1-31-2003

What's in a Word? Etymology!

Cynthia L. Hallen

Abstract   Scriptural records are important in preserving the words of prophets as well as the language of our ancestors. An etymological study of the important words in scriptures can link us to the thoughts and feelings of people who lived in the past. An example is the word *heart,* which has meaning both as an essential body part and as a metaphor for one's thoughts and feelings.

What's in a Word? Etymology!

The Book of Mormon teaches that scriptural records are important for two reasons: to preserve the words of prophets and to preserve the language of our ancestors. Preserving the language of the scriptures is one way to pass down the truths of the gospel from generation to generation:

> And behold, it is wisdom in God that we should obtain these records, that we may preserve unto our children the language of our fathers; and also that we may preserve unto them the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets, which have been delivered unto them by the Spirit and power of God, since the world began, even down unto this present time. (1 Nephi 3:19–20)

One way to gain insights in scripture study is to look up the semantic origins of key words in the text. Although "we cannot ascribe anything like 'fixed' meanings to words,"[1] studying entries in a good dictionary or electronic concordance can illuminate the range and history of a word's senses. Searching out the etymology of a word is somewhat akin to seeking out the genealogy of an ancestor:

> Etymology, we are doing it,
>   our etymology,
> And the truth we gain, when we're doing it,
>   is very plain to see.
> We gain insights from many words we read;
>   we learn philology.
> It's a record of our language,
>   just like a family tree.
> Words still living now and their ancient roots
>   have senses we can glean,
> And sometimes we learn gospel insights when
>   we study what words mean.
> All things testify of the love of Christ
>   when we search faithfully.
> It's the language of our fathers,
>   a scripture treasury.[2]

The term *etymology,* which derives from Greek, refers to the "true" origin, or root meaning, of a word. Because language always changes, the word root (etymon) develops new meanings as people over time use the word in new forms (reflexes). Different forms of the same root can show up in various languages as cognates (related forms). Like a family history, a word history can link us to the thoughts and feelings of people who lived in the past.

In order to follow the etymological roots of words in present-day English and in the 19th-century-English translation of the Book of Mormon, it helps to look at the direct-line ancestry of English as proposed by historical linguists. Philologists call this pedigree the orthogenetic line of a language. Some scholars have estimated dates and reconstructed ancestor languages for earlier periods of English; however, these dates may or may not correspond exactly to biblical events and timetables. In the table that follows, the boldfaced words represent the direct-line ancestors of English in the language families indicated. We cannot trace the history of English words back to the Adamic language because we do not have written records from earlier time periods to attest the connection between ancient languages that emerged from the Proto-World period. However, some scholars have reconstructed the roots of words in English and other languages back to their Indo-European origins using the scientific principles of the comparative method. Harvard professor Calvert Watkins provides many of these IE roots in his appendix to the 3rd edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary.*[3] He lists the IE roots and the related words derived from them that came into contemporary English from Old English, Latin, Greek, Old Norse, and other languages.

LINEAGE OF ENGLISH		
Time Period	**Language Period**	**Language Developments or Influences**
unknown	Proto-World? (Eden)	Divine gift, genetic endowment, the language of Adam and Eve (**Adamic**)
unknown	Diluvian? (Noah's Flood)	The language of Noah through Ham, Shem, and Japheth: Hamitic, Semitic, **Japhetic**
unknown	Nostratic? (Tower of Babel)	Afro-Asiatic, Altaic, Chukchi, Dravidian, Eskimo-Aleut, **Indo-European,** Uralic, Sumerian, etc.
ca. 5000–2500 B.C.	Indo-European	**Germanic,** Celtic, Italic, Hellenic, Balto-Slavic, Indo-Iranian, Anatolian, Armenian, Albanian, Tocharian
ca. 100 B.C.	Germanic (Teutonic)	North Germanic (Scandinavian), East Germanic (Gothic), **West Germanic** with Celtic, Latin, and Slavic influences
ca. A.D. 100	West Germanic	**Angles, Jutes, Saxons,** Frisians, etc.
ca. A.D. 500	Old English (Anglo-Saxon)	Beginning of English, with Latin and Old Norse (North Germanic) influences
ca. A.D. 1100	Middle English	with French influences
ca. A.D. 1500	Early Modern English	with Italian, Latin, Greek influences
ca. A.D. 1800	19th-Century English	with American influences
ca. A.D. 1900	New English	with many influences

To apply an etymological method to the scriptures, we can begin by identifying key words in a passage. The English word *heart* is a very important lexical item in 3 Nephi 25:5–6 (see also Malachi 4:5–6):

> Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord; and he shall turn the *heart* of the fathers to the children, and the *heart* of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

Then we can look up the transliterated Hebrew forms and meaning of *heart* using the electronic concordance included in *The Scriptures: CD-ROM Resource Edition 1.0,* available at distribution centers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The transliterated form of *heart* in Malachi 4:6 is *lēbh-,* which has the following meanings and connotations as paraphrased from Strong's concordance, a tool in the concordance program: "the heart; the most interior organ; also used figuratively for the feelings, the will and even the intellect; likewise for the center of anything."[4] The Hebrew idea of *lēbh-* as a center for emotion, desire, and intelligence is parallel to the *Oxford English Dictionary*[5] entry for the English word *heart*: "the seat of feeling, understanding, and thought"; "MIND, in the widest sense, including the functions of feeling, volition, and intellect" (definition 5a).

