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MAPPING INDO-EUROPEAN ANATOMICAL TERMINOLOGY III: LATVIAN *mēle* ‘tongue’

Abstract. In the present study the Latvian *mēle* ‘tongue’, an isolate within the Baltic lexicon, is studied from the point of view of its etymology. The existing etymological attempts operate with the semantic development ‘speech’ → ‘language’ → ‘tongue’, which is naturally quite legitimate, but in the three concrete cases analyzed here is not convincing enough. The new solution connects the Latvian *mēle* ‘tongue’, reflecting the Proto-Baltic **mēlijā*, with another isolate in the Indo-European anatomical lexicon, the Common Tocharian **mele-* ‘nose’, reflecting the Pre-Tocharian **molo-* or **melo-*. The semantic connection between ‘tongue’ and ‘nose’ is not trivial, but there are strong arguments for its acceptance, if ‘tongue’ is interpreted as ‘taster’ and ‘nose’ is interpreted as ‘smeller’.

Keywords: Baltic; Tocharian; Indo-European; anatomical lexicon; etymology; semantic motivation.

The Latvian word *mēle*, in the standard orthography *mēle*, ‘tongue’¹, although belonging to the most basic lexicon, remains without any satisfactory etymology.

1. Practically the only attempt to find the Baltic relatives was proposed by Endzelīns (ME 2, 613–614; cf. also EH, 806) and Karulis (1992 1, 580). They connected Latvian *mēle* with the verb *māļt* ‘mahlen, drehen, schnurren’ (ME 2, 559), Lithuanian *mālti* ‘mill, grind grain to make flour or groats; rub one’s eyelids; digest food; tread (grass, wheat), trample; beat, strike, gore; perform monotonous chores; ride in circles; wander around in a forest’; in the phrase *mālti liežuvīū* ‘to talk a lot and fast, babble, twaddle, prattle, jabber, chatter’, lit. ‘to mill with one’s tongue’ (Smoczyński 2018, 748–749).

¹ Also ‘die Zunge als Organ des Sprechens; die Sprache eines Volkes; das Gerede, Geschwätz, die Klatscherei, Verleumdung; zur Bezeichnung einer sprechenden Person; etwas Zungenähnliches’ (ME 2, 613–614).

Just the metaphorical shift in the last meaning should represent a nature of the semantic motivation of Latvian *mēle*. Following Berneker (1914, 72), Endzelīns and Karulis also added Russian мѣля ‘windbag, chatterbox’, derived from Russian мелю́, inf. молóть ‘mahlen’, also ‘Unsinn reden’ (cf. Vasmer 1953–1958 2, 116) < IE **melh*₂- ‘to grind, mill’ (LIV, 432–433; Pokorny 1959, 716–717). This semantic development is naturally very late and expressive.

Alternative etymological attempts are also based on the idea of the primary meaning ‘language’ or ‘speech’. The following comparanda chosen by the present author could be hypothetical candidates for cognates (§2) or sources of borrowing (§3):

2. Runic *mal*, Old Norse *mál* n. ‘speech; case’, Icelandic, Faroese *mál*, Norwegian, Danish, Swedish *mål* are in principle derivable from Proto-North Germanic **mēla*-², but generally accepted cognates in Gothic *maþl* n. ‘forum, marketplace, assembly’, *maþleins* ‘speech, dialect’, *maþlja* ‘I talk’; Old English *mæðel* ‘assembly, council; speech, address’, Old Saxon *mahal* ‘court, meeting; speech’, Old High German *mahal* ‘court, assembly’ imply Proto-Germanic **maþla*- < **mod-tlo*- (the Germanic data are discussed e.g. by Lehmann 1986, 247–248; Kroonen 2013, 358; EWAhd 6, cc. 39–42).

