

# The Role of Semantics and Etymology in Promoting Insightful Learning

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## *Abstracts*

The difficult meaning of many unfamiliar and new words is 'motivated' by their original and semantic meaning. In an EFL context, this offers the possibility of presenting a number of difficult words in ways that promote insightful learning rather than blind memorization. Associating a word with its semantic change and etymology has been shown to enhance comprehending and then remembering. This effect seems in accordance with dual coding theory, as the etymological association is likely to call up a mental image of a concrete scene which can be stored in memory alongside the verbal form. The present study explores the possibility of taking this technique beyond mere mnemonics. A series of tests that are set up with the participation of students who study English in their higher study are reported. The results show that knowledge of the origin and semantic changes of these new and unfamiliar words can effectively help learners comprehend their meaning and then ease their retention. Not only does the task of knowing word meaning on the basis of etymological information appear practical, it seems to facilitate recall, too. Finally, the results suggest that knowledge of the origin of unfamiliar words can help learners estimate whether they might have more than one meaning.

Failing to remember previously encountered words is one of the commonly reported complaints of EFL learners. Among the variety of commonly used vocabulary reinforcing techniques, making students aware of etymological accounts of words is a relatively under researched area in the literature. The present study, therefore, aims at exploring the effect of presenting etymological accounts of 20 unfamiliar words on short- and long-term vocabulary retention of EFL learners. The participants (20) are members of two higher studies classes randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. While both groups are asked to look up the meaning of the words in their dictionaries, the participants in the experimental group received a short instruction on the etymologies of the words. The results of

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both immediate and delayed posttests demonstrated the mnemonic effectiveness of etymology presentation.

**Keywords:** semantics, etymology, etymological account, dual coding theory, schemata theory, retention, comprehension, etc.

### ***Introduction***

In semantics, the meaning of words and sentences of languages are studied. Linguistic semantics studies meaning in a systematic and objective way. Since meaning as a concept is not static, a great deal of the idea of meaning still depends on the context and participants in the act of communication. There is a strong connection between meaning and communication. Communication as used here is the exchange or relay of information, message, attitude, feelings or values from one person to another. This is done mainly by the use of language. It is often expressed that language is a system which uses a set of symbols agreed upon by a group.

The power of interpretation complements that innate ability. Interpretation is an aspect of semantics. Therefore, language acquisition or learning includes not only the knowledge of the organization of sounds and structures, but also how to associate meaning of expressions or words to their origin via knowing the etymology of these expressions. Nonetheless, the problem expressed in this research as a question is how to use etymology for more advantages of etymological word memory.

The etymology of a word very often consists of a narration of a story related to the word, a list of older versions and variants of the word (usually in older languages, such as Latin, Greek, Old German, or French), and/or an account of the developmental process the word has gone through (See Appendix B for examples of etymologies used in this study). Any of these can play a significant role in an enhanced insightful learning, comprehending and retention of the target words.

The present study is an attempt to examine the role of etymological accounts in comprehending and then remembering the meanings of unfamiliar or new words, hypothesizing that they will have a significantly positive effect on vocabulary comprehension and retention due to the theoretical background described below. At the same time, the results of this study could, at least partially, be considered as further evidence for or against the three long-lived theories mentioned in the theoretical background. Additionally, the results of this study could be of principal importance in choosing a more effective technique for teaching the words which students do not encounter very often, and are likely to be forgotten soon. Finally, it is hoped that this study will be a contribution to the

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relatively underexplored topic of etymological accounts and their roles in second/foreign language teaching. To this end, the present paper is intended to answer the following research question: Does the presentation of the etymological account of a word result in a better short- and long-term retention of it?

### **Section One**

#### **Semantics and Etymology**

##### **1. 1 Brief History of Semantics**

Alfred Korzybski was the first person to attempt studying semantics as a distinct discipline, separate from the discipline of philosophy. Prior to the work of Korzybski, semantics has been looked at from a non scientific perspective but his work was the first formal attempt at bringing in a scientific model to the study of semantics. He started by describing all entities and realities by assigning labels to them. He had names for common objects such as chair, stone, cow etc. He also had labels for groups and collections like nations, animals, people etc. Korzybski's third group of labels does not have identifiable referents in the outside world. These labels are highly abstract and do not readily lend themselves to the assignment of concrete reality. These labels are only assignable to concrete realities by imagination. Such labels include but are not limited to freedom, love, democracy etc. They are feature in aesthetics, philosophy and politics. However, this is not the same with common objects since there seems to be a direct correspondence between items and linguistic expressions. It is interesting to also know that a serious difficulty tends to be posed by labels for groups as a result of the wide range of items within the group. The main challenge with abstract labels stems from the fact that meaning does not have an objective reference in reality because different people will react to different words differently. For instance, the word "love" would be viewed differently by different people as a result of their circumstance or present reality. One person who probably is in a loving relationship will view it positively while another in an unfulfilled relationship will view it negatively. Hence, their reactions will be different and will therefore evoke different emotions from them (Ullmann, 1964: 210-13).

Two other scholars, Odgen and Richards came very close to the analysis of meaning by combining philosophical processes and linguistic methodologies. How did they do this? They introduced the concept of referent to describe the physical object or situation which the word identifies in the real world. They pointed out that the representation or situation should be seen as a referent while the actual pronunciation or

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orthographic representation will constitute the symbol. For example, the figure or silhouette of an adult female human being will be the referent while the word used to describe the referent will constitute the symbol. The symbol is similar to Korzybski's concept of label. Since the world is dynamic, the study of semantics has not been left out. One of such areas that have remained dynamic among others is the concept of change in meaning. Semantics has been at the fore in the study of change in meaning (ibid.226).

