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Komárková Alena

Development and Word-formation Patterns of Folk Etymology
Vývoj a slovotvorné procesy týkající se lidové etymologie

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Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Ondřej Tichý, Ph.D.

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Prohlášení:

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze dne

Alena Komárková

Abstract

This bachelor thesis is focused on the phenomenon of folk etymology. Folk etymology is the result of cognitive processes which can be observed in those unlearned in etymology or in lexicographers and etymologists with limited access to historical records and limited knowledge of linguistics. Folk etymology concerns itself with the intake and transformation of new words into one's mental lexicon on the basis of similarity between the items already present and the newly incoming ones. Folk etymologies are thus logical judgments based on the speakers' prior experience with language. The speakers create folk etymologies based on the word structures they have observed and analogically apply them onto the new words in their mental lexicon which they are trying to understand.

The core of this thesis is the analysis of the creation of individual folk etymologies. The sample examined in this thesis is made up of 5 words, the folk etymologies of which will be analysed and mutually compared. These words and folk etymology theories have been selected from A.S. Palmer's *Folk-etymology; a dictionary of verbal corruptions or words perverted in form or meaning by false derivation or mistaken analogy* in such a manner so as to be representative of the diverse word formation processes and origins of borrowing present in the English language. Palmer's theories of the folk etymologies for these five words are complemented by data from relevant dictionaries and corpora. The aim of the thesis is to identify pattern of formation among the examined folk etymologies.

keywords:

etymology, folk etymology, word formation, analogy, loanwords, lexicology, lexicon, misinterpretation, misidentification, mental lexicon, word formation

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se věnuje zkoumání fenoménu lidové etymologie. Lidová etymologie je výsledek kognitivního procesu, který probíhá u mluvčích bez vzdělání v etymologických disciplínách nebo lexikografů a etymologů s omezeným přístupem k historickým dokladům a omezenými znalostmi jazykovědy. Jedná se o zařazení nově jevících se slov do mentálního lexikonu na základě podobností mezi slovy novými a těmi již známými. V procesu vytváření lidové etymologie se tedy jedná o logické úsudky, které jsou zakotveny v předchozích zkušenostech s jazykem. Mluvčí tvořící lidovou etymologii na základě slovtvorných struktur vypozerovaných na slovech ze své slovní zásoby prostřednictvím analogie podvědomě aplikují tuto motivaci na slova, která se snaží si osvojit nebo vysvětlit.

Základem práce je analýza samotného procesu vzniku lidové etymologie. Zkoumaným souborem dat mé práce je pět slov, jejichž lidové etymologie jsou analyzovány a vzájemně porovnány. Tato slova a teorie vzniku jejich lidových etymologií byly vybrány ze slovníku A.S. Palmera *Folk-etymology; a dictionary of verbal corruptions or words perverted in form or meaning by false derivation or mistaken analogy* tak, aby byly zastoupeny různé způsoby slovtvorby a různé slovní původy přítomné v Anglickém lexikonu. Palmerovy teorie vzniku lidových etymologií těchto pěti slov jsou doplněny doklady z relevantních slovníků a korpusů. Cílem práce bude na základě této analýzy kodifikovat vzorce, podle kterých lidové etymologie vznikají.

klíčová slova:

etymologie, lidová etymologie, slovtvorba, analogie, jazykové výpůjčky, lexikologie, lexikon, misinterpretace, misidentifikace, mentální lexikon, slovtvorba

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List of abbreviations

EEBO.....	Early English Books Online
EPL.....	Early Print Lab
FE.....	Folk etymology
ME.....	Middle English
EME.....	Early Middle English
OE.....	Old English
OED.....	Oxford English Dictionary
PDE.....	Present-day English

1 Introduction

Between the world of scholarly etymologists and that of average speakers, there exists a special niche wherein their aims and some of their methods meet, partway between the approach of the learned professional and that of the curious everyday layman.

As any educated individual with a background in diachronic linguistics would attest, the etymological backgrounds of the constituents of the lexicon of PDE are of an incredibly diverse, heterogeneous and elusive nature. The etymologies of words in the English language are seldom transparent and rarely easy to trace. Extensive efforts in researching the origins of words are often required in order to trace their origins and even then, theories of origin may differ yet from linguist to linguist. The opacity, meaning the relative degree of obscurity, of the individual words' origins, can itself be explained by looking into the complicated, multi-origin genesis that resulted in the state of the lexicon of PDE.

Given these circumstances, it is no wonder that the average speaker has little-to-no scholarly knowledge of the true attested etymologies of the words in their lexicon. For the unlearned, FE is the avenue through which they understand the newly added words in their lexicon on a case-by-case basis.¹ This process brings a transformative side-effect onto the folk-etymologised words, analogically changing their form on the basis of similarity to words already present in the speaker's lexicon.² While FE may seem like an "ad hoc" method, the formation of FE is a pattern-based process which deeply relies on speakers' experiences with language, their underlying cognitive abilities, their language acquisition skills and draws on their socio-cultural context.³

¹ Gabriella Rundblad and David B. Kronenfeld, "The Inevitability of Folk Etymology: A Case of Collective Reality and Invisible Hands," *Journal of Pragmatics* 35, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 119, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0378-2166\(02\)00059-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0378-2166(02)00059-0).

² D. Gary Miller, *English Lexicogenesis* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2014), 117.

³ Gabriella Rundblad and David B Kronenfeld, "Folk-Etymology: haphazard perversion or shrewd analogy," *Lexicology, Semantics and Lexicography*, January 1, 2000, 20-21. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=253425&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

The phenomenon of FE occurs when a speaker of the receiving language misunderstands or misinterprets a new word based on a perceived similarity between the form of the borrowed word and that of a word or multiple words from the speaker's own pre-existing vocabulary, creating a false analogy between the new and the old.⁴ The speakers who unknowingly participate in this phenomenon are most often non-linguists operating merely within the bounds of their own experience with their native language, or linguists operating with limited knowledge and a limited skill set in research and access to records.⁵ FE is a phenomenon occurring across all languages.⁶ It is particularly prevalent in languages the lexicons of which include a large percentage of borrowed words and have undergone a complex genesis. A large percentage of borrowed words means that the speakers of the target language have more “work” to do in terms of understanding the newly arrived words in their mental lexicons. The more cases of words which the speakers need to contextualise for themselves based on the rules and structures observed in their native language, the more opportunities to misinterpret them therefore the more opportunities for FEs to be created.

It is my belief that their lack of modern linguistic education and knowledge of etymology unveils the inner workings of pattern recognition within language use and the mental lexicon. While FE is often categorised as a randomly occurring process, I believe that it in fact works in patterns, which I intend to search for in my thesis. To test my hypothesis, the theoretical section of my thesis will firstly concern itself with providing a definition of FE through establishing a comparison with true etymology.⁷ Furthermore, I will elaborate on the

⁴ Miller, *English Lexicogenesis*, 117.

⁵ Sascha Michel, “Word-formation and Folk Etymology,” in *An International Handbook of the Languages of Europe*, vol. 73 (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015), 1004, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=1019481&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

⁶ E.g. Czech *protěžovat* appears to be a falsely analogized French borrowing *protegee* based on formal similarity between words like *vytěžovat* and *zatěžovat* to *protegee*.

⁷ Etymology traced through historical record and present-day linguistic theory.

history of studies in folk etymology. The following section will concern itself with the causes of creation of FEs, their specific changes on all relevant levels of linguistic description and the underlying processes and influences of their creation. The following section is dedicated to the creators of folk etymologies. Furthermore, the theoretical section will concern itself with some of the disputed points in studying folk etymologies as well as a comprehensive definition of the mental lexicon and its role in pattern recognition as pertinent to the scope of this paper and to the topic of FE.

The empirical section will be based on analysing the FEs of various English words in order to discover the types and illustrate that FE is in fact a pattern-based process and provides insight into speakers' cognitive abilities, language acquisition skills and cultural standing. The analysed words will be taken from Palmer's *Folk-etymology; a dictionary of verbal corruptions or words perverted in form or meaning by false derivation or mistaken analogy*. Their FEs, as described by Palmer, will be expanded upon through data of selected diachronic corpora as well as the words' respective dictionary entries. The resulting pattern of folk etymologies will be grouped based on their categories and/or similarities in identified type. These results will reveal not only the systematic approaches of the creators of folk etymologies as well as the semantic, phonological, morphological and extralinguistic forces which motivate the creation of folk etymologies.

1.1 Literature review and problem areas in research

In my inquiry into publications regarding the topic of FE, I have found that the vast majority of the literature fits into one of two categories. The first category being the work of linguists that see FE as simply a special type of formal analogy, and the second being focused

primarily on the socio-cultural aspect of FE as pertinent to one specific group or locality. In the second group of materials, the vast majority concerning the topic is highly specialised to a single lexical and socio-cultural area, meaning that works concerning FE are small-scale qualitative studies providing a deep look into a given community's cultural and linguistic history. An optimal representative of this group is Baumanova and Tramutoli's *What's in a name? Swahili toponymy of past towns on the East African coast*.⁸ The linguistic element of these specialised works serves as the means to an end in illustrating how cultural bias can influence the understanding of lexically rich and historically important words such as place names or personal names.

According to Rundblad and Kronenfeld, most of the writing on the topic of FEs tends to fall under the first group, the category of analogy-based theses therefore covering mostly the formal basis of the innovations that FEs bring.⁹ Outside of Rundblad and Kronenfeld's groundbreaking work, namely *The inevitability of folk etymology: a case of collective reality and invisible hands*¹⁰ and *Folk-Etymology: Haphazard Perversion or Shrewd Analogy?*,¹¹ the unique semantic innovations brought on by FEs haven't been given nearly as much attention in academic writing.

By far, the most comprehensive work in terms of the amount of data on FE in English is A.S. Palmer's work *Folk-etymology; a dictionary of verbal corruptions or words perverted in form or meaning by false derivation or mistaken analogy*,¹² wherein Palmer provides a dictionary of

⁸ Monika Baumanova and Rosanna Tramutoli, "What's in a Name? Swahili Toponymy of Past Towns on the East African Coast," *DOAJ (DOAJ: Directory of Open Access Journals)*, July 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.13135/1825-263x/6892>.

⁹ Rundblad and Kronenfeld, "The Inevitability of Folk Etymology: A Case of Collective Reality and Invisible Hands," 122.

¹⁰ Rundblad and Kronenfeld, "The Inevitability of Folk Etymology: A Case of Collective Reality and Invisible Hands," 119–38.

¹¹ Gabriella Rundblad and David B Kronenfeld, "Folk-Etymology: haphazard perversion or shrewd analogy," 19–34.

¹² Abram Smythe Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy* (Chiswick Press, 1882).

FEs with brief explanations of the misinterpretations that led to the folk-etymologised words' change of form and meaning.

Unlike true etymology, FE has a lack of comprehensive material support for the claims it puts forward concerning the origins of words and is therefore difficult to trace. FE works on the basis of concurrence of the word undergoing the FE process and the word after which it was modelled, based on their mutual similarities in form. True etymology, on the other hand, views the histories of words diachronically, considering all of a given word's previous and current forms across all relevant dialects and the languages from which it descended into English, whether borrowed or inherited.

Due to the specificity of individual FEs that is brought on by the morphological structures and word-formation patterns of their respective languages, any work that would approach FE as a cross-language phenomenon is a herculean task. Therefore, works concerning FE are focused on one language and may merely point to the individual words' journeys into its lexicon. With regards to English language FEs, the work done by Rundblad and Kronenfeld has been essential in providing a far more holistic approach to FE. The biggest shift in attitude from Palmer's work to Rundblad and Kronenfeld's is that of the prescriptive grammarians' approach to that of the descriptive grammarians.