3. Finnic **mēli* > Finnish *mieli*, gen. *mielen* ‘mind; idea, thought; sense, wit; inclination; desire, wish; taste; temper, disposition, humor; frame of mind, mood; opinion, view; feeling, sentiment; heart, soul, spirit’, Karelian *mieli* ‘mind, sense, reason; character, nature; idea, thought; humor, temper, spirit; memory’, Ludi *miel* ‘meaning, sense, feeling, taste; mind, reason’, Veps *mel* ‘mind, sense, reason; frame of mind, state of mind; humor, temper, spirit’, Vote *meeli* ‘meaning, sense, feeling, taste; soul, spirit; wish, will, volition; mind, sense, reason; memory; frame of mind; opinion, view, feeling, judgment’, Estonian *meel*, gen. *meele* ‘reason, mind, temper, sense; feeling, taste; memory; opinions, views’, Livonian *mēļ* ‘meaning, sense, feeling, taste; mind, sense, reason; idea, thought; opinion, view, feeling, judgment’ (EES, 278–79).

The Finnic term has generally accepted cognates in other Finno-Permic languages (the abbreviations of dialects follow UEW):

² Cf. Gothic *mel* n. ‘season, point in time, period of time’; Old Norse *mál* n. ‘time; meal’; Old English *mæl* n. ‘moment; meal’, Old High German *māl* n. ‘point in time; meal’ < Proto-Germanic **mēla*- (Kroonen 2013, 362).

Saami (N) *miellâ* -l- ‘disposition, temper, desire, opinion, sense, senses, wits’, (L) *miella* ‘Sinn, Lust, Gefallen, Verstand, Meinung’, (T Kld. A) *mill*, (Not.) *miell* ‘Sinn; Verstand’;

Mordva: Erzya *mel’*, Mokša *mâl’* ‘Sinn’;

Udmurt (S) *mîl*, (K) *mâl* (K) ‘Lust, Wunsch’, (G) *mîl* ‘Sinn, Gemüt, Gesinnung’, (S K) *mal-pal-*, *nal-pal-* ‘denken, fühlen’, (G) *malpal-* ‘denken, im Sinne haben’, (S) *mîl-kîd*, (K) *mâl-kâd* ‘Gemüt, Herz, Sinn’;

Komi (S) *mîl-kîd*, (P) *mîv-kîd* ‘Verstand, Gemüt, Charakter’, (PO) *molkød* ‘Charakter’, (V) *męvpal-*, *mępal-*, (S) *męlpal-* ‘denken, überlegen’.

All these forms are derivable from Finno-Permic **meeli* ‘reason, understanding, sense; mind, soul, nature’ (Sammallahti 1988, 553; UEW, 701–702).

On the other hand, Latvian *mēle* ‘tongue’ stands isolated within Baltic. From the point of view of both historical phonetics and linguistic geography, Estonian *meel*, gen. *meele* could really be a source of the Latvian word. But the semantic difference is too big to accept this solution.

4. The following new solution seeks cognates in the Indo-European anatomical terminology. A promising candidate can be identified in Tocharian A pl.tant. *malañ*, B pl.tant. *meli* ‘nose’; cf. also the compound in A *ak-mal* ‘face’, where the first component *ak* means ‘eye’ (DTA, 1–2). Pinault (2008, 567) thought that the original meaning was ‘nostrils’ with respect to the plural. Adams (2013, 504–505) reconstructed Common Tocharian **mele-*, projecting it into Late IE **molo-* or **mēlo-*. Just the latter alternative corresponds exactly in the root vowel with Latvian *mēle* ‘tongue’, derivable from Proto-Baltic **mēlijā* (cf. Forssman 2001, 125).

Probably the only reasonable etymology of the Tocharian term ‘nose’ was proposed by Duchesne-Guillemin (1941, 167), followed by Adams (2013, 505), namely a comparison with Middle English (12th cent.) *smelle*, English *to smell* ‘to perceive by the sense of which the nose is the organ; to have an odour’ (Hoad 1996, 445). It implies the semantic motivation ‘nose’ = ‘smeller’, like Sanskrit *g^hrāṇa-* n. ‘smelling, perception of odour’ [ŚB], ‘nose’ [ChUp] vs. *g^hra-* ‘to smell, perceive’ [RV] (MW, 379; EWAI 1, 520). And this conclusion offers a key to the parallel semantic motivation ‘tongue’ = ‘taster’, as Sanskrit *rasanā-* f. ‘the tongue as organ of taste’ [MaitrUp, MBh etc.], *rasana-* n. ‘tasting, taste, flavour, savour’ [Yājñ, MBh etc.], ‘the tongue as organ of taste’ [Tarkas], ‘the being sensible of (anything), perception, apprehension, sense’ [Sāh], vs. *rasáyati* ‘tastes’ [ŚBr, Up, MBh etc.], ‘to feel,

