**Ep 88 Etymology**

**Aven:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Endless Knot Podcast where the more we know

**Mark:** [00:00:04] the more we want to find out

**Aven:** [00:00:05] tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** [00:00:08] and across disciplines

**Aven:** [00:00:10] Hi, I'm Aven

**Mark:** [00:00:11] and I'm Mark.

**Aven:** [00:00:12] And today we're talking about etymology

**Mark:** [00:00:14] Quelle surprise

**Aven:** [00:00:17] but even more so than usual, we're going to be talking about the etymology of etymology. We don't have very much to get to before that really just our cocktail.

**Mark:** [00:00:30] All right.

**Aven:** [00:00:31] So,

**Mark:** [00:00:32] this, this will make sense in, in retrospect, I guess

**Aven:** [00:00:35] Made sense to me when we were looking it up, I now can't remember how I got to it, but we are having a cocktail known as a Simple Truth, Difford's Guide recipe.

It has rum and grapefruit juice and pineapple juice and honey syrup. And that was it. Oh, no, and Campari. So cheers. Cheers.

**Mark:** [00:00:55] Or as the recipe actually said red bitter

**Aven:** [00:00:58] Italian red Italian bitter liqueur. Yeah. Italian red liquor bitter. I can't get this straight.

**Mark:** [00:01:04] This is the adjective zone thing.

**Aven:** [00:01:07] Italian red bitter liqueur, I think, but they must've meant Campari. That's real tasty though. It's interesting.

They call that the simple truth and there were a bunch of other cocktail recipes, several different versions called the bitter truth. I feel like you know, this has quite a lot of bitterness to it. So maybe the simple truth has always been better truth. Ooh, starting off real deep. All right, Mark.

Explain why we're talking about etymology more. Why is this etymology podcast more special than every other etymology podcast? Mark?

**Mark:** [00:01:36] It's our eldest son's fault. Oh

**Aven:** [00:01:39] yeah, that's right. I'd become that. So

**Mark:** [00:01:41] I was, you know, we were trying to discuss ideas, I think in a car trip to somewhere trying to come up with ideas about, you know, what to do for a podcast and no, not a podcast for a video.

And he said, well, why don't you do the etymology of the word etymology? I said, you're right. Why not?

**Aven:** [00:02:02] It must have been like what, 10 or something? Yeah,

**Mark:** [00:02:05] it was a while ago. Yeah. And and so I did.

**Aven:** [00:02:07] And so you did, right. So today we're going to talk about the, having done it, the last episode was pure history and no etymology at all.

This one was all etymology and then some we're going to get into the weeds a little bit. So we're going to listen to the video that came out of that conversation, and then talk even more in depth about the mechanics of etymology and about some ancient and medieval etymologizers, so let's get going.

**Mark:** [00:02:39] Words have a past, and like all of us they can change as they grow—so it’s often important to consider their etymology, or history. Words are, in a sense, the fossil remains of culture, the traces left behind by years of cultural change, so by examining these potsherds of language we gain insight into the history of culture by looking at what semantic frame has been connected to a given word throughout its history. However, we must remember that the meanings of words do change over time, and what a word means now is not necessarily determined by what it used to mean, as is the case for instance with the word decimated, which used to mean “reduced by a tenth”, but now is commonly used to mean “reduced by a nonspecific extreme amount”. And yes, whatever the pedants say, literally can be meant figuratively and just be used as an intensifier. If we forget this, and think that a word must always mean what its roots once meant, we are committing the etymological fallacy. Besides, what’s really fascinating is the way words change over time.

So, the etym- part of the word etymology comes from a Greek root meaning ‘true’, so etymology originally meant the study of the truth behind words, -logy meaning the study of, from Greek logos meaning “word, thought, or explanation”. Greek etumos may be related to sooth as in soothsayer [a teller of truths] and forsooth meaning, one might say, “for reals”. In fact, in Classical and medieval times scholars often believed that by finding the “true” roots and meanings of words they could learn about the “true” nature of reality, and even God’s plan itself. Perhaps the most famous example of this was Isidore of Seville’s great work, the Etymologiae, which sought to explain the world by finding the true names of everything in it. Nowadays, of course, we use the term etymology to refer to study of the origins and history of words, as opposed to their current meanings and uses.

Actually, Isidore’s Etymologiae is more than just a work of etymology. It’s an encyclopedic collection of all the knowledge that Isidore, a 5th to 6th century bishop with feet planted in both the classical and medieval worlds, thought important. It’s full of information about the classical world that would have been lost otherwise, and came to be a standard textbook of medieval education in the seven liberal arts, made up of the subjects of the trivium [grammar, logic, and rhetoric] and the quadrivium [arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy]. In fact, that’s sort of what encyclopedia means. It comes from the Greek phrase encuclios paideia, literally the “circle of education” referring to the educational curriculum, and initially that’s what the word meant in English too. Encuclios comes from a root that means “to revolve” and is related to the words cycle and wheel. And paideia literally means “child rearing” coming from Greek pais meaning “child”, and ultimately from a Proto-Indo-European root meaning “little or few”. From this in the “child” sense we get words such as pediatrician, and in the “education” sense words such as pedagogy and pedant — a word too often connected to lovers of language! Isidore drew on other earlier “encyclopedic” general knowledge books like Pliny’s Natural History, and there have since been other such works. However, one of the first modern encyclopedias as we would recognize it today was the Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers compiled by enlightenment thinker Denis Diderot. Today, of course, print encyclopedias have all but disappeared, largely replaced by online resources such as Wikipedia [from the Hawaiian word wiki meaning quick, so literally then a portmanteau meaning “quick education”, fitting no?]. So it is perhaps appropriate that Isidore of Seville has been suggested as the patron saint of the internet.

But getting back to etymology, while we often trace words back to their immediate source before coming into modern English, such as Old English, French, Latin, or Greek, we can sometimes go back to English’s most distant traceable ancestor, Proto-Indo-European. So it’s time for a word about that.

Languages are like families, with parent, child, and cousin languages. English, for instance, is one member of the Indo-European family of languages, and counts among its relatives languages such as Latin, French, German, Greek, and Hindi—and a long list of others. The ultimate parent of all these languages is thus said to be Proto-Indo-European, a hypothetical reconstructed language. That’s what a proto-language is, a hypothetical reconstructed language from which other known languages descend, from Greek proton meaning “first”, so Proto-Indo-European is the first Indo-European language. And for completeness, Indo- and India come, through Latin, Greek, and Persian, from a Sanskrit word meaning “river”, possibly from an Indo-European root which means “to drive or go away”. And European and Europe come from a figure in Greek myth named Europa, who was ravished by the god Zeus. But the name is of uncertain ultimate origin, possibly meaning “broad face” from eurys meaning “wide” and ops meaning literally “eye”, or ironically possibly from a non-Indo-European source, such as Akkadian erebu “to go down, set”, as in sunset, or Phoenician ‘ereb meaning “evening”, either way suggesting the west.

We don’t know for sure when or where the original speakers of Proto-Indo-European lived, but it was probably in or before the 4th millennium BCE. One theory, called the Kurgan hypothesis, is that they lived in the steppeland north of the Black Sea, the Caucasus Mountains, and the Caspian Sea, where the horse was first domesticated, and it was this technological advance which allowed them to herd more efficiently and to expand into new areas. Another theory, the Anatolian hypothesis, is that they originally lived in the area around modern-day Turkey and instead were an agricultural society. Either way, these original Indo-Europeans did spread into new areas bringing their culture and, most importantly for our purposes, their language with them.

When we talk about reconstructing proto-languages like Proto-Indo-European or Proto-Germanic, it’s like doing genealogical research to find a long-lost ancestor, only without any actual physical evidence. Proto-languages existed in a time before writing was available, so no written record survives, but by looking at a number of “child” languages that we believe are related, we can make some good guesses as to what their parent must have been like. So English father corresponds to Latin pater, Greek patēr, and Sanskrit pitr, and we can therefore posit the Proto-Indo-European \*pəter, [the asterisk written in front of it means it’s a hypothetical reconstructed form]. Nor is it just a question of finding a number of similar sounding words with similar meanings in a number of different languages. After all, words can travel [or be snatched] directly from one language into another – so that’s not enough proof. Furthermore, words from different languages might be coincidentally similar. Therefore historical linguists look for regular systematic and predictable correspondences between sounds in those sets of similar words. So for instance, the Germanic f in English words such as father, foot, and fish corresponds predictably with p in other Indo-European languages, such as Latin pater, pes/pedis, and piscis [and also with Greek patēr, and pous/podos, for that matter]. This is particularly noticeable in English. Originally a Germanic language, over time it borrowed many words from other Indo-European languages, such as from Latin because that was the language of the Church and of scholarship during the middle ages and renaissance, from French because of the Norman Conquest in 1066, and from Greek because it was often used as the language of scientific terminology after the rediscovery of the writings of the ancient Greeks. So English ended up with sets of related words— such as star and astrology, or fatherhood and paternity — which linguists call cognates, sort of like cousins [cognatus means ‘born together’ or ‘related by birth’ in Latin]. And knowing this tells you that hemp comes from the same plant as cannabis, sends your hound to a kennel, or gets you doing your cardio exercise to improve the health of your heart.

