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## ENGLISH ETYMOLOGIES FROM THE POPULAR REGISTER (II)<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Difficulties in tracing the etymology of lexical isolates and loans from other languages are exemplified in the discussion of a gathering of English words previously without satisfactory explanations of origin.

*Flabbergast*: The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun *flabbergast* as ‘bombast’, has but a single example, and calls the usage “rare” and possibly Scottish. As a verb, *flabbergast* is more widely attested and the definition shifts from content or style to effect: “To put (a person) in such confusion that he does not for the moment know what to do or say; to astonish utterly, to confound” (OED s.v. *flabbergast*, v.; accessed 1 September, 2015). Inter alia, one senses that this entry has not been the subject of recent editorial attention. The dictionary’s etymological note is quite full but inconclusive:

First mentioned in 1772 as a new piece of fashionable slang; possibly of dialectal origin; Moor (1823) records it as a Suffolk word, and Jamieson (1825 *Suppl.*) has *flabrigast*: “to gasconade, *flabrigastit* worn out with exertion, as used in Perthshire. The formation is unknown; it is plausibly conjectured that the word is an arbitrary invention suggested by *flabby* adj. or *flap* n. and *aghost* adj.”

The earliest recorded forms are with an initial *flaba-*. *Flaber-* and *flabber-* are later developments, whether phonological or orthographical, or both. As with the noun, Scottish antecedents are presumed (the lexicological reference is to John Jamieson’s *An etymological dictionary of the Scottish language* [1818] and its *Supplement* [1825]).

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<sup>1</sup> This article continues an inquiry initiated under the same title in volume 133, issue 3 of this journal.

Although the examples in the *OED* are not unanimous, *flabbergastation* (as *Punch* called it in 1856) is generally the product of an oral communication of something newly presented as fact.

On the premise that *flabbergast* originated in Scotland, before passing to fashionable speech in London, one might look for a source in Scots Gaelic and speculate on an adaptation into Scots English for satirical and/or comic purposes, the sort of Gaelicisms found in *The flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy*. Yet, aside from Gaelic *flò* ‘stupefaction’ and *beurla* ‘speech, language’, there is nothing suggestive of the mystery word (Dwelly 1930, s.v.). Old Norse, a major influence on the languages of the British Isles, is similarly lacking in clues (but note *flá* ‘to flay’; Cleasby et al. 1957). If, indeed, one or more loan words lie behind *flabbergast*, a more distant source, one with less immediate influence on Scots vocabulary than Gaelic or Norse, seems likely.

In Old French, in its Norman dialect, and in Anglo-French, *fable* ‘fable, verbal invention, etc.’ had a doublet, *flable* (Godefroy 1881–1902; Rothwell et al. 2005). Although unattested in Middle English and Middle Scots, where *fable/fabel/fabul* and *fable/fabill* are found, respectively, the variant *flable* could well have reached northern Britain (Kurath et al. 2001; *Dictionary of the Scots language*). A reduced form of *flable* can be imagined as the source of the *flaba-* of early spellings of *flabbergast*, or the second -l- of *flable* can have been replaced, through dissimilation, by another liquid, -r-, as seen in *flabber-*. As concerns semantics, in common with *flabbergast*, *flable* represents a speech act intended to impress.

In Old English *gæstan* meant ‘to frighten, terrify’ but later forms such as *gast* and *ag(h)ast* also meant ‘to astonish’ or ‘confound’. As the *OED* suggests, the past participle, *gast/agast*, could have entered into a compound to yield *flabbergast* on the model represented by *moon-struck*.<sup>2</sup> It is proposed that *flable*, at home in Scots in the post-medieval period, provided the first element of the compound *flabbergast*. The development here advanced may be schematized as follows: *fable* > *flable* > in Britain *flab(re)* + English *gast* ‘confounded’ = *flabbergast* ‘to confuse, confound, astonish with verbal invention’.

