

Dwarves, Pimps, and Galoots, or Chance, Luck, and Serendipity in an Etymologist's Work

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1. Introduction

Many books have been written about how poets and musicians compose their works and how great inventors make their discoveries. Newton's apple, authentic or not, is legendary. The psychology of creativity enjoys the reputation of a serious branch of science. Indo-European linguistics can probably vaunt of as many laws as physics. A thick book treats of them (Collinge 1985), but despite its fullness it does not exhaust the subject. For example, Bugge's Law (about Lithuanian phonetics) and Brandstetter's Law (about vowel shortening in German compounds) are not there. How does a linguist's brain work? I am aware of only one article in which this question is addressed. Karl Verner was falling asleep with a Sanskrit grammar in his hands one night and guessed that the alternation of voiced and voiceless fricatives in Germanic depends on the place of stress in Proto-Indo-European. The story is well-known thanks to Jespersen's retelling of it (1933:13–14). Some insights into the process of linguists' search can be obtained from their biographies (mostly obituaries) and published correspondence. Trubetzkoy's letters to Roman Jakobson (Trubetzkoy 1975), written before and during the formative years of Praguian phonology, show how one idea engendered another, but such gleanings are slim.

For over twenty years I have been working on a new dictionary of English etymology. That work has been documented in numerous articles, as well as two books (Lieberman 2005; 2008) and a bibliography (Lieberman, forthcoming [2009]). In conformity with their genre, etymological dictionaries emphasize the results rather than the process of the investigation. When one reads etymological dictionaries (though few people "read" them; most consult the entries they need), one gets the impression that, to produce an etymology, a specialist has to select the most reliable cognates and reconstruct the protoform or to point to the source of borrowing. When the clues fail (and there may happen to be no clues at all), the author says "of unknown origin" or, as a face-saving device, "of uncertain/debatable origin." In principle, this picture is true to life, except that neither selecting cognates nor reconstructing the protoform, nor finding the lending language (when there is a suspicion or even certainty of borrowing) depends on a set of mechanical procedures.

My interest in describing what may be called the inside of a philologist's lab goes back to the nineteen-sixties, when, still in Leningrad, I gave a series of lectures on great linguists, including Rask, Verner, Sievers, and Trubetzkoy (there were a few others). Much later I wrote an article with the title "An Etymologist at Work" (Lieberman 2000). Here I would like to return to the subject broached in that article.

Entries in some of the greatest etymological dictionaries are devoid of emotion. A classic example is Feist (1939; the same holds for the two previous editions); its style is matter-of-fact and dry. Skeat (1910), in contrast, strikes a more personal note, but even he does not elaborate on how he arrived at his conclusions. A good etymology presupposes a flash of inspiration, a sudden transition of quantity to quality, a combining of facts whose affinity, however obvious, escaped others. It is usually simple (*omne verum simplex*) and immediately persuasive. To be sure, inspiration, to quote Tchaikovsky, does not visit the lazy; hard work as a prerequisite of success should be taken for granted. Drawing on my experience, I can isolate three marginal situations conducive to good results in etymological work. All of them have something to do with chance, luck, and serendipity.

A warning is in order here. Although I realize how controversial all etymologies are, my tone will be apodictic. For proof the reader will be referred to my earlier published work. Naturally, I hope that my solutions are right, but this is not the best place for recapitulating my arguments. Those who will find fault with the etymologies I offered are welcome to refute them, and I will be grateful for their criticism. The ways of discovery, which are the subject of this paper, will be revealed regardless of whether I succeeded in hitting the nail on the head in each case. I believe that I detected both the nails and the heads. Others may and probably will disagree.

