Water, water everywhere…

ALEXANDER TULLOCH

Some ‘fluid’ etymologies

IT IS SUCH a simple word for so versatile and important a liquid. We drink it, cook with it, wash in it, sail across it, swim in it, sprinkle it on our flowers and, when the need arises, we put fires out with it. In some parts of the world there is too much of it and in other parts it is so scarce that it is more precious than gold. It is older than life itself, it predates human existence and it flowed over the land aeons before man learned to speak. So it should not come as a surprise, then, that when we start looking at the etymology of the word ‘water’ we soon find ourselves travelling back to prehistoric times and making contact with very ancient civilizations. Nor is it very long before we find ourselves going round and round in circles as the twists and turns of the word’s evolution reveal connections which the vast majority of us have probably never suspected.

As a starting point it is useful to stand back a little from a map of the world and concentrate our attention on Europe. If we now consider the distribution of various languages and their words for ‘water’, a definite pattern begins to emerge. In northern Europe most languages have words related to the English word ‘water’ (German *Wasser*, Dutch *water,* Icelandic *vatn,* Lithuanian *vanduo* and even Russian has *voda*) all of which can be traced back to Indo-European **wodor/wedor,* the same root that gave English words such as ‘wet’ and ‘wash’. Interestingly, however, Hittite, an Indo-European language spoken in parts of what is now modern Turkey around 1400 B.C, also used the term *watar.*

We will stay with Hittite for a moment, as it provides a seamless link with the languages spoken in countries a little further south such as France, Spain and Italy. The Hittite root for ‘to drink’ is *akw-*, derived from the proto-IE root **akwa* ‘water’, cognate forms of which can be seen in Latin *aqua* and the modern Romance languages such as the Spanish *agua*, Italian *acqua* and, in a slightly altered form French *eau.* So perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that in the case of the word ‘water’ Hittite seems to offer a link between the non-European and European branches of the Indo-European language group.

But at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean there was another civilization which was to have an enormous effect on European civilization and which acquired its word for water from a very different root. These people were, of

ALEXANDER R. TULLOCH has been a professional linguist since he graduated in Russian from Manchester University forty years ago. He began his career teaching Russian and Spanish to Oxbridge Scholarship level and then, in 1975, transferred to the Ministry of Defence, where he eventually became Senior Lecturer in Russian and Spanish. Working with all three branches of the services he was required to train future military linguists and prepare them for the Civil Service Commission Linguist and Interpreter exams. Soon after opting for early retirement in 1999 he accepted the position of Visiting Lecturer in Translation Studies at the City University, London, a post which still manages to keep him busy. Simultaneously he has followed a career as a writer and translator. He has translated over a dozen full-length books from Russian, French and Spanish, including works by major nineteenth and twentieth century Russian and Spanish authors. In addition to this he has published over a hundred articles on etymology and is the author of ‘Word Routes. Journeys through Etymology’, published by Peter Owen. He holds an MA in Soviet Literature from Queen’s University, Belfast and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Linguists.

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course, the Greeks and they referred to the life-giving liquid as *hudor,* from **ud,* the nasal grade of the IE root, a derivation which had linguistic consequences for many other languages. Almost all European languages, for instance, use *hudor* in the form of the prefix *hydro-* (or a variant of it) to denote anything connected with water. Just think of the usage in scientific English, where we constantly use words such as hydroelectric, hydrometer, hydraulics, hydrolysis and even the neologism of recent invention, hydroponic. Nor should we overlook another derivation: the Greek name for the many-headed, mythological sea serpent, the *hudra,* which was adopted into Latin as *hydra* and later appeared in English as the term for the aquatic creature known as the otter.

From the same Indo-European root came the Sanskrit *udan,* meaning 'water', which made its way back across the Mediterranean and turned up in Latin as *unda* or 'wave'. This produced the verb *undulare*, 'to undulate' or 'move in waves' and *inundare* 'to flood'. But it also produced another verb *redundare* 'to overflow', which is the origin of the now common term in the workplace 'to be made redundant'. So when an unfortunate employee is told by his boss that he is being made redundant, he is being informed etymologically that his services are no longer required because the business already has enough staff and that he is part of the 'overflow'. Or, to put it another way, the employee is 'superfluous (Latin *super* 'over' and *fluere* 'to flow') to requirements'.

