Joanna Kłos, "Entry on: TED-Ed Lessons Worth Sharing, Series Mysteries of Vernacular: Miniature / Inaugurate / Dynamite / Venom / Gorgeous / Sarcophagus by TED , Jessica Oreck, Rachael Teel", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/76. Entry version as of November 07, 2026.

TED , Jessica Oreck , Rachael Teel

TED-Ed Lessons Worth Sharing, Series Mysteries of Vernacular: Miniature / Inaugurate / Dynamite / Venom / Gorgeous / Sarcophagus

Online (2013)

TAGS: Divination Egypt Latin (Language) Octavian Pliny the Elder





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	TED-Ed Lessons Worth Sharing, Series Mysteries of Vernacular: Miniature / Inaugurate / Dynamite / Venom / Gorgeous / Sarcophagus
Country of the First Edition	Online
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2013

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

First Edition Details	*Miniature*. Jessica Oreck, Director. TED-Ed Lessons Worth Sharing, Series Mysteries of Vernacular. ed.ted.com, April 21, 2013, 2:03 min (accessed: August 21, 2018). *Inaugurate*. Jessica Oreck, Director. TED-Ed Lessons Worth Sharing, Series Mysteries of Vernacular. ed.ted.com, May 24, 2013, 2:07 min (accessed: August 21, 2018). *Dynamite*. Jessica Oreck, Director, Rachael Teel, Producer. TED-Ed Lessons Worth Sharing, Series Mysteries of Vernacular. ed.ted.com, June 7, 2013, 2:15 min (accessed: August 21, 2018). Venom. Jessica Oreck, Director, Rachael Teel, Producer. TED-Ed Lessons Worth Sharing, Series Mysteries of Vernacular. ed.ted.com, June 7, 2013, 2:03 min (accessed: August 21, 2018). *Gorgeous*. Jessica Oreck, Director, Rachael Teel, Producer. TED-Ed Lessons Worth Sharing, Series Mysteries of Vernacular. ed.ted.com, June 21, 2013, 2:01 min (accessed: August 21, 2018). Sarcophagus. Jessica Oreck, Director, Rachael Teel, Producer. TED-Ed Lessons Worth Sharing, Series Mysteries of Vernacular. ed.ted.com, July 21, 2013, 2:01 min (accessed: August 21, 2018).
Running time	2:03 min / 2:07 min / 2:15 min / 2:03 min / 2 min / 2:01 min
Official Website	*Miniature* (accessed: August 21, 2018); *Inaugurate* (accessed: August 21, 2018); *Dynamite* (accessed: August 21, 2018); *Venom* (accessed: August 21, 2018); *Gorgeous* (accessed: August 21, 2018); Sarcophagus (accessed: August 21, 2018).
Available Onllne	*Miniature* (accessed: August 21, 2018); Inaugurate (accessed: August 21, 2018); *Dynamite* (accessed: August 21, 2018); *Venom* (accessed: August 21, 2018); *Gorgeous* (accessed: August 21, 2018); *Sarcophagus* (accessed: August 21, 2018).
Genre	Animated films, Instructional and educational works, Internet videos, Short films
Author of the Entry	Joanna Kłos, University of Warsaw, joanna.klos@al.uw.edu.pl
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com

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Creators

TED (Company)

Logo retrieved from Wikipedia, public domain (accessed: December 8, 2021).

TED: Technology, Entertainment, Design (accessed: July 6, 2018) is a media organization focused on "ideas worth spreading", which organizes conferences and creates online talks for free distribution. One of its initiatives is TED-Ed (ed.ted.com), an online platform hosting short interactive lessons. Each lesson consists of four sections:

– *Watch* – animated educational video (available also on YouTube);

– *Think* – a short quiz about the video's content;

– *Dig Deeper* – a concise text on where to search for more information on the topic (providing mainly hyperlinks to educational websites rather than "traditional" bibliographical references);

– *Discuss* – a forum with two types of discussions: Guided (i.e. created by the educators), and Free (i.e. created by the viewers).

Prepared by Joanna Kłos, University of Warsaw, joanna.klos@student.uw.edu.pl



Jessica Oreck (Director, Producer)

Jessica Oreck is a filmmaker of animated films and documentaries. She admits that she always knew what she would like to do in her life – influenced by, i.a., David Attenborough's *The Private Life of Plants*, she attended film school and studied natural sciences: biology, ecology, botany and environmental history; later, she was hired by the Natural History Museum in New York. Interested in how people interact with nature, she calls her works "ethnobiological", created in order to "invite viewers to question their relationship with the natural

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world". Her films nominated or awarded at the cinema festivals are: *Beetle Queen Conquers Toky*o (2009), a documentary about Japanese captivation with insects; Venus (2011), a short about the "female" planet; *Aatsinki. The Story of Arctic Cowbys* (2013), a documentary on Finnish reindeer herdsmen; and *The Vanquishing of the Witch Baba Yaga* (2014), an animated film inspired by Eastern-European folklore and the character of Baba Yaga, enriched with references to such authors as Czesław Miłosz and Olga Tokarczuk.

