

The Unexpected Origins of the Word ‘Monster’ (feat. Dr. Z) | Otherwords **<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swuoSZXQTac>** **Transcript: <http://dontveter.com/ec/monster.pdf>**

When I say the word “monster” you might think of this or this or even this.

We might use it to describe something huge or intimidating, but what most of us don’t think about is where the word came from.

As far as our brains are concerned, word origins are irrelevant.

All that matters is that you think of the same thing I do when I speak it.

So why do we bother searching for the origins of words?

To answer that question (and many more), I’m excited to introduce the newest addition to the Storied channel: Otherwords, a show all about language, hosted by sociolinguist and certified word nerd, Dr. Erica Brozovsky.

Thanks, Dr. Z! The study of the origins of words, known as etymology, goes way deeper than just opening a dictionary.

Just like living creatures, words don’t pop up fully-formed.

They evolve over thousands of years, with ancestors that stretch back to the earliest Homo sapiens.

Tracing the history of a word shows us how human ideas change over time, and reveals connections between cultures that would otherwise be forgotten.

So let’s follow this monster’s footprints into the prehistoric past, across multiple continents and several languages, to a place that only exists in theory...

“Monster” entered the English lexicon as a version of the French *monstre* sometime between the 11th and 13th centuries, as a result of the Norman occupation of England.

When William the Conqueror invaded England and installed a bunch of French nobles to rule it, they brought a lot of French words with them.

This is one of the reasons why English, though technically a Germanic language, is filled with Latin words.

Because the invaders were the new aristocracy in England, their fancy Latin words tended to be things related to government, academia, and technology.

To this day, English words for simple or domestic things are usually Germanic in origin, like house, food and bread, while words that are more “intellectual” are usually from Latin, like representative, dissertation, and combustion.

This class distinction was so dramatic that when peasants raised livestock on their farms, they used the Anglo-Saxon words pig, sheep, and cow.

But when the meat was served to the nobles, they switched to the French: pork, mutton, and beef.

But how did France get words from Rome? You can thank Julius Caesar for that.

Around 55 B.C., he invaded what is now France, which at the time was occupied by a Celtic-speaking people known as the Gauls.

Over time, a colloquial version of Latin called Vulgar Latin mixed with the Gallic language to create what we now know as French.

In fact, all the romance languages, including Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, evolved from Vulgar Latin.

Like most French words, *monstre* has a Latin root: *monstrum*, which meant evil omen.

At the time, the appearance of strange creatures or animals with birth defects was considered a warning that something bad was about to happen.

It may seem silly today, but you can kind of see how, long before anyone understood genetic mutation or prenatal development, having a two-headed goat pop up on your farm might make you feel like someone was trying to tell you something--and that something probably wasn't good.

Monstrum was derived from the Latin verb *monere*, which meant "to warn, remind or instruct."

A lot of other English words are derived from *monere*, like *premonition*, *admonish*, *demonstrate* and *monitor*.

When words share an original root like this, we call them cognates. *Cognate* comes from the Latin for "born together," essentially implying that these words are siblings.

Incidentally, since they share a common parent, the words *nation*, *nature* and *pregnancy* are all cognates of *cognate*.

Some people think that the Roman goddess *Juno Moneta* was also named after *monere*, because, as the protectress of the city's funds, she "warned" against economic instability.

Her name is where we get the words *money* and *mint*, so if true, we can add them to the list of *monster's* cognates.

It seems like the word *monster* has changed a lot since its origins in Ancient Rome, but maybe not as much as you'd think.

Today, we don't explicitly associate monsters with bad omens, but it is there if you look for it. I mean, what is *Godzilla* but a warning about the dangers of atomic power?

Mary Shelley used *Frankenstein's* monster as a warning about scientific hubris, and even George Romero used *zombies* to warn us about social ills like racism, commercialism, and inequality.

Somehow, the notion of scary beasts being harbingers of worse things to come is still somewhere in our psyche.

That's why I named my show *Monstrum*, because when you spend your life studying monsters, you start to see that underneath the teeth and claws and fur are human fears about very real things.

Okay, so we've established that the scary, mythical beast we now call "monster," was originally *monere*, a warning or a lesson.

But is that the end of the road? After all, *monere* didn't come out of nowhere. It, too, must have ancestors.

But to find them, we have to travel back before the written word, which means we don't have much hard evidence, and have to rely instead on theory.

In the late 18th century, the British philologist William Jones noticed striking similarities between seemingly unrelated languages like English, Greek, Celtic and Sanskrit.

The similarities were too frequent to be coincidental, and often followed similar patterns.

He theorized that several of the major language groups were actually descended from the same grandparent language, which linguists today call Proto-Indo-European, or PIE.

There are several theories about where and when PIE was spoken, but the most popular puts it just north of the Black Sea, about 4500 to 2500 B.C.

As these ancient people spread throughout Europe and Asia, their dialects diverged and mixed with local populations to become early versions of several large language groups.

Today, there are over 400 spoken languages that descended from Proto-Indo-European, comprising 3.2 billion native speakers.

To be clear, there is no direct evidence of PIE. It exists only in theory, though that theory is pretty widely accepted.

Not a whole lot is known about its speakers, but if we look at which words modern Indo-European languages have in common, we can guess what kind of world they lived in... what food they ate, what terrain they inhabited, what technologies they used.

And by tracing the pronunciations of words over time, linguists can even triangulate back to what PIE may have sounded like.

The Latin *monere* is most likely a derivative of the Proto-Indo-European root *men-*, which meant "to think."

There are thousands of words around the world that descend from this source, like the Russian *mnit*, the Sanskrit *manayati*, and plenty in English like *mental*, *memory*, and *mania*.

Now maybe it feels like we've gone too far back in time to discover anything that would be relevant to us today.

But I think it makes sense that "monster" and "mind" are cognates. These are creatures that spring from our imagination, inspired by fear or anger or guilt.

Most popular monsters of fiction are metaphors for something psychological, whether it's the sexual anxiety of *Dracula*, the split personality of *Dr. Jekyll*, or the grief of *The Babadook*.

And when Jim Henson had to come up with a cast of muppets to help children understand their emotions, he chose monsters.

Etymology doesn't just show us how words evolve over time, but how ideas evolve.

It's almost like tracing the thought process of human civilization.

And though it's taken hundreds of years for linguists to track this monster all the way back to the shores of the Black Sea, in some ways, the connection was there the whole time.

How many of us as small children insisted that there was a monster in our closet or under our bed, only to have a parent assure us, "It's all in your mind."