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What is a pipedream?

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A pipedream is defined by the OED as “a fantastic or impracticable notion or plan, compared to a dream produced by smoking opium; a ‘castle in the air’”, and Chambers 20th Century Dictionary describes it as “a futile and unreal hope or fancy such as one has when relaxing while smoking a pipe (orig. an opium-smoker’s fantasy).”

The word is first recorded in the OED in 1890. The first two records in the Dictionary are these:

1890 *Chicago Daily Tribune* 11 Dec. II. 9/3 It [*sc.* aerial navigation] has been regarded as a pipe-dream for a good many years.
1904 B. VON HUTTEN Pam 238 Look at the sea, and tell me if, in your wildest pipe~dream, you ever saw anything lovelier.

A modern example from the BNC is the following:

Would it not have been a pipedream only six weeks ago to think that the Berlin Wall would be knocked down?

And here is one from the Cobuild Corpus:

With European unity seeming more and more of a pipedream, it is good to know that the French talent for bureaucracy is still alive[...]

It so happens that a word *pipedream* (*pípdream*) existed as early as Old English, long before anyone had smoked opium in England. Its meaning was very different from the present-day one; it meant ‘piping, sound of pipes’. Clark Hall & Meritt (1960) translate *pípdream* as ‘piping’. Bosworth and Toller (1898–1921) give *píp-dream* as ‘the sound of a pipe’ and illustrate it with the following example:

Pípdram singan gehyre gehende blisse
‘to hear (in a dream) the sound of the pipe shews joy at hand’
[Organa cantare audierit uicinas letitias]

OE *dream* means ‘joy, pleasure, gladness, mirth, rejoicing’ and ‘the sound of a musical instrument; music, minstrelsy, melody; noise, sound’ (OED), and is commonly associated with musical instruments, often pipes, in OE and ME. An example from Ælfric’s *Homilies* (Th. II. 86/35, c. 1000) is this:

He zehyrde micele stemne..swylce bymena dream
 'he heard a strong voice, like the sound of trumpets'

and a ME example is one from *Trinity College Homilies* (115, c1200):

Ðe bemene drem þe þe engles blewen.
 'the sound of the trumpets that the angels blew'

and one from *The Owl and the Nightingale* (MS. Jes-O 21, c 1250) is this:

Bet þuzte þe drem þat he were Of harpe & pipe þan he nere
 'It seemed better to the sound that it should come From harp and pipe
 than not at all'

Dream in the OE-ME sense of 'sound, noise' is documented in writing until the beginning of EModE. Cf. the example quoted by the MED:

Hee chaces by enchaument þe chamber within And with a dragones
 drem dreew too þe bedde. (*Alex.Maced.* 781 c1600 (c1300))
 '...with the roar of a dragon...'

and *dream* in the ModE sense of 'dream' is first found in ME. The first example in the OED is from *Genesis and Exodus* (1179 c. 1250):

On dreme him cam tiding.
 'He had some news in his dream.'

There must then have been a period, perhaps late ME, when the two meanings coexisted, or rather, when there were two homonyms in the language.

The widely different meanings of ModE *dream* and OE *dréam* make their possible interrelation somewhat problematic, see Onions (1966). But could ModE *pipedream* be derived from OE *þíþdréam*, despite their semantic divergences? Although ModE *pipedream* 'sound of instruments' is not recorded in the OED, it does not seem too fanciful to imagine that the OE-ME word lived on in the spoken language or in the dialects. There is some evidence to support such an assumption.

First, a compound of the type "A causes B", as in *pipe-dream*, (*flea-bite, exam pressure*) is much more likely with B meaning 'sound, noise' than 'dream'. Cf. *drum sound, guitar sound, machine gun sound, keyboard sound, organ sound, piano sound, siren-sound, string sound; aircraft noise, animal noise, engine noise, guitar noise, machine noise, microphone noise, road noise, tape noise, television noise, traffic noise*. With (ModE) *dream* 'dream' the pattern is normally "A is the object of B": *career dream, championship dream, World Cup dream, Premiership dream, promotion dream, title dream*, or A is the time-location of B: *boyhood dream, childhood dream, day-dream, a six-year dream*. (Examples come from the Cobuild Corpus.) If *dream* in

pipe dream means ‘dream’, the compound would therefore more naturally be interpreted as ‘a dream about a pipe’ than as ‘dream caused by a pipe’, whereas if *dream* in *pipe dream* means ‘noise’, the compound would naturally be interpreted as ‘noise caused by a pipe’.

Secondly, there seem to be traces of the original meaning of *pipe dream* in popular culture. The Internet provides many pieces of evidence. Several musical bands call themselves Pipe Dream, a record company is named Pipedream Music, a group of pipers (bagpipe players) are called Pipe Dreams Music (“Bagpipe Music For All Occasions”) and a newspaper article on a new organ is headlined “Pipe Dreams. Handcrafted Organ Is Music to Students’ Ears”. The *Larchmont Gazette* of November 3, 2005, introduces its article on another new organ in this way:

“I think I now know the meaning of a ‘pipe dream,’” said David Brandom, a Larchmont musician and chair of the Organ Implementation Committee at the Larchmont Avenue Church, as he introduced the new Konzelman pipe organ to the congregation on Sunday, September 26. Reverend Bill Crawford, pastor at LAC, added his accolades from the pulpit. “Such gifts of music stir and lift us, awaken and inspire us,” he said, adding that it is “such a beautiful sound, indeed a joyful noise.”

It is obvious that the two gentlemen in the quotation are referring both to the old sense of *pipe dream* and to modern organ pipes, perhaps with an additional sly allusion to the modern sense of *pipedream*.

There now seem to be two possibilities. One is that the modern word *pipedream* is the direct descendant of OE *pipdréam*. In that case, it will have lived on in the spoken language through the centuries and been reinterpreted after (1) *dream* ‘noise’ had been replaced by *dream* ‘dream’ and (2) tobacco- and opium-smoking had become a reality. If so, *pipedream* would owe its form to the descendant of OE *pipdréam* and its meaning to changed nonlinguistic circumstances.

The other possibility, sadly, is that the formal (near-)identity of OE *pipdréam* and ModE *pipedream* is just a coincidence.

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