Oreck's production company Myriapod Productions (accessed: January 28, 2018) is also strongly engaged in educational projects. Among them there are two series included in TED-Ed lessons: *Mysteries of Vernacular* and *In a Moment of Vision…*, devoted to conception and design of important devices – it covers the history of as varied inventions as, e.g., sandwich, stethoscope, bra, and Braille alphabet.

Sources:

An interview with Jessica Oreck at the *Pearl Snap Discount Entertainment* blog (January 28, 2011).

Profile in the IMDb database (accessed: May 24, 2018).

Twitter profile (accessed: May 24, 2018).

Bio prepared by Joanna Kłos, University of Warsaw, joanna.klos@student.uw.edu.pl

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Rachael Teel (Producer)

Rachael Teel who graduated in Environmental Science at Yale, is a film producer and researcher. She worked on TV series: *Nature*, *Border Wars*, *Break It Down*; also, with Jessica Ocker on the production of the documentaries *The Vanquishing Witch of Baba Yaga* and *Aatsinki. The Story of Arctic Cowboys*. She is the writer for the *Mysteries of Vernacular* series published on TED-Ed.

Source:

Profile in the IMDb database (accessed: June 24, 2018).

Bio prepared by Joanna Kłos, University of Warsaw, joanna.klos@student.uw.edu.pl

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Additional information

Summary

Every video from the series presents the etymology of a chosen English word and has almost identical structure. At the start, an old book with a title: *Mysteries of Vernacular. The History of Language* opens. Simultaneously with the narrator's comments the pages of the book turn and show illustrations (in most cases, black and white): either drawings/photos, or writings of the words/terms that the narrator currently speaks about. The first illustration is always the initial letter of the theme word, and the first sentence is its definition formulated in a dictionary/encyclopedia style. In the end, the pages turn the other way round, once again the one with the beginning letter is exposed, and then the book closes.

The series' main topics are English words, but lots of them have ancient roots and are etymologically related to other languages – the videos are accessible to a global audience: with the help of YouTube settings it is possible to choose subtitles in many different languages or to generate automatic translation.

Miniature

Miniature is defined as “something distinctively smaller than other members of its type or class”. We learn that the root of the word is Latin *minium*, which meant “red lead” (to illustrate this statement, the pages of the book are turning red); next the Middle Ages are evoked – back then a certain compound of lead (illustrated with a chemical formula Pb3O4) was used as a pigment, when copyists had to copy books by hand (here the illustration of a typical image from medieval manuscript is shown). The breaks between different parts of the text were marked red with the use of minium (here – a typical page from such manuscript is shown). Also, important parts of texts were adorned with huge ornamented letters (and here – typical illuminated letters). Paintings decorating those letters were called by the Italians *miniatura*, illumination (which is illustrated by many more ornate manuscript images as the pages of the book turn). As they were very small, *miniatura* started to mean tiny things; what is more, some other words associated with “small” became popular, such as *minimum*. In the 16th century the form *miniature* started to be used in English and it has retained the same meaning till now.

The section “Think” contains 4 questions; “Dig Deeper” contains a

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paragraph leading to the websites on topics relating to the word: mineral minium, miniature pieces of art etc.; the section "Discuss" contains 1 guided discussion: "How do you think contemporary printing and publishing have changed the way we value texts?" with 1 answer so far.

Till September 22, 2017 the video has been viewed 32917 times; it gained more than 700 "thumbs up" and 30 comments on Youtube.

Inaugurate

The definition of *inaugurate* – "to begin or introduce a system, policy, or period or to admit someone formally into public office" is given. Next it is said that Latin words *avis* – "bird", and *garrire* – to talk (illustrated with a profile of a face with typical Roman nose and with speech balloons), formed together the word *augur* – a person communicating with birds (here the same face appears, speaking with two birds using speech balloons), a religious official (here follows a photograph of the Roman altar from Vicus Sandaliarius showing Augustus as an augur along with Livia and Gaius). An augur predicted future by observing birds and helped making important decisions (here we can see once again the "Roman-profile" face with a hand holding a spyglass; next a man's figure that has a shape of Rodin's *Thinker* and a think balloon with birds inside it) based on his interpretation of birds' behaviour (here we can see seven small birds flying through the page, next – another bird is singing) expressing the gods' will (illustrated with a lightning). Next the word *inaugurare* is explained – "to see omens from the flights of birds and, then later, to consecrate or act when such omens are favorable" (once again birds are flying through the page, now forming a dollar "$" sign), which was the necessary condition for Roman officials to perform their duties (this time birds form a shape of a wreath). In the end it is said that the word became English i*naugurate* and has been adopted as part of political language, without strictly religious context.

