

ETYMOLOGY OF ENGLISH COGNATES: ORPHAN AND ROBOT

The English language contains an abundant amount of words, many of which did not actually originate from the English language itself. Upon that, English also contains a multitude of cognate words, that is, different words with the same etymological origin. Some of these cognate words, however, may not necessarily be ancestor to the same language, an example of this being the two cognate words ‘orphan’ and ‘robot’. On the surface, these two words both by their spelling and their meaning may not seem to be that much alike. However, further inspection by means of etymological analysis finds that these two words do in fact have a common linguistic ancestry. In what follows, I define these words based on a number of different sources, then I investigate the etymological roots of each word in order to show from where each word originated. Finally, after linking these two words back to their common ancestor, I discuss their meaning in depth, both in their root language(s) and in English.

PART I: Defining the words in English

First, let’s start by taking each word in its present day form in English and defining them individually. The word ‘orphan’ is typically a noun whose definition, according to *Oxford English Dictionary* is “A person, *esp.* a child, both of whose parents are dead (or, rarely, one of whose parents has died). In extended use: an abandoned or neglected child.” This dictionary also notes that the word ‘orphan’ can be used as an adjective or verb as well, for example “orphan – *v.* bereaved of parents, fatherless or motherless, or both.” ‘Orphan’ also has a connotative meaning in common usage, typically thought to be poor, perhaps living in an orphanage, and describes a person who has gone through undesirable circumstances (such as losing one or both

parents). Therefore, even though the word doesn't have common usage as a pejorative ("You orphan!"), there does seem to be an undesirable or negative connotation about the word. The word robot, defined by the *Webster's New World College Dictionary* refers to "1. any anthropomorphic mechanical being. 2. any mechanical device operated automatically, esp. by remote control to perform in a seemingly human way." By this definition, 'robot' is able to refer to mechanical humanoid robots, and/or any operatable mechanical device (such as the robots used to build cars). Also, the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes a figurative meaning of the word where 'robot' means "A person who acts mechanically or without emotion." This provides insight to the connotative meaning of the word, which sees a 'robot' to be non-human, or someone who does something but who does so without emotion or sensitivity, like a machine. This, just like orphan, associates the meaning of the word with a negative connotation.

PART II: Etymological Analysis

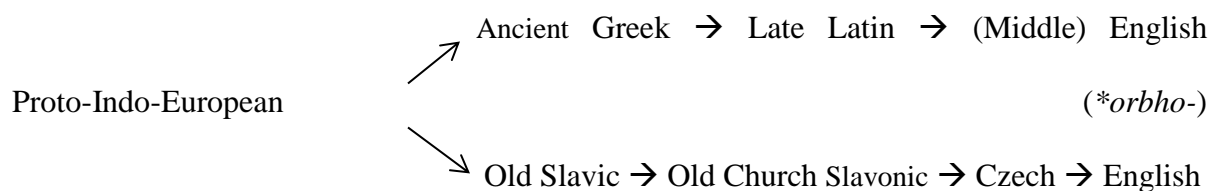
Now that each of these words has been defined in English, let's move to the etymological analysis by identifying the language of origin of each word, tracing the development of each before its entrance into the English language. Let's start again with the word 'orphan'. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, the word 'orphan' entered the English language (at the time, Middle English, as the first known usage was during the 14th Century) from the Late Latin term 'orphanus'. The term in Latin means the same thing as it does now in English, referring to a parentless child. Beyond this, Latin acquired this term from Greek (at the time, wherein the term is identified as 'orphanos' (ὀρφανός). The Greek meaning also refers to a 'parentless child', however it is worth noting that 'orphanos' can, according to also mean 'bereft', as in to be deprived or lacking of something (e.g. one's parents) Therefore, the chain of etymology proposed here is as follows:

(Ancient) Greek → (Late) Latin → (Middle) English.

Robot has a slightly more interesting etymology. One cannot discuss the origins of the word ‘robot’ in the English language without mentioning a particular science fiction play written by Karel Čapek entitled *R.U.R* or *Rossum’s Universal Robots*. The play features artificial people, called “robots”. In the play, these robots are manufactured in a factory and then sold all around the world in order to serve humans to perform various tasks, such as assist in the production of goods. Even though the robots in the play were organic and biological, the word “robot” has come to primarily refer to mechanical humans. The play was originally written in the Czech language and although the Czech writer Karel Čapek was responsible for writing the play, he wrote a letter to the *Lidové noviny*, a daily Czech newspaper, in reference to an article in the Oxford English Dictionary etymology where he points out that it was in fact his brother, Josef Čapek, who came up with the word. Karel himself initially wanted to use the word ‘laboři’, a Czech word meaning ‘worker’ (from Latin labor), which makes sense, considering how these artificial “people” are depicted in his play. The word “robota” was instead used, which according to the *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* means “work, compulsory service” in Czech. The *Oxford English Dictionary* makes note of another definition of the word ‘robot’ which becomes relevant here, which is “a central European system of serfdom, by which a tenant’s rent was paid in forced labor or servant. Now *hist.*” The etymology of this definition, based on the same dictionary, goes back as far as the Old Slavic **orbu-*, which later became the Old Church Slavonic ‘rabota’, meaning “servitude”. Based on these data, the chain of etymology proposed here is as follows:

