

Why On Earth Do They Call It Throwing?

by Dennis Krueger

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When a person changes professions (as most Americans do several times in their lives) one carries the knowledge and experience of the profession left behind into the new profession. In my case the old profession was German language and literature; the new one, pottery. I knew that language, like any other attribute of man, is in a constant state of flux. Anyone who tries to read Chaucer, or even Shakespeare, in its original form can see the enormous changes that have occurred in English just since the Middle Ages. I knew that language has a history just as political events or personalities do, and I knew that most European languages can be traced back to Indo-European roots that actually predate writing.

When I first began making pots, I was naturally curious about the new words I was learning - words which didn't seem to make much sense. Until then, I had thought *grog* was a rum drink, *slip* was something 'twixt the cup and the lip, and I wondered why on earth wheel work was called *throwing*. Since I had the skills in etymology to answer these questions myself, I eventually got around to doing just that.

One of my initial discoveries was of great personal interest. In graduate school, I had been told by one of my professors that *Krueger* means country innkeeper. *Krug* (not *Stein*) is the German word for beer mug and a *Krueger* is the man who serves beer mugs. This is indeed one definition. The other is that a *Krueger* is the man who makes beer mugs: *Krueger* means potter. No wonder I had such an affinity for clay! When I finally explored a larger number of potter's words, some patterns began to emerge. Within the flux of language some areas change rapidly and some resist change. Much of the specialized vocabulary of pottery has resisted change for the simple reason that the activities and objects described have changed so little over the centuries.

I shall begin with the words that appear in Old English (500-1050 A.D.), although many have even older roots.

Clay appears in Old English as *claeg* and means exactly the same thing it does today. To find the root for *clay*, we have to go back to the Indo-European root **glei-* meaning to glue, paste, stick together.

To throw. Potters at Marshall Pottery in Texas describe their work at the potters wheel as *turning*. They understand only the modern meaning of *to throw* and do not use it to describe their work. However, the Old English word *thrawan* from which *to throw* comes, means to twist or turn. Going back even farther, the Indo-European root **ter-* means to rub, rub by twisting, twist, turn. The German word *drehen*, a direct relative of *to throw*, means turn and is used in German for *throwing*. Because the activity of forming pots on the wheel has not changed since Old English times, the word *throw* has retained its original meaning in the language of pottery but has developed a completely different meaning in everyday usage. Those who say they *throw* pots are using the historically correct term. Those who say they *turn* pots are using more current language. Both are saying the same thing.

Glaze and *glass* come from the same root - the Old English root *glaer*, meaning amber. Amber, as everyone knows, is a "pale yellow, sometimes reddish or brownish, fossil resin of vegetable origin, translucent, brittle." (The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1967). For the English-speaking world, *glass* - and with it *glaze* - must have come into use at a time when amber was a

commonly recognized substance. Since amber was a substance much like glass in appearance, the word for amber - *glaer* - was transferred to the new substance.

Kiln derives from the Latin word *culina*, meaning kitchen or cookstove. *Culina* was introduced to England by the Romans in the first and second centuries A.D., managed to survive the Anglo-Saxon invasion of the fifth and sixth centuries, and showed up in the Old English forms *cylene* or *cyline*, meaning large oven. *Culina* has retained this specialized meaning ever since, and nowhere is it used to denote kitchen. Its cousin, *culinary*, is of much more recent origin. Its first written appearance was in 1638, and its closeness to the classical Latin form indicates that it was reintroduced to English by sixteenth century humanists.

Slip has a history like that of *to throw*. It derives from the Old English word *slype*, a relative of *slop*, and its original meaning is liquid mud. Common usage retains a hint of this meaning in the verb *to slip*, and in the common adjective *slippery*. As a noun, however, *slip* means liquid mud only to potters and ceramists. Everyday language has completely lost the meaning of *slip* as it is used in pottery.

