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Origins of Leadership: The Etymology of Leadership
Miriam Grace

Introduction

Words build the architecture of our thoughts and paint images in the mind. Like dance and music, they can alter how and what we think about and, as such, are some of the most powerful tools of leadership. “Every adventure of the mind is an adventure with

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words [or] among words, and occasionally an adventure of words...Every word presupposes a context” (Partridge & Crystal, 1981, p. i). Linguists and etymologists are clear that the words a culture develops relate to the characteristics of that culture. “To know the origins of words is to know how men think, how they have fashioned their civilization” (Shipley, 1945, p. vii). To trace the origin of key words in a particular culture’s language, therefore, may lead us to some insights into the crafting of that culture over time.

Bass and Stogdill (1990) identified *leadership* as a “preoccupation...in countries with an Anglo-Saxon heritage (p. 11) and Rost (1991) argued that “leadership helps Americans find significance in their search for the meaning of life” (p. 7). In this paper, I explore the origins of this key word and its evolution to see what may have led to this curious preoccupation. As I trace the history of the word *leadership* from its roots in pre-literate England, I also note the evolution of words related to leadership so that we can look across time at how the English people thought about the process of leading as their civilization matured. This exploration takes us to the most atomic level of leadership studies – at the level of the word and the way the word has been used over time by a particular culture.

Guiding Questions

The guiding questions are: When and where did the word *leadership* originate? What is its etymology? Supporting questions are: (1) What sort of persons, living where, thinking or acting how, at what period of time in their civilization...evolved the sense of the word [*leadership*]?” (Partridge & Crystal, 1981, p. 40) and (2) Is there a relationship between the evolution of the word *leadership* and the cultural evolution of the English people as recorded in the textual record?

Methodology

I employed a qualitative inquiry in my review of the literature. I followed the direction of the great lexicographer Eric Partridge into the literature of etymology. I followed Boggs’ (1990) direction that a thorough literature review on the origins of leadership must include the literary record. Boggs argued for the use of the literary record to understand evolving perceptions of leadership over time. He suggested “One reason to examine human perceptions of leadership as expressed in the pages of Western literature... [is that] literature is an expression of ideas and aspirations... [and is the record] of the ways in which the practice of leadership has been portrayed in human letters over the centuries” (Boggs, p. 167). I also followed Rosen’s (1984) idea that “leadership is a role that is understood in terms of the social and cultural context within which it is embedded and which shapes

the particular forms it takes in any society” (p. 39). I looked specifically at English cultural artifacts in this paper because of the Anglo-Saxon roots of the English word *leadership*.

I investigated ethnogenetic, literary, historical, philosophical, anthropological, and other records to answer my guiding question and supporting questions, keeping in mind Rustow’s (1970) admonition that “historiography [represents] a mixing of fact with legend” (p. 2). I looked for key events or contributions to literature that were clustered around the time that the words *lead*, *leader*, and *leadership* entered the lexicon. I charted these on the continuum shown in Figure 1 and discuss them briefly in the body of this paper.

Findings

When and where did the word *leadership* originate? What is its etymology?

“Etymology, Greek *etumologia*, literally means true, especially the original form and meaning of the word” (Partridge & Crystal, 1981, p. 51). Etymology is the art and science of ascertaining the history of a word. Etymology might also be defined as “the history of change...the changes are of two kinds – in form and meaning” (p. 52). The root word of *leadership* – *lead* – has a history of change in both form and meaning, from its origin (around 800 A.C.E.) to its evolution into the concept of *leader* (around 1300 A.C.E.), and finally to *leadership* in the mid-19th century.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the word *leadership* in the English language over the last 1000 years. The root word of *leadership* is *lead* from the Anglo-Saxon Old English word *loedan*, the causal form of *lithan* – to travel. The Oxford English Dictionary’s (OED) (1989) first entry for the word *lead* is from 825 A.C.E. with a meaning defined as: “to cause to go along with oneself, to bring or take (a person or an animal) to a place.” The OED indicates that a definition of *lead* that is closer to the modern sense of *leadership* appears in the textual record around 1225 A.C.E. with the meaning: “to guide with reference to action and opinion; to bring by persuasion or counsel to or into a condition; to conduct by argument or representation to a conclusion; to induce to do something – said of persons, circumstances, evidence, etc.” The use of the terms *persuasion* and *counsel* here is particularly interesting as these meanings were not attributed to the term *leader* until around 1828, when Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language* introduced the concepts of *influence* and *exercising of dominion* to define the concept of *leading*. In this same Webster’s edition, *leadership* was first defined as: *the state or condition of a leader* (Rost, 1991, pp. 39-40).