As early as 1933, Bloomfield observed a system of change in the meaning of words. Instances of change in meaning of words overtime:

- 1-Meat used to represent all types of food.
- 2- Bitter derives from the metaphor of biting.
- 3-The meaning of astound derives from the weakened meaning of thunder.
- 4-The meaning of knight has been an elevation of the concept of boy
- 5-The word money relates to the latin moneo [warn].
- 6-Tanks in modern warfare derived their names from the 1914 - 1918 war in which the Germans were deceived into believing that the structures being moved around were just water tanks.
- 7-The modern word car originated from the word chariot .Etymology, which focuses on the discovery of the origin and earlier meanings of words, also played an important role in earlier studies in semantics. However, it should be noted that there is a challenge with etymological studies. The major one being that no one can state with certainty the origin of the meaning of any word ( Taylor, 1989: 111).

It is obvious that semantics has its origin in philosophy. Earlier scholars in philosophical semantics were interested in pointing out the relationship between linguistic expressions and identified phenomena in the external world. In the contemporary world, especially in the United States philosophical semantics has led to the development of semiotics. In some other parts of the world, and especially, France, the term semiology has been favoured. In general, the reliance on logical calculations in issues of meaning has led to the development of logical semantics and etymology (ibid:198).

### **1.2 Major Concerns of Semantics**

Semantics is associated with different issues related to meaning including naming) concept, sense and reference. Naming as a semantic process derives from the understanding that words are names or labels for things. The major problem with this naming view of semantics is that it is only nouns and nominal expressions that can be analyzed semantically. In addition, abstract nouns like love, hatred, truth will be difficult to explain

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since they are not giving things. 'There is a red bull in the park' this will have meaning, only if there is a red bull in a particular park. Thus, sentences that are lies may not be interpreted. Concepts mediate between the mind constructs and objects in the real world. Saussure's sign theory and Ogden and Richards, semantic triangle derives from the conceptual approach to semantics. The approach emphasizes the power of the mind to make images and to associate these images to objects and ideas. The approach is highly mentalistic, relying on the ability to associate one thing with another. This ability of association may not yield universal understanding. That explains why language experts develop dictionaries to aggregate meaning on a universal basis. Interestingly, the production of dictionaries relies heavily on denotations and connotations, two major angles to the study of meaning. Reference relates to things, people and events in the world. It is the object or entity to which a linguistic expression relates. Thus, the referent of the word boy is a human being called boy. If meaning were restricted to reference, many words without obvious referents will be left out. It will be difficult to explain the meaning of prepositions, conjunctions and other grammatical unit (Jay, 1998: 269).

### 1.3 Semantic change

The word *silly* has changed its meaning. This case of semantic change is rather remarkable, having gone from something like 'blissful' or 'blessed' all the way to 'foolish'. The contrast between these two meanings is so pronounced that it is clear that there must have been some intermediate stages.

Using the Oxford English Dictionary or any other dictionary that contains etymological information that may piece together the various steps. Earliest recorded examples of the word occur around 1200, and in the first 100 years or so the meaning was quite clearly 'blissful' or 'blessed'. The following example (taken from the OED) illustrates this: A Jhesu, blyssede (es) bat abbaye and cely es pat religion (Abbey of Holy Ghost in Hampole's Wks.) 'Oh Jesus, blessed is that abbey and silly [i.e. blessed] is that religion'. (This example is actually from the first half of the fourteenth century but is convenient as it does not require a lot of context to make the meaning of the word silly clear.) (Simpson, 1989:314 ).

The next stage is the rise, towards the end of the thirteenth century, of the meaning 'innocent' or 'harmless'. Consider for instance: 'Alas', he seide, 'pis seli best: pat no-ping ne doth a-mis !' (5. Eng. Leg.) III Alas", he said, "this silly [i.e. harmless] animal, that does not do anything amiss!". The following step is the development, soon thereafter, of the meaning 'deserving of pity or sympathy, as in Sely Scotland, that of helpe has gret

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neide (Henry, Wallace ii) 'Silly [i.e. pitiable] Scotland, which is in great need of help'. The next meaning is 'weak/feeble', first in relation to physical strength or fitness (e.g. Here we see that a smal sillie Bird knoweth how to match with so great a Beast (J. Maplet, Gr. Forest)), then also of intellectual capacities, i.e. 'ignorant' (e.g. The silly herdman all astonied sfQnds (Surrey,.Aeneid ii)).

Finally, in the sixteenth century the meaning of 'foolish', is given as in In pride wee speake it, or at least inwardlie thinke it, wee are not as those seely Idioties are (Babington, Commandm.). Now it understood how the word silly could have developed from 'blessed' or 'blissful', which were very positive (especially in the Middle Ages), into something as negative as its present-day meaning of 'foolish'. The key is to realize that while the development as a whole is very drastic, the individual steps are not. Thus, 'blissful/blessed' is not that far removed from 'innocent/harmless'. More precisely, blissful or blessed people and things are often also innocent and harmless, and (again particularly in a medieval mindset) vice versa (Sinclair et al, 1994:440).

### **1. 4 Etymology**

'Etymology traces the history of a word from one language to another as far back as can be determined with reasonable certainty' (Malkiel,1994: 504). This definition of etymology given by the dictionary editors (lexicographers) reflects a distinctly modern development in linguistics. The tracing of a term's history in the diachronic perspective is to be contrasted with the study of language as a formal system in the synchronic perspective.

The distinction between the synchronic and diachronic perspective relates closely to the axiom of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. This axiom gives a modern inquiry into language a special status. A description of these structures, then, would be a description of language from a perspective that is historically discharged and" thus" free of evolved criticism in regard to the validity of formal description.

The old purpose of etymology (rhetorical and philosophical usability) gives way to a systematic study exercised for the sake of specifying the object of historical linguistics in its systematic aspects. This amounts to the construction of a formal system to bring the de facto perceived linguistic systematicity into the terms and under the concepts of a generalized description. The newer etymology is diachronic. It is based on the discoveries of 19th century historical theory. It has no hope anymore to be of use for stylistics, rhetoric, philosophy. It sees its purpose in itself. (Trier, 1972: 816).

