

# Putting 'think' back into 'thanks'

by Sabine Eiche

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A special day devoted to giving thanks can be found in the calendars of many countries. Canada claims to have celebrated the first Thanksgiving ever in North America in 1578, when the English explorer Martin Frobisher survived a perilous voyage while attempting to locate the Northwest Passage. As a holiday, it was celebrated in either October or November, until Parliament in 1957 declared it was to be observed on the second Monday in October for the purpose of rendering thanks for a bountiful harvest.

The American Thanksgiving is also a harvest festival, generally traced back to the first harvest celebration of the Pilgrims in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621. There was no specific date for the feast until 1863, when President Lincoln chose the fourth Thursday of November, although it wasn't fixed by law until 1941.

Because the intention is to show gratitude for a good harvest, the foods presented at the celebratory meals are linked in one way or another to the season and harvest. In North America, the two most important components of the meal are turkey and pumpkin. It happened that turkey, or sometimes another fowl, became the principal dish instead of beef or pork because traditionally (in the pre-refrigeration era) the main butchering was done only during the depths of winter.

Not surprisingly, my ideas for a column suitable for Thanksgiving all whirled around the word thank. The word fascinated me especially because of the different meanings history has packed into that one syllable. Thanks derives from Old English, but a few centuries ago, also the word grace, from the Latin "gratia," meant thanks. It's the root of our word grateful. The Old English source – "panc" or "ponc" for the noun thanks, "pancian," "poncian" for the verb – is linked to the Proto-Germanic

“thankoan,” which is related to the words in the various Scandinavian, Dutch and German languages. The Swedes, for instance, say “tack” for thank you, the Dutch and Germans “danke.”

What I hadn’t known was that all these words (excluding the Latin) can be traced back to the Proto-Indo-European root “tong,” signifying to think, to feel. To begin with, therefore, the Old English “panc” and “ponc” referred to thought, reflection, sentiment, or mind, will. Around the time of the first millenium, the word had become modified to mean good thoughts, or gratitude. Interestingly, the German word for thought – “Gedanke” – perpetuates the original significance of the root.

The combination of meanings – thought and gratitude – were preserved in other forms of the English word. The adjective thankful, for example, grew out of the Old English “pancful” and formerly meant thoughtful, ingenious as well as grateful.

Thanks, as an expression, is short for I give you thanks, and it’s been around since at least the sixteenth century. Shakespeare uses it in “Twelfth Night,” Act III, scene 3. The phrase thank you has been documented even earlier, to around 1400. Today’s generation of texters has stripped the expression to a bare “thx.”

This Thanksgiving, I want to think of thanks as born of thought. We’ve been lured into seeing mainly the superficial – the commercial – face of Thanksgiving. Isn’t it time for some Thoughtgiving?