

What dolls, eyes, insects and puppies have in common

by Sabine Eiche

Richmond News, April 5, p.16

Have you ever wondered how it came about that some words with seemingly unconnected meanings are nevertheless connected etymologically – for example, pupil, puppet and puppy? In this instance, the Latin word for girl, “pupa,” is the first element in the long and curiously linked chain.

“Pupa” was also what the ancient Romans called a doll (the English word doll is the pet-form of Dorothy), presumably because dolls looked like miniature girls. “Pupa” gave rise to several words, which in turn spawned others. “Pupilla,” the diminutive of “pupa,” was the Latin word for an orphaned girl. It became “pupille” in Middle French (14th-15th centuries) and referred to both girl and boy orphans. Late Middle English (15th century) took the Middle French “pupille” and transformed it into pupil, with the meaning of orphan in charge of a guardian. The modern sense of pupil – someone who is taught by another – dates from the 16th century.

At about the same time, the Middle French “pupille” (from “pupilla,” orphan) made its way into English as the word for pupil of the eye. The Latin “pupa” (doll) provides the connection because it’s said that by looking into someone’s eyes you can see yourself reflected in miniature in the dark circle within the iris. Incidentally, the same thing happened in ancient Greek with the word “kore,” which means girl, doll as well as pupil of the eye (the Greek

philosopher Plato wrote, in the First Alcibiades, “we see our own image in another’s eyes”).

Middle French turned “pupa” into “poupée” and “poupette” to refer to doll. Middle English then transformed “poupette” into “popet,” which by the 16th century had developed into puppet, originally meaning both a child’s doll and a small figure representing a human or an animal.

The doll – “pupa” – connection explains the history of the word puppy as well. In earlier centuries, as now, dogs were popular domestic animals. Men kept large dogs for hunting while ladies favoured small breeds, which they could carry around with them. In the 15th century, this type of lap dog, really a plaything of the upper-class lady, was known in English as “popi,” based on the Middle French “poupée” (doll). Over the next hundred years or so “popi” became puppy, signifying a young dog.

In the 18th century, the word “pupa” was given yet another role to play by the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus. When devising his Latin taxonomy (classification) of insects that undergo complete metamorphosis, Linnaeus gave the term pupa to the third developmental stage (after the larva and before the imago or adult). English did not Anglicise Linnaeus’ term, but Dutch and German did transform it into their own languages – “pop” and “Puppe” – which also happen to be the Dutch and German words for doll.

No doubt there are other words like “pupa” that have rambled and digressed through centuries of language. Certainly more words are cut free from

their moorings all the time. What will some curious logophile (lover of words) in the year 3017 think of the meanderings of window, mouse and cloud, I wonder?