For my parents

The Oxford Guide to Etymology

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These last two categories pose some difficulties, since it is not always easy to determine which meanings are readily predictable (or to put it another way, which meanings are institutionalized or even lexicalized). However, ideally we will want to ensure that problematic cases such as *snowberry* do not escape our notice. We will always have to assess our resources very carefully: if limited time is available, we may want to concentrate on just the monomorphemic words, or even just on monomorphemic words which have a certain level of currency. But if we do so, there will be losses. If we are working with a system where everything is connected, or even just a system where many things are connected, any unexamined word history may have contained vital clues to help explain other word histories. Limitations on our resources may force a pragmatic approach, but we should be alert to what may be lost as a result.

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Are words coherent entities?

In this chapter we will look more closely at the variation in form and meaning shown by individual words. Variation may be found within a single time period and locality, and between different historical periods (diachronic variation) or different geographical areas (diatopic variation). We will take up the crucial issue of how words change with time, and we will examine critically whether we can always take it for granted that a word has continuity as a coherent unit from one historical period to another. We will look at the importance of tracing the process by which a word has developed. In comparison with this, the actual point of origin may be a relatively trivial matter, although we will also look at some cases where it is very difficult to pin down exactly when a particular word originated. We will examine cases where two originally separate words have merged, and conversely cases where one individual word has split into two or more separate words. In doing so, we will gain a better understanding of the data which forms the basis of etymological research, and will be better prepared for a more detailed investigation of the major issues in etymological research.

3.1 Variety in form and meaning: *poke* 'bag, sack'

The noun *poke* 'bag, small sack' is probably familiar to most speakers of modern English only as part of the idiom *a pig in a poke* 'something bought or accepted without prior inspection'. This is a good example of the kind of idiom we considered in section 2.1.5, where one of the words (*poke*) is either obsolete or near-obsolete except for its use in this idiom. At least, this word is obsolete or near-obsolete in modern standard varieties, but it retains much more currency in many regional varieties. Because of its obsoleteness or obsolescence in standard varieties, it provides a fairly unusual example in modern English of the sort of divergence in form and meaning in different regional varieties of a language which is typical when comparison with a supra-regional standard variety does not act as a brake on variation and change. (By contrast, if we looked for instance at the history of northern English and Scots *mickle* and southern English *much* (< *muchel*), a large part of the modern history of the form *mickle* would concern its relationship with the modern standard form *much*.)

The *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* summarizes the current meaning, history, and ulterior etymology of *poke* as follows (with my silent expansions of its abbreviations):

poke...bag, small sack (now dialectal except in 'to buy a pig in a poke'). 13th century. – Old Northern French *poque, poke* (compare Anglo-Latin *poca*), variant of (Old) French *poche* (compare POUCH).

The *ODEE* is a fairly typical example of a single-volume etymological dictionary of a major modern language, and is based principally upon the documentation of the much fuller historical dictionary, the *OED*. The word *poke* has recently been revised for the new edition of the *OED*, and some aspects of the ulterior etymology of *poke* have been reconsidered, but the analysis remains very similar. The English word is first recorded in the Middle English period, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, or perhaps a little earlier in Latin documents, which could show either the Middle English or the Anglo-French word, and also in some surnames which probably originated as nicknames, e.g. *haripoke* 'hairy poke'. It probably shows a borrowing from Anglo-French or northern French variants of Old French *poche* 'bag, sack'. This French word is itself ultimately a borrowing from a form in a Germanic language, cognate with Middle Dutch *pōke* and Old Icelandic *poki*, which both mean 'bag'. In Anglo-French

and some northern varieties of French, a sound change common to other varieties of French did not take place. This resulted in a dialectal distinction between Anglo-French and northern Old French *poke, poque* as opposed to *poche* elsewhere. Middle English *poke* is most likely to have been borrowed from this source. Another, less likely, possibility is that it was borrowed from the unrecorded Old Dutch antecedent of Middle Dutch *pōke* (which, rather confusingly, would have shown a short vowel, since the long vowel in Middle Dutch results from later lengthening of short vowels in open syllables). Additionally, in Scandinavian-settled areas of northern and eastern England, the word could have been either borrowed from Old Norse *poki* or reinforced by association with this word (compare section 6.5 on this process).

All of these input forms would have given the same result, early Middle English *poke* /pokə/, with a short vowel. Beyond this initial input, no further foreign-language influence is found in the history of English *poke*, nor is there any important influence discernible from other English words. To that extent, the very simple, short presentation in *ODEE* serves us well. However, it does very little to get us from a Middle English borrowing *poke* (with a short vowel) to the modern English word *poke* (with a diphthong): the orthography may be the same, but we need to explain the phonological development. To do this we need to know a little about a couple of major English sound changes. To work from the present day backwards, the diphthong /əʊ/ in modern English *poke* is a relatively recent (nineteenth-century) development from the close mid long vowel /oː/, which itself developed from the open mid long vowel /ɔː/ as a result of the early modern English Great Vowel Shift (see 7.2.3). This open mid long vowel /ɔː/ itself resulted from another earlier sound change, early Middle English lengthening in open syllables in disyllabic words. In the case of a word like *poke*, the first syllable was open, i.e. the word had only one medial consonant, and the vowel lowered and lengthened as a result of the operation of this sound change. Subsequently, as a result of another Middle English sound change, the final vowel was lost, and the *-e* which was preserved in the written form served merely as a spelling convention indicating a preceding long vowel. (This is a traditional account of how this sound change operated. We will look at a different analysis in section 7.2.2.) We can thus put together the main sequence of events explaining the form history of the word from its first appearance in Middle English to its present-day form in standard English:

Middle English *poke* /pokəl/ > *pōke* /pɔːkə/ (by open syllable lengthening)

> *pōke* /pɔːk/ (with loss of the final *-e*, which remains in spelling)

> early modern English /poːk/ (with vowel raising as a result of the Great Vowel Shift)

> modern English *poke* /pəʊk/

Etymological dictionaries normally leave out this sort of information, as the developments are regular ones which are documented in historical grammars, but it is all actually a part of the etymology of the modern English word form *poke*.

If we look now at the documentation on spelling history provided by the *OED*, we see a large number of different forms in different varieties of English, all of which developed from Middle English forms with a long vowel as a result of open syllable lengthening:[1]

ME pook, ME-16 (17 *Irish English (Wexford)*) pooke, ME- poke, 15 poeck, 15-16 (18 *Irish English (Wexford)*) poake, 16 poak, 19- polk (*U.S. regional*); *Eng. regional (chiefly north.*) 17- poak, 17- poake, 18- pooak, 18- pook, 18- pwoak, 18- pwok, 18- pwoke; *Sc.* pre-17 poike, pre-17 poilk, pre-17 pook, pre-17 pooke, pre-17 poolke, pre-17 poyk, pre-17 poyke, pre-17 17- poke, pre-17 18 poak, pre-17 18 poik, 18 puock (*south.*), 18- pyock (*north-east.*), 18- pyoke (*north-east.*), 19- peock (*north-east.*); *N.E.D.* (1907) also records a form 18 puok (*regional*).

(*OED3* at *poke* n.[1])

Of course, what we are in fact looking at here is a collection of spelling forms, which represent spoken forms with varying degrees of faithfulness, within the constraints and conventions of a number of different spelling systems. In spite of this limitation on our data, we can trace a number of divergent histories, which we can piece together by looking at what is known of both the historical phonology and the spelling conventions of each variety of English. We will not do this here, but theoretically we could trace a different formal etymology for each of these word forms; indeed, in some cases the same spelling form in different documents might represent different spoken forms, or might represent the same spoken form but with a slightly different history. This approach of offering a distinct etymology for each distinct word form is currently being adopted on a large scale for the

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[1] 'ME' here stands for 'Middle English', and the numbers represent the first two digits of each century, hence '17-' means 'found from the eighteenth century onwards'. Early Scots forms are all dated 'pre-17' because of the difficulties of assigning precise dates to many of the early Scots sources.

historical atlas project *A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English*: see Laing and Lass (2008).

What we have seen so far is not the full form history of *poke*. The *OED* entry for this word also presents a further set of forms which indicate the existence of a variant with a short vowel:

ME poc, ME pok, ME puc, 15 pokke, 15-16 pocke, 15- pock, 19- pok (*Canad. regional*); *Sc.* pre-17 pocke, pre-17 17- pock, pre-17 (19- *Shetland*) pok; *N.E.D.* (1907) also records a form ME pokke.

