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**LIBERMAN AND LEVICKIJ:  
TOWARDS COMPARATIVE ETYMOLOGICAL  
LEXICOGRAPHY OF ENGLISH AND GERMANIC**

**Abstract.** Two important etymological dictionaries (one of English and one of the Germanic languages) and a bibliography of English etymology appeared in recent years. The aim of this article is to critically present and compare them, as well as to formulate a conclusion concerning the best possible future form of an etymological dictionary.

**Preliminaries**

It was originally my aim to review three books by two authors that appeared at virtually the same time, and are – even if for different reasons – of great importance for etymological lexicography. These are:

**B** = Anatoly Liberman (with the assistance of Ari Hoptman and Nathan E. Carlson): *A bibliography of English etymology*, Volume I: *Sources*, Volume II: *Word list*, Minneapolis – London 2010, xxiv + 949 pp.; ISBN: 978-0-8166-6772-7.<sup>1</sup>

**D** = Anatoly Liberman (with the assistance of J. Lawrence Mitchell): *An analytic dictionary of English etymology. An introduction*, Minneapolis – London 2008, xlvi + 359 pp.; ISBN-13: 978-0-8166-5272-3.

**S** = Viktor Vasil'evič Levickij: *Ětimologičeskij slovař germanskix jazыkov*, Vinnica 2010, Volume I (dictionary proper): 614 pp.; Volume II (indexes): 367 pp.; ISBN: 978-966-382-240-2.

However, it soon became clear that a reader might easily ask whether there were any substantial differences or maybe discrepancies between D and S, whether it made much sense to consult both D and S at the same time, or whether

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<sup>1</sup> The division into volumes on the title page is confusing. These are really two parts of a single volume (from a bookbinder's point of view).

a bibliography should really be discussed along with dictionaries. This is why it seemed to me more reasonable to combine all my remarks into one study.

## 1.

Liberman's *Dictionary* is a 400-page-long thesaurus in which only 55 etymologies<sup>2</sup> are given. This cannot but cause astonishment. A reader can only assume that this is somehow connected with the adjective 'analytic' in the title of the work. And this proves correct.

Liberman has been for many years dividing all etymological dictionaries into dogmatic and analytic ones.<sup>3</sup> Dogmatic dictionaries just say what the etymology of a given word is, and in most cases do not inform their users about possible weak points of this etymology, about thinkable counterarguments, imaginable doubts or other uncertain aspects; nor is the reader aware of the fact that this answer is not necessarily the only explanation ever suggested. If the author of a dogmatic dictionary cannot give a clear answer he just says that the word is of unknown origin.<sup>4</sup>

An analytic dictionary is the very opposite: it should inform the users about the polemics on the given word, discuss all strong and weak points and assess all suggested solutions. Needless to say, it is in the nature of things that an analytical dictionary is connected with many references. Even more: one has first to collect as many titles discussing a word as possible before he starts writing about its history and etymology. In other words, a *Bibliography* that has followed the *Dictionary* offers lists of references which make independent formulating of one's own opinions possible, whereas the *Dictionary* itself shows the method of putting them on paper. This is why both works may (or even should) be discussed together.

Liberman somewhat idealizes non-English dictionaries in that he says that "Outside the area of English most modern etymological dictionaries are analytic, that is, their authors discuss every word with reference to earlier scholarship, cite their sources, and offer hypotheses in agreement with or in defiance of their

<sup>2</sup> These are: *adz(e)*, *beacon*, *bird*, *boy*, *brain*, *chide*, *clover*, *cob*, *cockney*, *cub*, *cushat*, *doxy*, *drab*, *dwarf*, *eena*, *ever*, *fag* ~ *fag(g)ot*, *fieldfare*, *filch*, *flatter*, *fuck*, *gawk*, *girl*, *heather*, *heifer*, *hemlock*, *henbane*, *hobbledehoy*, *horehound*, *ivy*, *jeep*, *key*, *kitty-corner*, *lad*, *lass*, *Lilliputian*, *man*, *mooch*, *nudge*, *oat*, *pimp*, *rabbit*, *ragamuffin*, *robin*, *skeddadle*, *slang*, *slowworm*, *strumpet*, *stubborn*, *toad*, *traipse*, *trot*, *understand*, *witch*, *yet*.

