

FROM LATIN TO ENGLISH: FUNCTIONAL SHIFT AND MALPROPISM

by
Knud Sørensen

Throughout its history the English language has been open to influence from other languages. It is true that during the Old English period the language to a great extent drew on its own resources; thus Latin *trinitas* was rendered *Drīnes* (later replaced by *trinity*), *immortalitas* was rendered *undeadlicnes* and *praepositio*, *foresetnes*. But this early period also saw the adoption of a few hundred Latin and Greek loanwords. The Viking raids in the latter part of the Old English period resulted in a large number of Scandinavian loanwords, and in the wake of the Norman Conquest there followed numerous French loans. The influence from the Renaissance had as one consequence that the English vocabulary was enriched by numerous Latin and Greek words; it has been estimated that roughly one fourth of the Latin vocabulary exists as English loanwords. During the following centuries English introduced loans from several other sources, so that today English possesses a very comprehensive vocabulary.

This paper will concentrate on Latin influence, but viewed from a special angle, viz. the many cases in which the adopting language disregards the word-classes that the Latin words belong to. Obviously, as a general rule a Latin word adopted into English will retain its word class; thus a noun like *tensio* becomes *tension*, the verb *recitare* becomes *recite*, and the adjective *durus* becomes *dour*. But there are numerous exceptions when fossilized Latin forms are misinterpreted and come to acquire other functions than they have in Latin.

In the most striking instances of functional shift a Latin verbal form appears as a noun in English. A case in point is *ignoramus* 'an ignorant person', literally 'we do not know'. It is legal in origin, having formerly been used of a statement made by a grand jury on a bill returned as not a true bill, but it was generalized when *Ignoramus* was used as the name of an ignorant lawyer in a farcical play of the same name by George Ruggle, produced in 1615. *Ignoramus* is the present indicative active, and there are other corresponding forms that occur

quite frequently: *credo* or *creed* 'belief'; *habitat* 'the natural home of an animal or plant', literally '(it) dwells', from the use of the word in floras and faunas (for instance 'Common Primrose. Habitat in sylvis'); *tenet* 'a belief, opinion', literally '(he) holds' (the earlier form *tenent* '(they) hold' in the same sense is obsolete); *deficit* 'an amount by which a sum of money, etc., is too small', literally 'there is lacking'; and *non sequitur* 'a conclusion which does not follow from the premises', literally 'it does not follow'. A more special term, used in English universities, is *agrotat* 'a certificate of illness', literally '(he) is ill'.

A reflex of the present indicative passive is the word *debenture* 'an official paper that is sold by a business company and represents a debt on which the company must pay the buyer a fixed rate of interest'. The final *-e* of *debenture* is unetymological, the word having been assimilated to other words in *-ure*; it is from original *debentur* '(the amounts) are owing', this being the first word of a certificate of indebtedness.

Latin forms in the present subjunctive have produced some English nouns. There is *caveat* 'a warning, caution', literally 'let him/her beware'. *Fiat* 'a command' literally means 'let it be done'. In *habeas corpus*, literally 'you shall produce the body (in court)', we have the opening words of a writ requiring a person under arrest to be brought before a judge or into court. In university parlance there is *exeat* 'leave of absence', literally 'let him/her go out'.

In other cases Latin imperatives give rise to English nouns. There is *query* 'a question, especially one raising doubt about the truth of something', from the imperative *quaere*; *recipe* 'a direction for preparing something', from *recipe* 'take (such and such ingredients)'; and *vademecum* 'a (small) handbook', literally 'go with me'. At the first blush *dirge* 'a song of mourning' does not appear to belong here; but the word comes from the imperative *dirige*, the opening word of the antiphon used in the office of the dead: *Dirige, Domine, Deus meus, in conspectu tuo viam meam* ('Direct, O Lord my God, my way in Thy sight').

A single future form may be mentioned: *placebo* 'something not containing medicine given to soothe, not to cure, a patient'. This is the sense current since the early nineteenth century; but the word has a liturgical origin, it being the first word of the antiphon of the vespers for the dead (*Placebo Domino...* 'I shall please the Lord...').