These forms seem to show failure of Middle English open syllable lengthening, and hence a Middle English form *pok* with preserved short vowel. Most of the evidence for these forms is from northern sources, and when we check the historical grammars we find that there are some parallels in Older Scots and northern Middle English also showing failure of open syllable lengthening in disyllabic words which historically had final /ə/, especially when the intervening consonant was a velar (see Macafee (2002) §6.6.1). We will look at some possible explanations for this in section 7.2.2. In fact, some of the examples of spellings of the type *pok* could reflect a spoken form with a long vowel, and likewise some examples of spellings of the type *poke* could reflect a spoken form with a short vowel, but overall the evidence is sufficiently clear that both forms with a long vowel and forms with a short vowel have existed in the past, and still do in at least some varieties of English today.

The *OED* has a third group of spellings for *poke*, also originating from the forms with a short vowel. These reflect a further sound change in Scots which caused diphthongization before a velar plosive:

Sc. pre-17 polk, pre-17 18 pouk, 18 powk.

In the case of the form *polk* we see what is called an inverse spelling, a spelling convention resulting from earlier vocalization of /l/ in words like *folk* which thus came to rhyme with *pouk*. Interestingly, among the first group of forms we also had US regional *polk*, showing a similar generalization of the spelling conventions for rhyming words such as *folk* or *yolk*.

We need not concern ourselves further with the origin of all of these variant spellings and the pronunciations which they represent, but we can already see that the development from Middle English *poke* to modern English *poke* via Middle English open syllable lengthening and the Great Vowel Shift is paralleled by a number of other historical pathways in different

varieties of English. Most of the variation displayed by *poke* is regionally based, showing different formal developments of the same input form in different regional varieties. However, we also find formal variation that is not regionally based in origin. Open syllable lengthening often produced differences in vowel quantity in different parts of the paradigm of a single word, for instance in nouns which were monosyllabic in uninflected forms but disyllabic in inflected forms (e.g. uninflected *staf* 'staff' beside plural *stāves*), or which were disyllabic in uninflected forms but trisyllabic in inflected forms (e.g. *hēven* 'heaven' beside *hevenes*). We typically find that one form or the other is generalized (or levelled) to all parts of the paradigm by a process of analogy, but sometimes traces of the earlier variation are preserved. For instance, the modern spelling of *heaven* with -ea- probably reflects the disyllabic form with lengthening (*hēven*), while the pronunciation reflects the trisyllabic form without lengthening. In some cases forms with and without lengthening have survived, for example *staff* (< *staf*), showing absence of lengthening in uninflected monosyllabic forms, beside *stave*, a new form arising by levelling from the inflected disyllabic forms (*stāves*, etc.). In this case the two forms are now largely differentiated in meaning: *staff* 'stick used as a support, group of employees, etc.' beside *stave* 'length of wood forming part of a structure, set of lines on which musical lines are written, stanza, etc.'

When there is so much formal variation, we must consider whether all of this data can be said to show a single word, common to modern standard varieties of English, different varieties of modern Scots (as well as Scottish standard English), northern English regional varieties, English as spoken in Wexford in Ireland, etc. The problems become yet more complex when we look at the senses of *poke*, as recorded by the *OED*. I give here the *OED*'s definitions, omitting the illustrative quotations, but giving the year of the first quotation for each sense, and also of the last quotation for senses marked obsolete:[2]

> 1. a. A bag, now esp. a paper bag; a small sack; (*Sc.*) †a beggar's bundle (*obs.*). Also: a bagful. Now *regional* exc[ept] in *pig in a poke* (see PIG n.[1] Phrases 4). *c*1300
> Formerly used as a measure of quantity, varying according to the quality and nature of the commodity. Pokes seem to have been used particularly for the conveyance of raw wool.

[2] We will look in chapter 8 at some of the processes of semantic change which are involved here.

> b. Originally: † a small bag or pouch worn on the person (*obs.*). Later: a pocket in a person's clothing (now *rare*). *a*1616
> c. *N. Amer. Criminals' slang.* A purse, a wallet; a pocketbook. 1859
> d. *slang.* A roll of banknotes; money; a supply or stash of money. 1926
> 2. † a. The funnel-shaped opening of a fish-trap. *Obs. a*1325 – *c*1350
> b. Chiefly *Sc.* A bag-shaped fishing net, a purse-net. Cf. *poke-net* n. at Compounds. 1579
> 3. A long full sleeve. Cf. *poke sleeve* n. at Compounds. Now *hist.* 1402
> 4. The stomach, esp. of a fish; (also) the swim bladder of a fish. Now *regional. c*1450
> 5. † a. More fully *Bavarian poke.* A goitre. *Obs.* 1621 – 1819
> b. *Sc.* and *Eng. regional* (*north.*). An oedematous swelling on the neck of a sheep, caused by infection with liver flukes (fascioliasis); the disease fascioliasis. Now *rare.* 1793
> 6. *N. Amer.* Chiefly *Whaling.* A bag or bladder filled with air, used as a buoy or float. Now *hist.* 1883

We can discover a great deal from looking at the labelling of each of these senses. For instance, sense 6 is labelled *N. Amer.* 'North American', and is not recorded outside North American use (except perhaps for occasional references to usage in North America); additionally, it belongs chiefly to the specialist discourse of whaling, and hence will only ever have been in common use among those in North America involved with the whaling industry. It is also labelled 'now *hist.*', i.e. today it is found only with reference to the past. Sense 1c is also North American, but in this case is restricted to the slang used by criminals. Sense 5b has only ever been recorded in Scotland and in northern English regional varieties, and is now rare even there. Sense 4 appears early on to have been in fairly general use, but is now restricted to a number of different varieties of regional English. Senses 2a and 5a, and parts of the senses defined at 1a and 1b, are now obsolete everywhere.

Summary   This discussion of the word *poke* has highlighted some important issues in tracing any word history:

- A simplified account which identifies a modern standard English word form with its earliest precursor in English, and then provides an ulterior etymology, may well be all that there is space for in most standard single-volume etymological dictionaries, but such an account tends to leave out a great deal of information about form and meaning history.
- Form and meaning history can be very different in different varieties of English.
- If we are attempting to etymologize any word it is a practical necessity to gather as much information as we can about form and meaning in

different locations and historical periods, and not make rash assumptions about forms and meanings being identical in different places and at different times.

In the case of *poke*, we do not see any differentiation of forms in particular senses (except that senses found only in North America do not show specifically Scottish forms, etc.). However, in many word histories we find that such differentiation does occur, and can lead eventually to a split into two separate words, distinct in both form and meaning. We will look at examples of this (and of merger of distinct words) later in this chapter.

3.2 Do we know precisely when a word's history begins? Can we assume continuity of use?

We saw in chapter 2 that words are typically formed according to the productive word-forming patterns of a language, or else borrowed from another language. When the relevant processes of word formation remain productive it is possible for an identical word to be formed again. Similarly, in the case of a borrowing, if the contacts with the source language still exist it is possible for the same word to be borrowed again. If the original word has shown no subsequent change in form or meaning, then the original word and the re-formation or re-borrowing will be indistinguishable, and will merge. It is very likely (although rarely demonstrable) that most words show some degree of polygenesis of this sort: they are not coined once and for all, but enter a language on numerous separate occasions. A similar process probably also lies behind the development of most new senses, as we will explore in section 8.3.[3] Those words which enter dictionaries belong to the minority which gain some general currency. However, it is not always clear that even the entries in historical dictionaries reflect actual continuity of use, rather than a series of separate episodes of use.

The following are some examples of discontinuity in the historical record drawn from entries recently revised for the new edition of the *OED* (this is a small sample from a much larger number of cases):

> *air kiss* – attested once in 1887, then from 1986
> *appled* 'resembling apples, bearing apples' – gap between OE and *a*1729

[3] The term polygenesis was in fact introduced in this context by Dirk Geeraerts to refer to the emergence of the same meaning on two separate occasions: see section 8.3.

