

‘CORRUPTION’ REDUX

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1. Introduction. The present article is stage three¹ of the genesis of the author’s view on the term (and phenomenon) ‘corruption’ first encountered in Laurie Bauer’s book *Watching English Change* (1994) and mentioned there as a type of (lexical) formation. It is obviously a marginal issue and a marginal type (if recognizable at all), but one which is interesting by revealing a seemingly unruly complex of unpredictable formal changes in operation in the lexis that are difficult to bring into the fold.

The starting point was a reference in the chapter on lexical changes in the 20th century English vocabulary, including a survey of types of formation based on an OEDS sample of formations occurring between 1880–1982. They are arranged into ten groupings and, explaining the last of these ‘linguistically justifiable’ groupings, ‘other’, Bauer (p. 37) says it “comprises a large group of other types of formation, including corruptions, word-manufacture, reduplication, onomatopoeic words, phrases, and so on: none of these categories was very numerous.” It seemed logical to assume that the term was borrowed from the Supplement to the OED together with the lexical data, but apparently it was taken from another source (personal communication). The inclusion of ‘corruption’ among word-formation processes was a novel and intriguing idea which invited a closer look.

However, a search through the literature (including Bauer’s own accounts of English word-formation) failed to reveal another mention of it. The only other reference to corruption as a word-formation process I managed to find was in Šmilauer (1972), who refers to it in two places in a chapter on word-formation, using the Czech term ‘(z)komolení’ or ‘word twisting’. He describes it as a form of euphemisation (p. 66) whereby taboo expressions (interjections or curses, e.g. *safraporte*) can be changed out of recognition to allow their use, and later (p. 74) in a summary of special types of word-formation he specifies it with reference to curses as an intentional unpredictable formal change with a specific function.

¹ The first was an article published ten years ago, Klégr (1999), the second a presentation at the Universals and Typology in Word-formation Conference held in Kosice, Slovakia, 16–18 August, 2009.

A look at Oxford dictionaries showed that the term 'corruption' does indeed appear in their etymologies. A complete list of these cases gathered from COD9 was used as a basis for an article (Klégr 1999) aiming to analyze these instances and try to establish whether they represented a type of formation or not. The article concluded that the concept of corruption is so vague and elusive that it should be discarded. However, a certain amount of doubt has remained. One of the reasons why the subject was taken up again was the opportunity to re-open it at a conference (with Laurie Bauer present) and the fact that in the ten years the principal source of the 'corruptions' under examination, COD, had radically changed its policy of labelling such cases corruptions, though the status of this type of modification among word-formation processes still remains unaccounted for.

2. Original findings. The best way to start is by a brief summary of the findings of the original article. It used two approaches in exploring the subject: (a) comparison of the consistency of using the term 'corruption' in the etymologies of three dictionaries; (b) analysis of the complete set of 79 items described as *corruption*, *corrupted* or *corr. (of)* in their etymologies in COD9 (subsequently supplemented by 60 items from Encyclopaedia Britannica on CD-ROM).

For the comparison three electronic dictionaries providing etymologies were chosen: *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (COD9), *The Cassell Concise Dictionary* (CCD), and *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (RHD). COD9 was selected as the primary source, with CCD as another British source and RHD as an American dictionary added. The occurrence of *corruption* (or *corrupted*, *corr.*) in the etymologies was as follows: COD9 – 79, CCD – 201, RHD – 2. However, the degree of overlap between the items so described was not impressive: RHD – 0, COD9/CCD – 25 items (*ancient*, *banister*, *cartridge*, *chaise*, *cor*, *demijohn*, *do-se-do*, *Jerusalem artichoke*, *lobster*, *lud*, *missis*, *pediment*, *pidgin*, *pip*, *pratie*, *razz*, *sash*, *saveloy*, etc.). In other words, of the 282 items described as corruptions in the three dictionaries, only 25 coincided, which means that the agreement on what is 'corruption', was less than 9 per cent. The remaining COD9 corruptions are called in CCD: alteration/alt. of, a modification of, abbr. of, var. of, short for, contr., formed by vulgar confusion of, a minced form of, poss., blacks'/Cockney pronunciation of, cp. Dan. and Swed., (prob./perh.) from, dial. or facet., coll., euphem., sl., dated. Conversely, the CCD corruptions are termed in COD9: alteration of, (perhaps/ probably/apparently) variant of, abbreviation (of), contraction of, a pet form of, from a misreading of, from, phonetic reduction of, by metathesis from, originally (imitating), earlier (assimilated to), etc. If anything the comparison showed that the use of the label is rather haphazard (evidently due to its unclear content).