The last set of examples gives you another sound correspondence: Germanic h for Latin or Greek c or k. These particular correspondences between certain consonants in Germanic languages and other Indo-European languages, to follow yet another strand in the etymological web, is called Grimm’s Law, after Jacob Grimm [yes, that Jacob Grimm, of the Brothers Grimm]. In addition to collecting folktales, Grimm was one of the early pioneers in the field of comparative philology, comparing different languages to work out which ones were related and how. Basically Grimm’s Law describes a sound change that happened to Proto-Indo-European consonants as they passed into Proto-Germanic. So the voiceless stops in Proto-Indo-European became voiceless fricatives in Proto-Germanic, that is, p, t, k, and kw became f, th, x, and xw [with x and xw eventually becoming h and hw]. The voiced stops b, d, g, and gw lost their voicing [that is the vibration of the vocal chords] and filled the gap left by the voiceless stops becoming p, t, k, and kw. The voiced aspirated stops lost their aspiration [a little extra breath of air] and became those regular unaspirated voiced stops. The word philology, by the way, referring to ‘historical linguistics’ or more broadly ‘study of language in written texts’ literally means love of words, which I suppose you must have, as I do, if you’re interested in knowing how all these sound changes work!

By the way, Grimm wasn’t exactly the first to come up with the idea. Friedrich Schlegel was the first to note the p-f correspondence, and Rasmus Rask suggested further sound correspondences, but since Grimm was the first to clearly explain the idea as a regular sound change [at least initially crediting Rask], we now generally refer to this as Grimm’s Law [though some people have suggested Rask’s Rule as an alternate name].

However, it was really one of Grimm’s predecessors who kicked the whole thing off. In a way, we have trade monopolies and British imperialism to thank for his discovery. During the time of the great European empires, from the 17th through the 19th centuries, many countries set up what became known as East India Companies with trade monopolies in the east. Britain’s East India Company eventually came to have so much power and control in India that it became a kind of quasi-government, with its own currency, armed forces, and legal system. Eventually the British government decided it would be a good idea to take more of an active interest in the activities of the Company, and appointed a Governor General in Bengal, one Warren Hastings, who by the way was an admirer of our encyclopedist Denis Diderot and read his writings on the way to India. Hastings also became a big fan of India’s ancient culture and texts, and it became policy to run the administration and legal system in the area based on existing customs. Problem was, the ancient laws were written in the equally ancient language Sanskrit, so British judges had to rely on local knowledge, which they didn’t entirely trust. They were dependent on the interpretation of the pandits, scholars of Sanskrit — that’s where we get the word pundit, and fittingly too, given the potential for mistrust in both the original and contemporary senses of the word.

It was into this situation that language genius William Jones arrived. Jones already had a reputation as a gifted philologist, with knowledge of dozens of languages, and after receiving a judicial appointment in Bengal he took up the study of Sanskrit in order to translate those legal codes, and in his spare time founded the Asiatic Society with Hastings to pursue serious linguistic studies. And though there were others who had noticed similarities between different languages and suggested relationships, Jones was the first to really formulate the idea of a proto-language from which many other languages descend, what we now call Proto-Indo-European.

Jones’s interest in Indo-European comparative philology kicked off a whole cottage industry in comparative studies in Indo-European [and other] cultures, such as comparative mythology and folklore, which included Grimm’s other great work, the collection of folktales and fairytales he compiled with his brother Wilhelm. That same father example from before gives us a clue as to how this works. Many Indo-European cultures seem to have had sky-father gods, so we can posit Proto-Indo-European \*Dyeu-Pəter as meaning literally ‘shining father’, which becomes Jupiter in Latin. \*Dyeu also leads to Jove, another name for Jupiter; deus, the Latin word for ‘god’; the Greek god Zeus; and the Germanic god Tyr [in Old Norse] and Tiw [in Old English], who is the namesake of Tuesday.

So we started by digging up the past to try to find the ancestral truth about language by looking at its fossils. What we found was that, like all living things, language evolves, changes over time. And so while we fill in the family portraits of our genealogy we also have the fun of looking forward to snapshots of the next generations of our ever-evolving English language.

So I want to say a little bit more about you know, all the stuff about Grimm's law and comparative linguistics and so forth.

**Aven:** [00:15:08] Okay. And I will say some of that's a little hard to follow in the way, it was helpful in the video to have visuals. So if you found that a little hard to follow, do feel free to go watch the etymology video and see all those sounds and the sound changes.

Right.

**Mark:** [00:15:21] So let me further explain or clarify, let's say some of these terms that I've been throwing around there. So I talk about stops. Stops are consonants, consonant sounds in which you completely stop the air flow and then suddenly release it again. And so that includes sounds like "t" and "d" and "p" and "k", right.

Where you have this kind of a little explosion of air. Voicing is all about. Vibrating the vocal chords. So some of these stops you can make without vibrating your vocal chords. So if you place your fingers just on your

**Aven:** [00:16:04] throat, he's given very good visuals here, just so you know,

**Mark:** [00:16:08] You, you should do it too, place your fingers on your throat and then make a sound like the P sound or T sound. [sounds of consonants]

You feel no vibration in your vocal chords, but then if you make the B sound or D sound, bah, bah, duh, duh, you feel that little bit of vibration. So unvoiced and voiced right? Fricatives are consonant sounds that are

produced

when you make well, literally friction with the air. So you partially block the air coming out of your mouth. So that on its way out, it has to kind of brush past these small openings that you've left for it and makes a kind of noisy sound. Yeah. So that includes, sounds like"fff" or the F sound right.

Or "thhhhhh" the Th sound.

**Aven:** [00:17:06] You're making great faces.

**Mark:** [00:17:10] And so both stops and fricatives can be voiced and unvoiced, so you've got voiced and unvoiced stomps voiced and unvoiced fricatives

**Aven:** [00:17:19] so "vvvv" or "fffff". Yeah, voiced unvoiced. Yeah. So

**Mark:** [00:17:23] you, you make the, the V sound and the F sound, the exact, your mouth is in the exact same position with your teeth pressed against your lip.

And you push air through that partially constricted passage. And depending on whether or not you also vibrate your vocal chords at the same time, decides whether it's voiced or unvoiced. And then the aspiration that, as I said, is this little puff of air. And in fact, in English, I mean, we have, we do have these variations on stops. We have aspirated stops and unaspirated stops, but they never make the distinction between one word and another.

**Aven:** [00:18:00] Yeah. I was just going to say, aspiration is one of the ones that's hardest for English speakers to really hear or distinguish because it doesn't make a semantic difference or yeah.

It's automatic it's never the minimal pair. It's

**Mark:** [00:18:11] never the thing that distinction, you can't make a minimal pair, but you can get the feeling for it. If you. Hold. And so again, I'm describing what I'm doing here. I'm going to hold my, my hand in front of my mouth, fairly close to it.

It's going to block the microphone a little bit, but, and then you say the word pit and spit

**Aven:** [00:18:30] pit , spit.

**Mark:** [00:18:31] You'll notice when you make, when you say pit. There's more air coming through and you feel the air. Whereas when you say spit, you don't really feel that little puff of air. So the rule in English is that if the stop is the initial sound, then it gets aspirated.

But if it's in a consonant cluster, For instance with an S coming before constant cluster, which it's not the first sound, I guess , so if you've got a consonant cluster in which there is a sound that comes before the stop, then it's not aspirated, right.

Like

**Aven:** [00:19:05] spit, but in other words, yeah. It would English doesn't have is one word Pitt and another word. I can't even do it because I'm not, it's not important in English, so I don't know how to do it, but Pitt, but you know, that doesn't have an aspiration where one means something. And the other means something else, unlike, There are many languages where, whether it's an aspirated D or an unaspirated D or what, how much, can distinguish between two different words. that are otherwise homonyms. And that can be very hard. This one of these things that it's hard for English speakers to hear the difference, I'm thinking of Tamil specifically, right?

