

## Etymology and Taboo

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### *Redeeming Gegensinn: on the hazards of homonymy*

We recently celebrated the centenary of Freud's short but influential review (Freud 1910) of Carl Abel's pamphlet "Über den Gegensinn der Urworte" (1884), which unveiled the "universal phenomenon" of *Gegensinnen* ('contradictory meanings or antithetical senses of primal words purported to abound in the "oldest" languages. While history has not been kind to Abel's thesis or Freud's interpretation of it, philologists have long recognized a general tendency for words in a wide variety of languages to develop and maintain contradictory or opposite meanings, while debating the significance of that tendency.

For Freud, the significance of Abel's findings lay in the support they seemed to lend to his own edict that there is no *no* in the unconscious. To his claim of the dreamer's embargo on negation and contradiction—

The way in which dreams treat the category of contraries and contradictories is highly remarkable. It is simply disregarded. **"No" seems not to exist as far as dreams are concerned.** They show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or for representing them as one and the same thing. Dreams feel themselves at liberty, moreover, to represent any element by its wishful contrary; so that there is no way of deciding at first glance whether any element that admits of a contrary is present in the dream-thoughts as a positive or as a negative.

(Freud 1900: 353; cf. Horn 1989: §1.3.2 for discussion)

—he added this footnote for the 1911 edition of the *Traumdeutung*:

I was astonished to learn from a pamphlet by K. Abel, *The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words* (1884) (cf. my review of it, 1910)—and the fact has been confirmed by other philologists—that **the most ancient languages behave exactly like dreams in this respect.**

More generally, Freud imagined a rapprochement between psychoanalysis and philology that would shed light on this (supposed) phenomenon:

We psychiatrists cannot escape the suspicion that **we should be better at understanding and translating the language of dreams if we knew more about the development of language.**

(Freud 1910: 156, 161)

Such rapprochement was not to be, given the flaws in the argument. While Freud's editor and translator Strachey sought to excuse both Abel's scholarship and Freud's own gullibility,

The reader should bear in mind the fact that Abel's pamphlet was published in 1884 and **it would not be surprising if some of his findings were not supported by later philologists.** (Strachey, introducing Freud 1910: 154)

his assessment may well have been the understatement of the century: see, inter al., Benveniste 1956, Arrivé 1985, Hagège 1985, and Lopes 2004 for critiques.

One problem is the disparate nature of the evidence. In seeking to support the claim that not only "primitive languages" but modern ones as well, especially in the "oldest" and most basic roots, contain a significant subset of words simultaneously denoting contrary notions, Freud mingled examples involving polysemy, i.e. related senses of a given word, often resulting from metaphorical extension or definitional issues (as in (1a)), with others manifesting accidental homonymy between unrelated stems (as in (1b)).

- (1) a. Lat. *altus* 'high' vs. 'deep'  
Lat. *sacer* 'sacred' vs. 'accursed'  
Ger. *Boden* 'garret' vs. 'ground'
- b. Lat. *clamare* 'to cry' vs. *clam* 'softly', 'secretly'  
Lat. *siccus* 'dry' vs. *succus* 'juice'  
Ger. *stumm* 'dumb' vs. *Stimme* 'voice'  
Ger. *bös* 'bad' vs. *bass* 'good'

In still other cases, cross-linguistic relatives are invoked (as in (2a)) or reversals of sound rather than (or in addition to) those of meaning (as in (2b)).

- (2) a. Eng. *bad* vs. Old Saxon *bat* 'good'  
Eng. *lock* vs. Ger. *Lücke*, *Loch* 'hole'  
Eng. *cleave* 'separate' vs. Ger. *kleben* 'to stick' [cf. *cleave together*]
- b. Eng. *boat* vs. *tub*; *care* vs. *reck* (as in *reckless*)  
Eng. *pot* vs. Ger. *Topf* 'pot'  
*hurry* vs. Ger. *Ruhe* 'rest'  
*wait* vs. Ger. *Täuwen* 'tarry'  
*leaf* vs. Lat. *folium* 'leaf'

Freud's observation (1910: 160) that "If we take the other [Indo-European] languages into consideration, the number of relevant instances grows accordingly" is a truism; combining the results from all these kinds of reversals of meaning and/or sound will similarly increase the "number of relevant instances". What is less clear is whether these results are statistically significant (once we control for motivations like figurative language), especially given that Abel and Freud appear to have been easy graders.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yale Egyptologist John Darnell points out (in e-mails to the author, July 2010) the danger of relying on Abel or even giving him the benefit of the doubt:

[Abel] has not even a remote idea of Egyptian. His use of phonetics is remarkably uninformed; in fact, one cannot even excuse it based on the time when he wrote, since in terms of Egyptian, Heinrich Brugsch and others had already done a vastly better job at reading the language. Abel knew no Egyptian and had little knowledge of linguistics, at least so far as one may judge from his misrepresentation of Egyptian. To my knowledge Egyptian does not really present good

One matter of housekeeping: what is the English for *Wörter mit Gegensinn* (Abel, Freud, Nöldeke 1910) and for the category of *Gegensinn* itself? The least-effort translation is indeed WORDS THAT ARE THEIR OWN OPPOSITES (Eulenberg 1995), but besides its inherent inelegance, that leaves the phenomenon unlabeled, as does Murphy's (2003) evocative label of JANUS-WORDS. Other terms that have been suggested include ANTILOGIES, AUTO-ANTONYMS, ANTAGONYMS, and CONTRONYMS (see e.g. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auto-antonym>), while scholars of Arabic, which reputedly hosts a plethora of such cases<sup>2</sup> (Nöldeke 1910, Az-Azmeh 1986; Cohen 1961, 1970; Schub 1977), typically employ the dedicated term from that language, *ADDĀD*. My own chips are placed on the square occupied by ENANTIONYMY (for the phenomenon) and ENANTIONYMS (for the examples), supported by the link to ENANTIOSEMIA and ENANTIOSEMANTICS (Lepschy 1981, Justice 1987, Liberman 2005, Finkin 2005) and the parallel with such well-established terms of lexical art as antonym(y), homonym(y), synonym(y), and hyponym(y).

While lexicographic professionals and amateurs are often drawn to enantionyms—the compilation in Eulenberg 1995 represents what was acclaimed as the longest thread in the history of Linguist List—it is striking that the words involved tend not to be *Urworte* or primal in any obvious sense. Thus, in English, the standardly cited examples including those in (3)

(3) Some English words exhibiting enantionymy or *Gegensinn*:

Nouns:	<i>sanction, oversight, cipher, squat, patron, actor</i>
Verbs:	<i>cleave, rent, peruse, overlook, comprise, table, string, trim, dust</i>
Adjs/Advs:	<i>fast, moot, unpacked, literally</i>

The same problem arises in other languages. Consider, for example, the most antithetical word with the most philosophical resonance: *aufheben*, the distinct readings of which (= 'supersede, sublimate, preserve') were joyfully wielded by Hegel in his celebrated jousts with the Law of Non-Contradiction (see Horn 1989: §1.3.2 for elaboration). For Hegel, as for Freud, "the double usage of language, which gives to the same word a positive and negative meaning, is not an accident" (Hegel/Wallace 1892: 180). The confluence of the two (or three?) meanings of this term may well constitute "a joy for speculative thinking" (Kaufmann 1965: 192). But it is doubtful that either Hegel or Freud would inscribe *aufheben* on the roster of *Urwörter*.

If the candidates for *Gegensinn* involving homonymy or sound reversal as in (1a) and (2b) can be ascribed to sheer coincidence, as skeptics have maintained, those

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examples of the functioning of any real principle of "Gegensinn", even in cryptographic texts. My conclusion is that Abel is not really interesting even...; he is simply wrong, and I would say willfully wrong, in the sense that he tried to "read" Egyptian without proper ability, ignoring phonetic rules, and apparently avoiding any outside advice... His Egyptian examples of "Gegensinn" are just "Unsinn." Freud hätte besser verstehen sollen.

