

Many English words come from Latin, either directly or through French (e.g. *eager*, from *acer* “keen”, via French *aigre*). However, there are also many English words which are related to Latin but not derived from it. This is because English belongs to the Germanic language family, and Germanic and Latin both come from a common linguistic ancestor called Indo-European (or IE for short). Thus, English words of Germanic origin are “cognates” (relatives) rather than descendants of Latin words from the same IE root. The cognates do not always look alike, because pronunciation and spelling changed as the languages went their separate ways. For instance, Latin *dens* and English *tooth* have not a single letter in common, yet both come from IE *dent-* “tooth” (Germanic *tanth-*).

Latin and English cognates often have identical meanings, despite differences in spelling. So, if you can recognize the related English word, it may help you remember the meaning of the Latin word. Thus Latin *ferre* and English *bear* both mean “to carry” (IE root *bher-*). Other Latin verbs that mean exactly the same as their English cognates include: *domare/tame* (IE *deme-*); *frangere/break* (*bhreg-*); *gnoscere/know* (*gno-*); *sedere/sit* (*sed-*). Latin nouns with synonymous English cognates include: *frater/brother* (*bhrater-*); *fundus/bottom* (*bhudh-*); *genu/knee* (*genu-*); *anser/goose* (*ghans-*); *cornu/horn* (*ker-*); *cor/heart* (*kerd-*); *labium/lip* (*leb-*); *lux/light* (*leuk-*); *nox/night* (*nek-*); *piscis/fish* (*peisk-*); *stella/star* (*ster-*); *sudor/sweat* (*sweid-*); *ventus/wind* (*wento-*); *verbum/word* (*wer-*); *radix/root* (*wrad-*); *iuvenis/youth* (*yeu-*); *iugum/yoke* (*yeug-*). The same occurs with a few adjectives: *crudus/raw* (*kreue-*); *unus/one* (*oino-*); *pauci/few* (*pau-*); *rufus/red* (*reudh-*).

More often, however, the English and Latin cognates have different shades of meaning, developed from their common root. IE *bhle-* “to howl” gives Latin *flere* “to weep”, English *bleat*. Latin *dicere* and English *teach* both come from IE *deik-* “to show”. Similarly the Latin-English pairs *ducere/tug* (*deuk-* “to lead”); *durus/tree* (*dreu-* “to be firm”); *gallus/call* (*gall-* “to call”); *gelare/chill* (*gel-* “cold”); *gens/kin* (*gen-* “to give birth”); *gustare/choose* (*geus-* “to taste”); *vivere/quick* (*gwigwo-* “alive”); *capere/have* (*kap-* “to seize”); *carpere/harvest* (*kerp-* “to gather”); *clangere/laugh* (*kleg-* “to cry”); *lectus/lair* (*legh-* “to lie”); *ligare/leech*

(*leig-* “to bind”); *magnus/much* (*meg-* “great”); *molare/meal* (*mel-* “to crush”); *pluere/flow* (*pleu-* “to flow”); *spolia/spill* (*spel-* “to split”); *sternere/strain* (*ster-* “to spread”); *strigil/strike* (*streig-* “to rub”); *sonare/swan* (*swen-* “to sound”); *vigilare/wake* (*weg-* “to be lively”); *vehere/wagon* (*wegh-* “to transport”); *videre/wise* (*weid-* “to see”); *vestis/wear* (*wes-* “to clothe”); *vertere/worm* (*wer-* “to turn”: we still say “the worm has turned”).

The most interesting cognates are those whose meanings seem completely unrelated, until we compare them with the IE root. Who would have suspected that *habere* and *give* come from the same root, *ghabh-*, which means both “to give” and “to receive”? *Hostis* “enemy” and *guest* are almost opposites, but both are derived from *ghosti-* “stranger”. Latin *cella* (the innermost part of a temple) has nothing to do with *hell*, except for their common root *kel-* “to cover, conceal”. The Latin noun *pecten* “comb” seems unrelated to our verb *fight*, yet both come from *pek-* “to pull hair”. Similarly *pons* “bridge” and *find* have the common root *pent-* “to go”; *spes* “hope” and *speed* both come from *spe-* “to thrive”; *toga* and *thatch* from (*st)eg-* “to cover”; *terra* and *thirst* from *ters-* “to dry” (we still speak of “dry land”); *vitis* “vine” and *wire* from *wei-* “to twist”; *velle* and *well* (and *wealth*) from *wel-* “to wish”; *Venus* and *win* from *wen-* “to desire”; *vir* and *world* from *wiro-* “man”.

Lastly, can you think of a Latin cognate for our word *girdle*? Believe it or not, it’s *hortus* “garden”. Both come from IE *gher-* “to enclose”.