Because this is like your, dad's the name for your dad in Tamil, name for grandfather in Tamil, thatha, I don't say

**Mark:** [00:19:46] right. It's supposed to be an

**Aven:** [00:19:48] aspirated or semi. Like there was like three or four D, D and T H sounds or D and T sounds in several Indian languages. I remember in Sanskrit, there were a number when I was looking at it and like, I can't do it.

I can't I can understand the logistics of it. I can, I can go through the mechanics of it, but I can't pronounce or hear it.

**Mark:** [00:20:08] But for English speakers, you do make a difference. You can find minimal pairs with voiced and unvoiced so like pear and bear or bit and pit

and in old English, it was only partially a distinction between. V and F. So in fact, the writing system didn't have V it was always spelled with F and you'd know how to pronounce it based on the phonetic.

**Aven:** [00:20:34] What other, what else was around it? Yeah.

**Mark:** [00:20:36] Context. and that gets sort of fossilized into modern English with words like Wolf and wolves. So we spell it. we now spell that as you know, with an F or a V, but in old English, you would always use the F and you'd know which way to pronounce it, depending on whether it was singular or plural.

**Aven:** [00:20:56] And also the, the one that always, I think, works really well to show that it's Fox and Vixen. Yes. Cause we don't think of those as being similar words because the F and the V are distinctive enough now to us to matter. But it's the same word Fox and vixen, it's just because one of them is an unstressed and one is stressed or whatever.

I don't know what it is that makes the difference between why one is voiced and one's unvoiced,

**Mark:** [00:21:17] And the other the other good example of that is off and of, right, right. We spell it with one F, but we pronounce it like it's a V

**Aven:** [00:21:26] yeah. That's all of course leads back to the spelling question of like, why does English spelling not match English, pronunciation?

It's things like this that tend to cause that yeah.

**Mark:** [00:21:36] So these are these kinds of distinctions, we can use to classify groups of consonants into these different groups. And what Grimm's law describes is a kind of a shift in, in which one whole group gets shifted to another position.

**Aven:** [00:21:55] So you should talk about positions. So what, when you talked about stops, you gave a whole bunch of lists of examples of stops and the thing, they were all stops. So what distinguished them? what distinguished them was what part of your mouth you were using to stop the air.

**Mark:** [00:22:09] Yeah. So within each group, there are several different positions where you put your mouth parts, right? So P is putting two lips together. T is putting your tongue just behind your teeth.

So what happened? What Grimm's law does is it explains a sound change in which a whole set of consonant sounds shifts as kind of as a group to a different manner of articulation. So the stops, the unvoiced stops, those stops become fricatives. You keep the same place of articulation, right? So the T and T H sound you're, you're still making those sounds this basically the same way with your tongue near the teeth. But you're changing the manner of articulation from a stop.

To

**Aven:** [00:22:56] a fricative. So like you're opening your mouth a little bit more so that the air goes through rather than stop. So, "t", "th", yeah, "th" is a really hard one to pronounce on a podcast , you can't extend a "th". It just didn't work.

**Mark:** [00:23:10] And so what we don't know though about this whole sort of shifting of groups from kind of one manner of articulation to another is whether it's a pull chain or a push chain.

In other words, did one group of sounds sort of vacate a slot basically. And so a bunch of other sounds then rushed in to take up that slot or do you have a situation in which one set of sounds moves to another slot pushing out the ones that were already there. So they have to become something else.

And we don't know if it's a pull chain or there's no way to reconstruct that. Really

**Aven:** [00:23:47] what we see is it's very hard to see the sort of middle moment, right? Yeah.

**Mark:** [00:23:52] Well, especially when you're talking about a sound change that happens before, right before

**Aven:** [00:23:55] writing . No, the ones that we have writing for without a fixed spelling system.

Because for instance, it's much harder to track it in writing now. If you talk about like I don't know, a London accent turning on, you know, TH's into F people don't write that down, or very, very rarely do you actually write down what it looks like? Yeah. I mean, now we can record sounds and everything, but you know, things, even after writing, in other words, it becomes hard to trace.

Some of them can

**Mark:** [00:24:19] Spelling can be a useful indication, especially before standardized

**Aven:** [00:24:22] That's what I was just saying though. Yeah. That, that period of time when there's not standardized spelling, it's great. But then once you get standardized spelling, it stops being very useful for tracking those changes anymore because we just changed the way we say it, but we don't change the way to spell it

**Mark:** [00:24:38] though surprisingly, a sound change that happened at a time when you think it would be easy to track, the great vowel shift, we don't know if that's a pull chain or push chain either. It's the same situation. Well,

**Aven:** [00:24:49] the problem is we were standardizing spellings right around that

**Mark:** [00:24:53] we can see it happening in the spelling, but it's tricky.

It's, it's hard to know exactly why it happens. Yeah.

**Aven:** [00:24:59] Yeah. The thing also that I want to stress and maybe you were going to stress this too. But when you're talking about these laws, like Grimm's law, whatever, it's not just that every P becomes an F it's not every single. Stop becomes a fricative or something like that.

Right? the point is that for instance, initial stops become, so it has to do with the context. It's not that that sound in every single place in one language turns into a different sound in every single place in another language. I suppose that can happen theoretically could happen, but these laws are really describing.

It's more, it's more specific

**Mark:** [00:25:31] than that, right. So it can be context dependent. And so that leads leads me to my next point, which is that there are exceptions, right, where you would expect Grimm's law to make a certain consonant change a certain way. and yet it doesn't happen. Or doesn't have that change

**Aven:** [00:25:49] until you kind of look there?

There are, there are exceptions, but there are rules to explain it, rules

**Mark:** [00:25:53] in terms of the context. So let's go back to the example of the word father we would expect from the proto Indo European \*pəter to get the Old English form \*fæþer . With a T H sound in the middle, right. , so the P becomes an F, as we saw , an initial P becomes an initial F and the T in the middle should become a fricative as well.

It should become a th sound. But in Old English, it's spelled fæder with a D. So that seems to break the rule. Now of course you may be thinking, but it does eventually become a th and it does. That is true, but it does that later. And that is in accord with a later sound shift that happens that we can see in other words.

so basically the rule is and this is a sound change that happens around 1400. What you see is that medial, T H, when it's in the middle of a word between two vowels we see this change of post vocalic, so after a vowel the D becomes a Th sound , a voiced th sound. Right, right. If it comes before syllabic R or "er", the "err" sound like the

**Aven:** [00:27:12] ER and that sort of Schwa or with an R. Yeah.

**Mark:** [00:27:16] And so we can see that regular sound change in words like mother Old English, moder. Modern English mother or hither from hider, the D to hither or another example would be weather.

that used to be a D becomes a th so that's a regular Sam change that we can see in a bunch of words. When you get that And that's what happened to father. And that's why it doesn't happen until 1400. Right.

**Aven:** [00:27:40] But why didn't it? Why didn't it turn initially?

**Mark:** [00:27:44] Why didn't it initially become father?

Well, that is because And this isn't a random thing,

**Aven:** [00:27:51] that's the point, right? Random changes by, I mean, obviously a very occasionally random changes are going to happen, but random changes tell us that we're not getting it right.

We haven't, we haven't figured out the pattern and we haven't figured out the etymology correctly. There's another stage or this word isn't really from the thing we think is from, if it's random. It's not right.

**Mark:** [00:28:11] So it it comes down to or it came down to a Danish philologist named Karl Verner to spot the regular pattern here.

And it basically has to do with stress patterns in proto Indo European. So If that voiceless stop was at the start of the first syllable of a word, or if it was immediately preceded by the stressed syllable of a word, it followed Grimm's law, as you would expect. But if the syllable before that voiceless stop sound was unstressed in proto Indo European, the stop instead just becomes voiced. Doesn't become a fricative.

**Aven:** [00:28:51] So, 't' to 'd'.

**Mark:** [00:28:53] Yeah. And so \*pəter the first syllable was unstressed and that stress falls on the second syllable there. And what happens that sort of goes along with this is in all of the Germanic vocabulary the stress pattern shifts to always having the stress on the first syllable in polysyllabic words

**Aven:** [00:29:12] But that's a later process.

Yeah. So \*pəter gives us "faDER" at some point, which is why at some point there must've been an intermediate stage is what you're saying, where it was "faDer". And that's why it stayed a D rather than, it goes from a T to a D rather than T to a th but then the whole , the language of the whole stress pattern switches.