<sup>2</sup> Some philologists are more skeptical of the purported prevalence of enantionyms in Arabic, e.g. Barr (1987: 173): "We may abandon the conception that words having completely opposite meanings are extremely common in Arabic or any other Semitic language." More plausibly, Barr notes, opposed meanings of an etymon often develop in cognate languages. Other attempts to "demystify" the exotic nature of Arabic include papers in Berque & Charney 1967, Cohen 1970, Justice 1987 (on the "wooly speculation" of the "Enantiosemanitics" tradition), and Finkin 2005.

involving related senses of a given word, as with *aufheben* or the examples in (1b), are in fact motivated linguistically rather than psychoanalytically; far from posing a threat to the Law of Non-Contradiction, they often reflect the economic advantage to polysemy, as Hagège has observed:

In certain languages, there are words that seem to have two opposite meanings. Confronted with a *Janus bifrons* of this sort, should we conclude that languages ignore the principle of non-contradiction?...In none of these cases does language actually contradict itself. Rather, generalization is facilitated by the ordering of opposing elements under the heading of their common features. (Hagège 1990: 112-13)

The value of polysemy for linguistic economy has long been recognized:<sup>3</sup>

Far from being a defect of language, polysemy is an essential condition of its efficiency. If it were not possible to attach several senses to one word, this would mean a crushing burden on our memory: we would have to possess separate terms for every conceivable subject we might want to talk about. Polysemy is an invaluable factor of economy and flexibility in language; what is astonishing is not that the machine occasionally breaks down, but that it breaks down so rarely. (Ullmann 1962: 167-68)

Further, the literature on *Gegensinn* systematically overestimates the hazards to comprehension posed by enantionymy—and by homonymy and polysemy more generally. This stems in turn from a tendency to ignore such factors as:

- (4) the difference between (spoken) language and its written representation
- the role of semantic shift, broadening, narrowing
- the role of coincidence and chance resemblance
- the communicative advantages of polysemy (esp. in metaphorical contexts)
- the presence of sarcasm or language games (cf. e.g. Hale 1971 on Walbiri)
- the range of meaning differentiation and neutralization (*altus* ‘high’ vs. ‘deep’)
- the difficulty in defining the relevant notion of “opposite” (or of “*gegen*”)
- the role of context, including register or speech level, in resolving sense

To take one example, the notorious polysemy of *literally*, longstanding bugaboo of prescriptivists, which derives—as the *American Heritage Dictionary*’s usage note points out—from “a natural tendency to use the word as a general intensive” rather than from a change in the meaning of the word or the incoherence of speakers. But it is tempting to ignore this and insist and *literally* can’t mean ‘figuratively’. So when Jerry Falwell warned us all in 2007, “If you and I do not speak up now, the homosexual steamroller will literally crush all decent men, women, and children who get in its way”, what he really meant was...

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<sup>3</sup> Whether representing opposed or just different meanings united within a given lexical item, polysemy plays an essential role in meaning change, as stressed in such recent treatises as Traugott & Dasher 2002 and Eckardt 2006.



(The Oatmeal, <http://theoatmeal.com/comics/literally>, *What it means when you say 'literally'*)

In fact, *literally* has been used as a (non-literal) intensifier since the 17<sup>th</sup> century in writing by Dryden, Pope, Austen, Alcott, Dickens, Twain, Joyce, and others, as detailed by Sheidlower (2005).

A variety of linguistic and extralinguistic factors conspire to alleviate potential homonymy or polysemy, including gender (as in French *le foie* 'liver' vs. *la foi* 'faith', a distinction famously neutralized in the pun-prone collocation *crise de foi(e)* 'religious crisis/liver crisis'), inflection (*brothers/brethren*, *hanged/hung*, *rang/ringed*), word order (Fr. *pauvre homme* 'unfortunate man' vs. *homme pauvre* 'indigent man'), and orthography (*draft/draught*, *metal/mettle*, *knight/night*) and/or pronunciation (*human/humane*). When all else fails, speakers use modifiers or other repair strategies to disambiguate underspecified items, as observed by Bloomfield (1933) and Menner (1936): *fair-sized/fair-minded/fair-haired*, *light-colored* vs. *lightweight*; *funny-strange* or *funny ha-ha?*.

A more extreme option is coinage, as for Miss Amelia Bedelia, literalist extraordinaire of literary housekeepers (Parish 1963), she who dresses a chicken in overalls, trims the fat with lace and bits of ribbon, and ices the fish with chocolate frosting.<sup>4</sup> Reading an instruction to dust the furniture, she exclaims, "Did you ever hear tell of such a silly thing? At my house we undust the furniture. But each to his own way," And she proceeds with her dusting, with the help of some fragrant powder

<sup>4</sup> Significantly, Miss Bedelia opts in each case for the core, goal-oriented reading of the verb, wielding default lexical semantics to override matters of plausibility in context.

she discovers in the bathroom. (In fact, *undust* ‘wipe clean, clear from dust’ has an OED entry with cites dating to the 17th century.)

More often, resolution is virtually guaranteed by the context, although this too can be exploited by *Witz*:



While homonymy can be defined at a given stage of the language, it may arise not only from the phonological convergence of two distinct lexical items but from polysemy, i.e. the complete (or near-complete) semantic divergence of different senses of a given item. Classic examples of the latter are *pupil* (‘student’, ‘part of iris in the eye’), *sole* ‘flat fish’/‘flat of the foot or shoe’, and *fast* ‘firm(ly), rapid(ly)’.

In some cases, as already noted, the sense are distinguished orthographically, reinforcing the impression that homonymy rather than polysemy is involved (*metal/mettle*, *principal/principle*, *flower/flour*). In still other cases, homonyms may be reinterpreted as related senses of a given item as when *ear* (of corn) is reinterpreted as a metaphorical extension—à la *foot* (of the mountain), *hand* (of the clock), *eye* (of the needle)—of the body-part label, or the reversative *un-* prefix of *unwrap* is associated with the prefix of *unhappy* (cf. Horn 2002). A striking recent case involves the computing slang term *troll* (‘someone who posts deliberately erroneous or antagonistic messages to a forum in order to elicit a hostile or corrective response’), which is actually a variant of the noun meaning ‘fishing lure’, zero-derived from the verb ‘to fish, saunter, cruise’ (< MF *troller*). However, the unwelcome poster has become associated with the unrelated Scandinavian word (< ON) for a (mythical) dwarf or imp living in caves or under bridges, extended to non-mythical people with a similar appearance, a reanalysis that is easy to demonstrate:

**Do Not  
Feed The  
Trolls.**  
Do Not Reply  
To This Thread.  
Let It Fall To The  
Bottom Or Be Locked



Since Paul (1880) it has been recognized that (ignoring taboo cases for the moment) apparent homonymy is tolerated in general because the context establishes the intended or salient meaning, as in (to take one of Paul's examples) the differential interpretations of *sheet* at a clothing store, on a yacht, or at a printer's shop. While there are somewhere between 1600 and 2000 homonyms in English (and more in French), there are relatively few cases in which the hearer is unable to recover the speaker's intention, a problem that arises only when there is identity of sound, category, subcategory, sense-domain, and register between the homophonous lexical items:

Only when the words are alike in sound, when they are in common use in the same social and intellectual circles, when they perform the same syntactical functions in the language, within the same sphere of ideas, do they become subject to mutual confusion and conflict.  
(Williams 1944: 5)

Thus no difficulty is posed by pairs like *fly* (N/V), *red/read*, *limp* (A/V), *cape*, *pound* (weight/currency); but potential homonymy destroys the weaker or less established member of a given pair that meets the criterion above. Relevant cases of homonymic obsolescence in English include *let* 'allow' vs. *let* 'hinder' (the latter—classically exemplified in Hamlet's "By heaven, I'll make a ghost of any man that lets me"—surviving in the *let ball* of tennis or *without let or hindrance* in legal English), *queen* 'sovereign' vs. †*quean* 'harlot', *straight* 'direct' vs. †*strait* 'narrow' (cf. "Strait is the gate"; *Matthew* 7:14), *gate* 'entrance' vs. †*gate* 'road, path' (but cf. *gait* 'manner of walking'), *pail* 'bucket' vs. †*pale* 'shovel', *an ear* vs. †*a neer* 'kidney', and so on. Other weaker values barely hang on, e.g. *raze* (typically occurring in a context ruling out *raise*). Useful discussions are provided in Bloomfield 1933: 396-99, Menner 1936, Williams 1944, and Bolinger 1961.

The classic case of word loss by homonymy involves the extermination of the *gat*- stem for 'rooster' (< Lat. *gallus*) when it fell together with *gat* 'cat' (< Lat. *cattus*) in southwestern France. As described originally by Gilliéron, it is only within the area of their merged pronunciation—

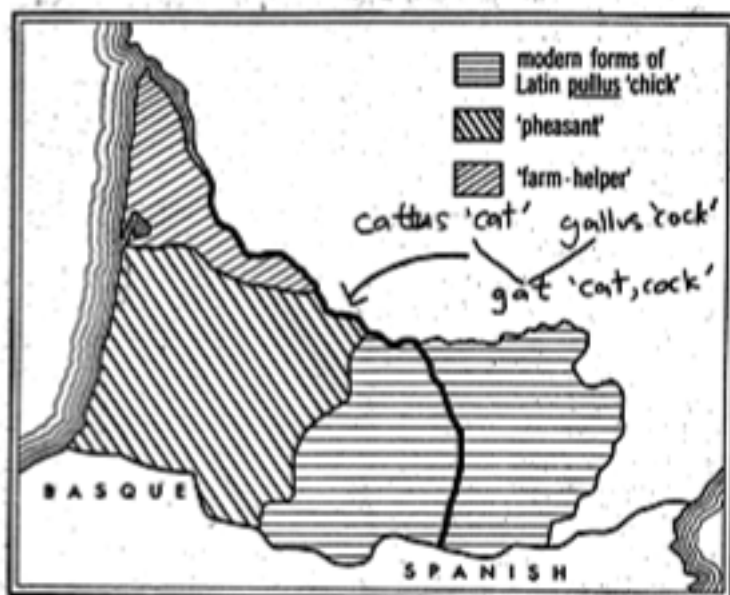


FIGURE 14. The southwestern part of the French dialect-area. — South-west of the heavy line — Latin [ll] appears in final position as [t]. The unshaded part of the area uses modern forms of Latin gallus "cock." The shaded areas use other words for "cock." — After Dauzat.

