

The same kind of wordplay occurs in the simile “smart as a whip.” What’s so smart about a whip? Delving into the history of *smart*, we find that the word first meant “inflicting or causing pain” (1023). Gradually the adjective took on additional meanings, including “having a certain degree of integrity, force, and strength” (1184) as in “look smart!” and, by extension, “clever in thought or argument” (1639). *Smart as a whip* ponderfully unites the original signification and the most pervasive (at least in the U.S.) meaning of *smart*.

Much newer is *couch potato*, which made its debut in U.S. slang in the 1970s. The compound compares lumpish watchers of television to lumpy potatoes: The longer couch potatoes sit, the deeper they put down their roots and the more they come to resemble potatoes. But there’s more than just a vegetable image here. *The Real McCoy* (Georgia Hole, ed.; Oxford University Press, 2005) explains:

The origins of the phrase are much cleverer than simply an image, however, since it actually relies on a pun with the word ‘tuber.’ A potato is the tuber of a plant, while *boob tuber* was an earlier term for someone watching the *boob tube* or television.

In some instances of semantic development, Samuel Beckett’s proclamation that “In the beginning was the pun” turns out to be true. Whether or not the pun is the foundation of all wit, the device is the foundation of some of the most sprightly word histories in the English language.

## A POEM

SIR JEREMY MORSE  
London, England

### COUNTING

Numberless son,  
Let me teach you  
(Or you teach me)  
Your natural lore.  
While we’re alive  
Arithmetic’s  
One way to heaven –  
An infinite, straight  
And narrow line  
From God to men.