**Mark:** [00:29:33] So you can no longer see that stress pattern.

**Aven:** [00:29:35] So now it's fæder. Yeah. But the D is still there because that stress change doesn't change the consonant. And then later there's a consonantal shift where you get the D's turning into TH's in certain contexts.

Yeah. So even though it ends up looking the same as if it had gone straight from PA-ter to father. Yeah, it doesn't because it wasn't that,

**Mark:** [00:29:58] and this is one of the difficulties with working through all these sound changes, is they all happen chronologically in a certain order, right?

A certain sound change happens at a certain time. And that could be either earlier or later relative to another sound change. And so you have to apply the sound changes in the right order to get the right form at the end.

**Aven:** [00:30:18] Finally. Yeah. And also to tell you what's similar to another language at any stage, or whether it was borrowed in at the stage or at that stage and things like that.

Yeah.

**Mark:** [00:30:28] And I remember as a graduate student having to learn this relative order. You know, we were applying the various sound changes to work our way from proto Germanic to old English. And so for instance, with the A sound various changes happen to that proto Germanic A sound like fronting.

It becomes an AH sound and breaking, it becomes an Ah-Uh sound, but also there was the restoration of the AH sound if there was a back vowel in the next syllable. And so you had to know what order all these sound changes happen in to produce the right, final form to show how it changed from, the proto language to the later form.

**Aven:** [00:31:06] And the key here is you learned that as a grad student, because it had all been worked out yes, scientific etymology or the development of this kind of etymology worked the other way. It worked from a modern word or from later example of you know, recorded word back. but the whole point of all these laws is if you try to do this with only one word, there is no, like, that isn't evidence that doesn't have to show set systematic. Bunches of words and what they do and you say, okay, well, these words went back. And so you take it as far back as you can with written sources and then you have to do the thing that's where the comparative philology comes in.

Right?

**Mark:** [00:31:42] Yeah. So what you do is you look for a pattern.

And it's like you know, the scientific method, right? You come up with a hypothesis that says, well, this sound should become this sound in these contexts. And in these orders and so forth. And then you say, okay, well let me try and reproduce that with another word, with that same sound.

And if it produces the right form, then you can say, Oh, okay, that's more evidence

**Aven:** [00:32:07] when you say right form. How are you checking that?

**Mark:** [00:32:10] The right final form?

**Aven:** [00:32:11] How are you checking that?

**Mark:** [00:32:12] so what you're doing is you're comparing two languages that have a presumed. Common ancestor. Well, that's

So you're looking at two words that are attested in a later language Well, actually it's not, you don't just work with two, you try and collect a whole bunch of words, follow a similar sound, pattern, that follow a similar sound pattern. Yeah. In fact, you look for a whole bunch of different languages that all come from the same,

**Aven:** [00:32:37] but you're trying to figure this out. You don't know about the proto language yet.

**Mark:** [00:32:40] No that you suspect,

or you get a bunch of languages that you say, Oh, these are kind of similar. Okay. Let's see if we can find a pattern, a regular pattern. And then you, you look at what bits are common between several of them. And say, well, three of these languages have the same thing in this context, this one has something different in this context.

So we can go with the hypothesis that the one that the three languages have is the earlier form the more original form and something happened to that fourth one that fourth

**Aven:** [00:33:11] language, then you see if that plays out in other words

**Mark:** [00:33:14] you come up with a hypothesis and you try it out and you try it out and you try it out and you try it out.

Yes. This is why

**Aven:** [00:33:20] this was done in the 19th century, by people with a lot of money and nothing else to do, because it's a very, I mean, obviously now you can use computers and things, but it's a long laborious process, even so, and. It's kind of amazing to think of how much work it took to figure this stuff out in a time before computers

**Mark:** [00:33:38] what is a refinement of Grimm's law or this exception to Grimm's law becomes known as Verner's law because he figured it out. So all of this, you know, I'm arguing in favor of, of looking at language as a kind of family structure where you got, as I said, parents and daughters and cousins and so forth or the other way is if you look at the actual video, you see how I visually represent all of these things as a kind of tree diagram with things branching off, right? So there's this tree metaphor it's called the tree model in fact, in, in linguistics. And so this is, kind of the central model that historical linguistics has used for well ever since William Jones.

But there are some problems. if we look really closely at this, there's some problems with this metaphor that can lead us astray. So it was 19th century linguist August Schleicher who was the first to actually propose the tree model in that particular metaphor.

And, and the idea of thinking of language as sort of evolutionary, right. And he claimed to have come to his ideas about the evolution of languages after he, heard of Darwin's ideas, but whether or not he was influenced by Darwin or not. He certainly begins to arrange languages in these genealogical trees inspired by the, the Darwinian phylogenic trees to show that same kind of evolutionary process. And the, the important thing to notice about this, think of it in, in this evolutionary way is you get divergences, right? That's all you get, right. One thing can split into two, right. And then can split into more and split into more. Right. That's the only action that is available to you.

If you're thinking in terms of this tree model, right. So Schleicher by the way, was also the first to attempt to use this evolutionary idea of language, to kind of roll back the clock and reconstruct a text in proto Indo European. And this is known as Schleicher's fable.

**Aven:** [00:35:49] Oh yes. I've heard about this.

That uses sort of the basic words the ones that he could most securely sort of reconstruct what he thought objects and basic verbs

**Mark:** [00:35:59] and it's, it's fairly short. I'll read it. I can read out a translation of it. I'm not going to attempt to pronounce either his reconstruction of the phonology or later cause I'm not, I'm not an expert in, in proto, indo European per se, but it's called the sheep and the horses. So this is an English translation. Not all of these words are necessarily the descendant words of the proto Indo European words, because they shift in meaning often.

**Aven:** [00:36:27] So you can, yeah, we can probably come back to that, that question of semantics too, but yeah,

**Mark:** [00:36:32] So a sheep that had no wool saw horses, one of them pulling a heavy wagon, one carrying a big load and one carrying a man quickly. The sheep said to the horses, my heart pains me seeing a man driving horses. The horses said, listen, sheep, our hearts pain us when we see this: a man, the master, makes the wool of the sheep into a warm garment for himself. And the sheep has no wool. Having heard this, the sheep fled into the plain.

It's a nice little story. It's a nice little, you know so he, he does a good job of constructing an actual story, an actual story that has a message and all of that.

So it could be this little, you know aphorism or, or what's the word? Fable, fable. Fable. Yeah.

**Aven:** [00:37:19] So the idea there is, those are words that appear in enough languages in stable enough forms that you can definitely, or as close to definitely as possible. and that's of course, part of what, when people start talking about the Indo Europeans as a culture, they make suppositions based on what words can be traced back to them to say things like they had horses and sheep and wagons, those are all specific cultural markers that are not true of every single culture.

So that gives you indications about their culture.

**Mark:** [00:37:48] So for instance, the word for sheep is \*awis, in his reconstructed form of it was \*awis but of course, people have refined the phonetics of proto Indo European since then so

But they're all basically that kind of sound, which is, you know, clearly recognizable in Latin anyways. It's not the same word in English, but yeah, ovis. so that's the other thing that, Schleicher is known for.

Now, as I say, it turns out that this,

Now it turns out that this tree model doesn't tell the whole story of language development as it doesn't account for things like lateral transmission due to borrowing from one language to another, or any other kind of language contact. And the fact that languages don't always develop from single isolated dialects, but from a range of dialects president at the same time, right?

It's not one parent, one child. You can have in a sense, a whole bunch of dialects that then lead to a whole bunch of dialects in very complicated ways.

**Aven:** [00:38:51] So you need incestuous branches. Yeah. So

**Mark:** [00:38:54] this is, this is the flaw with thinking of it as a tree, because it doesn't allow for this kind of complexity.

So, languages aren't , distinct abstractions, right. when we say the English language what we mean is, a whole bunch of speech communities that use a fairly similar language

**Aven:** [00:39:14] can communicate with one another, with one another. And conceive of themselves as having the same language.

Yes.

**Mark:** [00:39:20] So we have to think more in terms of speech, communities of numerous people who have cohesion for various, you know, social or political or whatever reasons. But are nevertheless individual people. And sometimes languages diverge into distinct dialects divided by geography.

So you have one group that splits off and one group maybe settles on or stays where they were in. The other group goes over a difficult mountain and settles over there. And so they're, divided geographically or they sail to an Island or something like that. Right. So that they're, they're isolated from each other.