The section "Think" contains 4 questions; "Dig Deeper" contains a brief text with links to online Latin dictionary (accessed: August 21, 2018), Wikipedia entry on "augur", and to some resources on inauguration speeches of U.S. presidents; the section "Discuss" contains 1 guided discussion: "In the United States, we inaugurate our new presidents on January 20th (…). Can you imagine why we might have picked that date? (…)" with no responses so far.

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Till September 22, 2017 the video has been viewed 29101 times; it gained more than 500 “thumbs up” and 52 comments on YouTube.

Dynamite

The definition of *dynamite*: “an explosive consisting of nitroglycerin, typically molded into sticks” is followed by the information that the word by coincidence is related to the word *dynasty* and “has as much to do with familial persuasion as it does with etymology”. Then a few facts about Alfred Nobel are mentioned: he was an engineer and in 1850 learned about the invention of nitroglycerin by Ascanio Sobrero (all these statements are accompanied successively by illustrations showing a stick of dynamite, a genealogical tree, photographs of Nobel and Sobrero, the chemical formula of nitroglycerin, and a shotgun). Nobel and his father started to experiment, as a result, Alfred's brother died and a prohibition of nitroglycerin tests in Stockholm was announced; then, Nobel started to work elsewhere and managed to transfom liquid nitroglycerin into an explosive paste (these statements are illustrated by a drawing of chemical laboratory, a map of Stockholm, and a drawing of a detonator). Nobel called his invention dynamite using the root of Greek *dynamis* – power (illustrated by a muscled arm) and the suffix -ite. Afterwards, when he became rich, he set up a fund that serves to reward excellent scientists, authors and peace advocates (here a photograph of Nobel Prize medal is shown).

The section “Think” contains 3 questions; “Dig Deeper” contains a brief text with references to Wikipedia entries and other online resources on how dynamite and nitroglycerin work, what dynasty is, who Alfred Nobel and Ascanio Sobrero were; the section “Discuss” contains 2 open discussions and 1 guided discussion: “Why did Alfred Nobel use his vast fortune to establish the Nobel Prize?” with 1 answer so far.

Till September 22, 2017 the video has been viewed 30777 times; it gained more than 400 “thumbs up” and 30 comments on YouTube.

Venom

The narrator defines *venom* as “the poisonous fluid secreted by animals, like snakes and scorpions, typically transmitted by bite or sting”; images of both these animals are shown one after another.

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Afterwards, he speaks about the Indo-European root *wen* and its meaning: “to desire”, “strive for”, which is the source of such words as “win” (illustrated with a sports cup), “wish” (illustrated with the star-spangled sky); and about its form *wenes*, connected with the name of the goddess Venus (illustrated with a small colored reproduction of Botticcelli's classical painting), by the Greeks called Aphrodite (illustrated with a Louvre statue of Aphrodite “Venus Genetrix”) and by the Egyptians Hathor (illustrated with a hieroglyphic drawing of a goddess with cow's head). Then we see the image of an arrow shot from a bow, which at the next page brakes a heart; and the word *wenesom*, “love potion”, is introduced. *Wenesom* has been transformed into *venënum*, at first meaning a substance arousing strong reactions in the body (illustrated with a vintage-style print of a man suffering from a headache follows), then – a poison (illustrated with a bottle with a “danger” skull icon). It was a shortening of *venënum* that led to the birth of the word *venom* – as we find out from the final statement.

The section “Think” contains 3 questions; “Dig Deeper” contains a brief text with references to information about venomous animals and about ancient goddesses of love mentioned in the video; the section “Discuss” contains 1 open discussions and 1 guided discussion: “Venom can also mean 'extreme malice or spite.' How does this second definition relate to the first?” with 3 answers so far.

By September 22, 2017 the video has been viewed 22284 times; it gained more than 450 “thumbs up” and 34 comments on YouTube.

Sarcophagus

A typical Egyptian coffin opens and the definition of *sarcophagus* is written inside it – “a stone coffin, typically adorned with decorative carvings or inscriptions”. The history of the word is described as “grotesque” as if it came from a cheap horror movie (this opinion is illustrated by a walking mummy). Yet the word comes from the times of the Roman empire (illustrated with the Prima Porta statue of Augustus). Back then, the word *sarkophagos* meant in Greek a limestone used to make coffins. Pliny the Elder's opinion is cited that according to the Romans, limestone which came from a quarry near Troy was able to dissolve bodies and thus was desired as material to produce coffins (these statements are illustrated successively by Pliny's portrait, a map showing the location of Troy, re-animation of a

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decaying body, and an ancient coffin). We are told that Pliny's report may not be fully credible (which is illustrated once again with his portrait and a speech balloon that says: “I tend to exaggerate…”). Then a proper etymology of *sarkophagus* follows: *sark* meant in Greek “flesh” (here we can see a naked body of a dancing woman…), and *phagein* – “to eat” (…and a vintage drawing of a young man greedily eating while writing). In the end a conclusion: “from flesh-eating stone to stone coffin” is the etymology that fits the place where people find their final resting place.