Analysis of the COD9/EB items proved just as inconclusive as the consistency comparison. It revealed that the range of phenomena that come under this heading even within one dictionary is rather wide. The analysis focused on their sociolinguistic classification, their prominent features, mechanisms of their formation, possible motivation and was concluded by an attempt to assess the justification of etymology in terms of corruption.

From the sociolinguistic point of view the sample corruptions can be divided into crosslinguistic (interlingual), i.e. loans from other languages (sometimes the word is already borrowed in its 'corrupted' form), and intralingual corruptions within English, where the word moves between different dialects (regional, social, temporal), usually deviating from the standard (Anglo-Ir. *begorra*, *pratie*, AmE *howdy*, *Injun*, *mush*, AusE *Rafferty's rules*; children's language, *bye-bye*, *nan*, *ta*, *twee*, *tummy*), or between different registers/styles, again deviating from neutral to become colloquial, slang or field specific (*dunno*, *gonna*, *gotta*, *hiya*, *howdy*, *kinda*, *lemme*, *pinta*, *sashay*, *shammy*, *yep*; field specific, *howzat* in cricket).

The most prominent feature of the sample corruptions is, of course, the departure from the original phonetic form of the source word in varying degrees. Some of the departures from the original words result in spelling neologisms previously not occurring in the target language, or spelling corruptions of the established words. In some cases, the change in form produces a homograph of a word in the target language. Morphologically, corruption involves a change in form only, but not in word-class. As with loanwords, most of the corruptions are nouns as carriers of concepts. However, they include a significantly high proportion of interjections (18%). The remaining parts of speech are relatively marginal. Structurally speaking, most of the original forms are single words, though a few are multiword units. They are usually transformed as such into the target language with one or all components being corrupted, i.e. altered. However, occasional asymmetries can be encountered, when either a multiword unit changes into a single word, or vice versa, a single word becomes a phrase (*and per se and* > *ampersand*, *how are you* > *hiya*, *girasole* > *Jerusalem artichoke*). Semantically, the new forms sometimes acquire specific connotations, such as euphemistic, dysphemistic, jocular, offensive, derogatory, etc. This typically goes hand in hand with a change in the stylistic characteristic; a neutral expression becomes informal, colloquial or even slangy, etc.

The mechanisms or processes producing the sample corruptions can be described at three levels, phonetic, morphological and semantic-cum-stylistic. At each of these several different mechanisms can be identified – at the level of sound we find assimilation (*partner* > *pardner*; sometimes triggered by etymologisation, *Chartreuse* > *Charterhouse*), and a number of other processes such as reduction, lengthening, contractions, metathesis, elision, haplology, reduplication, in other words both shortening and extension of the form. A good many of the COD9 corruptions coincide with familiar word-formation processes such as clipping, compounding, affixation, blending, or ellipsis. From a semantic-cum-stylistic point of view, corruptions resulted from such processes as commonisation (a proper noun becoming a common noun) or its opposite, onymisation. A very common shift appears to be euphemisation, or specific uses of the corruption, such as jocular or offensive.

The change in form seems to be motivated by three reasons: phonological dissimilarity between source and target language, triggering assimilation, etc. (there is an unclear borderline between 'ordinary loans' and 'corruptions' indeed); onomasiological needs: corruptions in the sample appear to be a source of new concepts (cf. predominance

of noun corruptions) as with borrowing and other word-formation processes; social reasons: as when 'corruptions' are used for attention raising, novelty value, in-group membership, expression of attitude, but also taboo avoidance in swearing, etc.

3. A shift in attitude. So much for the findings of the original article. In the ten intervening years since it was written there has been a marked change in the COD policy as regards the label 'corruption'. It was gratifying to find that in concurrence with one of the conclusion of the original article that the term should be avoided as having negative associations, the subsequent editions of COD, i.e., the 10th and the current 11th (COED), all but steer clear of the label 'corruption'. In fact, the COED11 describes the 79 corruptions in COD9 in the following way:

45 – alteration	1 – reduplication
1 – alteration/variant	1 – phonetic spelling
2 – altered (form)	2 – CORRUPTION
4 – variant (spelling)	[7 – no etymology (1 euphemism)]
3 – from	[9 – not included]
4 – contraction	79 – total

