

Donna Minkova and Robert Stockwell. *English words: History and structure*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)  
Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. (ix, 219)

This second edition text, which replaces the 2001 edition, is designed for a course on the increasingly popular topic of the etymology of English words. An accompanying workbook, which is available from the publisher, shall not be discussed here. In earlier generations, when courses in Latin and sometimes Greek were still offered in high schools, many students left high school with a more than passable knowledge about the history of the stratum of vocabulary that was borrowed from French mostly during the time the Norman French ruled the isles, vocabulary which for the most part informs the high culture register, learned speech, and writing. Courses such as those for which this book is designed fill the void created by the current dearth of classical language training in secondary education. Accordingly, the primary focus of this work falls on contributions from the classical languages, i.e., Latin and Greek.

One certainly agrees with the idea that one cannot call oneself educated without possessing knowledge about the words in one's own language (1); this sentiment holds all the more for English, whose vocabulary, in addition to the rich stock from Latin and Greek sources, is drawn from virtually every language of the world. In no small way, the history of the language and thus its speakers is told through the history of its lexicon, as is demonstrated in tabular data for the primary source languages of English loans (53).

The review of major dictionaries is not extraneous for today's students (3), many of whose experience with the genre begins and ends with the miniature glosses retrieved quickly from dictionary.com, nor is the detailed set of instructions for using a dictionary, school content which seemingly dispersed in a cloud of smoke during the era when students were advised instead to 'just guess from the context'. And the dictionaries discussed, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *American*

*Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, and *Webster's Third International Dictionary, Unabridged*, are certainly the right choices.

The discussion of word formation covers the major processes, and some of the unusual and newer examples cited, such as *glitch*, *ditzy*, *google*, and *Skype* (7 – 13) can be expected to spice up a course, although focusing on new stock for examples as a pedagogical tool can cut both ways, as what seems new or recent to more seasoned speakers may fail to register as such on 20 year olds, who experienced ‘new’ words like *CD* and *self esteem* while in the cradle. In the discussion of the highly productive field of acronyms and initialisms (alphabetisms) it is pointed out that an online data base of acronyms lists 4,195,00 entries (18). Since these items do the work of words, any estimate of the number of words in the language, notwithstanding the well-know difficulty in arriving at a satisfactory definition of *word*, will be pushed rather high. Something for students to contemplate.

The authors take the position that items formed through conversion (functional shift) “[in one sense ... are not new items in the lexicon,” as they are “already there in another function” (8 – 9). I am of the camp that unreservedly regards objects of conversion as newly created items, as they carry a new meaning, and perform a new function. It does not seem to do, though, to include in a about chapter word formation the abbreviations found in short message service or computer mediated communications (18 – 19). These exist simply as orthographic devices, employing abbreviation or the rebus principle. *Before* is still *before*, whether represented orthographically as <before> or <be4>. *Are* is still *are*, whether misspelled in haste <our> by undergraduates or represented as <r> in CMC. These are not new words, simply conventionalized, medium-conditioned written representations. In any case both *TGIF* and the restaurant chain which uses it in its name (18) predate the era of SMS.

The discussion of major patterns of borrowing in English, especially that of Greco-Latin items distinguished by periods (37-38) is very useful. While it is true that some grounding in the processes taught in courses in historical linguistics is necessary to fully appreciate the outcomes of

items transmitted during these several periods, it is also true that this exposure helps students grasp the richness of the history of the words in the language; these serve as well to underscore the close interrelations that have always occurred among languages in contact, which is well exemplified in the English outcomes of L. *discus* in *dish*, and later *disco*, *disk*, and *dais*, and in the etymology of *infant* (55).

The “large portion of Japanese words in English” is noted in a paragraph which discusses both non-classical loanwords and “words based on ‘Scientific Latin’” and which makes the remark, the “trend which started with Renaissance ... continues to this day” (53). It is not clear which trend this refers to. Certainly the trend of looking to Greek and Latin sources for learned vocabulary predates the Renaissance considerably, although in that era the practice certainly accelerated as the sciences and scholarly inquiry increased exponentially. It is also true that nonscientific vocabulary, as represented in Japanese words from the twentieth century like *pokemon*, *karaoke*, and *kamakazi*, has been coming into English since the time of the earliest records.

This text is easy going for today’s students, witness the gloss of *plural* “more than one” (67). I would not teach such students that morphemes such as (-ing) and the participle (-en/ed) may function purely as inflections or may via conversion form new words (adjectives) in the same paragraph (as on 74); some settling in is required for these concepts before they are complicated by further extension. It seems useful to point out, also, that consulting historical sources is useful to clarify the question of the orthographic representation of compounds (78), e.g., *today* appeared as <to day> in the literature of the eighteenth century, and <to-day> in some late nineteenth century texts. In general, with students new to the structural study of language, it is useful to clearly distinguish word formation processes from orthographic considerations. In the discussion of the pronunciation of “assimilated” and “unassimilated” Latin terms (ch 10), we are taken where angels fear to tread.

I would likewise want to distinguish between the numerous substitutions (*viz.* replacement rules, 108, f) that English swallowed whole, like Latin allomorphs *-in*, *-im*, *-il*, *-ir*, etc., and

morphophonemic alternations like *inclu-de / -sion*, from English developments like T-Lenition (119), *hap + en*, *hap + y*, etc. In that connection, the pages dedicated to *x*-Drop, *n*-Drop, and their exceptions (131 – 137) concern processes that occurred in Latin in items that were borrowed unanalyzed into English. Meanwhile, the discussion of palatalization, such a highly productive process in English, seems to go by very quick (119).

The brief resume of phonology and morphology offered in Ch 5 and Ch 6 is likely to prove challenging to undergraduates who thought they were signing up for a course in word origins, yet the breadth of example data offered certainly provide a rich sampling of just how variegated outcomes in the English lexicon can be, which is an important goal of the book.

It should be pointed out that, regarding the discussion of the arrangement of dictionary entries for polysemous items (165), that the *American Heritage Dictionary* arranges according to frequency in electronic data bases, changes in which account for differences from one edition to the next (remarks by J. Pickett, April 2005), and to that extent offers a portrait of changing patterns of usage.

This text contains an impressive amount of information about English vocabulary drawn from the several subdisciplines of linguistics. Adroit selection made by an instructor who is familiar with the student population concerned will provide a rich and rewarding study of the topic.

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