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The observation of systematic sound changes and the corresponding laws of phonetic change formulated for the Indo-European languages are a product of the 19th century comparative study of languages. It marks the rise of a structural and formal over a semantic approach to the study of languages that, methodologically and terminologically, co-exists historically with Darwin's theory of biological evolution. As a consequence, the regularity of the changes motivates a foregrounding of the structural aspects of language relative to the semantic aspect and, thereby, leads to the abandonment of traditional etymology or, at least, reduces its practicability through a re-definition of the proper object of inquiry after Saussure (Stierle, 1978:173)

The etymology of a lexeme is, in principle, synchronically irrelevant. The fact that the word curious, for example, can be traced, back to Latin '*curious*' meaning '*careful*' or '*fastidious*' (and that it also had this meaning in earlier stages of English) does not imply that this, rather than '*inquisitive*', is its true or correct meaning in present-day standard English (Lyons, 1977, Vol. I: 244).

In respect to the role and outcome of modern etymological inquiries, Malkiel, in the Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics, has the following to say:

"It is correct to state that the old style etymology whether satisfied with mere guesses or serving the purpose of helping one to establish and, later, control regular sound changes, seems to have run its course ( ... ). Etymology thus becomes an account - better still, a bundle of accounts - of individual word histories or word biographies, with the experienced etymologist's prime commitment remaining that of establishing an equilibrium of the separate forces invoked" (Malkiel,1994:1172).

In this brief overview of etymology old etymology is distinguished as a primarily semantic inquiry into the right use of words that lets itself be informed both by the history of the term and its current day use. New etymology, on the other hand, is a historical inquiry primarily into the regularity of sound change on the phonetic level and a specification of a loan-effect's semantic direction or trajectory from one language to another on the lexical level. Instead of generalizing over classes, new etymology is primarily concerned with individual terms, not sets of terms. Why handy came to be the German term for those situations in which the English use *cell phone* or *mobile* is, in the end, an semantic explanation to demand from modern etymology.

## **1.5 Etymological Account**

The historical study of English is just as important as the study of its present-day state and the comparison of the earlier and present-day stages of the English language can reveal to us the tendencies that have asserted themselves in the course of its development. Now, the etymology of selected adjectives, namely with their origin, obsolete forms and development of their meanings are dealt with:

### **• PRETTY**

#### **The New Oxford Dictionary of English (NODE; 1998:1468)**

ORIGIN Old English praettig; related to Middle Dutch pertich 'brisk, clever', obsolete Dutch prettig 'humorous, sporty', from a West Germanic base meaning 'trick'. The sense development 'deceitful, cunning, clever, skilful, admirable, pleasing, nice' has parallels in adjectives such as canny, fine, nice, etc.

#### ***A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (CEDEL; 1967: 1240)***

ME. praty, prety, 'clever'. fro OE. praettig, 'tricky, cunning', fro proett, 'a trick', reI. to ON. prettr, 'a trick', prettugr, 'tricky', Fris. pret, MDu. perte, Du. pret, 'trick, joke', Du. prettig, 'sportive, funny'.

#### ***Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (WEUD; 1996: 1534)***

[bef. 1000; ME prati Ie) pratte, prettie cunning, gallant, fine, handsome, pretty; OE pccettig, preti cunning, derive. of pccett a trick, wile (c. D part, pret trick, prank, ON prettr trick, prettugr tricky)].

The adjective pretty has its roots in the Old English. The form praettig comes from the word praett, meaning 'a trick' which relates to the Old Norse prettr, pretturg (also meaning 'a trick', some of the dictionaries present it as 'craft'), Frisian pret, Middle Dutch perte (the NODE has Middle Dutch pertich """""" brisk, clever) and Dutch pret (trick, prank), and also to Dutch prettig in the sense of 'sportive, funny'.

Taken all in all, the word from which pretty originated had existed already in the Germanic base but it meant something different, 'a trick, a joke, a prank'. The change of form was accompanied by development of meaning which evolved in the following way: from Old English 'tricky, cunning' to 'deceitful' and Middle English 'clever' (probably the influence of the Middle Dutch), then 'skilful, admirable', and finally 'pleasing, nice'.

The OED goes deeper in the analysis and presents the West Germanic base of the adjective, \*pratt. However, what is more important, it gives more information about the actual development of the sense: The meaning had shifted by is" century to 'manly, gallant' and later moved via



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'attractive, skilfully made', to 'fine' and 'beautiful in a slight way'. It seems to have had quite a weak load at first but in the course of time it got intensified and now it means 'attractive' or 'good-looking'.

The Compact Edition 01 the Oxford English Dictionary (CEOED; 1971: 2292-2293)

OE. *praettig*, f. *praett*, PRAT sb., *trick*, *wile*, *craft*, akin to *lcel. pretturg* *tricky*, *deceitful*, f. *prettr* *trick*; also to E Fris. and obs. Du *prettig* *sportive*, *funny*, *humorous*, f. *pret* *joke*, *sport*, *fun*, *pleasure* (Doornkaat-Kooiman, Franck):-WGer. "" *pratti-* or "" *pratta*; also, with metathesis, Flem. *pertig*, MDu. (ghe)*pertich* *brisk*, *dever*, *roguish* r *pertigh* Fland. *argutus*, *fallax*', Kilian), f. MDu *parte*, early mod.Du. *perte*, *parte*, *pratte* *trick*, *deceit*, *cunning* (Kilian), Du. *part* *trick*, *prank*.