> *appley* 'resembling apples' – attested once in ?*a*1425, then from 1854
> *applicatively* – gap between 1792 and 1966
> *appliedly* – attested in the 17th century, then from 1901
> *artificiously* – gap between 1710 and 1938
> *ballading* – gap between 1630 and 1959
> *boyly* 'boyish' – gap between 1615 and 1902
> *carcinogen* – attested once in 1853, then from 1936
> *caringly* – attested in 1606, 1797, then from 1961
> *effectable* – attested in the 17th century, then from 1897 (but rare)
> *effectivate* – attested in 1717, then from 1935 (but rare)
> *heavenish* – gap between 1577 and 1884
> *ladied* – apparently isolated examples from 1628 and 1999
> *ladyly* (adjective) – gap between *a*1500 and 1840 (now rare)
> *ladyly* (adverb) – gap between *a*1450 and 1829 (now rare)
> *lovesomeness* – gap between *a*1568 and 1869
> *masterfulness* – attested once in *a*1586, then from 1880
> *monumentary* – attested once in 1592, then from 1810
> *nonsensicalness* – attested once in 1674, then from 1882
> *openness* – gap between Old English and 1530
> *piquantness* – gap between 1733 and 1918
> *planetography* – attested in 1735 and 1736, then from 1936
> *prototypically* – attested once in 1642, then from 1860
> *reabridge* – attested once in *a*1631, then from 1950
> *sextuplication* – attested once in *a*1690, then from 1935
> *streetlet* – attested once in *a*1552, then from 1885
> *table-boarder* – attested once in 1647, then from 1845 (but rare)
> *thingliness* – attested twice in 1662, then from 1913
> *thingly* – attested once in ?*a*1450, then from 1860

In all of these cases we find gaps in the historical record in periods for which English more commonly presents a reasonably continuous documentary record. (I have excluded examples where revival of words as historical terms denoting things or concepts from the past seems clear, such as *ballistier* 'person who operates a ballista, a type of military engine' or *apple-moyse* 'any of various dishes made from stewed apples'.) Some words are rare even in the periods for which we do have examples (e.g. *effectable, effectivate, ladyly, table-boarder* above), perhaps leading us to suspect that the gaps in the documentation may be purely accidental. However, independent

formation in different periods probably cannot be ruled out in any of these cases. For instance, *OED* records *reabridge* 'to abridge again' once in the seventeenth century in the sermons of John Donne, and then examples can be found again from the mid twentieth century onwards. Prefixation in *re-* is productive in both periods, and there is no reason to assume any continuity between the seventeenth century and the twentieth, although there is also no linguistic argument against continuity, except for the failure of any documentary record. In other cases there are further complex factors at play: for instance, the contexts of the later uses of *boyly* suggest that it is being newly formed as a humorous formation on the model of *manly* and *womanly*.

Some words are of imitative origin, echoing natural (non-linguistic) utterances such as groans, or sounds in the natural world. (We will examine these also in much more depth in the next chapter.) These are particularly likely to be formed anew in different times and places. The *OED* has an entry for an exclamation *ou* /uː/ expressing surprise, excitement, or some similar emotion, and has examples showing three distinct pockets of use, in the Middle English period, in the seventeenth to mid eighteenth centuries, and in Scots from the nineteenth century onwards. The exclamation is probably imitative in origin (representing a shocked or surprised expelling of air through the mouth), and very likely the three periods of use have no connection with one another, although we cannot prove this.

Borrowed words can also show historical discontinuities, which may indicate that the word has been borrowed independently on two or more separate occasions.

- *operable*, a borrowing from post-classical Latin *operabilis*, occurs in the seventeenth century, and then again in the early twentieth century, when it may be influenced also by French *opérable*, which interestingly also occurs in two distinct periods, in the fifteenth century, and then again from the mid nineteenth century. (Alternatively, the modern word could show a new formation from *operate* or *operation* on the model of other words in *-able*: compare sections 4.1, 7.4. This could have happened in either English or French, or separately in both.)
- *Parasceve* 'the day of preparation for the Jewish Sabbath', is another borrowing from post-classical Latin (and in turn from ancient Greek *paraskeuē*). It occurs in the Old English period, and then from the

fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and then again (in the usage of Roman Catholics) from the twentieth century onwards, although it is rare in modern use. In fact, since the word occurred in the English Bible used by Catholics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was still arguably current in this period, even though no new uses of the word are recorded.
- *obol* 'a silver coin of ancient Greece' (< classical Latin *obolus*, itself < Greek) occurs in Old English and then again from the late seventeenth century onwards.

In these cases neither form nor meaning offer any particular clues as to whether there has been continuity of use for which we simply have no documentation, or whether a word has been formed or borrowed more than once. However, sometimes there is helpful evidence of this kind. *ordeal* (which in early use refers only to trial by ordeal, rather than in its modern metaphorical use) occurs in the Old English period as *ordēl*, *ordāl*, and *ordōl*, and has cognates in the other West Germanic languages. It is barely found at all between the Old English period and the early fifteenth century: there is only one recorded example, in the thirteenth century, and in that single example the word's meaning is completely misunderstood. In the late Middle English and early modern periods we find, beside the expected forms *ordel* and *ordele*, the forms *ordal* and *ordale* in parts of the country where these forms are extremely unlikely as developments of the Old English word, suggesting quite strongly that the word has been at least partly borrowed back into English from post-classical Latin, in which it appears as *ordalium* (and also *ordela*, *ordelum*) as a borrowing from Old English. Thus one explanation of this part of this word history would be as follows:

Old English *ordāl* > post-classical Latin *ordalium* (showing the Latin abstract-noun-forming suffix *-ium*) > Middle English or early modern English *ordal*, *ordale*

In chapter 6 we will look in some detail at cases where a borrowed word reflects borrowing from more than one language (6.5) and also at cases where differences in form or meaning indicate the existence of etymological doublets, showing borrowing from the same source in different historical periods (6.7). The frequency of both types of phenomena suggests rather strongly that many apparently simple borrowings probably also reflect the

coalescence of a series of separate borrowings by different individuals, rather than a single occasion of borrowing.

It is often difficult to tell whether we have a case of a single or multiple word histories when a morphologically identical word occurs in several cognate languages. For instance, Old English *frēodom* (modern English *freedom*) is paralleled by Old Frisian *frīdōm*, Middle Dutch *vrīdom*, Middle Low German *vrīdōm*, and Old High German *frītuom*. These words could all show reflexes of a proto-West Germanic derivative formation; or they could all be independent derivative formations in each of the separate languages, since the suffix is productive at an early stage in each of them; or, theoretically, some of the forms could be from a common origin, others not. There is really no way of being certain in such cases. In this instance many of the languages also show a parallel formation with a different suffix: Old Frisian *frīhēd*, Middle Dutch *vrīheid*, Middle Low German *vrīhēt*, *vrīheit*, Old High German *frīheit*. We could thus assume that proto-West Germanic possessed two abstract nouns with the sense 'freedom' formed with different suffixes, or we could assume that these words have been formed independently in the different languages, or some combination of the two scenarios. In either case, there is apparently redundancy in the existence of synonyms, but this is commonplace among groups of derivatives. (See further discussion of synonymy in section 4.2.)

However, there are other words where there are good grounds for assuming that a gap in the dictionary record is purely a matter of accident, and does not reflect any actual discontinuity of use. *pretty* is recorded in the Old English period (as *prættig*) with the meaning 'cunning, crafty' and then from the mid fifteenth century in a wide variety of senses, including: clever, skilful, able, cleverly or elegantly made or done, ingenious, artful, well-conceived, attractive and pleasing in appearance, pleasing to the senses, aesthetically pleasing, attractive or charming, considerable, sizeable. There are some probable uses in surnames in the fourteenth century, but no earlier Middle English evidence. The form history and the meaning development of the word present some difficulties, but these would become yet more difficult to explain if we did not assume that Old English *prættig* was the starting point, even though there is a major discontinuity in our evidence.

The adjective *rash* is not recorded at all in English until the late Middle English period, but it has clear cognates in other Germanic languages, and it seems likeliest that it did in fact exist in Old English and early Middle

English but happens not to be attested in the documentary record. (The only other possibility is that it was borrowed into English from either Middle Dutch *rasch* or Middle Low German *rasch*. Borrowing from Scandinavian languages can be ruled out on phonological grounds, since the forms in these languages show a velar plosive – compare Old Icelandic *rǫskr* – and hence would give English **rask*.)

3.2.1 Coinages

It may seem that we are on much surer ground when we have evidence for the coinage of a word. For instance, we know that the blend words *mimsy* and *slithy* were coined by Lewis Carroll in his poem *Jabberwocky*, first published in 1855. Similarly, we often have documentary evidence for a specialist introducing a new term in a particular technical or specialist register, especially in the scientific world, although sometimes such claims can prove to be incorrect, either because the word has already been in independent use by someone else unbeknown to the claimant, or, very rarely, because the person claiming the coinage deliberately ignores someone else's prior claim. More frequently, earliest examples which look like coinages can be misleading. *electromobile* 'a motor vehicle powered by an electric motor rather than an internal-combustion engine; an electric car' has an earliest example in the *OED* from 1899, from the *Twin-City News* (Uhrichsville and Dennison, Ohio), 27 July:

> An electrical journal has opened its columns to a competition for a good word to describe electric carriages, and 'electromobile' has been selected, but it is doubtful if it will 'stick'.