perceive, be sensible of' [Sāh], 'to love' [Dhātup] (MW, 869–670; KEWA 3, 48; the abbreviations of Sanskrit texts follow MW). It is important to stress that there are several examples from e.g. various Germanic languages, where the meanings 'smell' and 'taste' are identical: Old Norse *þefr* 'smell; taste' vs. Old English *þefian* 'to be heated'; Norwegian *dām* 'smell; taste' vs. Sanskrit *d^ham-* 'to blow'; Old English *swæc(c)* 'smell, taste'; Middle Low German *smak(e)* 'smell; taste', Middle High German *smac* 'smell, taste' (Buck 1949, ##15.21–24, 15.31–34).

The following step should lead to the primary root, from whose derivation both anatomical terms originated. One possibility to motivate both 'smell' and 'taste' is the preparation of food with heat, cooking. A promising candidate appears in the root **smel-*, reconstructed on the basis of Middle Irish *smál, smól, smúal* f. 'ember, glowing coal, fire; ashes'; Middle Dutch *smölen*, Dutch *smeulen* 'to smoulder', Low German *smelen, smölen* id.; cf. also Middle English *smelle* 'to smell'; Upper Sorbian *smalić* 'to singe', Lower Sorbian *smališ* 'to singe, scorch'; Ukrainian *prysmalýty* 'to ignite, kindle' (Pokorny 1959, 969). An alternative common denominator joining 'taste' and 'smell' is the more general meaning 'perceiving, perception'. A promising candidate representing this semantic model is the root **mel-* continuing in Hittite *māl* n. 'mental power', Cuneiform Luwian *māl-* 'thought, idea', *mal(a)i-* 'to think, to suppose'; Greek μέλω 'to be concerned with, be an object of care and thought, care for' (Kloekhorst 2008, 545–546). The semantic dispersion can be compared to Latin *sapere* 'to taste', but also 'to be wise, know', continuing e.g. in Spanish *saber* 'to taste' and 'to know'; similarly Old English *sefa* 'understanding, mind, sense' vs. Old High German *inseffan* 'to perceive', Middle High German *entseben* 'to perceive', especially 'to taste' (Buck 1949, #15.32).

5. Summing up, Proto-Baltic **mēlijā* 'tongue' and Common Tocharian **mele-* 'nose', reflecting Pre-Tocharian **mēlo-* (better than **molo-*), are compatible not only in the root **mēl^o*, but also as the parallel semantic formations: 'tongue' = 'taster' and 'nose' = 'smeller'. They are derivable from one of two Indo-European roots: **smel-* 'to heat' → 'to prepare hot food' and **mel-* 'to perceive' → 'to feel a taste or smell'.

Note: The present study is the third one devoted to etymologies of various ‘isolated’ anatomical terms in the Indo-European languages, preceded by Blažek 2023 and Šmejkalová, Blažek (forthc).

INDOEUROPIEČIŲ ANATOMINĖ TERMINOLOGIJA III: LATVIŲ *mēle* ‘LIEŽUVIS’

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama latvių kalbos žodžio *mēle* ‘liežuvis’, izoliuoto baltų kalbose, etimologija. Ligšioliniai etimologijos bandymai operuoja semantine raida ‘kalbėjimas, šneka’ → ‘kalba’ → ‘liežuvis’. Tokia raida yra galima, tačiau straipsnyje analizuojamais trimis atvejais nėra pakankamai įtikinama. Naujoji etimologija siūlo la. *mēle*, atspindintį bl. **mēlijā*, sieti su kitu indoeuropiečių anatominės leksikos izoliatu – tocharų **mele-* ‘nosis’, atspindinčiu ankstesnį **molo-* ar **mēlo-*. Semantinis ryšys tarp ‘liežuvio’ ir ‘nosies’ nėra trivialus, tačiau esama rimtų argumentų tam pritarti, jei ‘liežuvis’ interpretuojamas kaip ‘ragautojas’, o ‘nosis’ – kaip ‘uostytoja’.

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