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Comparative reconstruction confined to elements with specific internal connections."

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The Semantic Side of Etymology

Comparative reconstruction confined to elements with specific internal connections

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This article seeks to outline a less uncertain form of comparative religious and cultural reconstruction than has traditionally been done. The weakness of traditional comparative reconstruction is that it is difficult to determine which cultural elements are (historically linked) cognates and thus acceptable as a basis for the reconstruction. In many cases, however, this problem can be minimized by limiting the comparison to elements that constitute the semantic side of formally related words. If the words are linked formally, their meanings are linked, too, even across large time spans and geographical areas. Therefore, it is possible to make much of the many word clusters that have quite simple and thus quite certain formal sides while having semantic sides that are complex and thus rich in information. This is an etymological kind of reasoning, but one that focuses on the semantic side of it rather than the formal side.¹

The main problem for the study of ancient religions and cultures, including the Northern European ones, is lack of information, because the contemporary sources are few. To be sure, popular traditions and lexical material recorded in post-medieval times represent large amounts of information that may contain reflections of ancient times, but it is usually very difficult to separate those grains of gold from the gravel. However, although pieces of post-Medieval information may be worthless when considered separately, they may be valuable as supplementary parts of a jigsaw puzzle that mainly consists of early, (relatively) reliable pieces. In this article I sketch out one way, aided by etymology, to select such late pieces of information that are fairly confidently connected to more reliable pieces. The etymological or comparative principle, developed in comparative linguistics in the nineteenth century, can be illus-

1 Thanks to Oddvar Nes, Vladimir Napolskikh, Odd Einar Haugen, and Karen Bek-Pedersen for commenting on drafts of this article.

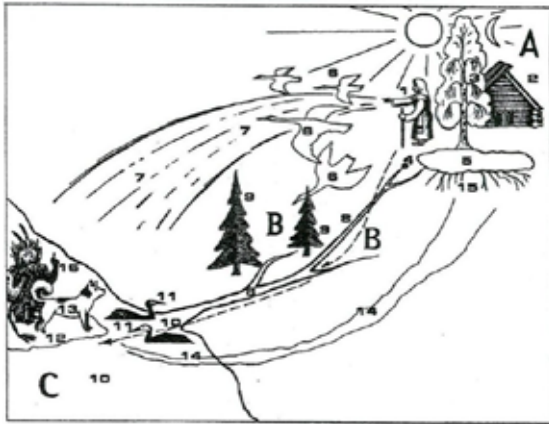


Fig. 1. Reconstructed Proto-Uralic cosmology (Napolskikh 1992a: 11). 'A' is the 'Upper World = South = river head = mountains = heavens'; 'B' is the 'Middle (Human) World', and 'C' is the 'Lower World = North = river mouth = cold sea = underworld'. '1' is the 'Old Woman of the South, mistress of life, protectress of birth and motherhood, sender of souls, mother of gods, mistress of the migratory water-birds', etc.

trated with the following example: on the basis of the cognates *tungen* 'the tongue' in Danish and *tunga* in Norwegian, it is possible to go back to a probable common origin by comparing them and calculating which starting-point would give the observed variants in the simplest way. In this case it is quite easy to determine that the starting-point is **tungan* (as can be confirmed by Old Scandinavian texts).

There is no reason to confine this way of reasoning to what we usually conceive of as etymology. Georges Dumézil's theory of Indo-European religion is an example of an etymology-inspired approach to cultural studies (Dumézil 1935, 1940, 1958). He observed that attested, far-apart Indo-European ancient cultures had a tripartite structure in society and religion: rulers, warriors, and producers. From this he inferred that the Proto-Indo-European society from which these cultures derived had such a tripartite structure. However, tripartite structures can be found in societies all over the world, not only in Indo-European ones. Accordingly, the tripartite structure in the Indo-European cultures does not have to be inherited from the Proto-Indo-Europeans. It can more easily be explained as a result of the development of complex societies, not least because the Proto-Indo-European society probably predated that complexity. Accordingly, Dumézil's argument for a Proto-Indo-European tripartite structure is weak.

However, such failures do not prove the etymological principle as such useless in this kind of historical reconstruction. A more plausible example can be found in an article by the Uralist Vladimir Napolskikh (1992a, summarized from Napolskikh 1992b: 189 ff.). He reconstructs a Proto-Uralic cosmology by comparing the cosmologies of the attested Uralic cultures – roughly twenty cultures distributed from Scandinavia to Siberia – assuming that elements

found in many Uralic cultures are inherited from Proto-Uralic. Napolskikh sums up his reconstruction in the sketch on the opposite page.