Old-Slavic → West Slavonic → (Old) Czech → English

At this point, you may notice something odd about the etymology of these two words. According to these data, these two words have traveled into the English language from very different historical/linguistic paths. Astonishingly, this is because these two words, as the *Webster's New World College Dictionary* was able to point out, actually travel all the way back to the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) reconstructed base **orbho-*. This reconstructed base features the sounds 'o' and 'r' in the same order or appearance as in the word 'orphan', so it may seem odd that these same letters appear in reverse order for the word 'robot'. This is explainable due to the process of metathesis, a linguistic term that identifies the rearrangement of two phonological elements (such as syllables or sounds) that are normally adjacent to each other. This means that at some point between PIE and Czech, metathesis occurred and rearranged the first two sounds in 'or' to 'ro'. Based on these new data, the following (and final) etymological lineage is proposed:



PART III: Investigating the Meaning

Now that each of these words have been defined and traced back through their common linguistic roots, let's go back and reinvestigate the different meanings that these words have had overtime. Unfortunately, the meaning of the Proto-Indo-European reconstructed based **orbho-* is not included in any of the dictionary sources consulted here. However, the meaning of this word can be deduced by assessing the meaning of the words which developed from this PIE base. Let us begin again with the word 'orphan'. 'Orphan' has maintained a relatively similar meaning throughout its history of usage, referring to 'a parentless child' in English, as well as both Latin

and Greek. However, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the ancient Greek ‘ὀρφανός’ means “bereaved, deprived of protection or benefits”, and does not necessarily refer to a person whose parents are deceased, but has a rather general meaning, referring to someone who lacks or is deprived of protection, analogous to that of a parent. This brings us closer to the PIE meaning, but in order to investigate this further, let’s consider the meaning of the word ‘robot’ overtime. The modern day English meaning discussed earlier is a lot different than the word’s meaning in Slavic languages, thanks to Kapek’s play which depicts robots as artificial humanoids which are designed to serve the human race. The meaning of the word in Czech, as mentioned before, is “work, compulsory service”. This word is cognate with a host of other words in Slavic languages such as the Old Russian ‘rabota’ meaning “slave, servant”, and the Old Polish ‘robota’ meaning “forced labor, work”. Clearly, this word is used among this language family to mean “slave, servant, forced labor, work”. So how does this compare to the ancient Greek “deprived of protection or benefits”? Certainly a slave or servant can be described as someone who is deprived of protection or benefits, just as an orphan. Also, a person whose parents are deceased (especially thousands of years ago) would have been a vulnerable candidate to become a slave or servant of some kind. Therefore, the meaning of the IE base **orbho-* can be deduced as “deprived of free status” or “the changing of one’s status in an undesirable way”. Based on these conclusions, two things become clear. First of all, the surprising relationship between the two words ‘orphan’ and ‘robot’ has been established, correlating these cognate words back to their original meaning of “deprived of free status”, thus showing why both words have the negative connotation they do, despite denoting separate things today. Second of all, the meaning of each word as it appears in English seems to make better sense. However, in the case of both words, a definite amelioration has taken place. The word ‘orphan’ will always have a somewhat negative

connotation, due to the fact that it denotes a child whose parents are deceased, which is undesirable. Certainly, however, this has improved overtime from its original connotation, where the word denoted a person who's "status" as a person was undesirable and deprived, such as a slave. Similarly, the word robot has undergone considerable amelioration as well. This is largely due to their redefining from "slave, servant, hard work, etc..." to "a mechanical humanoid." Certainly its roots as "one who serves" may still be in tact today, but not necessarily in the negative or undesirable state as that of a slave or person deprived of free status.

Even though the words 'orphan' and 'robot' may not seem to be related, this paper has investigated and discovered that these words are in fact cognate words in English. Both of these words come from the Indo European reconstructed base "*orbho-" meaning "deprived of free status", and has evolved to give these words their general (and negative) connotative meaning, as well as contribute to their meaning in English today. Each of these words has taken a remarkably different historical and linguistic path from their originally shared Indo-European origin, but as these various sources helped to show, they do in fact share not only a common ancestor root word, but a common meaning still related to that ancestor word today in one form or another.

