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Language Naming Principles

A Study in Etymological Typology

Etymology as a synchronic discipline

Etymology *sensu stricto* is a synchronous discipline.

Looking for “the etymology” of a linguistic sign is explaining in what way it is motivated, i.e. why a thing is named the way it is by relating its word to other words or forms (Saussure).

More abstract level: Looking for general principles underlying these motivations (Trier, Herbermann).

Motivation can only be investigated by looking at the moment of nomination, when the sign is first created. This is the fundamental etymological operation and is synchronic (Saussure, Herbermann).

Tracing a word back through its history of changes (“word biography” after Trier, Herbermann) is in many cases a prerequisite for that etymological operation, but not the essential part of it (Saussure).

Naming (nomination) principles

- › First Suggested by Trier (1955): *ergological principle*
- › We name things after the way they are intertwined with our daily lives of handling, working, producing, using them, how they are relevant to us:
 - › e.g. Latin *planta* 'plant, seedling' from id. 'sole of the foot', after the practice of compacting the soil around a planted seedling by treading it down with the feet
- › The ergological principle underlies most etymologies of artifacts and of many domesticated flora and fauna.
- › Many ancient motivations remain opaque since we cannot trace the words back far enough or cannot relate them to other words; recent word-formations are in most cases more transparent (i.e. "intersubjectively evident") so that we can more easily access their motivation.



Naming (nomination) principles

- ›The ergological principle can be differentiated into subtypes that specify more precisely in what way the referent is intertwined with human work.
- ›Herbermann (1998) suggested over a dozen such principles (technological, teleological, horological, topological, hylological, aitiological, praxeological, trophological, consumer-oriented, producer-oriented, symptom-oriented, container/storage-oriented, value-oriented, obstacle/hardship-oriented, etc.).
- › A separate subclassification are phenomenological nominations (age, size, shape, color, sound, smell, touch, consistency, salient feature, etc.).
Herbermann subsumes these to ergological, but they show characteristics of a different type as well...



Naming (nomination) principles

- › There are other (macro) principles that are not ergological, but
 - › Contemplative-aestheticizing
 - › Magical-mythological
 - › Honorific-associative
- › Words created through these principles are supposedly historically younger than ergological formations (Trier, Herbermann).



Language names – general remarks

- › One has to distinguish *exonyms* and *endonyms* (autonyms), the former sometimes become converted into the latter, often by means of reappropriation (e.g. *Tsalagi/Cherokee*).
- › Language names are in many cases based on a contrast *us vs. them* which may but need not be parallel to the corresponding endonymic ethnonyms.
- › Endonyms of this kind mostly carry positive connotations while exonyms or allonyms carry negative connotations.

Language names – associative type

- › Language names (*glottonyms*) in many (most?) cases go back to the corresponding names for their speaker communities (*demonyms*, *ethnonyms*) and/or the names of the region where they are/were spoken (*toponyms*), these are basically (metonymic) associative nominations:
 - › *German, Allemand, Saxon, Latina, Magyar, suomi, Tukang Besi, Nederlands*
- › A subtype of these need a word for ‘language, speech’ as their head noun:
 - › *nihon-go, randakel, Bahasa Indonesia, Tiếng Việt, Te Reo Māori*
- › These names often are adjectival or derived from adjectives:
 - › *Friesisch/Friesisch, Frysk, Sächsisch/sächsisch, русский*



Language names – of the people, by the people...

- › 'people': *inuit, dene, dimotiki, deutsch, runa simi* (Quechua)
 - Raute: autonym *Ra'te* may be of Tibeto-Burman origin, from *ra-* 'human' + a person marker, *-to* or *-te*.
- › 'others / not our lg.': *Chantyal* (etc.) *Kham(kura)* for non Nepali lgs.
- › esteem: 'true people', 'real people', 'upright people' etc.
 - *Mala Malasar* 'king of the forest'
 - Pendau: *Umalasa* is a Bugis exonym meaning 'the sick ones'
 - Davawenyo: *Mandaya* can be a derogatory term, meaning 'uneducated people from the hills'
 - *Guarayo* 'savage'
- › Physical features: *Coeur d'Alene, Nez Perce, Big/Smol Nambas*



Language names – metalinguistic principles

- › phenomenological: 'word', 'speech', 'language': *slav(ic)*
- › unintelligibility: *nemec, Welsh, rotwelsch, Berber (< Barbarian)*
- › technological: *ASL, DGS, solresol, silbo gomero*, David Gil's ludling names
- › historical: *Kriol, Tok Pisin, Russonor, Michif*
- › teleological: *Masematte, Volapük, lingua franca*
- › auditive: *Hottentot, Dyalnguy(?)*
- › topological: *xapaitüiso* 'that which comes out of the head'
- › estheticizing: *katharevousa, esperanto, toki pona*
- › mythological: *minangkabau, hawai'i (?)*

Language names – the shibboleth principle

- › Characterizing languages by naming them after a particular word that distinguishes them from neighbouring or related languages/varieties/dialects
- › By polarity item:
 - ‘yes’: Dialects of French: *langues d’oil* vs. *langues d’oc*
 - ‘no’: Dialects of Kaili: *Ado, Doi, Edo, Ija, Ledo, Lindu, Rai, Raio, Ta’a, Taa, Tado, Tara*
- › By interrogative:
 - ‘what’: Dialects of Croatian: *Štokavian, Čakavian* and *Kajkavian* dialects
- › By numeral:
 - Classification of Indo-European languages into *Kentum* and *Satem/Šatem languages*



Language names – the shibboleth principle

- By demonstrative:
 - ‘this’: *Guugu Yimidhirr, Ngaanyatjarra, Ngaatjatjarra*
- By prominent verbs:
 - ‘go’: *Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara*
 - ‘say’/‘I said’: Iraqi Arabic dialects: *Qeltu-* or *Gelet-dialects*
- By distinctive pronunciations (cross-linguistic allophones):
 - Berber languages: *Tamahak, Tamajak, Tamashak*
 - (cf. e.g. the terms *yeísmo/lleísmo* and *seseo/ceceo* (Spanish) or *акать/окать* (Russian))

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