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The Etymology of bless

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The Etymological History of the Word “Bless”

Abstract

How did the word bless evolve into common expressions like "God bless you?" This linguistic project expounds upon the origin, various definitions, and uses of the word bless.

Definition

Oxford English Dictionary:

“To make ‘sacred’ or ‘holy’ with blood”

Etymology

According to the Oxford English Dictionary:

The word bless has transformed in the English language from a specific religious practice, into a euphemistic utterance, which in part is due to a natural semantic mutation. Bless once meant to consecrate with blood and is now uttered when referring to a divine spirit. According to the OED, bless is derived from Old English blod and bloedsian, which is not found elsewhere in Germanic languages. Blot was originally used to describe a pagan ritual of marking or affecting with blood. Around the 11th century, the ds in bloedsian phonetically shifted into a ts sound, and yields blet-sien or similar spellings. By the fourteenth century the t was dropped, and formed blessed, which looks identical to the way we currently spell the past participle of bless. Although this is how bless has orthographically changed throughout the English language, bless has a longer derivational history. According to the OED, the borrowing history of the word bless can be traced back to the Hebrew word brk meaning “to bend,” which can be linked to Present-day interpretations of bless in religious contexts. The word bless was used as a semantic loan from the Germanic language to represent Latin benedicere and Greek εὐλογεῖν, which meant “to speak well of, praise, or eulogize,” but was itself influenced by the Hebrew word brk, meaning “to bend.” The conversion of bless into its current usage in English happened as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were being converted from their pagan ways, into the christian society within England.

Overall, the function and context of bless has changed drastically. The overwhelming majority of resources that I researched throughout this etymological analysis listed identical interpretations of the word bless, and all defined it as “to make holy by a religious rite.”

Uses

Oxford English Dictionary:

1. In its earliest attestations in the OED, bless and blood continued to coincide with each other. Once an entity was consecrated with blood, it was thought to rid off evil influences of men and demons. When used in this context the entity know is controlled by God's prospering care, which can be linked to the present day use of bless before dinner, when praying over food. The OED dates this documented history back to the eleventh century.
2. This usage of bless, which is “to sanctify or hollow by crossing yourself,” can be linked back to the first entry. The cross is put up in the defense of evil, and the usage started to circulate in circa 1225. Using the cross as protection can visually imitate the power of God to rid of evil, and is similar to the act of consecrating an entity with blood to gain God's favor over it.
3. Bless was also cited as an adoration towards God, and can be used when praising God for a blessing bestowed upon an entity. God can also bless someone by showing a supernatural favor over their life. A superior, such as a priest or sacred person, can also invoke blessings over someone's life, which will yield favor and well-being for that individual. This usage of bless began circulating around the eleventh century.
4. Bless can also be used to show mortification or a state of surprise. This is described by the OED as an elliptical or ironic use of bless, which would be stated as such: “Bless me!”
5. The last entry in the OED states that bless can be used in an ironic way or an euphemistic saying. The word bless took on a contradicting meaning in the nineteenth century, when it began to mean “to curse, damn, or condemn” someone.

How bless and bliss are related:



According to the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, bless takes on the meaning of “happiness” and “well-being,” which was first documented around the eleventh century. Bless and bliss are not etymologically related, but phonological developments may have caused the connotations to become misconstrued. The semantic similarities become transparent between the two words, once bless is converted to take the place of Latin benedicere. The spelling of bliss in Middle English varied by using i or y. The spelling, semantic, and phonology shows how easy it would have been for the human psyche to intertwine these words.

Usage in today's society:

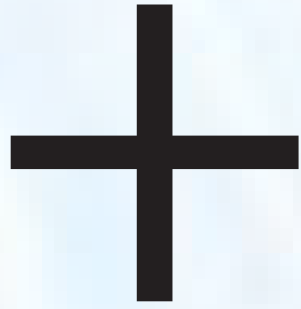
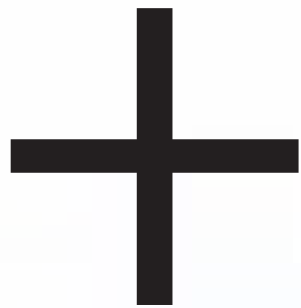
The Urban Dictionary refers to bless as a polite utterance after someone sneezes, because it was believed that your spirit was trying to escape your body. Uttering bless immediately after someone sneezes will help keep their soul inside of them. The speech act would be similar to this conversation:

Philip: AHCHOO!
Sandra: Bless You
Philip: Ahh, thanks Sandra

After entering bless into the google search engine, I found out that this is purely an American utterance. There were multiple youtube videos and blog sites that warned foreigners about the use of bless in America, which seemed logical because of how frequently it's used. The word bless may appear in other languages, but the context that it's used in will differ from American usages. Generally, in America no matter what religion you practice “bless you” will be uttered after someone sneezes.

Conclusion:

Bless started off as a concrete and specific word to describe a religious practice, but has since transformed over time into an utterance spoken for various reasons and can be perceived from multiple perspectives. Although bless has not lost its religious ties with Christianity, it has taken on multiple functions within Present-Day English. So, next time one hears the word bless it may become more evident that it's used to invoke different emotions or serve specific contextual purposes.



BLESS