



Folk Etymology – Some Lesson Activities

Pre-Reading

Discuss these questions with your partner:

- “Etymology is the study of where words come from. What do you think are the advantages of studying etymology?”
- “Do you know anything about etymology in your own language?”
- “When somebody tells you a story – about a legend, or about how something in nature works as it does – how can you tell if the story is true or not?”

Reading

1. **What do you think the word 'embellish' means?**
 - a. To make something unusual
 - b. To make something more attractive in appearance
 - c. To make something as noisy as a bell.
2. **From which animal do you think we take the word 'vaccine'?**
 - a. The cow
 - b. The horse
 - c. The chicken
3. **Why does the author give the examples of 'embellish' and 'vaccine' in the first paragraph?**
 - a. To show that English is full of difficult words
 - b. To prove that English takes words from many different languages
 - c. To demonstrate the usefulness of etymology for remembering difficult words.
4. **What does the author mean by the term 'folk etymology'?**
 - a. He is referring to etymologies created by normal people, not linguists.
 - b. He is talking about the etymologies of different people and where their names come from.
 - c. He is making a reference to the etymologies of the most popular words in English.
5. **What does the word 'particularly' mean in the fifth paragraph?**
 - a. It means 'in a special or unique way.'
 - b. It means 'in an unpopular way.'
 - c. It means 'more so than normal.'
6. **What does 'port' mean in the context of this story?**
 - a. It means 'in the harbour.'
 - b. It means 'a kind of drink.'
 - c. It means 'on the left side.'



7. What does 'starboard' mean in the context of this story?
 - a. It means 'facing the stars.'
 - b. It means 'on the right side.'
 - c. It means 'a wooden board covered in large stars.'

8. What point does the author make when he quotes Michael Quinion?
 - a. That acronyms were rare before the twentieth century.
 - b. That it's not possible for words to be formed out of their initial letters.
 - c. That the First World War led to the creation of a lot of new words.

Follow-Up

Discuss these questions with your partner.

1. How would you answer the final sentence in the article?
2. Can you think of any other folk etymologies?
3. Is it important to correct people who falsely believe in folk etymologies?



Folk Etymologies and Backronyms

Teacher's Notes

To use this activity, pin each of these mini worksheets to the wall, folded over so that only the word and its Folk Etymology can be seen. In pairs, students should discuss the etymology and how it relates to the word, suggesting what we can learn by looking at the folk etymology. When each pair has had a guess, they can turn the fold over and check their answers against the explanatory text.



Dormouse

The Folk Etymology:

Many people associate the dormouse with the large barn doors of farms in the British countryside, as this is where they are often found.

What it might mean:

The people who created this folk etymology saw a small animal that looked like a mouse, and thought it must therefore be a mouse. But thinking that meant that they had to split the word 'dormouse' into 'dor' plus 'mouse.' Therefore, people began to think that the 'dor' part referred to a 'door', and they drew a connection between the animal and the place where they might find it.

The Correct Etymology:

The dormouse is not really a mouse at all, but it does belong to the rodent family. It's an animal that spends most of every day sleeping – it's nocturnal, and also hibernates for long periods through winter. Its etymology actually has more to do with sleep than anything else: the word comes from Latin via French, and the verb *dormir*, which means 'to sleep.' In English, other words that are connected are the adjective 'dormant', and the noun 'dormitory'.

Kangaroo

The Folk Etymology:

According to the film 'Arrival', when the first colonists arrived in Australia they asked the locals what that strange hopping creature over there was. The locals responded by saying 'Over there?', which, in the Aboriginal language, sounds like the word 'kangaroo'.

What it might mean:

This folk etymology is quite wrong, but it's a useful statement about how different cultures really can't understand each other. It's also a reminder of how difficult it is to make first contact with people who speak a language you don't know – it's impossible to know what the other person is saying, or how they understand your own words.