Napolskikh is more cautious than Dumézil since he does ask the important question: is this system found among other peoples in Northern Eurasia? If so, it does not have to be inherited from the Proto-Uralics. Napolskikh's answer is: yes, in a few cases – but then always associated with Uralic loanwords and other traces of ancient contacts with Uralic peoples, so those cases do, in fact, seem to derive from Uralic influence. This indicates that the reconstructed system is truly Uralic and inherited from Proto-Uralic times. Napolskikh supports his argument (in the Russian version, Napolskikh 1992b: 71–83) by pointing out that certain, similar ideas² are found only in some of the Uralic traditions, thousands of kilometres apart. This can most easily be explained if these ideas are inherited from a common origin because the geographical separation by enormous distances makes borrowing implausible. This argument is essential also to much of the work carried out by the mythologist Yuri Berezkin: when for example 'parallels at the level of minor details' are found in myths from Western Siberia and indigenous America, this can be 'explained only by particular historical links between corresponding traditions', in ancient times (Berezkin 2005: 79, cf. 2010).

With the help of such reasoning, it is possible to make quite plausible reconstructions. Even so, no matter how clever the scholar, an etymology-like reconstruction based solely on cultural, non-linguistic elements will always be very uncertain (although easily better than nothing, which in many cases is the only alternative). The problem is that any reasoning based on the etymological principle requires connections between the elements compared, the possible cognates. But in cultural, non-linguistic material, the only observable, potential connections are similarities, which are highly subjective entities, and when the cultural elements change, such similarities disappear. As a result, after thousands of years, it will be very difficult, or impossible, to determine which cultural elements in the different cultures are cognates³ and which are innovations or borrowings from neighbouring peoples.

In etymology proper this is different because the regularity of sound correspondences allows us to follow the cultural elements far beyond immediate recognition. For example, we know that German *essen* is the same word as Old Norse (ON) *eta* 'to eat', even if the words look very different. This is because we know from systematic comparison that Proto-Germanic *-an* regularly goes to

2 Among others ideas e.g. about where children's souls come from.

3 Although in some cases the internal relationship between the elements may be recognizable even if the elements themselves have changed significantly.

-*en* in German and -*a* in ON and that *t* regularly goes to -*ts-* or -*ss-* in German while it is preserved in ON. So, when knowing the sound correspondences, we can recognize both *essen* and *eta* as cognates – and reconstruct their common, Proto-Germanic (PG) ancestor as **etan*.

Fortunately, the regularity of sound correspondences can be used as an aid in cultural reconstruction, too. For example, Indo-Europeanists have reconstructed words for (among other things) beaver, cow, sheep, pig, horse, wagon, harrow, sickle, barley, oats, wheat, beer, mead, axe, fort, gold, copper, silver (Mallory and Adams 2006: 523 ff.). This implies that the Proto-Indo-European society knew these phenomena.⁴ Thus, the mere reconstruction of words yields information about a society thousands of years ago.

I advocate a combination of reconstruction based upon sound correspondences, and the comparison and connection of semantic elements, like in the examples from Napolskikh and Dumézil. This is possible in the not-so-few cases where a large element of Napolskikh-style reasoning is required *within* the etymological reasoning. To explain this, I have to say more about how etymology works. When an etymologist studies a certain cluster of inherited words, s/he seeks to answer *two* questions:

1. What was the original *form* of the word, or the root that it derives from? The etymologist will compare word *forms* to establish the form that the attested forms most likely derive from.
2. What was the original or essential *meaning*? The etymologist will compare *meanings*, to find the meaning or cluster of meanings that the attested meanings most likely derive from.

In the common perception, etymology is mostly associated with the first of these questions, and this is natural, as the foundation of etymology is the knowledge of the sound correspondences. In many etymologies, this knowledge is enough because the semantic side is banal. The following ON words are one example of this:⁵

4 For most examples, the cognates are found so far apart that borrowing can be ruled out.

5 Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874: 53, 62, 66, 72, 85, 91.

