

The Etymology of “Grave”

There is one thing that remains constant in language: linguistic change. Languages are constantly evolving and changing in order to fit their environment. As *The English Language* states that although a language is considered dead “they have not *died*: they have changed into something else.” (31). The English language is no different. It has continually changed throughout the centuries until it has become what it is today. There are three distinct periods of change in the English language: Old, Middle, and Modern. Although many of the words that we use today were used in Old English, the word meaning, pronunciation, and spelling have changed and developed. This linguistic change can be seen in individual words throughout the English language. One such word is the word “grave” which can be traced back to its Indo-European roots.

The word “grave” has multiple meanings and each meaning is used in a different part of speech. The most common and oldest meaning is “a place of burial for a dead body, typically a hole dug in the ground and marked by a stone or mound.” (merriam-webster.com). It is quite obvious why this definition has been around for as long as it has. From the beginning of time there has been a need to dispose of the bodies of the dead. It can be inferred from the age of this definition that burial was a somewhat if not widely used method. According to etymonline.com from the Middle-Ages to the 17th century graves were merely a temporary holding place for bones until “removed to ossuaries after some years and the grave used for a fresh burial.” Permanent graves did not become common until around the year 1650. This definition can be traced all the way back to its Proto-Indo-European root and is generally used as a noun. The Proto-Indo-European root of this word is *ghrebh* meaning “to dig, or to scrape”. This root changed into the Proto-Germanic root *graban* which changed into the Old English word *græf*

meaning “grave, ditch, or cave.” The Old English word has cognates, or words that come from the same root, in many other old languages. These are: from Old Saxon *graf*; from Old Frisian *gref*; from Old High German *grab* meaning "grave or tomb;" from Old Norse *gröf* meaning "cave," and from Gothic *graba* meaning "ditch". (etymonline.com).

Later on, starting in the 19th century, this definition of the word “grave” was used in many different sayings and colloquialisms. One example of this is the phrase “turning or spinning in his grave” which refers to someone living doing something that the person in the grave, the deceased, would not have approved of. Another example is “he has one foot in the grave” meaning that a person is near death. Or “he is digging his own grave” meaning that a person is doing something that will cause his own downfall. Or lastly, “silent as the grave” which usually refers to secret keeping. Although most of these may have been used regularly in speech at one time, now they are still used, but mostly in literature. This is just another testament to the ever-evolving nature of language.

Another definition and the adjective form of the word “grave” comes from the Proto-Indo-European root *gwere* meaning “heavy”. There are also many cognates for this definition. These are: from Sanskrit *guruh* meaning "heavy, weighty, or venerable;" from Greek *baros* meaning "weight," from Old English *cweorn*; from Gothic *kaurus* meaning "heavy;" and from Lettish *gruts* meaning "heavy". This developed into the Latin word *gravis*, which means "weighty, serious, heavy, grievous, or oppressive." This eventually developed into a word that is the most similar to our Modern English spelling and definition, the Middle French word *grave* meaning “serious”. In Modern English this is usually used to describe something that is serious or oppressive in nature. Essentially it means bad or unwanted news. This word is not commonly

used in the American English of 2015, at least among the youth, but its meaning is still completely understood (etymonline.com).

Another word that comes from essentially the same root as “grave” is the modern English verb form of the word “engrave” or “engraven”. The earliest known form of this word comes from the Proto-Germanic root *grabanan*. Like the other definitions of “grave” this Proto-Germanic root has many cognates in old languages. These are: from Old Norse *grafa*, from Old Frisian *greva*, from Dutch *graven*, from Old High German *graban*, from German *graben*, and from Gothic *graban* meaning “to dig, or carve”. This developed into its Old English variation, *grafan*, which became *graven* in Middle English, and changed into *engrave* in Modern English. This word is not used a lot in Modern English unless the speaker is referring to engraving inscriptions or something similar. (etymonline.com).

One other meaning of the word “grave” that is no longer used in Modern English comes from the Old French word, *greve*, meaning shore. This changed into the French word *grave* and eventually to a word that was used mainly in late Middle English, *grave*. This word referred to “cleaning the bottom of a ship by tarring it”. The origin of this variation is not completely known for certain, but it is suspected to be from the Old French *greve* because the ships would have been run aground (merriam-webster.com). For obvious reasons this variation of the word is no longer used in our modern language and thus is not applicable to anything modern, but it is always interesting to look at the linguistic deviations that a word has taken before it becomes what we know of as the modern definition.

One of the primary reasons for the dramatic shifts in the English language was the conquered and the conquerors that inhabited England for centuries. As the land and culture was in a state of constant movement and flux depending on who was living there, it stands to reason

that the language and dialects of the country would face a similar fate. As *The English Language* states, although we do not know a lot about the Germanic tribes that invaded England and took over the Celtic peoples who were living there, we do know that this time period was full of dramatic shifts in language and people. Similar to most lands and languages of those that are conquered, “the Germanic language of the incomers became the dominant one, and there are few traces of Celtic influence on Old English” (106). The only words that really were able to retain their place in the vocabulary of the people were the old Celtic place names. As a result English has a Germanic base. Even with all of the influence of other languages and dialects that have come in and “polluted” the English language, it still can take its basic structure and words from its Germanic roots. Eventually, Old English was formed from the compilation of all of the dialects of the Germanic tribes that settled what is now England. Even the grammar of Old English was formed by simplifying Proto-Germanic grammar.

After the Norman conquest of 1066, Old English was met with a French influence. According to *The English Language*, “French became the language of the upper classes in England simply because it was the language of the conquerors” (145). This changed Old English into Middle English, but the country still retained its various dialects. During the thirteenth century French began to die out in England and there was a shift back to English. English had never gone anywhere as it was still the mother-tongue of most of the people living there but it eventually gained prestige in the court. However, French still played a major role in what English became. *The English Language* states, “Although French died out in England, it left its mark on English. Its main effect was on the vocabulary and an enormous number of French loanwords came into the language during the Middle English period.” (155). This explains why many of our words have a French root or are inherently French and even why the word “grave”

has its own French variations and definitions. Since that time our language has taken words from many different languages and that has given English one of the largest vocabularies of any language in the world.

Language is ever evolving and changing and the English language is not an exception. The word “grave” is one example of this, but there are many other examples throughout the language. As English has evolved over the centuries we can expect it to continue to evolve and change as time goes on. As humans change and expand their viewpoints, their language will change as well.

Works Cited

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