The law of Hobson-Jobson

SUSAN PURCELL

Yule and Burnell's 1886 Anglo-Indian dictionary still fascinates and informs today

Introduction

It is not the finest of Salman Rushdie's writings, but this is the first paragraph of his essay *Hobson-Jobson* (italics in original):

> The British Empire, many *pundits* now agree, descended like a *juggernaut* upon the *barbicans* of the East, in search of *loot*. The *moguls* of the *raj* went in *palanquins*, smoking *cheroots*, to sup *toddy* or *sherbet* on the *verandahs* of the *gymkhana* club, while the *memsahibs* fretted about the *thugs* in *bandannas* and *dungarees* who roamed the night like *pariahs*, plotting *ghoulish* deeds. (Rushdie, 1992:81)

Rushdie points out that the italicised words all appear in the celebrated dictionary *Hobson-Jobson: a glossary of colloquial Anglo-Indian words and phrases, and of kindred terms, etymological, historical, geographical and discursive* by Henry Yule & A.C. Burnell, first published in 1886[1].

This gem of a dictionary gives definitions and origins of words in common use by the British in colonial India in the late nineteenth century. Some of the entries won't be a surprise to readers – we all know that raj, mogul and memsahib are Indian words. But there are many words with their origins in Hindustani, Bengali, Sanskrit or other Indian or Eastern languages, whose origin is perhaps not quite so well known. 'Loot', we are told, comes from the Hindustani *lūt*, which, in turn, comes from the Sanskrit *lotra* or *loptra* meaning 'rob' or 'plunder'. 'Toddy' is a corruption of the Hindustani word *tārī*, the fermented sap of various palm trees. A ghoul, defined as 'a goblin or man-devouring demon, especially haunting wildernesses', is from the Arabic *ghūl* or Persian *ghōl*. A Pariah was originally a member of a low (but not the lowest) southern Indian caste and literally means 'drummer', from the Tamil word *parai*, a large drum beaten at religious festivals.

The dictionary gets its name from one of its entries. 'Hobson-Jobson' was the anglicised version of *Ya Hasan! Ya Hosain!*, the chant of Muslim pilgrims during the commemorative Muharram procession, Hasan and Hosain being grandsons of the Prophet Mohammed, both of whom were killed in battle. This event is still commemorated today by Shia Muslim communities and is occasionally mentioned in the press, usually because of the habit of some devotees of whipping themselves with chains to which sharp blades are attached. Yule admitted that the expression 'Hobson-Jobson' was already 'rare and moribund' by the 1880s, but he wanted a title which would make the dictionary sound more interesting and sell more copies (Yule & Burnell, 1994:xviii).

The entry for 'Hobson-Jobson' mentions that the term was 'peculiar to the British soldier and his surroundings'. The rank and file of the armed forces have always had their nicknames for words that were difficult to pronounce, either because they were foreign, or because they were long and awkward to say. The website of the Royal Navy (2008) has a section



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devoted to naval slang, which lists nicknames given to warships by British sailors in the past, including 'Billy Ruffian' for the *Bellerophon*, 'Dead Alice' for *Daedalus*, 'Eggshells' for *Achilles* and 'Niffy Jane' for *Iphigenia*.

Yule and Burnell also use the term 'Hobson-Jobson' in a more general sense to refer to any anglicised version of Indian words. 'Upper Roger' (crown prince) is described as 'this happy example of the Hobson-Jobson dialect'; it is a form of the Sanskrit *yuva-rāja*, young king or heir apparent. 'Summerhead', which appears under the entry for 'sombrero' is described as 'a capital example of Hobson-Jobson', being an anglicised corruption of the Portuguese *sombreiro*.

The law of Hobson-Jobson

'Hobson-Jobson' appears in the OED and *Chambers Dictionary* with this sense. The OED defines 'the law of Hobson-Jobson' as 'a phrase sometimes used of the process of adapting a foreign word to the sound-system of the adopting language. So, Hobson-Jobsonism'. *Chambers* has this entry: 'the modification of names and words introduced from foreign languages, which the popular ear assimilates to already familiar sound (sic), as in the case of the word Hobson-Jobson itself'. Thus, the expression 'Hobson-Jobson' is itself a Hobson-Jobsonism (although this latter expression is not in Yule and Burnell's dictionary).