<sup>3</sup> It comes as something of a surprise to see how seldom questions of the structure and characteristics of etymological dictionaries are discussed (or at least reported) in more or less general studies like introductions to or textbooks of etymology. The study by Malkiel (1976) certainly does not by itself solve all the problems of our unsatisfactory knowledge of the subject.

<sup>4</sup> Liberman has presented his views in numerous articles and conference papers. By way of example see Liberman 2002, 2005a.

predecessors” (B ix). If this were the case their dictionaries would have been immense.<sup>5</sup>

In reality, Liberman’s dictionary is a totally new lexicographical model. Its two most characteristic features are as follows: **(a)** it is based on the most detailed inquiry going through possibly the entire etymological literature; the oldest source here is an article by Leibnitz, published in 1692, see below; in about 580 columns with approximately 30 titles each the *Bibliography* brings more than 18,500 titles; **(b)** all references for a given word are discussed and assessed. The result is that every entry is virtually a specific etymological article, sometimes quite a long one.

Because both the *Dictionary* and the *Bibliography* are printed in large format (in the *Dictionary*, two columns on each page take together ca 23 × 16.5 cm), any page in the *Dictionary* is the equivalent of at least 1.5 pages of an average scholarly journal. Thus, the entry “dwarf” which is the longest one here (D 46-62) corresponds to about 24 journal pages. Some other examples are: “witch” (D 215-224) = ca 15 journal pages; “boy” (D 13-20) = ca 12 journal pages; “girl” (D 94-100) = ca 10 journal pages. Short entries like “doxy” (D 46 sq.) or “drab ‘slut’” (D 46) that would scarcely take more than one journal page (or, at the most, one page and a half) are extremely rare here.

The voluminous *Bibliography* is divided into two parts, each of which is called a “volume” by the author. Apart from the Introduction (B ix-xxiv) the *Bibliography* comprises (the numbers in square brackets added – M. S.):

- Volume I: Sources (B 1-416)
  - [1] “Journal abbreviation list” (B 3-50)
  - [2] “Bibliography” (B 51-344; this is the core part of the whole publication)
  - [3] “Supplement 1: Subject reference” (B 345-411; here, entries like “Ablaut”, “Body parts and organs”, “Diseases”, “English and Scottish dialects”, “Folk etymology”, “Plants, trees, and flowers”, and so on, refer to authors and their works dedicated to a given subject)
  - [4] “Supplement 2: Publications containing mainly lists of words borrowed into English and containing little or no discussion of their origin” (B 413-415) + “Journal abbreviations” (B 416; oddly enough, this list contains 22 abbreviations of which only one (*ADST*) is absent from [1], mentioned above).

<sup>5</sup> This can be readily seen on the basis of Liberman’s *Analytic Dictionary*. If the author needs 231 pages for 55 entries C. T. Onions’ *Oxford dictionary of English etymology* with its *circa* 24,000 articles would need about 101,000 pages. As Bammesberger (1998: 782b) aptly puts it: “Jedes Etymologicum muß mit dem Dilemma fertig werden, daß einerseits relevantes Material in ausreichendem Maße geboten werden muß, daß aber andererseits der zur Verfügung stehende Raum für jede Art von Diskussion nicht ausreicht.”

- Volume II: Word list (B 417-949)
- [5] “The word list” (B 419-890; here one can find etymological references for specific English words)
- [6] “Supplement 1: Thesaurus” (B 891-904; the somewhat misleading title covers a list of subjects and words connected with the subjects, as “body parts and fluids, human and animal”, “disease and illness”, “plants (other than flowers and trees)”, and so on)
- [7] “Supplement 2: List of regional words featured in this volume” (B 905-913)
- [8] “Supplement 3: English words of certain and possible Celtic origin from the works by John Davies and Mitsuhiko Ito” (B 915-944)
- [9] “Supplement 4: List of archaic words featured in this volume” (B 945 sq.)
- [10] “Supplement 5: List of slang words featured in this volume” (B 947-949).