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*Pimp*: Still with the life on the town, we find that the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers a definition of *pimp* that takes into account the earliest attested use in Ben Jonson and brings readers up to modern times: “Originally: a person who arranges opportunities for (illicit) sexual intercourse; a procurer. Now: a man who takes a proportion of the earnings of a prostitute, usually in return for arranging clients, providing protection, etc.” (*OED* s.v. *pimp*, n.1; accessed 1 September, 2015). As for etymology: “origin unknown”. The economies of the online edition of the dictionary do, however, permit some history of the lexical inquiry. German *Pimpf*

<sup>2</sup> The second element of the Perthshire term *flabrigastit* ‘worn out with exertion’ may show the influence of Old French *gast* ‘devastated, wasted’. A reconstructed, all-French form *\*flabre-gast* violates the language’s rules for compounding.

‘small boy’ and *pimpernel* are rejected as possible congeners on semantic grounds. The dictionary continues:

The similarity to the following French words is probably coincidental: *pimpant* alluring or seducing in outward appearance or dress, in later use also elegant, coquettish, affected (c. 1500 in Middle French as *pinpant*), *pimper* to adorn, attire (a person, oneself) (1578 in Middle French) ...

In the following, the discussion is guided by a quotation from Pepys that exemplifies part one of the above definition: “The Duke of York is wholly given up to his new mistress... Mr. Brouncker it seems was the pimp to bring it about” (Pepys 1970–1983: 10 June, 1666, VII. 159). In Middle English *pimpe* referred only to a flock of chickens or birds. ‘An adornment of fowl’ might qualify as a novel collective but *pipe* ‘flock’, < Anglo-French *pipée* ‘flock’, is the likely source. Norman French has no other plausibly relevant terms. Yet the French connection should not be too summarily dismissed, as the *OED* would do, if we entertain the idea that in English usage it is not the young woman who is primping by dressing in her finery but rather her ‘placement officer’, the procurer, who is touting his *protégée* to a prospective patron in an enticing word picture. Pimping would then be the projection of this enhanced image with a view to a liaison. But this semantic adjustment, from an intransitive or reflexive use (she pimps) to transitive (he pimps her), would – in the lack of any French evidence – have had to occur in English after an undocumented loan from the continent. While this is not impossible, especially in the case of a vogue word proper to rakes about town, evidence is lacking.

Largely on the basis of an instance of *pimp* in Ben Jonson that does not figure in the *OED* commentary (see further below), Anatoly Liberman (2007: n.p.) sees English *pimp* as cognate with German *Pimpf* ‘young lad’ and continues:

The less-known meanings of Engl. *pimp* “servant at the lowest level of a social hierarchy” indicates that *pimp* “provider of sex” is not the only and, most probably, not the original meaning of this word. The development must have been from “worthless person” to “the least respected servant” and from those to a general term of abuse, later transferred to the sexual sphere.

Liberman’s definitions, ‘servant at the lowest level of a social hierarchy’ and, in a subsequent reference to Jonson, ‘nanny, raw novice; servant’, has no antecedents in the full *OED* entry, where secondary meanings are “a person who panders to an undesirable or immoral impulse, appetite, etc. ... a despicable person; a spy, an informer; a telltale (orig. U.S.); a peeping Tom, a voyeur (Welsh English); a male prostitute (U.S. slang).” This said, it does seem that a dynamic comparable, if not similar, to that outlined by Liberman was at work in the evolution of *pimp*. I suggest that the history of *pimp* is informed not so much by shifts in station or moral stature as by function. The function, apparent in all attested cases, is that of a go-between, at the lowest level the errand boy or modern U.S. *gofer* (< *go for*; cf. the electricians’ *best boy* on film crews), at a higher social level, the pander. This conception of function would encompass the more specialized application to scouts, spies, and informers (*OED*), who procure information. The North American use of *pimp* as

the young factotum in a lumber camp, noted in Liberman but not in the *OED*, fits neatly into this cluster of meanings.<sup>3</sup>