The shift from prescriptive to descriptive goes hand-in-hand with the personal, extra-linguistic judgments that Palmer attaches not only to the entries in his dictionary but also to the title of it. While in the title of his dictionary, Palmer perpetuates the notion that speakers, the creators of FEs, are somehow corroding the English language by straying from its developing

standards. According to Palmer, FEs are “verbal corruptions or words perverted in form or meaning by false derivation or mistaken analogy”.¹³

In their descriptive approach, Rundblad and Kronenfeld raise the question of what causes FEs in order to succinctly formulate its impacts on the English language and inquire to find recurring patterns within instances of FE, without providing any prejudiced judgement of the speaker who created them. They as well note the fascinating semantic innovations that English FEs bring.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Defining folk etymology

Folk etymologies, also known colloquially as “popular” or “armchair” etymologies,¹⁴ are instances of misunderstandings or rather misinterpretations of newly encountered words, which are most commonly partially or entirely borrowings of foreign origin and incidentally resemble either in part or in its entirety the form of a word (or a multi-word unit) that the speaker has previously encountered in their own native language.¹⁵ The newly introduced words’ FEs are thus well-intentioned attempts at understanding that which the speakers have not encountered before through the use of their current knowledge, modelled on prior experience. Algeo defines FEs as “the naive misunderstanding of a more or less esoteric word that makes it into something more familiar and hence seems to give it a new etymology, false though it be—is a minor kind of blending.”¹⁶ Algeo’s definition emphasises the element of familiarisation that speakers employ in order to bring words closer to their own socio-cultural

¹³ Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, title page.

¹⁴ Michel, “Word-Formation and Folk Etymology,” 1004.

¹⁵ Miller, *English Lexicogenesis*, 2014, 117.

¹⁶ John Algeo, Carmen Acevedo Butcher, and Thomas Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, vol. 6 (Wadsworth, 2009), 6:241.

context. Rundblad and Kronenfeld liken this process to how children first react in confusion upon encountering irregular forms in English, such as irregular plurals. Children will gloss over these unique forms because from their prior linguistic experiences, they've come to expect a pattern for how forms are created, thus they analogize those known patterns and unknowingly streamline the paradigm.¹⁷ A simple illustration of the process of FE can be observed in the English speakers' reinterpretation of the word *vaudeville*, or as its original French form stood prior to its FE, *vaux-de-vire*. The confusion leading to reinterpretation in this case stems from incorrect identification of word constituents. The English speakers misidentified the *vire* as *ville*, shifting the meaning from the place name of the town of Vire, wherein the style of song "the song of the valley of Vire" originated from. Given that the word was transmitted to English sometime before 1739¹⁸ and the French-origin word *village* sometime before 1386¹⁹ and evolved into the derivational suffix *-ville*, meaning settlement,²⁰ and further used in the names of settlements in Britain, it is likely that speakers made the logical assumption that analogized *Vire* into *-ville*. This change was made easier by the phonetic properties of /l/ and /r/, which are a minimal pair and thus tend to be indistinguishable in certain speakers' pronunciation, especially so when spoken at a speed in conversation. Permitting the assumption of the period's low rate of literacy, it is unlikely that the speakers who created *vaudeville* had ever seen the original form in writing, meaning that they would have had no factual support to dispute their assertion of *-ville* over *Vire*. This fact combined with the other place names now quite frequently ending in *-ville* likely resulted in *vaudeville* being accepted as the eventual standard form.²¹²²

¹⁷ Rundblad and Kronenfeld, "Folk-Etymology: Haphazard Perversion or Shrewd Analogy," 21.

¹⁸ OED (July 2023), "vaudeville (n.), Meaning & use," in Oxford English Dictionary, OUP. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1197931221>.

¹⁹ OED (July 2023), "ville (n.3), Meaning & use," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3930583173>.

²⁰ OED (July 2023), "ville (n.3), Etymology," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3930583173>.

²¹ OED (July 2023), "vaudeville (n.), Etymology," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1197931221>.

²² Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 421.

Vaudeville is a case of FE in which the FE overtook its predecessor and changed the original meaning of the word alongside with changing the written and pronounced forms through being analogically modelled on the *-ville* compounds present in the English lexicon.

The practice of analogy is, according to Chomsky, a purely logical effort as well a space and effort saving one, given that it uses one productive pattern and glosses over peculiarities. Theoretically speaking, thanks to analogy, speakers would be able to merely automatically generate items like verb forms instead of having to remember them. Though this assertion falls flat in the face of the mental lexicon, which stores words despite it being an inefficient effort²³. These peculiarities, such as present-day irregular English verbs that were originally Germanic strong verbs and retain their irregular conjugations, have a historically traceable reason for their irregularities.²⁴ Without this perspective on the matter, children first encountering English as their L1 and speakers having recently begun to acquire it as their L2 will by analogy assume that since the majority of verbs end in the *-ed* form, so should, logically, all others.

2.1.1 History of folk etymology

The discipline of “Volksetymologie” originates from the work of German linguists of the 19th century, specifically Förstemann’s article *On German folk etymology*, in which the author coined the very term. In this 1852 article, Förstemann articulates that,

Often, the spirit of the folk wrongly believes to find the etymon of one word in another one and since the folk as such never stops at theory, but moves on immediately to practice it changes the derived word in a way that brings it closer to the supposed form of the alleged etymon²⁵

Karl Gustaf Andersen’s 1872 publication *On German folk etymology* then legitimised the study of FE as an academic pursuit. Andersen provides theoretical background as well as the analysis

²³ “Noam Chomsky speaks about Universal Linguistics: Origins of Language,” March 20, 1998.

²⁴ Rundblad and Kronenfeld, “Folk-Etymology: Haphazard Perversion or Shrewd Analogy,” 21.

²⁵ Förstemann as quoted in Michel, “Word-formation and Folk Etymology”, 1003.

of a multitude of individual examples of FE in German. Many publications followed suit in the latter by providing a dictionary-like collection of examples of FEs from their respective native languages, such as Palmer's dictionary. The 19th century publications focus mainly on how meaning and context contribute to the creation of FEs. With the 20th century rise of formalist theory in linguistic disciplines, the study of FE followed suit. Writing from the era on the topic of FE focuses mainly on the written and spoken forms that are subject to FE, noting the conditions under which FEs happen. Most of the writing from this period is prescriptive, viewing FE as an undesirable corruption of language.²⁶

2.1.2 Causes of folk etymology

Among the multitude of ways in which languages can expand their lexicons, the most pertinent to FE is the borrowing of foreign lexical words, foreign affixes and foreign formation patterns. Borrowing occurs when two linguistic communities meet in a given physical or figurative space.²⁷

The borrowings that remain within the lexicon undergo a process of integration. According to Poplack and Sankoff, the process of integration is two-fold. The first stage of the process is purely on the linguistic level and involves processes like transliteration and varying types of phonological changes. This process occurs in varying degrees and is often dependent on how long a borrowed word has been acclimating to its new surroundings. The second stage is defined by the community of speakers who are to accept and integrate said words into their lexicons and therefore into their view of their shared reality. The first half of the process is where the basis for the "misunderstandings" brought on by FE is laid. Speakers, when faced

²⁶ Michel, "Word-Formation and Folk Etymology," 1004.

²⁷ E.g. borrowings can occur in physical contact in one geographical location or through processes such as translation.

with anything foreign, will compare and contrast it to their own language's word-stock, sound profile and spelling conventions. By likening a word to another, speakers effectively sever the connection of that word to its very origin and thus create the ideal conditions for a FE to come to life- an esoteric word of opaque etymology with no guiding evidentiary support besides the speaker's own.²⁸

Upon the initial encounter with the new word, a speaker will apply the linguistic knowledge that they have acquired over the course of their life, ones that they have honed through usage and subsequently stored in their mental lexicon as a sort of internal linguistic system which guides them through future linguistic experiences and is also moulded by those very experiences. Therefore, besides acquired principles of grammar, speakers will, over the course of their lifetime, build a strong mental lexicon alongside it. The mental lexicon is where words and word-formation patterns acquired by the individual speakers are stored. It will be discussed further in the following sections.

The speaker, faced with a novel word, will turn to their mental lexicon and attempt to classify that word within the plethora of word form patterns, syntactical connections and semantic fields that they have noted over the course of their lifetime of linguistic experiences. By consulting the guidelines provided by their mental lexicon, speakers create analogies among the constituents of their mental lexicon and relate them to the newly acquired word, thereby integrating it, albeit mistakenly and creating a folk etymology in the process.²⁹ This practice relies, among other cognitive skills, on the speaker's proficiency in pattern recognition, their socio-cultural background, and level of linguistic education, which will all be discussed further in the following sections.

²⁸ Shana Poplack and David Sankoff, "Borrowing: The Synchrony of Integration," *Linguistics* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 1984), 100–101, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling.1984.22.1.99>.

²⁹ Rundblad and Kronenfeld, "Folk-Etymology: Haphazard Perversion or Shrewd Analogy," 20.

2.1.3 The process of folk etymology in English

From its humble beginnings as a descendant of the West Germanic branch to its present-day position as a global language, English has, over the course of its expansion, naturally been shaped by the diverse needs of its users. Whether they be those of the few or of the many- in order for the language to keep up with the speakers' needs to accurately express their extra-linguistic shared reality or as a reaction to the impact of contact with other linguistic communities- whether those languages are native and influenced by foreign languages they themselves have been in contact with, such as regional dialects,- or with purely foreign languages, such as French,³⁰ Latin³¹ or Old Norse.³² Consequently, every transformation of a given linguistic community's extra-linguistic circumstances demands an adequate expansion of its lexical capacities, either to denote an entirely new fact of life or to expand the lexical variability of their native language's vocabulary. The borrowing of a word or multiple can be motivated by a lack of expressions for the words denoting a given phenomenon in the target language, but borrowing can also be entirely unmotivated and simply brought on by contact between linguistic communities.³³

Once the need for an expansion or contact between two or more languages is felt by the speakers, they either find an element within their own language and expand upon it by means of derivation or compounding, or they will look to other languages' vocabularies and enrich their own via borrowing from them.

After the needs for lexical expansion are satisfied by borrowing, the new words are integrated into the language's lexicon and await integration into the speakers' mental lexicons. Perhaps

³⁰ Laurel J. Brinton and Leslie K. Arnovick, *The English Language: A Linguistic History*, English Language and Linguistics, second (Oxford University Press, 2011), 249.

³¹ Brinton and Arnovick, *The English Language: A Linguistic History*, 2011, 164.

³² Brinton and Arnovick, *The English Language: A Linguistic History*, 2011, 167-168.

³³ Brinton and Arnovick, *The English Language: A Linguistic History*, 2011, 60-62.

due to natural curiosity or an underlying tendency to lean on analogy, speakers begin to inquire as to how the new words fit in their language's lexicon. The true etymological origins are most often elusive to speakers of a given language, especially so in English, with its complicated history and multiple origins and layers of borrowings of full words, parts of words as well as formation patterns.

Naturally, speakers are inclined to become inquisitive regarding the constituents of their own personal lexicons. Any new incoming borrowed constituent becomes a new constituent to familiarise themselves with. FE can theoretically occur in the mental lexicons of two types of speakers. The first type of speaker is the unlearned layman, simply observing similarities between examples A and B and drawing a conclusion between the two based on their form in written or spoken form. This speaker has no formal education in linguistics, meaning that their observations are purely based on instinct and underlying cognitive processes such as categorization and analogy. The average speaker is not motivated by a quest for knowledge, but rather by a need to understand their immediate surroundings and the words that they are to integrate into their own personal mental lexicons.³⁴ The second type of speaker is a, from our current perspective, synchronic linguist operating on their then-current knowledge of etymology. Their methods may exhibit the hallmarks of academic research that we employ in our present-day linguistic studies, but their knowledge is limited by the basic fact that in their time, linguistics did not yet have the same access to materials and knowledge it has today. This type of speaker is motivated by a quest for knowledge, but limited by the methods and knowledge available to them.³⁵

³⁴ Rundblad and Kronenfeld, "Folk-Etymology: Haphazard Perversion or Shrewd Analogy," 20.

