What We Propound

Abstract

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I intend to give an account of the etymological journey of the word ‘pun’. The word pun first appeared in written usage in 1662 according to the OED. Various theories have been put forward to explain the origin of the word but none are conclusive. I will examine the etymology put forward by the OED and examine other theories including that of Swift. While I do not expect to provide a clear and final answer to the question: where did the word ‘pun’ originate and what did it derive from, I will examine all theories and account for the journey the word pun has taken through English literature with examples taken primarily from Shakespeare and G. V. Desani’s All About H. Hatterr.

Dr Johnson, in his celebrated Dictionary wrote: “Pun. n. s. [I know not whence this word is to be deduced: to pun is to grind or beat with a pestle; can pun mean an empty sound, like that of a mortar beaten, as clench, the old word for pun, seems only a corruption of clink?] An equivocation; a quibble; an expression where a word has at once different meanings.” (Johnson; p.938)

Swift put forward the notion that the word pun was descended from an Italian word, puntiglio meaning small or fine point. The OED, in its note on the origin of pun, mentions Swift’s idea but also states that no evidence has been found to confirm or deny the theory. This theory would mean that pun meaning ‘play on words’ has no relation to the older and now defunct pun that meant ‘to pound’ which probably has its roots in Old English. Swift’s theory is still just that, a theory, and knowing his reputation as a satirist, can we put as much faith in it as the OED suggests?