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The use of the word *leader* in the English language (beginning around 1300 A.C.E.) demonstrated an awareness of a new role in society. As the “divine right of kings” melted away and statesmen and politicians were documented in the literature and honored in stories, the concept of leading as a key role in society took lexical form. The industrial revolution brought with it the professionalization of certain roles in society. It was at this time that the professional role of leader in organizations came into the vernacular of the English people (around 1828 A.C.E.). By this time, the term *leadership* was gaining usage in politics and was used as a way to describe what leaders do, the process of leading. By 1908, *The New English Dictionary* introduced a psychological definition of *leadership* as “the ability to lead” and by 1925, March and March documented the introduction of the concept of leadership in organizations by identifying *leadership* as one synonym for *manager* (Rost, 1991, p. 41). Rost further suggests that “leadership is a 20th century concept and is related to the democratization of Western civilization” (p. 43). Thus, the “peculiarly English” preoccupation with the role of leadership in society, as noted by Stogdill and Bass (1990), appears to be supported by the textual record.

Before I address the textual record in more detail, I first examine how the leadership literature addresses the subject of the origins of the word *leadership*, briefly discuss the etymology of the suffix *-ship*, and then highlight the timing of the introduction of three related words (headship, manager, and partnership) into the English vernacular to give us an understanding of the evolution of words that are like or connote the meanings we attribute to *leadership* today.

Etymology of Leadership in the Leadership Literature

One of the few leadership scholars who addressed the etymology of leadership, aside from Stogdill and Bass (1990) and Rost (1991), was Eugene E. Jennings (1960), who discussed Greek and Latin words for the concept of leadership, but did not delve into the English roots of this English word. He referenced the work of Hanna Arendt (1958) who indicated “the two Greek verbs *archein* (to begin, to lead, to rule) and *prattein* (to pass through, to achieve, to finish) correspond to the two Latin verbs *agere* (to set in motion, to lead) and *gerere* (the original meaning of which was to bear)” (Jennings, p. 3). Jennings further suggested that this linguistic correspondence demonstrated a continuation of the idea in Plato that differentiated leading and executing – “so that knowing what to do and doing it become different performances that require different kinds of talents” (p. 4), and thus different words. Rost (1991) mentions the meaning of the Latin word *ducere* as “to draw, drag, pull; to lead, guide, conduct” (p. 38) and indicates that it was usually translated using the term *lead*, but he does not mention Jennings’ or Arendt’s work. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) states that the association of *ducere* with lead affected the evolution of the meaning of the term *lead*, but with the sense of “to travel” rather than the meanings that Rost indicated. Stogdill and Bass (1990) take us back to the Egyptian

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hieroglyphs from 2800 B.C.E. and the Instructions of Ptah-Hotep (2300 B.C.E.) for the “start” of these concepts *lead*, *leader*, and *leadership* in the written record.

These contributions from Jennings and Stogdill & Bass are noted here only to indicate that, aside from Rost (1991) very few leadership scholars have attempted to address the linguistic origins of the concept of leadership or the etymology of the word itself.

