

**ENGLISH ROOT WORDS FROM FASCINATING ORIGINS: A  
LINGUISTIC AND ETYMOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION**

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**Abstract.** *The English language represents one of the most lexically diverse languages in the modern world. Its vocabulary has been shaped through centuries of historical contact, conquest, trade, migration, religion, literature, and scientific development. As a result, English root words originate from numerous linguistic sources including Latin, Greek, Old Norse, Arabic, Persian, French, Celtic, Sanskrit, and Germanic languages. This article explores the fascinating origins of selected English root words and examines the semantic evolution that transformed these roots into modern vocabulary items. The study employs a historical-linguistic and etymological approach to analyze lexical borrowing, semantic shifts, and phonological adaptation. Particular attention is given to roots whose origins reveal unexpected cultural and historical connections. The article demonstrates that etymology not only explains word formation but also reflects the intellectual and cultural history of humanity.*

**Keywords:** *etymology, root words, English linguistics, lexical borrowing, semantic change, historical linguistics*

**Introduction**

English is frequently described as a “global linguistic mosaic” because of its extraordinarily mixed vocabulary. Unlike languages that preserved relatively homogeneous lexical systems, English evolved through continuous interaction with external linguistic communities. The Anglo-Saxon foundation of Old English was later enriched by Scandinavian influence, Norman French domination, Latin scholarship, Greek scientific terminology, and global borrowings from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Root words form the structural core of vocabulary. Understanding roots allows linguists and language learners to recognize semantic relationships among words and trace historical patterns of language contact. Etymological investigation reveals how words travel across civilizations, often carrying traces of trade routes, conquests, religious movements, technological innovation, and literary creativity.

This article investigates several English root words with especially interesting origins. The study focuses on the historical pathways through which these roots entered English and how their meanings evolved over time. The analysis illustrates that vocabulary development is deeply interconnected with human civilization itself.

### Literature Review

The study of etymology occupies a central position within historical linguistics. Scholars such as Otto Jespersen, David Crystal, and Anatoly Liberman have emphasized that the English lexicon is shaped by multiple historical layers. According to Crystal (2003), more than 70 percent of English vocabulary derives from Latin and Greek sources, particularly in academic and scientific terminology. Research on lexical borrowing demonstrates that language contact is one of the strongest mechanisms of vocabulary expansion. Haugen (1950) identified borrowing as a natural linguistic process occurring when communities interact socially, economically, or politically. Similarly, Campbell (2013) noted that borrowed roots often undergo phonological and semantic adaptation to fit the recipient language.

Recent linguistic studies also highlight the educational importance of root-word awareness. Morphological knowledge improves vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and inferential language skills. Consequently, etymology has gained increasing importance in applied linguistics and language pedagogy. Despite extensive studies on English vocabulary, many root origins remain unfamiliar to ordinary speakers. This article contributes to linguistic scholarship by presenting scientifically grounded yet engaging analyses of remarkable etymological developments.

### Methodology

This research employs a qualitative descriptive methodology based on historical-linguistic analysis. Lexical items were selected according to three criteria:

1. The root must possess a historically significant origin.
2. The semantic evolution must demonstrate notable transformation.
3. The word must illustrate intercultural linguistic interaction.

The analysis draws upon etymological dictionaries, historical corpora, and comparative linguistic studies. Each root word is examined in terms of:

- original linguistic source,
- historical transmission,
- phonological adaptation,
- semantic development,
- modern English usage.

### Analysis and Discussion

#### 1. The Root “Salary” and the History of Salt

One of the most fascinating English words is salary. Modern speakers associate the word with monthly payment or professional income. However, its origin is connected to salt. The term derives from the Latin word *salarium*, which referred to money allocated to Roman

soldiers for purchasing salt. In ancient civilizations, salt possessed enormous economic value because it preserved food and supported long-distance travel.

Consequently, salt became associated with economic worth and compensation.

Over time, *salarium* evolved through Old French before entering Middle English as salary. The semantic transition from “salt allowance” to “regular payment” demonstrates how economic practices influence vocabulary development.

## 2. “Window”: A Scandinavian Contribution

The English word window originates from Old Norse rather than Old English. The term derives from *vindauga*, composed of *vindr* (“wind”) and *auga* (“eye”). Literally translated, the word meant “wind-eye.” The Viking settlements in England introduced numerous Norse lexical items into English. The metaphorical imagery of a “wind-eye” reflects how early societies conceptualized architecture and environmental interaction.

## 3. “Alcohol”: Arabic Scientific Influence

The word alcohol derives from the Arabic term *al-kuhl*, originally referring to a fine cosmetic powder used around the eyes. During the medieval Islamic Golden Age, Arabic scientists developed sophisticated techniques of chemistry and distillation. European scholars later borrowed many Arabic scientific terms through cultural contact in Spain and the Mediterranean.

The meaning of alcohol gradually shifted from “fine powder” to “distilled essence” and eventually to ethanol-containing liquids.

