

Word Choice in English-Language Haiku: The Uses of Roots

by David Grayson

morning shower -
finding just the word
I was looking for

- Carolyn Hall¹

Word choice stands at the centre of the practice of writing. This is particularly true for poetry, and even more so for haiku. Simply put, the choice of a word can make or break a poem. Choosing the right word entails a myriad of considerations. Etymology can be a useful part of this process: Words originating in different periods have different properties and reflect unique states.

For English-language haiku poets, a useful starting point is distinguishing Anglo-Saxon (Old English) words from those descended from Latin (Middle English). It's estimated that half of the commonly used words today have Old English roots². These words are older and often shorter, and contain few syllables. Typically they include the first words that native speakers learn as children: good, bad, hot, cold, eat, sleep, and so forth. As such, they possess a strong visceral resonance. When you compare these words with their Latin-derived synonyms, the differences are readily apparent:

Old English Middle English

eat consume
dead deceased
dog canine
rain precipitation

The Old English-descended words are simpler and more direct, imagistic, and colloquial.

first frost
the echo in the caw
of the crow³

Mark Hollingsworth's poem (which won *Frogpond's* best of the Fall 2009 issue) contains the Old English-derived words "first", "frost" and "crow". These words produce an austere and spare feeling that underscores the scene.

the sack of kittens
sinking in the icy creek,
increases the cold⁴

In this classic by Nick Virgilio, the Old English words- "sack", "sink", "creek" and "cold" - paint a sharp picture that is multi-sensory. The reader can feel the cold and the wet, and imagine the muffled cries of the kittens.

As is apparent in these two examples, Anglo-Saxon words offer several benefits. Because they are more visual, they can better evoke a scene. Because they are shorter, not only can they be accommodated in haiku, they can actually contribute to the compression of the poem. Additionally, Anglo-Saxon lends itself to alliteration; in fact, alliteration was a notable attribute of Old English literature.

In contrast, Latin-derived vocabulary from Middle English tends to be used in formal communication. It predominates in scientific and medical terminology, as well as in the legal and academic fields. Some writers and teachers recommend avoiding Latinate terms altogether because the vocabulary has been used to remove "subjectivity" from prose.

But a wholesale rejection of Middle English is unwarranted. This vocabulary is an indispensable part of everyday English. Sometimes it makes better sense to use a Latin-derived word.

sunflowers
the tube of cadmium yellow
squeezed flat⁵

Claire Gallagher's poem is comprised of rich words, but I think that "cadmium" is the key one. "Cadmium" is from the Latin *cadmia*, itself from the earlier Greek *kadmeia*⁶. The word has a complex set of sounds. It's unusual and stands out, granting uniqueness to the poem.

abracadabra -
the hairy tarantula
waves his arms at me⁷

There are two key words in this haiku by Patricia Machmiller. The word "tarantula" is of Latin origin and is a relatively recent addition to English, from the 16th century⁸. The other word, "abracadabra", is also Latin-derived. The poem is playful and unnerving at the same time, and both words fit the mood.

These distinctions also play out with kigo, or season words. The effectiveness of a kigo is based not only on its meaning and history but also its sound. As

mentioned above, the formal scientific terms are typically Latin-based, while the common usage is from Old English. Poets of course largely use the common terms, but occasionally the rarer form makes sense, as in this Kiyoko Tokutomi poem translated by Fay Aoyagi.

Where my mother lives
standing there
towering cumulus⁹

The word "cumulus" is bigger (that is, longer) than the alternative "cloud" and evokes the expansive setting and "towering" body. "Cumulus" is also more open-ended than "cloud", which is short and ends with a hard "d" sound. The translators' choice better matches the wistful and meditative mood of the poem.

It's useful to remember that the Anglo-Saxon vs Latin dichotomy is not always cut and dried. Sometimes a word can surprise you, as in Gary Snyder's poem:

Pissing
watching
a
waterfall

*(the Tokugawa Gorge)*¹⁰

Without resorting to the dictionary, we might reasonably expect that "piss" (vs "urinate") would be of older lineage in English. It denotes a basic bodily function, is one syllable, and is of common (even vulgar) usage. But it's of Latin (French) origin. So, there are exceptions.

Awareness of etymology can be a useful guide to finding the right word or confirming why one does work so well. It is as useful for non-native speakers of English as for those whom it is their mother tongue. Of course, English is a wonderfully layered and still-evolving language. But a knowledge of its Anglo-Saxon and Latin foundations is essential, even if, as Carolyn Hall observes - we don't always alight on the perfect word:

autumn dusk -
a word that will do
for the one I can't find¹¹

Footnotes:

1. From Water Lines: Haiku and Senryu (Snapshot Press, 2006).
2. From the [English Club website](#).
3. From Frogpond 32:3
4. From The Haiku Anthology (W W Norton & Co, 1999)
5. From the Haiku Poets of Northern California [contest results 2004](#).
6. Merriam-Webster online dictionary [definition for cadmium](#).
7. From San Francisco Bay Area Nature Guide and Saijiki (Yuki Teikei Haiku Society, 2010).
8. Ibid.
9. From Kiyoko's Sky: The Haiku of Kiyoku Tokutomi (Brooks Books, 2002).
10. From the [American Haiku Archives](#).
11. From How to Paint the Finch's Song (Red Moon Press, 2010).