The Etymology of the Suffix “-Ship”

The suffix *-ship* has a long history in English going back to Old English (OED 1989), but in Modern English the suffix *-ship* has been added only to nouns and usually indicates a state or condition (i.e., authorship, kinship, partnership, relationship), the qualities belonging to a class of human beings (craftsmanship, horsemanship, sportsmanship), or rank or office (ambassadorship). Compounds of the latter kind, where the noun is the designation of a class of human being (e.g., leader), the sense of the qualities or character associated with or the skill or power of accomplishment of the person denoted by the noun, is included in the sense of the compound (e.g., lordship, kingship).

The attachment of *-ship* to the word *leader* is unusual only in its late arrival on the etymological scene. As noted above, many similarly constructed words had fallen into disuse long before the word *leadership* appeared. For example, the following quote from a 1674 document is almost unintelligible: “Supposing that by Almighty power their Sunship and Moonship might be kept by them; without worldship” (OED, 1989).

Etymology of Other Like Words.

Headship is first documented in the English lexicon in 1582, almost three hundred years before the word *leadership* appears. A modern perspective on the meaning of this word is that “Headship is leadership as defined by position – leadership is defined by the relationship between leader and followers...[Headship is associated with] the rights and duties of an office or status in a hierarchical structure whether a formal organization or an informally stratified collective” (Kellerman, 1984, p. 70). Headship is identified with superior position and followership w/subordinate ones. It is more closely aligned with the traditional English version of hierarchical positioning. It is maintained through an organized system and implies a considerable distance between group members and the head (p. 71).

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The word *manager* has French roots and emerges in English around 1598 A.C.E. with the meaning of *handler* because of its roots in Italian and Spanish in the 13th century when it meant “one who works with horses” (OED, 1989). The political sense of the word *manager* comes into the lexicon around 1666 in relation to the British Houses of Parliament as a “member of a committee appointed by one house to confer with a similar committee of the other house” (OED, 1989). It was 1809 before the concept of management of people appeared in the textual record, and this was related to workhouse management. It would still be 30 years before the first documented use of the word *leadership* appeared.

The word *partner* is first documented in the early 13th century with a meaning “of one who has a share with another or one who is associated with another...in the enjoyment or possession of anything” (OED, 1989). The word *partnership* came into usage 200 years later (around 1597 A.C.E.) to reflect relationships in business or politics. The original meaning of the root word *part* (that which together with another or others makes up a whole) seems not to have carried forward into the meaning of *partnership*, until the word was repurposed to express awareness of a shared destiny by modern authors like Meg Wheatley (2002) and Riane Eisler (2002).

What sort of persons ... thinking or acting how, at what period of time in their civilization...evolved the sense of the word *leadership*?

The etymology of *leadership* encompasses the history of the word as well as the cultural and historical context within which the word and its human expression existed. The following sections briefly outline the historical origins of the English people, followed by indicators in the textual record of the creation of an English national sense of self that show some correlation in terms of timing to the evolution of the word *leadership* in English society. These indicators suggest why the English people may have this “preoccupation with leadership.”

The Origins of the English People.

When we trace the origins of the word *leadership* in the English language, the story of the English people emerges. The origins of the English word *leadership* start with the origins of the Anglo-Saxon people in England. The roots of the word *leadership* have changed in both form and meaning over the centuries, but their Anglo-Saxon origin remains clear, with no footprints of the Latin or French or other Indo-European linguistic invader (except perhaps Old Norse). Harris (1999) informed us “England appears to

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have taken its name from the name of the language spoken there by Anglo-Saxons – rather than from the tribe of Angles” (p. 184). Shipley (1945) indicates “Not two percent of our English words rose in the British Isles. Twenty-five percent of our English words migrated along the rivers, fifty percent by the sea” (p. vii). What caused this interesting patchwork of language influences were the parades of people from other lands who came into the British Isles and stayed. Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Goths, Vikings, and Normans all came across the water to displace the people who inhabited Britain. The Britons were overwhelmed by the Anglo-Saxons, who were overtaken by the Vikings, who were overtaken by the Normans in 1065 A.C.E. Following the Norman invasion, as the Anglo-Saxons and Normans began to intermarry, the languages that distinguished them evolved into a shared Middle English” (Harris, 1999, p. 212). Samuel Johnson’s 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* attested to the Anglo-Saxon origins of the English language (Towell, 2003, p. 35). This was also the first English dictionary to define the words *lead* and *leader* (Rost, 1991, p. 38). Despite the twists and turns of English cultural and linguistic history, the word *leadership* has a clear etymological genealogy.

