

**ON THE FORMATION OF  
ENGLISH WORDS BY  
MEANS OF ABLAUT. A  
GRAMMATICAL ESSAY**

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**KARL WARNKE**

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A GRAMMATICAL ESSAY

BY

KARL WARNKE, PH. D.

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HALLE A/S.  
MAX NIEMEYER.  
1878.

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In all Teutonic languages we are able to distinguish two principles ruling over the whole of what English grammarians call Etymology. In the declension as well as in the formation of words two manners of proceeding are at work: either new elements are added to the original and simple form of the word, without that form itself undergoing any material alteration, or the word is modified in one of its essential parts, viz. in the vowel which combined with consonants constitutes its stem. As to the former method, the elements affixed to the root have often lost their original form, and frequently they have even dwindled down to only one letter; but the greater the progress is, made by comparative philology, the more it appears that those syllables and letters which, apparently without any meaning themselves, have served to call into existence new words and new forms, were once possessed of a distinct and clear signification. The only difference existing between them and those prefixes and suffixes whose forms have not been curtailed, and whose meaning is still discernible, is that they date from a period much more remote than the latter, and that, like chemical compounds, they have been intimately blended with a stem, whilst the others like mechanic compounds, have preserved both their form and their meaning. Thus to give only one instance, the consonant suffix *k* as we have it in *hawk*, *bullock* &c., is of pronominal origin (AS. *ic* = I)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>) See R. Morris, *Historical Outlines of English Accidence*, London 1875, p. 213 (Note 2).

Quite as frequently, however, new words have been formed by means of vowel-change. Two sorts of vowel-change may be distinguished in English words: the one is due to exterior influence; the other is based on a fundamental law valid in all Teutonic dialects.

It is well known that certain vowels whose pronunciation did not differ much, very often took each other's place in the early written language. When language got more fixed and settled, when more ideas arose, and consequently more words were needed, no better expedient offered than to assign a particular domain to either of these forms. Thus are to be considered: *bathe beath, bless bliss, clam clem, desk disk, meddle middle, neb nib, quid cud, rudder rother* (in *rothernails*), *stud stot, than then, thrash thresh, truth troth*.

The same is the case in a number of French words, where the right vowel, not caught by the ear of the common people, was introduced by writing: *café coffee, chant chaunt, cleff cliff, cull coil, molasses melasses, ostrich estrich, pair peer, poult pullet, rosin resin, tamper temper*. Very often the vowel has lost its original sound by the influence of certain subsequent consonants. Before the liquid consonants *m* and *n*, the vowels *a* and *o* were indiscriminately used in AS.; so we have in modern English the double forms: *can con, hale whole, ramp romp*; similarly, *deal dole, mean moan, load lade*. — Especially easy is a change of vowel before the guttural *r*, by which the clear sound of a preceding vowel is invariably modified so that often it may quite as well be represented by one vowel as by another. In the written documents of English provincial dialects we in fact sometimes meet with almost all vowels before *r* in the same word: f. i. *vurgin, vergin, virgin, vorigin, vurgin*. This proceeding has enriched the vocabulary of the English tongue with a number of words; f. i. *birth berth barth, carl churl, charm churm, churn quern, dear darling dilling, dark dirk, farther further, girth garth, mirk murky, orchil archil, perilous parlous, shark sherk shirk, whirl whorl*.

No change of vowel properly speaking is to be stated in a number of words in which the different vowel is caused

by the one word having been taken from a different language. Due to French influence are: *cave*, *cape*, *rank* existing by the side of *cove*, *cope*, *ring*. From a Northern source have been derived: *bark*, *frisk*, *rindle* occurring by the side of *birch*, *fresh*, *run*. *Brisk* is a Celtic word, *brusk* is = Fr. *brusque*. Directly from the Latin as a mot savant has been taken *probe*, the popular form of which is *proof* (*prove*). In all these instances the vowel-change is accidental: the second form is the same as the first, only with a slightly modified pronunciation.

It is different in a number of cases where we meet with a regular transition from *i* to *a* and *u*. This regular transition is, also by English grammarians, called Ablaut. Its origin dates from a prehistorical period, and the words formed by it bear a much more primitive character than those produced by composition — an opinion which seems to be illustrated and corroborated by the fact that all Teutonic dialects in course of time have been deprived of this faculty, whilst on the other hand, every day new words may be called into existence by means of composition. The primitive character of the Ablaut-formations will still more distinctly be set off, if we consider the origin and the character of the three vowels which they exhibit, and if we examine those words themselves in an historical point of view.