And then they're, they therefore diverge. Okay. That sometimes happens. But often that is not the case. Right. They are still geographically within reach of each other and still have contact with each other. Right. So while they do diverge, they still, can share things back and forth. And so now linguists tend to talk in terms of dialect continuums so that, you know, one group that's relatively close geographically to a neighboring group may be mutually intelligible to each other.

But if you go several groups down, I mean, each one will, will maybe be able to communicate with the one that's closest to them. But if you look at the two furthest away ones, they may have difficulty. So it's, it's a lot more complicated. All, a lot of this is obscured now, these kinds of things are obscured now because we have first of all, more rigid borders.

And we also have communication that, you know,

**Aven:** [00:40:57] transcends geography. Well and we have, and we have art artificial things like national language policies and religious choices that make people choose particular languages over other languages, you know, like a whole bunch of things. A lot of different factors go into what languages people speak and how they work to maintain or change or whatever.

Yeah.

**Mark:** [00:41:17] Furthermore, divergence and descent is not the only way that linguistic features can be transmitted. So as we said, there could be borrowing for instance. And so the other thing that we often talk about you know, we refer to it with this, this German word Sprachbund

**Aven:** [00:41:33] . Do we? Well, some people do, some people do .

**Mark:** [00:41:36] which are linguistic regions that can have an areal feature that's areal as the adjective version of area.

Okay. That's the word that linguists use, areal features

**Aven:** [00:41:48] see who put a linguist in charge of making up words? Cause that was a big mistake.

**Mark:** [00:41:54] These are features that can be shared by a number of different languages, including ones that aren't even related. So you could have two languages that are, that don't come from the same language family, but they're in the same geographical region.

And so certain linguistic innovations like a new word can spread around in that area. And we talk about that as an areal feature. Right. Like a vocabulary, like a vocabulary, but it can also happen with non vocabulary things too, like pronunciations and various other things. So it is possible, but vocabulary is the most common kind, but it can be other things

and the, of course the other problem is, you know, because of this sort of reference to the evolutionary side of things is that biological species do not crossbreed, right?

**Aven:** [00:42:40] that's the definition of a species

**Mark:** [00:42:42] of a species, right. So you come to the sort of conclusion that, Oh, language can't either, but there's no reason that so you may miss things if you're thinking rigidly along those lines. And so language can have lateral transfer, right.

So, I mean, lateral transfer is, turns out is pretty common in language.

So again, that makes problematic the, the notion

**Aven:** [00:43:05] And English is a very good example of pretty much all of these things.

**Mark:** [00:43:08] Right? A whole lot of vocabulary that was lateral.

**Aven:** [00:43:11] If you try to do English just as a branch of a single branching tree. you can only trace it back to German and to germanic And that is just a false understanding of English. So you then can't figure out where most of the words in English come from because they don't follow that trace. Yeah.

**Mark:** [00:43:30] So as a result, a student of Schleicher named Johannes Schmidt proposed a different model.

And whether you think it's a complete replacement or a refinement or an extra thing, you know, different people have thought different things about this over the years. But in any case he suggested thinking of it more like waves. So this is the wave model. Okay. So think of, dropping a pebble in water and it spreading out in these concentric circles, that was the sort of model that he was saying that language could change that way now, as it turns out, I mean, what most modern linguists would say is That's one possible way it can happen, but it's not the only way either. Right? So it can't be a complete replacement of the tree model, but nevertheless, thinking of it in terms of these concentric waves is important. And so what you get is, yeah, linguistic innovation can happen in one place and then spread out having a smaller and smaller effect, the further you get away.

**Aven:** [00:44:29] And then you could theoretically set up interference patterns, right? You can have, you could have multiple originating languages, which the waves then cross over one another. So

**Mark:** [00:44:37] produce. Language, language A and language B could each have their individual you know, linguistic innovations and both of those can influence language C Yeah. so that's the wave model. More recently, another way of thinking about it is in terms of linkages. And I like this this model

**Aven:** [00:44:55] you would.

**Mark:** [00:44:56] Yes. so it's thinking of dialects as a kind of network. So you have a network of related dialects or languages, however, and linguists, you know, actually don't like using the word dialect because there's no definition for it

**Aven:** [00:45:11] as if there's a definition for the word language.

Yeah.

**Mark:** [00:45:13] Well, yeah. Not, not as distinct from the word dialect. Yeah. So there's a field called dialectology, but it refuses to define the word dialect, which is, you know, great naming.

**Aven:** [00:45:25] I told you nobody should have put the linguists in charge of making up words. It was a big mistake.

**Mark:** [00:45:31] So you have these, this complex network of related varieties which Kind of forms out of the gradual diffusion of a proto language or rather, I suppose, you know rather than thinking of it as a proto language think of it as a proto dialect continuum, because even the proto language is not one variety that produces a bunch of things.

It's a bunch of varieties that produce a bunch of other things in these very complicated network of influences.

**Aven:** [00:46:01] Yeah. The reason we go back to one proto language is because our ability to track that variety in those distinctions disappears over time. So that by the time you're going back that far, you can really only reconstruct large level units.

You can't go to the point of being able to reconstruct that. Yeah. That's why the, the trunk thickens in the other metaphor,

**Mark:** [00:46:23] So language innovations can be shared between neighboring dialects, even though they are diverging, right? So it's not just a, you know, point of divergence and you've got two species, right.

They still can continue to influence each other overall kind of diverging, but certain linguistic innovations can still jump back and forth. Right. So, you know, simplicity is replaced by complexity. But we still use the tree model because it helps us wrap our head around what's going on.

And

**Aven:** [00:46:54] for sort of high level understanding of languag change.

It gets you the basics, but yeah,

**Mark:** [00:47:00] Now one way that we can look for this sort of evidence and try and work out relationships between languages is using a list of vocabulary. And specifically there was a list developed by Morris Swadesh, and so it's called the Swadesh list. He was a linguist who by the way, was a student of Edward Sapir.

Good friend of the show

**Aven:** [00:47:25] controversial figure.

**Mark:** [00:47:27] And so what he did is he came up with a list of basically concepts that were thought to be like basic that you could find in all the languages. Right. And therefore you could use this list for the purpose of cross-linguistic lexical comparison.

Find the words, that mean these things in language A and language B, and then compare them, compare the two lists, and then you can see, well, what's in common, what's not in common or

**Aven:** [00:47:53] whatever. Are there sounds that are similar? Yeah.

**Mark:** [00:47:55] Now Swadesh used the list first to sort of study and classify the extent to which languages replaced basic words in their proto language.

So over time, language has changed. So how, you know, what words, how fast, how many words get tossed out and replaced with something else. And then he used that information to try and estimate the "age" and I'm doing big scare quotes here, the "age" of languages, which is really to say the time since two languages, diverged from a common ancestor.

So it's all relative. So it's, you know, kind of comparing two languages and trying to work out. Okay. Well, when, how long ago was this divergence between these two?

**Aven:** [00:48:39] How long were these two languages, the same language. Yeah.

**Mark:** [00:48:42] Now there's a bunch of assumptions of course being made there. And so, you know, he is, although the list, linguists still use the list.

A lot of what he said about it is no longer held to be all that reliable. But there's this basic assumption that there is a basic rate at which these changes happen, right? And that's by no means clear that it's true. In fact, it, you know, it's not that hard to show that some languages can be more conservative and change less over a certain number of years is compared to another language.

**Aven:** [00:49:12] Right. I also feel like maybe you were going to talk about this, the base assumption there, that there are certain words, lexical items that are common to all languages . While.I'm going to assume there's some fairly basic, you know, that we would all think, Oh, common sense. That's true. The edges of a lexical.

I mean, this is something we've talked about elsewhere. What any given lexical item actually encompasses and doesn't encompass, I can't imagine there's any, like, even something as basic, like I'm sure the words for relationships are on there. Right? Mother, father. Yeah, sure. Mother and father. Seem like the most basic.

How could every language not have a mother and father? There are languages where mother means every woman who is related to my mother, every, my mother and my aunts are all my mother. The same word is used for all of those people. That doesn't mean that language doesn't have a word for mother.

Of course it does. But the word, like to say that's the same as my word for mother, which only means one person. And I can't even mean a stepmother or, you know, or mother-in-law that's not really the same word is it,

**Mark:** [00:50:17] which is why a lot of linguists don't talk about the Swadesh list, but talk about the Swadesh lists, because many people since have, you know, changed the list and refined the list and, you know, I can totally

**Aven:** [00:50:31] see the, I can absolutely see the usefulness of it.

And I'm not trying to say that, you have to have something, you have to have some way of saying, like, what words, if I go to look at a new language, I can't look at the entire vocabulary. Right off the bat. Yeah. I have to do something to let, to limit my, my understanding of it start off with, but, but yeah. I just think,

**Mark:** [00:50:52] yeah, what you consider basic is a tricky thing.

I mean, you know, you can say certain things like, Oh, well we're all biologically the same. So.

