

MUSINGS BY BRUCE

The old-fashioned term “muse”, to ponder, meditate or marvel, is today called a “blog.” So, like many do these days, when I think I have something worth sharing, I will add it to an *Engage!* issue. Fair warning, don’t expect any consistency in quality or subject matter ... it’s a stream of consciousness sort of thing. So, here goes.

Words, don’t cha love em?

As the child of a linguist (Dad spoke eight languages) and an English professor, I’ve always had an interest in the derivation of words. So I am reading a new book, *The Secret Life of Words: How English Became English* by Henry Hitchings (Farrar, Giroux, Strauss) ... and really liking it.

English obviously started in England. Invaders of old England were the Anglo-Saxons and in fact the name English came from the Angles. The book is just full of such facts.

English, perhaps more than any other language, has taken into it more words from a variety of languages than probably any other language. It started by the various invaders of England, which includes tribes from France, Denmark, Germany and the Romans.

Then English spread to other parts of the world during the 16th through 18th centuries as the English, along with the Spanish, Portuguese and French raced around the world claiming lands and establishing colonies for each country’s king or queen. Thus English became one of the principal languages in Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa, Kenya, Bermuda, the Bahamas and the United States.

In the 19th, 20th, and now the 21st centuries, English has made even further penetration due to the influence of the United States. Today, English is the language that predominates in the areas of commerce, technology, journalism, entertainment, fashion, education, diplomacy, science, medicine, the youth culture and air traffic control. I found that amazing. “Today more people use English as a second language than are native speakers. Yet the future of English may well be defined in India and China, not Britain or America. And when we hear a non-native English speaker it’s a sign of aspiration.”

Beyond the social, economic and cultural effects of English, the author cites historical facts. For example, Alcatraz, site of the prison in San Francisco Bay, was named by Spanish explorers for the pelicans (inhabiting it, *Alcatraz*), but the word came from an Arabic word (Arabic Moors had invaded Spain at one point) for a bucket attached to a waterwheel used in irrigation.

Or take the word *mattress*. It comes from an Arabic word meaning “a place where things are thrown” because it was the custom to sleep on scattered cushions.

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With the arrival in England of William the Conqueror, also called William the Norman, came words like *arrival*, a French word, and before it a Latin verb *adripere* that meant "to come ashore."

Or consider the common base root for the words hospital and hospitality. They're from the French, but originally from a Latin word *hospes*, referring to a host, for both a hospital and a hotel were places of refuge for a traveler or the sick.

Personally I get a kick out of the "ahah" moment when understanding dawns on why we use a word the way we do. I even wonder (can anyone tell me?) if the Japanese word for thank you, *aregato*, is similar to the Portuguese word for thank you, *obrigado*. These sound more similar than they look in writing. Did the one come from the other given the Portuguese were the first Europeans to reach Japan? Or is it just coincidence?

I love languages ... different cultures ... understanding people and personalities. You think maybe I went into a good profession?

All the best until the next time the muse is with me. By the way, if you have a reaction to this musing I'd love to hear it. Drop me a quick email if so inclined.

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By Bruce