And so does usage in Jonson, to which we now turn. The *OED* offers three instances, the first from 1600: “*Punt*. What is he for a Creature? *Car*. A Pimpe, a Pimpe, that I haue obseru’d yonder, the rarest Superficies of a Humor” (Jonson 1600: iii. i. sig. Iii<sup>v</sup>). There are two examples of the phrase *pimp errant*: “I neuer saw a young Pimpe errant, and his Squire better match’d” (here *squire* = ‘pander’) and “I hope you take not me for a Pimpe errant, To deale in smock Affaires?” (Jonson 1631: iii. v. 24; Jonson 1965: v. iv; “smock affairs” = ‘dealings with women’).

The more recently noted instance of the word to which Liberman alludes is in Jonson’s *The alchemist* (1965). Liberman follows Jonson editor G. R. Hibbard’s lead in identifying the pimp as a ninny, both inexperienced and a menial (Hibbard 1977). The context in Jonson’s play does not entirely bear this out. Face speaks to Kastril about Subtle, the ‘alchemist’: “He made me a Captain. I was a stark pimp, / Just ‘o your standing, ‘fore I met with him” (Jonson 1965: iii. iv. 44–45). Face need not have been a ninny and any lack of experience was primarily in the techniques of fraud or coney-catching, to which he is now being initiated. As Jonson’s phrasing elsewhere suggests (‘errant pimp’), the lad was initially one who ran errands. Face’s promotion to Captain in reality reflects only his fraudulent identity in the deceptions now being orchestrated by Subtle.

The condemnation now associated with *pimp* does not derive from the low status of those who first bore the label but rather from its later adoption in the sex trade. Even before the semantic narrowing (in which the notion of intermediary was not lost), the word’s age-specific ties were loosened, as were those with household or comparable service. *Pimp* also illustrates that etymology is not destiny. The ultimate origin of *pimp* may lie in the phono-semantics of the cluster of words on the reconstructed Indo-European root \**pank-*, *peng-* ‘to swell’ (Pokorny 1959–1969 I 789). The narrow front vowel of *Pimpf* and *pimp* prompts a comparison with *pimple*, this too a serviceable derogatory term for a young servant (cf. the figurative use of *sprout* and *squirt*).

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*Dude*: In a scholarly and editorial style that seems to mirror the subject under consideration – lexicographical self-referentiality – The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *dude* as:

A name given in ridicule to a man affecting an exaggerated fastidiousness in dress, speech, and deportment, and very particular about what is aesthetically ‘good form’; hence, extended to an exquisite, a dandy, ‘a swell’. (*OED*, s.v. *dude*, n.; accessed 1 September, 2015).

Admittedly, we learn that “[t]his entry has not yet been fully updated (first published 1897).” As for origins, the dictionary continues: “[a] factitious slang term

<sup>3</sup> *Pimp* as ‘spy, informer, toady’ is exemplified in Cassidy (1985–2012: 4.154).

which came into vogue in New York about the beginning of 1883, in connection with the ‘aesthetic’ craze of that day. Actual origin not recorded.” The difference between factitious lexical coinage and “true” slang may be difficult to establish and, even though no sure etymology has been proposed, there is no compelling reason to think the term is entirely lacking in historical depth back beyond the 1880s. The *OED* is on surer ground in the matter of the vogue for *dude*. No fewer than six attestations are recorded from the popular press over a first three-year period.<sup>4</sup>

Yet reference to personal style of a very different kind is evident within the next four decades. A naval memoir from 1918 contains the following: “In a gang of snipes there is generally one dude who is known as the ‘king snipe’.” (Ruggles 1918: 139; *snipe* ‘a member of a group of workers’, in this case firemen in the ‘black gang’). To accommodate this semantic development, a 1993 draft addition to the *OED* entry qualifies the original commentary on *dude* with “[m]ore generally, any man who catches the attention in some way; a fellow or chap, a guy. Hence also approvingly, esp. (through Black English) applied to a member of one’s own circle or group.” A common element in these two uses of *dude*, which are at some distance in terms of social status, is then aspiration to, or acquisition of, social approval (in which being a dapper dresser might count), whether society is defined in larger or narrower terms.