2. A Reward for Honoring the Past

Two types of etymological dictionaries exist. Some authors list indubitable cognates of the words to be included and stop there; one of such authors was Ferdinand Holthausen. The information in their dictionaries is moderately useful, but their format does not stimulate further research. Others make an effort to discuss all hypotheses and conjectures by their predecessors, sift them, and only then formulate their conclusions. Obviously, both experts and students find the second type of etymological dictionaries (I call them analytic, as opposed to dogmatic) more useful than the first. Suffice it to put Holthausen's dictionaries of Gothic and Old Icelandic (1934; 1948; both dogmatic) alongside Feist (1939) and De Vries (1977), to see the difference. Yet there is a hitch in the phrase *all hypotheses and conjectures*; predictably, the danger lurks in the word *all*.

Above, I mentioned the bibliography of English etymology as one of the byproducts of my work. (In fact, it is its foundation, for I set out to write an analytic dictionary, an enterprise that, by definition, makes sense only if the literature of the subject has been assembled.) At the moment (December 2008), it contains close to 21,000 articles, reviews, and reports in which something is said about the origin of an English word or its cognate. The works screened for the purpose appeared in more than twenty languages, from Finnish and Faroese to Modern Greek and Slovenian. The earliest article I was able to uncover (by Leibnitz) is dated 1692. Thanks to my volunteers, I have had access to thousands of publications in *Notes and Queries*, *The Athenæum*, *The Saturday Review*, and their likes. This is probably the largest database of English etymology anywhere, but it would be silly to assume that it includes "all" there is. Not only do new works appear every month. Innumerable old publications have been missed through inattention and ignorance and will never be dug up by my team or me, and among them a little note may discuss a dialectal form or a semantic twist that could have shed light on an otherwise impenetrable etymology. However, realizing one's limitations is no reason for despair, and in this section I will give several examples of how important it is to strive for the infinite.

In my work I routinely look through the relevant entries in all the editions of all the dictionaries at my disposal. Authors like Kluge make do with trivialities in their introductory remarks ("as compared with the previous edition, many words have been added, the illustrative material has been expanded," and so forth), rather than giving a list of details, such as "I find my previous treatment of the following words incomplete or wrong." One of the words I investigated was *dwarf*. It has congeners in all the Old Germanic languages except Gothic. Even a cursory look at the many suggestions on its origin shows their weakness. It follows from the Scandinavian myths that the dwarves were the gods' apprentices: they were useful insofar as they produced the mead of poetry and all kinds of great artifacts. Their status, not their physique, made them appear small, even though *dweg* and others glossed Lat. *pumillio* and its synonyms. Consequently, the etymologies that compared Gmc¹ **dweg-* with words meaning 'crooked; tiny; perverse; divergent' should be dismissed out of hand. Kluge (1884) did not guess the origin of **dweg-*, but pointed out that *r* in *dweg* need not be old, for it may have developed by rhotacism from **z*; the protoform may therefore have been **dwezg-* (<**dwezk-*). Later he gave up this reconstruction, and it was forgotten.

When I saw Kluge's **dwezk-*, everything in my ideas about Germanic dwarves fell into place. According to the most ancient beliefs, supernatural beings brought on diseases. Language has retained

¹ The following abbreviations have been used in the text: Bulg. - Bulgarian, Dan. - Danish, dial. - dialectal, Du. - Dutch, Engl. - English, G. - German, Gmc - Germanic, Go. - Gothic, Icel. - Icelandic, It. - Italian, Lat. - Latin, MDu. - Middle Dutch, ME - Middle English, Mod. - Modern, OE - Old English, OI - Old Icelandic, ON - Old Norse, Russ. - Russian, Swed. - Swedish.

many traces of those superstitions: *god* is related to *giddy*, *elfshot* means ‘lumbago’ (cf. OE *ylfen* ‘raving mad’), and *troll*, most likely, has the same root as *droll*. The dwarves, before they became anthropomorphic, must have shared their evil power with the gods, elves, and trolls. **Dwes-k-* can be compared with Du. *dwaas* ‘foolish’, OE *dwæs* ‘crazy’, etc. For details, including the tricky question about when the dwarves “diminished in size,” see the entry *dwarf* in Liberman 2008. One should never feel overconfident when dealing with etymology, but I am almost sure that *dwerg-* is related to the family of *dwaas*. This solution would not have occurred to me if I had not taken the trouble to consult the “outdated,” almost antiquarian edition of Kluge’s dictionary.