Pot, potter, pottery. These words do not show up in England until late Old English or early Middle English (1050-1450). There are forms of the word *pot* in Old Frisian, Middle Dutch, Middle Low German, Old Norse, Swedish, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. However, no forms exist in Old High German or Middle High German. This suggests that the word *pot* comes from some vulgar Latin derivative of the classical Latin verb *potare*, to drink. Medieval Latin uses *pottus* for drinking cup; classical Latin uses *potorium* for drinking cup; and classical Greek uses *potion* for drinking cup. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, however, disputes this etymology and claims that the origin of *pot* is unknown. Since the former explanation is better than no explanation, I shall opt for it. *Pot* comes eventually from the Latin word for drinking cup. It seems likely that the words *pot* and *potter* were introduced to England at the time of the Norman conquest (1066). *Pottery* seems to be a much later addition to English than *pot* or *potter*. Apparently it was adopted from the French *poterie* in the fifteenth century. By the way, the *-er* of *potter* means one who makes, and the *-ery* means the place where.

Since *pot*, *potter*, and *pottery* come into English relatively late, it is logical to assume that they displaced another set of words prior to their arrival. After casting about for a number of possibilities, I hit upon *crock*, *crocker*, and *crockery*, and decided to see how old they are. *Crock* goes back to Old English *crocc* - *crocca* meaning earthenware pot or pitcher - and is related to Icelandic *krukka*, Danish *krukke*, Swedish *kruka*, Old High German *krog* or *kruog*, Middle High German *kruoc*, and German *krug*. The ultimate origin of *crock* is unknown. There is a written record of the word *crock*, dating from about 1000 A.D. *Crocker* is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "potter." The earliest written record of *crocker* occurs around 1315. The existence of *Crocker* today as a surname is strong evidence that it is quite old. *Crockery* is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "crockets, or earthenware vessels, collectively earthenware, especially domestic utensils of earthenware." Its earliest written appearance was in 1755. This suggests to me that until the arrival of the Normans in 1066, *crock* and *crocker* were the common Anglo-Saxon terms for *pot* and *potter* which were pushed aside by the new terms imported by the French-speaking Normans in 1066, but which lived on with a specialized meaning. *Crockery*, however, seems to be a much later coinage, probably formed by analogy to other nouns ending in *-ery*. *Crockery* did not come into common use until the eighteenth century.

Four words whose origins are unknown, but which are probably quite old, are *to wedge*, *bat*, *grog*, and *saggar*. Their monosyllabic forms would seem to indicate Anglo-Saxon roots, but no evidence exists to prove that one way or the other. Even the *Oxford English Dictionary* sheds no light on their derivation.

To wedge. The *Oxford English Dictionary* contains the following under *to wedge*:

wedge, v. in 7 wage (of obscure origin; the modern form is probably less correct than the earlier *wage* but cf *wedge* Sb 4). Trans. to cut (wet clay) into masses and work them by kneading and throwing down, in order to expel air bubbles. 1686 Plot. Stafford- ish. 123 (Potter's clay) is brought to the waging board, where it is slit into flat, thin pieces . . . This being done, they wage it, i.e., knead or mould it like bread.

The latter part of this entry contains the date, 1686, of the oldest written record of the word. I suspect that the word is much older and that if it is related to *wage*, it may simply mean something like *make*, as in the expression "to *wage war*," but that is just speculation on my part.

Bat. On *bat* there is even less information than on *wedge*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *bat* as a "lump, a piece of certain substances" and calls its origin obscure.

Grog. As used by potters, grog must be a figment of our imaginations because it is not listed in any of the major dictionaries I consulted. (It is found in *An Illustrated Dictionary of Ceramics*.) The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists only the meaning for the rum drink. Perhaps if potters who read this would send sharp letters of protest to the editors of Random House, Oxford English, and other dictionaries, this deplorable situation could be corrected.

Saggar. *Saggar* seems to be a corruption of *safeguard*.

Many words are derived from the names of the places they are found, or from the way they are made or used. *Ball clay* is a type of clay found in Dorset and Devon in England, so named because the clay was cut into balls weighing about thirty pounds. *Bentonite* is named after Fort Benton, Montana, where it was first mined. *China* is named after the country of its origin. *Kaolin* is of Chinese origin and derives from *kao ling*, meaning high hill - the place it was first found. *Faience*, the tin-glazed earthenware, was made at Faenza, Italy, in the sixteenth century. *Maiolica* is named after the island of Majorca (formerly Maiolica), which was a transfer point for work produced in Valencia, Spain, and exported to Italy. *Mishima* may derive from the radiating character of certain almanacs made at Mishima, Japan, or it may have been acquired by association with the island of Mishima where the ware was transshipped from Korea. *Potash* - potassium carbonate - was originally produced by burning wood in a pot. The Dutch coined the term *potasch* in 1598, and it entered English in 1648. *Raku* means enjoyment, and the ware takes its name from a seal engraved with this word, which was used to mark early pieces. It is also the name of a series of potters - Raku I-XIV.