Of as much interest for English lexicography as for establishing an origin for *dude* is the entry in *The American heritage dictionary*, which might be imagined as closer to the evidentiary material: ‘1. *Informal* An Easterner or city person who vacations on a ranch in the West; 2. *Informal* A man who is very fancy or sharp in dress and demeanor; 3. *Slang*, a. A man; a fellow, b. A person of either sex’ (*The American heritage dictionary*, s.v. *dude*). But no source is suggested in the abrupt “origin unknown”. Although the *AHD* does not profess to be a historical dictionary, this entry “de-topicalizes” the *OED* documentation from the 1880s, making dudism seem practicable in any socially defined dress style and in any era. As well, in the ordering of the sub-sections, it gives more prominence to the dude on the side of the corral in New Mexico than to the one on the sidewalks of New York.

The late appearance of *dude* in American English argues against a long underground existence in British English, where it might otherwise be fancifully imagined as cognate with, or (via Old French) derivative of, the early Germanic name *Dudo* (cf. the medieval Norman historian Dudo de St. Quentin) or related to Middle English *dud*, which is attested from the early fifteenth century as ‘an article of clothing, a coarse cloak’ (*OED*). In polyglot New York or other nineteenth-century American urban centers, almost any kind of adstratum linguistic influence would have been possible. Popular language and slang have an

<sup>4</sup> *Dude* is also recorded from Chicago. The *OED* has a citation under *dude* as “a non-westerner or city-dweller who tours or stays in the west of the U.S., esp. one who spends his holidays on a ranch; a tenderfoot” from the *Prince Albert Times* (1883): “The dude is one of those creatures which are perfectly harmless and are a necessary evil to civilization” (5 July, 1) but Prince Albert is far from cowboy country and this is surely a reference to the dude in his urban environment. The first attested use of *dude ranch* would then be somewhat later, from 1921.

affinity for picking up terms from neighboring languages, if some cachet or witty application is promised. In the case of *dude*, it is proposed that the term, initially lightly derisory, was borrowed from native speakers of Irish resident in large numbers in New York and other cities. Any clothing style that smacked of British pretensions would invite particular scorn. In Old Irish *duí*, with the forms *duid*, *dhaoi*, *daoithe*, meant ‘fool, unwise or unlearned person, ignoramus’. In modern Irish *daoí* is found as ‘fool, dullard, dunce, clown’. From fool to fop is perhaps no great stretch. A more compelling phonological match is with Irish *dúd*. The referent here is often the mouth or other body orifices. Extended meanings and derivations are often figurative, e.g. *dúd* ‘a horn; a smoking pipe’, *dúdach* ‘with a big or prominent mouth’. Could this term also have been applied to a show-off? A related form, *dúid*, was used of a craning neck (= snobbishness?), a listening attitude, but also in simple pejoration as ‘cad’. (Quin 1913–1976: s.v.; Dinneen 1927: s.v.).<sup>5</sup> Irish immigrants in New York would promptly have enhanced their popular language with slang terms thought appropriate to the new circumstances<sup>6</sup> and any of the above, often derogatory, words might be assigned a new meaning in Irish and then appear, seemingly without precedent, as *dude* in early nineteenth-century American English. The subsequent slang use of *dude* for a member of the speaker’s social group is consonant with such an origin in popular language – very possibly immigrant Irish slang. Lexicogenesis is still not a well understood process but in this case it seems unlikely that *dude* is the factitious creation of a style-conscious late nineteenth-century journalist. Other writers were, however, quick to show that they were “with it”. The vogue word *dude* was soon archly complemented by established suffixes to yield *dudedom*, *dudeness*, *dudery*, *dudism*, *dudish*, *dudess* and *dudine*, none of which survived the era. *Dude*, however, shows continued vitality, in, however, a very different social environment. Yet other urban environments are commerce and the courts.