A similar episode happened in my research into Old Germanic names of leprosy. Somewhere I found the title of an early nineteenth-century commentary on the Gothic Bible (Henshall 1807). I realized that this book could not have much value, for otherwise, references to it would have turned up in later works (and they hardly ever did). However, I ordered it through interlibrary loan and copied the entire volume. My expectation did not deceive me: the book turned out to be perhaps the most useless one I had read in my life (to render it even more useless, it has no word index), but a certain note attracted my attention: the author remarked that Go. *þrustfill* ‘leprosy’ must be related to Engl. *thrush* ‘a disease affecting the mouth of infants’. This was an original idea; yet even the omniscient Feist had no notion of it.

The Old English cognate of *þrustfill* is *þrustfell*. The second element of the compound (*-fill* ~ *-fell*) means ‘fell, hide, skin’, but *þrust-* ~ *þrust-* remains a puzzle. Most etymologists believe that the vowel of *þrust-* is long (Gothic did not differentiate between *ū* and *ū* in spelling), compare *þrust-* with such words as OI *protinn* ‘swollen’, and ascribe OE *st-* to metathesis. *þrustfill* ~ *þrustfell* emerged as ‘swollen skin’. After I examined the vast literature on the subject, I saw that all three conclusions rest on a most flimsy foundation. Furthermore, I felt convinced that Henshall, the overall uselessness of his commentary notwithstanding, was right. The *OED* and the dictionaries recycling its etymologies remain noncommittal as to the origin of *thrush* (the disease), but its affinity with Dan. *trøske* and Swed. *torsk* ‘rotten wood’ should hardly be called into question. OE *þrustfell*, not Go. *þrustfill* preserved the original form, with *u* in both being short. *þrustfill* meant ‘rotten skin’, not ‘swollen skin’, a more appropriate name for leprosy (Gk *λεπρός* means ‘scaly’). I wrote an article inspired by Henshall’s etymology (Liberman 2002a), and not only my conclusions regarding *þrustfill*, but the very subject of that article (a deviation from my work on the dictionary, for *þrustfell* did not continue into Modern English) owed its existence to reading a book one may happily have left untouched. Old Icelandic for “leprosy” was *líkþrá*, but I wonder whether the medieval Scandinavians had a word with the inner form of OE *þrustfell*. One of the most famous Icelandic manuscripts is called *Morkinskinna*, literally ‘rotten skin’. Could it contain reference to leprosy, a reference we no longer understand? In 2002 this association did not occur to me.

Finally, I will touch on the derivation of *galoot* ‘an awkward, uncouth, or oafish person.’ This is also a success story, and two unpredictable events figure in it. Several times a year I speak on Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) in the program “Midmorning.” Listeners are invited to ask questions about etymology, and I am expected to answer them. As a rule, I know the answer, but sometimes “concede defeat” and promise to return to the subject in my weekly blog “The Oxford Etymologist” on the website of Oxford University Press.

One day a question came about the origin of the word *galoot*. Naturally, I do not remember offhand all the information stored in my database and indexes, but I felt positive that *galoot* was not among my words, and so it turned out to be. Dictionaries feature it but either say “of unknown origin” or suggest improbable sources of borrowing, such as Scots *gilly* ~ *gillie* ‘a professional guide and servant for sportsmen’, MDu. *gelubt* ‘castrated’, or Du. *genoot* ‘comrade, companion’. Although *galoot* (also spelled *galoot* and *geeloot*) was recorded only in the 19th century, it must have been around for a long time. Judging by the 1867 citation in the *OED*, the word belonged to sailors’ slang and meant not only ‘an awkward soldier’ but also ‘an inexperienced marine’. With time it broadened its sphere of application and (at least in American English) became an informal (slangy) synonym for ‘a clumsy person’.

