

It's all Greek: Borrowed words and their histories (a review)

Original work by Alexander Tulloch published by The Bodleian Library 2018

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It's All Greek is really a play on words. The phrase *It's all Greek to me* is a way of saying 'I don't understand anything.' In this case, Tulloch is making the point that Greek is the origin of many commonly used English words. His book, subtitled *Borrowed Words and Their Histories*, explains the origin and meaning of 260 words and phrases used in English with roots in ancient Greek.

In his introduction, Tulloch claims that Greek is the longest continuously spoken and written language in Europe. A variety of Greek was being used in 1500 BCE, and Homer was using it to narrate the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the 8th Century BCE. Latin dates from the 3rd century BCE. The Celtic, Slavonic and Germanic languages date from the 6th century CE. Greek, he explains, is especially common in science and technology but also in household implements and food. *Marmalade*, *currants*, *butter* and *margarine* are all

words of Greek origin. *Chemist*, *church* and *cemetery* are also modified Greek words, as are *telephone*, *lamp* and *television*. Even the words *cinema* and *theatre* are of Greek origin. The book is an etymologist's dream.

As a result of ancient Greek expansion and empire, Greek words spread all over Europe and Asia and the New Testament of the Bible was originally written in Greek. Religious words like *bible*, *bishop*, *cathedral*, *chorus*, *priest* and *choir* all derive from ancient Greek. Many words you would not expect also have Greek origins, such as *purse*, *place*, *chimney*, *pirate* and *chair*. The scientific revolution in Europe in the 16th century rejected older Latin religious thinking and sought for a new language to provide the new words needed to describe new discoveries and new ways of thinking. The answer was Greek. Words like *machine*, *orthodox*, *dilemma*, *diagnosis*,

anthropology and a lot of other words all entered the language in the 16th century.

The entries explain the original Greek use of the word under discussion followed by its entry into European languages and into English and explains how it is used. The word *kithara* in Greek became the English word *guitar*. In Latin, it was known as a *cithera*, in Old French – as *guiterre*, and in Spanish – as *guitarra*. It entered English in the 17th century, used initially to describe a lute but as the instrument evolved, came to mean *a guitar*.

An interesting entry is the word *hoi-polloi*. This is one of the relatively few Greek words which has become an English word with no change. In English, it used to refer to the common people and is a pejorative term. In ancient Greek, it meant simply *the people*, specifically, *those who hang around the market*. The poet John Dryden was the first to use it in English in 1668 and it was absorbed into the English language in 1837.

As Tulloch explains *polloi* is the plural of *polus*, which means *much*. This in turn became *poly* and the basis of a large number of other English words in use today, including *polyglot*, *polymath* and *Polynesia*.

As well as its definitions and origins of English words derived from ancient Greek, *It's All Greek* also contains explanations of common Greek references. The Eleusinian Mysteries, the Gods, ancient Greek characters all make an appearance with a short explanation and their relevance today. One fascinating entry concerns the phrase, *Pandora's box*. The mythical warning is that you must never open Pandora's box as it contains dangerous things. The only problem is – it isn't a box. Apparently when Erasmus, the great medieval philosopher, first translated the story he mixed up the words and confused the Greek word for 'box', *puxis*, with the word *pithoi*, meaning *an earthenware jar!* We think we prefer Pandora's box to Pandora's jar.