From this we may perhaps imagine that *electromobile* was one of a number of coinages suggested by people entering this competition, and was subsequently chosen as the winner. Thus we would have a satisfying and rather entertaining account of the origin of the word. However, if we stop to investigate our assumptions here a little more closely, maybe this is not the only possible explanation. Could the word *electromobile* not already have been in circulation, and been picked up on by entrants to the competition? It may even have been known to the organizers of the competition, but not been felt by them to have become institutionalized as the obvious word to denote such a vehicle. This hypothesis seems more plausible when we check the lexicographical record for French in the same period, and find

that *électromobile* is recorded one year earlier, in 1898, and in an example where there is no indication that it is a newly coined word:

Pour la première fois les électromobiles occupent une large place dans l'Exposition.
 'For the first time electromobiles occupy a large space in the Exhibition'

(*La Nature* II.55; see *Datations et documents lexicographiques: Matériaux pour l'histoire du vocabulaire français* 10 (1976) 74)

3.3 Homonymy and polysemy

In section 2.1.4 we touched briefly on the topic of homonymy, with the example of *file* 'type of metal tool' and *file* 'set of documents'. We established that these two words are of separate origin (the first being an inherited Germanic word, and the second a borrowing from French), and also that there is no semantic common ground. These two observations each have a very different basis: the first is based on the historical record, and is thus empirical, and as long as we have lots of data we will normally not have too much difficulty in tracing the historical development. (We will look in chapter 8 at the difficulties which can arise when we do not have very much historical data.) The second observation, that there is no semantic common ground between *file* 'type of metal tool' and *file* 'set of documents', concerns the connections which contemporary speakers perceive between words, and is much more difficult to be certain of, and brings us to an area of some controversy. It is fairly uncontroversial that the kinds of meanings we find in dictionaries are typical or core meanings, which will reflect average usage, but which will not come close to capturing all of the nuances of usage in actual speech or writing. It is also fairly generally accepted that some words have several interconnected core meanings, at the level described by a dictionary. Such words are polysemous.

For instance, among the conventional meanings of the word *extension* are:

- an increase in length of time (to hold office, complete a project, etc.)
- an application of an existing idea in a new area
- a new part added to a building

We can group all three of these meanings under a broader meaning such as 'part that is added to something', and hence some scholars would regard this as not a case of true polysemy at all but simply of contextually determined conventional uses of a single main sense, but nonetheless we

will expect any good dictionary to list them all as established meanings of this word. Even a simple case like this raises some further questions: perhaps it is reasonable to assume that no one who knows all of these senses will doubt that they are all meanings of a single word, but it is very possible that some speakers will know some but not all of these senses. Many speakers will be unfamiliar with the further conventional meaning 'extramural instruction by a university or college' (as in *an extension course*), and others will be unfamiliar with the meaning in computing: 'an optional suffix to a file name'. For different people the word will thus have a different range of meanings, according to their interests, experiences, membership of different professional or leisure groups, etc. Perhaps this will not worry us unduly, since all of these senses can reasonably easily be related to a simple meaning 'part that is added to something', although we might observe that, from a diachronic perspective, the potential for quite a radical divergence is certainly in place if the simple meaning 'part that is added to something' should come in the future to be realized by a different word. (For an extended example of just such a word history see *board* in section 8.5.1.)

The difficulties will become much more apparent if we now look at a case where, historically, we have two separate homonyms. From a diachronic perspective English has two homonyms with the form *bank*: the one is a borrowing from Old Norse, and has 'land at the side of a river' among its meanings; the other is a borrowing from French, and has 'place where money is deposited' among its meanings. The Norse and French words may perhaps ultimately be connected etymologically, but this is irrelevant to the history of the two words within English. The word *bank* 'land at the side of a river' shows other meanings which have developed historically from the same source, including:

- elevation in the seabed or a river bed (as in *mudbank* or *sandbank*)
- set or series of similar things (as in *banks of lights*)
- the cushion of a pool table

It is very debatable how far individual speakers will feel a connection between these rather specialized meanings, still less how confident they will feel that these meanings all constitute aspects of the meaning of a single word which is quite distinct from *bank* 'place where money is deposited'. From a synchronic point of view polysemy is thus a rather difficult concept: very close meanings may simply show different conventional contextual uses of a single core meaning, while it is difficult to be sure that more distant

meanings are perceived by speakers as having anything more in common than the meanings of unrelated homonyms.[4]

We will consider some further aspects of how new meanings develop, and how they interact with other meanings of a word, in chapter 8. In the rest of this chapter we will explore further the divergence that can occur between the conventional meanings of a word, and the implications that this has for the coherence of that word as a single unit over a long period of time. Additionally, we will look at how historically unrelated words can become associated in meaning, and the further effects that this can have on both word meaning and word form.

3.4 How polysemy–homonymy relations can change

However much uncertainty there may be about how we identify homonymy and polysemy in the synchronic meaning relations between words, relationships of homonymy and polysemy certainly change over the course of time. To take a simpler example than *bank*, *crane* 'a type of tall, long-legged, long-necked bird' and *crane* 'machine for raising and lowering heavy weights' show developments of what is historically a single word: the machine was originally so called (by metaphor) on account of its resemblance to the bird in shape. However, it is debatable whether any connection is felt between the bird and the machine by contemporary speakers of English, and these are treated as distinct words by many dictionaries which have a synchronic perspective (such as the *Oxford Dictionary of English*). Nonetheless, it is difficult to prove that no connection is felt between the words, at least without elaborate fieldwork, although in this particular instance it might be easier to prove that a good many speakers know what a building-site *crane* is but have no knowledge at all of what sort of bird a *crane* is, hence demonstrating at least that a building-site *crane* is for these speakers a self-sufficient lexeme, and not a metaphorical extension of *crane* 'type of bird'.[5]

The dissociation between earlier and newer meanings is often particularly great when a word has acquired a more grammatical meaning (i.e. it has moved along the cline of grammaticalization) in addition to retaining

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[4] For a useful discussion of polysemy from the perspective of cognitive linguistics see Croft and Cruse (2004) 109–40. For a discussion of some of the types of tests for polysemy which are commonly applied, and their limitations, see Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2007).

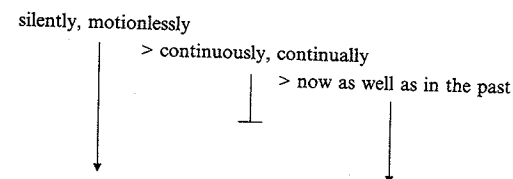[5] For discussion of this issue compare Traugott and Dasher (2005) 15.

Fig 3.1 The meaning development of *still*

an earlier, more transparent meaning. The adverb *still* originally had the meanings 'silently', 'motionlessly'; it is derived from the adjective *still*. In the Middle English period it developed additionally the meaning (now obsolete) 'continuously, continually', and from this in the early modern period it developed the meaning 'now as well as in the past'. Today the meaning 'motionlessly' survives in such expressions as *to sit still* (which could alternatively be analysed syntactically as showing a predicative adjective, although the historical evidence favours analysis as an adverb), but very few speakers will feel that this is the same word as occurs in such sentences as 'he is still there', 'there is still time to make a difference' (although in this instance the two are placed under a single headword by the *Oxford Dictionary of English*). We can represent this as in figure 3.1.

In neither of these cases, *crane* or *still*, has divergence in meaning been accompanied by divergence in word form, which usually gives the clearest evidence that a language now has two separate words where formerly it had only one. We will look at some examples of this phenomenon in section 3.6, but first we will consider the even more difficult area of semantic convergence of originally unrelated words.

ear 'organ of hearing' has the Old English form *ēare*, and a set of cognates which correspond in meaning and are fully explicable in form, e.g. Old Frisian *āre*, Middle Dutch *ōre*, *oore* (Dutch *ore*), Old Saxon *ōre*, *ōra*, Old High German *ōra* (German *Ohr*), Old Norse *eyra*, Gothic *ausō*, and (in other branches of Indo-European) Latin *auris*, Old Irish *ó*, etc. The modern English homonym *ear* 'spike or head of corn' has the Old English form *ēar* (that is to say, it belongs to a different declensional class from *ēare* 'organ of hearing'), and it has a quite different set of cognates, which again correspond in meaning and are fully explicable in form, e.g. Old Frisian *ār*, Middle Dutch *aar*, *aer* (Dutch *aar*), Old Saxon *ahar* (Middle Low German *ār*), Old High German *ehir*, *ahir* (German *Ähre*), Old Norse *ax*, Gothic *ahs*, and (outside Germanic) Latin *acus*. The two words thus have

completely different origins, but as a result of perfectly regular phonological and morphological processes they have come to be homonyms.

