

The Monthly * Lemma

one word a month, and the whole world behind it

THIS ISSUE'S WORD

gift

*from Proto-Indo-European *gʰebʰ-, 'to give' · say it "GHEB"*

A small word for handing something over. In English it became *gift* and *forgive*; in German, the very same word turned to *poison*.

* IN THIS ISSUE *

* **gift** · *a thing you give*

* **give** · *to hand over*

* **forgive** · *to let a debt go*

* **German Gift** · *the word that now means poison*

* **Norwegian gift** · *married, and also poison*

* **Mitgift** · *a dowry, the old sense kept*

* **gifted** · *full of natural talent*

* **forgiveness** · *letting the wrong go*

* **cadeau** · *French, from a little head*

* **donum & dōron** · *Europe's other give-word*

* **poison** · *at root, a drink you are given*

* **thanksgiving** · *the giving of thanks*

The constellation of *g^heb^h-

One root, one plain act: handing something over. English split it in two. The verb stayed a verb and gave us *give*, *gave*, *given* and *forgive*. The noun became a thing you could hold, a *gift*. Follow that noun into German and watch it darken, step by step, until *Gift* means only poison.



● English word

○ ancestral form

* reconstructed root

..... shared sense

*g^heb^h- · give, gift, and a Viking g

It began as a plain word for giving, and it kept on giving: a verb, a present, a pardon, even a feast.

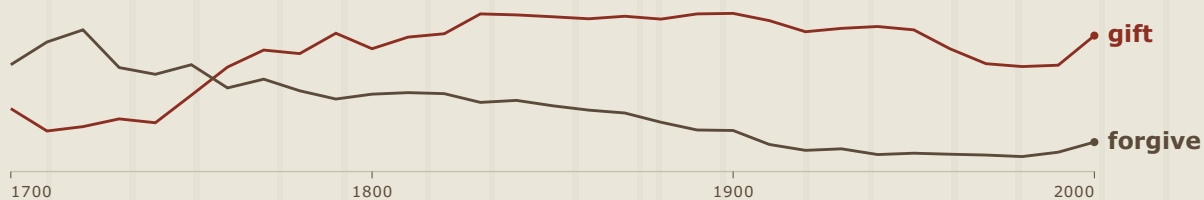
The star on *g^heb^h- means nobody ever wrote it down. We know it only by working backward from the languages that grew out of it, the way you might guess at a grandparent from a room full of cousins. The meaning was simple: *to give*. Old English turned it into *giefan*, which is just our word *give* in older clothes.

English kept the word close to home. We *give*; we *gave*; a thing is *given*. To *forgive* is to give fully, to hand a debt back instead of collecting it. One small puzzle hides in the spelling. Old English was drifting toward a soft *yive*, but Norse settlers said the word with a hard *g*, and their version is the one we kept.

A *gift* is simply a thing that is given. In Old English it first meant the price a man paid for his bride; only slowly did it soften into the present we know. The same root keeps giving: to *forgive* is to hand a debt back rather than collect it, and to be *gifted* is to be handed a talent, as if from above. And in German the very same little word took a darker road, which we follow a little further on.

A NOTE ON DATES. Every date here is the earliest we could find, not proof no one said it sooner. Beat one and tell us. We like being beaten.

TWO WORDS FOR GIVING, GOING OPPOSITE WAYS



By 1800, gift had overtaken forgive and kept climbing. Google Books, English, 1700–2000.

THE STAR, AND THE LITTLE H

The star marks a word no one ever wrote down; we reconstruct it from the languages that kept it. The raised ^h is a breathy sound, a *g* or *b* let out with a puff of air, the kind the oldest form had and English long ago dropped.

WORDS BUILT ON GIVING

English keeps making plain compounds from the old verb: *forgiveness*, *thanksgiving*, *almsgiving*, each one a kind of giving.

WHY THE HARD G

Left alone, Old English would have given us *yive*. We say *give* with a hard *g* because Norse settlers did.

gift

/ ɡɪft / say **GIFT** noun

something handed over freely; a present. Also a natural talent.

In Old English a *gift* was the price a man paid for his bride. Old Norse nudged it toward ‘present, good luck,’ and that is the sense that stuck. Strip it back and the word is just the old verb ‘to give’ turned into a noun. A gift is a giving.

The hook. *It started at the altar as a bride-price, long before it meant the parcel under the tree.*

*gʰebʰ-

→ PG *gebanaǵ ‘to give’

→ *giftiz ‘a giving’

→ O.E. gift ‘bride-price’

→ O.N. gift ‘gift, luck’

→ gift

THE SAME WORD ABROAD

Gift (German) ‘poison’ · *gift* (Dutch) · *gipt* (Old Norse) · *fragifts* (Gothic) ‘betrothal’

EARLIEST WE FOUND

Old English

Already in Old English, where it first meant a wedding gift.

give

/ ɡɪv / say **GIV** verb

to hand something to someone; to bestow.

The plain old verb, straight from Old English *giefan*. The only twist is in the sound. English was sliding toward a soft *yive* until Norse speakers said it with a hard *g*, and theirs is the version we say today.

The hook. *Half English and half Viking. The spelling is ours; the hard g is theirs.*

*gʰebʰ-

→ PG *gebanaǵ ‘to give’

→ O.E. giefan

→ M.E. yiven / given

→ give

THE VERB ABROAD

geben (German) · *geven* (Dutch) · *giban* (Gothic) · *gefa* (Old Norse)

EARLIEST WE FOUND

Old English

All through Old English writing; the hard-g spelling spreads later, from the north.

forgive

/ fəˈɡɪv / say fuhr-**GIV** verb

to stop holding a wrong against someone; to cancel a debt.