The Correct Etymology:

The word 'kangaroo' is probably very similar to the word for the animal in one of the Aboriginal languages of Australia. Unfortunately, nobody cared to study these languages and many died out along with their speakers as a result of the British conquest of the continent.



Hamburger

The Folk Etymology:

This is an easy one. The meat in a hamburger is usually pork or ham, and everyone knows that burger is another kind of sandwich. After all, we have cheeseburger, beef burger, chicken burger, fish burger... so it makes a lot of sense to think about it this way.

What it might mean:

People tend to forget that a word can derive from a place name. Look at 'denim' as another example – it means 'de Nimes', or 'of Nimes', the French town where the fabric was invented. But why do we forget this part of the story? Perhaps because we feel more positive towards the things that we invented ourselves, or that come from our home country. Being permanently reminded of the German origin of Hamburgers might not please some people.

The Correct Etymology:

As you might have guessed, the first Hamburgers came from Hamburg, the German city. Technically, it makes little sense to take the 'ham' part off the word and substitute it for another food noun, but language works in mysterious ways.



Crayfish

The Folk Etymology: Clearly these creatures must be fish. They live in the water, don't they? That must make them fish, right?

What it might mean:

This might seem harsh, but a lot of people don't really care about technical accuracy. How many people go around thinking dolphins are fish as well? If you cared enough to check you'd know that dolphins are mammals. The fact that crayfish are not fish but crustaceans suggests that, for most people, knowing the difference simply isn't important.

The correct etymology:

It's incredible how frequently a word is born in English because of a mishearing. The classic example is 'hocus pocus', which refers to a cheap kind of magic. Where does that come from? It's actually from the Latin 'Hoc est corpus', read during the sacrament in Mass. For a long time Mass was only read in Latin – it still is in many places – but the English of the time did not know Latin, so they didn't really know what the priest was saying. The same goes for crayfish, which comes from the French word 'écrevisse'. The last syllable sounds like 'fish', and so the name was born and a poor crustacean was confused for a fish for the rest of history.



Bridegroom

The Folk Etymology:

The woman is the bride, and the man who marries her is clearly going to be her servant for the rest of their lives.

What it might mean:

To some, the big day – the wedding day – should be more about the woman getting married than about the man she’s marrying. This is certainly the impression you get from the countless Hollywood films that choose weddings as their subject.

The Correct Etymology:

The word ‘bridegroom’ goes back a long, long way into our history, back to a time when ‘guma’ meant ‘man.’ But over time the Old English word died and was replaced by ‘man’, but the word ‘bridegroom’ continued in its new form, borrowing the word ‘groom’, which might in some contexts mean ‘male servant’. So if we’re guilty of mishearing foreign words (like crayfish), we’re also guilty of mishearing our own words too.

Nerd

The Folk Etymology: This one goes back to the 1950s and Harvard University. Two rival groups emerged. The first were the party animals, the students who cared more about drinking than about getting their degrees. They were nicknamed the 'drunks'. The more serious students were then called the 'nerds', which is basically 'drunk' spelt backwards.

What it might mean:

This etymology sets up the two words in opposition: on the one hand, party animals, on the other, the boring nerds. If you didn't drink all the time, you weren't cool, and you had to be a nerd; later, if you were considered a nerd it meant you chose never to go to parties.

The Correct Etymology:

It's quite likely that the word comes from a book by Dr Seuss, where the word 'nert' is used instead of 'nut', and was used to describe a crazy person. If you were 'crazy' about studying, you might be called a 'nut' – 'Maths Nut' being an example. 'Nerd' came later and probably became popular because so many people read Dr Seuss, just as the invented term 'runcible spoon' became a real thing in time because the poetry of Edward Lear was so widely read.



Hangnail

The Folk Etymology:

Since a hangnail is a bit of dry skin hanging off the side of your finger around the nail, it made sense to call it what it was, and hence its name.

What it might mean:

If you think that words should describe what they represent, then this is a great etymology. It works in the same way that other compound nouns work, like the word 'homework', which is 'work you do at home.'