The section “Think” contains 4 questions; “Dig Deeper” contains a brief text with references to photos and information about ancient sarcophagi, along with the Wikipedia entry *Sarcophagus*; the section “Discuss” contains 1 open discussion and 1 guided discussion: “Do you have strong opinions about burial? What are they?” with no answers so far.

By September 22, 2017 the video has been viewed 29327 times; it gained more than 500 “thumbs up” and 32 comments on YouTube.

Gorgeous

Gorgeous, meaning “beautiful or very attractive” has its roots in Latin, where *gurges* meant “whirlpool”, and, because of the similarity of shapes, it also started to mean “throat” (these statements are illustrated with an animated drawing of whirlpool and an anatomical print of human head with the throat marked in red letters). In the 14th century the term came to England (which is illustrated with a profile of a beautiful woman who swallows a British Union Jack), assumed the form gorge (here we can see that the woman emits the word *gorge* from her mouth), and was used for a “steep and rocky ravine” (illustrated with a romantic vintage drawing), as a ravine has a shape similar to the throat. Meanwhile in France the word assumed the form *gorgias* and meant a wimple, female head covering which covered both head and throat (this information is illustrated with a couple of medieval portraits of women wearing wimples). As mostly wealthy females of a high social position were wearing head coverings, the notion gorgias started to mean “fond of dress and elegant”. In Middle English *gorgias* became *gorgayse*, and finally – *gorgeous*. From that time, we are told, the term “has been linked to all things of exceptionally graceful allure”.

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The section “Think” contains 3 questions; “Dig Deeper” contains a brief text with references to Wikipedia entries *Wimple* and *Beauty*, as well as to a short essay on the meaning of the word *gorgeous*; the section “Discuss” contains 1 open discussion and 1 guided discussion: “Do you think *gorgeous* would have the same modern meaning if... its French ancestor *gorgias* had described an article of clothing worn only by commoners?” with 2 answers so far.

Till September 22, 2017 the video has been viewed 37496 times; it gained more than 726 “thumbs up” and 51 comments on YouTube.

Analysis

The videos serve as a didactic tool, which allows young people receive information about everyday language and explains the terms they can encounter in books, cinema or the media. Noticeable number of videos from the series under discussion refers to words with Latin and Greek roots, so the audience learns about significant role these languages play in shaping our communication today; also, they learn about ancient realities (such as religious life, common beliefs etc.) and their reception in the history of art, politics, or daily life during the following centuries.

The principal and most clear conclusion that can strike the viewers of the series is that languages can evolve in large measure thanks to intercultural contacts. The mutual or one-way transfer of material culture inventions and symbolical concepts can happen both within the same era (as it was with the Romans' interest in Greek and Egyptian coffins) or across different periods (as it was with the use of Latin term for throat in medieval England and France). What is more, many terms carry a load of stereotypes, common opinons and symbolical way of thinking of the community that invented them. Some of them disappear when the word starts to be used in different contexts (such as the connection between inauguration and religious rites); others are long-lasting (such as the association between females and venomous poison). The awareness of such processes provokes one to think critically about the out-dated beliefs that people can unconsciously assume simply thanks to linguistic usus.

Another noticeable intention of the series' creators is to persuade the audience that it is important to study and use unobvious, not frequent words and expressions coming from the ancient times – so we can find

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	out how many complicated historical factors shaped our community's identity. This remark concerns also the viewers for whom English is not a native language – in their vernacular speech there is undoubtedly also a great deal of words with Greek or Roman roots and no less fascinating history.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Divination Egypt Latin (Language) Octavian Pliny the Elder
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Animals Appearances Communication Death Fashion Invention Knowledge Learning
Further Reading	Canahai, Jordan, "The Vanquishing of the Witch Baba Yaga", *Artvoice*, March 24, 2016 (accessed: August 21, 2018). Lawson, David Gregory, "ND/NF Interview: Jessica Oreck", *Film Comment*, March 24, 2014 (accessed: August 21, 2018). Oreck, Jessica, "Never Show What You're Telling", a talk at the Scottish Documentary Institute Masterclass, March 19, 2014 (accessed: August 21, 2018). The crew of the film *Aatsinki. The Story of Arctic Cowboys* (accessed: August 21, 2018).
Addenda	

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