The label 'corruption' is evidently very much on the decrease in COED11, but it has not been discarded altogether. In addition to the two corruptions from the original sample, the term appears in five more cases of COED11 etymologies, bringing the total number to seven: *baloney*, *diddy*, *kobo*, *sparrow grass*, *starling2*, *tsotsi*, *wotcha*. Incidentally, of these seven, only *starling2*, *wotcha* (*wotcher*) are termed 'corruptions' in COD9; *baloney* is called 'alteration' (!) in COD9, *sparrow grass* has no etymology, and the remaining three are not included. This supports the idea voiced in the article that 'corruption' as a term has outlived its usefulness and can hardly be justified any more. It seems to be a leftover from the prescriptive era: diachronically speaking, a departure from the etymon is a natural process, not a mark of deterioration; stylistically speaking, not all 'corruptions' are deviations from 'correct' or standard language (e.g. loan corruptions or, for that matter, secondary loan corruptions).

The other conclusion drawn in the original article concerned the justification of corruption as a concept. It was claimed that corruption, as used in COD9, CCD or EB, does not stand for any specific, distinct lexical phenomenon or process that has not been or could not be described otherwise, in a more apposite way. While the array of phenomena described in this way was truly bewildering, a certain lingering doubt remained whether by discarding the concept altogether one might not be throwing the baby out with the bathwater, especially in view of Šmilauer's rather cogent definition of 'word twisting' and its function. Accordingly, at stage two, the Košice conference presentation, the following four suggestions were submitted for consideration concerning the status of 'corruption' (or whatever name we choose for it) as a 'type of formation': it is one independent onomasiological/semasiological lexical process; it is several distinct processes, one being, for example, an intentional means of manipulating the form (e.g. euphemisation), the other a spontaneous change due to the pressure

of the TL phonological system; it is a formal subcategory of recognized morphosemantic processes (borrowing, clipping, word ellipsis, blending, compounding, affixation, etc.); it is just a concomitant optional feature of semasiological change.

4. COED11 findings. In an attempt to find an answer, a fresh sample of close to 600 COED11 items, described in their etymologies as 'alteration of' (the most frequent replacement of the former term 'corruption'), was examined in the light of the findings of the previous analysis. The new analysis tried to find some regularities or patterns that would put alterations in some sort of order. The obvious starting point was the exclusion of loan alterations. Borrowing and form modification are inseparable – alteration is best regarded as its concomitant feature for even an unassimilated Gastword will be pronounced differently from the way it is pronounced in the source language.

The decision to concentrate only on alterations within English greatly simplifies the task, but does not resolve all the problems. Unlike in borrowing, where alteration is part of the adoption of a new form which names a new concept, language-internal alteration only modifies the existing form which expresses basically the same meaning. The reason for altering the form is presumably that it is intended to signal something, usage in new contexts, new semantic connotation, a change in attitude, etc. While in borrowing alteration is concomitant (whether spontaneous or intentional, as in folk etymology), language-internal alteration appears to be functional, a purposeful reshaping of an existing word which may give it a 'new lease of life'.

The difficulty with the term functional alteration, however, is that it is too general and thus seems to apply equally well to other kinds of alteration, such as clipping (indeed some 'corruptions' and alterations are basically clippings). The crucial features of clipping, starting with unpredictable change of form, but no change of denotation and no change of part of speech, are in fact the same. Likewise, clipping is functional in that the new forms serve the social needs for novelty and innovation, getting attention, a change of stylistic value, connotation, etc. The obvious difference is that clipping is easily recognizable by its *modus operandi*, time-saving truncation of the original lexeme (with the remaining part unchanged), whereas 'corruption' or the purposeful reshaping of words is a ragbag of different kinds of changes (mostly keeping the length the same), from relatively simple ones, such as assimilation, down to replacement by completely different words (*Salvation Army* > *Sally Ann*). This leaves us with two problems, what to call the kind of functional alteration that was previously called corruption and how to define it.

A survey of the COED11 alterations not involving borrowing suggests several things. They form a minority among the whole sample, most of them are typically style-shifting, i.e. they change neutral/standard expressions into stylistically marked ones, and they can be roughly classified into several groups.