Among Latin verbal forms in the perfect tense may be mentioned nouns like *cognovit*, *inspeximus*, *sederunt*, and *vidimus*. *Cognovit* 'an acknowledgement', literally '(he) has acknowledged', is a legal term, a defendant's admission that the plaintiff's cause is just. *Inspeximus* 'we have seen (it)' is another legal term formerly used as the first word of a document (a charter) in which the authors attest that they have seen a previous document. *Sederunt* 'a meeting, assembly', literally 'there sat (viz. the following persons)' is a Scottish word used of those present at a sitting. *Vidimus* 'a copy of a document bearing an attestation that it is authentic', literally 'we have seen (it)', is another legal term. And then there is the peculiar word *mumpsimus*, which has come to mean 'a traditional custom or notion adhered to although shown to be unreasonable' or 'a person who obstinately adheres to such a custom or notion'. The explanation of the word is found in the story related in Richard Pace *De Fructu* (1517:80) of an illiterate English priest, who, when corrected for reading *quod in ore mumpsimus* (instead of the proper *quod ore sumpsimus* 'what we have taken with our mouths') in the post-communion of the mass, replied 'I will not change my old mumpsimus for your new sumpsimus' (The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology 1966:596).

These examples are rather special, several of them being legal and of infrequent occurrence today. But there are also fully current perfect forms like *affidavit* 'a written statement, confirmed by oath, to be used as judicial evidence', literally '(he) has stated on oath', and *floruit*, which besides its verbal use ('he or she flourished') is also used as a noun to refer to 'the period during which a person was alive or working'. This usage may suggest a comparison with a form like *a has-been* 'somebody or something now out of date', based on native elements (cf. also *a wannabe*).

After this survey of finite forms let us briefly consider some non-finite verbal forms. In *posse* 'an armed force, a strong band' we have a Latin infinitive that has become a noun. This functional shift took place in mediaeval Latin, where in scholastic terminology *posse* could be used in the sense of 'potentiality' (contrasted with *esse* 'being'), while in later legal parlance *posse comitatus* came to mean 'the force of the county'. Today the word is mainly used in the USA: 'the outlaw Jesse James, pursued by a posse'.

Other non-finite forms are the gerundive and the gerund. The gerundive has produced nouns like *agenda* 'things to be done' and *legend* (from *legenda*) 'things that ought to be read (particularly of a saint's life)'. An example of the gerund is the word *innuendo*, now used in the sense 'an indirect reference, usually something unfavourable to a person's reputation'. It is the ablative of the gerund of the verb *innuere* 'to give a nod, hint', so that the original sense of *innuendo* is 'by hinting'. This form was employed in late mediaeval legal Latin documents to introduce a precise inference in parenthesis, and the word acquired its pejorative connotation owing to the fact that it was often used in libel cases to specify negative elements.

Now for the other word-classes. Latin pronouns and adjectives as well as adverbs can appear as English nouns. The noun *quibble* 'hairsplitting' was formerly *quib*, which probably derives from Latin *quibus*, the dative and ablative plural of the relative pronoun *qui*. *Quibus* was a form that appeared frequently in legal documents and so came to be associated with verbal niceties or subtle distinctions – hence the transition to 'hairsplitting'. The same Latin pronoun in the genitive plural masculine form is *quorum*, whose present-day sense is 'a stated number of people, without whom a meeting cannot be held'. This goes back to the wording of commissions concerning committee members designated by the Latin *quorum vos ... unum (duos, etc.) esse volumus* 'of whom we wish that you ... be one (two, etc.)'. Finally there is *nostrum* 'a patent or quack medicine'. This form is the Latin possessive pronoun in the neuter, 'ours, of our own make', which formerly, from the seventeenth century, was written on bottles containing this kind of medicine. Today the word is obsolescent and somewhat derogatory.

Among Latin adjectives that appear as nouns in English there is *mob*, a shortened form of *mobile vulgus* 'the fickle crowd'; it is one of the words that were satirized by Swift in the early eighteenth century. *Biceps* is a Latin adjective that means 'two-headed'; it has come to refer especially to 'the muscle that flexes the forearm'. *Integer*, Latin 'untouched, entire', has come to mean 'a whole number'. And then there is *bonus* 'good', used of an extra dividend; the masculine *bonus* is odd – one might have expected the neuter *bonum* 'a good thing'. The OED suggests that the masculine form was used jocularly or from ignorance, and it may originally have been stock exchange slang.