**Aven:** [00:51:01] But that's like saying we all see the same way. We've talked about this with color, right? Like that's like saying we all see the same wavelengths. Therefore our words for color must be the same must mean the same wavelengths, but I mean, that's obviously it's empirically not true.

And whether you even think you see color is appearing and you know, quite leaving aside color blind people and stuff like it's the same biology doesn't produce the same understanding of the world.

**Mark:** [00:51:27] I mean, there, there certainly have been many challenges to the Swadesh list and how we use it. And is it even useful and so forth, but, but nevertheless, it's still, you know, is a thing that linguists linguists work with.

So, I mean, obviously there is a lot more, one could say about etymology and historical linguistics. And I will, I'm going to have a video coming out hopefully very, fairly soon that will

**Aven:** [00:51:59] Don't say very soon, that's over promising

**Mark:** [00:52:02] that is going to revisit a bit of this stuff about dialects and that sort of thing. So I will maybe say more about it then, and I will no doubt come back to this topic again on the podcast too.

But I think that sums up what still needed to be said after the previous video that I made.

**Aven:** [00:52:20] Okay. Well, I'm not, I don't want to talk too much about this, but I think, you know, what you're talking about is the development of what we might call scientific etymology or scholarly etymology.

And I think that a lot of people who watch our videos in particular, you know lots of people who are interested in etymology, aren't necessarily aware of the principles by which historical linguistics functions and why would they be, I mean, they're, as we've just listened to quite complicated and difficult and need, you need a lot of work and time and understanding.

So, I mean, you can go and look up in a dictionary and find out what an etymology is, but if you want to try to do it yourself or to understand why a dictionary says what it does. That's hard. it's not just common sense. But people have been interested as your video talks about in the origins of words, you know, ever since ever since, presumably people started talking to other people who had other languages, which presumably was ever since ever.

They've wondered why, the words they use and ever since we moved away from pure onomatopoeia to, to arbitrary language. Wondered why the words we use for things are the words we use for them, especially when you see that other people don't use the same word. And so I think the impulse for a lot of people who love etymology is to try to sort of look for those connections themselves.

And unfortunately it can be very misleading because you've talked about, you know, sound changes the most obvious thing to do when you look at words is look for other words, that mean something similar that sound the same. But as you've just demonstrated with the sound changes with Grimm's Law and stuff, in fact, what you need to look for often is words that don't sound the same. Two words that sound the same in two different languages might be less likely, depending on, you know, the history of those changes might be less likely to be the same word. a word in Latin and a word in English that both start with a P are possibly, if there is actual English word, less likely to be related than a word with P and a word with F.

So if you follow the sort of what words sound the most similar, you're going to be misled. And also we didn't talk very much at all about semantic changes. We talked a little bit, but I have another video. Yeah, exactly. So we'll talk about it later, but the basic point is, again, if you take two languages and you just look for words, that mean the same thing and assume they must be related.

Words go through amazing changes in meaning over time and the same root sounds can end up meaning something very different. But until all of this work was done in the 18th, 19th century and 20th century, the best tools people had were these two words sound the same, or these two words mean something similar. And so you get this attempt to do. And so while that continues, I would say folk entomology continues now unabated. And we see in the comments to our videos, that lots of people see spiritual and magical and religious and nationalistic, meaning in etymology and therefore look for their own secret hidden understanding of the world through etymology.

And apply common sense rather than scientific principles to it, to come up with whatever fits their best ideas. Well, that was happening a long time ago, too. And you touched on Isidore of Seville who wrote that comprehensive etymological encyclopedia. And the reason those two things go together in his mind is because etymology is the study of true things and the origins of things.

And so I just wanted to say a little bit more about who he was and what he did, because only touched on it briefly in the video. So he's. We have very precise dates for him, which is quite, I guess, because he's a Saint. And he wrote so much. And so the dates are 560 to the 4th of April 636.

**Mark:** [00:56:00] That's important because that's his death day.

**Aven:** [00:56:02] Yeah, exactly. Of course that doesn't mean it's correct, but anyway, yeah. It is the day that goes onto the calendar as the saint's day, yeah. But you know, even, even having a precise year, frankly, is, is pretty impressive at that period.

And he's um, Savelle obviously he's from, in, in Spain, under the Visigothic kingdoms and he wrote a whole bunch of things, not just the Etymologicae , Etymologiae, sorry, but that is his most famous work. A lot of the other stuff he wrote was theological, though not all of it. And the Etymologiae is really long.

And very comprehensive or attempts to be very comprehensive. So I don't really want to talk about it in great length, but it does start off with talking about the seven liberal arts, the liberal disciplines, like it starts very, it starts with grammar and then it talks about those things. And I'm just, I thought I would read just the first paragraph, because I think it already gives you a very.

Clear understanding of the way he's looking for it. Like how do, where do words come from. So I'm going to read it. And of course, because he's all talking about Latin, I'm going to have to keep reading the Latin words out to explain, right. it's got in in brackets So On discipline and art. Discipline, "disciplin a", takes its name from learning, "discere", whence it can also be called knowledge, "scientia". Now know, "scire", to know, is named from learn "discere ." Right, because there's sounds that are the same, but because the meaning is the same. That's the important thing, because none of us knows unless we have learned. A discipline is so named in another way, because the full thing is learned, "discitur plena" a "disci - plena". And an art, "ars", genitive "artis", is so-called because It consists of strict "artus", precepts and rules others say this word is derived by the Greeks and from the word "arete", that is virtue as they termed knowledge, so arete which means virtue.

Plato and Aristotle would speak of this distinction between an art and a discipline. An art consists of matters that can turn out in different ways while a discipline is concerned with things that have only one possible outcome. Thus when something is expounded with true arguments, it will be a discipline when something merely resembling the truth and based on opinion is treated, it will have the name of an art.

**Mark:** [00:58:08] I wonder what access he had to Greek authors

**Aven:** [00:58:11] at that point? He probably still did. I would think so. But so you just, just to see there, like you know, does "discere" and "disciplina" have anything to do with each other? I don't know. "scientia" and "scire" do, sure, science and to know, but "scire" and "discere" do not have anything to do with each other.

So, his etymologies in other words, are not based on any scientific understanding, but it's very clear there from how he does it, what he's trying to do. He's looking for words that sound the same and that have a meaning or that, that lead logically one from the other, and the reason he's doing it.

And the reason that would be good proof is because by talking about it like that, you learn something about what an art is. If the word comes from "artus" precepts, strict rules, then that tells you something about what art is. If it comes from "arete", virtue, then that tells you something about the value of art.

So the etymology here as far removed as possible in a way from this phonetic, you know, like I don't care. All I'm caring about is the phonetic similarity. Now, obviously those phonetic patterns have to also fall into semantic groups, you know, pater and father are connected because they also mean father.

But the, the thing that matters the most is the phonology.

**Mark:** [00:59:26] Yeah. And, and what's demonstrated again and again, in the videos I do and everything is that very often. It's really surprising what the, the proto word meant compared to what the,

**Aven:** [00:59:39] you can like you did for the sounds. You might have to trace the steps of how the meanings changed.

And sometimes you just have to say, I don't know, it has to have come from there because of the sounds. And we have to assume that like, it's close enough in meaning that it must be weird, but something happened then we don't know why. Yeah. But that would be, I think, nonsensical to Isidore.

Like it just, it would be a fundamental violation of how the world worked. And he knows Greek and Latin, or he knows of Greek and Latin. So he's willing to believe that these things like follow logical precepts within those languages. And presumably he's not necessarily saying that these explain the whole world that only Greek and Latin work, but he's assuming there is a logical underpinning to the language where words are going to have a relationship to one another.

That is going to mean something. So, I just thought that was, it was just interesting to see that example and people are still doing that, but it is not how scientific etymology goes. So his work is fascinating and interesting. And from time to time probably does give us real etymologies, especially when it's from like a name of a place to a thing, or, you know, he preserves a historical moment or a document or transition or event that we wouldn't know otherwise.

but in general, we should not take him as being any kind of actual authority on etymology. The other thing I wanted to just mention is that he is in no way alone in the ancient world in being fascinated by these things. Right. It is something that is a feature of other scholars.