³⁵ This type of folk etymologist is for example Palmer himself. In his attempts to find folk etymologies for his dictionary, he instead created new folk etymologies as is the case of *tribulation* and *clever* in the analysis section of this thesis.

2.1.4 Folk etymology vs. true etymology

The term “etymology” is, in the case of FE, somewhat of a misnomer. As a lexicological discipline, in its most traditional sense, the aim of etymology is to retrace the historical basis of a word the entire way from its modern forms through the word’s transformations, formation and back to its proto-language ancestor. An integral part of this process is also the tracing of cognates in other languages in order to provide a holistic portrait of a word’s history and possible proto-language origin as well as to discover any possibilities of the word being a borrowing rather than evolving from a proto-language directly into its present-day form within one language. True etymologies rely on attested evidentiary support from contemporary writing as well as historical context.³⁶

Thoroughly investigated etymologies may provide insight into how a language has evolved from its proto-language stages into their present-day forms. While true etymologies aim to contextualise words within a multi-dimensional network of influences, transformative processes and documented semantic shifts, FEs, at least at the point of their creation, are the results of the efforts, biases and knowledge of individual speakers under strong socio-cultural influence and lack or lower level of linguistic knowledge.³⁷

In the case of FE, speakers do still contextualise a new word, but their context is extremely narrow due to their lack of education in lexicology and knowledge of any larger language family context, such as a sister language or a proto-language.

Unlike true etymologies with dateable evidentiary support, which provides etymologists with correlations among words, FEs provide us with little-to-no wide-range impact in terms of discovering any general semantic trends in a given language, though they do reveal facts about

³⁶ Philip Durkin, *The Oxford Guide to Etymology* (OUP Oxford, 2011), 1–2.

³⁷ Rundblad and Kronenfeld, “Folk-Etymology: Haphazard Perversion or Shrewd Analogy,” 31.

the socio-cultural context and cognitive processing. True etymologies are thus better fit for quantitative research needs, while FEs are more appropriate for a case study basis with interdisciplinary overlap into areas of sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and language acquisition.

2.1.5 The creators of folk etymologies

The creators of FEs are most often those unlearned in linguistic disciplines. Instead of being able to draw on knowledge of lexicology, semantics, phonology, the source language of the borrowed word and diachronic linguistics, the speakers must rely purely on the outward similarity that they have noted between words in their mental lexicon and the cultural context they find themselves in. The lack of proper theoretical basis results in the newly acquired word undergoing a semantic reinterpretation accompanied with a change in form that is better suited to the language receiving it.

Most commonly, a word in its original form is misunderstood in spoken form by the recipient, who then adapts the word as they hear it in accordance with how the sounds that constitute the word are represented in their own native language. Algeo exemplifies this process using the present-day English collocation *chest of drawers* which is sometimes interpreted by speakers as *Chester drawers*, therefore a type of drawers rather than a unit of them³⁸. *Chest of* is a partitive that collocates only with *drawers*.³⁹ On the other hand, *Chester* is a proper noun that speakers are likely to encounter. In this case, the speakers most likely have never seen the words in their written form. The resulting change is a very mild semantic shift brought on by imprecise pronunciation which causes *chest* and *of* to merge into one word that sound similar

³⁸ Algeo, Butcher, and Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, 6:241.

³⁹ OED (June 2024), “‘chest of drawers’ in chest (n.1), sense 8,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7435830513>.

to *Chester*, but nonetheless it shows how easy it is for speakers to adjust a new unit to the contents of their mental lexicon rather than create an entirely new space for it.

This newly acquired word is then compared to similar words in the speaker's lexicon, at which point the orthography of the word is highly likely to be altered further in order to better fit with commonly encountered word patterns and standards of sound representation in the speaker's native language.⁴⁰ From here on, the word, altered by its FE, spreads to the initial speaker's community until such time when they are corrected, such as with "*Chester drawers*" or the new form of the word is accepted into standard use, replacing the original form, as in the case of *vaudeville*. Thus, by creating FEs, speakers will introduce both a novel form and meaning and will essentially divorce the word from its original etymological basis. Whether or not the new meaning and written form of the word remains in the language depends purely on how useful the folk-etymologised form is to the speakers of its language. While FEs can be seen as misguided corruptions, they are seldom corrected and practically irreversible once accepted into the lexicon. FEs remain in the lexicon due to them being intrinsically connected to the extra-linguistic reality that the speakers share.⁴¹ Once a word is folk-etymologised, the transformations that the word would have undergone, had it not been misinterpreted through FE, cannot be reconstructed.

Regarding the limitations of FE, Rundblad and Kronenfeld draw attention to the "invisible hand" theory. This theory argues that speakers of a language and their parole of said language are governed by the cultural constraints of their own community, even without the speakers' direct awareness. The two tenets of the invisible hand theory are its two maxims. The first maxim demands that one should speak in such a way so as not to be misunderstood and

⁴⁰ Rundblad and Kronenfeld, "Folk-Etymology: Haphazard Perversion or Shrewd Analogy," 29.

⁴¹ Rundblad and Kronenfeld, "Folk-Etymology: Haphazard Perversion or Shrewd Analogy," 20.

the second maxim demands that speakers speak in such a way that they are understood. Speakers adhere to these tenets and therefore their parole must naturally conform to their socio-cultural context in order to successfully communicate with other members of their community. In terms of FE, these tenets impact opaque expressions and cause speakers to simplify them. In the practice of etymology, these tenets cause speakers to folk-etymologise the constituents of their lexions, thus ensuring that they are understood both by becoming simplified and also by having socio-cultural context intrinsically attached due to the FEs being modelled, in part, on a given community's socio-cultural context.⁴²

2.2 Disputations of Folk Etymology

The place of FE within linguistic theory as a transformative process has long been a controversial topic among linguists of all languages.⁴³ While the process is recognized as an attested phenomenon happening even up to the present day, its exact limitations and parameters are difficult to ascertain. FE is a lexically transformative process that occurs to individual words on multiple levels of linguistic description simultaneously. This is unlike most transformative processes, which usually occur on one level and the change occurring there subsequently ripples into the other levels based on general language tendencies, such as ease of articulation on the phonological level simplifying the spelling of a word on the orthographic level or loss of inflection on the morphological level affecting the way word order can be composed on the syntactic level. Language change typically occurs from the smallest units and travels upward towards syntax and the lexical level, such as the loss of most OE noun case categories causing the English word order to become mostly fixed in order to compensate for the lack of formal relations between the constituents of a sentence. While it is perfectly common for a formal

⁴² Rundblad and Kronenfeld, "Folk-Etymology: Haphazard Perversion or Shrewd Analogy," 31.

⁴³ Michel, "Word-Formation and Folk Etymology", 1002.

change on one linguistic level to cause a change on another, it is not so common for a semantic and formal change to go hand-in-hand as it does in cases of FE.

FE can be defined by what Olschansky terms “synchronic isolation.”⁴⁴ While the rest of etymology takes a diachronic look at the etymology of words in order to trace their present form all the way back to their origin, FE requires that the focus be synchronic, meaning that it examines the meaning of a word affected by FE in the timeframe of it being affected by it. FE is a one-time transformation, meaning that somewhere in the history of a word's existence, a singular impulse based on a presumed formal similarity between the folk-etymologised word and the contemporary written or spoken form of the word which it is modelled after. The process of identifying and analysing FEs is understandably further complicated by lack of sound recording, potential lack or lacking quality of written record-keeping as well as transmission errors.

By isolation, Olschansky means that the change of a folk-etymologised word is unconditioned and solely focused on the one singular word itself. This means that each case of FE is its own self-enclosed process which is not repeated in the same way anywhere else, such as is the case with inflection loss in verbs.⁴⁵ FE occurs with constituents of every word class, though Rundblad and Kronenfeld's compiled corpus shows that FE happens most often to nouns, especially so to morphologically complex and longer nouns. The evident reason for FE's focus on long, morphologically complex nouns is that there is simply more “material”, therefore they carry within themselves more opportunities for speakers to misunderstand and corrupt them.⁴⁶ FEs are born into existence depending on the relative degree of transparency or opacity of the words they are created for. Transparency and opacity are the two mutually opposing poles between which the evident or non-evident etymologies of words exist. Opacity points to the

⁴⁴ Olschansky 1996 as cited in Michel Michel, “Word-Formation and Folk Etymology,” 1004.

⁴⁵ Olschansky 1996 as cited in Michel, Michel, “Word-Formation and Folk Etymology,” 1004.

⁴⁶ Rundblad and Kronenfeld, “Folk-Etymology: Haphazard Perversion or Shrewd Analogy,” 32.

word being morphologically more than merely “the sum of its parts”, such as is observed in multisyllabic words that are not the products of easily identifiable compounding or words without specific derivational suffixes and roots, such as *university* or *helicopter*. Conversely, transparency points to the parts of a word being identifiable on their own standing as well as when combined with one another in words such as *toothbrush* or *sunglasses*. Logically, words that fall closer to the opacity pole are more likely to be misinterpreted, while those closer to transparency are more likely to be understood without being reinterpreted based on a formal similarity with another constituent of the mental lexicon.

There is also the nature of the “folk” behind FEs.⁴⁷ Their socio-economic status, linguistic background, possible migrant status, employment, age and gender are mostly unknown to us. The location of origin of a given folk-etymologized word can be ascertained by record tracing the variant in its context to a given region. But due to low levels of literacy among the population of speakers of Old and Middle English, it is not possible to trace a FE to its exact originators.

2.3 The mental lexicon

The mental lexicon is a highly abstract term used to describe the inventory of words available in an individual speaker’s mind. Simply put, the mental lexicon is a speaker’s mind-map of their language experiences and the interconnected word-stock that they have gained from those experiences. The term “lexicon” is somewhat unfaithful to the complex and highly interwoven network of pieces of linguistic data stored over the course of an individual’s entire

⁴⁷ Michel, “Word-Formation and Folk Etymology,” 1003.

lifetime.⁴⁸ Giving it the name “lexicon” somewhat disregards its inner structure and complexities which go far beyond the basic alphabetized list that a traditional lexicon or dictionary would give us. The mental lexicon contains much more information than the comparatively specialised dictionaries, which provide definitions of entries in isolation from one another. The mental lexicon instead works more like an extensive handbook for the speakers’ language or multiple languages.⁴⁹ Though even when thought of as a linguistic textbook, the mental lexicon is difficult to grasp. Our mental lexicons do not, for example, intentionally split words by word-class or alphabetical order. Rather, they group its constituents by perceived similarity and connectedness based on our memories wherein we note the words existing together in combination.⁵⁰

Regarding the structure of the mental lexicon, since the development and changes of language are never pre-planned streamlined processes heading towards some idealised state of the language, the mental lexicon reflects that. Rather, the genesis of language is a series of linked changes that seldom happen across all levels of language at the same time. With how unsystematically language develops, the mental lexicon, the reflection of language as perceived by individual speakers, could never be orderly in any outwardly perceivable way.⁵¹

The mental lexicon’s structures are often abstract, prone to change and based on the individual speaker’s own subjective view of their language.⁵² Over the course of a speaker’s lifetime, these connections split and connect to other words, which then influences one speaker’s interpretations of other speakers’ paroles of their shared language. There is therefore very little that can be generalised about the mental lexicon, which is what makes it such an elusive subject.

