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PERCEPTUAL ETYMOLOGY.
A SOCIAL ASPECT OF ETYMOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Abstract

Perceptual etymology is a new term which is introduced here to refer to an anthropological rather than a purely linguistic interpretation of the origins of words. This author tries to show in what way different aspects of our understanding of etymology can be combined to create a coherent and possibly full image of a word.

1

The term *perceptual etymology* has been used for the first time in linguistic literature in 2021 (M. Stachowski 2021). It was not, however, presented and discussed in detail there, which is why I decided to explain it in a little more detail.

Generally, two types of etymology have been known up till now: the scholarly (or, linguistic) and the folk etymology. Scholarly etymology – seriously underpinned by historical phonetics and word formation, comparative data, semantic parallels, philological attestations, precise references and a thorough discussion – has been considered *the* etymology in the strict sense of the word. The opposite is folk etymology – a naïve way of making borrowings and obsolete words more familiar by means of distorting their form[1] or fabricating a story about how they came into being.[2]

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[1] E.g. Latin *asparagus* > English *(a) sparrowgrass*.

[2] E.g. about *marmalade*: '[…] the story is that when Mary, Queen of Scots was ill, her French maid would say *Marie est malade* ("Mary is sick"). Then, someone would bring her preserved fruit to make her feel better.' (www.babel.com/en/magazine/english-folk-etymology).

Folk etymology is usually ignored by linguists who, at best, adduce an example or two during their lectures to the merriment of the audience.[3] In such situations, the more imaginative stories are valued higher because they cause louder laughter. Nobody asks whether any of the two main devices of folk etymology is better or closer to scholarly etymology. They are both rejected, without a second thought, as being unworthy of the name of etymology. However, they are not equal. Distorting is completely unlike scholarly etymology where the form of the etymologized word is never intentionally altered. By contrast, a fabricated story and a scholarly etymology are almost identical – they are both verbal explanations and the only difference is that a folk etymologist has never learned the criteria or the methods of rigorous etymological research. This lack of linguistic training reveals itself in that the comparative data are not adduced, historical phonetics, philological attestations, and word formation patterns are ignored, etymological literature is not consulted, and so on. In theory, none of these shortcomings excludes the possibility that a folk etymologist could after all be right, but I am not aware of any example to this effect.[4]

A special combination of both types is what is usually called an "inspired etymology" in Polish (*etymologia natchniona*) or a "learned folk etymology" in German (*gelehrte Volksetymologie*). Anatoly Liberman calls it a "misguided learned etymology" and says it "does not differ from folk etymology" (Liberman 2005: 50). But this means that a "(misguided) *learned* etymology" is equal to a "*folk* etymology" which is a surprise. One may assume that this is just an unhappy wording, and be right, because both of these etymologies are worthless from the linguistic point of view. There is, however, an important difference between them. An inspired or misguided etymology is published in a scholarly book or journal, equipped with footnotes and references and yet fanciful and far from the requirements of linguistic methodology. The term is an evaluation rather than a specific type of etymology. An "inspired/misguided etymology" is intended as a scholarly one and should be included in that type.

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[3]   This approach can sometimes be fairly pointless, see, for instance, the evolution of French *fesser* 'to give a slap, spank' caused by a popular association of the original *fessier* 'to whip with a switch/osier' with *fesse* 'buttock' (von Wartburg 1931 [= cited after Schmitt 1977: 137sq.; cf. his conclusion on p. 138, fn. 2: "Autrefois on fessait avec des fesses, aujourd'hui on fesse les fesses"]). Another French example, first given by Ferdinand de Saussure, is the distortion of French *maladerie* (< *malade* 'sick, ill') to *maladrerie* 'leprosorium, lazar house' under the influence of the word pair *ladre* 'miser, stingy' : *ladrerie* 'miserliness' (Testenoire 2018: 77).

[4]   Sometimes, a proposition resides halfway between folk and scholarly etymology. If one thinks the ornithological name *secretary bird* comes from the word *secretary*, one is, to an extent, correct. Another problem is whether *secretary* (bird) is the same word as *secretary* (human being), or maybe, the Arabic phrase *ṣaqr aṭ-ṭair* 'hunter bird' (for a discussion see Urban 2008: 196). In the latter case, the change of the Arabic phrase into English *secretary* should be considered a result of folk etymology, but the opinion that *secretary bird* comes from *secretary* is technically true as long as it does not involve the assertion that it is the same word as *secretary* (human being).

2

The main subject of this paper is what I have called a "perceptual etymology". We have all more than once observed that non-etymologists link a word to a language that is just one of several languages on the long way from the ultimate source to the direct one.

