

THE ETYMOLOGY OF MODERN ENGLISH *MONKEY*

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ABSTRACT

Modern English *monkey* does not represent a Romance loan-word of Arabian origin and transmitted by Middle Low German but is a vernacular diminutive derived from *monk*.

The origin of the ModE word *monkey*, recorded since 1530 in John Palsgrave's English – French dictionary *Lesclarcissement della langue francoyse*, ranks among the etymological riddles still to be solved. Whereas only a few etymological dictionaries like *ODEE* (1966) or Hoad (1986) rightly content themselves with the statement “of unknown origin”, the great majority, including *NED* [1907] = *OED*<sup>1-2</sup>, Skeat (1910), Holthausen (1949), Partridge (1966), Klein (1966-67), Barnhart (1988), Cannon (1994) and Terasawa (1997), with varying degrees of uncertainty and dubitation consider *monkey* to be a MLG loan-word. *OED*<sup>3</sup> Online now presents the most recent and somewhat elaborated version, drafted in June 2008, which in the end is based on *NED* and runs as follows:

The immediate etymon of *monkey* perhaps or presumably is MLG *\*moneke*. The unrecorded appellative can be inferred from the name of a character in the MLG version of *Reynard the Fox* called *Moneke* whose name denotes ‘monkey’ because his father was *Martin the Ape*. In an earlier Middle French context the name appears c1330 in the form *Monnekin* ~ *Monnequin* which probably is a diminutive formation with the suffix MLG *-kin*, MD *-kijn* on the basis of MFr *monne* ‘monkey’. MLG *\*moneke* contains the same root and conceivably was introduced into the English language by itinerant German entertainers. As far as MFr *monne* (1545-1611) is concerned, the word goes back to It *monna* (1547),<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The form with *-nn-* is influenced by *monna* ‘madonna’.

whereas ModFr *mone* (18<sup>th</sup> cent.) is borrowed from It *mona* (16<sup>th</sup> cent.) or from Sp *mona* (c1400), *-o* (cf. *FEW*, XIX, 115-118; *DEI*, IV, 2492, 2497; *DECH*, IV, 123-125). It, Sp and Cat *mona* are generally explained as shortened forms of It *maimone*, Sp *maimón* (c1326), Cat *maimó* (1284) and OOcc *maimon* (1339) < Ar *maymūn* adj. ‘blessed’, developed by aphaeresis because the original forms allegedly were reanalysed as being reduplicated (cf. *DEI*, III, 2321; *DECH*, III, 771f.; *DELCat*, V, 373).

Regardless of the phonological and semantic difficulties, which the Romance *etymologia remota* presents, the common derivation of *monkey* is hardly tenable for several cogent reasons. Firstly, according to sixteenth-century <u>-spellings such as <mun(c)key, munkai, munkeie, munky(e)> ModE *monkey* with /ʌ/ < EModE /u/ cannot be derived from an etymon with /o/ like MLG \**moneke*. Secondly, as MLG *Moneke* is attested only once the probability that the proper name had such a wide range that it could have been used in deonymic function as a common noun tends toward zero, all the more so since it would have been a hybrid whose French root was not borrowed into MLG. In an unsuccessful attempt to overcome these difficulties Barnhart (1988: 674) alternatively suggests that *monkey* could have been adopted directly from It *monna* or Sp *mona* and represents a diminutive formed with an otherwise unknown suffix *-key*. Yet there is an element of truth even in this proposal.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century spellings such as <moncky, mun(c)kie, -y(e)> strongly suggest a different and in addition simpler solution (cf. Dietz 2006: 573). In particular Shakespeare’s examples <monkie(s)> *Macbeth* 4.2.60, *Othello* 3.3.408, 4.1.126 provide evidence for the finding that *monkey* is a vernacular diminutive formation made up of the root *monk* and the hypocoristic suffix EModE *-ie* ~ *-(e)y*, for which see Koziol (1972: § 489), Marchand (1969: 298-299), and *OED*<sup>3</sup> s. v. *-y* suffix<sup>6</sup>, *-ie*. Its semantic motivation is based on the appearance of certain small or medium sized tailed primates. Especially as capuchin monkeys which belong to the family of Cebidae look, as their name implies, like little (Capuchin) friars. Furthermore *monkey* is semantically motivated by the mediaeval tradition according to which the figure of the ape was mostly used in satiric portrayals of the clergy. This tradition, conveyed by the *Physiologus*, rests on the idea that the ape is a representation of the devil, a notion that survived even into the post-Reformation era. As capuchin monkeys are common in Central and South America from Nicaragua to Paraguay the word *monkey* could not have been coined before the discovery of the New World. Having competed with the older word *ape* (< ae. *apa*) for some time EModE *monkey* eventually caused the narrowing of meaning of the originally general term *ape* to the denotation of *Simiadae* in the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

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#### INTERNET SOURCES

*OED*<sup>3</sup> see Simpson, John A. – Edmund S. C. Weiner (eds.)

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