There's no easy way

ALEXANDER TULLOCH

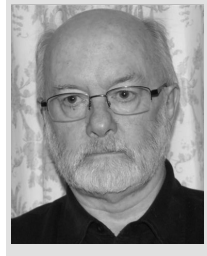
The etymology of travel

IN THE not too distant past there were really only two reasons why people travelled: to wage war and to conduct trade. And setting off on a journey for whatever purpose was frequently, if not always, an arduous task. In the 21st century, when we think nothing of getting on a plane and landing a few hours later on the other side of the world, it is perhaps difficult to appreciate what travel involved for our forebears. A brief time exploring the etymologies of the relevant vocabulary, however, soon leaves us in little doubt about the sheer hard slog getting from one place to another used to be.

Take the word 'travel' itself. Even the most cursory examination of the history of the word reveals associations with hard work, prolonged discomfort and frequently the realisation that it might have been better to stay at home. The modern spelling of the word only dates from the fourteenth century; prior to that it was spelled 'travail' and meant 'hard work' or even 'labour pains' rather than to undertake a long journey. Its modern cognates can still be seen in French *travailler* and Spanish *trabajar* 'to work', all three of which are thought to originate in the Medieval Latin *trepāliāre* 'to torture on a *trepalium*.' This was an instrument of torture consisting of three pointed sticks (Latin *tres* 'three' and *palus* 'a stick') used to punish idleness and persuade those who appeared to slacken that they needed to work harder. No doubt the early merchants and soldiers who set off on their commercial trips and military campaigns saw little difference between the unpleasantries meted out to reluctant workers and those which seemed to be part and parcel of their own occupations.

Of course, once a would-be traveller had made his mind up to leave hearth and home behind him for a few weeks, if not months, he would almost certainly have had to spend some time on lengthy preparations for what lay ahead. In brief, he would have to get 'ready' before he set out on the 'road' to his destination. And both these words share the same origin: 'ready' originally meant 'prepared to go riding' and the 'road' was literally a track or path a traveller 'rode' along.

Perhaps the most graphic indicator of how difficult travel was in days gone by, however, is the word 'route'. This is actually connected etymologically with the word 'rupture' as both are derived from the Latin infinitive *rumpĕre* 'to break, to shatter' and hark back to the days when an intrepid traveller would have to hack his way through dense forest as he made dreadfully slow progress to wherever he was bound. Then, once the traveller had settled down into a set pattern of smashing his way through the undergrowth, eating, resting and then starting blazing a trail again he would have settled down into what we should now refer to as a 'routine'. And, strictly speaking, if our intrepid adventurer really did 'blaze a trail' he would have left 'blazes' or white marks on



ALEXANDER R. TULLOCH has been a professional linguist since he graduated in Russian from Manchester University forty years ago. He began his career teaching Russian and Spanish to Oxbridge Scholarship level and then, in 1975, transferred to the Ministry of Defence, where he eventually became Senior Lecturer in Russian and Spanish. He has published over a hundred articles on etymology and is the author of 'Word Routes. Journeys through Etymology'. He holds an MA in Soviet Literature from Queen's University, Belfast and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Linguists. Email: alex@tulloch96.freeserve.co.uk

doi:10.1017/S0266078409990307

 © 2009 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409990307 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the trees so that those who came after him would have no difficulty following his route. And the original meaning of 'blaze' was 'shining, marked with white' and it is directly related both to the Russian *belyi* 'white' and the English 'bald', which originally was a term applied to white-haired men rather than those with no hair at all. This explains why the bald eagle is not bald in the modern sense of the word but has a fine head of beautiful white feathers.

Now if the traveller was a merchant determinedly treading along a path to establish a lonely trading outpost in some distant land far from home, he was still leaving an etymological trail for us to follow as the word 'trade' is simply another version of 'tread'. Or perhaps his intentions were to establish something which we now think of as being a little grander than an isolated trading post. Perhaps his motivation was to build an 'emporium' selling high class goods to a discerning clientele. In this case the etymological trail he left us would lead back to Ancient Greece: 'emporium' is the Latin version of the Greek *emporion,* derived from the verb *poreuomai* 'to travel' and meaning 'trading post'. So the original *emporion* or *emporium* was nothing more than the spot where a travelling salesman (in Greek *emporos*) decided to cease wandering and set up shop. Whatever the case, in the middle ages such a traveller would have referred to the distance he travelled in a day as a 'jornée', a corrupted form of the Vulgar Latin *diurnata,* itself derived from *dies* 'day'. Nowadays we use the related word 'journey' to refer to any travel between two points, no matter how long it takes to cover the distance, but originally it was simply the distance covered in one day.

A more archaic and perhaps poetic term in English for a traveller was 'wayfarer', the second element of which is a linguistic cousin of the modern German verb *fahren* 'to travel'. The first element, however, has a history which can be traced back to the Indo-European roots which it shares with its homophone 'weigh'.

