

**Excerpt from the novel *Double Negative*, by David Carkeet –  
a murder mystery set in a child language acquisition research center.**

"I'm fascinated by etymology."

This last sentence was delivered without prelude by the scowling man to his left. Cook [a linguist] could only assume it was meant for him. He said, "Really?"

"I think it's a wonderful thing."

"Good," said Cook, unnerved. The man's expression had not changed as he said this. In fact he barely opened his mouth when he spoke. His face seemed frozen into a permanently mean, unhappy look, somewhat at odds with what he was saying. It was as if he found etymology wonderful as a torture device.

"I learned just the other day that the word *yoga* is akin to *yoke*, that there is an etymological relation between them going back to the ancient Indo-European tongue. That is an interesting fact when you consider that both are concerned with union in a basic sense."

"Yes. That is interesting," said Cook guardedly.

"Also interesting is the fact that common people often alter foreign words in such a way that they become more familiar. Woodchuck, for example, comes from the Cree *otchek*, but *otchek* doesn't look or sound like English, so over time it was transformed into the more palatable *woodchuck*, which looks like a good old native compound. The same thing happened to the Algonquian *musquash* when it became *muskrat*, and the Old French *appentis*, which meant 'something attached to something'—you can see the relation with *append*, *appendix*, and so on—when it became *penthouse*. The transformation always makes the word appear more native: *house*, *rat*, *wood*, *musk*, though ironically *musk* is of probable Sanskrit origin. This transforming process is called 'folk etymology.'

"That's quite right," said Cook.

"The folk make other mistakes with language. I'm thinking of the area of popular explanations for the origins of words. *Yankee* is a good example. There are many fanciful explanations of that word. *Okay* is another. One hears ridiculous stories about these and other expressions."

"Yes. I've heard some of them."

"Or take *Hoosier* [name for a person from the US state of Indiana]. There are those who would have us believe it comes from *who's* there, or even *whose* ear, with silly stories about the occasion for these utterances, when in fact the word is of Cumberland dialect origin, coming from *hoozer*, meaning 'anything unusually large.' Because the truth is less interesting than that other nonsense, the nonsense is forever perpetuated. I can't abide nonsense, and I speak out publicly against it whenever I have the opportunity."

"I share your feelings deeply," said Cook.