

PREHISTORY IN ACTION

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Molecular geneticists propose that all living human beings are descendants of a single woman who lived about 250,000 years ago. Evolutionary linguists propose that the cladogram of all human languages follows closely the cladogram of the molecular geneticists. Does it then follow that all of modern English derives from the language spoken by our prehistoric mother? And, if so, how is it that synonyms arise?

One hypothesis is that languages evolve in a way akin to the game of telephone. Someone hears a word just a little bit off, and repeats it to the next person as they heard it, not as it was spoken. After a few repetitions, this process leads to harmless party amusement. Could the same process, expanded to archeological time scales, explain the origin of synonyms?

Since we don't have access to recordings of prehistoric speech, how do we test this hypothesis? Perhaps we can observe it operating a little bit over short time periods. Are there words that are synonyms of one another, but that differ only a little in pronunciation? There are a large number of onomatopoeic words, such as TOOT and HOOT, or CRUNCH and MUNCH, or even CHEEP, BEEP and PEEP -- but these might have entered the language independently. No, what we need is a list of words that clearly evolved from the same word through a process of meta-telephone. Turning to Webster's Ninth, we find the following list of 26 such words, one starting with each letter of the alphabet. Can the reader improve on these, with longer and/or closer words?

Finally, PECK, PICK, POKE is a set of three telephone synonyms; can the reader think of a set of four? (Onomatopoeic words are not allowed by definition.)

- A asperity, austerity = rigor
- B bulbil, bulblet = small bulb
- C careen, career = to go at top speed in a headlong manner
- D dribble, drizzle = spray
- E expertise, expertism = skill
- F funeral, funereal = solemn
- G glitter, glimmer = shine
- H haggle, higgle = negotiate
- I immerse, immerge = submerge
- J jointure, juncture = joint
- K khaddar, khadi = Indian cloth
- L lagan, ligan = goods thrown into sea for later recovery

M mobile, motile = moving
 N noddle, noodle = head
 O orgasmic, orgastic = producing orgasm
 P portentous, pretentious = pompous
 Q quiver, quaver = shiver
 R ravage, savage = destroy
 S suppliant, supplicant = petitioner
 T teeter, totter = to move unsteadily
 U usucapion, usucaption = acquire title by possession
 V vibrate, librate = oscillate
 W widdershins, withershins = counterclockwise
 X xerophile, xerophyte = desert dweller
 Y younker, youngster = child
 Z zamindari, zemindary = Indian land tax

QUERY

Jeff Grant, Waipatu Settlement Road, RD 2, Hastings, New Zealand asks:

- (1) *Apart from cooe, assegaaiing (Chambers) and ooaa (solid form only in Mrs. Byrne's Dictionary as far as I know), are there any other dictionary words with consecutive doubled vowels?*
- (2) *Is there a word (any source) with consecutive doubled consonants? Not counting words where the pairs are the same, such as esssse (OED), or nonce-words such as pprpffrrppfff in Joyce's Ulysses, I thought of possibilities like myrrhhead (by analogy with acidhead or pothead), sshh (a variant of shh which I can't find), or Welsh place-names. Can readers identify a legitimate example?*