⁴⁸ Jean Aitchison, *Words in the mind: an introduction to the mental lexicon* (Basil Blackwell, 1994), 12.

⁴⁹ Aitchison, *Words in the Mind: An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon*, 13.

⁵⁰ Aitchison, *Words in the Mind: An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon*, 190–201.

⁵¹ Aitchison, *Words in the Mind: An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon*, 11.

⁵² Aitchison, *Words in the Mind: An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon*, 5.

Since we don't need to present the mental lexicon to any other speakers or share the contents of in any way outside of conversational context, there is no need for us to organise our mental lexicons so as to make them accessible to other speakers. Therefore, the structure of any given mental lexicon is entirely subjective and non-interchangeable with any other.

The mental lexicon's enigmatic nature is perhaps best explained by its approach to structure. The mental lexicon holds a vast number of items, more than the owner of said mental lexicon could consciously recall when asked to do so. Yet, when using language, we are able to recall the words we intend to use at an incredible speed, which points to the fact that the mental lexicon must, in fact, be impeccably well organised in order to allow us to pull the items from it instantaneously.⁵³

It is my belief that this instantaneousness relates to the creation of folk etymologies. When encountering a new word, the receiving speaker instantly connects it with another word that is already present in their mental lexicon. The creation of folk etymologies is not a lengthy systematic process, it rather relies on an instantaneous connection of two items. The instantaneousness is made possible by the mental lexicon's structure that allows for instantaneous retrieval and categorization.

3 Analysis section

3.1 Methodology and materials

The aim of the practical section is to explore how specific FEs came to exist and whether there are any identifiable patterns upon which the creation of FEs generally rests. Abraham Smythe Palmer's *Folk-etymology; a dictionary of verbal corruptions or words perverted in form or meaning, by false derivation or mistaken analogy*⁵⁴ is the only work that compiles entries for FEs in the English lexicon. Due to its unsurpassed scale, Palmer's

⁵³ Aitchison, *Words in the Mind: An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon*, 9.

⁵⁴ Henceforth referred to mainly as "Palmer's dictionary" for brevity's sake.

dictionary provides the starting point for the analysis of individual words' FEs. While Palmer's work is considerably old, it has yet to be surpassed by any modern publication. From Palmer's dictionary, five words were selected based on their formation patterns, present-day forms, syllable count, context for which their usage is typical and languages of origin in order to create the most diverse sample possible. As an additional criterion, the words are picked so as to be representative and possessing substantial evidentiary support. "Representative" in this context means that there needs to be a sufficiently kept record of the words' transformations throughout their presence in the English lexicon as well as cognates in other languages within the PIE language family so as to make the words' history traceable and transparent from proto-language to present day.

The definitions of each English word are then taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Chamber's *Etymological Dictionary*, Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, Strattman's *Middle English Dictionary* and Bosworth-Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. Additional evidentiary support is provided by the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, *The Middle English Compendium* and *the Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin*. The corpus of *Early English Books* online as well as the *Early Print Lab* serve as a way to fact-check the purported time frames provided by the above-mentioned dictionaries as well as to discover the context of their usage if deemed necessary by the individual analyses.

Once the factual etymology is traced via the above-mentioned dictionary entries, Palmer's FE is analysed and compared to the true etymologies. The validity of Palmer's theories is then examined based on the available evidence from the above-mentioned dictionaries as well as general language trends in English, general plausibility, the history of

English word borrowing and its lexicogenesis. Palmer's FE theories are then either validated via the collected evidentiary support or opposed on the basis of said evidentiary support. The reasons for the misinterpretations of the four folk-etymologised words are subsequently expanded based on Palmer's reasoning for the misinterpretation's occurrence. Likewise, they are either supported or opposed based on the collected evidence. The final result of analysing the words is the discovered formation-pattern of the FEs. These patterns will likely be based on similarities of orthography, phonology, morphology as well as semantics. The final aim is to cross-reference the pattern which will emerge from each analysis and attempt to find some tendencies and approaches that govern the entire phenomenon of FE.

3.2 Research limitations

This thesis is based round a qualitative study based on collecting data that makes up and surrounds the etymologies of five specific words. These words were researched in detail with attested evidentiary support connected through linguistic theory on all relevant levels of linguistic description in order to find certain patterns which show how FEs come into existence. Specifically, the aim is to reveal these patterns through speakers' attempts to contextualise and integrate the folk-etymologised words into their lexicons. Due to the small and intensive scale of the research presented here, the tendencies observed cannot be applied indiscriminately to any and all other folk-etymologised words without further time and labour-intensive analyses. A significant limitation I perceived in my research into FE was finding the examples used here in the analysis section. I was initially hesitant to use Palmer's dictionary, given its age and prescriptive tone. Nevertheless, there is no other source for FEs in English as holistic as Palmer's dictionary. Terms like "of uncertain origin", as can be seen under some cross-referenced entries from Palmer's dictionary in the OED's records. The issue with the label "of uncertain origin" is that the term covers more than just FEs. The record of certain English

words is simply discontinuous, making their etymology untraceable. It cannot be asserted with absolute certainty that a word of “uncertain origin” has undergone reinterpretation through FE. Therefore, that which the OED terms “a word of uncertain origin” does not have to qualify for the research conducted here. Another limitation I perceived in working with the OED was the lack of revision made since the publishing of certain words analysed here. The year of publishing is noted in each analysis.

Rundblad and Kronenfeld, whose two studies are also cited in this thesis, also both use Palmer’s dictionary as the source for their data. Besides Palmer’s dictionary, no attempt has been made by any modern linguists to create and publish a dictionary or database of FEs in English, meaning that the examples analysed here are, at their youngest, from the beginning of the Late Modern English period. Research conducted on PDE’s FEs is severely lacking.

3.3 Analysis introduction

The section below consists of detailed analyses of five different English words chosen from Palmer’s dictionary. The words are analysed in terms of their true etymologies, which are then compared to Palmer’s theories of their respective FEs. Palmer’s etymologies are then either supported or disproved based on evidentiary support from the relevant levels of linguistic description as well as available records sourced from other dictionaries and corpora, if necessary.

3.3.1 Belfry⁵⁵

Belfry was chosen for the analysis portion due to its Germanic origins, subsequent assimilation to French and final transition into English as well as the type of sound change that is implicated in the development of its FE.

Belfry is an infrequently used English noun which currently appears at about 0.4 instances per million words and falling as per the OED.⁵⁶ In present-day British English, it is most often used to refer to “a section of a church that contains a singular large bell or multiple bells”. Though the *belfry* is most often attached to a church, specifically its steeple, it can also be attached to any other building or be a detached structure.⁵⁷ Its synonym is the compound *belltower*, first attested by the OED in the year 1612.⁵⁸

Although the -y final form of *belfry* resembles countless other PDE nouns, it is in fact a borrowing of French origin which became integrated into EME after the beginning of the Norman conquest in 1066. The OED attests the first usage of it to a work authored by English monk William of Malmesbury to the year 1143. Although this work was written in Latin, its form *berfreit* is not dissimilar to the French form of *berfrei*, which was borrowed and assimilated into the English lexicon.⁵⁹ Although the English speakers of PDE intrinsically connect *belfry* with the English noun *bell*, the semantics of *belfry* have undergone a significant shift since its entry into the English lexicon. The borrowed French form of *berfrei* brought the initial meaning of “a, usually, movable wooden tower or simple structure meant to protect foot

⁵⁵ The entry under *belfry* in the OED was first published in 1887 and has not yet been revised, merely modified in December 2023.

⁵⁶ OED (December 2023), “belfry, Frequency,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1973596516>.

⁵⁷ OED (December 2023), “belfry, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1973596516>.

⁵⁸ OED (1887), “belltower, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8978216385>.

⁵⁹ OED (December 2023), “belfry, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1973596516>.

soldiers from the defence attacks from the settlement which they are besieging.”⁶⁰ ⁶¹ *Berfrei* is itself a compound descended into French from Middle High German *berefrit*,⁶² ⁶³ which translates roughly to “protection tower”. Although his meaning is now obsolete, *belfry* remained in the English lexicon in its original borrowed form with only slight respelling of the root vowels. The newer meaning is attested by the OED to the year 1553, wherein *belfry* shifted from being a protective building for foot soldiers to being “a protective shed for cattle, farming equipment or harvested crops”. This meaning is still in use today according to the OED. Between the years 1631 and 1655, *belfry* held another meaning, shifting from “a protection tower” to “a watchtower”, though this meaning fell into obsolescence after seeing minimal usage. The PDE meaning of *belltower* first appears in the OED’s record in the year 1440. *Bell* is a word inherited from Germanic which has been a part of the English lexicon since the OE period.⁶⁴ It has formed over 300 compounds⁶⁵ throughout its membership, putting its frequency of occurrence at about 20 instances per million words.⁶⁶

According to Palmer, after the initial meaning of *belfry* became obsolete, the word’s semantics shifted to mark any high-reaching tower.⁶⁷ Once the word lost its siege context and had therefore undergone an amelioration, its folk etymologists likely identified it as a compound of the root *bel(l)* and the suffix *-fry*.

⁶⁰ Brachet and Kitchin, *An Etymological Dictionary of the French Language: Crowned by the French Academy*, 53.

⁶¹ OED (December 2023), “belfry, Etymology,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1973596516>.

⁶² Trésor De La Langue Française Informatisé. “Beffroi,” n.d. <http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/advanced.exe?8;s=2607040950>

⁶³ Chambers, *Chambers’s Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 37.

⁶⁴ OED (March 2024), “bell, (noun1), Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9590011765>.

⁶⁵ OED (March 2024), “bell, (noun1), Compounds & derived words,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9590011765>.

⁶⁶ OED (March 2024), “bell, (noun1), Frequency,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9590011765>.

⁶⁷ Smythe Palmer, *Folk-Etymology; a Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 27.

While *-fry* is not an English suffix and is generally an uncommon ending for English nouns, the identification of *bel(l)* will have sufficed for the speakers to shift the meaning of *belfry* from “any tall tower” to “belltower”, given the many other compounds that *bell* had formed.

Palmer’s theory of FE for *belfry* is somewhat lacking, in that he gives no indication of how the consonant change between the /r/ and /l/ consonant sounds occurred. A possible reason is that the /r/ shifted into /l/ due to the fact that in English, they are both voiced liquids and have adjacent places of articulation. /r/ is a palatal consonant sound while /l/ is an alveolar consonant sound. The two sounds are also among those that require the most effort and control in pronunciation. Rhotacism, the inability to pronounce the /r/ sound is common among children but can continue as a speech defect into adulthood in some individuals.⁶⁸ It is plausible that, when pronounced at a conversational speed and with no extra effort, the two sounds could be mistaken for one another by English speakers. Palmer’s theory presumes that the French borrowing *berfrei* was misinterpreted as *belfry* and that the consonant change followed. Therefore, the change in meaning caused the change in form of the word, making it a FE. Palmer does not give any evidentiary support for the change having happened in this exact order.

A more likely scenario is that of sound dissimilation.⁶⁹ Dissimilation is a conditioned type of sound change, meaning that it is brought on by the speakers of a given language perceiving a need for clarity and/or simplification of neighbouring sounds that are far too similar. Dissimilation makes one or both sounds different enough so as to increase perceptual clarity. Perceptual clarity is a cross-discipline terms which describes a need of the addressee or

⁶⁸ Bryan A. Garner, *Garner’s Modern English Usage* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 738.

