

Review

Bagels, bumf and buses: A day in the life of the English language (a review)

Original work by Simon Horobin published by Oxford University Press 2019

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Everybody is interested in where words actually come from. The science of etymology is an important discipline in applied linguistics, and the etymology of words and phrases in English has been the subject of many popular applied linguistics books by David Crystal and others.

In *Bagels, Bumf and Buses* Simon Horobin, Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford University, has taken an interesting and unusual approach.

He focuses on words we use every day without even thinking about where they come from or what they originally meant, and then organises them according to the progress of a typical day, hence the subtitle, *A day in the life of the English language*.

So, what does this day look like? The book is divided into five parts: Starting the Day, Work, Eating and Drinking, Sport and Leisure, and Evening. Each part is divided into between two and six chapters, making seventeen in all. There is an index of the words and phrases explained and an index of people associated with many of the words and phrases.

Rather than describe the origin of each word or phrase in alphabetical order, as most etymologists do, Horobin chooses to contextualise them in a discussion about habits. Thus, the word *bagels* in the title is part of typical continental breakfast foods. It's a Yiddish word but derives from an old English word for a metal arm-ring. In the same way *focaccia* (a popular Italian bread) meaning 'bread baked in the hearth' and derived from the Latin word *focus* referring to the centre of the home where the household deity was worshipped and the cooking done. Horobin goes on to say that *focus* entered English in the 17th century as a geometrical term referring to a point equidistant from any other point in a curve. Only later did the word come to mean any centre of interest. Staying with Italian breads, the book describes how *ciabatta* comes from a dialect word for an old shoe with a worn-down heel. This loosely describes the shape of the bread, emphatically not its taste! Probably, the most famous continental breads are the French baguettes and croissants. *Baguette* (meaning literally 'a small rod') is also Latin from *baculum* – 'a staff'. Incidentally, adds Horobin, the loan word

from French, *imbecile*, referring to a person criticised for doing something stupid, also comes from *baculum* in the sense of ‘without a staff’, i.e. someone physically frail. *Croissant*, as most of us know, comes from Latin *crescens* referring to the moon, meaning ‘waxing’ or ‘growing’. Horobin doesn’t mention that *croissant* also has a German origin in the word *kipferl*, a popular bread baked in Austria and introduced to France in the 19th century.

But what about bread itself? Obviously, there is a link to *brot* in German and the word does have an old English origin, probably originating in Latin *frustrum* meaning ‘piece’, ‘fragment’ or ‘morsel’. But the word *loaf* (as in a loaf of bread), is even more interesting. Old English used the word *hlaf*, and in Anglo-Saxon England the *hlaforð* was ‘the guardian of the bread’ (i.e. the lord of the manor) and the *hlafdige* was the ‘breadkneader’ (i.e. the lady of the manor). *Bread* and *loaf* then became the basis of a large number of idioms to do with wealth and privilege, such as *use your loaf* meaning ‘think before you do something stupid’; *know which side your bread is buttered on* meaning ‘know where your interests lie’; and *to have your bread buttered on both sides* meaning ‘to be able to profit from all sides of a situation, often to the disadvantage of others’.

So, well-breakfasted we are now ready for work. How do we get there? We go by bus, the third word in the book’s title. *Bus* is short for *omnibus*, which comes from France. It was first used by a French transport company run by a man called Omnes, who ran buses between the town of Nantes and a nearby lido. His slogan was *omnes omnibus* meaning ‘omnes for all’. The Latin word *omnibus* is the plural dative and ablative case in *of omnes* (all). So *omnibus* can translate as ‘to all’ or ‘by all’. Anyway, the world transited into English and became the shortened form, *bus*.

Interestingly enough, the English word *bus* has also spawned a number of idioms, such as *you wait and wait and no bus comes, then three come at once* alluding to the situation where things tend to happen all at the same time, and *you missed the bus* (also, *you missed the boat*) which means ‘you missed the opportunity’. *Bus* also has a sporting re-

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ference. *Parking the bus* means ‘to place all your players in defence to stop an attack by the other team’, apparently a popular tactic employed the international football manager, Jose Mourinho.

The second word in the title is, *bumf*, usually refers to unnecessary publicity or reading matter. This might include old household bills, correspondence you’ve read and haven’t thrown away, office files and other unnecessary paper. *Bumf* is an abbreviation of the word *bum-fodder*, a 19th century description of toilet paper. The word *bum* itself is an English word term dating from the 14th century meaning ‘buttocks’ or ‘a drunk person’ and a German word *bummer* meaning ‘a high-spirited irresponsible person’. A *bummer* in modern British colloquial English describes a really bad experience. Hence the derogatory associations of *bumf* to described useless paperwork.

The longest of the book’s five parts, *Work*, contains six chapters, five of them devoted to different professions, the law, politics, the church, health services and parenting and school. On the way the book covers language used by electricians, firefighters, plumbers and farmers. The sixth chapter is about the office. The word *office* comes from the Latin *officium* referring to an act of service and comprising two words – *opus* (‘work’) and *facere* (‘to do’).

It’s interesting to follow the origin of many words now commonly used internationally in social media. The word *Bluetooth*, for example, used to describe wireless communication technology, comes from the name given to King Harald I of Denmark (c.910-985 CE) who united Scandinavian territo-

ries under Danish rule. The Bluetooth symbol combines the two runic symbols that make up Harald's name. The word *spam*, used to refer to unwanted files, refers to a type of tinned meat and meme. It was coined by the geneticist Richard Dawkins to describe a caption spread widely through social media and derives from the ancient Greek *mimema* meaning 'what is imitated'. When a *meme* goes viral, the term comes from the Latin word *virus* coined to describe a poisonous liquid referring to snake's venom. So even new coinages can have their roots in the languages of the past and the study of etymology helps us discover them.

There aren't many Russian etymological references in the book, although the word *bistro*, a French word to describe a small restaurant and bar serving simple meals, is alleged to have come from Russian soldiers occupying Paris in the 19th century and demanding quick meals, shouting 'bistro!' meaning 'quickly!' Horobin doesn't mention that in his book but he does mention *pavlova*, the delicious dessert named after the famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova. In fact, although the name is Russian the dish itself was invented in

Australia and New Zealand and named after her following her tour there in 1926. For chess players Horobin also refers to the *Kotov syndrome*, named after the Russian chess grandmaster Alexander Kotov and meaning 'a long and hard thought-out strategy, which turns out to be a disaster'.

How can *Bagels, Bumf and Buses* support the languages researcher and teacher of English? The book gives the origin of over 2,000 words and phrases and shows how they are used in the context of everyday life. Therefore, they can provide the basis of reading texts offering an interesting insight into how the English language is used in different daily contexts. In language and cultural study, the book shows how terms are related to daily life in Britain and are used in practice, as well as explaining where they came from and, in many cases, how their use has changed over time. For intermediate and advanced students studying English as it is used in everyday contexts, the book can illustrate the cultural background. It can also be used as a quiz (give students a word and encourage them to find its origin). All in all, an interesting and entertaining way to motivate students to explore language through etymology.