I mean, we see it in other writers, but in particular, Because it's not the podcast without me mentioning Roman poetry. We see it a lot in, in Roman poets . Greek poets as well, but I'm going to talk about the Roman ones. and what they do is they use what I suppose we could just call puns not necessarily in the same way, not necessarily to prove something about the world but to sometimes just show off that they know stuff.

But also as a way of Adding variety and interest to their poetry.

**Mark:** [01:01:32] it's a stylistic

**Aven:** [01:01:33] It's stylistic, but it can also do things like make allusions to other works. It can show off Obscure knowledge. it can also point out a significance or a thematic element within the story.

So, there's a million examples, but Ovid is very fond of etymological wordplay. He's fond of every single kind of wordplay that there could be. I was just looking sort of up for articles on these things. So just one example, plucked Somewhat at random in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which is the story, it's the *Metamorphoses*.

And it doesn't even matter what the story is, but there's a Mulberry. At one point, somebody turns into his blood turns into a Mulberry tree, or there is a Mulberry tree that is stained by his blood. And it's the story of lovers kept apart and come together. So he puns on the word Mora, which means mulberry tree, but also means it's a separate word that means delay. And the story of Pyramus and Thisbe is one of them is delayed. And so

**Mark:** [01:02:27] it's basically Romeo and Juliet,

**Aven:** [01:02:29] the same plot. And it's the it's in a Midsummer's night dream too, is that little inset narrative in Shakespeare, but yeah, it's very similar plot.

But Mora is also an anagram of amor, love. Right. So that's a kind of, I mean, it's not really, but Isidore would use that as etymology. We saw that with his "discitur plena" can give us, "disciplina ." So Mora, you know, delay, Mulberry tree, amor, and then Mora in moriens, so "dying" has that same, "mor" root, Mors meaning death, but also morsus is a bite. And of course the guy is mauled by lion bitten by a lion. So you get lines you know, it's not really helpful to read this out in Latin, but you know, lines where he has mors next to a Mora, and amor .

And so he has all of these words in a cluster of four or five lines. And the sounds are repeated, but also there's sort of thematic idea that there's a resonance between these words because they're in his mind related words, whether or not they actually are, but then it can go further because, so this I'm going to read from an article here.

"This cluster of anagrammatic and paronomastic puns on mora, amor, mors, mora conceals another etymological wordplay of deeper significance on the Greek derivation of the word. The standard Greek term for mulberries was sykamina but Athenaeus reports that the Alexandrian Greeks called them "mora". ... like the Alexandrians moreover, the Hellenistic Greek poet Nicander, whose lost *Transformations* was an important model for Ovid identifies the tree by the related form of morea, rather than by the more common sykaminos."

So now when he's using mora in Latin, he's referring to the specific Greek author who happened to use this dialectical word for it, So "etymological discussion of the Latin morus and morum preserved by Isidore shows that the Romans were aware of the Greek derivation of these words", that Mora in Latin comes from the Greek. "Athanasius also preserves the information that [a grammarian ] derived Mora from "haimoroa", flowing blood, in his *Etymology.* Virgil clearly alludes to this etymology in his own poem, in the one reference he makes to the Mulberry where he glosses the noun with an etymologically significant adjective "sanguineis... moris," bloody mulberries". So that's the kind of wordplay that again, pun is not quite the right word, but where Virgil by saying,sanguineis... moris, yes, a Mulberry plant can be called bloody because it has red berries. But he's showing that he knows that the Greek word, at least by some scholars is said to come from a word for blood. So he's showing off his etymological knowledge, but not by using that word, by using a Latin word that refers to the Greek word, that was the derivation of this Latin word of the other Latin word.

Right? So that kind of thing. And he says "Ovid follows Virgil by signaling the Greek etymology at the outset and conclusion of his tale" with "sanguinis arbor", the bloody tree, and then at the end of his tale "monimenta cruoris" a monument, a remembrance of blood, of a different word for blood But although he suppresses the word, he glosses.

So in both of those cases, he refers to the tree by reference to it being bloody in Latin without using the word mora, which is the word that is derived, supposedly from the Greek word for blood. Right. So he replaces the word with an etymological gloss.

**Mark:** [01:05:45] So he's showing he knows it without actually using the

**Aven:** [01:05:48] word.

so this is the kind of. many layers of play and cross-linguistic play that these authors like to use.

**Mark:** [01:05:55] It's interesting hearing these these specific examples, it's sort of strikes my ear, that they rely more on the consonants than the vowels.

**Aven:** [01:06:05] Well, I mean, I think that's not really too surprising given the forms of Latin and Greek where the vowels are very shiftable right. Because they can shift with, so I wonder if forms of language of words. Yeah.

**Mark:** [01:06:16] So I wonder if you would, you know, find different kinds of puns in languages that were more vowel predominant.

**Aven:** [01:06:23] Where vowels were more stable and the consonants are what change

**Mark:** [01:06:26] languages but yeah, in a vowel-y, there must be

**Aven:** [01:06:29] languages where the vowels would make more of a difference. Yeah. Oh exactly. I'm sure you get different structures to that. In fact, another article I was looking at points out that very often.

It's alliteration or the initial consonant, in fact, that seemed to be the most important. So if they alliterate then they'll, then they'll think they're connected. And the rest of the word is just kind of, if it follows a vaguely similar pattern, it's close enough. Whereas if the beginnings of the words don't match, they're much less likely to think that they're the same word.

Now, a Latin accent is recessive, so that might be part of it too. The accented syllable may feel more important for reasons like that, but there are sort of rules, so I'm not going to go over them, but there's an article here that I have that I can put a link to that kind of lists the types of etymological connections that the poets and these authors tend to make like A is from B, A is similar to B, therefore A is from B you know, like kind of works out the different, the different levels of complexity that these kinds of assumptions about language can take.

And they're fun, but what's important again, in these poems is they don't necessarily reflect any actual truth about the language. Right. But they reflect a listener's experience of the language or semantic connections, or very often other people's suppositions or other authors' suppositions in the past about such things.

What Virgil likes to do a lot in the Aeneid and elsewhere is have in lines that are very close to each other different forms of words, where one is the etymological seemingly the etymological root of the other. So Saturnia Saturn he has a line in the Aeneid where he talks about Saturnian Juno.

And then two lines later, has a line that has the word "saturata " saturated filled up. there's nothing explicit in the line that connects those two words. It's the simple proximity. Within the same grammatical structure, like larger phrase and within a couple of lines, that proximity.

And the fact that, Saturnian, it was thought to come from the same root as filled up. And therefore he puts the two words in close proximity to show that connection, to emphasize that connection as being part of where that word comes from, but it's, he's not saying it like, there's nothing explicit in the lines that is making that connection. Or elsewhere he has you know, a few hundred lines later, he talks about exsaturabile , overfilled. And then has when he's talking about Juno still, but he, now he doesn't call her Saturnian, but he has this other word for her that has to do with saturation. And then later talks about she's filled up, "satis est" there is enough of hatred for her.

Right. Right. So words to do with satiation or fullness or, plenitude gather around Juno and in one place, her actual epithet of Saturnian because she's the daughter of Saturn. That's why she's called Saturnian Juno, in one place that epithet is used and then elsewhere that epithet isn't there.

But there's these words that have that at etymological connection that cluster around her, because they are appropriate to her, even if they actually technically referred to some other thing in the line, you know, referencing something else. So he'll do that. That's the sort of thing he'll do repeatedly and you can actually go through the Aeneid and find like, a root will be repeated multiple times around particular characters or particular events or something like that repeatedly throughout the Aeneid. So that's another kind of, you know, puns. Isn't really the right word for it, but there's playing with these etymological connections.

That's really all I wanted to point out because I think it's interesting. Well,

**Mark:** [01:09:55] and I think you know, Latin students ever since had been fascinated and aware of this kind of wordplay. And I have one example of that just kind of shows this appreciation for Latin punning.

And it takes us back to the world of colonial British India. There was a general Sir Charles Napier, who was basically the, the military commander in chief, in India in the 18th century. And he sometimes clashed with the East India company. So they didn't always agree on what the right way to govern and handle the situations what was the best way to go?

**Aven:** [01:10:35] How best to exploit the natives? Yes, exactly.

**Mark:** [01:10:38] And in fact, there is a specific extra connection between Napier and William Jones, the linguistic whiz kid who came up with the idea of proto Indo European. Both Napier and Jones specifically reacted against the practice of the Sati, the immolation of widows when their husbands died. And this is in the context of, for instance, Jones, trying to reconcile local customs and laws with British customs and laws and the difficulty of that and Napier said at one point "Be it so. This burning of widows is your custom; prepare the funeral pile. But my nation has also a custom. When men burn women alive, we hang them and confiscate their property. My carpenters shall therefore erect gibbets on which to hang all concerned when the widow is consumed. Let us all act according to our national customs!" And apparently the practice they took the point and . But that's kind of beside the point of this particular pun . When he annexed an area in what is now Pakistan , and he apparently did it without full authority to do so, but he was successful.