The Proto-Indo-European root **wegh* 'to move' can be detected in the Sanskrit *vahati* which translates all of 'it moves' and 'it carries' and is quoted in most etymological dictionaries as the source of what might appear at first sight to be quite disparate words, despite their common association with motion and travel. A Sanskrit derivative of *vahati*, for instance, was *vah* 'to carry' which at a later date produced the Latin *vĕhĕre* 'to carry, to convey' – an infinitive which is of course the origin of the word 'vehicle'. Similarly the same Sanskrit root can be detected in the Greek noun *okhos* (with an earlier form *wokhos*) meaning carriage or wagon. Another cognate Greek verb here is *ekhō* 'to have, to hold, to contain', as the original meaning behind the word for a carriage or cart was simply a vehicle that could hold or contain people and goods. And if we stay with the world of classical languages we also note that the Latin for a two-wheeled carriage was *carpentum* and the Late Latin term for the artisan who specialised in the construction of such modes of transport was the *carpentarius*. This, of course, is the origin of the skilled woodworker we now refer to as a 'carpenter'.

When it came to moving goods from one place to another of course a certain amount of lifting and heaving would almost certainly have been involved. And lifting bulky goods and chattels onto a wagon would have left those involved in the arduous task in no doubt as to how heavy the cargo was. In fact, they would soon have made the connection between lifting the goods onto a wagon for transportation and how much they weighed. After all, if we wish to ascertain the weight of an object the first thing we have to do is lift it off the ground. And the association between the Indo-European root **wegh* and lifting survives in the naval expression 'to weigh anchor', which simply means to raise it and has nothing to do with assessing its weight.

For the last hundred years or so the most ubiquitous form of transport throughout the world has been the car. Related to words such as 'chariot', 'carriage' and abstract nouns such as 'career', 'current' and 'course', the word 'car' came into English from Latin *carrus,* a corrupted form of the Gaulish *karros*, a Celtic war chariot. And the Proto-Indo-European root at work here is **krsos* from the base **kers* 'to run'. So when we refer to a car as being 'a nice little runner' we are closer to the etymological truth than we probably realise.

Another word frequently heard in English in association with travel is 'coach'. A single-decker bus designed for long distance travel is now referred to as a 'coach' and the same word is frequently used when referring to a section of a train. But the term originally designated a large cart or carriage and it made its way into English in the sixteenth century having travelled half way across Europe from the tiny

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409990307 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hungarian village of Kocs,[1] situated about forty miles west of Budapest. The story is that the inhabitants of this little village acquired a reputation for being among the country's best carriage builders and even came up with the idea of incorporating the first spring suspension system to give travellers a smoother ride. In Hungarian a carriage of this type came to be known as *kocsi szekér* (literally *szekér* 'a wagon', *kocsi* 'from Kocs'). The additional use of the noun 'coach' for 'trainer' was originally Oxford university slang, thought to have first been used about 1830 and rooted in the idea that a tutor or trainer was somebody who would drive or conduct his students along a certain pathway of studies leading them hopefully to a successful outcome in the final exams. Either way, the word 'coach' is one of only a handful that have entered English from Hungarian.

Of course the journey which should be our least arduous and most peaceful is our final one, the one we make when we have shed this mortal coil, turned up our toes and dropped off our perch. In Britain this means a gentle ride to our last resting place in a specially designed vehicle known as a hearse. But the French word *herse*, from which the English term is derived, was originally a spiked agricultural implement, known in English as a harrow, designed to be pulled behind a horse and to churn up the ground in preparation for planting and sowing. At some point in the seventeenth century somebody had the bright idea of turning the harrow upside down to provide a means of transporting the dead to the graveyard. Then a further degree of ceremony and respect was added by using the spikes to support candles which would no doubt have been lit and paid for by the relatives of the departed. Presumably, such attention to detail and somewhat ostentatious concern for the dead would have helped relieve the grief felt by the loved ones left behind. In short, it would make the whole experience less 'harrowing'.

Note

1 The combination 'cs' in Hungarian is pronounced 'ch' as in 'church'

References

Ayto, J. 1990. *Dictionary of Word Origins.* London: Bloomsbury.

Bánhidi, Z. Jókay, Z & Szabó, D. 1965. *Learn Hungarian.* Budapest: Publishing House for Textbooks.

Hawkins, J. M. (ed.) 1986. *The Oxford Reference Dictionary.* Oxford: University Press.

Liddell, H. G. & Scott, R. 1864 &1963 editions. *Greek-English Lexicon.* Oxford: Clarendon.

Skeat, W. W. 1993. *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* (Wordsworth reference). Ware, Hertfordshire. [1882]

Tulloch, A. 2005. *Word Routes, Journeys through Etymology.* Peter Owen. London.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409990307 Published online by Cambridge University Press