(Map from Bloomfield (1933: 397), based on earlier work by Gilliéron (1921). But it is the subclass of homonymic avoidance involving taboo, rather than the more innocent barnyard labels, to which we now turn.

### ***Taboo and the euphemism treadmill***

Besides exemplifying some of his favorite cases for *Gegensinn*, Freud (1912-13: 18) considered the contrary meanings of taboo words to be of particular significance for both language and the unconscious.

‘Taboo’ is a Polynesian word. It is difficult for us to find a translation for it, since the concept connoted by it is one which we no longer possess. It was still current among the ancient Romans, whose ‘sacer’ was the same as the Polynesian ‘taboo’...The meaning of ‘taboo’, as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, ‘sacred’, ‘consecrate’, and on the other ‘uncanny’, ‘dangerous’, ‘forbidden’, ‘unclean’.

The replacement of taboo terms has been cited as a driving force in a long-recognized cyclical pattern that Steven Pinker (1994) has dubbed the EUPHEMISM TREADMILL. Gordis (1938: 277) describes this tendency as seen in Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic (emphasis added):

Very often there is a desire to escape from the unpleasant word as far as possible, and so refuge is had by the very opposite...What better euphemism for “curse” could the Hebrew find than the word for “bless” [berekh]?...

But usage tends to dull the figure of speech. It is soon forgotten that the word was used only figuratively in a negative meaning, and **comes to mean what originally it sought to replace**...Nearly always, the original meaning persists side by side with its opposed, more recently acquired significance, and **so words of like and opposite meanings arise**.



From the *berekh* and *sacer* of the ancient Hebrew and Roman to the *sacré calice* (lit. 'holy chalice') of the Québécois and the *holy shit* of the American, these curses born of euphemistic enantionymy have long provided a rich source of shifts from the sacred to the profane.

At the same time, these shifts illustrate the fluidity of the border between positive and negative uses of strong expressives. This is best seen through the in-group reclamation of slurs and taboo words that take on positive meanings through denotation or connotation reversal.<sup>5</sup> The terms may be historically racist (*nigger* or *nigga*, *hebe*, *yid*), sexist (*bitch*, *cunt*, *crone*, *slut*), homophobic (*queer*, *homo*, *fag*, *dyke*), or otherwise insulting (*redneck*, *hillbilly*), and some reclamation projects have proved tougher than others, given the persistence of the negative values. Simple adjectives (*wicked*, *bad*, *sick*) or nominals (*the shit*) have also shifted to positives within socially or regionally defined groups. In each case, the hazards of polysemy are precisely what provides the spice of life to the intended positive meanings for those in the know, while also allowing the target of vilification to employ linguistic jiu-jitsu to overcome the name-caller's contempt.

Traditionally, taboo avoidance and word (or sense) loss took the form of replacing or avoiding terms directly referring to culturally powerful or totemic categories including those denoting 'God', 'Satan', 'the Furies', 'bear', 'snake', 'left (hand)', names of one's children, husband, and so on (Meillet 1906), later extended to the avoidance of (and euphemistic substitution for) socially potent or dangerous objects or processes including those related to death, disease, sex, excretion, politics, religion, and class.

While ordinary homonymy-triggered word loss is only triggered when the speaker's intended meaning is likely to be misidentified within a given context, taboo avoidance occurs more broadly, even in the absence of identity between the taboo and innocent word or meaning, the latter of which may suffer a kind of contagion or guilt by association, as we shall see below. Indeed, taboo avoidance can be seen in economic terms as a linguistic corollary of Gresham's Law: "bad" meanings drive out "good" ones, even when no actual confusion is likely to arise.

Before turning to a range of English examples, I will set the table by reviewing a particularly elegant case of twin taboo replacements from French. In earlier centuries, *baiser* was the standard verb 'to kiss' while *embrasser* (the source of our *embrace*) meant 'to hug.' This straightforward state of affairs became untenable once *baiser* increasingly began to serve as a euphemism for *foutre* 'fuck'.<sup>6</sup> With the weaker, etymological meaning is now unavailable for the verb *baiser*, *embrasser* has been recruited to bear the meaning 'to kiss'; its original value 'to hug', the next domino to fall, must now be conveyed by *serrer* (*dans ses bras*). But while predicative *baiser* can no longer be used to describe mere interlabial osculation, the nominal *un baiser* ('a kiss') retains its original sense, allowing *donner un baiser à* [lit. 'to give a

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Napoli & Hoeksema 2009 on the pragmatic motivation for taboo intensifiers and Anderson & Lepore, to appear on slurs and reclamation.

<sup>6</sup> The fact that the 2000 French thriller *Baise-moi* was released in English under the title "Rape Me" says more about cultural differences between Francophone and Anglophone culture than about the lexical items themselves.

kiss to'] to serve as a periphrastic expression for 'to kiss'.<sup>7</sup> It's nice to know that *un baiser* is still *un baiser* as time goes by.

The catalogue of exemplars of taboo avoidance in English begins with body parts, as in the loss or avoidance of the "innocent" meanings, e.g. **ass** 'donkey', **cock** 'rooster', **coney** 'rabbit', and their relatives. To take the last first, here are excerpts from the OED entry for **cony/coney**, which survives in Coney Island—but now pronounced as in *phony*, not as in *honey* (or *cunny*):<sup>8</sup>

**OED: cony | coney, n.**

**Pronunciation:** / ' kəʊnɪ / / ' kʌnɪ /

**Etymology:** The current form represents Old French *conil*, *connil*, cognate with Provençal *conil*, Spanish *conejo*, Portuguese *coelho*, Italian *coniglio* < Latin *cuniculus* rabbit... The historical pronunciation is with /ʌ/ ; common spellings from 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> cents. were *cunnie*, *cunney*, *cunny*, and the word regularly rhymed with *honey*, *money*, as indicated also by the spelling *coney*; but during the 19th cent. the pronunciation with long ō has gradually crept in.

...It is possible...that the desire to avoid certain vulgar associations with the word in the *cunny* form, may have contributed to the preference for a different pronunciation in reading the Scriptures. Walker knew only the *cunny* pronunciation; Smart (1836) says 'it is familiarly pronounced *cunny*', but *cōny* is 'proper for solemn reading'.

**1. a.** A rabbit: formerly the proper and ordinary name, but now superseded in general use by *rabbit*, which was originally a name for the young only.

†**5. a.** A term of endearment for a woman. Obs.

1556 N. UDALL *Ralph Roister Doister* (?1566) Ah sweete lambe and coney.

**b.** Also indecently.

1622 T. DEKKER & P. MASSINGER *Virgin Martir* ii., A pox of your christian Coxatrices, they cry like Poulterers wives, **no money, no Cony.**

Cf. **cunny, n.** / ' kʌnɪ / = CUNT n., 1

1720 in T. D'URFEY *Wit & Mirth* VI. 197 All my Delight is a Cunny in the Night, When she turns up her silver Hair.

1879–80 *Pearl* (1970) 216 **Your private parts, or cunny, Should not be let for money.**

Another victim of guilt by association is the missing masculine counterpart of *countess*; alongside *prince/princess* and *duke/duchess*, we find **earl/countess**:

It is likely speculation that the Norman French title Count was abandoned in England in favour of the Germanic Earl precisely because of the uncomfortable phonetic proximity to *cunt* [ME *counte*] (Hughes 1991: 20)

In these cases, near homonymy with the strongly taboo term for female genitalia (or its diminutive) has sufficed to preclude the unrelated words for a rabbit and a nobleman. Along the same lines, consider the recent adventures of **niggardly**. In

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, *baiser la joue* and *baiser la main* retain the meanings 'kiss on the cheek/hand'.

<sup>8</sup> The French source of *coney* has disappeared for the same reason, replaced by *lapin*.

January 1999 Washington, D.C. mayoral aide David Howard was (temporarily) fired for warning at a meeting with city the council that they would have to be niggardly with the funds. *Niggardly* ‘stingy, miserly’ derives from Old Norse and is as unrelated to *nigger* as *cuniculum* is to *cunnus*, but that turns out to be irrelevant.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, the “innocent” meanings of **undertaker** ‘one who undertakes a task’, **pussy** ‘cat’, **gay** ‘cheerful’, **booty** ‘plunder’, **thong** ‘beach sandal’, **intercourse** ‘conversation’, and **ejaculate** ‘exclaim’, and. Two examples of what is no longer possible:

**“I do detest conventional intercourse. Nasty! they are going into the church, too. Oh, the Britisher abroad!”**

—E. M. Forster (1908), *Room With a View*, Chapter II

She [Miss Twitterton] embarked on an agitated description of the previous night's events, in which the keys, the chimneys, Crutchley's new garage, the bed-linen, the ten o'clock bus, and Peter's intention of putting in an electric plant were jumbled into hopeless confusion. **The vicar ejaculated from time to time and looked increasingly bewildered.** “Most trying, most trying,” he said at length, when Miss Twitterton had talked herself breathless.