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*Finagle*: The *Oxford English Dictionary* has a relatively brief entry for *finagle*, which is defined as “*intrans.*, to use dishonest or devious methods to bring something about; to fiddle. Also *trans.*, to “wangle”, to scheme, to get (something) by trickery” (OED, s.v. *finagle*; accessed 1 September, 2015). Best known from twentieth-century American popular speech, its origins are here said to lie in English dialect, as reflected by the word *fainague*, meaning ‘to cheat’. For this the dictionary relies on a no less assiduous but of necessity less meticulous editor, Joseph Wright, who compiled a five-volume *English dialect dictionary* between 1898 and 1905.

<sup>5</sup> To return to English *dud*, could the image of a gaping mouth have early been attached to the rough, open cloaks that were an Irish export product in the Middle Ages?

<sup>6</sup> See Cassidy (2007). In the sub-title of this entertaining collection the implied contribution of Irish travelers to American slang is surely overstated.

On the basis of evidence from Shropshire, Hertfordshire, Gloucestershire and other western counties, *fainaigue* is defined as (1) to revoke at cards, (2) to fail of a promise, to play truant, to shirk work, and (3) to deceive by flattery, to obtain by improper means, to cheat (Wright 1898–1905: 2.281, s.v. *fainaigue*). But this third meaning is supported by only a single quotation, “But a maiden came one day And feneaged his heart away”, and seems an over-reading, when ‘to fail of a promise’ might be closer to the truth, a broken engagement and a broken heart. Wright proposes an origin in Old French *fornier* ‘to deny’ (< Latin *foris* + *negare*). As *renege* relates to French *renier*, so *fainaigue*/*faineague* to *fornier*. Thus far Wright. But *fornier* is represented in Anglo-French vocabulary only as ‘baker’ and ‘to bake’ (cf. modern French *four* ‘oven’ < Latin *furnis*) and, more importantly, has no Middle English derivative, e.g., *\*fornien* (Rothwell et al. 2005, s.v. *fornier*; Kurath et al. 2001). This lack of evidence and the considerable phonological, not to say semantic, distance from *fainaigue* to *finagle*, makes Wright’s and thence the *OED*’s derivation implausible.

The first attestation of *finagle* is from 1926 and is from a lexical reference work, so that popular use before that date seems guaranteed: ‘Finagle, U.S. political cant’ (Wentworth 1944: s.v.). As a consequence, one can only speculate when a transfer from some other language than English might have occurred, if, indeed, a loan is implicated. None of the Celtic or Germanic languages of the North Sea zone has anything similar, and German *vernaglen* ‘to nail neatly down’, while perfective in a sense similar to that of a bit of political or commercial hoodwinking or backroom-dealing (cf. English *to fix*), is nonetheless an unlikely source.

Popular impressions of Yiddish and prejudicial associations might suggest to some a Yiddish precedent for, and North American deployment of, *finagle*, from an origin in a putative *\*feinnageln* (whatever this ghost word might mean), but there is no evidence for any of this. In this regard, the Benedictine monk turned professor of mnemonics, Gregor von Fainaigle, who gave demonstrations and lectures in England and Ireland, must be considered, if only that his and his pupils’ feats of memory were assumed to be tricks. (Stephen 1908–1909: vol. 18, s.n. *Feinaigle, Gregor von*). And Ireland offers precedents for turning proper names into verbs, e.g. *to boycott*, *to lynch*.

