

ETYMOLOGY OF SOME ENGLISH COMMON PLANT NAMES

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When people study a foreign language they study names of various objects of reality. But they seldom ask a question *Why?*: *Why* a table has a name *table* or forest is called *forest* in English and *лес* in

Belarusian. Still, to know *why* is not less important: knowing *why* helps to understand better and remember the words and the reality they denote. It is etymology which helps us to answer *why*-questions. Etymology is the scientific study of the origin of the words, terms, names.

This article aims to show the etymology (or the origin) of some common plant names in the English language. Etymology is not equivalent to the meaning of the word given in the explanatory dictionary. Knowing the origin of the word as well as the peculiarities of the real thing it denotes seems to be very important for better understanding and quicker learning and mastering the vocabulary. The plants under consideration play important role in the Belarusian folk culture as well. So the research of the origin of the English names is also of interest from the point of their comparison with the Belarusian ones.

The material of the research was taken from the following sources: the origin of the names – from the Online Etymology Dictionary [1]; the explanations of the meanings of the words – from Webster's Dictionary [2], ethnobotanical information – from the Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia [3].

Clover, *Trifolium* L., 'a plant that has a dense flower and trifoliate leaves' [2, p. 60] is found on the official emblem of the Republic of Belarus. It is also the national flower of Ireland: Shamrock, the traditional Irish symbol coined by Saint Patrick for the Holy Trinity, is commonly associated with clover [3].

The English word *clover* is of uncertain origin. Old English *clafre* probably derives from Proto Germanic **klaibron* (compare Middle Low German *klever*, Middle Dutch *claver*, Dutch *klaver*, Old Saxon *kle*, Old High German *kleo*, German *Klee* "clover") [1]. In this connection Russian *клевер* should be mentioned.

Clover is extremely delicious and fattening to cattle, which probably explains its Belarusian name *канюшына* (connected with *конь* "horse"). A common English idiom is "to be in clover", meaning to be living a carefree life of ease, comfort, or prosperity.

Clovers occasionally have leaves with four leaflets, instead of the usual three. These four-leaf clovers, like other rarities, are considered lucky in western tradition [3]. Though, in Belarus it is considered to be lucky to find a five-petal lilac-flower.

Another plant depicted on the national emblem of the Republic of Belarus is *Linum usitatissimum* (Belarusian *лён*). In English there are two words for it: *linen* and *flax*. Still, *linen* is used at present in the meaning 'thread, yarn, or fabric made of flax; household articles, such as sheets and pillow cases, made of linen or of similar fabric' [2, p. 214], while *flax* 'a plant with blue flowers, seeds that yield linseed oil, and slender stems from which a fine textile fiber is derived' [2, p. 135].

Linen comes from Old English *linin* (adj.) "made of flax", from *lin* "flax, linen thread, cloth", from West Germanic **linam* (compare German *Leinen* "linen", Gothic *lein* "linen cloth"), and is probably an early borrowing from Latin *linum* "flax, linen", which, along with Greek *linon*, is from a non-Indo-European language [1].

Flax comes from Old English *fleax* "cloth made with flax, linen", from Proto Germanic **flakhsan* (compare Middle Dutch, Dutch *vlas*, Old Saxon *flas*, Old High German *flahs*, German *Flachs*), probably from Proto Germanic base **fleh-*, corresponding to Proto-Indo-European **plek-* "to weave, plait" [1] (see *ply* 'to mold, bend, or shape'). But some scholars connect it with Proto-Indo-European **plak-* [1] (see *flay* 'to remove the skin of; to scold harshly') from the notion of "stripping" fiber to prepare it.

Dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale* Webb, ex Wigg. (*Taraxacum vulgare* Schrank), 'a plant considered a weed in North America, having yellow flowers and green notched leaves, sometimes used in salads and in making wines' [2, p. 78] comes from Middle French *dent de lion* [1], which literally means "lion's tooth" (because of its toothed leaves), and which (as well as the German *Löwenzahn*) is the translation of Medieval Latin *dens leonis*.

Other folk names, like *tell-time* refer to the custom of telling the time by blowing the white seed (the number of puffs required to blow them all off supposedly being the number of the hour), or to the plant's more authentic diuretic qualities, preserved in Middle English *piss-a-bed* and French *pissenlit* [1]. Belarussian *знахорка*, Russian *бабушкина трава*, Polish *Mniszek lekarski* fix the medicinal qualities of the plant.

Pansy, *Viola arvensis*, 'a garden plant with flowers bearing blossoms in a variety of colors' [2, p. 253] comes from Middle French *pensée* "a pansy", which literally means "thought, remembrance", from *penser* "to think" which in its turn from Latin *pensare* "consider" [1]. (See also English *pensive* 'involved in serious, quiet reflection; causing melancholy thought'). The plant was so called in English because it was regarded as a symbol of thought or remembrance.

Forget-me-not, *Myosotis arvensis*, comes from Old French *ne m'oubliez mye*: in the 15th century the flower was supposed to ensure that those wearing it should never be forgotten by their lovers. Similar

loan-translations took the name into other languages: compare German *Vergißmeinnicht*, Swedish *forgätmigej*, Hungarian *nefelejcs*, Czech *nezabudka*, Russian *незабудка*, Belarussian *незабудка*, *незапамінайка*.

Contrastive comparison of common plant names in various languages helps to see and understand the world pictures of different nations, to see the universal and pay attention to the peculiar in each language, which is going to be the next step of our research.

Literature references

1. Online Etymology Dictionary [Electronic resource]. – Mode of access : <http://www.etymonline.com> – Date of access : 19.02.2011.
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