Some questions may be posed here, for instance: Is it not better to combine [3] with [6] into one comprehensive index (or, at least, place both of them in one and the same part of the *Bibliography*)? Why should only Celtic words be listed as [8], and no index of, say, Scandinavian words is included?

Nevertheless, all these seven indexes will be most certainly extremely useful instruments in the everyday work of an English etymologist. Any reviewer or author can admittedly find some more or less important places in someone else’s book which he would formulate slightly differently. But remarks of this sort must not veil the most important fact: Liberman organized a team of linguists<sup>6</sup> who helped him to write this practical *Bibliography* that additionally “has been conceived broadly and [...] includes works on the etymology of the cognates of English words” (B xii). It is self-evident that such a *Bibliography* cannot possibly be fully complete.<sup>7</sup> Its chronological frame is fixed by the years 1692<sup>8</sup> and 1999, i.e. the *Bibliography* covers etymological literature written in different languages (even those rather rare in English linguistic works like Russian and Polish) over a period of more than 300 years. No wonder, then, that it cannot possibly be perfectly complete.

There is therefore little point in enumerating, in a review, these or those words that have been treated differently in a new article or a new edition of a book whose

<sup>6</sup> For the description of the team work and the presentation of the collaborators see B xix sq.

<sup>7</sup> A fully complete bibliography is anyway hardly imaginable. And nobody can be really sure that no new etymological article will appear in a journal the next day after the bibliography has been published.

<sup>8</sup> The oldest etymological study used by Liberman is Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz’ article “Conjecture de Monsr. Leibnitz sur l’origine du mot *Blason*”, in: *Journal des Savants* 20 (1692): 513-515.

old(er) edition is cited in Liberman's *Bibliography*. It is this *Bibliography* that will certainly remain a stable reference book of English etymology for many years into the future, whereas remarks in reviews will probably be scarcely remembered by their readers.

The core part of the *Bibliography* is an alphabetical list of etymological publications. However, it is "The word list" [5] that will probably be the most consulted section of this book. Here, a reader can find bibliographical data of works which include etymological information concerning a specific word, as for instance:

**abut** to lie adjacent to

Ball, Christopher John Elinger. 1970: 68; Skeat, Walter William. 1870g

**heavy** the opposite of light

Cohen, Gerald Leonard. 1972j: 1,4; Fulk, Robert Dennis. 1988: 154; Hirt, Herman Alfred. 1897a: 128; Krogmann, Willy. 1933a: 381; Wood, Francis Asbury. 1898d: 57.

One can, it is true, cut the references shorter if one uses initials, rather than full names (they can easily be found in [2]). But what is more important is the fact that the authors are listed alphabetically. Now, if the *Bibliography* is necessary (and it certainly is) for learning the history of etymological discussion of a word, chronological order seems more reasonable than alphabetic.

My task here is not only to present the *Bibliography* but also to assess the scholarly value and the position of Liberman's *Analytic Dictionary* among other works on etymology (especially in comparison with Levickij's dictionary). Liberman probably exaggerates when saying that "our current English etymological dictionaries are among the most insubstantial in Indo-European linguistics" (D xv sq.). But his *Dictionary* surely is one of the most interesting ones in linguistics.

The main idea of this *opus* is that not only each word, but also its etymologizing has its own history. Liberman has taken great pains with collecting, ordering and coherently retelling the entire etymologizing history of each entry. His reluctance to make do with a short statement like "Origin unknown" (see e.g. D xv) is most praiseworthy,<sup>9</sup> and it has resulted in an extremely interesting and stimulating presentation of etymologies, even if some formulations of his are sometimes more or less close to "Origin unknown".<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed classification of explanations given in etymological dictionaries see Malkiel 1976: 54 sq.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the following opinions: "Definitive conclusions cannot be expected in such a case" (s.v. *bird*, D 13a); "Since Swift did not explain how he created his neologisms, of which *Lilliput* is the most successful [...], our conjectures are doomed to remain

Thus, the question arises whether Liberman has achieved something more than his predecessors. In my opinion, he certainly has. The task of an analytical dictionary is to stimulate professionals, rather than to quickly and easily inform an uninitiated reader about the original meaning of a given word.<sup>11</sup> A short statement “Origin unknown” certainly does not suggest a solution either to a layman or to a professional. Liberman is thus too detailed, too professional, and therefore too complex for laymen, but he inspires professional etymologists instead.

