

## FROM THE HISTORY OF THE WORD *VODKA*

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The Oxford English Dictionary describes the meaning of the word *vodka* in the following way: 'An ardent spirit used in Russia, chiefly distilled from rye, but also from barley, potatoes, or other materials'. According to this Dictionary, the word was first registered at the beginning of the 19th century.

Although the word *vodka* has probably been borrowed into English from Russian, it is of Polish origin. It is derived from *woda* 'water' by means of the diminutivizing suffix *-k-*. Forms with this suffix may be of all the three grammatical genders, i.e. masculine, feminine, and neuter, depending on the gender of the base word; cf. for example, *młynek* m. 'mill, grinder' from *młyn* m. 'flour-mill', *pyłek* m. 'particle of dust, fleck, speck, mote' from *pył* m. 'dust', *cukierek* m. 'sweet, bonbon' from *cukier* m. 'sugar', *gumka* f. 'rubber' from *guma* f. 'gum, caoutchouc', *żelazko* n. 'flat-iron' from *żelazo* n. 'iron' etc. (Kreja 1969:19 ff).

In addition to its basic, diminutivizing function, the suffix *-k-* may also have other semantic shades. Two of them are important here. First, forms with this suffix may denote goods, products made of some material whose name is indicated by the base word. Second, forms with *-k-* may mean something better or something softer, something more delicate than what is denoted by the base word. Kreja (1969 : 20) calls the latter meliorative function. Both functions show up in the above examples, both are also present in the meaning of the word *wódka* 'vodka': it denotes a product that is made of water and that is better than water.

The word has been known in Polish since the early 15th century. It was first attested in 1405. Its first meaning was 'water', then 'medicinal water, tincture; scented water'. The meaning 'strong drink, alcoholic liquor' was first noted in 1600 (Smólkowa 1970 : 3). In the 17th century the word was used in both senses, i.e. 'tincture; scent, perfume' and 'strong drink, alcoholic liquor, booze'.

The semantic development of the word has close parallels in other languages, cf. for example, English *drink* 'liquid for drinking' on the one hand and 'alcoholic liquor' on the other, French *liqueur* 'liquid substance' and 'liqueur', etc. Polish *piwo* 'beer' also meant simply 'liquid for drinking' previously (the word is derived from the verb *pić* 'to drink').

The art of making alcohol was probably invented by Arabs in the Middle Ages (Kuchowicz 1970: 1). Any way, the word *alcohol* is of Arabic origin. For a long time alcohol was produced in pharmacies and used only as a medicine. In Europe alcohol as a medicine was already known in the 14th century, first of all in Spain. It was only about 1500 that Europeans started consuming alcoholic liquors but even then not in every country. In Poland, vodka appeared at the beginning of the 16th century and soon became popular in all orders of society, including the aristocracy. It was first called *gorzałka* or *aqua vitae*. The latter was later phonetically adapted as *okowita*. Both *gorzałka* and *okowita* still existed for a long time together with *wódka*, which in its present sense started probably to be used in the late 16th century. As has been noted above, it was in this sense first recorded in 1600 but in speech this meaning must have appeared earlier. *Gorzałka* and *okowita* as obsolete words are sometimes used also in present day Polish.

In Old Russian the word *vodka* was probably unknown. At least it has not been registered in Old Russian linguistic sources (cf. Sreznevskij 1893). The word *vodka* was first attested in Russian as late as 1533 meaning 'medicinal tincture'. The meaning 'alcoholic liquor' was acquired by the word as a semantic calque of Polish *wódka* (Šanskij 1968: 9) and was first registered in 1649 (at first still as 'wine'). The word was still used in its previous sense 'medicinal tincture' in the second half of the 19th century.

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