A good example is the Slovene word *čevapčič* "grilled meatball or meatroll" (M. Stachowski 2021). It displays an obviously Croatian diminutive suffix *-čić* (> Slovene *-čič*). And yet, in Slovene it is viewed as a Turkish loanword. Why not Croatian? I would suggest the following answer: These words are, in the minds of Slovenes, associated with the Turkish cuisine. For the Slovene society, they represent the Turkish world. Similarly, the salad *insalata romana* will presumably be associated with Rome rather than with France. As a matter of fact, it was invented in Avignon in the 14th century when the Pope temporarily had his residence there (Giani 2009: 49). The wine name *romanìa* will probably point to Romania rather than to Greece although "*Romanìa* was the Medieval denomination of the Byzantine Empire" and the wine *romanìa* is a Greek invention (Giani l.c.). In both latter cases the very sound of the word *roman(ì)a* evokes an incorrect association. Little wonder, then, that a layman might think, or even claim, that the etymological sources of these terms are the names *Roma* and *România*, respectively. Linguistic arguments can hardly change imaginations, associations and feelings.

It is not too rare for non-etymologists to express their opinion in no uncertain terms, "Slovene *čevapčič* is a Turkish word". This is, superficially, a very similar statement to "English *valid* is a French word." But there is a significant difference between them. The latter reflects linguistics, and the former cultural tradition and associations which are still alive in the society.

A very special case is the Turkish term *altın bez* 'gold cloth, cloth of gold', a type of fabric interspersed with golden strands (< Turkish *altın* 'gold; golden' + *bez* 'cloth, fabric'), and its Polish reflexes. The term was borrowed into Old Polish as *altembas* (first attested in 1496 as ‹altabassa› = *altābassa*, presumably genitive *altambasa*; cf. 1500 ‹altambasz› = *altambasz* id.), but more interestingly, beside being borrowed it was also translated into Polish as *złotogłów* (< *złot-y* 'golden' + *głów* < *głowa* 'head'). Why should a type of cloth be called "golden *head*"? The original Turkish phrase *altın bez* was first distorted to *altambas ~ altembas ~ altambasz* and then, it seems, misinterpreted as a reflex of an erroneously reconstructed Turkish phrase *altın baş (< Turkish *baş* 'head') and, thus, translated as *złoto-głów* into Polish (S. Stachowski 2014: 17sq.). That was, of course, a case of folk etymology put into practice. Above, I have announced this example as *a very special case*. It is because three aspects can be observed here: (1) the linguistic, scholarly etymology: Polish < Turkish *altın bez*, literally 'golden cloth' (2) folk etymology: Turkish > Polish *złotogłów*, literally 'golden head'; (3) perceptual etymology: the deep belief of Polish historians and art historians that this is a Turkish word, just translated. This shows that even a word composed of Polish elements and motivated by a Polish folk etymology which was inspired by a distortion in Polish, can still be viewed as a "(principally) Turkish term."

Similarly peculiar is the story of the German word *chic* 'chic, elegant'. It was borrowed from French in the 19th century but, in French, it is a German loanword, that is: Low German *Schick* 'adequacy, match, (well-)fittedness' (cf. *schicklich* 'decorous, appropriate', *sich schicken* 'to be proper/suitable') > French *chic* 'decorous, elegant' > German *chic* id. Why is the German word *chic* written according to French orthography even though its ultimately German origin is commonly known and accepted? One could say, the word was borrowed with its meaning 'chic' from French and is, thus, distinct from the Low German noun *Schick*. That is absolutely correct. One cannot, however, help asking whether cultural associations were really not involved here. Words concerning beauty, good style and elegance are generally first of all associated with the French culture (that is why Polish juveniles more often than not believe that the title of the fashion magazine *Glamour* is a French word and they read it [gla'mur]; here, in addition, the spelling with ‹ou› as in French *amour* 'love' is probably significant, too). Even though etymologically trained German linguists preferred to maintain the original French orthography because the word for 'chic, elegant' *was borrowed* from French, one is rather certain that an average German-speaking person accepts that orthography because they think the word *just is* French.

The stereotypical image of certain cultures impinges also on experts in etymology. The fact that it is German, rather than Czech, that is associated with higher culture in Eastern Europe must have been the reason why some authors considered Polish *kielich* 'goblet, chalice' to be a borrowing from German even though its route has in fact been a little longer: Polish *kielich* < Old Czech *kelich* < Middle High German *kel(i)ch* < Latin *calix* (for that and some other examples see Hentschel 2017: 124 sq. and passim).

Social tradition lives its own life. It is resistant to both scholarly and folk etymology and it has no ambition to explain the original formation or meaning of a given word. This is because:

> Perceptual etymology concerns itself with indicating the language
> which represents, in the eyes of the borrowing society, the culture
> most associated with the specific object or phenomenon.