⁶⁹ OED (December 2023), “belfry, Etymology,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1973596516>.

perceiver of a piece of information for the parts of that information to be mutually distinguishable, otherwise said, they need to have contrast in order for the addressee or perceiver to be able to identify them. In language, dissimilation is a phenomenon that takes place when two sounds need to be acoustically differentiated.⁷⁰ In the case of the borrowed *berfrei*, the two /r/ sounds are too close to one another for a speaker to be able to pronounce them at average conversational speed while creating enough contrast between them. The only boundary between the two /r/ sounds is the voiceless fricative /f/ sound, which is articulated as a labiodental. Dissimilation between two English /r/ sounds usually happens by changing the first /r/ sound to an /l/ sound instead in order to both create sufficient acoustic contrast between the two consonant sounds, but also to ease articulation of the entire word. Although dissimilation is not a frequent phenomenon, words such as *purple* and *pilgrim*, both partially of French origin, have undergone the same change on their first /r/ sound shifting to an /l/ sound in order to provide contrast and ease articulation.⁷¹

Though as the OED points out, dissimilation is a common phenomenon in late mediaeval Latin borrowings, but very rarely occurs in words borrowed from French. French words rather tend to drop one of the similar sounds in order to increase perceptual clarity. The present-day French equivalent of *belfry* is *beffroi*, having dropped the first /r/ in *berffroi*.⁷² It is possible that the preference of dissimilation over dropping the sound was modelled after the late mediaeval Latin model of increasing perceptual clarity through dissimilation.⁷³ Due to the fact that the change is based in spoken form and the ease thereof, it is practically impossible to determine which of the scenarios presented here is more likely.

⁷⁰ Brinton and Arnovick, *The English Language: A Linguistic History*, 71.

⁷¹ Brinton and Arnovick, *The English Language: A Linguistic History*, 2011, 71.

⁷² Trésor De La Langue Française Informatisé. “Beffroi,” n.d.

<http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/advanced.exe?8;s=2607040950>.

⁷³ OED (December 2023), “belfry, Etymology,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1973596516>.

3.3.2 Tribulation⁷⁴

Tribulation was chosen for the analysis portion of this thesis due to its Latin origins, higher syllable count and affixed form.

Tribulation is an infrequently used, archaic English noun, occurring at roughly one instance per one million words, according to the OED statistics.⁷⁵ The word denotes “difficulty, affliction, complication or generally a negative circumstance befalling a person or persons during an undertaking of some sort, generally when expressing some form of hardship that a given person has overcome.”⁷⁶ In PDE, *tribulation* is also frequently encountered in its plural form *tribulations* in the two-noun collocation of *trials and tribulations*, denoting “a difficult undertaking which tests a person’s endurance.”⁷⁷

The word first appears in ME in the first half of the fourteenth century as an early borrowing from Old French.⁷⁸ The Old French borrowed form *tribulacion*, which in turn made its way into French from the Ecclesiastical Latin form of *trībulātiōn*, which evolved from the Latin form *trībulum*. The Latin form *trībulum* was created via a compounding process in which the first element *tri-* was combined with the noun suffix *-bulum*.⁷⁹

The Latin form *trībulum* is comprised of a variant of the stem of the verb *terere*, meaning to “rub, grind or wear away with physical force”.⁸⁰ The second element *-bulum* is a derivational

⁷⁴ The entry under *tribulation* in the OED was first published in 1914 and has not yet been revised, merely modified in July 2023.

⁷⁵ OED (July 2023), “tribulation, Factsheet,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4952142217>.

⁷⁶ OED (July 2023), “tribulation, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4952142217>.

⁷⁷ OED (June 2024), “trial, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4952142217>.

⁷⁸ OED (July 2023), “tribulation, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4952142217>.

⁷⁹ OED (July 2023), “tribulation, Etymology,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4952142217>.

⁸⁰ *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1971

noun suffix denoting “an instrument or tool”.⁸¹ The Latin form of *tribulum* is then a tool for rubbing or wearing away, specifically that of harvested wheat stalks in order to extract their seeds by whipping the dried stalks against the spiked surface of the *tribulum*, known in English as a threshing sledge. The threshing sledge is a large board with spiky protrusions.⁸² According to Stelten’s dictionary, the Ecclesiastical Latin form of *tribulātiōn* carried on with it the same meaning, but also developed the metaphorical sense of the word that is primarily known to present-day English and French speakers.⁸³ The shift in meaning was brought on by metaphorisation of the word, the literal act of breaking something against a hard edge being transferred to the idea that the human soul or rather faith is being tested by an external source of considerable force. While the OED’s entry published in 1914⁸⁴ does not attest any record of the former, literal meaning of the word, Chambers’ dictionary published in 1872 contains both, purporting that the word was initially borrowed into English as a polysemous unit under both its literal and metaphorical meaning.^{85 86}

Palmer terms his theory of FE regarding *tribulation* a pseudo-etymology. According to this theory, the form *tribulation* came from the Latin word *tribulus* or Greek *tribolos*. Both words denote a thorny plant named *caltrop* in English, as well as a weapon in the form of a four-pronged metal star by the same name, meant for defence against foot soldiers.⁸⁷ Palmer theorises that the weapon likely takes its name after the caltrop plant’s thorny seeds, which have an uncanny resemblance to the weapon’s form. Palmer links *tribulation* to *tribulus* via the thorns of the plant and the biblical motif of thorns or curses involving thorns, in which the

⁸¹ *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 245

⁸² *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1971.

⁸³ Leo F. Stelten, *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin: With an Appendix of Latin Expressions Defined and Clarified* (Hendrickson Academic, 1995), 273.

⁸⁴ OED (July 2023), “tribulation, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4952142217>.

⁸⁵ OED (July 2023), “tribulation, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4952142217>.

⁸⁶ Chambers, *Chambers’s Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 37. 531.

⁸⁷ OED (July 2023), “caltrop, Factsheet,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5911602581>.

thorns are the cause of the affliction or suffering, in other words they are the tribulation that Christians are meant to overcome.⁸⁸ The forms *tribulus* and *tribulum* also carry an uncanny resemblance, though the *-ulum* suffix distinguishes them. Palmer does not develop any of his theories chronologically beyond Latin and Greek, therefore the possibility of a common PIE ancestor is left unexplored. Their common PIE ancestor is most likely the root *terǝ-*, which means to twist, thresh or pierce.⁸⁹

The FE of tribulation differs from the others examined in this work. Palmer states that the commonalities are observed between two Latin forms, only one of which, *tribulum*, made its way into the English lexicon directly, meaning that it was not first assimilated to another language and later borrowed into English, as is the case with *caltrop*.⁹⁰ The *tribulus* form instead only appears in herbalist literature under its Latin name.⁹¹ The average speaker likely would not have integrated the word into their lexicon and was therefore much more likely to integrate the older word *caltrop*. The creators of the FE must have then necessarily been either herbalists with a background in etymology or more likely etymologists attempting to find the true etymology of *tribulation* and instead of *tribulum* finding *tribulus*. Their mental lexicons will have then considered the similarity between the thorny plant and the biblical thorn motif and established a connection between the two. Added that *tribulation* was not borrowed into English in its original, literal form, it is possible that the connection of *tribulum* and *tribulation* was simply not as evident as the one between *tribulus* and *tribulation*. The FE of *tribulation* also differs from the others examined in this work due to the fact that it did not change the form

⁸⁸ Smythe Palmer, *Folk-Etymology; a Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 403-4.

⁸⁹ American Heritage dictionary, "Appendix I - Indo-European Roots," n.d., *terǝ-*¹, <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/indoeurop.html#IR116300>.

⁹⁰ Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 403-4.

⁹¹ Early Print Lab, "[reg="tribulus"]" within all documents, accessed July 25th 2024. <http://earlyprint.wustl.edu/url/1722458254>

of the word. The lack of formal change points to the possibility that its FE was created by an etymologist attempting to conduct a retracing of the word's origin rather than the FE coming into existence organically through the use by a large group of speakers.

If we are to take Palmer's theory of FE at face value, then the formal similarities between *tribulus* and *tribulation* are the reason why the FE did not change the form of *tribulation*.

3.3.3 Unruly⁹²

Unruly was chosen for the analysis section due to its blending of French and Germanic elements as well as its affixed form.

Unruly is an English adjective and in fringe cases a noun when used with an article to refer to an individual or group of people.⁹³ The adjective occurs at a frequency of about 2 instances per million words used, as per the OED.⁹⁴ In its most common sense, unruly denotes somebody that lacks discipline, structure and order. Of animals, *unruly* denotes that they “do not adhere to commands, training and are generally non receptive to commands.” Regarding inanimate objects, unruly denotes their “awkwardness and unmanageability when being used. Generally speaking, *unruly* is used to point out a perceived lack of ability or capacity to adhere to some perceived set of rules which are held by the speaker or speakers in a specific context.⁹⁵ Chambers' dictionary⁹⁶ echoes this rule-based definition. Johnson's dictionary⁹⁷ diverges in this regard, instead defining *unruly* first as turbulent and second as ungovernable. Skeat continues in the same vein, defining *unruly* as lacking restraint. Skeat's definition goes on to

⁹² The OED's record of *unruly* was last revised in December 2014 and last modified in March 2024

⁹³ OED (March 2024), “unruly, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6852620796>.

⁹⁴ OED (March 2024), “unruly, Factsheet,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6852620796>.

⁹⁵ OED (March 2024), “unruly, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6852620796>.

⁹⁶ Chambers, *Chambers's Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 541.

⁹⁷ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, vol.1, 2226.

touch on the remarkable similarity that unruly shares with the ME word *rou*⁹⁸, a noun that is defined as “rest, peace, quiet and repose”.⁹⁹

The OED describes the formation of *unruly* as a process of affixation resulting in the compound *un-rul(e)-y*. The OED also attests the beta form *unrulely* created through remodelling in the 16th century.¹⁰⁰ The *un-* prefix indicates negation, while the *-y* suffix is used in *unruly* to form an adjective from the prefixed noun *unrule*. The prefix *-un* was inherited from Germanic and used indiscriminately in OE as a way of negating whichever root the prefix is attached to.¹⁰¹ The derivational suffix *-y* means that the adjective formed by its usage marks the noun it is modifying as having a certain quality.¹⁰²

Palmer’s theory of the FE of *unruly* revolves around the formal and semantic similarities between *rule* and *ro*.¹⁰³ *Ro* is, in PDE, an archaic and obsolete noun of Germanic origin that first appeared on written record in OE sometime before the end of the 12th century.¹⁰⁴ *Rule* is a noun borrowed into ME from French in the first half of the 13th century, making it a newer member of the English lexicon than *ro*.¹⁰⁵

Palmer claims that interpreting *unruly* as a derivation of the base noun *rule* is a misunderstanding of the word. Instead of *un-rule-y*, the word should instead be broken down as *un-ro(o)-ly*, wherein the base noun component *ro* carries the meaning of rest and peace.

⁹⁸ Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 676.

⁹⁹ “Ro - Middle English Dictionary,” n.d.,

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english>

[dictionary/dictionary/MED37698/track?counter=1&search_id=75284478](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english/dictionary/dictionary/MED37698/track?counter=1&search_id=75284478).

¹⁰⁰ OED (March 2024), “unruly, Forms,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6852620796>.

¹⁰¹ OED (March 2024), “un-, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7729542446>.

¹⁰² OED (March 2024), “-y, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1419454720>.

¹⁰³ Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 415.

¹⁰⁴ OED (July 2023), “ro, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4767996387>.

¹⁰⁵ OED (June 2024), “rule (noun 1), Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8650595566>.