In the following, a source for *finagle* is sought in a cluster of words, once quite in vogue, now best known from the adjective *finicky*, judged an adaptation of *finicking* “affecting extreme refinement; dainty, fastidious, mincing; excessively precise in trifles. Also of things: Over-delicately wrought or finished; also, insignificant, paltry, trifling.” (*OED*, s.v. *finicky*; accessed 1 September, 2015). The verb *finick* as attested from 1857 but *finicking* possibly from 1661, the earliest form (1592) and perhaps the locus of the coinages is the adjective *finical* (/ˈfɪnɪkəl/), thought to be a perhaps lightly critical adaptation of *fine* in the sense of the above definition – with the learned ending *-ical* parodying the style in question. Illustrative of the senses “of persons, their actions and attributes: Over-nice or particular, affectedly fastidious, excessively punctilious or precise, in speech, dress, manners, methods of work, etc. Also of things: over-scrupulously finished; excessively or

affectedly fine or delicate in workmanship”, early examples of *finical* and their dates are as follows: [1592] “She is so finicall in her speach” (Nashe 1592: sig. C4<sup>v</sup>); [1607] “Women gorgeously appavelled, finicall and fine as fippence” (Estienne 1608: 50; [1650] “Expressions made up of a bombast of words and finical affected complements” (Howell 1650: i. i. 2); [1660] “More trim and elegant fancies, who are so nice and finical that they would not come near a sore” (More 1660: 12, xi.); [1709] “Your open Sleeves ... made a much better Show than the finnikal Dress I am in” (Steele 1710: §6); [1727] “The Finical [style] ... consists of the most curious, affected, mincing Metaphors” (Pope 1727: 67); [1753] “Lord G. seems a little too finical in his dress” (Richardson 1785: II. ii. 9).

How far-fetched is the notion of a derivation of U.S. *finagle* from British *finical*? In the reconstruction of a plausible development, the shift in stress from the first syllable to the second and the impression of subsequent alignment with verbs in *-agle* (of which there are actually none; *inveigle* is close) will have been determining for other changes. Importation into new social circumstances in North America would also have facilitated changes in register and meaning. The above examples of *finical*, if reflective of general use and not simply the choices of the editors of the *OED*, concentrate on the dress and social manners of women (and men charged with effeminacy) and, less narrow in gender focus, on styles of self-projection in speech and writing. In comments lightly critical or condemnatory, artifice and inordinate attention to (personal) detail are targeted. Such conceits may be suspected of ulterior motive and deceit, and this conclusion seems to mark the turning point in the development in usage. The semantic focus appears to have moved from self-preoccupation according to certain social norms to other, less laudatory objectives, although still in the pursuit of personal advantage. In *finagle*, attention to detail is redirected to exploiting detailed knowledge of “how the system works”, to achieving perhaps unscrupulous or dishonest ends through insider information, cronyism, awareness of loopholes, misrepresentation, insinuation, leverage, even fraud and graft. In the advance of *finagle*, *finical* seems to have been left behind; the latest attestation that the *OED* chooses to list is from 1885.

Examples of U.S. usage of *finagle*, again from the *OED*, may be projected against the British examples above: [1926] “I’m a weary man, and I don’t want any finnageling from you” (Anderson, Stallings 1926: 111); [1936] “Discounting any possible editorial finageling ... the solid fact remains that opposing politically minded people do cancel subscriptions” (*Writer’s Digest* 1936: 193, 4 October); [1954] “All the time trying it on, fiddling and finagling, selling anybody out for fourpence” (Priestley 1954: vi. 120); [1955] “Any attempt to fudge or finagle or to get ahead of the other fellow will be recognized by the judge for what it is” (Denlinger 1955: 173).

From the sphere of social behaviour, including dress, manner and writing, *finical/finagle* entered politics, commerce, the justice and regulatory systems, as the earlier grudging recognition of style and assuinity was supplanted by an awareness of cunning, cleverness, and deviousness – still, as with the original *finical*, artifice and attention to detail in the service of self-promotion.

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