—Dorothy L. Sayers (1937), *Busman's Honeymoon* (London: Victor Gollancz), p. 113

Other lexical items may develop a sexual, anatomical, or other “loaded” meaning for some speakers and not for others—or a different one for others. As “the most prominent example of a common word having quite different meanings in different speech communities” Hughes (2006) cites **fanny**: (U.S.) ‘the buttocks, rump’ vs. (U.K.) ‘the female pudendum’.<sup>10</sup> While Hughes elsewhere endorses the standard story on the latter *fanny* that “The sense is surely implied in John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* [sic] (1749), a punning reference to Latin *mons veneris*”) (Hughes 1991: 254), this is not in fact the case. Spedding & Lambert (2011) argue convincingly that the modern consensus on the name of the protagonist of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* cannot be right, given that the first clearly attested cite for *fanny* ‘vulva’ is 1835-40.

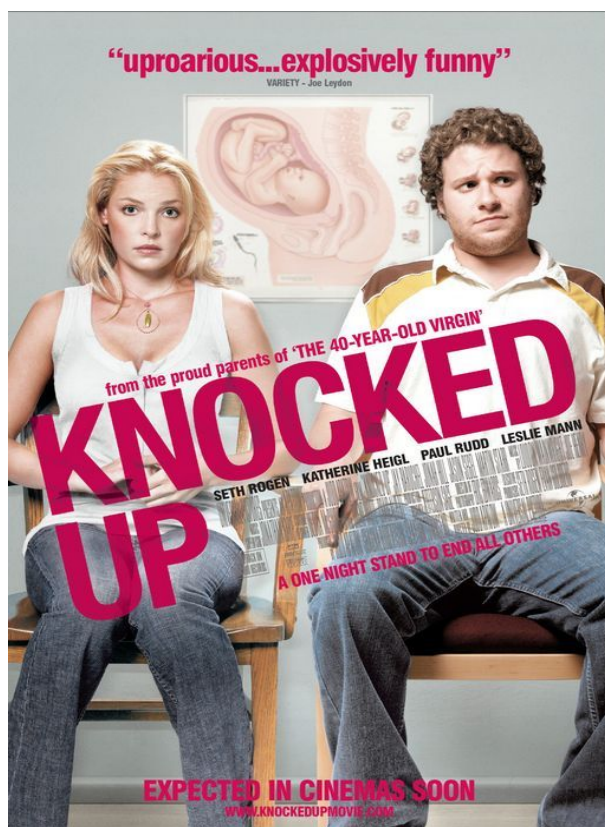
Elsewhere, **pissed** = ‘angry’ in the U.S. but ‘drunk’ in the U.K. Other words may have a loaded meaning on one side of the pond while retaining their innocence on the other: “*You have a lot spunk*” works as a straightforward compliment in the U.S. but may be avoided elsewhere (British **spunk** = ‘semen’), while British **pot plant** (for ‘potted plant’) tends to jar on American ears.<sup>11</sup> We also have the classic mixup over **knock up** ‘impregnate’ (U.S.) vs. ‘awaken’ (U.K.), although it’s unlikely that many British moviegoers would have attended the 2007 Judd Apatow movie—

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<sup>9</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controversies\\_about\\_the\\_word\\_%22niggardly%22](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controversies_about_the_word_%22niggardly%22) for more such “incidents” of *niggardly* damage.

<sup>10</sup> A similar instance of ambiguous geography within a single speech variety is **ass**; cf. *piece of ass*.

<sup>11</sup> For an informative and entertaining exploration of such transpondic mismatches, well beyond the usual lifts vs. elevators and crisps vs. chips, see Lynne Murphy’s “Separated by a Common Tongue” blog, <http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com/>.



under the mistaken impression that they would be seeing a romantic comedy about whether Seth Rogen remembers to awaken Katherine Heigl by rapping on her door.

As for the possibility of ‘a common word having quite different meanings in different speech communities’, an even more dramatic example than that provided by Hughes’s own *fanny* is **cock**, invoking two different varieties of genitalia above and below the Mason-Dixon line, as seen in the HDAS entry:

**cock 1.a.** the penis—usu. considered vulgar.

**cock 3.** *So. and Black E.*

**a.** the vulva or vagina; CUNT—usu. considered vulgar.

**b.** copulation with a woman—usu. considered vulgar.

Needless to say, befuddlement may arise as to which *cock* is which:

In southern white English the reference to ‘penis’ is unknown. Instead the word refers to the vulva, or the act of intercourse. Southern males will use the phrase ‘I’m gonna get some cock.’ The semantic confusions which arise when Northern and Southern men begin to converse about sex can be amusing. Recently, when a (Northern) visitor to Baton Rouge used the word in reference to the male [organ], a local boy was overheard to comment, “It’s been so long since he’s had any, he don’t remember what it is.”

De Camp & Hancock (1974: 20-21)

The sociolinguistic implications of taboo avoidance across linguistic varieties is explored by Mary Haas (1951) in her celebrated study of “interlingual word taboos.”

After reviewing the tendency for Creek-English bilinguals to avoid words in their native Creek that are phonetically similar to taboo English words, e.g. *fákki* ‘soil’, *apíswa* ‘meat’, *apíssi* ‘fat (adj.)’, Haas goes on to detail a particularly complex case of taboo displacement:

Thai students studying in this country also tend to avoid certain words of their own language which bear a phonetic resemblance to English obscene words...The word *phríg* “(chili) pepper” caused one group of students to be faced with a dilemma, since, when eating out, it was necessary to use this word frequently. In order to observe their self-imposed taboo and at the same time provide themselves with a substitute term, this group adopted the device of translating the obscene connotation of the word (if interpreted as English) into the elegant Thai term of the same meaning, namely *lyη* “the lingam” (derived from the Sanskrit term). Thus in one limited circle of intimates (men), the word *lyη* acquired a secondary meaning “pepper” by the round-about method of translating a Thai word as if it were an English word. (Haas 1951: 338-40)

Homonymy between two terms with sexual or anatomical reference, as exemplified with *fanny* and *cock* above, may also obtain within a single linguistic variety, as seen from the OED entry on **tail** excerpted here:<sup>12</sup>

- 5a.** The lower and hinder part of the human body; the fundament, buttocks, backside.  
 1303 R. MANNYNG *Handlyng Synne* 5416 Parfor shul þey. .Go to helle, both top and tayle.  
 ?a1500 Chester Pl. II. 176 Thou take hym by the toppe and I by the tayle.  
 1530 J. PALSGRAVE *Lesclarcissement* 279/1 Tayle or arse, *queue* or *cul*.  
**5c.** Sexual member; penis or (oftener) pudendum.  
 1483 *Cath. Angl.* 377/1 A Tayle, *penis equi est*.  
 ?1518 *Cocke Lorelles Bote* sig. C.iiij, Many whyte nonnes with whyte vayles That was full wanton of theyr tayles.  
 1972 F. WARNER *Lying Figures* III. 17 Give her her head...and she'll give you her tail.

The euphemistic value acquired by **tail** = ‘penis’ is paralleled not only by similar shifts in Fr. **queue** and Ger. **Schwanz**, but by the classical shift of Latin **penis** [orig. ‘tail’] itself, cognate with *pencil* [< Lat. *penicillus* ‘little tail, brush’] and *penicillin*. A particularly insightful review of this development of sense together with an early account of Pinker’s euphemism treadmill and the virtues and hazards of calling an X an X is due to Cicero:

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<sup>12</sup> Two of the three meanings exhibited by *tail* also turn up with the more recent expansion of *junk*: **junk** (in the trunk) ‘buttocks, esp. if large’ [HDAS] vs. **junk** ‘family jewels’, as in “Don’t touch my junk!”, as typically (though not exclusively) applied to women and to men respectively.

If what is indicated by the word is not indecent [*turpe*], the word indicating it cannot be indecent. When you [Papirius Paetus] speak of the *anus*, you call it by a name [*anus*, lit. = 'ring'] that is not its own; why not rather call it by its own [*culus*]? If it is indecent, do not use even the substituted name; if not, you had better call it by its own. The ancients used to call a tail *penis*, and hence from its resemblance to a tail, the word *penicillus*. But nowadays, *penis* is among the obscenities [*in obscenis*]. “Yes, but the famous Piso Frugi complains in his *Annals* that youths are given up to the *penis* [*adulescentes peni deditos esse*].” What you in your letter call by its own name [= *mentula*] he with more reserve calls *penis*; but **because so many people use it so, it has become as obscene as the word you used.**

[...]

*Ruta* ['rue'] and *menta* ['mint']—we use both words without impropriety. I want to use the diminutive of *menta*, as one might say *rutula* [lit. 'little rue']; it is not done [*non licet*]. *Bella tectoriola* [lit., 'beautiful stucco']; then use the diminutive of *pavimenta* in that way; you can't do it.

(Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares* [*Letters to his Friends*] IX.xxii, 45 BCE, emphasis added; Loeb library edition, trans. W. Glynn Williams, 1928; see Allan & Burridge 2006 for related discussion)

As shown by his contrast between his well-formed (if invented) diminutive of *ruta*, i.e. *rutula*, and the inconceivable diminutive of *menta* (= #!*mentula*) and that between *tectoriola* (as the innocent diminutive of *tectoria* 'stucco') vs. #!*pavimentula* (as the would-be diminutive of *pavimenta*), Cicero clearly recognizes the force of taboo avoidance.<sup>13</sup> In effect, he attributes the impossibility of Latin diminutives of the words for 'mint' and 'pavement' to what we might call...a *mentula* block. Students from Thailand visiting Ancient Rome would doubtless have referred to a pretty little pavement as a *pavilingam*.

While Pinker's (and Cicero's) treadmill of cyclic replacement extends to euphemisms of all kinds (see e.g. the chronology tracked in the OED entry for *toilet*, or the shifts in **lame** > **crippled** > **handicapped** > **disabled** > **physically challenged**)<sup>14</sup>, it is the sexual lexicon, illustrated most eloquently by the *baiser/embrasser* complex recounted above, that brings this pattern out most clearly. Another example is the fate of English *make love* (and that of *faire l'amour* on which it's calqued).

<sup>13</sup> The guilt by association illustrated by words accidentally mapping onto the taboo *mentula* can be supported by the partial or complete disappearance of *stopcock* (in favor of *faucet*), *weathercock* (in favor of *weathervane*), and the family name *Allcock* (> *Alcott*).

<sup>14</sup> McGlone et al. 2006 propose a "camouflage"-cum-conventionalization view of euphemism to replace the standard [Cicero-]Pinker "contamination" approach. While their arguments and results may be valid for cases involving a phrasal "conventional euphemism", representing a periphrastic replacement as with *pass away* or *relieve oneself*, it doesn't necessarily extend to cases of simple lexical substitution as in the *penis*-type cases, in particular when the substitute doesn't wear its euphemistic displacement status on its sleeve (cf. *toilet* vs. *defecate*). In the lexical alternative cases, the treadmill will indeed be activated, in conformance with the Cicero/Pinker prediction. In any case, formal considerations will play a major role in launching the treadmill.



**Make love:**

OED, First ed. [1933] 'to pay amorous attention to, to court, woo'

OED, Second ed. [1989] 'to pay amorous attention to; now usually to copulate'

[after Old Occitan *far amor* (13th cent.), Middle French, French *faire l'amour* (16th cent.; 1622 with reference to sexual intercourse), or Italian *far l'amore*]

**(a) To pay amorous attention; to court, woo.** Freq. with *to*. [added in 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.: Now somewhat arch.]

1600 SHAKESPEARE *Midsummer Night's Dream* i. i. 107 Demetrius...Made loue to Nedars daughter.

a1616 SHAKESPEARE *Hamlet* (1623) v. ii. 58 Why, man, they did make loue to this employment.

1695 W. CONGREVE *Love for Love* iv. i. 70 Nay, Mr. Tattle, If you make Love to me, you spoil my design, for I intended to make you my Confident.

1712 J. ADDISON *Spectator* No. 517. ¶2 The Widow Lady whom he had made Love to.

1768 L. STERNE *Sentimental Journey* I. 79 You have been making love to me all this while.

**1829 W. COBBETT *Advice to Young Men* iv. §181 It is an old saying, 'Praise the child, and you make love to the mother'.**

a1845 T. HOOD *Poems* (1846) I. 213 Oh there's nothing in life like making love.

**1948 W. S. MAUGHAM *Catalina* (1958) ii. 18 Her lover Diego no longer came to the window at night to make love to her through the iron grille.**

1972 B. EVERITT *Cold Front* v. 38 'Are we conversing or making love?'... 'Let's go into the slow lane for a minute.'

1991 S. CISNEROS *Woman Hollering Creek* 153 Ay! To make love in Spanish, in a manner as intricate and devout as la Alhambra.

OED, revised on-line edition [<http://www.oed.com>]

**(b) orig. U.S. To engage in sexual intercourse, esp. considered as an act of love.**

1927 J. S. BOLAN *Deposition* in L. Schlissel 3 Plays Mae West (1997) 218 Jimmy embraces Margie LaMont and goes through with her the business of making love to her by lying on top of her on a couch, each embracing the other.

1934 'G. ORWELL' *Burmese Days* iv. 54 Why is master always so angry with me when he has made love to me?

**1950 M. PEAKE *Gormenghast* xxix. 173 One of the Carvers made love to her and she had a baby.**

**1967 B. WRIGHT tr. R. Queneau *Between Blue & Blue* xiv. 151 When you make love on a bunk,...the man has to bump his head.**

[note the hidden presuppositions here!—LH]

**1971 *Daily Tel.* 15 Jan. 17/1 Couples who make love frequently are more likely to have sons than those who do so less often.** [yes, and to have daughters too!—LH]

**1999 T. PARSONS *Man & Boy* (2000) ii. 19 We were making love on the floor—or the futon, as Gina called it.**

Along the same lines, consider the fate of **lover**, glossed in the first edition of the OED as 'one who is in love with, or enamoured of a person of the opposite [sic] sex' but now tending to depict a rather more graphic relation.

A more complex history is displayed by **venereal**. The OED entry indicates a robust use in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries with the general meaning ‘of or pertaining to, associated or connected with, sexual desire or intercourse’, cognate with *Venus*, *venerate*, *venison*, *venial*, and *win*. Some citations illustrating this etymological sense:

- 1552 R. HULOET *Abcedarium Anglico Latinum*, Veneriall pastime, *aphrodisia*.  
 1610 J. HEALEY tr. St. Augustine *Citie of God* (1620) xiv. xv. 490 Such is hunger and thirst, and the venereall affect, usually called lust.  
 1732 ALEXANDER POPE *Relation E. Curll* in Swift *Misc.* III. ii. 44 Those Appetites are now become Venal which should be Venereal.

A related sense, ‘pertaining to the genitals’, shows up in the **venereal moth**. Topsell’s *History of Four-Footed Beasts* (1608) distinguishes four varieties of moth: the Library or Book Moth, the Bee Moth, the Cloth Moth, and “the Venereal, bred in the genitals of men.” But by the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, the spread of **venereal disease**, **venereal pox**, and **venereal distemper**, rather more worrisome than those spontaneously generated crotch moths, has virtually evicted the (relatively) innocent or neutral occurrences of the term.

Later still, **venereal disease** gives way to the vaguer **social disease** or the more evasive **VD**, prefiguring **ED** ‘erectile dysfunction’, **PD** ‘premature ejaculation’, **Low T** ‘low testosterone, and their ilk. **VD** itself then goes for a spin on the euphemism treadmill and is replaced by **STD**—or now **STI**. These are instances of the increasingly trendy **PLAIN BROWN WRAPPER INITIALISM**, freely extended to other categories of euphemisms for referents that dare not—or would just as soon not—speak their (full) names: **FBI**, **CIA**, **KGB**, **S.O.B.**, **B.O.**, **KFC**. (See also “the F-word” and variants.)

We now turn to one last case of avoidance and deformation, the story of *gymnos*. We work out at the *gym* today because the Greeks worked out naked. The Greek word *gymnos* (γυμνός) ‘naked’, the etymon of our *gymnastic*, *gymnasium*, cognate with *naked* (< PGmc *\*nakweda*), *nude* (< Lat. *nūdus*), and even *naan* (< Old Iranian *\*nagna*; *naan* is born “naked”, with no covering of ashes), derives from PIE *\*nog<sup>w</sup>-mo*. Various lexicographic sources describe the shift from *\*nog<sup>w</sup>-mo* to *gymno-* as involving metathesis or “taboo deformation.”

But **why**? The Greeks had no problem working out and competing in the buff, but when it came to naming the activity and the location they resorted to a lexical fig leaf? And **how**? What sort of metathesis is this anyway? Certainly not one of the usual kind, illustrated by *horse* < *hros*, *Farv* < *Favre*, *iron* [aiərn], *pasghetti*,...). The real story (following Huld 1997; cf. also Pangman 2001) begins with a general Indo-European taboo that barred naming the body parts subject to witchcraft and magic spells—ears, eyes, tongue, and the naked (male) body—all of which show up with “metathetic deformations” in the daughter languages. This reflects not shame or delicacy, as with modern euphemism, but the fear of “potent” referents and magical forces, as in the taboos against referring directly to God, Satan, bears, the left side, the Erinnyes, and so on. The result was that the PIE root *\*nog<sup>w</sup>-mo-* metathesized to *\*mog<sup>w</sup>no-* in Indo-Iranian, Hellenic, and Armenian, and subsequently in Greek “a final metathesis produced the attested γυμνός.” (Huld 1997: 88). Thus the fear of potency of the naked (male) body (ironically, the opposite fear from that exemplified in “*ED*”) “is negatively expressed in the multiple deformations which the Indo-European etymon for ‘naked’



shares with those of the other organs for the production and perception of curses, both spoken and visual” (Huld 1997: 90).