The term "associative etymology" appears to be similar but its meaning is, in actual fact, quite different. For instance, Myrvoll (2021: 43) recently used it in connection with the Nordic rendering of the name of Jerusalem: "[…] the Norsemen, by naming the city *Jórsalir*, […] made it more familiar to them by assimilating it to names for other important places in the North, like *Jórvík* and *Uppsalir* […]." This term is used in a very similar context also in German and Romance studies (cf. Miettinen 1965). Thus, "associative etymology" is just folk etymology and its task is incorporating foreign words in the lexicological system of the borrowing language.[5]

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[5]   Cf. also (1) "Der Begriff *Volksetymologie* erfreut sich […] immer noch großer Verbreitung […]. Von den alternativen Termini wie Paretymologie, […], assoziative Etymologie, Wortanalogie

3

The origin of the term "perceptual etymology" is easy to explain. It is a parallel to "perceptual dialectology," a term known as early as the 1930s even though the research into this field "only gained greater impetus in 1980s and 1990s" (K. Stachowski 2017: 221; for further details and references: see K. Stachowski 2018). The central problem of perceptual dialectology is how dialects and dialectal diversity are perceived by non-philologists. It is arguably an interesting way to approach the question of why some societies readily accept the status of dialect for their ethnolect whereas other groups insist on seeing it as a separate language – for instance, Swabian as a dialect of German on the one hand, and on the other, Dolgan which by Dolgans themselves is perceived as separate from Yakut.

The main question of perceptual etymology is quite similar: Why are some words perceived by non-specialists as belonging to languages other than those identified by professional etymologists?

The gap between genetic classification and social perception can also be observed in other contexts for that matter. The word *Soviets* was used during the Soviet Union for sundry representatives of that state and its culture, regardless of their ethnic affiliation, and it continues to be used for those people even today despite the fact that the Soviet state does not exist any longer. What is more, the same word *Soviets* can also be applied to young people, born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and living in countries other than Russia; thus, a young citizen of Ukraine or Transnistria can be called a *Soviet* even though they might have never lived in the Soviet Union at all. But this does not apply to the Baltic states, that is Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Those have always been viewed as the most European (~ Western) and least Soviet (~ Eastern) republics in the Soviet Union. So, it appears, also the term *Soviet* is in fact used according to the cultural perception rather than to the genetic (= political and national) affiliation of the characterized person.

4

The next question is the relationship between the three types of etymology so far discussed in the context of classification of research methods. I think the following distribution can easily be accepted:

(a) linguistic or scholarly etymology → linguistics[6]
(b) folk etymology → psychology, psycholinguistics[7]
(c) perceptual etymology → sociology, sociolinguistics

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u.a. hat sich keiner als erfolgreicher Konkurrent behauptet" (Panagl 2005: 1346); (2) "Es gibt zwei Antworten auf die Frage nach dem Woher der Wörter: eine sprachwissenschaftlich begründete und eine assoziative" (Greule 2012: 41).

Thus (a) and (b) both aim to identify the original form and meaning of a given word, which puts them in opposition to (c). On the other hand, (b) and (c) represent two aspects of anthropology and, as such, contrast with (a). This can be represented in the form of a table:

lexical connection	linguistic etymology	linguistics	
	folk etymology	psychology	anthropology
cultural connection	perceptual etymology	sociology	

From a strictly linguistic point of view, both the folk and the perceptual etymology are worthless. But the purely linguistic perspective does not encompass the mental and social status of words. These two aspects complete the linguistic image of a specific word in much the same way as ice and steam complete the image of water – they cannot replace water but *are* other forms of water.

5

Finding out how a loanword is perceived by non-etymologists is not always easy. One possibility is searching, in linguistic and popular publications, for phrases such as *XY is a French word borrowed via German into Polish*, which clearly shows that the author associates the Polish word with French rather than with German. The question "But why?" is in this case entirely justified.

Another method is to compare dictionaries. The Turkish word *maki* 'maquis (shrub vegetation typical of Italy and some other Mediterranean regions)' has a phonetic shape which clearly points to French *maquis* id. Yet, two out of three Turkish dictionaries that Hilal O. Altun compared, inform the reader that the word is of Italian origin even though it does not phonetically match the Italian counterpart *macchia* id. (Altun 2021: 62). Apparently, Turkish lexicographers thought the word Italian because its meaning concerns Italy. We might, thus, say Turkish *maki* is linguistically a French loanword but perceptually an Italian one.

A similar geographical association must have misled the authors of a Turkish dictionary who classified the Turkish word *kolonya* 'eau de cologne' as a borrowing

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[6]   The fact that the attribute 'scholarly' is only connected with linguistics is not an attempt on my part to evaluate sciences. My reason for such use is very different: A hypothesis within linguistic etymology is a result of linguistic research; folk and perceptual etymologies, meanwhile, are objects rather than effects of research. Similarly, if a medical professional makes a statement, this statement is part of medical knowledge whereas his or her patient's claim might become an object of medical research but it is not part of medicine.

[7]   Folk etymologies are not part of linguistics because they have no linguistic task to achieve. Instead, "they exist to justify the name rather than find out its ancient meaning" (Liberman 2005: 12).

from German (Altun 2021: 65) because *Cologne* is a city in Germany (two other dictionaries give the correct information: < Italian *Colonia*).

An awareness of perceptual etymology is only just being born. One cannot offer a ready list of its methods right now. The attractive idea of an etymological dictionary which gives, whenever possible, all three etymologies seems quite remote. But nevertheless attractive.

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