While screening the literature for my database, my assistants and I disregard the articles that hold out no promise for English etymology. This is why we missed Emil Öhmann’s work on the influence of Italian on the vocabulary of German (1940). More probably, it was one of my assistants who felt

discouraged by the title, for I have great respect for Öhmann's scholarship, and his name, which said nothing to a student, would have attracted my attention. Quite recently, somebody's reference to the words Öhmann discussed has aroused my interest, and I decided to read that article. It dealt with the naval vocabulary of Early German, and, among other things, I learned that in the Middle Ages *galleotto* 'galley slave' became part of sailors' international lingo and meant 'sailor' (apparently, with derogatory connotations; cf. Mod. It. *galleotto* 'cunning person; pimp' and even 'pirate'). Dutch also had it; the Middle Dutch form was *galioot*. A Middle English counterpart of *galioot* has not been found, and Öhmann does not mention *galoot* (nor could he be expected to know such a word), but it would be a minor miracle if the Dutch and the English words did not belong together. The pejorative meaning of *galleotto* is still present in *galoot*. Its late attestation is a problem, but old slang often escaped the notice of writers. Since *galoot* is not a bookish word and its pronunciation could not be affected by its spelling, it must have become known in English before the shift of ME /o:/ (the value of *oo* in Dutch) to /u:/.

Two chance events led to my discovery of this etymology. The main one was the question from a listener on MPR. Without it, the history of *galoot* would have remained outside the sphere of my immediate interests. I try to concentrate on the history of English words lacking established cognates. Those are many. Some of them have universal currency (for example, *boy*, *girl*; *ever*, *yet*; *slang*, *slum*, and even the notorious *F*-word). Others are less common, and slang from all over the English-speaking world predominates in that group. Their origin is hard and, given our resources, often impossible to trace. *Galoot* seems to be one of them. As noted, but for the question on MPR, it would have joined hundreds of equally unpromising words on my list. On the other hand, if Öhmann's article had caught my fancy some time earlier, mention of *galleotto* would not have been enough to make me think of *galoot*. Oscar Wilde once remarked how important it is to miss a business appointment in London. Sometimes it is also important to miss an article, for it may surface later when it is really needed. On a more serious note, I can add that for a database like mine everything should be read twice: first for an initial, of necessity incomplete, familiarity with the material and after some time again, with more experienced eyes. Unfortunately, rereading everything is an unachievable goal.

Not too long ago, when Webster's dictionary (including its 19th-century versions from 1864 on), *The Random House Dictionary*, and others like them were being prepared for a new edition, their publishers used to hire consultants with the request to revise the etymologies. As a general rule, the results were not worth the trouble, for serious updating requires an exhaustive database (which even now does not exist for any Germanic language) and ample time (whereas dictionary-makers work against strict, often inhuman deadlines). But one more factor has to be taken into account, namely chance and luck. The best specialist in the world cannot be told to produce a convincing etymology of *galoot* (this word is cited here only as an example). No one is able to stare an etymology out of an obscure linguistic form. And as though to mock the efforts of diligent scholars, an elegant solution may come as a reward for some "extramural" work when it is least expected.

I might add a story of *yeoman* (a compound), whose origin remains problematic because *yeo-* has so far defied an explanation. The existing etymologies of this element are so unconvincing that they are usually given with disclaimers. My dealings with *yeoman* and *prutsfill* are similar in that I ran into the right (and easy!) answer without a thought of either. In an old Dutch book that is all but forgotten even in the Netherlands (van den Helm 1859), I saw discussion of the West Germanic cognates of British English dial. *yeomath* ~ *yemath* 'a second-year crop of grass', a word that the *OED*, with good reason, cites in the entry *yeoman* and for which the same putative (wrong) explanation has been offered as for *yeoman*. Once I knew the origin of *yeomath*, I could account for *yeo-* in *yeoman* (the Dutch scholar did not think of the English word). But a long essay is needed for this plot, and I mentioned *yeomath* only because, by a curious coincidence, we will have to return to a second-year crop of grass below.