Yule and Burnell's dictionary has many examples of picturesque Hobson-Jobsonisms which never passed into common use in Britain, because their usage and sense was so specific to time and place.

Bobbery or **bobbery-bob**: defined as 'a noise, a disturbance, a row' is the Anglo-Indian representation of the commonly heard Hindustani expression of grief or surprise '*Bāp-rē!*' or '*Bap-rē Bāp!*', literally 'O Father!'.

Molly with his dolly: found under both 'Molly' and 'Dolly'. 'Molly' is the Hindustani *mālī*, gardener. 'Dolly', or the Hindustani *dālī*, is 'a complimentary offering of fruit, flowers, vegetables, sweetmeats and the like, presented usually on one or more trays; also the daily basket of garden produce laid before the owner by the *Mālī* or gardener'.

Rum-johnny: this expression is described as both vulgar and obsolete. It has two meanings; the first is a corruption of the first name *Ramazānī* (ie one born during the month of Ramadan) and is defined as 'a low class of native servants who plied on the wharves of Calcutta in order to obtain employment from new-comers'. The second meaning was 'prostitute', from the Hindustani *rāmjanī* and Sanksrit *rāmā-janī*, meaning 'pleasing woman' or 'dancing-girl'.

Ramasammy: the English generic term for Hindus, rather like Tommy Atkins for any British soldier. It is a corruption of *Rāmaswāmi*, a common Hindu name.

Chuckerbutty: a vulgarised corruption of *chakravarttī*, or sovereign.

Binky-Nabob: the *benkī-nawāb*, or Commandant of the Artillery (*benkī* meaning 'fire' in Canarese or Kannada).

The old colonials of India anglicised place names too. *Angrezābād* became 'English-Bazar', *Sanjān* became 'St John's', and Upper Sind was nicknamed 'Sucker-Bucker', the name being taken from the town of Sakhar, on the right bank of the Indus, and the neighbouring fortress of Bakkar, or Bhakkar. 'Sir Roger Dowler' doesn't get a mention in Yule and Burnell's dictionary, but this is another, albeit earlier, Hobson-Jobsonism, according to nineteenth-century Orientalist, Duncan Forbes. Sir Roger Dowler was actually the notorious Siraj ud-Daulah, Nawab, or Viceroy, of Bengal at the time of the Black Hole of Calcutta incident in 1756 (Forbes, 1861:413–14).

Hobson-Jobson, the dictionary, contains many familiar words which have their origins in Indian languages – 'juggernaut', for instance, which is a classic Hobson-Jobsonism. The entry is spelt Juggurnaut and is described as being from the Sanskrit *Jagganāth*, meaning 'lord of the universe', a reference to the Hindu deity Vishnu. In an annual festival in Puri in the Indian state of Orissa, we read, large, heavy chariots carrying statues of Lord Vishnu or *Jagganāth* were wheeled through the streets. Chariots would occasionally career out of control, crushing onlookers under their wheels. Although originally the name of the idol, the word juggernaut came to describe any event to which people were blindly devoted or where human lives were ruthlessly sacrificed, as well as a large, heavy vehicle. Other familiar words of Indian origin in *Hobson-Jobson* include:

cash: defined as 'a name applied by Europeans to sundry coins of low value in various parts of the Indies'. It is from the Sanskrit *karsha*, 'a weight of silver or gold equal to 1/400 of a *Tulā*'. This definition is given in the OED but for the headword 'cash' as a coin of low value in the East Indies and China, as opposed to the separate entry for cash meaning 'ready money'.

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tank (container for water): has a Gujerati (*tānki*) or Marathi (*tankoo*) origin (as OED confirms).

compound: this entry takes up more than three pages in the *Hobson-Jobson* dictionary, since its derivation has been the subject of much dispute. Yule and Burnell settle on a Malaysian origin – from *kampung*, meaning settlement (and the OED considers their evidence 'weighty').

shampoo: from the imperative form *chāmpō* of the Hindustani verb *chāmpnā*, meaning 'to knead and press the muscles with the view of relieving fatigue'.

pyjammas (sic): from the Hindustani *pāē-jāma*, literally 'leg-clothing'.

cheese (meaning 'important or self-important person' as in 'a big cheese'): from the Persian and Hindustani *chīz*, 'thing'. Yule and Burnell write that one would hear Anglo-Indians say 'These cheroots are the real *chīz*'.