From the dawn of time until relatively recently the main source of drinking water was, of course, the river. In fact, so important were rivers that settlements and then towns and cities all grew up around rivers that could be trusted not to dry up and to provide a constant supply of water and therefore sustenance. It is no surprise, therefore, that words for 'river' should also have long and noble histories. Many European languages take their name for these ribbons of water from ancient roots or words meaning 'to flow'. A large, voluminous river in France, for example, is called *fleuve;* the general term in German is *Fluss* and Italian has *fiume,* and all of these can be traced back to the Latin *fluere* 'to flow'.

English has taken another route. The word 'river' is allied etymologically to words such as *rive* in French and *ribera* in Spanish, both of which mean 'bank'. In other words, English has taken its term from the edge of the land on either side of the flowing water which determines its width and regulates its flow. And these English, French and Spanish terms all derive from the Latin *ripa* 'bank' which in turn has come down to us from the Greek *eripne* 'cliff' 'precipice' and the verb *eripein* 'to tear down'. So our word 'river' can be traced back all the way to the ancient Greeks and their concept of a river bank as being the visible result of years of erosion caused by rainwater as it trickled or cascaded down the hillsides and it made its way to the sea.

But there is another common English word associated with this natural process which contributed over the centuries to the shaping of today's world. When the ancient Romans ventured out onto the rivers in their tiny craft they were probably only too well aware of the dangers involved in leaving *terra firma* and would certainly have been greatly relieved when they set foot on the other side. And reaching the other side would mean that these bold adventurers had sailed across the water *ad ripam* (Latin for 'to the bank') so that that they could now rest and perhaps dry out by an improvised campfire. By the fourteenth century *ad ripam* had reached English and evolved into the word 'arrive'.

We have already seen how the general term for a river in German is *Fluss* from the Latin 'to flow'. Coincidentally, the mighty German river Rhine also takes its name from a verb 'to flow', but this time the language is Greek and the verb is *rhein,* a verb which crops up in all sorts of unexpected places in modern English. It is the root of words such as 'catarrh' (flowing down) 'diarrhoea' (flowing through) and 'rheumatism,' a medical complaint which, it used to be believed, was caused by fluids flowing through the body.

The Greek word *rhein* can be traced back to its Indo-European and Sanskrit roots **rei* and *ri* 'to flow' which subsequently showed up in Latin as *rivus,* the origin of the English word 'rivulet' which, despite the apparent similarity, has no linguistic connection at all with the word 'river'. But *rivus* and 'rivulet' have provided us with another rather surprising relative: rival. We now think of business competitors or members of the opposing football team as our 'rivals' but this disguises somewhat the original meaning of the word. When the word entered English in the sixteenth century your 'rival' would simply have been somebody who used the same part of the *rivus* or stream as you

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did. No doubt common use of one stretch of water eventually led to competition, petty squabbles and then serious fisticuffs, which explains why the word acquired the confrontational meaning we attach to it today.

And believe it or not, another cognate noun here is the vegetable 'rhubarb', a word that does not feature in too many learned articles on etymology, but which nevertheless has some fascinating linguistic associations. Its modern botanical name is 'rheum', a Latinised form of the Greek '*rha barbaron*' 'the *rha* from the barbarian country'. This was a plant which originated in China but also grew in abundance on the banks of, and took its name from, the river Rha (another derivative of the Greek *rhein*), the name the Scythians gave to the river which flows through Russia and which the world now knows as the Volga.

But the story doesn't end there. The Volga takes its name from an old Slavonic word *vlaga* meaning 'wet' 'damp' and this in turn is cognate with the modern German noun *Wolke*, 'cloud', the harbinger of damp, rainy weather. And *Wolke*, of course, is the origin of the English poetic word for the sky, the 'welkin'. All of these words are cognate and can trace their origins back to the IE **uelgos* 'moist'.

If we now return to our map but cast our gaze a little further to the east we come across another piece of the linguistic jigsaw puzzle surrounding the word 'water'. In the north of the Indian subcontinent there is an area known as the 'Punjab' and the constituent parts of this place name show up in the most unexpected places. Although the name applies to an area between modern India and Pakistan, it is actually a compound noun taken from Persian meaning 'five rivers' (*panj* 'five' and *ab* 'water' 'river') as it is the place where five rivers converge. The first part of the word, *panj*, gave English the word 'punch', an alcoholic drink made with 'five' ingredients. The second element, *ab*, showed up in the Latin *amnis (*for **abnis*) 'river' 'stream of water' and then at some point in history made its way westwards. It now survives in modern Celtic languages such as Welsh which has *afon*, Irish and Scots Gaelic which have *abhann* with *abhainn* respectively, all of which mean 'river'. And these Celtic words have an anglicised form as a river name, the Avon.

So when an Englishman informs you that Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford, is situated on the 'river Avon', he is in fact just repeating himself. ■

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