Christopher Mallon

English 412

2/18/20

Etymology of the Word "Pie"

When one thinks of the word pie today, the unambiguous image of a baked pastry comes to mind. But on closer examination, one of the most plain-seeming words in use today has a much more complicated history than at first glance.

To begin with, we must attempt to find the earliest recorded instance of the word *Pie* in history and work back to the present day. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it is the case that the origin of the term "Pie" goes back to Old English, and does not trace back to PIE. Despite such a great chance of linguistic serendipity being missed, our investigation does unearth very interesting results. To begin with, the term "Pie" was first introduced to Old English from the Latin *pīca*, the bird which we know today as the magpie (*Pica pica*). Rendered in such diverse forms as "Pyge," "Peye," "Pye," or "Py," the form we know came into Old English with the encroachment of Norman *Pie* in the early 12th century. This morphological variation remains fairly constant for much of the word's history, with the other forms only dropping out of use during the 18th and 19th centuries. Phonologically, the sounds of the word pie remained essentially constant, maintaining the form /pʌɪ/ in British English with a slight shift to /paɪ/ in American English.

But beyond simply the name of one particular species of bird, “Pie” also came to represent any of the birds connected to magpies (from Old French *Pi* and Latin *pīcus* for woodpecker) as well as anything resembling the bird’s iconic coloring or behaviour. In this way one may find talk of wood-pies or rain-pies (woodpeckers), sea-pies (Oystercatchers), pie-ducks (Labrador duck), and river-pies (Dipper birds). A soldier’s livery could be pie-coated, and cows, dogs, butterflies, and more could be pied, pie-coloured, or piebald. The act of incessantly repeating something can be called “Pieing,” like parroting. A particularly chatty or obnoxious person could be called a pie, as well as a sly or wily person, such as was used in Chaucer’s *Troilus & Criseyde* in 1385. Suffice to say the image of a fresh baked pastry dish was not the only one in people’s minds when the word “Pie” was uttered for a long part of the word’s usage.

All of this etymological history brings us to the central question of our investigation; how did the meaning of the word “Pie” make the jump from ornithology to gastronomy, and moreover why the new definition eventually beat out the old? Truth be told, no one is entirely sure. “Pie” started being used for the dish around the beginning of the 14th century, and grew to stand right alongside the various other senses of the word - In fact, pie was used in terms of the food by Chaucer merely a few years later in the *Canterbury Tales*, 1387-95. The leading explanation for such a strange expansion of word-meaning follows from a quirk of the bird’s behavior; magpies love to collect and store a mishmash of items in their nests. Combined with the fact that pies are cooked with various foodstuffs within them, a little creative imagery may have drawn a comparison between the two in Middle English minds. This theory follows a similar line of reasoning to the etymology of *haggis* (a dish which mixes various organs of sheep or cows) connected to *haggess*, yet another term for magpies. Alternatively, it has been proposed

that the concurrence of food-pie and bird-pie is purely coincidental, and the true origin of food-pie lies in a possible unattested variant of Old French *puis*, a pit or well. This could explain the fact that eventually in the 16th century "Pie" also came to be colloquially used for a heap of objects, usually collected in a pit or hole, and covered with straw or earth to store.

This rather confusing mix of definitions persisted from Middle English onwards into Modern English, when at some point in the 18th and early 19th centuries "Pie" began to be dominated by the food, the bird's name came to be "Magpie," and the other terms fell out of common use. One may still find ornithology books talking of pies, or writers attempting to invoke a classical tone referring to a noisy woman as a "chattering pie," but by and large "Pie" as it is used today has come to mean the delicious dish one can fill with almost anything.

As a last note, here is my attempt at forming a grammatically correct sentence which almost solely employs the various historical meanings of the word "Pie" (some omitted earlier due to very rare/ill-attested use) -

A pie, pie, pied pie pieing a fellow pied pie, pieing a list of pie pied pies pied with a pie of pies in a pied pie for pied pies.

In other words - A sly, chatty, piebald magpie parroting a fellow piebald magpie, compiling a list of merciful piebald magpies mixed with a jumble of pies in a piebald heap in the ground for piebald coins (a *pie* was a small unit of currency in India and South Asia.)

Citations

- Oxford English Dictionary, *pie,* www-oed-com.
- LEME: Lexicons of Early Modern English, leme.library.utoronto.ca