The type of etymological dictionary elaborated by Anatoly Liberman<sup>12</sup> will never be popular with “normal users”, but it now defines the standard of professional etymological discussions.

One feature still remains to be touched upon. Liberman and his collaborators are Germanic linguists. It is therefore absolutely understandable (and admirable) that they concentrate on the Germanic lexis of English. On the other hand, the rationale for the comparative neglect of the substantial body of non-Germanic and non-Indo-European loanwords in English in a dictionary such as this may be briefly assayed here. M. Urban in his (2008) discussion of the etymology of the English expression *secretary bird* – based on Liberman’s analytical model – came to the conclusion: “It seems that for an adequate analysis of Oriental borrowings in English (or any other borrowings in any other language for that matter) a team of scholars is needed comprising specialists in the receiving language and those in the donor language (Urban 2008: 197). This is certainly true (Etymologists of the world, unite!). However, considering both the immense organizational and intellectual effort made by A. Liberman and his assistants one scarcely has grounds for believing that such an international project is realistic and possible.

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guesswork [...]” (D 149a); “The etymology of *trot* (v) is debatable. If the verb is of Germanic origin, it is related to *trot* (sb), but that is exactly the point of dispute” (D 209b).

<sup>11</sup> Uninitiated readers do not usually ask about the original phonetic form or the evolution of the morphological structure of words. – Indeed, Liberman is perfectly aware of their needs, cf. his sober statement in another book: “Those who consult an etymological dictionary expect a solution rather than an exhaustive survey” (Liberman 2005b: 4).

<sup>12</sup> Most etymological dictionary entries usually include a short historical and a short comparative part. The Latin dictionary by Alfred Ernout and Antoine Meillet is especially well known as a work in which “das im engeren Sinne “historische” Material [...] mit dem etymologischen [actually, = comparative]” (Abaev 1980: 32) is combined, and each part was written by a specific specialist: the historical part by Ernout, and the comparative-etymological one by Meillet. What Liberman provides is rather a fusion of “wissenschaftshistorisch” with “etymologisch” material. Because nobody has, in a dictionary, allowed for the history of etymologizing in such a detailed manner before, the *Analytic Dictionary* by Liberman absolutely deserves in my opinion to be considered as a new type of etymological dictionary in general.

## 2.

Viktor Vasil'evič Levickij is a Germanist, well known also far away from his university in Černovcy ~ Chernovtsy (Ukraine) although he was not for many years allowed to participate in conferences outside the Soviet Union, or even publish his works in the West (Levickij 2008: 56). His greatest achievements concern Germanic etymology, general semasiology and quantitative linguistics. I am, of course, not going to discuss Levickij's impact on quantitative linguistics here, but it is conspicuous that his semasiological interests have also influenced his concept of the etymological dictionary.<sup>13</sup>

The history of Levickij's dictionary (that will be called in Russian here: *Slovař*, in order to be better differentiated from Liberman's *Dictionary*) began more than fifteen years ago. It was as early as 1994 that the first edition of his dictionary appeared with the title *Сравнительно-этимологический словарь германских языков* (= 'A comparative-etymological dictionary of the Germanic languages', Černovcy 1994).

Since the author's aim was not only to show the morphological structure of different Germanic derivatives going back to one and the same root, but also to make visible their semantic evolution in specific Germanic languages, the title of the first edition with its combination of 'comparative' and 'etymological' was really well thought out. It is to be regretted that this part of the title was, in subsequent editions, simplified to 'etymological' alone.

It was in 1997 that Levickij published a separate book devoted to those difficult etymologies that could not be discussed sufficiently explicitly in the *Slovař*. Interestingly enough, Levickij, like Liberman, also says that the wish to avoid the formula "Origin unknown" was his important motivation (Levickij 1997: 4).

The second edition appeared in three parts: a three-volume core of the dictionary (Černovcy 2000) was followed by two supplementary volumes (Černovcy 2001, 2003). The joint title of them all was now *Этимологический словарь германских языков* (= 'An etymological dictionary of the Germanic languages').