In Watkins's AHD appendix, we learn that *heart* traces back to Old English *heorte,* which in turn traces back to the reconstructed Indo-European form **kerd-¹,* meaning "heart." The literal meaning of *heart* as an essential body part has remained about the same, but the word also has a metaphorical extension, so that *heart* in 3 Nephi 25:6 refers to one's thoughts and feelings, not the physical organ of the human circulatory system.

The word *heart* underwent noticeable sound changes from Indo-European to Germanic to Old English. The IE initial /k/ segment changed into an /h/, and the final /d/ changed to a /t/, in the Germanic sound shift called "Grimm's Law." This helps us see that the English word *heart* and the words *cardia* and *cardiac,* which originated in Greek, are cognates that we have borrowed for medical terminology.

The word *heart* is also a cognate with the word *courage,* which comes to us from Latin, so by metaphorical extension the phrase *take heart* in English means "have courage." The same Latin reflex gives us the English word *record,* providing a striking connection between the "records of the fathers" (Abraham 1:31; see also Ezra 4:15) and the "heart[s] of the fathers" (3 Nephi 25:6; Malachi 4:6) . According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the verb *record* means "to get by heart, to commit to memory, to go over in one's mind" (def. I1a). Etymologically speaking, to "re-cord" is to learn things by heart so that we can ponder them again and again. Records of personal and family history enable our children to "-re-member" and "re-turn" to us. Scriptural records enable the hearts of the Lord's children to turn to the hearts of the prophets, and they enable righteous forebears to speak directly to the hearts of their descendants. Doctrine and Covenants 128 discusses at length the importance of record keeping in performing temple ordinances for our ancestors. This connection between the Spirit of Elijah, redeeming the dead, and keeping holy records seems apparent in Alma 37:3: "these plates of brass . . . have the records of the holy scriptures upon them, which have the genealogy of our forefathers, even from the beginning."

A different Latin derivation of Indo-European **kerd-¹* reveals a cognate relationship between the English word *heart* and the concept of "believing" or "trusting." The words *credence, credible, credo,* and *credulous* stem from Latin *crederĕ*. However, this connection is attested with a negative connotation, or a pejorative semantic shift, in Doctrine and Covenants 123:7: "that spirit . . . hath . . . riveted the creeds of the fathers, who have inherited lies, upon the hearts of the children, and filled the world with confusion." In this verse, a creed can be a set of beliefs that turns the hearts of the children away from the words of the true prophets and toward the misguided traditions of their forefathers.

A more positive connotation, or amelioration, links the cognate *grant* from the same Latin root *crederĕ* to the word *heart.* That link adds insight to Alma 33:23, where Alma says, "I desire that ye shall plant this word in your hearts. . . . And then may God grant unto you that your burdens may be light." A grant is a gift from the heart of one person to the heart of another; to grant something is to give a heartfelt blessing in covenant settings (see Psalm 20:4; Alma 24:10; 31:31; D&C 5:24).

To enhance scripture study, readers may wish to ponder the meaning of key words in relation to their etymons, reflexes, and cognates. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great New England philosopher of the 19th century, observed that "every word was once a poem."[6] When we use a good dictionary as part of our scripture study, we can find poetic connections in words. Such explorations can touch our hearts with deeper feelings and fill our minds with further insights. The etymology of words can endorse gospel principles by bearing witness of the Lord and his truths:

> And behold, all things have their likeness, and all things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: all things bear record of me. (Moses 6:63)

As we let the words of the scriptures bear record of Christ, our hearts will be turned to him and he will grant us his richest blessings.

Send questions or comments to Cynthia_Hallen@byu.edu.

6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," cited in Stephen E. Whicher, ed., *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 229.

[What's in a Word?]
What's in a Word? Etymology!
Cynthia L. Hallen

1. Thomas Pyles and John Algeo, *The Origins and Development of the English Language,* 4th ed. (Boston: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 240.

2. Adapted from Jeanne P. Lawler, "Family History—I Am Doing It," *Children's Songbook of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995), 94.

3. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,* 3rd ed., 2087-134.

4. James Strong, ed., *New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible,* in *The Scriptures: CD-ROM Resource Edition 1.0.*

5. *The Oxford English Dictionary,* 2nd ed., s.v. "heart."