The derivations of some words that came into the language in the Middle English period (1050-1450), or later, are quite amusing.

Porcelain. Chinese porcelain was reputedly first introduced to Europe by Marco Polo via Italy. The Italians therefore had the privilege of giving it a European name (although some say it was the Portuguese who named it). They called it *porcellana*. In French it became *porcelaine*. The English took it over from the French and dropped the final *-e*. The Italians probably kept the origin of the word a secret; it is unlikely that the English would have had anything to do with it otherwise. Italian *porcellana* originally denoted the sea shell *concha veneris*. This Venus' conch shell is hard and white, and perhaps the Italians named the Chinese ware *porcellana* because they thought the shell was ground up and used in the body, or because of the similarity in hardness and whiteness. More interestingly, the word for the seashell itself comes from the word *porca*, pork. The shell was so named because of its similarity to the genitalia of the sow.

Celadon is an equally interesting word. Most of the dictionaries say that the name comes from the character Celadon in Honore d'Urfe's novel *Astree*. d'Urfe for his part is said to have borrowed the name from the Latin poet Ovid. The character in d'Urfe's novel always wore pale green ribbons. The connection seems tenuous at best, and no one can explain how the name was transferred to a pale green Chinese glaze. *An Illustrated Dictionary of Ceramics* offers this much more likely derivation: "The name is

probably a corruption of Salah-ed-din (Saladin), Sultan of Egypt, who sent forty pieces of this ware to Nur-ed-din, Sultan of Damascus, in 1171."

Stein. When I was an undergraduate student at the University of Freiburg in the Black Forest area of West Germany, I remember being asked by a friend back home to send her a beer mug. I went to a shop and in my best German (which at the time was none too good) I asked for a *Bierstein*. The saleswoman kept asking me to speak English. I kept refusing because I was determined to speak only German. She only figured out what I wanted when I pointed to the object. Later, I realized that *Bierkrug* is the correct word, and that *Stein* means stone. How the German word for stone has come to mean mug in America is a mystery to me. I still feel embarrassment for not having known the difference that day in Freiburg.

Direct borrowings from other languages are common in the English language for pottery. We have already seen *kaolin*, *mishima*, and *raku*. Some others are *ceramics*, *engobe*, *sgraffito*, and *temmoku*. *Ceramic* is of recent French origin. It was borrowed from *ceramique* in the nineteenth century. Its root is the Greek word *keram(os)*, potter's clay. *Engobe* derives from the French *en-* plus *gober* which means, literally, to gulp, take in the mouth, hence to coat something with saliva. From this original meaning to its current sense is not too great a leap. Its earliest appearance in written English was in 1857 in Birch's *Ancient Pottery*. *Sgraffito* is borrowed from Italian and derives ultimately from the Greek *graphein*, to write or scratch. *Temmoku* is used to describe black-glazed stoneware cups and bowls made during the Sung dynasty (960-1280) at Chien-an (Honan province), China, and so called by the Japanese who sought the ware for use in the tea ceremony. I do not know its meaning or origin.

Modern technology has introduced a number of new words to the language of pottery. *Opax*, *superpax*, and *zircopax* are all based on *opacifier*. *Fiberfrax* is from *fiber* and *refractory*, *kaowool* from *kaolin* and *wool*. While these are brand names, they are often also used as common names.

Finally, I decided to see where *art* and *craft* would lead me. *Art* goes back to the Indo-European root **ar-*, to join. *Craft* derives from the Indo-European root **ger-*, to twist, turn. I was tempted to try to make something out of the difference but gave up the idea, knowing that it would be futile.

In summary, the potter's language has a core of words that go back to Old English roots, and beyond, which have changed little in form or meaning over the centuries because the objects and activities have changed little. Many new words have been added - largely from foreign sources - describing new techniques, new bodies, new technology, or new objects so that there is a continuous enlargement of the core vocabulary: a sign of a healthy and vigorous craft.