The CEOED finds even more connections between the Old English *praettig* and similar words from languages of that time, this time related by the metathesis, e.g. Flemish *pertig*, Middle Dutch (ghe)-*pertich* 'brisk, clever, roguish', early modern Dutch *perte*, *parte*, *pratte* 'trick, deceit, cunning' or Dutch *part* 'trick, prank'.

The dictionary mentions that *pretty* came to be used not earlier than in 15th century (the Norman Conquest might be the reason for this gap) but in different sense than in OE. There were forms *prati*, *pratty* and *prety*, *pretty* - the latter pair has 'e' in the middle like Old Norse and continental words which suggests the interrelation of the meaning between Anglo-Saxon and Europe. The sense development was as follows: 'deceitful', 'tricky', 'cunning', 'clever', 'skilful', 'admirable', 'pleasing', 'nice', 'pretty' .

### • HANDSOME

*The New Oxford Dictionary of English (NODE; 1998: 833)*

ORIGIN Middle English: from HAND + -SOME. The original sense was 'easy to handle or use', hence 'suitable' and 'apt, clever' (mid 16th cent.), giving rise to the current appreciatory senses (late 16th cent.)

*A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (CEDEL; 1966: - 701)*

ME. *handsom*, lit. 'easy to handle, treatable', compounded of *hand* and 1st -some. Cp. MDu. *handsaem* (Du. *handzaam*. 'treatable'. which is the exact etymological equivalent of E. *handsome*.

*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (CEOED; 1971: 1251)*

Known only from 15th c. f. HAND sb. + -SOME: d. *toathsome*. Cf. early mod. (16th c.) Ger. *handsam*, Ger. dial, and E.Frls. *handsam*, early mod. Du. *handsaem*, Du. *handzaam*, an In sense I.+ 1. Easy o handle or manipulate, or to wield, deal with, or use in any way. Obs.

The adjective *handsome* was known only from 15th century, i.e. it appeared in the Middle English period and is therefore a few centuries younger than *pretty*. It is compounded of two words: a noun HAND and a

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suffix forming adjectives SOME. The original meaning is therefore 'easy to handle or use, treatable, ready at hand' and it was connected with manual work. The relative equivalents are German handsam, Frisian handsam and Middle Dutch handsaem (in Dutch handzaam, i.e. treatable). The next two dictionaries offer more expanded information on the development of handsome:

### *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (EDEL; 1910:260)*

comely, orig. dexterous. (E.) Formerly it signified able, adroit, dexterous; see Trench, select Glossary; Shak. has it in the mod. sense. ME handsum. 'Hondsum, or esy to hond werke, esy to han hand werke, manualis; Prompt. Parv. - AS. hand, hand; and suffix -sum, as in wyn-sum, winsome, joyous; but the whole word handsum does not appear. + Du. handzaam, tractable, serviceable. B The suffix -sum is a weaker grade of Du. -zaam, G. -sam (in lang-sam).

### *Online Etymology Dictionary (OED)*

(<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=handsome&searchmode=none>)

c.1400, handsom "easy to handle, ready at hand," from hand (n.) + -some. Sense extended to "fair size, considerable" (1577), then "having fine form, good-looking" (1590). Meaning "generous" (in handsome reward, etc.) first recorded 1690.

### *hand*

O.E, hond, from P.Gmc. \*khanduz (cf O.S., a.Fris., Du., Ger. hand, O.N hond, Goth. handus). The original O.E. plural handa was superseded in M.E. by handen, later hands. Meaning "person who does something with his hands" is from 1590, hence "hired workman" (1655) and "sailor in a ship's crew" (1669).

### *-some*

as a suffix forming adjectives, it represents O.E. -sum (see some; cf. O.Fris. -sum, Ger. -sam, a.N. -samr), related to sama "same."

The EDEL has the word handsum as the original form (i.e, the added suffix 'sum', not 'som'; the suffix existed also in old German and Dutch). It also points out that the original sense was 'dexterous', 'able' or 'adroit' - all words have connection with manual skills.

The OED contributes with an observation that the sense of handsome extended in 16<sup>th</sup> century to 'fair size, considerable', then 'having fine form, good-looking' and 'generous' in 17<sup>th</sup> century, which reflects the shift of meaning from 'easy to handle' to 'good-looking' just within two centuries.

Although the words pretty and handsome denote a certain kind of beauty nowadays, their original meanings have different historical roots.

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Nevertheless, they have certain features in common. Firstly, it is their domestic origin - the root was always taken over from a Germanic base (\*pratt-. or hand) which had parallels in other European languages (Dutch, German, Flemish) and the word was then adapted in a native environment. The development then diverged from the original meaning (neither of the words denoted physical beauty) and both words came to mean 'good-looking, attractive), each with its peculiarities and various other shades of meaning.

In Old English pretty originally stood for 'tricky, deceitful'. In Middle English the meaning shifted to 'clever', then 'gallant', 'manly', later also 'skilfully or cleverly made', and finally 'attractive' and 'beautiful in a slight way'. On the other hand, handsome appeared as late as approximately in 15th century and meant 'easy to handle or manipulate'. Then the meanings of the two adjectives came nearer and both denoted 'clever', 'apt' or 'skilful' although the sense was probably not quite the same. Pretty seems to represent more abstract nations whereas handsome was connected with a concrete result of a manual work or concrete people (d. a very pretty way to escape, handsome players). In handsome this sense survived quite long, approximately till 17th century and it also kept a relatively high degree of concreteness (cf. examples in CEOED). The sense 'skilful' then probably influenced the formation of the already mentioned proverb Handsome is as handsome does (the behaviour is more important than the appearance) where handsome draws on its original meaning and relates it to deeds. However, the proverb has a variant Pretty is as pretty does (Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms online). Unfortunately, the etymological dictionaries do not say anything about the latter one; anyway, the proverb provides an interesting material for exploration in the corpus .