Indicators from the Textual Record

According to Berger and Luckman (1967) language not only reflects reality, it creates reality (Henrickson, 1989, p. 79). It is a phenomenon that is unique to the culture from which it springs (and will change over time, as the culture changes). Cultural expressions, such as leadership, provide us the ability to view this creation of reality in its journey through time. Boggs (1990) argued “in order to undertake a serious study of leadership, it is important to have an understanding of how relevant the idea has been to the human experience.” He argued for the validity of studying the “literature [as] a mirror of human perception and thought... [and suggested] literature may be a more accurate reflection of the human mind than history or even philosophy” (Boggs, p. v).

Henrickson (1989) saw leadership as a cultural force that operates “through the use of language and symbols...shapes perceptions and creates a reality that directs behavior and thought” (p. 360). He explained how literature can be instructive in leadership studies because literary texts are made up of language and symbols that together paint a writer’s understandings of the shared perceptions of a given segment of a culture at a point in time. The Anglo-Saxon King Alfred understood the reality-creating power of literature when he carefully selected which Latin texts would be translated into Old English. As these became the first readings of the English nation in their own language, they created a framework for thought that, in some measure, determined the nation’s future direction.

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According to Harris (1999, p. 180), ethnogenesis is the study of how ethnic groups perceive their origins as recorded in the textual record. Harris suggests that “Bede’s Ecclesiastical History [written around the date that the word *lead* entered the English lexicon – 800 A.C.E.] provided the archtext for English ethnogenesis” (p. 181). Harris suggested that Bede’s History became a model for later historiographers in the translation of mythical ancestors into historical persons and mythical achievements into historical events.

Beowulf is an Old English poem surviving from a 10th century manuscript whose text may have been first written in the 8th century, a time when England was being won over from paganism to Christianity. The story may be the first work of Western fiction where the same character plays both hero and leader. “The hero follows a code that exalts indomitable will and valor in the individual, but society requires a king who acts for the common good, not for his own glory” (Boggs, p. 94). By the 10th century, the roles of heroes and kings were beginning to be differentiated in the minds of the people. A leader’s desire for personal glory placed the entire society at risk (p. 98) and, therefore, Beowulf signaled the beginning of the end of the heroic age. The end of the heroic age in literature came with the death of another king – Arthur (p. 98). According to Boggs (1990), Arthur is the first fully developed leader in Western literature (p 102).

The 1000th anniversary of King Alfred’s birth, 1849, around the time the word *leadership* entered the textual record, brought a focus on England’s Anglo-Saxon origins with Alfred typifying the English archetype. The writers of this era were interested in presenting positive views of their predecessors and they played an active role in the documenting of an English past that in some regard helped to craft the evolving 19th century English national identity. “Of necessity, this undertaking required the enshrining of certain traits, principles, and institutions as peculiarly English. As a result, an array of elements was produced and reproduced to construct and authenticate a set of beliefs and characteristics that defined English identity and constructed a historical basis for English superiority” (Towell, 2003, p. 510).