The largest one can simply be called **fanciful modifications**: *bazoom* (from 'bosom'), *bonzer* (from 'bonanza'), *broo* (from 'bureau'), *bubba* (from 'brother'), *Chrimbo* (from 'Christmas'), *chuddies* (from 'churidars'), *crawdad* (for 'crayfish'), *Gordon Bennett* (for 'God blind me'), *jim-jams2* (for 'pyjamas'), *muzak* (from 'music'), *ocker* (from

‘Oscar’), *patootie* (from ‘potatoe’), *rass* (from ‘arse’), *rollicking2* (from ‘bollocking’), *roquet* (from ‘croquet’), *Sally Army* (also *Sally Ann* from ‘Salvation Army’), *tippy-toe* (from ‘tip-toe’), *varmint* (from ‘vermin’), *widdle* (from ‘piddle’), *wodge* (from ‘wedge’), *woofter* (from ‘poofter’).

A very distinct group is formed by **exclamations** functioning as euphemisms (a group which corresponds to Šmilauer’s word-twisting): *bedad*, *begad*, *begorra*, *bejabbers*, *gad2*, *gadzooks*, *gorblimey*, *gum3*, *jeepers*, *lawks*, *sheesh*. Two other exclamations serving as informal friendly greetings can be also subsumed under fanciful modifications: *hiya* (from ‘how are you’), *howdy* (‘how d’ye’). This is not to say that only exclamations are euphemisms. For instance, COED11 describes *rollicking2* as an example of euphemism.

A small but interesting group (appearing already in the COD9 sample) is that of fanciful, but purely **orthographic alterations** (not affecting the pronunciation): *dammit*, *lilo*, *phreaking*, *pox*, *yessir*.

The last group includes borderline cases where it is difficult to decide whether the alteration is not simply a diachronic phonological change (facilitating pronunciation), rather than functional alteration, although the items in COED11 are typically stylistically marked. They could be called **pronunciation streamliners**: *flabby* (from ‘flappy’), *blotch* (from ‘plotch’), *bodge* (from ‘botch’), *razz* (from ‘razzberry’ from ‘raspberry’), *twaddle* (from ‘twattle’), *doofus* (from ‘goofus’), *lud* (from ‘lord’), *bindlestiff* (from ‘bundlestiff’), *lunkhead* (from ‘lumphead’).

Obviously, not only the first, but all the other groups are arbitrary **fanciful or playful modifications**, and this description could well replace the term corruption.

5. Conclusion. If the kind of change called previously corruption, later alteration, variation, etc., is to be regarded as a (fanciful or playful) type of forming new lexemes at all (although not by morphological means), it must be confined to changes of lexemes already existing in the language (and exclude loan words). It is probably best defined negatively as any arbitrary purposeful alteration of form (phonological or orthographic) other than the recognized types of formation such as clipping, blending, etc., an alteration which does not result in part-of-speech change, which does not alter the denotative meaning, but appears to involve a certain shift in the lexeme’s function and use (stylistic and connotative, euphemistic, dysphemistic, evaluative, facetious, jocular, offensive, derogatory, etc.). It is to be expected that there will be a great deal of overlap with the other types of formation, i.e., some (embellished) clippings, blends, etc., will include an element of fanciful modification, and vice versa. This definition includes Šmilauer’s euphemistic ‘komolení’ but at the same time it is much broader and covers a range of other reasons for modifying words. Finally, the number of relevant items found in COD dictionaries suggests it is a relatively marginal phenomenon (even though not all labels under which it may hide in the etymology were searched).

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„Komolení“ jako způsob tvoření slov – pohled po deseti letech

Resumé

Článek se vrací k tématu komolení jako slovtvornému prostředku, kterým se autor zabýval před deseti lety. Vede k tomu několik důvodů: změna v označování tohoto jevu v oxfordských slovnících, které jsou hlavním zdrojem dat, možnost konfrontovat závěry původního článku na konferenci o tvoření slov (mj. s L. Baurem, autorem monografie, v níž bylo komolení takto prezentováno) a časový odstup. Na rozdíl od odmítavého postoje v původním článku, je nyní komolení chápáno jako okrajový způsob (nemorfologického tvoření slov, které nemění slovní druh) za předpokladu, že jsou z něho vyloučeny slovní výpůjčky, že jde o záměrnou změnu formy za určitým cílem (jazyková inovace spojená se stylistickým posunem, změnou konotace, hodnotícího aspektu, eufemizačním rysem atd.) a že je vymezeno negativně vzhledem k ostatním způsobům tvoření (tj. zahrnuje všechny jiné změny formy, než je „clipping“, „blending“ atd.).