Similarly, *corn* 'small, painful area of thickened skin on the foot' is a borrowing from Middle French *corn*, which shows this sense as a metaphorical development of the sense 'horn', and is itself derived from Latin *cornū* 'horn' (the English word *horn* is ultimately a cognate of the Latin word, showing the regular operation of Grimm's Law). *corn* 'cereal crop' is of quite different origin, being an inherited English word of Germanic descent (it is ultimately cognate with Latin *grānum* > English *grain*). There is thus no historical connection, although the two words have always been homonyms in English.

Rather more controversially, Bloomfield (1933: 436) suggested that each of these pairs of words is identified by speakers of modern English as showing a semantic connection. According to Bloomfield, *ear* 'spike or head of corn' is perceived as a metaphorical application of *ear* 'organ of hearing', on account of a perceived similarity of shape (in Bloomfield's words, 'since the meanings have some resemblance, *ear* of grain has become a marginal (transferred) meaning of *ear* of an animal'). Likewise *corn* 'small, painful area of thickened skin on the foot' is perceived as a metaphorical application of *corn* 'cereal crop' (presumably on the basis that the thickened area of skin is likened to a grain of corn). Bloomfield acknowledges the difficulty of proving this assumption concerning speakers' perceptions about the meaning relationships between these words, although it is clear that he believes that this analysis is correct:

> Of course, the degree of nearness of the meanings is not subject to precise measurement; the lexicographer or historian who knows the origins will insist on describing such forms as pairs of homonyms. Nevertheless, for many speakers, doubtless, a corn on the foot represents merely a marginal meaning of 'corn' grain.
>
> (Bloomfield (1933) 436)

This discussion was taken up also by Ullmann (1962: 104, 164), and treatment in two such distinguished works has led to frequent occurrence of the same examples elsewhere. As both writers acknowledge, this perception of a relationship between the two words is difficult to prove; some fieldwork might perhaps be framed, but to the best of my knowledge, no such fieldwork has been carried out on these examples.[6] Personally, I do not find these particular examples entirely convincing, but they do illustrate well

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[6] On the types of tests which are commonly applied in such cases, and their limitations, see footnote 4 above.

that the actual history of words may be totally obscure to speakers of a language, and certainly it is very feasible that new, historically unjustified, links in meaning may become established between etymologically unrelated homonyms.

We can have much more certainty that merger has occurred when there comes to be complete overlap in one or more of the senses of two homophonous words, as we will investigate in the following section.[7]

3.5 Merger (or near-merger) in form and meaning

The modern English verb *melt* is the reflex of two different Old English verbs. One was a strong verb, *meltan*, and was intransitive, with the meaning 'to melt, become liquid' (e.g. 'the butter melted'). In what are called strong verbs in Germanic, different parts of the verbal paradigm show different stem vowels (on the origins of this variation see section 4.4.1). Thus *meltan* had, beside the present stem *melt-*, the forms: past tense (first and third person singular) *mealt*, past tense (plural) *multon*, and past participle *gemolten*. The other verb was a weak verb, also with the infinitive *meltan* (or in the West Saxon dialect *mieltan*), and it was transitive, with the meaning 'to melt (something), to make (something) liquid' (e.g. 'the heat of the sun melted the butter'). Germanic weak verbs form the past tense by means of a dental suffix, usually represented by *-ed* in modern English, although in the case of *meltan* this is somewhat obscured by regular syncope of the vowel in the second syllable and simplification of the consonant cluster, giving (in the West Saxon dialect, in which Old English forms are normally cited) past tense (first and third person singular) *mielte* and past participle *mielt* (compare the non-West Saxon form *gemǣlted*, without syncope). Germanic weak verbs are mostly derivative formations from other stems. The weak verb *meltan* was originally a derivative formation, Germanic **maltjan*, from the base **malt-* of the past tense of the strong verb *meltan* plus a causative suffix, hence 'to cause to melt' (see further section 4.4.1).

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[7] Occasionally there can be different sorts of evidence for speakers assuming that words which have become homophonous show a single word. Compare for example von Wartburg (1969) on the homophony in some southern French dialects of *aze* 'blackberry' (< Latin *acinus*) and *aze* 'donkey' (< Latin *asinus*) leading to use also of *saumo* 'donkey' in the sense 'blackberry'. We can present this as a proportional analogy, *aze* 'donkey' : *aze* 'blackberry' = *saumo* 'donkey' : *saumo* 'blackberry'
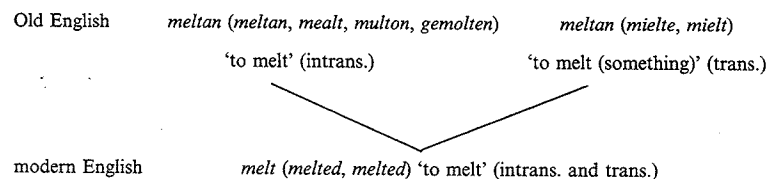
Old English   meltan (*meltan, mealt, multon, gemolten*)   meltan (*mielte, mielt*)

            'to melt' (intrans.)   'to melt (something)' (trans.)

modern English   melt (*melted, melted*) 'to melt' (intrans. and trans.)

Fig 3.2 Merger of Old English *meltan* (strong verb) and *meltan, mieltan* (weak verb)

Gradually in the course of the Middle English period (if not earlier) the strong verb *melten* (Old English *meltan*) 'to become liquid' began instead to show weak inflections. This is a pattern shown by many originally strong verbs which gradually moved over to the numerically much larger class of weak verbs. The (originally) strong verb *melten* thus became formally indistinguishable from the weak verb *melten* 'to make liquid', which in Middle English normally shows past tense *melted*, past participle *melted*. Alternatively, we could interpret the same data as showing the weak verb displaying a change in meaning, from transitive 'to melt (something)' to intransitive 'to melt', a development that again would have many parallels among originally causative verbs in this period. Either way, the result in modern English was a single verb *melt*, with both intransitive and transitive meanings, and with regular, weak inflections (see figure 3.2), although the originally participial adjective *molten* is still found in specialized semantic use designating liquefied metal or glass.

Some other cases of merger or near-merger are harder to pin down because the semantics are less clear-cut. Such is the case with English *mystery*. In classical Latin there are two distinct words of quite different origins, *mystērium* 'secret' (in the plural, 'secret rites'; this word is a borrowing from Greek) and *ministerium* 'office, service, agency, instrumentality' (a derivative of *minister* 'servant, subordinate', which is itself ultimately < *minus* 'less'). As a learned loanword, Latin *ministerium* gives English *ministry*, quite unproblematically. However, in their application to the Christian faith in the early medieval period, the Latin words *mysterium* and *ministerium* became more closely associated in sense, and both came to be used in the sense 'ecclesiastical service'. This in turn led to confusion in word form, and a variant *misterium* emerged for the word *ministerium*. The form *misterium* gave, by regular development, (Anglo-)French *mester, mister* (modern French *métier*), and, as a borrowing of this, English *mister* 'occupation'

(not the same word as the title *mister* or *Mr.*). *misterium* was also borrowed into English directly as *mystery* (in early use also *mistery*), with the meanings 'ministry, office; service, occupation' and (probably partly by association with *mastery*) 'craft, trade, profession, skill' and 'trade guild or company'. Meanwhile, Latin *mysterium* was also borrowed into English as *mystery* (in early use also *mistery*); this has a wide range of senses including 'mystical presence or nature', 'religious truth known or understood only by divine revelation', 'incident in the life of Christ', 'ordinance, rite, or sacrament of the Christian Church', 'hidden or secret thing', 'mystery play', 'an action or practice about which there is or is reputed to be some secrecy', 'a highly skilful or technical operation in a trade or art' – or at least, all of these senses are normally attributed to this word, but it is at least possible that some of them developed instead as senses of *mystery* 'ministry, office; service, occupation'. If we start out from the modern English word forms, the formal development of each can be summarized as follows:

A. English *ministry* < classical (and post-classical) Latin *ministerium*
B. English *mister* < (Anglo-)French *mester, mister* < post-classical Latin *misterium*, variant (by association with *mysterium*) of *ministerium*
C. English *mystery*, †*mistery* < post-classical Latin *misterium*, variant (by association with *mysterium*) of *ministerium*
D. English *mystery*, †*mistery* < classical (and post-classical) Latin *mysterium*

C and D are formally identical in English, and the assignment of particular senses to one word or the other is at best somewhat tentative. Historical or etymological dictionaries will endeavour to trace the development of each word, looking closely at the order of the examples of each sense, and also at the senses in the donor language, but it may prove impossible to be certain which development belongs to which word. So far as the speaker of contemporary English is concerned, it is surely the case that the word form *mystery* corresponds to a whole variety of meanings, some very familiar and some rather abstruse, some of which may strike some speakers as transparently related to one another, but on the whole rather disparate, and certainly not identifiable as showing two clearly differentiated words.