Many Latin adverbs reappear as English nouns. Latin *alibi* means 'elsewhere', but is used in English of 'a plea that one was in another place at the time when a crime was committed'. *Tandem*, 'at length' in Latin, appears in eighteenth-century English in the sense 'a two-wheeled vehicle drawn by two horses harnessed one in front of the other'. This use of the word is based on a punning translation of *tandem* into both temporal 'at length' and the spatial notion 'in extended line' suggested by the two horses. Much later the word came to be used in the sense now current, 'a bicycle built for two riders sitting one behind the other'. *Item*, Latin 'besides', is used as a general noun in vague senses like 'unit' or 'point'. The word occurs frequently in enumerations, introducing the next point in a list, but this introductory word has come to refer to the point itself. Another adverb, *quondam*, 'formerly, once', is employed adjectivally as in *the quondam king* (which may remind us of the native parallel *the then king*).

Let us now consider a final case of functional shift: from Latin nouns to English adjectives. One of the early Latin loanwords (dating from the Old English period) was *caupo* 'an innkeeper, a small tradesman', which became *cheap* in English, at first in for example *good cheap* 'a bargain, a good buy'; later *good* was dropped, and *cheap* acquired its adjectival function. Similarly, *dainty* 'a delicacy' at first preserved its status as a noun; it was adopted from French in the thirteenth century, and in its turn French was indebted to Latin *dignitatem* (cf. the later latinised form *dignity*). From the fourteenth century *dainty* came to be used as an adjective over and above its use as a noun. The origin of the modern adjective *dismal* 'sad, gloomy, miserable' is *dies mali* 'evil, unlucky days' in the mediaeval calendar; there were two of these each month. The origin was forgotten, however, for from the fifteenth century one can find formulations like a *dismal day*, in which *dismal* is interpreted as an adjective. The ablative expression *prima facie* when used in English can function adverbially, meaning 'at first sight': 'She seems *prima facie* to be guilty', but in attributive use the two words acquire an adjectival function in an example like *a prima facie reason*. Another instance of a Latin adjective + noun combination in the ablative occurring in an adjectival function is *bona fide*, literally 'in good faith'; but in its adjectival function equalling 'genuine, real': *bona fide cases of hardship*. It may be added that the nominative form *bona fides* is

employed in the sense of 'credibility, sincerity': *He wanted to check on my bona fides*. Thus the Latin case system has been partially retained in English.

As will have appeared, there are numerous examples showing that Latin loanwords undergo functional shift when adopted into English. There seem to be two main reasons for this. One is an inherent and strong tendency towards functional shift in English since the Middle Ages, of which more anon. The other is ignorance of Latin. In the wake of the mass adoption of Latin loans in the Renaissance there arose a gap between language users: on the one hand there was a comparatively small group who knew Latin and dealt judiciously with the loans; on the other hand there were the many to whom Latinisms were hard words, inhorn terms that easily led to misunderstandings. This gap was exploited by many writers for humorous purposes. It was a dramatist from the eighteenth century, Richard Sheridan, whose character Mrs Malaprop (in *The Rivals*, 1775) gave rise to the term malapropism: the ridiculous misunderstanding of hard words. Where the intention is to refer to 'a nice arrangement of epithets', this in Mrs Malaprop's version becomes 'a nice derangement of epitaphs'. But these malapropisms were exploited already by Shakespeare, sometimes in the form that he had a character reveal a failure to distinguish between the word-classes. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c. 1597) there is a Welsh clergyman, Hugh Evans, who makes speeches like: 'I will description the matter to you, if you be capacity of it' (I.1.195f.). Treating *description* as a verb is of course shocking and ridiculous; but on second thoughts a glance at contemporary English makes it clear that there are a number of nouns whose *-ion* endings obviously characterize them as such, but which have nevertheless also become current as verbs: *to commission a painting*; *to requisition a car*; *the book was optioned for the movies*; *he was sectioned* (the last example means 'he was compulsorily committed to a psychiatric hospital in accordance with a section of a mental health act'). It seems a matter of chance which nouns in *-ion* become verbs and which not. In other cases we find functional shift even where a verb and its corresponding noun are available as distinct formal and semantic entities, but where nevertheless a new noun is created on the basis of the verb: *divide* – *division* – *the great divide*; *edit* – *edition* – *the final edit*; *invite* – *invitation* – *an*

invite; repeat – repetition – a repeat of last year. Another fertile source of nominalization is the type verb + particle: *to go between* is the basis of a *go-between* and *to pick up* of a *pick-up*. Such examples testify to the fact that functional shift is a widespread phenomenon in English, and this may have given a fillip to the wordclass changes of Latin words that have been discussed here.

*Råhøj Allé 12
DK-8270 Højbjerg*