

# Such a small word with such a big story behind it

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Where words come from is something which many people find very interesting.

There is something rather fascinating about the fact that the etymology of the word *persona* lies in the Latin word *persona*, which meant the role taken by an actor in a play.

*Persona* originally meant mask: Roman actors wore masks made of wood or clay which depicted the face of the character they were playing.

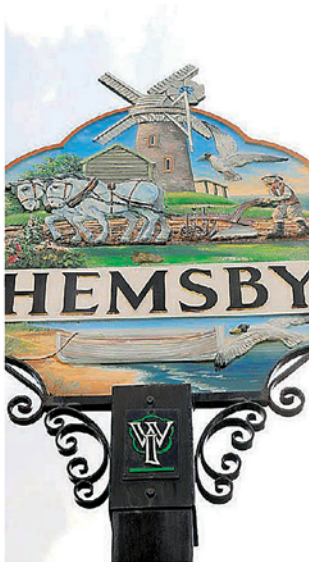
The word probably originally came from Latin *per-sonare*, where *per-* meant through (as in percolate) and *sonare* meant to sound (as in resonate) – the actor had to speak through the mask.

Two-and-a-half millennia later, this two-part compound Latin word has turned into a single English word with a very different meaning.

The portion of our English vocabulary that descends from Latin includes lots of rather grand etymologies like this.

But what about some of our humble little Germanic-origin words?

Every word, however small, has to have come from somewhere.



## ■ What's in a name?

What about “but”, for instance? Intriguingly, this also used to be a two-part compound – the *b-* and the *-ut* actually have their origins in two different

words! In Anglo-Saxon, but was *butan*. It originally meant ‘outside’ and then later on ‘unless’; and it came from an earlier form, *be-utan*.

In our West Germanic parent language, *utan* ‘from outside’ was derived from *ut* ‘out’ – so the second element of modern *but* has the same origin as modern *out*.

And the *be-* part is just as interesting. There was an ancient Indo-European word *bh1*.

This came down into Greek as the second element of *am-phi* ‘round’, as in *amphitheatre*, and it also appeared as the second part of Latin *am-bi*, as in *ambidextrous*.

The corresponding form in ancient Germanic was the adverb of place *bi*, also meaning ‘around, about’.

This developed through time down two different paths.

In one direction, it became the Scandinavian word *by*, meaning a settlement – the area around a place where people lived.

We can still see this today in many English place-names ending in *-by* which are found in areas settled by the Danes.

In Anglo-Saxon it became *bi* meaning ‘by, near, in’ – which survives as our modern word *by*.

But Anglo-Saxon *bi* also had a weak, unstressed form *be-* which occurred in compounds like *be-yond*, *be-neath*, *be-fore* and *be-tween* – and *be-utan*.

It's astonishing but true that the *b-* in *but* and the *-by* in *Hemsby* were originally the same word.