A very interesting case of partial semantic merger is shown by English *mean*. In the meaning 'common', English *mean* is the reflex of Old English *mǣne*, a variant of Old English *gemǣne* (Middle English *i-mene*), which is cognate with German *gemein* and is ultimately from the same

Indo-European base as Latin *commūnis* 'common'. The *OED* distinguishes three separate main branches of sense development in this word (*OED mean* adj.[1]):

    I. Held commonly or jointly
    II. Inferior in rank or quality; unpleasant
    III. With approbative connotation

In the meaning 'intermediate', English *mean* shows a quite different origin, as a borrowing from (Anglo-)French *mene, meen* (modern French *moyen*; ultimately < Latin *mediānus* 'that is in the middle'). The *OED* distinguishes two main branches of sense development for this word (*OED mean* adj.[2]):

    I. Intermediate, intermediary
    II. Moderate, middling; average

Semantic overlap between the two words occurs when the senses 'moderate, middling, average' of the second (Romance-derived) adjective are used depreciatively, i.e. 'only middling', hence 'not good'. The *OED* describes this convergence in sense as follows, in the entry for *mean* adj.[1] (Old English *gemǣne*):

> In Old English (and in the earlier stages of other Germanic languages) substantially the only sense of I-MENE adj. and its cognates was 'possessed jointly', 'belonging equally to a number of persons'; however, already in Old English there existed a spec[ific] sense 'of ecclesiastical orders: minor, inferior in degree', which, although it did not survive into Middle English, may have informed the development of *mean*.
>
>   The semantic development shown by the Old English spec[ific] sense of I-MENE adj. was carried further with Middle English *mene, mean* (as with Dutch *gemeen* and German *gemein*; cf. COMMON adj.), so that the word acquired the general senses of 'ordinary', 'not exceptionally good', 'inferior'. In English this development was aided by the fact that the native word coincided in form with MEAN adj.[2], which was often used in a disparaging or reproachful sense. The uses in branch II might be referred almost equally well to the native or to the foreign adjective; the truth is probably that the meanings of two originally quite distinct words have merged.

It is relatively easy to explain what has happened here in historical terms. Two words which are etymologically quite unrelated happen to have the same form in Middle English and modern English. Both words are semantically complex, and they show areas of convergence and overlap, with the result that in some particular instances it is impossible to say whether we have a use that has developed ultimately from Old English *gemǣne* or from (Anglo-)French *mene*. In synchronic terms, it is more difficult to explain the situation here in terms of either homonymy or polysemy. If there are

meanings which overlap, perhaps we have a case of polysemy. However, although we can establish a plausible link between 'mediocre' and the other senses of either word, it is less clear that all of the senses of both words could be construed as constituting polysemous senses of a single word.

3.6 Splits in word form

In section 3.4 we saw the difficulty of determining whether divergence in meaning results in polysemy or homonymy in cases such as *crane*. We can be more certain that the synchronic result is two separate words when divergence in meaning is accompanied by a split in word form. We will look presently at some cases where a split occurs in the spoken language, and the result is indisputably two separate words with different word forms. In some other cases a split occurs only in the written language. Such cases are particularly interesting because they show homophones being distinguished by different spellings in the written language, even though historically they were senses of a single word. They thus provide us with clear evidence of polysemy leading eventually to homonymy.

    mantle 'loose sleeveless cloak' and *mantel* 'ornamental structure of wood, marble, etc., above and around a fireplace' are in origin a single word. In the Old English period Latin *mantellum* was borrowed in the sense 'long sleeveless cloak'. In the Middle English period this was reinforced by borrowing of Anglo-French *mantel*, itself from the Latin word. In the medieval period the Latin word also developed the (originally metaphorical) meaning 'piece of timber or stone supporting the masonry above a fireplace', and this is reflected also in English. In Middle English *mantel* and *mantle* are both expected word forms for a word of this etymology, and both are found, as indeed they are also in Anglo-French. However, in the subsequent centuries we find a gradual process of differentiation of the two word forms in different meanings. *mantle* shows the meaning 'long sleeveless cloak' (and subsequent metaphorical developments from this, such as 'the region of the earth's interior between the crust and the core', which is in fact modelled on earlier use of the equivalent word *Mantel* in German at the end of the nineteenth century). *mantel* shows only the senses connected with fireplaces, 'piece of timber or stone supporting the masonry above a fireplace' (now obsolete), 'ornamental structure of wood, marble, etc., above and around a fireplace', 'manteltree of a fireplace together with its supports', 'shelf formed by the projecting surface of a mantelpiece' (figure 3.3). Both

Middle English   *mantle, mantel*
           'long sleeveless cloak', 'piece of timber or stone supporting the
           masonry above a fireplace', etc.

modern English   *mantle*   *mantel*
           'long sleeveless cloak', etc.   'manteltree of a fireplace', etc.
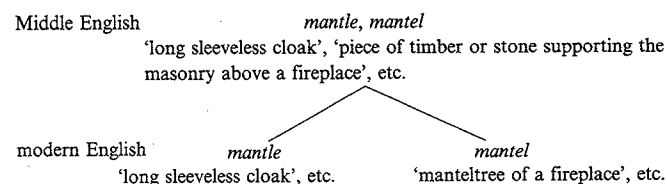
Fig 3.3 Split of *mantle* and *mantel*

word forms thus show semantic specialization, although the process is very gradual, and occasional instances of the 'incorrect' spelling are still found for each word. In this instance, a split has occurred, but only affecting the written form, since the pronunciation of each is the same, /ˈmantl/.[8]

Similarly, *flour* is in origin the same word as *flower*. *flower* was borrowed from Anglo-French *flur*, *flour*, *flor* in the thirteenth century. Among its early spellings in English are *flure*, *floure*, *flowre*, *flowur*, *flower*. The meaning 'flour' is found from the thirteenth century onwards, originally being a metaphorical use, denoting the 'flower' or finer portion of flour meal. The graphic split does not occur until much later than this: in the early modern period, *flour* or *floure* are just spelling variants of the word *flower*. In Johnson's great Dictionary of 1755 only the form *flower* is found and both senses are listed under the same entry. However, seventeen years earlier in Cruden's Bible concordance of 1738 the modern distinction in form and meaning is made between *flower* and *flour*, and this usage, not Johnson's, was rapidly becoming the standard one during the eighteenth century, with the result that (at least in print) *flour* is very rarely found as a spelling of *flower* and vice versa after the beginning of the nineteenth century. Today very few people without some knowledge of the linguistic history of the two words are likely to have any inkling that they are of the same origin. (On the pronunciation of the two words see further section 3.8.) Some other similar examples are *canvas* and *canvass*, *metal* and *mettle*, and (showing split into three different spelling forms) *coin*, *coign*, and *quoin*.

The splits that we have encountered so far are purely graphic. They are thus an oddity of the languages of modern highly literate societies where each word has a settled orthographic form. They are also very unlikely to arise in languages such as Dutch or Italian where spelling reflects pronunciation much more closely. Nonetheless, in a language like modern English

[8] For the somewhat mixed evidence of pronouncing dictionaries, and for a detailed account of how this material is treated in the new edition of the *OED*, see Durkin (2006c).

they may come to be regarded by speakers as signalling very fundamental distinctions in word form. The basic mechanism which they show is much more universal: existing variation is exploited in order to distinguish between particular meanings.