### ***Etymology and its implications***

What would a post-Freudian science of “deep” etymology look like? In earlier work (Horn 2004, 2006), I have identified a process of ETYMYTHOLOGY as “the lexical version of the urban legend, a fable—or more generously a piece of culturally based arcane wisdom—not transmitted by scholarly research but passed on by word of mouth (or computer)” (Horn 2004: 39). Given the near-universal scholarly endorsement of the fallacious “Fanny Hill” (= ‘mons veneris’) story (Spedding & Lambert 2011), the last part of this definition must be stricken. But the concept remains a significant one for what it reveals about the language user, rather than the language. Etymythologies are distinct from first-order folk etymologies, conventionalized or not (a.k.a. EGGCORNs, MONDEGREENs, PULLET SURPRISES): *Jerusalem artichoke*, *sparrow grass*, *bonified*, *social moray*, *pus jewel*, *candle arbor*,... (See <http://eggcorns.lascribe.net/> for a catalogue.) As with other urban legends (cf. <http://www.snopes.com/> inter alia), the motivation for etymythologies is the appeal of possessing and sharing arcane information about the true nature of things (or words) that “they” don’t want us to know, whence the invention and perpetuation of a semantically quasi-plausible and often quite colorful etymological narrative lacking any empirical substance.

A particularly robust store of etymythologies is provided by the faux acronym or quasi-acronym. Some of these invoke a derivation from another language, as in the case of *snob* (supposedly from either the Latin or French for ‘without nobility’: *Sine NOBilitas*, *Sans NOBilité*)<sup>15</sup> or the *Ivy League* (putatively once the “IV league”, after the four original colleges in the group, whichever ones they may have been). Simpler examples invoke straightforward, if totally unsupported, derivations as acronyms

- (5) **FUCK** < ‘For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge’  
—or if you prefer, ‘Fornication Under Consent of the King’
- GOLF** < ‘Gentlemen Only, Ladies Forbidden’
- NEWS** < ‘North East West South’
- POSH** < ‘Port Out Starboard Home’
- SHIT** < ‘Stow High in Transit’ (in labels for manure stored for oceanic transport)
- TIP** < ‘To Insure Promptness/Politeness’
- WOG** < ‘Wily/Wealthy Oriental Gentleman’

Other celebrated or at least widely attested etymythologies are not hard to find. Each of the derivations in (6) is entirely fallacious.

- (6) **bloody** < by our Lady
- crapper** < Thomas Crapper, 19<sup>th</sup> c. London plumbing entrepreneur
- gringo** < “Green Grow the Rushes, Oh”, sung by American soldiers in Mexican War

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<sup>15</sup> In this case the real etymology is more culturally revealing: *snips* (tailors) and *cobs* (cobblers), later alliterating into *snips and snobs*, represented lower-class tradesmen who sought to climb above their assigned station, with *snob* eventually generalizing to anyone with social pretensions regardless of class.

**Elephant and Castle** < *Infanta de Castile*

**G-string** < G- or Grafenberg spot, which it is (supposedly) designed to cover

**harlot** < Arlette, mother of William the Conqueror

**hocus pocus** < “*Hoc est corpus*”, as spoken in Latin Mass

**hooker** < Gen. “Fighting Joe” Hooker who encouraged prostitutes to service his men

**pumpernickel** < *pain pour Nicole*, i.e. bread for Napoleon’s horse Nicole

**sirloin** < tender slab of meat knighted by beef-besotted monarch

**Welsh rabbit** < Welsh rarebit (cf. “rarebit redux” in Horn 2004: 39-42)

The invention and exploitation of etymythologies is not all fun and games, as the examples above might suggest.<sup>16</sup> Thus, contrary to widely purveyed claims, **picnic** doesn’t really come from an unspeakable (but in fact nonexistent) practice in which African-Americans were chosen for lynching as a lunchtime diversion (cf. <http://www.snopes.com/language/offense/picnic.htm>), nor does **squaw** (a.k.a. “the S word”) actually derive from an Algonquin word for female genitalia, nor **faggot** from the (unattested) practice of burning homosexuals at the stake, nor **handicap** from a mendicant begging with cap in hand. (Not to—once again—mention **niggardly**.)

### **Case study: the “spittin’ image”**

As a demonstration of what a Freudian science of etymology (and etymythology) can teach us, and in honor of the fact that this paper was delivered as a dinner talk on Father’s Day (19 June 2011), we turn to the history of the /’spit(ə)n/ **image**, describing a close likeness borne by one individual (or object) to another. Did this expression originate as a **spittin’ image**, a **spit an’ image**, a **spi’t an’ image**, or none of the above? (See Horn 2004 for more detailed references and discussion.)

For the majority opinion of language pundits (William Safire et al.), **spittin(g) image** is a “corruption” of the original expression, **spit and image**. In fact, however, both **spittin’ image** and **spit an(d) image** are antedated by the counterfactual verbal locution “**as if X were spit out of Y’s mouth**.”<sup>17</sup>

#### **(i) spit as verb**

1605 W. Houghton. Now look I as like the Dutchman **as if I were spit out of his mouth**

1668 Dryden. As like to one **as if spit out of his mouth**

1690 We are of our father the devil,...as like him **as if spit out of his mouth**

1788 Grose, *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*. **He is as like his father as if he was spit out of his mouth**; said of a child much resembling his father.

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<sup>16</sup> A related problem results from positing unsupported West African, and in particular Wolof, etymologies for English words like *hip*, *honky*, *jazz*, and *O.K.* (cf. Sheidlower 2004). The frequent appearance of Wolof in such etymythologies, together with the possible effect of increasing one’s skepticism toward actual documented out-of-Africa etymologies, prompted me to refer to this etymological practice as “crying Wolof.”

<sup>17</sup> Material from *DARE* archives appears here with the courtesy of Joan H. Hall; other examples are from OED, the EDD (= Wright 1961), Stevenson 1948, Urdang 1985, and Whiting 1989.

(ii) **spit** as noun

- 1825 Knapp & Baldwin. a daughter...the **very spit** of the old captain  
1836 Th. Hook. You are a queer fellow—the **very spit** of your father  
1885 Hall Caine Shadow of Crime II. xxvi. 129 A brother...the **spit** of hissel’.  
1899 Green, VA Folk-Speech . He is the **very spit** of his father

(iii) **spit an(d) image/picture/fetch**; also **spit image**

- 1859 Sala, Gas-light & D; xxix. 334. the very **spit and fetch** of Queen Cleopatra  
1895 E. Castle, Lt. of Searthey vi. 71 She’s like the poor lady that’s dead and gone, the **spit an’ image** she is.  
1929 J. B. Prestley, Good Companions I. v. 166 That’s theirs... It’s the **spit image** o’ yours, too.  
1949 Penguin New Writing XXXVI. 35 My husband saw a man that was the **spit-image** of King no further away than Jackson.

•dialectal attestations for **spit an(d) image** &c. from EDD, p. 670:

- Northumb.* A fine lad; the **spit an’ pictor** iv horsel; He’s the varry **spit an’ image** on his fethor.  
*w. Yorks.* He’s the very **spit an’ image** o’ ahr Bill.  
*Lanc.* She’s like the poor lady that’s dead and gone, the **spit an’ image** she is.  
*Westm.* His father’s own get surely; his varra **spit and pictur’**, OLLIVAN *Owd Bob* (1898)

•and from U.S. regional collections and literary sources:

- 1892 *Dialect Notes* 1: 232 KY. The ve’y **spit an’ image** o’ him.  
1893 Shands, *Mississippi Speech* 75, **Spit and image**  
1912 D. H. Lawrence (Letter, 8 March 1912 to Edward Garrett, in Moore 1962: 109), ‘If our George-Henry says that isn’t his’n he’s a liar. It’s the **spit and image** of him.’  
1927 S. Williams, *Drury*, 101. It was Hal, or his **spit and image**.  
1931 *PMLA* 46.1308 So. Appalachians, That kid’s the very **spit-an’-image** of his daddy.

(iv) **spittin(g) image**

- 1887 A. C. Gordon, “A Pinchtown Pauper”, *Atlantic Monthly* 60: 333  
[Uncle Newton, the speaker, is an “unlarnt” poor old ex-slave basket-maker in the Blue Ridge Mts.]  
“Fo’ Gord, ef it ain’t little Mary!” he says, as he rises to his feet. “Lord, honey, it pintly does do de ole nigger’s eyes good ter look at ye! An’ dat purty, too! As purty as Mis’ Agnes, an’ de **spittin’ image** of her!”  
1901 A. H. Rice, *Mrs. Wiggs*, 94. He’s jes’ like his pa—the very **spittin’ image** of him!  
1916 Macy-Hussey, *Nantucket Scrap Basket* 146, “**Spitting Image**”

- 1916 *Dialect Notes* 4.336 Nantucket MA, **spitting image**, striking likeness.  
 1917 A. W. Blue, *Blue Quay Head Tryst*, 70. He's the **spittin image** o' a thrawn fechter.  
 1927 N. Martin, *Mosaic* (NY) the **spitting image** of this young millionaire.  
 1928 Noel Coward, *Operette*, 58 Believe it or not, she was the **spitting image** of Princess Ena!

