

Brewers' English: Beer and the English language

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I want to start the story of Brewers' English with a particular brewery, the Mortlake Brewery. It is on the River Thames, and brewing began as early as 1487 when the site was owned by the Archbishop of Canterbury. In the mid-eighteenth century, two local breweries were amalgamated to form the beginnings of what became the famous Stag Brewery at Mortlake.¹ The eighteenth was the century in which brewing became big business. By 1800, brewers had become such great men that we know their names today: James Watney, Sir Henry Meux, Spencer Charrington, Robert Courage, Samuel Whitbread - 'each of them worth a million or close to it'.² A million pounds in 1800 was not far off a billion pounds in modern purchasing power³ so those men had done well for themselves.

At the end of the nineteenth century when brewing was becoming an even bigger business, Mortlake Brewery was sold to the Watney Company. Watney's still owned it when I went to work there in the summer of 1962. The thing about a brewery is that it is not like an ordinary factory or a workshop, and each of the old breweries had its own traditions and its own spirit. Mortlake Brewery had its own raven master whose job was to keep

the ravens, if not happy, at least alive, and I was told that if the ravens died, the brewery would collapse - just like the Tower of London. Another superstition surrounded the word water. When I asked for a glass of it, I was told never to use that word in the brewery. 'It brings bad luck. You must call it "liquor"', I was told. That was my first lesson in Brewers' English.

Each division of the brewery had its own mess. I was in Cooperage, and I had to report for work at 8.15. In Cooperage, I thought that I was washing barrels. But I was not. Barrels, it turned out, were a species of cask that held thirty-six gallons of beer. The coopers' general name for a wooden beer container was 'cask', and each beer container had its own name. From smallest to largest, the names were: pin, firkin, kilderkin, barrel, puncheon, hogshead, butt, and tun. Actually, the only ones we saw at Mortlake were pins, firkins, barrels, and hogsheads. The smallest, the pin, holds four and a half gallons of beer and, the largest, the tun, holds 216 gallons. In Cooperage, we never saw butts and tuns because they are so big that they are only used for storing beer not for transporting it. Why we never saw kilderkins and puncheons, I do not know.

Brewers then have their own rich vocabulary. What I am calling Brewers' English is technically brewers' jargon. A jargon is 'the specialized or technical language of a trade, profession, or similar group', as the *Oxford English Dictionary* says. But, the word 'jargon' has negative overtones, so I am going to continue to speak of Brewers' English. It can be spoken in any accent, but it is worth noting that, as it was used in the Mortlake Brewery in the 1960s, the people speaking it were, by and large, South London working-class men.

Pin, firkin, kilderkin, barrel, puncheon, and hogshead are beautiful words with precise meanings to everyone in the brewing trade, from coopers to publicans. But, it is not wrong for those of us outside the trade to call all of them barrels. It is only wrong in a brewery. In the big, wide world, the differences in size are not only unknown, they are unimportant. There is a linguistic lesson here. The lesson is that words do not have real meanings; they have conventional meanings. In the beer trade, people agree to make the word 'barrel' mean a thirty-six gallon cask; in the outside world, the rest of us agree to make the word 'barrel' mean a 'large cylindrical container, usually made of staves bound together with hoops, with a flat top and bottom of equal diameter'.⁴ 'Barrel' then means a 'large cylindrical container' unless we are looking at a gun, and then the word 'barrel' means something else again. Words have no fixed meaning, and any one word can have many meanings.

Before we go further with the language of beer, it is important to get the difference right between a beer and a wine. Wine is produced by a natural process that induces fermentation in fruits. Beer is produced by an artificial process that induces fermentation in grains. Fruits carry yeasts on their skins, and, in a pile of broken fruit, the yeasts begin to consume the sugars in the juice. As they do so, they release two waste products, carbon dioxide and alcohol. Carbon dioxide is a gas, and it escapes into the atmosphere. Alcohol is a liquid, and it accumulates in the juice. The yeast keeps on converting sugars until there is so much alcohol in the juice that the yeast drowns in it. Saturation for fruit yeasts is reached when 8% to 12% of the juice has been converted into alcohol.⁵

The natural process that occurs with fruit does not occur with grain, and beer is made from grain not fruits. The most commonly used grain in beer making is barley. To make barley ferment is difficult, but, if you can get the process started, you get the alcoholic liquid that we call beer. Today all fermented liquors made from malted grains are called beer. Beer has had more specialist meanings in the past, but it is word that has been around for some time. It appears in Old English as *béor*, in Old High German as *bior*, and in Old Norse as *bjor-r*. It is found in modern German and modern Dutch. 'Beer' is then a common West Germanic word.⁶

West Germanic descended from the Proto-Germanic of the Bronze Age. That

would make the word 'beer' about 3,000 years old. It is not one of our really old words; it is not a word like father or mother. Beer is instead a word created by the Germanic people once they had reached the north-west corner of Europe. That makes agricultural sense as well as linguistic sense. The West Germanic regions are regions of the grain not the grape, and the word barley, in Old English *baerlic*, is another West Germanic word.