In 16th century the sense of pretty was evolving from 'fine', 'admirable', 'proper or 'pleasing' (and it applied also to the proper appearance and qualities of men) to the adjective denoting a delicate and sometimes superficial beauty usually conjoined with smallness. It describes something pleasing to the aesthetic sense and is usually connected with women or children.

Handsome" on the other hand" acquired a sense of dignity and stateliness, sometimes connected with grace 'becoming', 'decent' --> 'courteous', 'police"gracious'). It is interesting to notice that the element of admiration or appreciation was present in both adjectives, nowadays the feature is even stronger in handsome (cf. CEOED: pretty - in the sense of 'admirable, commendable' till 17th century; handsome - 'becoming, polite'; now 'generous, magnanimous').

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As far as military area is concerned, it is notable that pretty used to describe brave and stout soldiers (i.e. persons) whereas handsome was applied rather to military exploits (i.e. actions); however, this meaning of pretty fell out of use.

There is one more common feature to both adjectives - the sense of 'a considerable amount'. Both used to mean 'moderately large' which in the course of time intensified; in the case of pretty the meaning survived in informal use and in phrases denoting a considerable amount or size (e.g. a pretty penny). Taking into consideration handsome, this sense influenced the word in a similar way: it was used when speaking about sums of money, gifts etc. or also with severe or strong reproof. Now it obtained the meaning 'generous, liberal' or 'bountiful'. However, the notion of amount is present also in its today's sense 'good-looking, attractive' as the word reflects a kind of beauty associated with balanced proportion, strong features and symmetric form. That is probably the reason why handsome is associated with persons of male sex: the strong and large features (and indirectly also manual work) are usually more typical of men rather than of women who stereotypically represent a delicate kind of beauty.

### **Section Two**

#### **Theoretical background**

##### **2.1 Dual Coding Theory and Other Theories**

Cognitive science has influenced educational research by proposing theoretical models that explain the encoding of information among representational systems. Dual Coding Theory, proposed by researchers in the field of educational psychology, is the assumption that information for memory is processed and stored by two interconnected systems and sets of codes (Clark and Paivio, 1991: 253). Dual Coding Theory has been extended to literacy as an account of reading comprehension (Sadoski & Paivio, 1994; Sadoski, Paivio, & Goetz, 1991: 464), as an account of written composition (Sadoski, 1992:267), and as a unified theory of reading and writing (Sadoski & Paivio, 1994:234). Dual Coding Theory, which is based on the general assumption that cognition consists of two classes of verbal versus non-verbal representations. That is, a verbal form is stored alongside with a mental, non-verbal image in the memory. The non-verbal class, according to Paivio (1990: 53), can include all sorts of "perceptual, affective, or behavioral knowledge". The basic theoretical support is how human brain supposedly stores words, or, more generally, any piece of information through making associations. The more associations the brain makes for a word, the easier it will be to store and retain it. The failure to remember words is in many cases a result of an earlier failure to store that

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word efficiently by connecting it to the background and already-established knowledge.

In line with what has been mentioned above, another theoretical support for the use of etymology as a means to enhance retention comes from Schema Theory. Schema Theory, for instance, works on the very same basis. "Schemata serve as a reference store from which a person can retrieve relevant existing knowledge and into which new information is assimilated" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002: 469). Accordingly, the etymological accounts could further help learners associate a new word with the relevant existing knowledge in their minds inasmuch as etymological accounts consist of stories that might sound familiar to many learners, and thus help them activate the related schemata when learning new words. As for Schema Theory, in order to activate the relevant schemata, familiar stories are needed (or at least stories similar to what learners already know), but in the case of Dual Coding Theory, the etymological stories are not required to be familiar ones because what matters is not connecting new information to existing knowledge, but raising some sort of reaction or feeling in learners. Such non-verbal reaction or feeling, when coupled with the verbal form, leads to a better storage of new words.

Another theory lending support to the justification of the use of etymological elaboration for the sake of better understanding and retention of a word is Levels of Processing Model (Cermak and Craik, 1979:65). In this concern, Richards and Schmidt (2002:453) consider "elaborative rehearsal" as a level of processing, they state that:

"... elaborative rehearsal [...] involves deep semantic processing, resulting in more elaborate associations and more durable memories. For example, if you need to remember a sequence of numbers for later recall, it is useful to transform the sequence into something that is meaningful".

### **2.2 Etymology as a Guide for Comprehension**

The possibility of using etymological information as a guide for comprehension of unfamiliar words meaning is encouraging. The scene described by the original, literal usage of an expression typically carries many potential associations, and the fact that a particular association rather than others has given rise to the unfamiliar words meaning is the outcome of a fair degree of chance. As far as the comprehension of idiomatic meaning is concerned, Boers et al (2007:45) state:

"There is ground for scepticism over the possibility of using etymological information as a guide for comprehension of idiomatic meaning. After all, although figurative meaning extensions are now believed to be motivated rather than arbitrary, this does not at all mean

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that they are fully predictable either. The scene described by the original, literal usage of an expression typically carries many potential associations, and the fact that a particular association rather than others has given rise to the conventionalized idiomatic meaning is the outcome of a fair degree of chance. For example, the scene of a boat whose keel is level may call up various associations, including that of a boat making steady progress but also that of a boat lying motionless. Awareness of the source domain of boats and sailing behind the expression 'the economy is on an even keel' alone does not guarantee the (correct) interpretation along the former association (i.e. that of making steady progress).

Students have been shown to be more likely to remember difficult words derived from specific source domains when they are associated with the original, literal usage (Boers, 2001: 37). It is hypothesized that presenting the etymological explanation first would be an encouragement for students to use this knowledge as a basis for deciding on the most likely unfamiliar words meaning in the subsequent task. This is believed to stimulate deep processing (as compared to blind guessing and memorizing) and hence retention. Despite being given information about the original, literal usage, a learner may therefore still find such idioms multi-interpretable. At first sight, it thus seems rather unrealistic to expect students to be able to independently infer the meaning of an unfamiliar idiom from knowledge of its origin or etymology. The use of the technique of etymological elaboration that it has been advocated must be confined to helping students remember the idioms after their meaning has been clarified to them (ibid.).