3. A Reward for Unpredictable Knowledge

Etymologies are not theorems: they cannot be proved by means of postulates and syllogisms. Sound correspondences make it possible to weed out some tempting but inadmissible look-alikes and connect remote forms, but dubious cases muddy the water all the time. The affinity of OE *fæmne* with Lat. *fēmina* (both mean 'woman') shatters at the *f-/f-* hurdle, and no evidence for positing a loan from

Latin has been found. Yet it is hard to avoid the feeling (perhaps ungrounded) that some bond between the two nouns exists. Even more baffling is the history of Engl. *guilt*. OE *gylt* meant ‘debt; offence’, that is, something to be paid for. Its kinship with OE *gielðan* ‘to pay’ (the etymon of *yield*) is reinforced by G. *Gült(e)* ‘tax’ (a southern word). However, the Modern English form should have been *g(u)ild*, like *guild* ‘a corporate group’, a borrowing of ON *gildi* ‘tribute’, hence ‘guild’. Dictionaries either call *guilt* a word of unknown origin or mention hesitatingly *Gülte* as a cognate. The *-t/-d* problem remains unsolved.

The rejection of *fēmina* and *Gülte* as cognates of *fǣmne* and *guilt* justifies the term *the science of etymology*, for comparative phonetics did turn medieval and 18th-century guesswork into a semblance of science, but, other than that, this “science” is a game of probabilities in which a great deal depends on analogy. Not all semantic bridges inspire confidence (they are too easy to draw), but if a pattern emerges in the development of meaning across several languages, such bridges become more secure. In several cases I could use my knowledge of the Slavic languages to advantage. Germanic etymologists can seldom read fluently, let alone speak, any of those languages. I will touch on two examples.

Icel. *glenna*, a noun with cognates elsewhere in Scandinavian, designates various open spaces, from a ray of sunshine between the clouds to a clearing in the forest and perineum. But it also means ‘trickery’, and here the gamut runs all the way from ‘entertainment’ to ‘deceptive movement in wrestling’. Among its meanings we find ‘a flirt’. The verb *glenna* refers to walking with long steps (striding), stretching, making faces, and the clearing of clouds. The semantic kernel of this polysemy is probably ‘move fast, leap’. From ‘jump, leap’ we get ‘frolic; indulge in sports; have a good time’. Public games took place in open fields, and the name of the places where physical activities were carried out and where people enjoyed themselves was transferred to the forms of entertainment associated with them. Among “open spaces” were an open mouth (cf. the meaning ‘to grimace, make faces’) and the distance between the legs of a jumper; from the latter ‘perineum’ was derived. ‘Perineum’ must have yielded ‘vagina’ and ‘featherbrained woman, flirt’. (Engl. *glen* ‘valley’ is from Gaelic Irish, where it has no etymology, and this is why I think the Celtic word—Welsh also has its cognate—is a borrowing from Scandinavian; see Liberman 2002b; first discussed in Liberman 1996.)

This looks like one of the insecure semantic bridges mentioned above. If by a series of small steps we can arrive from “joke” to “perineum,” where will the line be drawn? I regularly consult Vasmer (1950-58) and other etymological dictionaries of the Slavic languages. The root of Russ. *shutka* ‘joke’ is **seu-* ‘seethe, act violently’. The initial idea was, as in Icelandic, ‘contest, public game’, not ‘witty remark’, for in the early Middle Ages words for “joke” and “fun” never referred to verbal resourcefulness. *Shutka*, as I learned from Vasmer, also occurs in some Bulgarian dialects and means ‘vagina’. The seeming incompatibility of the meanings ‘joke’/‘vagina’ made the most distinguished Bulgarian etymologists posit two unrelated homonyms, but the history of Icel. *glenna* and its cognates dispels all doubts on this score. The situations in Scandinavian and Slavic are parallel, and we detect the coveted pattern: “jump, jump for entertainment, joke,” → “space between the jumper’s legs” → “any open space,” from “a clearing between clouds” to “perineum/vagina.” In Icelandic, all the stages are present, and the etymologist should only rearrange them to find the starting point (which is no easy task), while in Slavic we observe the extreme points (‘joke’ – ‘vagina’), though here, too, Russ. dial. *shutëm* ‘fallow ground’ (stress on the second syllable) and *shutyi* ‘hornless’ allude to “open spaces.” By way of compensation, the fact that the root of Russ. *shutka* and its cognates in Latvian and Lithuanian (**seu-*) means ‘seethe, behave wildly’ makes the connection between “quick motion; wild activity” and “joke” more transparent than in Germanic. Once again I owe my understanding of a difficult word to chance or luck. I am a student of Germanic and accidentally a native speaker of a Slavic language. If I knew Ewe, Japanese, or Welsh as I know Icelandic and Russian, other unpredictable associations would have helped me to solve etymological puzzles. Regrettably few historical linguists are polyglots like Jacob Grimm and Antoine Meillet.