The brewing of beer is said to be 6,000 years old, so the West Germanics came to the business only half way through the history of beer. Though they did not brew beer until 3,000 years ago, they had a word for brewing, and the word 'brew' is a much older word than 'beer' or 'barley'. 'Brew' is a common Germanic word with forms found in Old English, Old Saxon, Old High German, Old Norse (*bréow-an; briuwan; brugga*). Those forms point to a pre-Germanic word with links to other Indo-European languages. It probably had 'a wider sense than "brew"' and meant something like to infuse.⁷

The main ingredient of beer gives us a truly ancient word: water. Water cannot be said to be a brewers' word, but water has to be added to grain since, unlike fruit, grain does not produce a juice. Water, in Old English, *waeter*, derives from the Indo-European root *wod-*, which you find in Polish as *woda* and Russian as *voda*. Vodka means 'little water'. It is a root also found in Sanskrit.⁸ This is a word at least 6,000 years old.

The third ingredient of beer is yeast. This is another truly ancient word. In Old English, it appears as *ist*. In the West Germanic languages, it appears as *gest, ghist, gist, jastr*. Related words are found in Ancient Greek and in Sanskrit. The root meaning is to seethe or to boil.⁹ That is the fizzing, bubbling action that we know as fermentation. With the yeast beginning to fizz, we need only four more words to have a pint of beer. Those words are malt, mash, wort, and hops.

Seeds are not fruits; seeds are hard, and unless they are in soil, they resist water. Therefore, grains must be crushed, steeped and warmed to make them germinate. Then they change their starches into sugars. At this point the process has to be halted because the sugars must be preserved so that yeasts can get to work on them. The germination is stopped by roasting. By the process of crushing, steeping, germinating and roasting, the seeds are turned into a malt. 'Malt' is another Germanic brewing word. Versions are found in Old English, Old Saxon, Old High German, Old Icelandic: *malt, mout, molt, malz*. And some of these forms also mean 'soft' and even 'rotten'.¹⁰

The brewer then adds more water to the malt to produce a mash. 'Mash,' like malt, has many West Germanic relations: *meish, meiskur, mask, mäsk*. The mash is boiled, and, as it is boiling, the brewer adds hops to flavour it. 'Hops' is a Middle English word; it does not appear until the fifteenth century, and the English took

the word from the Dutch. Where the Dutch got it from, the dictionary does not know.¹¹ Hops are important, and we will return to them, but, just for now, note that they are a medieval innovation.

When the malt has become a mash, it has then to be worked on further to become a wort. The brewers does that by boiling again, and after an hour or so, the mash becomes a wort. 'Wort' comes from the Old English word for plant, *wyrt*. Except in brewing, *wyrt* exists today only as a word ending in the names like ragwort, liverwort, milkwort.

At this point, by creating a wort, we have an unfermented beer. You would not want to drink wort, but we are not far off a good pint. You need to cool wort as rapidly as possible and strain it into a fermenting vessel and add yeast. This action is called pitching the yeast; 'pitching' is a word with its own brewers' meaning. If you add yeast, you are an amateur; if you pitch yeast, you are a brewer.

The yeast turns the wort sugars into carbon dioxide and alcohol, and that turns the wort into beer. The process normally stops when the yeast has converted so much sugar that the volume of the alcohol in the brew is about 5% of the total volume of the liquid - 5% ABV. It is difficult to brew beers with a higher alcoholic content.¹² If you reuse the mash, you get a weak beer called 'small beer' - once drunk throughout England by men, women and children before the days of clean water supply.

Now we have beer, and beer comes in two kinds: ale and lager. Those are the two great classes of beers, and the word 'beer' can mean either. A lager is a cool-brewed beer, fermented by a bottom yeast and stored thirty days to mature. The German for storing is *laagern* so we get the word 'lager'.¹³ Lager comes originally from Bavaria where they have been brewing it for six hundred years, but it did not spread beyond Bavaria until the nineteenth century. Then the Czechs worked on it in the town of Pilsner to transform it into a light, clear beer, or Pilsner, which has since then conquered the world driving out the ales. With the invention of refrigeration, it became the standard beer of Continental Europe, North America, and Australia. Only the United Kingdom held out,¹⁴ until the 1980s, that is. In 2008, in England, there were five pints of lager drunk for every pint of ale.¹⁵

But that is enough about lager; its English-language terminology is mainly modern in origin. Now, it is time to talk about ale, a wonderful word for wonderful beers. An ale is a warm-brewed beer, fermented by a top yeast for seven or so days. What is the history of the word 'ale'? It comes from the Old English word *alu* which is cognate with the Old Saxon word *alo* and the Old Norse word. By the twelfth century, the word is appearing as 'ale', though probably being pronounced as 'arler'. Ale and beer appear to have been synonymous until the fifteenth century when hops were introduced. Brewers reserved the word beer for the

new brew,¹⁶ but the words ale and beer were going to change places in the next two hundred years.

