

Don't get shopped while shopping in a shop

by Sabine Eiche

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This morning, two words zipping through my mind collided. One word was shop, the other was "Schuppen," German for shed. Upon closer examination, I discovered that there is in fact a connection between the two, by way of the Old English "scypen" (shed), and the Old French "eschoppe" (booth, cobbler's stall).

Similarly unglamorous are the origins of boutique – now associated with fashion and sophistication. French for workshop, boutique entered our vocabulary in the mid 18th century. Its roots are in the Greek "apotheke" ("apotheca" in Latin), meaning storehouse, which is also the source of apothecary, someone who sells spices, condiments, drugs etc. The noun apothec, referring to the apothecary's shop, is obsolete in English, though not, for instance, in German ("Apotheke"), where it identifies what we call a pharmacy.

In North America, shop and store are used interchangeably, but in fact a store was originally a place for storing merchandise, a warehouse. Another word for warehouse is magazine, from the Arabic "makzan" (storehouse). Magazine is still used by the military to refer to an ammunitions storehouse. The chamber of a gun containing the cartridges is also known as a magazine. In the 19th century, magazine appeared in the titles of books to indicate that it was a storehouse of information. For most of us today, magazine denotes a periodical publication.

I shop for groceries at the supermarket, a type of store that's been around for less than a century. It grew out of the concept of the self-service grocery store, launched by Clarence Saunders in 1916 when he opened the Piggly Wiggly stores

in Memphis, Tennessee. The mega-size supermarket, which is now so much a part of our lives, is linked to the surge in suburban development that occurred in North America after World War II.

In the generic name supermarket, coined in the early 1930s, the prefix super (from the Latin “super,” meaning above) indicates that it is at the top of its class, in other words a market above all others. The formation of the word supermarket has been connected to G.B. Shaw’s translation (1903) of Nietzsche’s “Übermensch” as Superman.

Emptor and vendor – that is, buyer and seller – are based on the Latin verbs to buy, “emere,” and to sell, “vendere.” The terms we commonly use, buyer and seller, derive from Old Norse words. Buyer grew out of “byggja,” meaning to let out, lend, and seller comes from “selja,” to give up.

Shop and sell are words we read and speak daily, without giving them a second thought. But beware – sinister connotations lurk in their history. In Anglo-Saxon, which is a form of English spoken between the 5th and 12th centuries, to sell meant not only disposing of something for a price (as in current usage), but also betraying a person, giving someone up to the enemy.

As for shopping - it wasn’t until the 18th century that it acquired the sense of going to a shop to buy something. Earlier, in the 16th century, to shop signified to imprison or inform against a person, and it’s still slang for getting someone into trouble. So be careful – shop-lift in a shop, and you might just get shopped.