A conviction was formed during this period that “the English were uniquely suited to govern by virtue of their superior form of government based upon an inherent love of liberty tempered by respect for order. Anglo-Saxonists, liberal or conservative – wanted to celebrate their Anglo-Saxon forebears by stressing an enduring, unique, and superior English system” (Towell, 2003, p. 516). Kemble’s (1849) *The Saxons in England* harks back to the days of Alfred the Great as the seed of the British Parliament and honors that heritage for the 19th century parliamentary structure of the House of Lords and the House of Commons. In religion, too, the 19th century saw a rediscovery of the Anglo-Saxon roots of the Church of England. Sharon Turner (1828) speaks of the “intellect” of the Anglo-Saxon converts to Christianity and Palgrave (1831) says of the earliest Anglo-Saxons that although they

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were “heathens, they were good heathens and were less corrupt than the polished Greeks and Romans” (Towell, 2003, p. 517). The notion of a victorious and virtuous English race recurs throughout the textual record of the 19th century. Towell (2003) tells us “it was one area of agreement that all sides could come together on – Whigs and Tories... the middle class and the aristocracy were all in agreement about the superiority of the English nation (p. 543). Thus, a notion of superiority and an inherent talent for governance became a part of the English psyche that cut across social class and position. It came to be the understood birthright of the English nation to rule. It was in this fervor of revival of the Anglo-Saxon heritage of the English that the word *leadership* entered the textual record.

Boggs (1990) discovered an interesting pattern in the leadership literature he researched. He suggested that “the degree of leadership demonstrated by the protagonist [in a story] was somewhat directly proportional to the level of self-governance of the people” at the time the story was written. He also observed that “as the power of the gods to influence society diminished, the requirement for effective leadership increased” (p. 181).

According to Heinrickson (1999), “Philosophy was the first discipline to identify leadership as a process” that appears in different forms in different cultures (p. 155). Key philosophical theories that may be considered as having influenced English and American cultures may also be considered as having influenced the evolution of the meaning of the word *leadership* as a cultural expression.

In 1690, John Locke recognized the rights of followers to participate in the leadership process. Locke elevated the individual in the moral order and challenged the existing power structure. Rousseau questioned traditional forms of authority and the legitimacy of the ruling class and Nietzsche talked of people creating themselves. Carlyle’s (1846) essay on heroes tended to reinforce the notion of the leader as a great person endowed with unique qualities who could overpower the masses. To William James (1880), the major changes in society were due to great men, and John Stuart Mill “saw great men as individuals who would create as many centers of independent thought as possible and whose powers of persuasion would be used to enlighten the people and give them a robust aptitude for critical, independent thought” (Jennings, 1960, p. 7). Henrickson (1989) argued “Western societies, in particular, have embedded people with the values of individualism, reinforced by philosophies of capitalism, Protestantism, and personal achievement; it is not surprising that we continue to...celebrate heroes...and call them leaders (p. 161).

“Prior to the Renaissance, the connectivity between leaders and followers was essentially a one-way process. The populace had little voice in the process of statecraft and virtually no control over the daily governance of their own societies” (Boggs, 1990, p. 185). By the Renaissance period, common people, the followers, realized they had a role to play. Coriolanus, a little known work

of Shakespeare written at the end of the 16th century, is “Western literature’s first example of a would-be leader placed in conflict, not against rival heroes...but against those very people whom he would lead” (Boggs, 1990, p. 49). “As people began to perceive themselves as participants in, not simply subjects of, the governing process, the entire social fabric changed” (p. 30). Leaders emerged from the common people and took on the mantle of the people as they shed the mantle of religion and the divine right of rule (p. 41).

These selected readings from the textual record show how the evolution in meaning of *leadership* from its roots in Anglo-Saxon culture parallels that of the evolution of the role of leader in English culture. The Anglo-Saxon “preoccupation with leadership” may be an acknowledgement of the importance of the role of leader in society to a culture that may have been unclear about its own genealogy and national identity.

Recommendations for Further Study

Further study of history and literature is warranted to show whether the historical and literary events that occurred around the time that the words *lead*, *leader*, and *leadership* emerged were significant from a leadership studies perspective. Rosen (1984) indicates that the important questions to ask from a historical perspective on leadership studies are “What are the varying forms of leadership as they have emerged over time? How are these tied to the structure of the sociocultural systems from which they are derived? What do they tell us about the possibilities for leadership in modern complex societies?”