The OED does not always agree with Yule and Burnell's theories of word origins, as in the case, for instance, of the idiom 'I don't give a damn'. Under the headword 'dam' (from the Hindi *dām* which was originally a small copper coin worth one fortieth of a rupee) *Hobson-Jobson* includes the expression 'I don't give a *dām*', the equivalent of 'I don't give a brass farthing'. The OED claims that this theory has no basis in fact.

It seems to be a basic human trait that we want to impose order and harmony on the unknown and incomprehensible. As nineteenth-century clergyman and keen lexicographer and etymologist Abram Smythe Palmer put it, 'We love the familiar and hate the strange and unknown' and, to illustrate his point, compares a new word entering the English language with an 'Oriental visitor or foreigner' who would be ridiculed if he walked down the road in his 'majestic grace and long-robed dignity', but will only be accepted and allowed to 'go on his way unmolested and mingle with others unobserved' if he 'should exchange his turban for a bowler and his flowing skirts for a pair of strait (sic) trousers' (Smythe Palmer, 1904:12).

Just as we want the 'Oriental visitor or foreigner' to look quintessentially English, so 'the words of his vocabulary will be regarded with suspicion till they put on an honest English look and begin to sound familiar' (Smythe Palmer, 1904:12). In other words, we are not happy with words borrowed from another language until they have adapted themselves so well to English that no one would believe they hadn't been part of the English lexicon for centuries.

The words mentioned earlier in this article underwent the aforementioned process to 'put on an honest English look'. 'Hobson-Jobson' is one term for the process, or 'law'. Another is folk etymology, defined in the OED as 'usually the popular perversion of the form of words in order to render it apparently significant'. In other words, when we come across a new word we look for similarities – in sound and meaning – with words that are already well known to us, so that we can make sense of it.

Words that are often cited as typical examples of folk etymology include 'sparrowgrass', the old name for asparagus, 'Jerusalem artichoke' and 'cockroach'. Thus, they could be called Hobson-Jobsonisms. These words look English but only because the ordinary 'folk' heard the unusual and foreign-sounding words asparagus, *girasole* and *cucaracha* and then searched for analogies or similarities in English to make them more acceptable. The fact that artichokes are not from Jerusalem (the plant is a member of the sunflower family and *girasole* is the Italian word for sunflower), asparagus has no connection either with sparrows or with grass, and cockroaches have nothing to do with cocks or roach (the word is from the Spanish *cucaracha*) matters not a jot. The words sound English and thus completely plausible.

The law of Hobson-Jobson, as the OED definition makes clear, does not apply to all words that have entered English from other languages. Words such as *foccaccia*, *savoir faire* and *smorgasbord* are not Hobson-Jobsonisms, since they have kept their original spelling and pronunciation and do not look English. To be a perfect example of a Hobson-Jobsonism, a word not only has to look quintessentially English, but its spelling and pronunciation should appear to be logically linked to its meaning. Such words from Indian languages which are in Yule and Burnell's dictionary include:

bungalow: the syllable 'low' seems to describe the style of house, but 'bungalow' is from a Hindustani word meaning 'belonging to Bengal'.

gymkhana: Yule and Burnell believed that this was from the Hindustani word *gend-khāna*, ball-house, to describe an English racket-court. Because of the link with sport, *gend* became 'gym'.

cockatoo: this is not related to the word 'cock', but is from *kākātūwa*, the Malaysian name for the bird, derived, according to *Hobson-Jobson*, from the sound of its cry.