(v) **splittin(g)/splitten image**<sup>18</sup>

- 1880 T. Clarke Specimens Westmoreland Dial. ii. 36 Soa t'kersmas up i't'fells Et just be t'**splitten image** Ov a kersmas'mang yersells.  
 1939 D. Hartley Made in England i. 3 Evenness and symmetry are got by pairing the two split halves of the same tree, or branch. (Hence the country saying: 'he's the **splitting image**'—an exact likeness.)

Or is it really from **spirit and image**? This derivation traces back to a remark in the Transactions of the American Philological Association for 1886, glossed as "Spi't", as in "He the ve'y spi't (spirit) an' image" (from the *DARE* archives, courtesy of Joan H. Hall). Later adherents of the "spi't (an') image" include a contributor to *American Speech* writing as "S.K.S." (1929), who cites a remark of the New York columnist O. O. McIntyre explaining that "In years ago, the southern matron often remarked a new born babe was '**the spirit and image**' of his father or mother, as the evidence offered. The best the old southern mammy could do with the phrase was 'the spittin' image'." Joel Chandler Harris Jr. concurs, in a letter published by *Time*, Oct. 11, 1927:

The records on "spittin' image" should certainly be kept straight. I don't think that the expression has anything to do with saliva. It originated, I believe, among the darkies of the South and the correct phrasing—without dialect—is "**spirit and image**." It was originally used in speaking of some person whose father had passed on—and the colored folks would say—"the very spi't an' image of his daddy."  
 (Harris 1927)

More recently, the same derivation shows up on various web sites and in the *Facts on File* encyclopedia, albeit advanced with some diffidence (Hendrickson 1997: 634):

[*Spittin' image*] could also be a corruption of "**spirit and image**."...*Spittin' image* would then be derived from "he's the very spirit and image of his father," that is, the child is identical to his parent in both spirit and looks.

And, with more confidence, in a letter to the editor of the Salt Lake City Weekly (on line edition, Jan. 29, 2004):

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<sup>18</sup> Or, for an even more far-fetched outlier, cf. the suggestion in Ashton 1930: "Just as two [barbecue] spits are exactly alike, so the two people are." No additional skewering of this proposal is necessary.

Greg Beacham reviewed the new Charlize Theron movie *Monster* [“Winning Ugly”, Jan. 22, *City Weekly*]. In the second paragraph he uses the term ‘spitting image’. The actual term is ‘**spi’t ‘n’ image**.’ This is southern drawl for ‘**spirit and image**’...Please spread the word before we slaughter the English language any more than we already have. —Jon Kramer

This elegant proposal is flawed only by a total lack of support. First, there is as much (and as little) serious positive evidence for *spirit and image* and there is for its sister etymologies, e.g. *spittin(g) image* or the kebabian spit theory. Further, as Gould (1975: 270) points out, the same reduction never occurs in other contexts: “Some say the original term was ‘spirit and image’ but nobody ever says *spit lamp*, *spit level*, *spit world*, and *Spit of ’76*.” And if the relevant source is a simple conjunction of the two nouns, why do we never find **image and spirit** (or **image an’ spit**)?

Finally, if **spit** = ‘likeness’, why are speakers intent on using a construction (*spit an’ image*) that builds in redundancy? We are led to conclude that the first element [**spi(tə)n**] must be a **modifier**, not a conjunct. But if this is modifier is not *spittin’* (after all, images don’t actually spit), what can it be?

### *The spitten image*

On phonetic and semantic grounds, the ideal candidate for this mystery modifier is the dialectal past participle of *spit*: **spitten**. While such an origin is considered and as quickly dismissed in the OED (s.v. **spitten**: ‘Repr. corrupted pronunc. *spit and (image, picture)*’), this “corrupted pronunciation” is well attested in dialect cites, both as a verbal participle and as an attributive modifier of *image* and other nouns. We observe first that **spitten image** and its cousins show up in both British and U.S. sources:

19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. cites from English dialects, via EDD (Wright 1962: 671):

[Westm.] He’s t’**spitten image** ov his faddre

1859 [Cumberland] Yon barn’s his varra **spitten picter**

1889 Caine, *Deemster*, 170. He looked the **spitten picture** of my ould father.

1936 W. Holtby, *South Riding*, 313. **Spitten image of his dad**, little Alf is, isn’t he, Reg?

from U. S. sources

1928 Hit’s the **spitten image** of you, Jilson. Your likeness pint blank.

(Thomas 1928: 819, from a story set in “a cabin hidden away in a high cranny of the Kentucky mountains”)

1941 John Faulkner [William’s brother], *Men Working* 105 MS, Ifen hit ain’t the **spitten image** of that church acrost the street. (*gratia* Joan H. Hall)

1944 R. Altrocchi, *Sleuthing in the Stacks*, 177. The **spitten image** (no scandal this time, merely a coincidence) of the deceased. (cited in Whiting 1989)

**Spitten** shows up regularly as a dialectal and/or archaic past participle in verbal, and especially adjectival contexts:

In Spain the very beggar does not feel himself a degraded being, for he kisses no one's feet, and knows not what it is to be cuffed or **spitten upon**.

—George Borrow, *The Bible in Spain*, 1842

saliva...has two open doorways under the heavens of the palate—one through which part of it may be **spitten out**, the other through which part of it may be swallowed down

—translation of St. Augustine's *City of God* at <http://www.mere-christianity.org/CityofGod/city7.htm>

...like someone had **spitten** tobacco into it

—Dave Godfrey (1968), *Canadian Short Stories*, gratia Doug Wilson

Many if not most of the recorded **spitten** cites manifest an adjectival status of the participial form, e.g.

a crumb... from her conspicuous table here in Rome, should be, though but once yearly, cast to the famishing dogs, under-trampled and **bespitten-upon** beneath the feet of the guests (Hiram Corson, *Introduction to Browning*, 1886)

As a participial adjective, **spitten** is a prime candidate for preposing into attributive position. This trait is one shared by several verbs, both strong and weak, which thus yield models for *spitten image*:

- (7) **graven** image (vs. *They **engraved** this image*)  
(new-) **mown** lawn (vs. *I've **mowed** that lawn*)  
(un) **proven** allegation (vs. *You haven't **proved** that allegation*)  
(store-) **boughten** clothes (vs. *Have you **bought** any new clothes?*)  
(clean-) **shaven** face (vs. *Have you **shaved** your face?*)

A close relative of attributive **spitten** is another strong Anglo-Saxon verbal participle: **shitten** 'dirty, paltry, mean, base, contemptible' (Wright 1961: 390, with attestations from Scot., Westm., Yorksh., W. Somerset, and N.W. Devon dialect use):

1653 Urquhart *Rabelais* Such **shitten** stuff!

1665 Pepys *Diary*, 6 Apr. Carteret...called Sir W. Batten in his discourse at the table to us...**shitten** fool, which vexed me.

1868 Scot. No doubt the body has a **shitten** face

W. Som. He must be a **shitten** sort of a fellow to do that there **shitten-end-up** (of a person) 'head-over-heels, upside-down'; 'having a foetid breath'

or, a bit earlier, courtesy of Chaucer (Prologue to *Canterbury Tales*, c. 1390):

And shame it is, if that a priest take keep,  
To see a **shitten shepherd** and clean sheep:  
Well ought a priest ensample for to give,  
By his own cleanness, how his sheep should live.

If the **spitten image** is a non-redundant modifier-head construction involving a dialectal form of the participial adjective, we can similarly rediagnose the **spit image** noted above and attested elsewhere into the present era—

1929 J. B. Priestly *Good Companions*, 166. It's the **spit image** of yours, too.

1949 *Penguin New Writing* XXXVI.35. My husband saw a man that was the **spit-image** of the King no further away than Jackson.

—as an alternate irregular form of the same construction. Joan Hall reports that 17 informants for the *DARE* entry used **spit image**—all of them white, all but one old, and all but two from the South or South Midland areas. Like the **spitten image**, the **spit image** is a participial adjective + head noun, not a nominal compound (thus motivating the absence of *image an' spit*); no redundancy is involved. Analogous examples of zero-form attributive (prenominal) are not hard to locate: to our **spit** images we can add **hit** batters, **lit** matches, **knit** sweaters, and **split** ends.

Once we accept that our expression began as **spitten image**, it's not hard to see how it could be reanalyzed as **spittin' (>spitting) image** or **spit an' (> and) image**. Indeed, these sorts of shifts are legion.