Additional study of the textual record, specifically non-fiction literature and the newspapers or other communications media of the time should be investigated to discover when and where people began using these terms in everyday language. Boggs’ (1990) study of key fiction literature of Western civilization revealed that in ancient and modern literary works from Plato to Hesse written over the last 30 centuries, no evidence of the use of the term *leadership* was found. The word *leader* was used, but it was typically used as a title for a warrior whose position placed him at the head of a contingent of soldiers. The verb *to lead* was also used in Beowulf and Shakespeare, but once again, *leading* was simply what one did when one stood at the head of a body of warriors. This pattern can be validated only with further study.

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Summation

Etymological research into the origins of the words *lead*, *leader*, and *leadership* shows that these words have their roots in pre-literate Anglo-Saxon culture, and that the concept of leadership has evolved along with the emergence of the idea of representative government, democracy, and the empowered individual in Western society. Literature demonstrates the evolution of the leader/follower relationship and describes human perceptions of leadership over time.

From a time when heroes were kings (King Alfred), to a time when legendary kings became leaders (King Arthur), to a time when people began to see themselves as having a role in the leadership equation (Coriolanus), to the institutionalization of representative government, the continuum of leadership indicates an evolving role for the “common” person in leadership action. The increasing numbers and complexity of organizations in modern industrial societies by the mid 1800s required large numbers of persons with high levels of technical and administrative expertise (professionals) to manage organizations. Expertise came to be equated with leadership. Personal achievement replaced heredity or other means for determining a basis for leading. Thus began the mid-20th century industrial equation of management with leadership. The emergence of management and organizational theories about leadership led to a shift in focus from who leaders are to what they do. This shift in thinking is reflected in philosophical works beginning in the late 17th century and continuing through the 20th century. The evolution of words similar to or related to the concept of leading at much earlier times tends to suggest that the emergence of the word *leadership* in the 19th century and the subsequent preoccupation with this concept in the 20th Century filled a need for a new role in society that could not be satisfied with the existing vocabulary.

What appears to be evolving across the leadership spectrum, as Rost (1989) and Henrickson (1989) suggested and 21st Century scholars document (Wheatley, 2002; Eisler, 2002), is a post-industrial perspective or “whole systems” approach to leadership where the focus is shifting to the follower (often in collaborative or community-based groups) operating in relationship with the leader and expressing more of a balance in their work between leading and following that looks more like a partnership than either alone. Only the future will reveal how our language and culture will change to reflect this changing focus from a singular leader, guiding people through turbulent times, to a “sharing of the whole” in partnership.