So it was kind of all right in the end. Yeah.

**Aven:** [01:11:57] Well, all right. Yes.

**Mark:** [01:12:00] the area which is called Sindh. S I N D H. And so there's one of those aspirated D's for you. Sindh.

That

**Aven:** [01:12:06] we can't pronounce

**Mark:** [01:12:07] properly, yeah..

He is meant to have sent back a report saying "peccavi".

**Aven:** [01:12:14] I have sinned

**Mark:** [01:12:15] sinned, as in S I N N E D.

**Aven:** [01:12:19] But he had also sinned by doing it without permission.

Yes.

**Mark:** [01:12:24] Yes. He's done it. Without permission

He has sinned, he has Sindh. Yes, it's a pun on the words has as well. Yeah.

Unfortunately, this is apocryphal

**Aven:** [01:12:35] It's always apocryphal. They're always apocryphal when they're good. So

**Mark:** [01:12:39] it was, the joke was actually written by and they've been able to track down who did come up with it.

It's a woman named Catherine Winkworth who later went on to write hymns. She was 16 at the time though, that she came up with this and she sent it into *Puck* magazine and they printed it as if it were an actual report, but it was, it was so it was all just a joke. So in the end it turned out that it wasn't actually Napier who punned it.

**Aven:** [01:13:03] Oh, okay. I am going to hit you. You told me I was going to hit you when you told that who was a pundit, he punned it.

**Mark:** [01:13:14] That's commitment to a bit. I told that whole story about a pun just, as a setup for my own pun.

**Aven:** [01:13:21] So, thanks for listening everyone. I think we're done here,

**Mark:** [01:13:25] those pundits, you know?

**Aven:** [01:13:27] Yeah. Okay. Yeah. You've made it. You don't need to keep talking about it. We're done

**Mark:** [01:13:32] one last little tidbit. Speaking of Isidore, one other kind of interesting thing that came out of little kind of detail that came out of Isidore's *Etymologiae* was what are referred to as T-O maps.

This was how maps were kind of visualized in the middle ages in Christian Europe. As if you think of a circle, an O, with a T written through it. So like one line that goes through the middle horizontally and then a sort of half line from the bottom to to the intersectional point.

Yeah. So it looks like a T inside an O. And you have, Asia is actually on the top, so they didn't have North as

**Aven:** [01:14:17] their

**Mark:** [01:14:18] up in, in medieval maps. It's always East is up. And so you have Asia and then you have the two sections below are Africa and Europe, right. And they thought of the world in terms of these three kind of regions.

And the T-O map is based on Isidore's description of the world in the *Etymologiae*. So that is the source of that. And so if you ever look at medieval maps that's what you'll see. And I didn't talk about that in the video, but I did use the image of T-O maps ,particularly in, if you watch the video, it's the background is a T-O map.

**Aven:** [01:14:54] So it's sort of an Easter egg, I guess, cause you didn't explain it at all,

**Mark:** [01:14:57] I didn't explain it at all, but you know, it's Isidore. but you know, as I said, Isidore's book is really an encyclopedic work, so obviously it's going to have, you know, things like geography, geography. Yeah. And speaking of encyclopedias, and I don't really have anything specific to say about this, but I just wanted to bring it up as a topic conversation, not just for, for us, but for you know, any listeners.

But it just occurred to me when thinking of, you know, I know that linkages model of dialects with these complex networks It's similar to you know, the complex, interconnections that you see in encyclopedias, particularly if you think of something like Wikipedia, right.

Which has these references to other Wikipedia entries. And so it forms this complicated network of things. And one of the tools that I use it's really just a different front end for Wikipedia. It's called Wiki web, and it's an app iOS app. And it just allows you to, to look up Wikipedia pages.

But when you click on a link in one entry, it will track the path you took from the previous article. So it'll show the interconnection between those two articles. And then if you keep clicking, you end up building this complicated network of how all of these different Wikipedia articles are connected.

So it's a good way of tracking your research if you're looking for interconnections between concepts. Right? So it's one thing that I use. There is also something called The Six Degrees of Wikipedia, which looks for the connection between any two

**Aven:** [01:16:33] random Wikipedia articles. Yes.

**Mark:** [01:16:36] Which is actually usually not the most useful thing, because the shortest path between two things is not necessarily the most interesting path.

**Aven:** [01:16:44] Well, and there's some fairly basic things that probably turn up in almost every, with so many, Wikipedia articles, just really, isn't going to tell you very much. Yeah.

**Mark:** [01:16:53] But every now and then, you know, I will check it and every now and then I come up with something surprising. Right.

If I think of two things that I think are not at all related and I put them in there and sometimes it will come up with an interesting path between them. Hmm. But you know, it's just a fun thing to play around with. And when I made this video originally this was around the time that, and I've mentioned James Burke before, but

**Aven:** [01:17:21] only once, twice, or 5 million times

**Mark:** [01:17:23] I haven't mentioned him recently.

But it was around this time that there was a Kickstarter to create a sort of James Burke Connections app. That was there were various different plans.

One was just, it was going to be again, a front end for wikipedia to show the connections between things, but there was also, you know, he'd been working on this thing called the Knowledge Web which again is, it was going to be this graphical connections between various things. And there was a sort of model of it that had been a limited model of it that had been created.

And it's still online, but. To show, show this off. As far as I know all of this, went nowhere, which is a shame because I think it's really interesting. But that model of the knowledge web was done on a software called the Brain, which is the same software that I use to track my research. And now I have built up this, basically what it is is it's an etymological dictionary grafted onto an encyclopedia. Right, right. So Isidore would be proud. So there are words,

**Aven:** [01:18:28] Proud but so confused. Yes. So confused.

**Mark:** [01:18:31] So there are words in it and the etymologies are all traced back to whatever, from the English word to whatever, wherever it came from. But then those English words also point to concepts.

So like a historical event or a historical figure or an abstract idea or whatever. And so it's sort of like a Wikipedia-like Encyclopedia of, things, but attached to an etymological dictionary. And so you can find these, that's how I find these loops. And that's how I sort of track all of these loops is by putting them into the brain.

And it's gotten to the size that now I can use it to find things,

**Aven:** [01:19:12] because you put something every time you're doing research, this is where you store the research and you put

**Mark:** [01:19:16] all the notes and links and everything in, and then I can search it and find something that I didn't know was there. So it's sort of already containing more stuff than I can kind of keep in my head.

**Aven:** [01:19:28] It's your brain. Yeah. and when it becomes self-aware, it will be the nerdiest machine that takes over the world,

**Mark:** [01:19:36] but I've often thought that it would be really neat to kind of make something like this available to people to make your "brain", to make my brain available to people. But. It would involve a bit more manpower than I, have available to me to put into the thing.

So what we need is minions

**Aven:** [01:19:54] so many minions,

**Mark:** [01:19:55] Because you know, if you could produce a publicly publishable version of this thing people could go and go, go inside my brain and explore around

**Aven:** [01:20:05] and all they'd find would be pundits.

**Mark:** [01:20:08] Well, in the end, it turns out I punned it.

Oh God.

**Aven:** [01:20:13] All right. Is this it? So yeah, if anyone, you know, has hours and hours of their life, they'd like to devote to completely just for the fun of it project and what not to do that for us. That'd be great. Get in touch. But in the meantime, you'll just use it for your research.

Yes. And people can, the brain is an existing, you can,

**Mark:** [01:20:35] they can get the software. There's a free version of it. So you can build your own brain,

**Aven:** [01:20:38] Is it just brain.com ?

**Mark:** [01:20:40] Yeah, brain.com. So

**Aven:** [01:20:42] yeah. Great. Build your own brains. Build

**Mark:** [01:20:44] your own brain.

**Aven:** [01:20:46] All right. Well, thank you for listening to this very, very etymological episode of the Endless Knot.

Thanks for

**Mark:** [01:20:54] listening. Bye-bye.

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**Aven:** [01:21:30] and if you've enjoyed it, consider leaving us a review on Apple podcasts or wherever you listen. It helps us a lot. We'll be back soon with more musings about the connections around us.

Thanks for listening.

**Mark:** [01:21:40] Bye.