My second example is about Engl. *fog* ‘thick mist’ and Engl. dial. *fog* ‘second-year crop’. We face the familiar question: two ostensibly incompatible meanings of the same word or homonyms? In light of another Slavic parallel, preference should be given to the first solution. *Fog* ‘thick mist’ is almost certainly of Scandinavian origin. Among its possible cognates we find G. *feucht* ‘damp’.

The root of those words means ‘to rot’. Russian has *par* ‘steam, vapor’ and ‘a field left unsown’; both, as it seems, are related to the verb *pret’* ‘to become damp, moist’. Such a field is also said to be

pod parom ‘under steam/vapor’; with time it regains its fertility. In the past, the Germanic- and Slavic-speakers practiced the same system of agriculture, and the idea of grass growing on the “steaming soil” of fallow land suggested the same way of calling this phenomenon. Being under steam/vapor is an accurate description of the process, not a metaphor (see Liberman 2002b). Although Russ. *pod parom* (unlike Bulg. *shutka*) is a fairly common item of Slavic vocabulary, an English etymologist cannot be expected to know it. As with *glenna*, my ability to explain *fog* by referring to Slavic did not reward hard work or a profound knowledge of semantic laws. My “benefactor” was chance, an accident of birth.

4. A Reward for Serendipity

Despite my effort to classify the rewards for good luck into several groups, under each rubric the story resolves itself into the same: a decisive clue leading to the solution may be found by chance. My last example is of similar nature.

An old dictionary glossed Engl. *pimp* so: ‘a procurer of illicit sex; faggot’. A modern lexicographer, aware of the offensive meaning of *faggot* (which, incidentally, does not predate the 20th century; before that time it existed as a broad term of abuse, applied to obnoxious men, women, and children—so still in Samuel Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh*), would not have resorted to it in this context and said ‘a bundle of wood’ (and *illicit* would have been left out as judgmental, but this is beside the point). I was struck by the fact that *pimp* and *faggot*, two words pertaining to the sexual sphere and having negative connotations, were able, under certain circumstances, to function as interchangeable synonyms and decided that they should be investigated together. This hypothesis bore fruit, though I did not succeed in tracing every step in the development of *pimp*: see the corresponding entries in Liberman 2008. I looked up *pimp* in multiple dictionaries for a reason (*pimp*, being a word “of unknown origin,” had been on my list from early on), but the juxtaposition *pimp – faggot* surfaced by chance.

Pimp ‘bundle of wood’ and *pimp* ‘pander’ (to use a euphemistic gloss from another old dictionary) are as remote from each other as are *fog* ‘mist’ from *fog* ‘grass’ and *shutka* ‘joke’ from *shutka* ‘vagina’, and determining the nature of their relation constituted the first point of business. It so happened that at that time I was asked to direct a senior project (a work required for graduation) by a student who had embarked on a paper on Nazi German. I told her to read a few main books on the subject and leaf through a set of *Der Stürmer* (our library has many issues of that murderous newspaper). To make sure that the student would use her time with profit, I went down to the Periodical Room and examined *Der Stürmer* myself.