Unruly would then mean *unrestful* or *unpeaceful* rather than marking a lack of adherence to a system of rules and regulations or the refusal or inability to submit to being governed. According to Palmer, the word was formed by addition of the universal negative prefix *-un* and the polysemic suffix *-ly*, which was as well inherited from Germanic and is used in PDE to form adverbs and in the case of *unruly*, adjectives. The form and semantics of *ro* can be found in the sister languages of English within the Germanic language branch. The cognates of *ro* can be found in the lexicons of present-day German, Swedish, Danish and Icelandic, all within the same semantic field indicating calmness and restfulness. German has the cognate *ruhe* Swedish and Danish have *ro* in their respective lexicons and Icelandic has *ro*.¹⁰⁶

The OED marks the 14th century as the first attested use of the word *unruly*, in its most prevalent ME form of *unrueley*.¹⁰⁷ The form *reule*, upon which *unruly* is formed, is a borrowing from French integrated into English around the first quarter of the 13th century. The word underwent many respellings and was subject to regional variation, but the consonant sounds of /l/ and /r/ were unchanged throughout. The respelling affected only the vowels in between the two consonants as well as the addition of an /e/ end vowel.¹⁰⁸

Unlike *rule*, *ro* and the prefix *-un* are not borrowings, but were rather inherited into English through its Germanic wordstock base, meaning that the two coexisted in English before *rule* was borrowed from French. Given that the negative *un-* prefix was used indiscriminately, it is highly likely that the two would have been compounded together into *unroo*, meaning unrest, in order to fill the lexical gap that was caused by lack of a possible antonym. Today's antonyms of *ro*, namely *chaos*, *disorder*, *panic*, *disturbance* are all newer members of the lexicon of English than the *un-* prefix. Given the lack of other means of negation and the universal nature of the *un-* prefix, the form *unroo* would have likely been part of the lexicon of OE and EME,

¹⁰⁶ Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 415.

¹⁰⁷ OED (March 2024), "unruly, Meaning & use," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6852620796>.

¹⁰⁸ OED (June 2024), "rule (noun 1), Etymology," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8650595566>.

until *rule* pushed it out of regular use and eventually into obsolescence after it became enmeshed in the English lexicon.¹⁰⁹ Given that the time frames of the two words' presence in the English lexicon overlap, it is entirely plausible that they coexisted for a number of decades.

Palmer theorises that the reason for the initial switch from *unro* to *unruly* is to be found in the translation process of the Authorised Version of the Bible, otherwise known as the King James Bible, which commissioned at the very beginning of the 17th century for the Church of England, the clergy of which concluded that English speakers of the British Isles needed a vernacular version of the Greek, Arameic, Hebrew and Latin combination that had been used previously in order to ease and accelerate the spread of Christianity. The translators likely confused the word *unro* for *unruly* because *unrule* and *unruly* had been used in translation of the Authorised Version as an equivalent to disorderly, ungovernable, unrestrainable. Therefore they, most likely unintentionally, created a slight semantic shift between *unro*, meaning not calm or not peaceful and *rule*, meaning disorderly. The translators essentially equated unrest with disorder, cementing the membership of the word *unruly* in the English lexicon at the expense of *unroly*.¹¹⁰

Morphologically, the matter of differentiating between the form of *unrooly* and the form of *unruly* is simply a matter of where the boundaries are between the individual parts of the words' structures. *Unrooly* breaks down into *un/r/vowel//y*, while *unruly* breaks down into *un/r/vowel//y*.¹¹¹ The difference on the morphological level of description is in the words' endings and whether the *//* belongs into the suffix ending in *-y*, as is the case with *unrooly*, or whether it is part of the affixed word base, as is the case with *unruly*. This difference is

¹⁰⁹ OED (July 2023), "ro, Meaning & use," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4767996387>.

¹¹⁰ Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 415.

¹¹¹ Forward slashes are used to indicate word structure boundaries.

noticeable in morphological analysis of the two words, but the boundaries are not evident in any way when in spoken form. The accent in both forms is on the second syllable beginning with the consonant /r/, meaning that the emphasis in spoken form is not placed on the suffix and is therefore not a determining factor in deciding where the base ends and the suffix begins. As for the vowels in the word base, they are both back vowels with mutually adjacent placement. When pronounced in fluid conversation at standard or high speed of articulation, the two blend together. Even if they had remained in slight contrast with one another, it is not the vowels that typically carry meaning and the intention with which the speaker enters the conversation. Given that and that the remaining parts of the words are orthographically and phonologically identical, it is absolutely possible that the two began to blend into one another. According to the OED's records, *ro* fell into obsolescence at the very beginning of the 17th century¹¹², giving *rule*, and therefore *unruly*, the space to take over.

In terms of their semantic similarities, the meanings of both words can roughly be rephrased as “causing a disturbance.” For *unruly*, the guidelines which are not being followed are a specific set of rules, while for *unruly*, the disturbance is being caused by a general restlessness and lack of calm. In both cases, the words express a failure to adhere to some form of expectation, therefore making them generally interchangeable without any noticeable change in meaning that could not be corrected via context.

Based on the evidence presented above, Palmer's theory of FE for *unruly* is plausible. The issue with validating the theory arises with its evidentiary support.

While the OED does not provide a record for *unroo* or *unruly*, Palmer's entry provides record of the form *unroo* used in a replication of mediaeval romances written in the middle of the 19th

¹¹² OED (July 2023), “ro, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4767996387>.

century.¹¹³ Neither the EPL or the corpus of EEBO provide any hits for any of the various forms of *ro*, as recorded by the OED, when prefixed with *un-* and/or suffixed by *-ly*.

3.3.4 Flushed¹¹⁴

Flushed was chosen for the analysis section for its Germanic origin and ameliorated PDE meaning as well as its polysemous *-ed* form.

Flushed, meaning reddened with a rush of blood under the skin, is an adjective of unclear origin which is first recorded in BrE in the year 1623.¹¹⁵ The very first appearance of *flushed* comes from the year 1548,¹¹⁶ though in this case, the meaning is referring to a scene being flushed with sunlight rather than a face flushed with blood or redness. *Flushed* is the past participle form of the verb *flush*. The verb has two similar meanings, the older of which appears around the year 1300 and its meaning is “to take flight suddenly”. The more recent meaning dating back to 1548 expresses “a sudden flow or rushing movement with considerable force and/or violence”.¹¹⁷ The meaning attested to 1623 and 1548 are very similar as they both express a sudden rush or flow of something. This analysis will focus on *flushed* in the sense of blushing.

The entries under *flushed* in etymological dictionaries differ. Johnson’s dictionary asserts that the word *flush* came as both a verb and a noun into BrE via borrowing from either French *flux*

¹¹³ James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps, *The Thornton Romances: the early english metrical romances of Perceval, Isumbras, Eglamour and Degrevant*, 1844, 15, accessed at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/CME00026/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext> on July 23rd 2024.

¹¹⁴ The entry under *flushed* in the OED was first published in 1897 and has not yet been revised, merely modified in July 2023.

¹¹⁵ Early Print Lab, “[reg=“flushed”]” within all documents, accessed July 25th 2024. <http://earlyprint.wustl.edu/url/1722515517>.

¹¹⁶ Early Print Lab, “[reg=“flushed”]” within all documents, accessed July 25th 2024. <http://earlyprint.wustl.edu/url/1722515517>.

¹¹⁷ OED (July 2023), “flushed, Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8186770589>.

or Dutch *fluysen*, both meaning *to flow*, or perhaps from Low German.¹¹⁸ Chambers' dictionary connects the word to the German verb *fließen*, which as well means *to flow*.¹¹⁹ Durkin expands on the theory behind the origin and points out that Dutch and Low German borrowings are often mutually indistinguishable due to the similarity between the two languages and are therefore often considered as originating from one "stock" as the speakers of the two languages were in close physical contact.¹²⁰ Given that English is a Germanic language and owes a considerable part of its word stock to borrowings from Germanic, the likelihood of *flush* and *flushed* being Germanic or Dutch borrowings is a definite possibility. Likewise, a portion of the English lexicon is made up of French and Norman borrowings, making the likelihood of French origin just as likely as the Germanic origin.

The OED offers an alternative explanation as to why the etymology of *flush* is so opaque, that being that the word could possibly be of onomatopoeic origin, with the word-initial *fl-* sound imitating a flutter of wings or sudden movement. This interpretation would fall in line with the more recently attested meaning of *flush* - sudden flow or rushing movement.¹²¹ In any case, the true etymology of *flushed* remains in obscurity.

Palmer interprets the etymology of *flushed* quite differently. According to Palmer's dictionary, the word *flushed* is merely a misinterpretation of the word *fleshed*, which the OED attests back to the year 1530. *Fleshed* is the past participle of the verb *flesh* which is as well formed via use of the bound inflectional morpheme *-ed*. The verb *to flesh* means "to bestow flesh upon a hunting animal, hound or bird of prey", in order to activate the animal's prey drive and make them quite literally blood-thirsty. Analogically, Palmer expands this theory to the

¹¹⁸ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, vol.1, 803.

¹¹⁹ Chambers, *Chambers's Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 187.

¹²⁰ Durkin, *Borrowed Words: A History of Loanwords in English*, 355.

¹²¹ OED (July 2023), "flush (verb 1), Meaning & use," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2578000164>.

shrike, otherwise known as the butcher bird, but provincially known as *flusher*. Palmer theorises that the name for this bird must have originally been *flesher*, a term used mainly in Scotland as a synonym for the French borrowing *butcher*.¹²²

On the semantic level, *fleshed* and *flushed* are related through both words having a connection to blood and blood flow. This connection places them in the same semantic field and means that they are therefore likely connected to each other in an English speaker's mental lexicon. The motivation for the root vowel change is unknown, much like the true attested etymology of *flushed*. The change may have been brought on by semantic amelioration applied to the word *fleshed*. This amelioration could have been motivated by a desire to create a distinction between the violent connotations of *fleshed* and the more recent meaning of having a flush of red on one's face. The semantic distancing might have then created a need for the forms of *fleshed* and *flushed* to differ as well, therefore bringing on the root vowel change to provide contrast between the two.

The vowel change could not have been brought on by any unconditioned type of sound change, such as the great vowel shift, as *flushed*, according to Palmer, had merely split from *fleshed*, the root vowel of which remained unchanged.¹²³ Therefore the change of root vowel must have occurred purely on the level of the individual word and was not a generally occurring phenomenon in English. A possible explanation as to why *fleshed* transformed into *flushed* may be that the form was modelled after the borrowing *flux*, which had been borrowed into the English lexicon from French at the end of the 14th century.¹²⁴ *Flush* and *flux* are interchangeably usable synonyms in English, both roughly expressing *to flow*. Besides

¹²² Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 124.

¹²³ Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 124.

¹²⁴ OED (September 2023), "flux (noun), Meaning & use," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9850256173>.

meaning, the two verbs are also similar in pronunciation, differing only in their final consonants. *Flush* /flʌʃ/ and *flux* /flʌks/ both end in a fricative. The fricatives /k/ and /s/ have the same final places of articulation, with /k/ being a post-alveolar fricative and /s/ being an alveolar fricative. The similarity between the two sounds could have potentially led *flesh* and subsequently *fleshed* to be assimilated in accordance with the root vowel of *flux*.

The FE provides the word with both a semantic and morphological change. Semantically, the FE of *flushed* ameliorates the word whilst still keeping the core basic meaning of blood flow, therefore remaining in the same lexical field. Morphologically, the FE likely brought on an analogical change of the root vowel modelled on the phonetically similar French borrowing *flux*.

3.3.5 Clever¹²⁵

Clever was chosen for the analysis section due to its short syllable count, Germanic roots, its cognates among the sister languages of English as well as its opaque origins.

