

International Conversation Cafe

Lifestyle Topic: Etymology- Word Origins

Etymology is a big word for a pretty simple idea. Etymology is the study of the history of words and their origins. Etymology traces how words and phrases change meaning over time. “Etymon,” comes from the Greek and means, “true sense.” “Logia” means the study of words.

Read through the following examples that trace the origin of a few words. Or think of a word and look it up the origin at etymonline.com.

Teddy Bear is the name for a child’s toy, a stuffed animal that looks something like a bear. President Theodore Roosevelt went on a bear hunt in 1902 on the Mississippi River. His tracker found and caught a bear that was injured. But Roosevelt refused to shoot it calling the act unsportsmanlike. When the news media heard the story, a cartoon was circulated picturing Roosevelt standing with his back to the bear, his gun butt on the ground. When Morris Michtom saw the drawing of Roosevelt he created a little stuffed bear and called it “Teddy’s bear.” The toy was an immediate success.



Tell the story, in your own words. Where did the teddy bear toy come from?

*What is a favorite children’s toy in your home country.
Do you know the origin of the toy?*



Jigsaw tool

Jigsaw is a word to describe a type of puzzle. Around 1760, John Spilsbury, a teacher in London, wanted to teach what shape each county of England looked like and where they were located. He drew the map of England out on a sheet of mahogany wood and cut the county outlines apart with a jig saw tool. In this way, the county shapes uniquely fit together. He then manufactured and sold the puzzle. The idea caught on and was developed and spread across Europe and the United States.

What are some favorite kinds of puzzles in your country?

Phoney is a word to describe something that is fake, an imitation, not real. For example, if someone took a metal like gold and spread it over the surface of an object, like a ring, but called the ring pure gold, the ring would be considered a phoney. Gilding is the process of spreading the metal over another surface. The word phoney comes from the English word, fawney. British thieves and swindlers were the first to use this word.

What is something you would call a phoney?

Malaria refers to an infectious disease that is characterized by fever and chills. The disease is carried by mosquitos. The word, malaria, comes from a medieval Italian root word, “mal”, which means bad and “aria” which means air. The word was first used to describe the bad odor from swamps surrounding Rome. It was first believed that the air caused the infection, not the mosquitos that carried the infection.



How diseases spread have often been misunderstood. Give another example.



Fringe describes the decorative border on clothing. The Latin root for fringe is fimbria. Fimbria was name for Friulia, which was a settlement on the farthest northeast corner of the Ancient Roman Empire. It was named for the Norse god, Frey, which was the god of prosperity and fertility. A fringe is something that is on the edge of a garment.

Sometimes we say a person is on the fringe. What would that mean?

Hazard is a way to describe some kind of danger or something that may be harmful. The word comes from the Arabic term, “al zahr” means dice. In western Europe, the word hazard became related to the word dice because of how dice was used to gamble, which is of course, a risky business.



How else do we use the word hazard?

<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Everyday-Etymology-Interesting-Origins-of-Ten-Common-Words-That-Might-Surprise-You>