(8) reanalyses of X [ən] Y dyads (thanks to Ben Zimmer for some of these)

**and > in:** *hand in glove, by in large, one in the same, part in parcel, in this day in age*

**in > and:** *once and awhile, case and point, puss and boots, tongue and cheek*

**en > and/in:** *Chip 'n' Dale chairs, black and red fish, clean shavin', as in...*

γclean shavin' and hair wavin' [*here and below, γ marks Googled data*]

γhe thought I had looked slightly less than totally clean shavin'

γnever seen Chris look healthier, happier or more sharp. He's all clean shavin'

γWell, Joel's always hairy, and I'm clean shavin' /

γI'm a clean shaving **ing** guy [cf. **spitting** image]

But it would still be reassuring to have positive evidence for the participial source, even if the evidence must be drawn on languages beyond English. To this end, I posted a query on the American Dialect Society e-mail list and Linguist List in November 2000 and received copious responses, some of which are briefly summarized here. (Translations are literal even when this results in awkwardness.)

### ***Around the world with the spitten image***

#### **Romance**

##### **FRENCH**

C'est le portrait craché de son père.

'He's the spitten portrait of his father'

##### **ITALIAN**

È suo padre sputato; È sputato a suo padre.

'He is his father spit (out)', 'He is spitten to his father'

##### **GALICIAN:**

É cuspido a seu pai.

'He is spitten to/from his father'

##### **ASTURIAN**

Ye cuspi'u a so padre.

'He is spitten to/from his father'

PICARDIAN

C'est sin père tout raqué à s'mur.

'He's his father all spitten on the wall'

[BRAZILIAN] PORTUGUESE

Ele é a cara cuspida e escarrada do pai.

'He is the face spitten and coughed up of [his] father'  
(where *escarrar* can be glossed as 'spit', but more specifically  
refers to mucus, sputum, or blood hacked up by a deep cough)

**Other Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages**

(SOUTH) GERMAN

Er sieht seinem Vater ähnlich wie gespuckt.

'He's as like his father as if spit out'

(WEST) FLEMISH

Hij is zijn vader gebraakt en gespogen

't is zen voader gespogen

'He is his father thrown up and spitten'

'It's his father spitten'

CROATIAN

On je plunuti otac.

'He is [his] spitten father'

GREEK

O Janis ine ftystos o pateras tou.

'John is his spitten father'

IRISH

Tá sé cosúil lena athair, mar a chaithfeadh sé amach as a bhéal é.

'He is (as) like his father, as he would throw/spit him out of his mouth.'

TURKISH

Hık de-miş burnundan düş-müş.

'[Father] hiccoughed/blew his nose, [child] dropped from his nose'

HUNGARIAN

Péter kiköpött az apja.

'Peter [is] spitten his father'

*(Other bodily fluids)*

NORWEGIAN

Han er som snytt ut av nesa på far sin.

'He is as if sneezed out of the nose of his father'

ICELANDIC

Hann er eins og snýttur út úr nefinu á honum föður sínom.

'He is as if blown out of the nose of his father'

TAMAZIGHT BERBER

Zun t id insđ babn-s.

'He looks as if he fell from his father's blown nose'

But why *spit* in the first place? What does expectoration have to do with family resemblance? And why do so many examples of this expression refer to a child's resemblance to his or her father in particular? Some have depicted the allusion as a curious metaphor singly lacking in gentility or elegance, as the Word Detective (a.k.a. Evan Morris) suggests under the header "Yuckarootie"—



Most authorities accept the “spit” element of the phrase at face value, and maintain that it is **a remarkably inelegant metaphor for similarity**: “just as if one person were spit out of another's mouth.”

—*The Word Detective* (<http://www.word-detective.com/052598.html>), 5/25/98

—but the real explanation is even less genteel and elegant than is generally acknowledged. We have encountered the French version of the spitten image, cited in Mossé (1930) and taking various alternate forms:

*Il est son père tout craché*            ‘He’s his father spit out’  
*C’est son portrait tout craché*    ‘It’s his spitten portrait’

but it is time that we push the connection...

### ***From here to paternity***

One clue is provided by the internet diaries of single mothers who are reminded of their children’s runaway fathers by the fact that the kids are the spit and image (or spittin’ image) of their distant daddies. More classically, we have these insightful commentaries by Dundes and Carmichael (emphasis added):

*Apple* happens to have somewhat of a male association in such a proverb as “Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Baum” [The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree], implying that the son looks like or acts like his father, roughly equivalent to American idioms such as a “chip off the old block” or **“the spitten image”** which incidentally **demonstrates the symbolic equivalence of saliva and semen**.  
(Dundes 1991: 348)

The Talmud (for example, Babylonian *Niddah* 16b) **uses the term ‘spittle’ for semen**. In the Egyptian creation myth Atum generated the cosmic pair Shu and Tefnut by **masturbation**, but in a variant tradition it is by **spitting**. The expression ‘spitting image’ (**possibly ‘spitten image’ where spitten is the old past participle**) may refer to **the father’s ‘spitting’ that results in a son so resembling him**.  
(Carmichael 1998, §23)

The connection is reinforced by the wide range of creation myths and legends—from Hittite, Egyptian, Indic, Greek, Slavic, and West African sources to Douglas Adams’ *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*—in which God creates man [sic] in His image by spitting/sneezing/masturbating.

Pride of place on style points alone must go to the immortal fabulist Jean de la Fontaine [1665] 1874: 226, whose depiction of the shock of the familiar in “Les deux amis” is rendered here in the original French with my translation (and emphasis):

Axiochus avec Alcibiades,  
 Jeunes, bien-faits, galants, et vigoureux,  
 Par bon accord, comme grands camarades,  
 En même nid furent pondre tous deux  
 Qu'arrive-t-il? l'un de ces amoureux  
 Tant bien exploite autour de la donzelle,  
 Qu'il en nâquit une fille si belle,  
 Qu'ils s'en vantaient tous deux également.  
 Le tems venus que cet object charmant  
 Put pratiquer les leçons de sa mere,  
 Chacun des deux en voulut être amant:  
 Plus n'en voulut l'un ni l'autre être pere.  
 Frere, dit l'un, ah! vous ne sçauriez faire  
 Que cet enfant ne **soit vous tout craché**.  
 Parbieu, dit l'autre, il est à vous, compère:  
 Je prends sur moi le hazard du péché.

*Once upon a time there dwelt a pair  
 Of well-endowed young men who loved to share:  
 Comrades-in-arms, they even found their way  
 To one sweet nest their fertile eggs to lay.*

*One lover laid so well their fair young miss  
 Brought forth in time a charming baby daughter.  
 Each young gallant then swore the child was his—  
 Till she could play the games her mother taught her.*

*Now both forswear the proud paternal throne,  
 Each strives to be her lover now she's grown.*

*'You can't deny, my comrade and my brother,  
 The child's **your spitten image** and your kin.'*  
*Why, she's YOUR doppelgänger,' cries the other,  
 'I'll make the lass my own and risk the sin.'*

Note in particular the telltale (**highlighted**) expression, where the *crachat* or sputum functions (in a pre-DNA era) as a diagnostic for paternity, while allowing for the possibility of denial (or repression) of the symbolic relationship between the relevant fluids. As Alan Dundes points out (p.c., 24 May 2004), this neatly exemplifies what Freud called “displacement upwards.”<sup>19</sup>

### ***Toward a Freudian science of etymology: final thoughts***

History has not been kind to Carl Abel's reputation as a psychophilologist, or to Freud for signing on to his quest. But the study of taboo, etymology, and etymythology informed by Freudian insights into depth psychology and the power of repression have significant implications for the study of languages and the people who speak them, even if Freud himself was looking for corroboration in all the wrong places. A similar if more general point is made in another connection by Oxford University physicist Michael Deutsch, quoted in Galchen 2011), assessing Freud's contributions:

He did a good service to the world. He made it O.K. to speak about the mechanisms of the mind, some of which we may not be aware of. His actual theory was all false, there's hardly a single true thing he said, but that's not so bad. He was a pioneer, one of the first who tried to think about things rationally.  
 (Galchen 2011: 43)

For a post-Freudian etymologist, it is especially revealing that the Scandinavian *snytt* ('snot')-variants of the *spitten* motif must be understood as referring specifically to the confirmation of paternity, as in this wonderfully evocative Norwegian commentary on the facial appearance of the young son of an orchestra conductor:

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<sup>19</sup> Corroborating evidence for our connection is provided by the history of slang. Spears (1982) notes that while *spew* originally derives from Lat. *spuere* 'spit', it has come to be used for 'ejaculate' (Brit., from 1600s) and as a noun for 'semen' (from the 1800s).

Han van som snytt ut av dirigentpinnen til sin far fva fakter og minespill angikk.

'He was as if [snot-]blown out of the baton of his father (= the conductor)'

To be sure, sometimes a baton is just a baton. But I think we can all agree that this is not one of those times.

As to the lack of any parallel collocation involving the observable transmission of **maternal** traits a (female) Norwegian lexicographer comments (via Jan Engh, p.c., 13 Nov. 2000): "There is hardly any use. Usually people know who is the mother. As for the father, one may have one's doubts."

*Happy Father's Day!!!*

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