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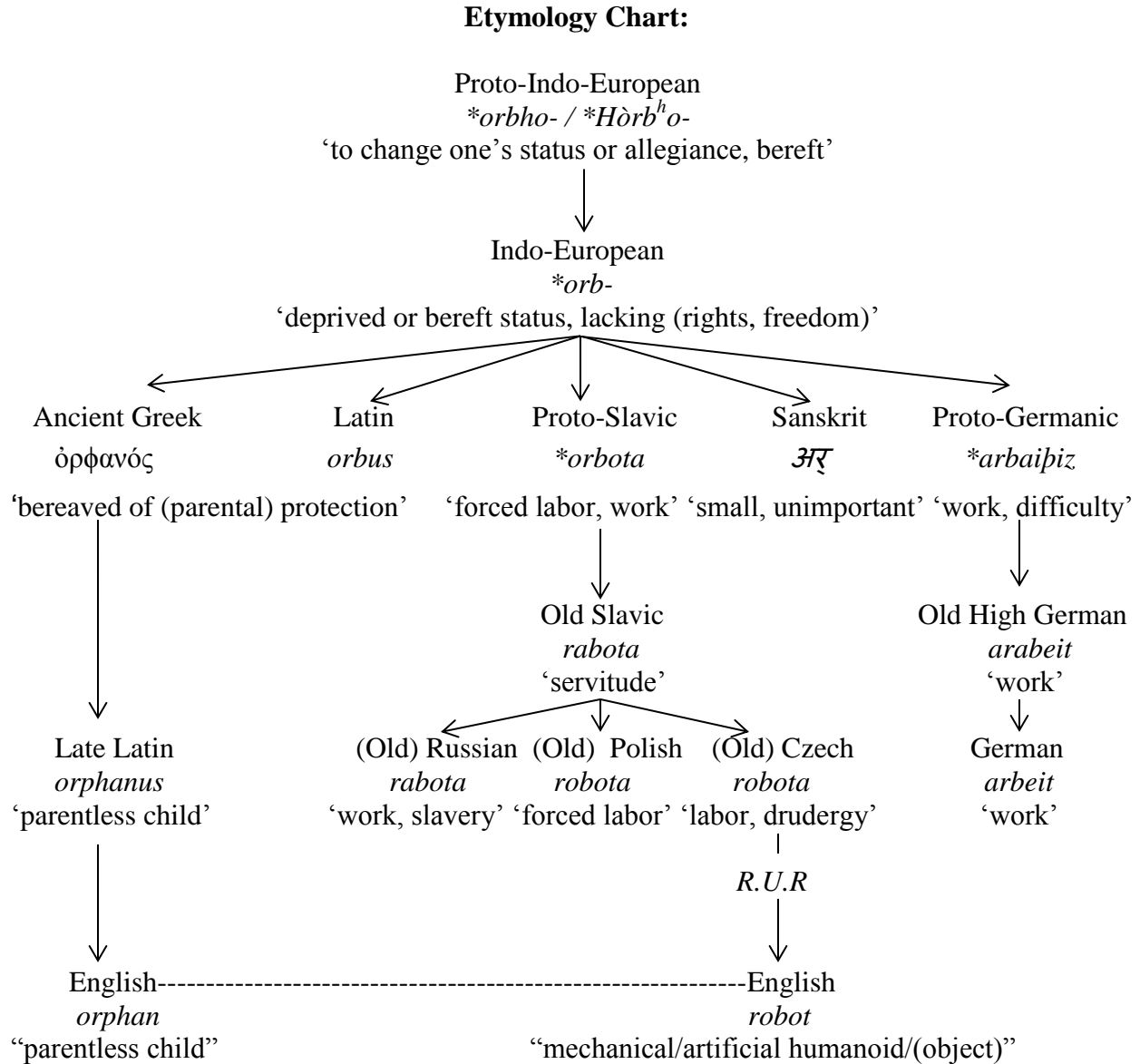
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Additional/Extra Information:

I have constructed the following chart in order to show the etymological history of the two words 'orphan' and 'robot'. The chart is not fully complete, but shows many connections between different words in different languages which all stem from the reconstructed PIE base **orbho-*. This chart shows the different form of the word(s) overtime, as well as the different meaning(s) overtime.



* Some of the information included in this chart is not represented in the paper, due to the fact that this chart uses external internet sources. However, some information comes from the Oxford English Dictionary.