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The Etymology of *bum*: Mere Child's Play

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The etymology of the word *bum* in the meaning 'buttocks, bottom' is generally considered to be uncertain (e.g. by the *OED*, sv; by Onions et al. 1966:sv).¹ One of the leading possibilities, though, is that *bum* is somehow a contraction of *bottom* (so *Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia*, 1906:sv, Partridge 1966:sv), Morris and Morris 1977:sv). This etymology has been denied by the *OED*, however, for two reasons. First, there is the "historical fact that 'bottom' in this sense is found only from the 18th cent." (1173), while *bum*, in its Middle English form *bom*, occurs as early as the 14th century (in Trevisa *Higden*, from 1387).² Second, there are claimed to be phonetic difficulties in the development from *bottom* to *bum*.

With regard to the "historical fact", we note first that attestation is often merely a matter of chance and it is quite possible that *bottom* referring to 'buttocks' might have been omitted from Middle English texts now available for reasons other than its nonoccurrence in the usage of the time. Also, the shift in meaning from 'bottom (in general)' to 'bottom part of a seated person'

¹ Some sources venture no opinion at all; *Webster's Third*, for example, has no comment on etymology of this word.

We would like to thank Zheng-Sheng Zhang of the Department of Linguistics of Ohio State University for his help with some of the research on this paper.

² The actual citation with the one attestation runs thus:

He hadde many zere þe evel þat hatte ficus, þat is a schrewed evel, for it semep þat his *bom* is oute þat hap þat evel. (6.357)

This is apparently the only Middle English occurrence of *bom*, for both the *MED* and the *OED* list only this lone example.

seems natural enough that it might have occurred independently at several times in the history of English.³

It is possible, too, that the *OED* was somewhat precipitate in its pronouncement that *bottom* meaning 'buttocks' dates only from the eighteenth century. We suspect that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), the name of *Bottom* may be part of an elaborate Shakespearean pun which plays upon a meaning of 'buttocks' for the common noun *bottom*. In the first place, *Bottom* is given the head of an *ass* (donkey); with the contemporary American senses of *bottom* and *ass*, 'buttocks', 'buttocks, donkey', respectively, there is a reasonably good pun playing on Bottom's name and his fate. The double sense of *ass*, though, is the result of a sound change merging *ass* 'donkey' with the ME and ENE *arse* 'buttocks' through the loss of preconsonantal *r* (with some vowel changes as well, most likely). However, there is a strong possibility that *arse* had an *r*-less pronunciation as early as Shakespeare's time. Barber points out that "/r/ was lost in some non-standard forms of speech in LME, especially in eastern dialects and in substandard London speech . . . before /s/ and /ʃ/" (1976:319). For example, Barber continues, "in *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare uses the word *tercell* 'a male hawk' [while] in *Romeo and Juliet*, the same word occurs in the form *tassell*". Both *r*-ful and *r*-less forms of *arse* are likely to have coexisted in Shakespeare's time, increasing the possibility of a play on *arse/ass*. Now, according to Rowse, Bottom's name is already to be understood as a pun on his occupation as a weaver, *bottom* referring to "a skein on which the weaver's thread is wound" (1978:1.232; and we note also that weavers of necessity spend a lot of time sitting); it is therefore not unreasonable to suggest that Shakespeare, as an ardent and often ribald punner, may have intended a double pun, pivoting on the relationship between Bottom's name and his identity with *ass* (= 'donkey' and 'buttocks'). Diagrammatically, then the relations in these puns are:

³ David Stampe of the Department of Linguistics, University of Hawaii, has informed us that he has found virtually the same semantic connection in the Munda languages of India that he has worked with, adding plausibility to our claim that it is indeed a natural connection. We note also that among the meanings given for Middle English *botme* in the *MED* are several from which a shift to the meaning 'buttocks' would be fairly straightforward; especially relevant are the meanings 'the part of a bodily organ farthest from the exterior; bottom of the stomach' (1077).

weaver's skein ↔ *Bottom* ↔ *ass* ('donkey')

↓ \ ↓
(bum) ↔ [a:s] ('buttocks')

The success of these puns depends on a meaning of 'buttocks' for both *bottom* and *ass* (through the near-homonym in the nonstandard pronunciation of *arse*). Thus, we conclude that the meaning 'buttocks' for *bottom* was available somewhat earlier than the *OED* suggests, at least as early as the late sixteenth century.