## 4. “Assassin”: Political Origins of a Word

The English word assassin originates from the Arabic term *Hashashin*, associated with a medieval Nizari Ismaili group in Persia and Syria. European Crusaders encountered stories about this organization and transmitted the term into European languages. Eventually, the word lost its direct historical association and acquired the broader meaning of “professional killer.”

## 5. Persian Contributions to English Vocabulary

Persian has influenced English indirectly through trade, literature, and cultural exchange.

**Paradise.** The word *paradise* derives from the Old Persian *pairidaeza*, meaning “walled garden” or “enclosed park.”

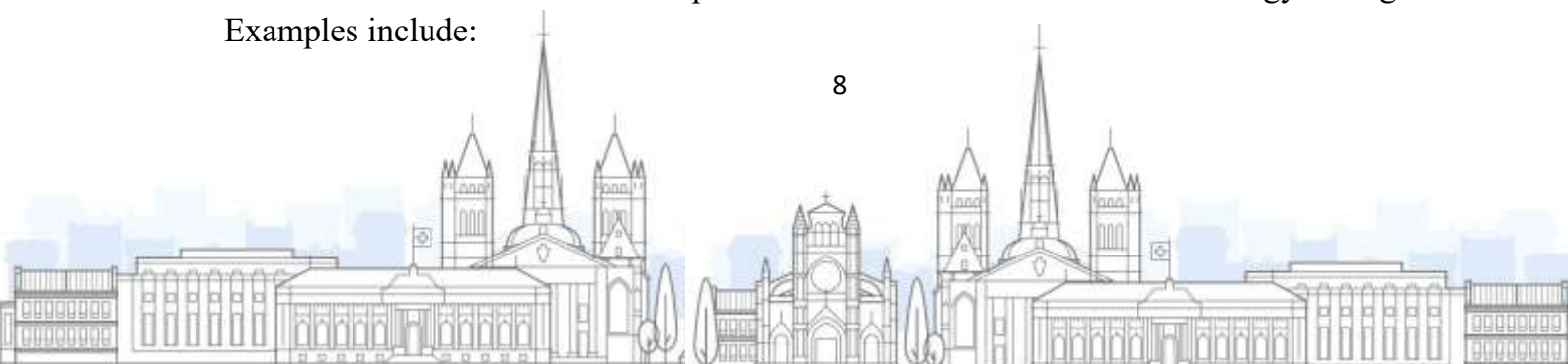
**Bazaar.** The term *bazaar* comes from Persian *bāzār*, referring to a marketplace.

**Jasmine.** The flower name *jasmine* derives from Persian *yasamin*.

These examples illustrate how cultural exchange enriches vocabulary systems.

## 6. Greek Roots in Scientific Vocabulary

Greek remains one of the most productive sources of scientific terminology in English. Examples include:



- Biology = bios (“life”) + logos (“study”)
- Telephone = tele (“far”) + phone (“sound”)
- Psychology = psyche (“mind”) + logos (“study”)

The persistence of Greek roots demonstrates the historical continuity of scientific language.

#### 7. “Nightmare”: Ancient Mythology in Language

The word nightmare originally referred not to a dream, but to a supernatural spirit. The element mare derives from the Old English mære, a mythical creature believed to sit on sleeping individuals and produce terrifying experiences. Ancient societies often explained sleep paralysis through supernatural beliefs.

Over time, the mythological meaning disappeared while the emotional association with frightening dreams remained.

#### 8. “Deadline”: From War to Office Vocabulary

The term deadline originally referred to a dangerous boundary in American Civil War prison camps. Prisoners crossing the line risked execution.

Later, the word underwent metaphorical extension and entered journalism and business vocabulary to mean a fixed time limit.

#### Linguistic Implications

The etymological histories discussed above reveal several important linguistic principles.

First, lexical borrowing naturally occurs when societies interact through migration, trade, warfare, religion, literature, or science.

Second, semantic change continuously reshapes vocabulary. Meanings broaden, narrow, deteriorate, improve, and shift metaphorically over time.

Third, etymology functions as a historical archive. Every borrowed root reflects intercultural communication and human interaction across centuries. Finally, awareness of roots improves vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. Understanding etymology allows language learners to infer meanings and recognize relationships among lexical families.

#### Conclusion

English root words originate from remarkably diverse historical and cultural sources. From Roman military payments and Viking architecture to Arabic science, Persian chess terminology, and literary inventions, etymology reveals the extraordinary global journey of English vocabulary. The analysis demonstrates that words are not merely communication tools; they are historical artifacts carrying traces of civilization itself. The evolution of root words reflects migration, conquest, trade, mythology, religion, literature, medicine, politics, and scientific innovation.

Therefore, etymological research remains essential not only for linguistics but also for understanding cultural history and intercultural communication. Future studies may further examine how globalization and digital technology continue influencing the evolution of English vocabulary in the modern era.

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