Some critics claim that the anglicisation of

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Indian words shows the racist and patronising attitude of the British in India. Undoubtedly some Britons in colonial India were racist and patronising, but applying the law of Hobson-Jobson to difficult or foreign words is a universal phenomenon. Indeed, the Indian writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri gives an example of the indianisation of a British name in his introduction to Yule and Burnell's dictionary. The uneducated people of Calcutta called the department store Harrison and Hathaway by the more Indian-sounding *Hatison-Hatibai* (Yule & Burnell, 1994:vi). Examples of Hobson-Jobsonisms in English which have come from non-Indian languages include:

carry-all: it is a bag or old wagon, so the word 'carry' seems appropriate here. In fact, it is from the French *carriole*, a type of carriage.
bully beef: bully isn't from bull but is an English rendition of the French *bouilli*, boiled.
ten-gallon hat: this is a large hat, so 'ten-gallon' seems an appropriate metaphor to describe its size, but, in fact, *galon* is 'braid' or 'stripe' in Spanish. A ten-gallon hat is, therefore, a hat with a ribbon or braid around the brim. (Many sources, but not the OED, have this explanation.)
silver-type (a printing term); this was originally named after the printer who invented the technique, Elzevir, but as memories of him dwindled, silver seemed to be an appropriate name for the process so Elzevir morphed into silver (Rundblad & Kronenfeld, 2000:23).

Not all examples have such clear semantic links with existing words, but one thing that words which have been transformed by the law of Hobson-Jobson have in common is that no-one who didn't know their true etymology would guess that they were not English through and through. Two examples are:

plonk (cheap wine): from the French *vin blanc*, white wine.
woodchuck (the US groundhog): an approximate pronunciation of the Cree word for this animal, which is *wuchak* or *otchock*.

Some sources claim that the words below are Hobson-Jobsonisms, but the OED does not necessarily agree:

petticoat-tails (shortcake biscuits): from the Old French *petits gatels* (*petits gateaux*), little cakes.
smashing: from the Irish *is maith é sin,* that's good.
johnny darbies: an old slang term for policemen or handcuffs. The expression is believed to be a corruption of the French *gendarmes*, police officers.
barley sugar: from the French *sucre brûlé*, burnt sugar.

We see many examples of Hobson-Jobsonisms in place names in the British Isles. They are usually the result of the anglicisation of words from Celtic or other minority languages. 'Brown Willy' is a hill on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall. Smythe Palmer (1882) says the name is either from *bryn uhella*, highest hill, or *bryn huel*, the Tin Mine ridge. A more recent source, the *Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Watts, 2004) says it means 'hill of swallows' and derives from the Cornish words *bron* and *gwennili*. There are several rocks or stacks in Britain called 'Old Men' – Old Man of Hoy, Old Man of Coniston, Old Man of Stoer, for instance; Smythe Palmer (1882) claims that 'Old Man' is a corruption of the Celtic *alt maen*, high rock. An early nickname for Falmouth was 'Penny-Come-Quick', which, Smythe Palmer (1882) says, is from the Celtic *Pen y cwm gwic* meaning 'head of the creek valley'. The Swilly river in Donegal is the English name of the Irish *Súileach*, according to Oxford's *A Dictionary of British Place-Names*, (Mills, 2003) and, in a speech to the University of Ulster, Coleraine in 2001, Mary McAleese, the president of Ireland made reference to the fact that the Oily river, also in Donegal, is the anglicised pronunciation of the Irish word *Áille*, meaning 'beauty'.

The term 'Hobson-Jobson' is not widely used today, although it does occasionally crop up in the most unlikely places. The *Daily Telegraph* devoted several lines to it in an article on texting entitled *Text Speak: U 2 can communic8* in August 2007. The author was referring to the ability of the English language to adapt to new influences. The word is very occasionally used in non-linguistic contexts. John W. Campbell, editor of the influential sci-fi magazine *Astounding Science Fiction*, wrote an editorial in 1950, claiming that the scientific world was rife with Hobson-Jobsonism and bemoaning the 'tendency to force the new and unfamiliar into the old and familiar form' (Campbell, 1950:4). Yule and Burnell's dictionary, anachronistic as it is, continues to delight word lovers. It was last reissued in paperback format in Britain by Wordsworth Editions in 1996.

Notes

1 The term Anglo-Indian describes people of British origin who were living in India at the time, usually temporarily.

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