Nonetheless, it is worth estimating the chances of success of such a strategy, as it could provide an additional pathway for insightful learning, for example if it were used in combination with contextual cues. If the probability of correctly figuring out unfamiliar words meaning on the basis of the original, literal usage were high enough, then it would make sense in classroom contexts (and in materials design) to challenge students with this task prior to illustrating the unfamiliar words meaning to them. This challenge would engage students in 'word comprehension' and would thus require cognitive effort at a 'deeper' cognitive level, which is recommended by Levels-of-processing theory (Cermak and Craik, 1979) to enhance comprehension and remembering. However, in the tests described below we shall try to measure whether encouraging results could be obtained for unfamiliar words.

## **Section Three**

### **Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

Two EFL classes, taught by the same teacher (one of the researchers), at Al-Mustansiria University/College of Education in the academic year (2013-2014) served as the experimental (10) and control (10) groups of this study. All the participants in the higher studies stage, they are adult learners from both genders at the intermediate level of language proficiency.

#### **3.2 Materials**

Screened through two filters, twenty words are finally selected for this study. As the first step, 50 words are taken from the electronic subscribing of the researchers in Mariam-Webster's Word of the Day. In this application within yahoo mail services, everyone can subscribe to receive the meaning and etymology of English words. The first criterion for cutting down this randomly obtained sample is to examine whether or not the words are frequently used or unfamiliar in English. The online Corpus English is accordingly utilized to check low-frequent words. The purpose in this stage is to minimize the possibility of students' familiarity with the selected words. The next criterion, as another major basis for choosing the words, is the availability of an interesting etymological background for those words. One of the researchers, does the task of judging whether an etymological account is good enough to be included in the study or not. This is done to enhance the internal validity of the study by strengthening the treatment. The whole twofold process results in the selection of 20 final words with captivating etymological accounts provided by (M-W's Word of the Day electronic services) (see Appendix (1) for the complete list of the target words that are used in the study).

#### **3.3 Procedure**

The twenty words are presented to both groups in two sessions (10 words each session). In the control group, the primary presentation technique is asking the students to look up the given words in their dictionaries. The teacher would then ask one or two students to explain the meaning to the class. The participant will clarify the meaning or provide further explanation only when the students have problems understanding the meaning or have questions about it. In the experimental group, the same presentation technique is used in addition to the teacher's short talk about the etymology or the historical story of each word. In order to make sure that all the students have comprehended the etymological account, the teacher, in addition to asking comprehension questions, would ask one or

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two students to orally summarize the etymological explanation or the story or event. As the final part of vocabulary presentation in the experimental group could possibly make the act of presentation in this group longer than that of the control group, the researchers reported how much time they spent each session on presenting the new vocabulary. Nonetheless, to prevent a strong difference between the two groups regarding the amount of time assigned to vocabulary presentation, the researcher finishes the whole task in 32 to 35 minutes at most. The factor of time is specifically taken into account to further balance the conditions for both groups since the more time spent on the activities related to the target words could possibly put one group at an advantage, and thus decrease the internal validity of the study. The following table shows the amount of time spent on vocabulary presentation in each session of the two classes.

### The Time Assigned (in minutes) to Vocabulary Presentation in both Groups

Groups	session 1	session 2	total
Control	32	34	63
Experimental	35	35	70

As for pretesting the participants to check if they had any prior knowledge of the words, before the presentation stage in each of the two sessions, they are given a copy of vocabulary knowledge test developed by Paribakht and Wesche (1997:191). None of the participants knew the meaning of any of the target words. Some participants have, however, chosen level 2 (“I have seen this word before, but I don’t know what it means.”) or level 3 (“I have seen this word before, and I think it means .....”) for some items, but a close look at such words revealed that the participants who have opted for levels 2 or 3 for any of the given words have most probably made a mistake because those words looked somehow similar to other words that the students already knew. The typical examples are “hospitalist” similar to “hospital”, “yen” (similar to Japanese currency 'Yen'), “Walter Mitty” (similar to “water”), and “rancid” (similar to “ranked”). For example, for the word “rancid,” one of the students in the control group gives explains it as “the level”. The results of the pretest are reported in the table below:

### The Pretest Results

Groups	alternativ e1	alternativ e2	alternativ e3	alternativ e4	alternativ e5
Control	65.5%	24.5%	8%	2%	0%
Experimen tal	61.5%	25%	9.5%	4%	0%



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The alternatives of the pretest:

No. 1: I don't remember having seen this word before.

No. 2: I have seen this word before, but I don't know what it means.

No. 3: I have seen this word before and I think it means----- (synonym or translation).

No. 4: I know this word. It means ----- (synonym or translation).

No. 5: I can use this word in a sentence. e.g:---- (if you do this section, please also do 4)

### Posttests and Scoring Procedures

Both immediate and delayed posttests (to check for both short- and long-term retention of the words, as indicated in the research question) consist of the whole list of the 20 words taught to both groups. The participants are given 10 minutes to answer each 20-item posttest (30 seconds for each word).

The participants are asked to define, translate, exemplify, illustrate, or clarify the meaning of each word in any way they could. This freedom in answering the questions is purposefully provided because the retention of the meaning is the only thing we aimed to test, irrespective of how the participants could show a sign of recalling the meanings of the words. One score would be given for any response which indicated knowledge of the meaning of the word. Leaving an item unanswered or giving a wrong response would be scored as zero.