The Correct Etymology:

This word actually has a long history, and a surprising origin. The 'nail' part refers more to a physical nail, something you would hit with a hammer. That's because 'hangnails' are hard pieces of skin, with a texture like a hard iron nail. The 'hang' part has nothing to do with the word 'hang' – instead, it comes from the same 'ang' that gave us 'anger,' and in this case meant something like 'painful.'



Wiki

The Folk Etymology:

Since most examples of a 'wiki' contain a large amount of knowledge, it makes sense to label the collection as 'What I Know Is...' – and so the word is an acronym.

What it might mean:

Not all wikis contain knowledge in the way that Wikipedia does. But it's interesting to think that the word 'wiki' is related to knowing things – and it also suggests that if you put the word 'wiki' in front of something, people will assume it is a collection of what we know about a subject.

The Correct Etymology:

The word actually comes from Hawaiian, and their word 'wikiwiki', which means 'quickly.' The name was applied to the likes of Wikipedia because it was so quick and easy for people to edit the contents of this online encyclopaedia – anyone could be an editor.



SOS

The Folk Etymology:

If there's an acronym, there has to be some meaning to give to each of the letters, and since the three-letter term SOS is always used to refer to rescue events, Save Our Souls or Save Our Ship are both very sensible suggestions for the acronym's meaning.

What it might mean:

The people who gave us the folk etymology 'Save Our Ship' were probably interested in naval rescue, and were thinking of stories like that around the sinking of the Titanic.

The Correct Etymology:

Strangely enough, the acronym SOS doesn't stand for anything at all. The letters were chosen for their simplicity in Morse Code, the telegraph communications system that uses a combination of dots and dashes – short beeps and long beeps – to send messages over long distances. The S is represented by three dots, and the O by three dashes, so the message SOS is one of the most recognisable and easily communicated messages possible using Morse.



Decimate

The Folk Etymology:

The folk etymology in this case is slightly unusual, in that it is often given by people who think they know better than others. These days, the word 'decimate' means 'to almost completely destroy', but historically it was used to mean 'reduce by one tenth'. Some people get quite upset if the word is used in any other way than the original.

What it might mean:

The people who insist on the 'correct' usage of 'decimate' are what we call 'prescriptivists.' They think that there is only one correct usage, and that any change that happens to language needs to be resisted.

The Correct Etymology:

The folk etymology in this case is actually correct: the word 'decimate' does mean reduce by one tenth. Or at least that's what it used to mean. But the meanings of many words change over time. The Roman philosopher introduced the word 'atom' to the language, but he was thinking of something that was visible to the naked eye. When we use the word 'atom' today we mean something very different. If you believe that the 'correct' meaning of words is defined by how the majority of people use them, you are a 'descriptivist', and you accept that 'decimate' now means 'to almost completely destroy.'

Follow-Up Activities

A. Call My Bluff

Students choose a random word from the textbook. They check the word in the online dictionary of etymology (<http://www.etymonline.com>) and write a summary of the real etymology. Then they invent one of their own. The students can then mingle, telling each person they meet what their word was and the two etymologies, challenging their partner to choose the true etymology.

Example:

“The word is ‘missile’, which is something that you shoot or throw. The first etymology is ‘Something you shoot at a target, in the hope that it doesn’t miss – and so we get the word missile.’ The second etymology is ‘Something that can be thrown, combining ‘miss’ from the Latin for throw, with the ending ‘ible’, meaning ‘can be done’. When the two are connected we get ‘missile.’”



B. The Best Backronym

Students work in pairs or on their own to develop the best backronym for a word suggested by a teacher. One example might be the word SCHOOL.

Possible backronyms:

- Student-Centred Help On Our Level
- Studying CHOres OffLine
- Sparing Children Homework Or Other Lies

When ready, each team reads out their backronym. Each team votes for the best creation (but are not allowed to vote for their own).

Alternatively, each team can suggest a word to all the others, and then the team that suggested the word becomes the judge for their part of the competition.