Clever is a commonly used English adjective, and in minor cases an adverb, of uncertain origin.¹²⁶ *Clever*, in PDE, is mainly used as an adjective to refer to something or someone that is “practical, dexterous and in the case of persons and animals, mentally nimble and intelligent.”¹²⁷ Though the PDE meaning of *clever* is generally intended in the above mentioned sense, its meaning has transformed multiple times throughout its presence in the English lexicon. *Clever* has many meanings. It has been used to mark someone’s good health, looks,

¹²⁵ The entry under *clever* in the OED was first published in 1889 and has not yet been revised, merely modified in March 2024.

¹²⁶ OED (March 2024), “clever (adjective & adverb), Etymology,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6010855940>.

¹²⁷ OED (March 2024), “clever (adj. & adv.), Etymology,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6010855940>.

stature, build, personality attributes as well as physical skills and the dexterity of one's grip.¹²⁸ Across all the uses of *clever*, the semantic commonality among the meanings of *clever* is that the word is always used in a positive assessment of skill, practicality or wit, or as a sarcastic positive regarding those. In adverbial form, *clever* is used to describe the smart or practical manner of an undertaking.¹²⁹ The first available record of *clever* is in the sense of "positively marking physical nimbleness and good manual skill" is attested by the OED at the beginning of the 13th century.¹³⁰ The PDE meaning of "positively marking the intellect of a person or practicality of an object" is more recent, its first use in this sense dates back only to 1716 as per the OED.¹³¹

On the FE of *clever*, Palmer's entry claims that it is merely a corruption of the adjective *deliver* and its derived form of *deliverly*. The two share the meaning "nimble, active and dexterous in the physical sense."¹³²

Deliver is a French borrowing which was integrated into the English lexicon at the beginning of the 14th century. The borrowing is attested under two meanings, the first marking someone who is "free or liberated, especially so in the spiritual sense." The second meaning marks "a person or animal that is able to move quickly and nimbly with great physical skill."¹³³

Palmer theorises that the transformation began with a contraction of the derived form *deliverly* in spoken English. In order to ease and increase the speed of articulation, the form will have

¹²⁸ OED (March 2024), "clever (adjective & adverb), Meaning & use," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6010855940>.

¹²⁹ OED (March 2024), "clever (adjective & adverb), Meaning & use," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6010855940>.

¹³⁰ OED (March 2024), "clever (adjective & adverb), Meaning & use," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6010855940>.

¹³¹ OED (March 2024), "clever (adjective & adverb), Meaning & use," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6010855940>.

¹³² Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 65.

¹³³ OED (July 2023), "deliver (adj.), Meaning & use," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6432968379>.

gone from *deliverly* to *d'liverly*. *Deliver* then analogically followed suit, contracting from *deliver* to *d'liver*. Subsequently, the apostrophe was removed from written form and thus *dliverly* and *dliver* entered the ME lexicon. Palmer then argues that *dliver* was doubtless assimilated to the ME adjective *cliver*, which descended into ME from the verb *cliven*, which is itself a descendant of *clifan*.¹³⁴¹³⁵ Palmer claims that the meaning *cliven* is “quick in seizing or grasping”.¹³⁶ The OED traces the etymology of *cliven* back to the merging of two OE verbs, *clifan* and *clifian*, which share the meaning of “adhering or clinging to something”.¹³⁷¹³⁸ *The Middle English Compendium* then cites the ME verb *clēven*, which descended from the OE *clifian*, meaning “to stick, hold with the hands or feet, or to remain”.¹³⁹

Palmer’s dictionary does not comment on the sound change of the word-initial consonants from /d/ to /k/. Such a change is not observed in English initial consonants, especially so when the two consonants do not share a place of articulation or have neighbouring places of articulation as can be seen in the case of /f/ and /s/ in *flushed*. Although both /d/ and /k/ are stops, /d/ is an alveolar sound while /k/ is articulated on the velum.

In Palmer’s *Leaves from a Word-hunter’s Note-book*, he explains that this sound change is in fact possible when taken into account with the adjacent /l/ sound. According to Palmer, /dl/ and /kl/ become virtually indistinguishable in spoken form, especially when pronounced at a speed.

¹³⁴ Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 65.

¹³⁵ Franz Heinrich Stratmann, *A Dictionary of the Old English Language Compiled From Writings of the XIII, XIV and XV Centuries.*, 1878, 121. As quoted in Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 65. (Palmer’s entry here expanded through Stratmann’s for clarity’s sake.)

¹³⁶ Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, 65.

¹³⁷ Dictionary of Old English: A to Le online, “clifan”, <https://dictionary-doe-utoronto-ca.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/doe/#home>, accessed July 25th 2024.

¹³⁸ Dictionary of Old English, “clifian”, <https://dictionary-doe-utoronto-ca.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/doe/>, accessed July 25th 2024.

¹³⁹ Middle English Dictionary, “clēven” <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED8012/track?counter=3>, accessed July 25th.

He argues this point by stating that the sounds /gl/ and /kl/ are not distinguishable in speedy articulation.¹⁴⁰ Seemingly, Palmer doesn't account for the fact that /k/ and /g/ are a minimal pair with the same place of articulation on the velum, while the /dl/ sound moves from alveolar to the velar, its articulation cannot be performed elsewhere, making the sound change theory improbable.

Palmer briefly comments on what he sees as the end stage of the etymology of *clever*, that being the assimilation to *cliver*. This part of the theory is based around the similarity of *clever* to the ME noun *cliver*, meaning claw or talon.¹⁴¹ While Palmer maps the assimilation from *d'liver* to *clever* extensively, the “claw” section is left largely unexplored. While the first part focuses on form, the second is explainable through the two words' shared semantic fields.

The OE meaning of the verb *claw* denotes “grasping or clutching at something”, as well as “scraping, scratching and generally causing physical harm or destruction with a talon or pointed instrument”.¹⁴² The OED attests a slight shift in meaning to the year 1557. This change is brought on by metaphorization. Instead of a physical movement meant to injure or physically seize, *claw* begins to also denote a figurative act of “seizing or regaining” alongside retaining the expression of the physical act of *clawing*.¹⁴³ Parallely, *clever* begins its presence in the lexicon of OE in the year 1220, as attested by the OED. Its initial meaning marks “physical nimbleness or dexterity with hands or claws”. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the meaning of *clever* widened to cover mental nimbleness and dexterity. *Cleverly*, the adverb, undergoes a similar transformation. Its widening to cover mental dexterity as well as physical precedes that of *clever*, having taken place in 1654, as attested by the OED.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Abram Smythe Palmer, *Leaves From a Word-hunter's Note-book: Being Some Contributions to English Etymology* (Trübner & Co., Ludgate Hill, 1876), 243.

¹⁴¹ Palmer, *Leaves From a Word-Hunter's Note-Book: Being Some Contributions to English Etymology*, 245.

¹⁴² OED (December 2023), s.v. “claw (v.), Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5246541072>.

¹⁴³ OED (December 2023), s.v. “claw (v.), Meaning & use,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5246541072>.

¹⁴⁴ OED (March 2024), “clever (adjective & adverb), Etymology,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6010855940>.

The above presented semantic connection, shared semantic shift and the morphological similarities between *clever* and *claw* add evidentiary support to the latter half of Palmer's theory. As for the true etymology of *clever*, the OED points to a possible borrowing from the East Frisian *clüfer* /kli:fə/, meaning "clever, skilful, nimble".¹⁴⁵ In English, /f/ and /v/ are both labiodental fricatives, voiceless and voiced respectively. East Frisian and English are sister languages, both descended from their shared ancestor proto-West Germanic, meaning that *clever* is likely to be a borrowing from East Frisian, or perhaps both East Frisian and English inherited the word from their common ancestor.

3.4 Discussion

It seems as though in an attempt to make my sample as diverse as possible, I unintentionally picked a few words that are not FEs at all and are merely Palmer's own misinterpretations or lack of access to true etymologies. Palmer's dictionary is a prescriptive work, one that aims to point out the faults in FEs and correct what the author sees as corruptions of the Queen's English.¹⁴⁶ It seems as though in an attempt to correct as many "mistakes" as possible, Palmer termed multiple true etymologies as FEs and in doing so, essentially created his own FE of the words the etymologies of which he misinterpreted or misunderstood.

Perhaps a randomly picked sample of words could have yielded a stronger result that would be more supportive of my hypothesis that there are indeed formation patterns behind the phenomenon of FEs. If I were to conduct this study again, it would doubtless be beneficial if a more recent publication that could rival the scale of Palmer's dictionary were available.

¹⁴⁵ OED (March 2024), "clever (adjective & adverb), Etymology," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6010855940>.

¹⁴⁶ Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*, viii.

Overall, I do believe that my hypothesis has been partially validated by my findings, even though only three constituents of my sample turned out to be valid candidates. It would be interesting to conduct the research in this study again at a larger scale, though that is far beyond the scope of this BA thesis.

4 Conclusion

The primary aim of this thesis was to answer the question of whether there are identifiable patterns of formation that guide the phenomenon of FE in the English language. The hypothesis upon which this thesis was based is that there have to exist some identifiable patterns based on prior language knowledge and underlying cognitive abilities in identifying patterns as well as information provided by the speakers' collective mental lexicon. Once identified, these patterns of formation would then reveal the types of words which are most often folk-etymologised. The phenomenon of FE was chosen for this thesis due to its unique ability to affect the semantic level and morphological level of a word's linguistic description at one time. FE tends to be glossed over as a transformative process and classified as simply a type of analogy, simplifying its effects. Compared to other linguistic phenomena, FE is quite rare and seldom written about on a larger scale outside of research focused on a specific socio-cultural context, such as studies about toponyms or last names of the members of a certain culture. English FEs are incredibly diverse and come from all socio-cultural contexts, languages of origin and word classes.

Palmer's dictionary provided the starting point for the analysis section of this thesis. From this dictionary, five words were selected based on a set of criteria established in the section on Methodology. The criteria were created based on a survey of Palmer's dictionary in order for

the chosen order to be representative of the English lexicon. These criteria for representation were established so as to ensure that even though this thesis is of qualitative nature, the chosen words could still represent the lexicon and reveal the patterns of FE formation, as was the goal for this thesis. The individual analyses revealed interesting results.

Palmer's theory of FE of *belfry* can be interpreted in two ways. The simpler of the two relies on the *bel-* element. If we assume that the dissimilation of sound that took the form of *berfrei* to *belfry* happened prior to the semantic shift from "defence tower" to "bell-tower", then its FE is based in a simple misidentification of the boundaries between the word's supposed elements, causing the speakers of English who created its FE to consider it a compound. While the word was formed as a compound, it is not an English compound, therefore its compounded elements cannot be picked apart by an English speaker who has no awareness of the true etymology of *belfry*.

The more complex theory of the genesis of *belfry* in English supposes that the sound change happened before the form change, meaning that the speakers of English came into contact with *belfry* and did not misinterpret it whatsoever, therefore altogether disqualifying it from being a FE.

Following in the same path, Palmer's FE theory of *tribulation* seems to be based on Chambers' misidentification of the semantics with which the word was borrowed into English. Chambers' entry names firstly the literal meaning of tribulation, which cannot be found in any other dictionary contemporary to Chambers' own. Palmer's theory of FE seems to have taken this literal meaning and traced it back to the wrong Latin ancestor, though one that likely came from the same PIE root. According to this theory, the meaning of *tribulation* changed only ever through metaphorisation, not misinterpretation. Its meaning on the other hand did not change at all, disqualifying it from being a FE altogether.