### Results

To answer the research question of the study, the results of the immediate posttest of both groups are compared using an independent samples t-test. The means of the control and experimental groups are 20.1 and 27.5, respectively (see the following table).

#### Immediate Posttest

Groups	Participants	Mean
Control	10	20
Experimental	10	27.5

The following table displays the descriptive statistics obtained for the delayed posttest. The independent samples t-test again revealed that the mean score of the experimental group (21.7) is significantly higher than the mean score of the control group (3.6).

#### Delayed Posttest

Groups	Participants	Mean
Control	10	3.6
Experimental	10	21.7

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### Discussion

The obtained results clearly indicate the considerable effect of presenting etymologies on vocabulary comprehending and then retention, particularly when it comes to long-term retention. Since a rather large number of words are presented in each single session (10 words per session), it could be, more or less, expected that the participants in the control group would not do much well on the delayed posttest. On the other hand, it seems that the participants in the experimental group took advantage of etymological accounts as an additional resource to rely on in order to remember the meanings of the target words on the delayed posttest. Furthermore, the results of the present study seem to be satisfactorily consistent with the previously mentioned psycholinguistic theories, i.e. Schema Theory, Dual Coding, and Levels of Processing. From the perspective of Dual Coding Theory, it is obvious that the participants in the experimental group recall the words more effectively because they might have managed to form a mental representation of the words or might have developed an affective state associating with the words. These mental representations or affective states, as proposed by Dual Coding Theory, are stored with the verbal form of a word in human mind, and thus contribute to a better storage and an enhanced subsequent recall. Students are unique people with unique life experiences and may react in many various ways to the events or situations included in etymologies. These personalized affective states can be stored in their minds together with the word. The etymology of the word *lodestar* "a star that leads or guides", for example, is related to kinds of stars, which might arouse various affective states in the students' minds. An example of the formation of a mental representation for a word is the etymology of the word *kith* 'familiar friends, neighbors, or relatives'. *Kith* has had many meanings over the years. In its earliest uses it referred to knowledge of something, but that meaning died out in the 1400s. Another sense, "one's native land," had come and gone by the early 1500s. The sense "friends, fellow countrymen, or neighbors" developed before the 12th century and was sometimes used as a synonym of "kinsfolk". Presented with such an etymology, the students would expectedly form related images, which would be attached to and stored with the verbal form of the word in their minds (see Appendix (2) for more etymological accounts) The other highly illustrational etymology used in this study is for the word *spandex* 'any of various elastic textile fibers made chiefly of polyurethane; also : clothing made of this material'. *Spandex* originally is a fiber that has had an impact on fashion high and low, casual and formal, outer and under. It is not a trademark, as a number of the names of other fibers are, among them "Dacron," "Lycra," and "Orlon." It's

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a generic term, coined in 1959 as an anagram of the word "expands." Anagrammatic coinages are not common; the only other in our dictionaries that the average person is likely to be familiar with is "sideburns." "Sideburns" is an anagram (and synonym) of "burnsides," from Ambrose E. Burnside, a Union general in the American Civil War credited with originating the fashion (in the U.S., at least) also known as "side-whiskers". Furthermore, the etymology of the word *rancid* is related with senses smell and taste. It has a straightforward history; it derives from Latin "rancidus," itself from the Latin verb "rancēre," meaning "to be rancid" or "to stink." In addition to the related words "rancidness" and "rancidity," another descendant of "rancēre" in English is "rancor," meaning "bitter deep-seated ill will." ("Rancor" passed through Middle French rather than being borrowed into English directly.) These days, "rancid" also has developed a second, extended sense which is used in the context of offenses to less literal or physical senses than those of smell or taste, and you might see references to "rancid behavior" or "a rancid personality. It is another example which is likely to cause images to be formed in the students' minds.

From the perspective of Levels of Processing Model, a greater amount of elaborative rehearsal of a word facilitates its recall and increases its durability in human mind. It could be argued that the etymological accounts used in this study served as the elaborative rehearsal referred to in Levels of Processing Model, as they could create new elaborative associations for a word and add sense and meaning to a simple raw verbal/orthographic form of a word. Here, again, a number of etymologies used in this study can be regarded as the relevant examples, one of which is the word *Walter Mitty* 'a commonplace unadventurous person who seeks escape from reality through daydreaming'. It originates in an interesting historical story .The original *Walter Mitty* was created by humorist James Thurber in his famous story "The Secret Life of *Walter Mitty*." In *Walter*'s real life, he is a reticent, henpecked proofreader befuddled by everyday life. But, in his fantasies, *Walter* imagines himself as various daring and heroic characters. Thurber's popular story was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1939. "*Walter Mitty*" has since become the eponym for dreamers who imagine themselves in dramatic or heroic situations. The story teaches the students how and why *Walter Mitty* is now used in English, and this is what gives sense and meaning to this word. To the best knowledge of the researchers, there are very few studies, if any, that have investigated the role of etymological accounts on the learning of unfamiliar and new vocabulary. A rather small body of research, however, is available on the effectiveness of teaching the etymologies of idioms to improve some

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aspects of learning, especially retention (e.g. Boers, 2001; Boers et al., 2007). The findings of the present study are consistent with them, although idioms are supposed to lend themselves much easier and better to etymological accounts. Nevertheless, word etymologies seem to act generally in a similar manner and evoke the same mental processes as etymologies for idioms, and this can mainly account for this consistency.

### **Conclusions**

Etymology is the systematic study and classification of word origins, especially as regards forms and meanings - it is therefore an important concept both for semantic change and language learning. The etymology of a given lexeme denotes an account of its historical-linguistic origin. As English contains hundreds of thousands of lexemes, etymology is a vast field of study, of which any examples will be pitifully few and probably not very representative. Many dictionaries will give etymological information. Thus, a learner should though be aware of false etymologies and interesting and plausible stories about word origins. However, there are many advantages of etymological word memory:

- Increasing vocabulary
- Understanding a language and culture
- Strengthening the learning interest of the students
- Reducing the frustrations by forgotten words.