Like the putative attestation problem, the phonetic "difficulties" can also be effectively addressed. It seems that the main objection to the phonetic derivation of *bum* from *bottom* stems from the fact that such a reduction or contraction was not a regularly occurring process in the historical phonology of English. In particular, *bottom* has continued into Modern English alongside *bum*, giving the current doublet, and there are words with a similar phonetic shape which have not undergone this "reduction", such as *bottle* and *bodice*, both attested early enough in English to be relevant to the matter at hand.⁴ Thus, if *bum* is derived in some way from *bottom*, it would have to have arisen in a dialect other than the one(s) providing the main input into standard Modern English.

A solution to these difficulties was suggested to us through observation of the usage of our older son David. At the age of 2 years 4 months (in late 1982), we heard David, while being diapered, say [ba(?)əm], with a clear reference to the part of his anatomy we were most concerned with, his bottom. This seems to have been an attempt on his part to say *bottom*, the term we used most often with David. The glottal stop in David's utterance was somewhat weakly articulated so that it was barely perceptible to our ears, and in fact later repetitions of the word may not even have contained it (hence the parentheses in our transcription). The resulting utterance sounded remarkably like adult *bum*. Moreover, the process responsible for the reduction evident in David's pronunciation of *bottom* seems to have been a regular one in his speech at the time.⁵ During approximately the same period of his

⁴ The putative "reduction" involves elimination of the medial consonant as well as alteration of the vowels. The source we propose below addresses both of these matters.

⁵ We know of several mothers who have also noted a similar pronunciation of *bottom* from their children, making it likely that such a reduction is characteristic of children's speech in general.

development, we heard [bawəl] for *bottle*, [liəl] for *little*, and [pæmbeyər] for *Paddington Bear* (with assimilation of *n* to *m*), all with a medial dental stop⁶ "reduced" and the resulting word "contracted", with some alteration of the vowels, when compared with the adult version. The regularity of this process in David's speech is shown also by the fact that at a later stage of development, 2 years 10 months, all of the above words which had appeared in "reduced" form six months earlier came to have a medial dental stop in them.

Thus it is evident that there are "dialects"—or, more accurately, sociolects—in which the phonetic reduction of *bottom* to something like *bum* is perfectly regular. We propose, then, that adult English *bum* has its origins in child speech, especially in the relatively early stages of its acquisition. The occurrence of *bum* in adult English would then result from a form of dialect borrowing, fostered by the opportunity for close and frequent adult-child interaction that diapering provides. The parents would thus be using and incorporating into their own speech a true child-language form.

As with any borrowing—dialect or otherwise—or neologism, the entry of *bum* for child language into adult speech needs only to have occurred once,⁷ though the possibility of recurring borrowing at several points in the history of English cannot be discounted.⁸ Once a part of the mainstream dialect, the retention and spread of this word becomes a matter not of dialect borrowing but instead of the regular lineal transmission of language through subsequent generations. However, one interesting aspect of this proposed borrowing, whether it occurred once or many times, is that it is entirely in keeping with the Neogrammarian view of sound change, in which dialect borrowing can be an explanation for apparently irregular sound changes in a given speech community. Here the donor dialect—child language—had the phonetic reduction regularly and the borrowing into adult language led to the *bum/bottom* doublet and the seemingly irregular and sporadic sound change linking the two.

⁶ We hesitate to label this stop, for it is unclear to us whether the input to David's speech included a /t/, /d/, or flap /r/ in these words.

⁷ We have noted, for instance, that our younger son, Adam, as early as 22 months of age (early 1987), has used a form quite close to adult [bəm]; since we have ourselves used *bum* more often with Adam than we believe we did with David, it is likely that Adam's form is taken directly from adult *bum*.

⁸ This is especially true if the reduced form is a common child language pronunciation; see footnote 5.

Moreover, parallels can be found for the type of development suggested here for *bum*. The word *tummy*, for instance, is universally accepted (e.g. by *OED*, the *American Heritage Dictionary*, Partridge, etc.) as being in origin a nursery form or infantile alteration of *stomach*; its use by adults is especially common when they are talking to children, but it has penetrated into adult speech sufficiently to form the basis for a product name (*Tums*) and advertising slogan (*Tums for the tummy*). Similarly, *bye-bye*, as observed by Dilkes 1983, is another nursery word—here probably an adult-conventionalized child form rather than a form originating with children—which has made its way into adult use.

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