One of the first typical Nazi words I saw was *Pimpf* ‘a member of the youth organization under Hitler’ (a feeding group for the Hitlerjugend). I had known the word, but, understandably, it was not active in my German (*pimpelig* ‘sickly; effeminate’ had occurred to me without any help from dictionaries). The near homonymy *Pimp – Pimpf* suggested common origin. *Pimpf*, originally slang, became known to the German educated public late. Eduard Mueller, the only 19th-century German scholar who compiled an English etymological dictionary (1865-67), included *pimp* but did not mention *Pimpf*. He would not have missed it if he had been aware of its existence: the parallel is too obvious. Skeat and Murray’s contemporaries had even less chance to come across *Pimpf* and tried to etymologize *pimp* through Romance words, as did their predecessors. Since the 1920s not a single original dictionary of English etymology has been written, and *pimp* has been dismissed as a word of unknown origin.

Everything I could say about *pimp* I said in my 2008 dictionary and here will only repeat the conclusions. *Pimp*, I believe, is related to Engl. *pimple*, *pamper*, G. *Pumper(nickel)*, and the like. All of them are united by the idea of swelling. A *pimp ~ Pimpf* is, as it were, a person insufficiently swollen to give a big fart (the most recent German etymologists explain *Pimpf* correctly but do not mention *pimp*). Likewise, a pimple is a small swelling. To pamper is to feed to the full, glut; hence the figurative meaning, the only one extant in the Standard today ‘to indulge to excess’ (note the sound symbolic alternation *i – a* in *pimp*, *Pimpf/pimple – pamper*). *Pumper-* in *Pumpernickel* reminds us of the effect this bread has on the stomach. In some logging camps in North America a *pimp* was (and perhaps still is) the name reserved for an errand boy, a servant at the lowest level of the social hierarchy. Like

faggot, *pimp* ‘pander’ emerged as a derogatory word, an expression of contempt. The specialized sense must have developed in the cant of the London underworld. G. *Pimpf* experienced an amelioration of meaning and became a patronizing, slightly humorous term of caress: a *Pimpf* was small but destined to grow and serve the Third Reich as befits an adult. *Pimp* ‘faggot’ is a *small* bundle of wood (the obsolete word *bavin*, also ‘a bundle of wood’, may, in similar fashion, be related to a word for an extended stomach).

If I had not encountered *Pimpf* in *Der Stürmer*, I may not have unraveled the history of *pimp*. Clearly, advising students on senior projects is not the easiest path to the intricacies of etymology. Yet this method worked for me. I still do not understand why German has *Pimpf* rather than **Pfimpf*; a monosyllabic word with a short vowel and the sequence *pf – pf* is not unpronounceable (*Pimpf* looks like a parody of Grassmann’s Law, which prohibits two voiced aspirates in a Sanskrit word): cf. *Pfropf* ‘cork, stopper’ (but *Pfropf*, a back formation from *Pfropfen*, is a domesticated Latin word).

5. Conclusion

One of the questions I hear with some regularity is: “What does it take to become an etymologist?” I explain that etymology presupposes a detailed knowledge of comparative phonetics and grammar, familiarity with many languages, old and new, and a willingness to explore every conceivable area of human experience, for there is nothing in life that does not leave its imprint on language. But the older I get, the more often I realize how much in my work depends on chance, luck, and serendipity. Students of biology and other sciences have, as I know, similar stories to tell. Perhaps a series of “novelettes” like the present one may stimulate an interdisciplinary symposium on the subject of unpredictability in scholarly discoveries. Nowadays a project with the word *interdisciplinary* in it may attract financial support and an enthusiastic crowd of people sitting between two stools.

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Selected Proceedings of the 2008 Symposium on New Approaches in English Historical Lexis (HEL-LEX 2)

edited by R. W. McConchie,
Alpo Honkapohja, and Jukka Tyrkkö

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2009

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