The results obtained in this study indicate plausible productivity of presentation of etymological accounts of words for an enhanced subsequent recall. This becomes even more significant when the more longitudinal recall of words is concerned (see the results of the delayed post-test). There are, however, some limitations in the study, among the most crucial of which stands the rather small number of participants. Besides, due to some practicality restrictions, the number of sessions in which the participants received instruction on the target words could not be increased, so ten words were presented in each session. Aside from the research limitations, the pedagogical implications of this study need to be accounted for carefully. The results of this research are generalizable to the words which bear a stimulating etymology, similar to the words used here. Fortunately, however, at the hands of creative teachers, the dull or less informative etymologies can be enriched and elaborated to grasp students' attention and make further associations for the targeted word in their minds. In other words, some etymologies, to qualify as pedagogically significant, might need some level of processing executed by the materials writer or the teacher before they are presented to the students as a mnemonic device. While moving on the same line of many previous theories, models, and studies on vocabulary teaching and learning, this study introduces a rather

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new vocabulary teaching technique, which has been shown here to be considerably effective in enhancing students' comprehending and then retention of words and their meanings. The present research focuses merely on two aspects of vocabulary learning, i.e. comprehending and retention, but it is hoped that further research will study the role of etymology teaching in other aspects of vocabulary learning such as explaining, collocations and usage.

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### Appendix (1)

The target words used in this study:

1-lodestar
2-Walter Wittny
3-kith
4-collmate
5-rancid
6-virescent
7-spandex
8-hospitalist
9-callous
10-yen
11-infix
12-smite
13-timorous
14-perforce
15-rearguard
16-orthography
17-verboden
18-inroad
19-Exhort
20-fantod

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**Appendix (2)**

**Examples of Etymologies Used in the Experimental Group**

**Lodestar - and a "test your memory" quiz**

M-W's Word of the Day

To

majdasabri@yahoo.com

**You are receiving this email because you opted in to receive the Merriam-Webster Word of the Day.**

Unsubscribe majdasabri@yahoo.com

- Manage your subscription settings

lodestar \LOHD-stahr\

noun

: one that serves as an inspiration, model, or guide

When she started her own business, Melinda used her father's motto—"Trust your instincts"—as her *lodestar*.

"For a generation of computer programmers, astrophysicists and other scientists, Mr. Munroe and his online comic, xkcd, have been *lodestars*." — From an article by Noam Cohen in *The New York Times*, March 17, 2014

The literal, albeit archaic, meaning of "lodestar" is "a star that leads or guides" and it is a term that has been used especially in reference to the North Star. (The first half of the word derives from the Middle English word "lode," meaning "course.") Both the literal and the figurative sense ("an inspiration or guide") date back to the 14th century, the time of Geoffrey Chaucer. The literal sense fell out of use in the 17th century, and so, for a while, did the figurative sense—but it appeared again 170 years later, when Sir Walter Scott used it in his 1813 poem *The Bridal of Triermain*.

Walter Mitty \WAWL-ter-MIT-ee\

noun

: a commonplace unadventurous person who seeks escape from reality through daydreaming

Alan is a *Walter Mitty* who loves to read travel books but rarely ventures beyond the limits of his own small town.

"Ralphie eventually has to resort to his own *Walter Mitty*-esque flights of fancy to deal with his real-life predicament." — From an article by Bill Eggert in *The Tribune-Democrat* (Johnstown, Pennsylvania), December 14, 2013

*Sponsored Content*

Walter Mitty Inspirational Quote of the Day:

“Stop Dreaming. Start Living.” – The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

kith \KITH\

noun

:familiar friends, neighbors, or relatives

Alan looked forward to the annual block party as a way to stay connected with his *kith*.

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"Many urban dwellers, embedded in networks of *kith* and kin, wouldn't dream of swapping the spiciness of the city for the white-bread pleasures of suburbia." — From an article by David L. Kirp in *The New York Times*, October 20, 2013

"Kith" has had many meanings over the years. In its earliest uses it referred to knowledge of something, but that meaning died out in the 1400s. Another sense, "one's native land," had come and gone by the early 1500s. The sense "friends, fellow countrymen, or neighbors" developed before the 12th century and was sometimes used as a synonym of "kinsfolk." That last sense got "kith" into hot water after people began using the word in the alliterative phrase "kith and kin." Over the years, usage commentators have complained that "kith" means the same thing as "kin," so "kith and kin" is redundant. Clearly, they have overlooked some other historical definitions, but if you want to avoid redundancy charges, be sure to include friends as well as relatives among your "kith and kin."

### Collimate - and a "test your memory" quiz

• M-W's Word of the Day

•

• 11 Apr

**collimate** ˈKAIH-luh-mayt

"Amazingly, some astrophysical jets—streams of charged particles collimated and accelerated over astronomical distances—also exhibit a helical structure." — From an article by Mario Livio on *The Huffington Post*, November 20, 2013

"The higher cost and fixed eyepieces of the ... binoculars are distinct disadvantages, but setup time is reduced—there's no need to collimate optics or align tube assemblies." — From a product review by Phil Harrington in *Astronomy*, February 2004

Sponsored Link

One might expect a science-y word like "collimate" to have straightforward etymology, but that's not the case. "Collimate" comes from Latin "collimare," a misreading of the Latin word "collineare," meaning "to direct in a straight line." The erroneous "collimare" appeared in some editions of the works of ancient Roman statesman Cicero and scholar Aulus Gellius. The error was propagated by later writers—most notably by astronomers, such as Johannes Kepler, who wrote in Latin. And so it was the spelling "collimate," rather than "collineate," that passed into English in the 19th century.