in 1943. A boy named Johnny and his playmate Boyd, a negro boy, repeat the phrase trying ‘to outdo each other in politeness’, after the manner of the two main characters in the old comic strip. See how this phrase is used in the story. Here are the passages: (As to the title of the story see Note 2.)

“Johnny,” she called, “you are late. Come in and get your lunch.”

“Just a minute, Mother.” Johnny said. “After you, my dear Alphonse.”

“After you, my dear Alphonse.” another voice said.

“No, after you, my dear Alphonse.” Johnny said.

“Johonny,” Mrs. Wilson said, “go on and eat your lunch.”

“Sure.” Johnny said. He held out the dish of scrambled eggs to Boyd. “After you, my dear Alphonse.”

“After you, my dear Alphonse.” Boyd said.

“After you, my dear Alphonse.” Johnny said. They began to giggle.

“After you, my dear Alphonse.” Johnny said, holding the door open.

“Is your mother still mad?” Mrs. Wilson heard Boyd ask in a low voice.

“I don’t know,” Johnny said. “She’s screwy sometimes.”

“So’s mine,” Boyd said. He hesitated. “After you, my dear Alphonse.”

Notice that in this case always the phrase “After you, my dear Alphonse” is monotonously repeated between the two. No doubt it is one of the variants of the above mentioned original. Although it is a work of fiction, Jackson’s story well attests that this catch phrase was far from obsolescent in 1940’s in the U.S.A.

Notes

- 1 Brewer’s *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* includes the item ITMA:

(initials of “It’s That Man Again”). The famous and once most popular of British radio features, and one which did much to brighten up the dreariness of the BLACK–OUT years of World War II . It was devised and maintained by the comedian Tommy Handley (1896–1949), the script being written by Ted Kavanagh. It ran from 1939 until Handley’s death in 1949. Mrs. Mopp and Funf were among the characters in this hilarious weekly skit on English life.

- 2 *After You, My Dear Alphonse*, the title of Shirley Jackson’s story, has a double meaning. It means the phrase itself repeated by the characters of the story, and at the same time means figuratively the kindness of Mrs. Wilson, Johnny’s mother, who tries to give alms to the negro boy who doesn’t want any.

Bibliography

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- 6) Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, Vol. II : The Supplement, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979)

- 7) Ebenezer C. Brewer. *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Revised by Ivor H. Evans, (Cas-sel, 1970)
- 8) Joseph T. Shipley. *The Origins of English Words*, (John Hopkins, 1984)
- 9) Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Catch Phrase*. (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979)
- 10) Robert C. Pooley, general editor, *America Reads* (high school textbooks in six volumes. Shirley Jackson's *After You, My Dear Alphonse* is included in one of the volumes entitled *Outlook through Literature*.)