The same mechanism can be seen at work in cases where the spoken form as well as the written form is affected. *ordinance* and *ordnance* were originally variants of a single word, Middle English *ordenance*, *ordinance*, *ordnance*, etc., which was a borrowing of (Anglo-)French *ordenance*, *ordinance*, etc. This showed a wide variety of senses such as 'decision made by a superior', 'ruling', 'arrangement in a certain order', 'provisions', 'legislative decree', 'machinery, engine', 'disposition of troops in battle'. It is a derivative formation from the verb *ordener*, from which English *ordain* is borrowed. Over a period of centuries the form without the medial vowel, *ordnance*, became more and more common in English in the 'military' senses 'military materials', 'artillery for discharging missiles', 'the government department responsible for military materials and artillery', etc., and it became progressively less and less common in the other senses of the word, until in contemporary English near-complete differentiation has occurred, with the form *ordinance* very rarely occurring in the military senses, and the form *ordnance* only occurring in these senses. In this case it seems clear that the differentiation occurred because of selection of the disyllabic variant in a particular group language, that of the military.

ballad and *ballade* show differentiation of respectively more and less naturalized borrowings of French *ballade*, in the less specific sense 'light, simple song of any kind' (*ballad* /ˈbaləd/) and the more specific sense 'poem or song written in any of several similar metres typically consisting of stanzas of seven or eight lines of equal length' (*ballade* /baˈlad/ or /bəˈlɑːd/). The documentary record shows that in this case we do have differentiation rather than reborrowing of the French word in a more specific meaning, although in many similar cases the data is rather finely balanced.

We will see further examples of formal variation being exploited to distinguish between meanings with *pattern* and *patron*, and with Dutch *pertig* and *prettig*, in section 7.3.

Some splits affect only the spoken form of a word, and thus the result is two words which are homographs but not homophones. The verb *recollect* shows a sixteenth-century borrowing from Latin *recollect-*, the past participial stem of *recolligere* 'to gather together (again), to recall, remember'. In early use all senses of the English word were pronounced alike, with

/ɛ/ in the first syllable, as is usual in borrowings from Latin showing the prefix *re-* (e.g. *reconcile, recognize*). However, from the nineteenth century onwards we find evidence for the modern pattern, with a pronunciation with /iː/ in the first syllable in the sense 'to gather together (again)' and /ɛ/ in 'to recall, remember' and related senses. Interestingly, the mechanism in this split is almost certainly different from that in a number of the other examples we have looked at. In this instance the pronunciations with /iː/ result from reanalysis (see section 7.4.3) of the existing word as showing a native formation from *re-* and *collect*, and hence a pronunciation in accord with the usual pattern for English formations in *re-*. The senses relating to mental activity show a less transparent semantic relationship with the elements *re-* and *collect*, and thus retain the pronunciation typical of Latin borrowings. In such cases it can be hard to be certain that we are dealing with a split, rather than a new formation from *re-* and *collect* which happens to be a homograph of the earlier word. In this particular instance the identification of a split is supported by the evidence of eighteenth-century pronouncing dictionaries, which record the pronunciation with /ɛ/ for both groups of senses.

3.7 A case of merger followed by a split

council and *counsel* show a rather complicated and entwined history as far back as classical antiquity. The ultimate origin of these two English words lies in two distinct Latin words, *concilium* and *consilium*. Latin *concilium* (< the prefix *con-* 'together' + the verb *calere* 'to call') has the senses 'a convocation, assembly, meeting, union, connection, close conjunction'. A convocation or assembly might specifically be one called for the purposes of consultation, and in this sense the word overlapped in meaning with *consilium* 'consultation, plan decided on as the result of consultation, advice, counsel, advising faculty, prudence; a deliberating body, a council of state, war, etc.; a counsellor' (< the verb *consulere* 'to consult, deliberate' < the same prefix *con-* + an element of uncertain origin). The two words were perhaps confused in antiquity; they certainly are in medieval manuscript copies of classical texts. In French *consilium* gave rise by regular phonological development to *conseil*, which has roughly the same range of senses as in Latin, while *concilium* gave as a learned borrowing French *concile*, denoting only a type of ecclesiastical assembly. (See further section 6.7 on learned
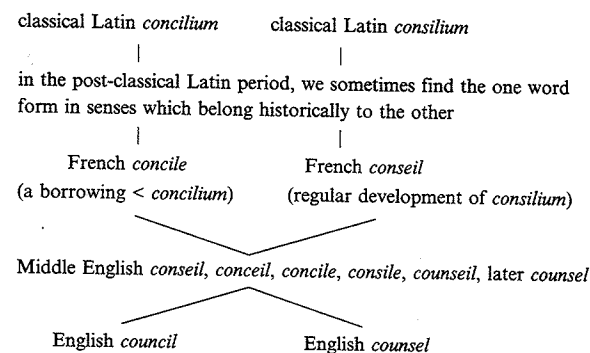
classical Latin *concilium*   classical Latin *consilium*
     | |

in the post-classical Latin period, we sometimes find the one word form in senses which belong historically to the other

     | |

  French *concile*   French *conseil*
(a borrowing < *concilium*) (regular development of *consilium*)

Middle English *conseil, conceil, concile, consile, counseil,* later *counsel*

   English *council*   English *counsel*

Fig 3.4 Merger followed by split: *council* and *counsel*

borrowings of this type.) Both French words were borrowed into English in the Middle English period. The *OED* provides a succinct summary of the subsequent developments:

In English, the two words were, from the beginning, completely confused: *conseil* was frequently spelt *conceil*; *concile* was spelt *consile* and *conceil*; and the two words were treated as one, under a variety of forms, of which *counseil*, later *counsel*, was the central type. In the 16th c[entury] differentiation again began: *councel*, later *council*, was established for the ecclesiastical *concilium*, F[rench] *concile*; and this spelling has been extended to all cases in which the word means a deliberative assembly or advisory body (where L[atin] has *consilium*, Fr[ench] *conseil*), leaving *counsel* to the action of counselling and kindred senses. The practical distinction thus established between *council* and *counsel* does not correspond to Latin or French usage.

We can summarize this history graphically as in figure 3.4.

As we can see, we do not have two separate word histories, the one linking English *council* with Latin *concilium* and the other linking English *counsel* with Latin *consilium*. Crucially, the distinction between two distinct French words was lost in Middle English. The *Middle English Dictionary* treats all of this material in a single entry, *cŏunseil* n. Subsequently, in early modern English the available word forms were exploited to realize differentiations of meaning, partly under the influence of the original etymons, especially as a result of classicizing influence in the early modern period, but with a result which is ultimately different from that in either the donor language (French) or its donor (Latin): English *council* shows senses which belonged originally to Latin *consilium* rather than to *concilium*, while English *counsel* realizes only a subset of the senses realized by Latin *consilium*. In formal terms we

appear to have a merger of the two words in the Middle English period, followed by a fresh split which is informed by knowledge of the classical Latin words but which does not restore the earlier semantic distinction precisely.

3.8 Homonymic clash

As already exemplified, I take both homonymy and polysemy to be very widespread phenomena and part of the natural state of languages. This point is in itself fairly uncontroversial, although a lot hinges on the word 'natural', and on the extent to which various mechanisms may work to eliminate homonymy.

It is sometimes observed that the high degree of homonymy in modern English results in part from very large-scale borrowing from a language which is not very closely related, French. However, homonymy is also quite common in Old English, and also in Icelandic, which has shown relatively little borrowing from other languages over the past millennium and also very little of the kind of reductive change in word shape that often produces homonymy. (On the degree of homonymy in what can be reconstructed of the lexicon of proto-Indo-European see Mallory and Adams (2006) 115–6.)

If we accept that homonymy is a common phenomenon in the languages of the world today, this gives us a good typologically based reason for assuming that it was also common in languages in earlier times. This has important implications for some arguments that we will look at in detail in chapters 7 and 8: put very simply, just because we reconstruct formally identical etymons for two words this does not mean that the two words must be cognate; if there is no plausible semantic link, it is usually much safer to assume that we have two unrelated homonyms. Defining semantic plausibility is the real challenge here, and will form a major topic of chapter 8.

However, running counter to my assumption that homonymy and polysemy are common and natural phenomena is the assumption often made that the most desirable state for languages, as systems of communication, is one where there is a state of 'one meaning one form', or isomorphism. If such an assumption is valid, one consequence might be that homonymy is undesirable, since it involves the same form realizing two meanings, which brings no communicational advantage, and could conceivably lead

to ambiguity. Some scholars would conclude from this that homonymy is therefore likely to be eliminated over time.

It is less clearly the case that polysemy brings no communicational advantage, since it can be argued that some types of polysemy enable links to be made simply and effectively between contiguous senses without any semantic ambiguity. An extreme case is the regular polysemy in such cases as *a beer* (as in *he drank a beer*) by metonymy from the mass noun *beer* (as in *he drank some beer*).