What we now have on our desks is the third edition, consisting of two volumes, one being the dictionary proper, the other an index volume.

It is astonishing to see that Liberman and Levickij have some features in common, even if their starting points and methods seem to be totally different. For instance, their dictionaries are definitely scholarly works, but both authors explain their ideas in the introduction in a way that makes them readily comprehensible for

<sup>13</sup> And vice versa: Levickij's textbook on semasiology includes also a chapter on etymology (Levickij 2006: 346-372).

etymological beginners as well.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the introduction in the *Dictionary* differs clearly from that in *Slovar'* in that Liberman has written an introduction: (1) about etymology, and (2) for general readership, whereas Levickij writes – apart from the description of his *Slovar'* and the entries – about the main phonological processes and phenomena in the Germanic languages (S I 13-20; with tables showing the main modern reflexes of Indo-European sounds, together with a brief explanation of some sound laws and the laryngeal theory<sup>15</sup>), with further material on the reconstruction of Germanic morphological forms (S I 20-23), the principles of semantic reconstruction (S I 23-40; it can be easily inferred from the number of pages devoted to this that semasiology is the author's favourite topic), and finally, with a brief consideration of the philological characteristics of the languages taken into account in the *Slovar'* (S I 41 sq.). This introduction is certainly too complex for general readership (even if its linguistic content is explained in simple terms). But a philology student can learn a lot here. All this part of Levickij's *Slovar'* could be also published separately as a concise university textbook (or crib?) in pocket format.

Unlike most other etymological dictionaries, Levickij's work shows the semantic evolution of a Proto-Germanic root as it is used to create new derivatives, rather than tracing back a specific modern word. His starting point is the Proto-Germanic root, and all the comparative data are, more often than not, divided into semantic branches, e.g.:

**HAR<sup>1</sup>**- 'army, armed forces' (S I 248 sq.)

1. Germ. *Heer*, Old Engl. *here*, and so on;
2. Germ. *Herzog*, Old Engl. *heretoga*, and so on;
3. Germ. *Herberge*, Engl. *harbour*, and so on;
4. Germ. *Harnisch*;
5. Germ. *verheeren*, Engl. *harry*, and so on;
6. Germ. *Herald* ~ *Herold*, Engl. *herald*, and so on;
7. personal names like *Harold* ~ *Harald*, *Herbert*, *Hermann*, *Herwig*.

It goes without saying that the lexical data are supplied with commentary. Also folk etymologies are shown, as. e.g. sub AL<sup>3</sup>- 'alder' (S I 65) where Germ. *Erlkönig* 'erlking' is explained as a word only falsely connected with Germ. *Erle* 'alder' because its true etymon is Low German *elverkonge* 'king of elves'.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> I can even imagine a most instructive tutorial or a workshop discussion devoted to a critical comparison of the introduction in *Slovar'* with that in the *Dictionary* and in the *Bibliography*.

<sup>15</sup> For those who read Polish, Smoczyński (2006) can be recommended as a very condensed and informative text on the laryngeal theory.

<sup>16</sup> The fact that the German word was borrowed into English, as well as that *elverkonge* first changed into Low German (and Danish) *ellerkonge*, and it is only this form that

Although every etymological dictionary repeats, whether willingly or unwillingly, a lot of what has been published before, its author may of course also suggest his own solutions. This is the case here, too (e.g. with Engl. *happy* and *slow*, or Germ. *Bein* and *schnell*, as well as with some other words, see S I 9, II 345).

Heinz-Dieter Pohl (Klagenfurt) has good reasons to say in his “Geleitwort” in German (S I 4) that Levickij’s *Slovař* is an important “Beitrag zur Erforschung des gemeingermanischen Wortschatzes”.

### 3.

Lieberman (D 211a-212a) uses two columns in large format to retell the semantic history of Germ. *verstehen* ‘understand’. Levickij fills one line: “The semantic evolution: ‘to stand in front of’ > ‘to perceive’ > ‘to understand’” (translation mine – M. S.). One’s initial reaction is that Lieberman’s *Dictionary* is in this situation considerably more informative than Levickij’s – as it certainly is for an historian of etymological scholarship. On the other hand, the semantic connection between Germ. *verstehen* ‘understand’ and *stehen* ‘stand’, as shown in *Slovař*, is absolutely flawless. What Levickij says is the very heart of the matter.

