
The weather

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Etymology and the winds of change

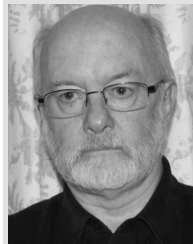
THERE'S A LOT OF weather about these days, isn't there? Until relatively recently the weather was just what we saw when we drew back the curtains and looked out of the bedroom window in the morning, but now things have changed dramatically. These days every time we turn on the TV or open a newspaper it is quite 'usual' for some part of the world to be experiencing 'unusual' weather. The Arctic is not yet a tropical paradise but it is starting to move in that direction and England, parts of which a mere year or so ago were drying up like so many dead leaves, has in recent months seen some of the worst floods in its history. And who among us had heard of the word *tsunami* (Japanese for 'harbour wave') before the terrible events of December 2004 in Thailand and Indonesia?

Like many words in English the word 'weather' has changed its meaning quite a bit over the centuries. We now apply it to any prevailing meteorological conditions, so we can talk about 'fine weather' or 'dreadful weather' and, of course, use it in a totally neutral sense when we ask the question 'what's the weather going to be like tomorrow?' But at one time 'weather' was applied only to rough, stormy conditions, which explains why even the briefest look at the history of the word soon reveals the fact that 'weather' is cognate with 'wind'. Both words can be traced back to the Indo-European root **wa* 'to blow' and are related to the Sanskrit word *vati*, 'it blows' and its associated noun *vatas* 'wind'. Descendents of these can be seen in most modern European languages. French, Spanish and Italian have *vent*, *viento* and *vento* respectively and Russian has *veter*, all of which simply mean 'wind'.

The same roots are found in words connected with artificially as opposed to naturally generated wind. One of the Latin descendents

of the Sanskrit *vati* was the noun *vannus*, an instrument used for winnowing grain by generating a current of air. The Latin term for this process was *ventilare*, a verb we will have no difficulty in recognising as the origin of the modern term, to ventilate. And the noun *vannus* made its way into Middle English where *fannus* appeared in the fourteenth century as the precursor of the modern English noun, fan.

Another curious fact about the evolution of the word 'weather' is the way in which it seems



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to be linked in people's minds to the concept of time. We are all familiar with the now somewhat archaic term 'tempest' used to denote stormy weather, particularly at sea. The origin of the word is the Latin *tempestas*, 'storm', which is itself allied to another Latin noun, *tempus* 'time'. And the descendants of this little word are strewn all over Europe: French has *temps*, Spanish has *tiempo* and Italian has *tempo*, words which mean both 'time' and 'weather'. And just a little further afield we find Russian with *pogoda* for 'weather', which also bears an historical association with time. The letters *god*, seen within the word, form the modern Russian for 'year' but in former times it was less specific and simply designated any favourable time or season for whatever activity was planned. Presumably, the reason for these parallel associations of time and weather in the mind is an unconscious recognition that the best of times can be all too brief and even the most ferocious storms are of limited duration.

Arguably, the most devastating meteorological events all over the world in recent years has been flooding. Britain, Germany, Bangladesh and many other places have been subjected to floods of almost biblical proportions since the effects of global warming began to make themselves felt. And if we cast an etymologist's eye at the word 'flood' and its related vocabulary some fascinating associations and links between English and other Indo-European languages begin to emerge.

One of the characteristic sound-shifts affecting this group of languages involves the way in which the sounds 'p' and 'f' frequently interchange according to set patterns. Where northern European languages such as English has the letter 'f' languages such as Latin and Greek frequently have a 'p'. Perfect examples of this are the words 'flood' 'flow' and 'fleet', which are all cognate with the Latin noun *pluvia* 'rain' and Greek verb *pleo* 'to float' 'to swim' or 'to sail'.

But another cognate Latin verb with less immediately obvious linguistic connections here is *plorare*. Preserving the association with streaming and flooding this verb basically meant 'to weep' 'to shed tears', but when combined with the prefix *de-* (becoming *deplorare*) it acquired greater emotional intensity, and now meant 'to weep bitterly'. In this form the verb passed into English and gave us the modern infinitive 'to deplore' which, stripped of connotations of weeping and wailing, is now

used simply to express strong disapproval. If we then take things a little further and substitute a different Latin prefix, *im-*, 'in-', we arrive at another verb, *implorare* 'to beg with tears in one's eyes' and this, of course, is our verb 'to implore'. So if we 'deplore' the authorities' tardy response to natural disasters and see television images of people 'imploring' their governments for help, we are linguistically not all that far removed from the floods that caused the damage in the first place.

The lady or gentleman who appears on the TV every night to tell us what the weather is going to be like for the next few days is a 'meteorologist'. But why should weather-watchers be called 'meteorologists'? Shouldn't the term be applied to students of meteors and other heavenly bodies? Or is the connection more apparent than real? The answer to this question is no. There is a definite connection between the two and it provides us with another example of how a word's original meaning can drift to such an extent that it becomes blurred if not lost altogether.

The word 'meteor' is from the Greek *aero* 'I lift' and when the prefix *meta*, indicating a change of position, is added, another verb is formed, *metaero* 'I lift up high'. A plural noun derived from this verb is *ta meteora*, meaning 'those things on high' and anybody who took an interest in those things 'high up' in the sky such as meteors, comets, stars etc. and then attempted to predict the weather from his or her observations was designated a *meteorologos* and this gave us the word we use today. But it seems that trying to predict the weather was not held in great esteem in ancient Greece, as the term *meteorologos* was also applied to visionaries and speculators who had something of the dreamer about them and walked about with their heads in the clouds all day!

The doom-merchants, as we know only too well, are constantly warning us of the damage we are doing to the planet. If we don't mend our ways, they say, climate change will soon be irreversible. But why 'climate'?

Quite simply this is another word we have acquired from ancient Greek, in this case *klima* 'slope' from the verb *klino* 'I lean'. But to understand fully the linguistic mechanism at play here we also have to take into account the way in which the Greek geographers viewed the known world. They imagined it as being divided up into various zones according

to the angle or 'slope' the sun's rays made with the earth at any given point. Consequently the word 'climate' originally denoted a given area or zone of the earth's surface much in the same way as we can still speak, if somewhat

poetically, of 'foreign climes'. It was not until the early seventeenth century that the word was applied to the prevailing meteorological conditions of a particular zone rather than to the zone itself. ■