The FE of *unruly* revealed a formation pattern that defied the presupposed idea this thesis began with. That being that the subjects of FEs are foreign borrowings misinterpreted based on their similarity to words already present in the speakers' lexicon. With *unruly*, it is possible that this directionality is flipped and that a word inherited into English from Germanic was likened to a newer French borrowing. This borrowing eventually sent the word inherited from Germanic into obsolescence. The likeness between the two on which the FE is based lies in their mutually similar written and spoken forms. Though, as is pointed out in the analysis, the evidentiary support that Palmer presents is dubious.

Flushed is perhaps the most transparent FE in this thesis. Palmer claims that *flushed* came from *fleshed*. The formal similarities shared by the two forms are evident. Though Palmer does not account for the sound change, which must have been conditioned due to the fact that the root vowel of *fleshed* did not undergo the same change. There are two possible explanations as to why the root vowel of *flushed* changed. The first theory is based on semantic amelioration. *Fleshed* has a violent, bloody connotation. It is possible that speakers of English needed to differentiate between the violent nature of *fleshed* and the non-violent nature of *flushed*. This need for differentiation could have possibly motivated speakers to alter the newer, non-violent *flushed*. The second theory supposes that *fleshed* became *flushed* based on its semantic and morphological similarities to the French borrowing *flux*. *Fleshed* could have possibly been modelled on the form of *flux*. Though it is also possible that both theories are valid and mutually dependent. The need for differentiation of the ameliorated *flushed* could have motivated the word to be modelled after the French borrowing *flux*.

Lastly, Palmer's theory of the FE of *clever* was analysed. Palmer's theory suggested a consonant change in the French borrowing of *deliver*. A change from /d/ to /k/ is not cited in the OED's entry, nor is it a type of sound change observed in the ME period.¹⁴⁷ The second

¹⁴⁷ Brinton and Arnovick, *The English Language: A Linguistic History*, 2011, 263-266

part of Palmer's theory of the FE of *clever* is based on the similarities between *clever* and *cliver*, a now obsolete noun of Germanic origin meaning "claw or talon". The process that created *clever* would therefore not be a FE, but rather a semantic shift through metaphorisation, taking a literal grasp on a physical entity or item to a metaphorical grasp on knowledge. This second theory disqualifies the creation of *clever* from being a FE.

From the conclusions drawn above, only three out of the five words analysed qualify as being created or altered through their respective FEs. From the three that qualify, certain patterns of the formation of FEs can be identified.

Belfry exhibits an FE based on the misidentification of one element of the word and subsequent misinterpretation helped by semantic similarities. *Flushed* exhibits signs of the form inherited from Germanic having been modelled after a French borrowing based on their shared semantic field. The motivation for this particular transformation could possibly have been a need for either semantic amelioration of the inherited word or a need for formal contrast between the inherited and the folk-etymologised form. For *unruly*, the pattern is similar. The form inherited from Germanic was semantically and formally connected to a younger French borrowing *ruele* and subsequently pushed into obsolescence by it. Interestingly, the present-day form *unruly* blends the inherited Germanic meaning with the borrowed French meaning.

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7 Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá zkoumáním fenoménem takzvané „lidové etymologie“, též známé pod názvy „populární“ nebo „armchair“ etymologie. Bakalářská práce se skládá ze dvou hlavních částí. Sledovanými aspekty fenoménu lidové etymologie v teoretické části této práce jsou způsoby jejího vzniku a důvody pro vznik. Lidová etymologie je proces, který transformuje individuální slova na formální rovině lingvistické deskripce a zároveň na sémantické úrovni lingvistické deskripce. Lidová etymologie je tedy více-úrovňový transformativní proces, který působí zároveň na formu a význam individuálních slov. Lidová etymologie je založena na základních lidských kognitivních schopnostech, zejména rozpoznávání spodoby mezi dvěma konstituenty a analogického sjednocení nebo zjednodušení jejich forem. Literatura týkající se lidové etymologie je často soustředěna na jeden specifický kontext, jako například příjmení členů určité kultury nebo názvy měst v určité lokalitě. Literatura obecnějšího charakteru je reprezentovaná dvěma články od autorů Gabrielly Rundblad and Davida B. Kronenfeld. Články *Folk-Etymology: Haphazard Perversion or Shrewd Analogy?* a *The inevitability of folk etymology: a case of collective reality and invisible hands* zkoumají lidové etymologie v angličtině bey zaměření na specifický kontext a ilustrují variabilitu lidových etymologií v anglickém lexikonu.

Transformativní proces lidové etymologie začíná v momentu, kdy do mentálního lexikonu mluvčích určitého jazyka vstupuje nové slovo. Mentální lexikon je depozitář slov a jazykových zkušeností obecně, které daný mluvčí za svůj život posbíral. Mentální lexikon je zdrojem slova, kterému je nově příchozí slovo přibodobněno. Lidové etymologie jsou obzvlášť časté v angličtině, jelikož v sobě má anglický lexikon mnoho vrstev výpůjček z cizích jazyků. Vysoké množství výpůjček z cizích jazyků způsobuje zvýšenou pravděpodobnost jejich misinterpretace.

Mluvčí v momentě setkání se s novým slovem reagují jedním ze dvou způsobů. Mohou slovo jednoduše přijmout jako výpůjčku v jeho aktuální formě a následně ho na formální úrovni změnit tak, aby slovo podléhalo konvencím korespondence mezi fonologickou úrovní a morfologickou úrovní v jejich jazyce. V tomto scénáři zůstává sémantická úroveň slova beze změny a slovo je stále přímo spojitelné s formou, se kterou bylo ze svého původního jazyka vypůjčeno do cílového jazyka. V případě lidové etymologie se tento proces zásadně liší. Nové slovo v lexikonu místo zařazení do lexikonu jazyka prochází transformativním procesem. V procesu lidové etymologie je nově příchozí slovo připodobněno slovu nebo slovům, které jsou již členy lexikonu cílového jazyka. Tvůrci lidových etymologií tato dvě slova spojí na základě podoby jejich formy na fonologické a morfologické úrovni lingvistické deskripce. Nově příchozí slovo a již začleněné slovo se též potkávají na sémantické úrovni, jsou tedy konstituenty stejného sémantického pole. Sdílené vlastnosti na formální a sémantické úrovni slov zapříčiní zpodobnění nového slova dle vzoru staršího. Slovo, které prošlo transformativním procesem lidové etymologie, je následně integrováno do lexikonu cílového jazyka. Lidová etymologie je tedy poněkud naivní snaha o poznání a porozumění nově příchozímu cizímu členu lexikonu. K porozumění používají mluvčí cílového jazyka své dosavadní zkušenosti se svým matřským jazykem. Mluvčí angličtiny porovnávají nová slova ve svém lexikonu na základě vzorců, které vypožorovali na ostatních členech svého lexikonu.

Mluvčí identifikují na svém dosavadním lexikonu slovotvorné vzorce, jako je například afixace nebo tvorba složených slov.

Samotní tvůrci lidových etymologií jsou ti, kteří nemají buď žádné formální vzdělání v lingvistických disciplínách, tedy laici, nebo někdejší lingvisti, kteří měli omezený přístup k záznamům, na kterých by byli schopni vytrasovat opravdovou etymologii slov. Lidová etymologie je motivována potřebou porozumět, přičemž čerpá z dosavadních zkušeností a je ovlivněna sociokulturním kontextem, ve kterém se mluvčí, kteří lidové etymologie tvoří, nachází. Termín „lidová etymologie“ je tedy poněkud mylné označení. Opravdová etymologie se vyznačuje trasováním slov napříč historií, od přítomnosti po proto-jazyk, a sledováním toho, jak se během své existence dané slovo mění. Lidová etymologie slova odděluje od jejich pravého původu za účelem porozumění. Vědecká etymologie tedy oproti lidové etymologii nezasahuje do transformativních procesů, kterými slovo prochází po dobu své existence.

Jelikož lidové etymologie vznikají v jeden specifický moment, a nikoliv napříč staletími jako opravdové etymologie, je přirozeně obtížné dohledat pro lidové etymologie prameny důkazů.

Hledání důkazů, které by podpořily vznik lidové etymologie, je obzvláště obtížné v obdobích staré a střední angličtiny, kterými se zabývá praktická část této bakalářské práce.

Praktická část práce je soustředěna na analýzy lidových etymologií individuálních slov. Cílem těchto analýz je potvrzení, nebo vyvrácení mé hypotézy, která udává, že lidové etymologie vznikají v rozpoznatelných vzorcích. Slova a hypotézy jejich lidových etymologií byly vybrány z A.S. Palmerova slovníku *Folk-Etymology; a Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy*

První analyzované slovo je *belfry*. Analýza tohoto slova vykazuje dva možné scénáře vzniku. První z nich počítá s hypotézou, že formální změna na fonologické úrovni slova se odehrála před vznikem lidové etymologie. Tento scénář předpokládá, že původní francouzská výpůjčka *berfrei* nejprve podstoupila disimilaci dvou /r/, prostřednictvím které byla výpůjčka změněna

na formu *belfry*. Mluvčí, kteří se poté setkali s *belfry*, nebyli nuceni slovo přizpůsobit svému lexikonu, tudíž u něj neproběhla lidová etymologie, jelikož se forma už dále nezměnila. Druhý scénář předpokládá opačnou posloupnost událostí. Předpokládá tedy, že mluvčí se setkali s *berfry* a na základě podoby s *bel(l)* jej pozměnili. Změna formy byla uskutečněna díky tomu, že /r/ a /l/ jsou alveolární konsonanty.

Lidová etymologie druhého slova *tribulation* se ukázala být pouhou misinterpretací jeho opravdové etymologie. Palmerova hypotéza lidové etymologie *tribulation* označila slovo *tribolos* jako původce *tribulation*, namísto jeho opravdového původce *tribulum*. Slova *tribolos* a *tribulum* jsou obě výpůjčky z Latiny a mají stejný PIE kořen, tudíž je evidentní, jak Palmerův výklad vznikl. *Tribolos* a *tribulum* mají též spojení na sémantické úrovni, jelikož obě značí určitou věc, která se vyznačuje špičatými trny.

Třetí slovo *unruly* nese lidovou etymologii, která vznikla na základě misinterpretovaných hranic částí slova. Dle Palmerova slovníku je předchůdcem současného *unruly* nikoliv afixovaná francouzská výpůjčka *un/rul(e)/y*, ale *un/ro/ly*. *Unroly* se skládá z prefixu *un-*, sufixu *-ly* a kořene *ro*, který byl do anglického lexikonu zděděn z původního germánského lexikonu, který tvoří základ dnešního anglického lexikonu.

Čtvrté slovo *flushed* je podle Palmera misinterpretace *fleshed*, tedy minulého příčestí slovesa *flesh*. *Fleshed* se proměnilo na *flushed* dle modelu francouzské výpůjčky *flux*. *Fleshed* a *flush* sdílí sémantické pole spojené s krví a krvácením. Palmer teoretizuje, že *fleshed*, ve významu „navnadit lovnou zvěř na syrové maso“, bylo prostřednictvím lidové etymologie modelováno podle *flux*, s významem „plynout nebo téct“. Lidová etymologie v tomto případě byla motivována formální podobou a sémantickou podobou zároveň.

Poslední slovo *clever* má spletitou etymologii. Palmerova hypotéza lidové etymologie je zde z lingvistického hlediska vysoce nepravděpodobná, jelikož vyžaduje typ změny konsonant, která v angličtině není možná. *Clever* je namísto produktu lidové etymologie jednoduše výpůjčka z

jihofrištiny, nebo bylo *clever* zděděno do jihofrištiny a angličtiny z germánštiny, jelikož jsou jihofriština a angličtina germánské jazyky.

Praktická část bakalářské práce ukázala tři vzorce vzniku lidové etymologie a dvě slova, která Palmer mylně interpretoval jako lidové etymologie. Hypotéza tedy byla potvrzena.