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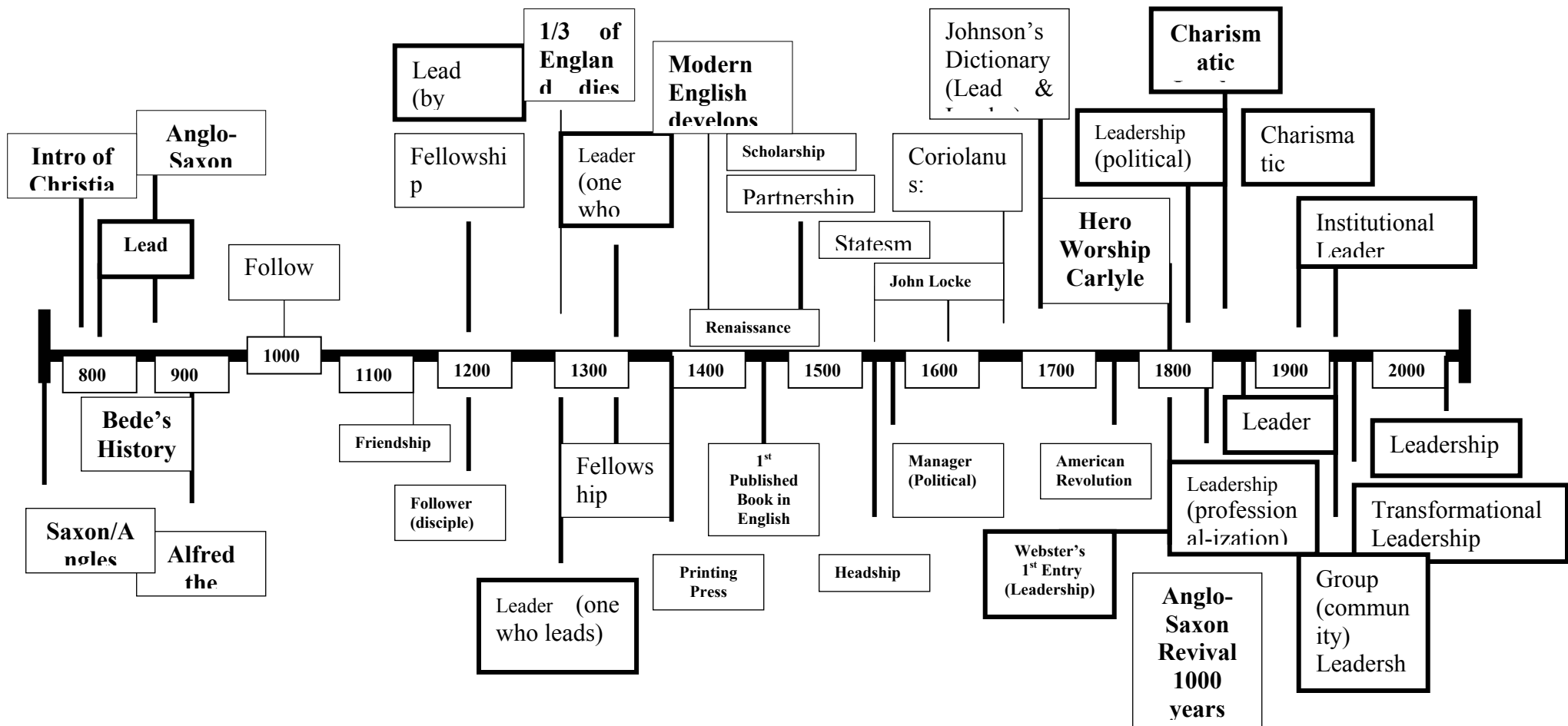
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Figure 1. Etymology of Leadership Continuum



Miriam Grace, "Origins of Leadership: The Etymology of Leadership" presented at the International Leadership Association conference November 6-8 2003 in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico.

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Word	Date Used	Definition at Usage (modern interpretation from Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2003)
Lead	825 C.E.	To cause to go along with oneself
	1225 C.E.	To guide with reference to action or opinion; to bring by persuasion or counsel to a condition; to conduct by argument; to induce to do something.
Leader	1300 C.E.	One who leads.
	1375 C.E.	Leader of laws. One who guides others in action or opinion; one who takes the lead in any business or movement; one who is followed by disciples or adherents.
Leadership	1821 C.E.	The dignity, office or position of a leader, especially of a political party; ability to lead; the position of a group of people leading or influencing others within a given context.
	1858 C.E.	The foremost or most eminent member (of a profession).
Follower	1000 C.E.	One who follows another as his attendant, servant, or retainer.
	1225 C.E.	One who follows another in regard to his teaching or opinions – an adherent or disciple.
Fellowship	1200 C.E.	Companionship, company, society.
	1382 C.E.	Partnership, membership
Friendship	1175 C.E.	The state or relation of being a friend.
Statesman	1592 C.E.	One who takes a leading part in the affairs of a state or body politic; especially one who is skilled in the management of public affairs.
Headship	1582 C.E.	The position or office of head, chief, principal, or supreme governor (political). The first place or position; supremacy, primacy.
Partnership	1576 C.E.	The fact or condition of being a partner; association or participation. Now esp. of relationships in industry and politics.

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