Lieberman’s *Dictionary* and Levickij’s *Slovař*, both published in 2010, differ from each other in more than only one respect. In contrast to Lieberman’s long entries Levickij’s explanations are short. While Lieberman’s dictionary has a retrospective construction (modern form → protoform), Levickij’s *Slovař* is unequivocally prospective (proto-root → modern forms). Lieberman mostly focuses on one specific word, whereas Levickij tries to embrace possibly all derivatives forming different semantic groups. Lieberman’s main concern is the written history of etymological discussions, and his aim is to avoid diagnoses like “Origin unknown”; Levickij concentrates on semantic reconstruction in the light of comparative data, and his general task is to establish semasiological laws.

Even if Lieberman’s *Dictionary* can be easily read by any educated person without linguistic training whereas Levickij’s formulations are far too compressed for general readership, no etymologically uninitiated user will profit from either of them. In reality, both works are intended for professionals. Thus, an important question is whether professionals actually need two dictionaries to find etymological information on one word only.

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should be considered as a direct source of Germ. *Erlkönig* (and Engl. *erlking*) is not discussed here, but these facts do not actually belong directly to the history of the Proto-Germanic root *\*al-*. This case shows that Levickij consciously avoids exaggerated extending of his *Slovař*, as if knowing what Lieberman says about America: “Both publishers and the public have been taught to appreciate bulk” (D xvi) – Levickij certainly appreciates content rather than bulk.

Let us first come back to Germ. *verstehen*. A short explanation of its semantic evolution is, as mentioned above, placed in the first paragraph of the Proto-Germanic entry STA/STÖ- (S I 506). But there are also six other semantic groups in this entry: § 2 with Engl. *stead* ‘place’ ~ Germ. *Stätte* ‘place, site’ and Germ. *Stadt* ‘town, city’, as well as Germ. *ge-statt-en* ‘to allow’ (< ‘to give place’); § 3 with Germ. *Stunde* ‘hour’; § 4 with Scandinavian reflexes of the Proto-Germanic *\*stinþa-* ‘solid, firm’; § 5 with Engl. *stud* (pointed piece of metal); § 6 with Germ. *Staude* ‘herbaceous plant, bush’, and § 7 with Germ. *Stadel* ‘barn’, and so on. All these words supply a very interesting and instructive background of Engl. *stand* and Germ. *verstehen*, one that is totally missing in Liberman’s *Dictionary* where, on the other hand, the use of the German prefix *ver-* (in *verstehen*) and Engl. *under-* (in *understand*) is discussed and explained which, in its turn, cannot be found in Levickij’s *Slovar’*.

In other words: Liberman and Levickij do not compete with each other; rather, they complement each other.

There can be no doubt that the full information on the etymology of a word has to combine philological with comparative data. A modern English etymologist will, from now on, have to take into consideration both Liberman’s and Levickij’s point of view, and the omitting of one of them will constantly involve the risk of being incomplete and not sufficiently up-to-date.

Reading both authors makes one think of a still other solution. Liberman cites eleven works by Levickij. Levickij cites fifteen works by Liberman (that is, fourteen in English and one in Russian). It seems to be a good sign for the possibility of cooperation. Fusion of both methods and both attitudes would certainly yield a unique dictionary of English etymology, showing not only the philological and the comparative aspect of presented etymologies but also the history of their presence in etymological discussions. These three factors would then establish in the most adequate way the real position of any word in the science of etymology.<sup>17</sup>

Needless to say, non-Germanic and non-Indo-European words should also be taken into consideration, so that the question of an international team arises again.

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<sup>17</sup> Since new studies on difficult etymologies will also appear after the complete version of Liberman’s *Dictionary* has been definitely published, it is worth considering whether a series of periodically presented reports on “etymological news” (like the Russian series *Новое в русской этимологии*, Moskva 2003-) is a good solution.

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