Before the seventeenth century, ale, hopped or otherwise, was produced according to family recipes with the ingredients brewed over unsteady wood fires. Coal cannot be used in brewing because its sulphur fumes destroy the flavour. But, in the seventeenth century, the coking of coal was discovered. Coke is to coal as charcoal is to wood, and coke burns clean and burns steady. One of the first uses of coke was to roast brewers' grain. Huge, cheap, consistent quantities could be brewed, and that drove home-brewed beer out of the taverns and public houses.

Coked-roasted grain produces a pale malt which in turn produces a pale brew. It was therefore called pale ale by contrast with the old ale that was dark. By 1800, the pale brew was simply called ale because it had driven the old dark ale from the market. However, the name pale ale was revived in the 1850s to describe a particularly strong beer that would keep its flavour when transported to the thirsty, hot men of the Indian Army. That beer was called India Pale Ale, commonly known as IPA today.

If we go back to the mid-eighteenth-century and look at a glass of the original pale ale, we are looking at the beer that is the forerunner of porter, stout, bitter, and mild. They are all versions of pale ale. One of the first things brewers began to

do to that pale ale was to brew it darker and darker and to start calling it 'porter'. Porter is a beer 'apparently originally either made for or chiefly drunk by porters and the lower class of labourers' says the *Oxford English Dictionary*. At the end of the eighteenth century, porter began to be brewed stronger, or, as they then said, 'stouter'. That produced a beer called 'stout'.¹⁷ It was also brewed darker and darker until it became black. Mr. Guinness did that best at his Dublin brewery and has kept it rich and black and stout to this day. Sweet stouts, milk stouts and ladies' stouts are all sweetened varieties, usually by the addition of caramels and various sugars. They are not necessarily any weaker alcoholically than regular stouts.

In the mid-nineteenth-century, London brewers returned to a paler, less well-roasted mash and, at the same time, increased the amount of hops in the brew to make a lighter, more bitter beer. The new beers came to be called 'bitter'. A less-hopped version of this beer produced a more mild taste, and that beer came to be called 'mild'. Mild and bitter dominated English beer drinking in the early twentieth century, but after the Second World War, mild lost favour. It had always been less popular in the South, and, from the 1950s to the 1980s, bitter triumphed. Its basic versions were 'best' and 'ordinary'. Breweries, wanting to go one better than best, came up with the names Directors and Special. These were all bitters with their price and taste increasing with their alcoholic content.

Two final names of beers deserve mention because they represent a return to the early seventeenth century's pre-pale-ale beers: brown ale and old ale. Brown ale became the name in the late-seventeenth century for beers that continued to be made with the old, dark malts. It disappeared in the eighteenth century, but it was revived in the late-nineteenth century by the Mann Brewery, and a new fashion was created for dark, often relatively sweet-tasting, usually low-alcohol beers that were normally supplied in bottled form. Brown ale was an old beer in style, and so was the beer that had the name 'old ale'. Old ale, says the dictionary, is 'a type of strong, dark ale, similar to barley wine, which has been aged at least six months (traditionally over a summer).'¹⁸ The old old ale, like brown ale, disappeared in the eighteenth century, but, like brown ale, was revived in the late-nineteenth century. This time it was the Bass Brewery that did the reviving. Bass called it 'barley wine because it was as strong as a wine' (8 to 12% ABV). But despite its name, it is a beer. It is 'dark brown, strongly flavored, and fruity'.¹⁹ Served in quarter-pint bottles, it used to be thought of as an old lady's or an alcoholic's drink. Old ladies drank one tiny bottle; alcoholics drank many tiny bottles.

Some reflections on Brewers' English and the language of beer suggest that these are language topics with both a rich history and a great potential. Many of the words used in the making of beer have a very long history, and many of the words used in the naming of beer have a very

short history. That makes beer an excellent subject for linguistic attention. Moreover, there is a range of approaches to beer, and each approach generates its own vocabulary. The maker of beer, the retailer of beer, the drinker of beer, and the historian of beer have their own terminologies. These terminologies overlap but do not completely coincide, and they reflect differing needs in relation to beer.

Much of the information for this article has come from the web, and there is a very great deal of information about beer out there. However, one thing that seems to be lacking is a site that supplies a good glossary of beer terms, one that covers the subject from the wide range of angles that the subject provokes. This present article has only touched on the linguistic riches of the beer, but, if, in addition, to interesting its readers, this article prompts the Brewery History Society to provide space on line for a moderated glossary of the Language of Beer, that would be a very good thing, a very good thing, indeed.

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