Vowels are produced by the tube which in form of a cavity is adjoined to the head of the windpipe, being either lengthened or shortened, and by the tongue and lips taking different forms. The vocal tube is shortest when we utter the sound *i*, the head of the windpipe having its highest stand; it is longest when we bring forth the sound *u*, the head of the windpipe having then gone as far down as possible; it has a middle position with regard to *a*, in which case the tube is longer than with *i* and shorter than with *u*. On the other side, when pronouncing *i*, the tongue takes a concave form, and the lips get rounded; when uttering *a*, the tongue has its natural position, and the lips are simply opened. Thus the different shape of the vocal tube as well as the different position of the tongue and lips, show that



*i* or *u* form the keynotes of the vocal gamut, the exact middle of which is taken by *a*. Between either *i* and *a*, or *a* and *u*, there is an infinite series of various vowels, none of which, however, exceeds either *i* or *u*, and none of which is produced with the whole vocal apparatus being in a more regular position than it is when bringing forth *a*. The three vowels *i*, *a*, and *u*, therefore, may justly be called the fundamental pillars on which the whole system of vocalisation has been constructed. From the remarks just made it also appears of what particular sound each of the three vowels is possessed. The shorter the vocal tube is, and the broader the opening made by the lips, the clearer and finer is the sound produced; and the more the tube is lengthened, and the more the lips are rounded, the more the sound becomes dull and hollow. Thus *i* represents a clear and even a shrill sound, *a* is loud and strong, *u* is loud and hollow. Compared with either *a* or *u*, *i*, being not possessed of the same force as those two, sounds rather soft and low.

The category of words, therefore, in which, already a priori, we may expect to meet with Ablaut, are those expressive of sound, which, only from the occurrence of Ablaut, may be supposed to belong to the oldest elements of language. That, in fact, they are so, is proved by the history of language.

According to the most generally adopted opinion, onomatopoeia was the principle which first led man to the use of language, and it was only in process of time that this principle was amplified and transferred from the imitation of sound to the representation of all other things that struck the senses. Max Müller<sup>1)</sup>, differing from this theory, thinks that, as bodies like glass and bells are possessed of a particular sound, the faculty of thinking necessitated the organs of speech to perform adequate vibrations in order to produce sounds and words. But he, too, is under the necessity of owning that a number of words in all languages

<sup>1)</sup> Lectures on the Science of Language. London 1864. p. 372 seqq., p. 402.

are formed in an onomatopoeic way. As men acquire a great part of their ideas by the impression which the objects surrounding them make on their senses, so it is in fact of language. Nature, proving its very life by perpetual movement and noise, presents a rich variety as to the eye so to the ear of the contemplative looker-on. Thus the words, generally called sounds, took their origin — words which compose a great part of the vocabulary of all nations, and which for the English language have been carefully compiled by Koch in an Essay, bearing the title *Linguistische Allotria*, and published after the author's death by Dr. Wilhelm (Eisenach 1875). The sounds once brought into existence, it was not difficult to take another step in the formation of new words. Soon the sharp ear of man perceived that very often several sounds succeed each other, which either represent a mere repetition, or give the same sound in different shades. In the former case the simplest manner of proceeding would have been twice to repeat the same word; and although there are instances of that having been indeed the case, as *bee-bee*, *paw-paw*, yet in general the English language, avoiding such monotonous and poor-looking formations, preferred to give them more variety by a change of the initial consonant of the second word, f. i. *bow-wow*, *boo-hoo*, *fol-lol*, *hirdum dirdum*, *hubbub*, *whurlic-burlic* &c. In all these instances the radical vowel has been preserved (in *whurlic-burlic* there is only an irregular and arbitrary spelling) for the simple reason that the sound originally expressed by these words has not undergone any alteration. In a number of cases, however, the second sound was, although bearing the same general character as the first, yet perceived to be as distinct from it, as the echo is distinct from the sound which effects it. In order to represent this difference, no easier and more appropriate expedient offered itself, than to repeat the stem not with any alterations affecting the first consonant, but with a simple and regular change of the vowel, i. e. with Ablaut.

As we have in German formations, exhibiting all three vowels, f. i. *piff paff puff*, *bim ban bam*, so we meet also in

English with combinations, like *cling clang cheng*, *see saw fun*, *knick knack knock*, *rim ram ruff*. I am at a loss to discover the meaning of the third form in such expressions, if it be not that the ear felt better pleased with, or found greater completeness in, three sounds. For beside expressions like those just mentioned, we have instances where the English language, although not choosing to affix a third modification with *u*, yet for the sake of completeness added a third word with a vowel different from the first two. Thus we read in Shakespeare (*Tempest* I, i): *ding dong bell*. Other examples are to be met with in Halliwell's interesting book: *The Nursery Rhymes of England* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London, 1843):

- p. 16. *See saw sack a day.*  
 p. 82. *Little John Jiggy Jag.*  
 p. 94. *John Cook had a little gray mare,*  
       *He haw hum,*  
       *Her back stood up, and her bones they were bare,*  
       *He haw hum.*  
 p. 109. *Ding dong darrow*  
       *The cat and the sparrow.*  
 p. 125. *Sing danty baby ditty.*  
 p. 141. *Tick tack too.*

Generally, however, two of these forms were thought sufficient to express the same idea as is conveyed by three. So we hear in German *piff pass*, *piff puff*, *bim bam*, *bim bum* quite as often as the forms with the three vowels; and the number of English words with only two vowels by far surpasses the quantity of those exhibiting three. A number of these double-formations are to be found in the scientific grammars of the English tongue<sup>1)</sup>; the completest list has been given by Koch in the above-mentioned Essay. Koch has, however, omitted to give the particular development of

<sup>1)</sup> Fiedler, *Wissenschaftliche Grammatik der Engl. Sprache* I, Zerbst, 1848, p. 200. — E. Mätzner, *Grammatik der Engl. Sprache*. Berlin 1873, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., I, p. 474.