The prefix *for-* here means ‘away’ or ‘fully,’ so to *forgive* is to give the debt away rather than collect it. Old English built the word to match a Latin idea, the same one that later gave us *pardon*.

The hook. *To forgive someone is, word for word, to give them back what they owe you.*

O.E. for- + giefan ‘give away’

→ forgiefan ‘to forgive’

→ M.E. forgiven

→ forgive

THE SAME IDEA ABROAD

vergeben (German) · *vergeven* (Dutch) · *pardon* (French)

EARLIEST WE FOUND

Old English

In English from its earliest writing.

ENGLISH

gift ↔ SAME WORD, TWO LANGUAGES ↔

English gift and German Gift are the very same word. English kept it kind. German let it turn deadly.

Both started as 'a thing given.' English left it there. German followed a quiet, grim logic: a gift can be a dose, and a dose can be a poison, so *Gift* came to mean poison and little else. The friendly old meaning survives in just one German word, *Mitgift*, a dowry.

The hook. *Hand a German a Gift and you have handed over poison. Only Mitgift, a dowry, still means something nice.*

GERMAN

Gift

PG *giftiz 'a giving'
→ Eng. gift 'a present'
→ Ger. Gift 'poison'

WHEN IT TURNED

German

German has used Gift to mean poison since the Middle Ages.

GERMAN

Mitgift

/ 'mitgift / say MIT-gift noun

German *mit* 'with' plus *Gift* 'a giving': the money or goods that come with the bride, a dowry. It quietly keeps the old, friendly meaning of *Gift* that the rest of German lost to poison.

Ger. mit + Gift 'with' + 'a giving'
→ Mitgift 'dowry'

NORWEGIAN

gift

/ jift / say YIFT adjective & noun

The Scandinavian languages run the same little word two ways at once. As a noun, *gift* means *poison*, just as in German. As an adjective it means *married*, from the old idea of a bride being 'given away.' So in Norwegian one short word can mean a wedding or a killing, depending on the grammar. This has fed more than a few jokes.

ON gifta 'to give in marriage'
→ Norw. gift 'married'
→ Norw. gift 'poison'

* HOW A GIFT BECAME A POISON

the word for a gift, in other tongues

Every language needs a word for handing something over. Here is how a handful of them manage it, and where one or two take a surprising turn.

THE ODD ONE OUT

English does not build gift the way its neighbours do.

Our give and gift grow from *gʰebʰ-. But Latin donum, Greek dōron and Russian dar come from a different give-root, *deh₃-. That one line alone hands us donate, donation, pardon, and the dōron hidden inside Pandora, “all-gifts.”

HEBREW

מתנה *mattanah*, a gift, from *natan*, ‘to give.’ It hides in the names *Nathan* and *Matthew*.

FRENCH

cadeau from Latin for a *little head*: a fancy capital letter, then a flourish, then a present.

JAPANESE

贈り物 *okurimono*, literally a *thing sent*.

MANDARIN

礼物 *lǐwù*, literally a *courtesy thing*.

WELSH

anrheg a present, on its own native track.

HAWAIIAN

makana a gift, and also a reward or a prize.

A KEY TO THE PERIODS

PIE *Proto-Indo-European* · reconstructed, c. 4500–2500 BCE

PG *Proto-Germanic* · reconstructed, c. 500 BCE–200 CE

L. Latin · Gk. Greek · O.Fr. Old French · Du. Dutch · Ger. German · Skt. Sanskrit

Goth. *Gothic* · 4th century

OE *Old English* · c. 450–1150

ON *Old Norse* · c. 700–1350

ME *Middle English* · c. 1150–1500

Found *g^heb^h- earlier? Beat our date. *

Our dates are the earliest we could find, not the last word on the matter. If you can show one of these words in print before the date we give, send it in: the word, the book, the year, and the line it sits on.

If it holds up, we print it in a later issue with your name on the find.

Write to the Reading Room, The Monthly Lemma, or antedate@monthlylemma.com

... AND THE WIDER FAMILY OF *G^hEB^h-

- * **forgiveness** · letting the wrong go
- * **gifted** · full of natural talent
- * **given** · handed over; taken as a fact
- * **gave** · the old past tense
- * **forgiven** · released from a debt
- * **misgive** *mis-* · to fill with doubt (misgivings)

- * **giveaway** · a free gift, or a telltale sign
- * **thanksgiving** · the giving of thanks
- * **almsgiving** · giving to the poor
- * **Mitgift** *mit-* · a dowry (German)
- * **fragifts** *fra-* · betrothal (Gothic)
- * **gift horse** · the one you do not look in the mouth

SOURCES & METHOD

We build each issue from the major etymological dictionaries, among them the *Oxford English Dictionary* and, for German, *Kluge*, and we read them against one another.

Where the experts disagree, we say so. A few old books tie this root to Latin *habēre* and the *have* and *debt* family; most current ones do not, so we have left it off the tree.

Dates marked 'earliest we found' are a floor, not a ceiling. They are the oldest use we could turn up, and we expect readers to push them back.

COLOPHON

THE MONTHLY LEMMA · a sample issue

Display in *Cormorant Garamond*, text in *EB Garamond*, and the slips in *Courier Prime*, the typewriter of the old catalogue card.

One root, traced out to its leaves.

A FEW MORE THINGS

Poison is a gift too. Our word *poison* comes from Latin *potio*, "a drink," the cousin of *potion*. German *Gift* reached the same place by another road.

Beware Greeks bearing gifts. The line is Virgil's, on the Trojan horse: the deadliest gift of all came dressed as a present.