Many scholars have identified a mechanism tending to eliminate homonyms, under a variety of names such as homonymic clash (or homophonic clash), harmful homonymy (or harmful homophony), homonymiphobia, etc.[9] Pioneering work was done in this area by Gilliéron in the early twentieth century (see Gilliéron and Roques (1912)). In one now famous example, Gilliéron looked at the words for 'cat' and 'cockerel' in Gascon, a Romance variety of south-western France. The Latin names *cattus* and *gallus* would have been expected, by normal phonological development, both to show the same reflex in Gascon, /gat/. However, while this is the form found for 'cat', for 'cockerel' we find instead substitution of alternative names such as *faisan*, which normally has the meaning 'pheasant', or *vicaire*, normally 'curate'. The homonymic clash thus appears to have led to replacement of the inherited word for 'cockerel'. In this instance the two words belong to the same semantic field, and it is easy to imagine actual ambiguity arising, for example if someone were stating that one animal or the other was standing in the farmyard.

A rather interesting example of avoidance of a homonymic clash within a particular semantic field is provided by the French term for a sequence of four consecutive cards of the same suit in various card games. In the seventeenth century this is *quarte*, literally 'fourth', forming part of a group of terms with *tierce*, literally 'third', *quinte* 'fifth', etc., but subsequently the synonym *quatrième* 'fourth' replaced it in this use. This was probably because of the homophony with *carte* 'card', a supposition which is supported by the fact that *tierce* and *quinte* do not show similar replacement, and also by the fact that in English the borrowing *quart*, which is not homophonous with English *card*, remained in use much longer, and still is used with reference to historic card games such as piquet. In this particular

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[9] For important accounts see Ullmann (1962), Samuels (1972), Malkiel (1979), Geeraerts (1997).

instance there thus appears to be a good deal of (albeit circumstantial) evidence that avoidance of homonymic clash has motivated the change.[10]

A particular pressure restricting use of words, at least in some social contexts, appears to arise from homonymy, or in some cases possibly polysemy, with taboo or other disfavoured words. This is often identified in the literature as a specific category, embarrassing homonymy. For instance, *cock* 'male hen' is rarely heard in many varieties of American English, being replaced by *rooster* or another synonym because of the homonymy with *cock* 'penis'. The same motivation probably explains use of the derivative *cockerel* in place of *cock* 'male hen'. Historically, *cock* 'penis' shows a metaphorical use of the bird name, perhaps originally as a euphemism.[11] However, cases of words becoming obsolete for such reasons, rather than just restricted to coarse slang registers, etc., are less common, and counterexamples, where such homonymy has not motivated avoidance or replacement, are also not hard to find.[12]

Within the literature on homonymic clash, four different types of responses to homonymy are often distinguished (see especially Malkiel (1979)):

(i) both homonyms are tolerated (often because they can be shown to belong to different word classes, or to different semantic fields, or to different registers or stylistic levels);

(ii) one of the homonyms becomes obsolete, or shows restriction in use to reduce overlap;

(iii) the two homonyms merge;

(iv) the two homonyms diverge in form (often in unusual or unpredictable ways).

However, it is possible to take a rather sceptical approach to the claim that these phenomena have anything to do with homonymy. Group (i) are basically exceptions, and the criteria for possible exception are extremely

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[10] For the details see *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (*FEW*) II. 1423/1. Assumptions of homophonic clash are frequent in von Wartburg's work, in *FEW* and elsewhere. Compare e.g. von Wartburg (1969) 119 on near-homophony between inflected forms of *edere* 'to eat' and *esse* 'to be' in post-classical Latin leading to adoption in place of *edere* of the originally more emphatic or expressive formations *comedere, manducare,* or *pappare.*

[11] See Cooper (2008).   [12] See Lass (1997: 355 note 25) for some examples.

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broad. A particular difficulty is that many of the examples typically given for processes (ii), (iii), and (iv) present no more convincing evidence of actual homonymic clash than many of the exceptions under (i), since the words do not demonstrably belong to the same semantic field without any differentiation in register or stylistic level.

Process (ii) is open to the objection that very many non-homonymous words also become obsolete or come to be used only in a restricted range of contexts, and very often no causal explanation for this can be established.[13] As Malkiel (1979: 4) notes, in standard English the homonymy of *lie* 'to be in a reclining position' and *lie* 'to tell an untruth' has long been tolerated, although the phrasal verb *lie down* is also common in the sense 'to be in a reclining position', and in colloquial and regional varieties of English the originally transitive verb *lay* is often found in intransitive uses, as in *he was laying on the ground.* Malkiel suggests that adoption of both *lie down* and intransitive *lay* possibly results from avoidance of the homonymy of *lie* with *lie* 'to tell an untruth'.[14] However, there are many parallel cases of originally transitive verbs which have developed intransitive uses where there is no suggestion of avoidance of homonymy. Similarly, Malkiel suggests that *cleave* 'to hew asunder, split' (< Old English *clēofan*) has reduced *cleave* 'to stick fast, adhere' (< Old English *clifian, cleofian*) 'to a precarious status' (1979: 5). However, perhaps the more surprising fact here is that the two words ever became homophonous, since the more expected reflex of the second verb would have been **clive*. This word history therefore seems actually to show that a variant form can become generalized even when this results in the creation of homonymy.

Process (iii) may simply be a result of contiguity of sense, and not the result of any pressures resulting from homonymy. Process (iv) hinges on the assumptions firstly that some changes in form can be shown to be particularly unusual or unexpected, and secondly that unusual or unexpected changes can be shown to be particularly common in cases of avoidance of homonymy, but the case here is far from proven.

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[13] Anttila (1989: 332) suggests, in the context of linguistic reconstruction, that it should be a principle of etymological research that an explanation is always sought for non-survival of a word: 'If it seems that a word is guaranteed for the protolanguage, its (alleged) absence in any of the daughter languages requires an explanation.' However, in practice explanations for lexical non-survival are often elusive, even when we are looking at very well documented periods of linguistic history.

[14] Compare also Samuels (1972: 67–8) on *lie*, and criticism of this in Lass (1980: 78).

Splits which affect only the written form of a word, as with *mantle* and *mantel*, *flower* and *flour* (see section 3.6), pose a further problem from a functionalist point of view, since any ambiguity obviously remains in the spoken form. In the case of *flower*, there was considerable variation in pronunciation in the early modern period (compare Dobson (1969) §§165, 218), and it is hard to see why a semantic differentiation was not established between the available pronunciation variants /fluːr/ (without diphthongization) and /flʌur/ (with diphthongization; ultimately > /flaʊə/).[15] The conclusion seems inescapable that the exploitation of variation to reduce (synchronic) homophony can only be a very sporadic process.

In some cases where a distinction in form does arise, it can be shown to be determined by factors other than the avoidance of homonymy. The English indefinite article *a*, *an* arose historically from the numeral *one*, but the differentiation in form in this instance can be attributed to the occurrence of the article in a position of low stress before the noun which it modifies, in contrast to the fuller stress of the numeral in most functions. In many other classic cases of grammaticalization, such as the development of the French negator *pas* from the noun *pas* 'pace', no such differentiation in form has occurred.[16]

One response to these difficulties would be to reject the concept of homonymic clash as an explanation for historical linguistic change in almost any circumstances. For an extended argument which comes close to this position, see Lass (1980) 75–80, and also Lass (1997) 355, note 25. See also Lass (1997) for rejection of the idea of 'one meaning one form' being a target towards which languages move. The evidence suggests that avoidance of homonymic clash is at most a minor tendency in language change, which may provide a plausible explanation for some word histories, where the selection of one variant over another avoids genuine ambiguity or homonymy with a taboo word. Certainly, examples such as *quarte/quatrième* offer very tempting explanations for what would otherwise seem random events of lexical replacement. However, there are far more exceptions than positive examples, and this leads to a very important conclusion for etymological research: there are no grounds for thinking that the existence of homonyms was not tolerated in earlier language states just

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[15] There is no difference in pronunciation between *flour* and *flower* in modern British English, but most US pronouncing dictionaries record at least an optional distinction between *flour* /flaʊ(ə)r/ and *flower* /flaʊər/.

[16] For much more detail on both of these examples see Hopper and Traugott (2003).

as it is today, and we can very confidently reject any assertion that a particular etymology is impossible simply because it assumes the existence of homonymy. Whether or not the existence of certain types of homonymy can sometimes lead to a pressure for the selection of one variant over another, or the use of a synonym or another avoidance strategy, is a more debatable question, but we can be certain that such pressures will not inevitably lead to the elimination of homonymy.