<i>bjúga</i> n.	'a sausage'
<i>bjúgr</i> adj.	'bowed, hooked, crooked, bent'
<i>baugr</i> m.	'a ring, armband'
<i>beygja</i> vb.	'to bend, bow'
<i>bogi</i> m.	'a bow'
<i>boginn</i> adj.	'bent, bowed, curved'
<i>bugr</i> m.	'a bowing, a winding'
<i>bægja</i> vb.	'to make one give way, push one back'
<i>bægin</i> adj.	'cross-grained'

To an uneducated eye, it may look as if all these words are related, but they are not. Only the first seven words derive from the same Indo-European (IE) root, as only they correspond to the ablaut grades – *eu* – *ou* – *u* – of one Indo-European root: *Bjúg-* from IE **bheug-*, *baug-* and *beyg-* from IE **bhoug-* (*beygja* *i*-mutated from Proto-Germanic **baugijan-*), and *bug-* and *bog-* from IE **bhug-* (*bogi-* *a*-mutated from PG **buga-*). To realize this, a high competence in Indo-European and Germanic phonology and phonological history is required. The semantic reasoning, on the other hand, is banal, as all seven words have meanings related to 'something bent or bow-shaped'. It could be possible to include the last two words on the list in this meaning, as 'to push one back' could be seen as 'being bent away', but the formal side excludes this: *bægja* and *bægin* cannot derive from the same root as the others. As can be seen in this case, competence on the formal side is what the scholar needs; no specialized semantic knowledge is required.

In other cases, the formal side is easy and the semantic side difficult, as in this example:⁶

Common Scandinavian	<i>vika</i> / <i>wika</i> /	'a week, seven days'
Old English	<i>wice</i> / <i>wike</i> /	
Old High German	<i>wecha</i>	
Common Scandinavian	<i>vika</i> / <i>wika</i> /	'a sea mile'
Gothic	<i>wikō</i>	'a turn (to perform duty)'
Old English	<i>wice</i> / <i>wike</i> /	'an office, a duty, function'

6 Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874: 705; Söderwall 1884–1918, III; Bosworth and Toller 1898: 1214; Schützeichel 1969: 225; Streitberg [1908] 1965: 85.

All these words seem to be (formal) cognates and reflections of the PG feminine **wikōn*,⁷ which derives from the verb **wīkan* ‘to recede, turn to the side, give way, yield’. But there is no immediately obvious semantic connection between all these words internally and between them and the verb. The link nonetheless exists. The Gothic meaning ‘a turn (to perform duty)’ refers to a rotation of people relieving each other successively. The OE meaning ‘an office, a duty’ can derive from this because one is on duty/ in office when it is one’s turn in the rotation. A week originally referred to a rotation of gods ‘in office’ one day each. The ‘sea mile’ probably originally referred to ‘the distance covered by one rotation of rowers’. The essential meaning seems to be ‘a rotation of people’, which fits with the verb **wīkan* because the essence of the meaning ‘rotation’ is that the person on duty steps aside for the person relieving him.⁸

As can be seen, sound correspondences are only one half of etymology. On this formal half, etymologists are very competent. But they cannot possibly be equally competent on the semantic half, because knowledge of all semantic fields would be required: techniques of crafts, house construction, ship building, fishing, farming; religious life and superstitions, judicial systems, weather, the firmament, cooking, child care, etc. – from ancient times until modern times. This, of course, is far beyond the capacity of any one scholar, which in turn means that etymologists generally benefit from working together in groups and from seeking more advice from non-etymologist specialists.

But it also means that there is an unexploited potential for research by scholars who are not etymologists, but have a basic knowledge of etymology and are experts on certain semantic fields – like those mentioned above. Such scholars can potentially make great contributions in cases where (formal) cognates of a word indisputably exist in several languages – usually because they have happened to change little in the development of the different languages – and the relationship between the different meanings is hard to understand, i.e. in cases where the formal side is unproblematic and the semantic side is complex. In such cases, reasoning on the semantic side of etymology is what matters.

7 OE *wice* is usually spelled with a long *i* in the dictionaries (**wīce*) but for no apparent reason. Vowel length is not marked in the manuscripts so it can only be known from later reflections and comparison with other languages. But neither indicates an OE form **wīce*. The long vowel of the root **weik- / *wīk-* shows nothing because the ON short-vowel *vika* is derived from the same root.

8 Wessén 1914: 171 ff.; Heide 2008; Falk and Torp 1903–6: 947; Torp 1919: 864; Holthausen 1934: 392; de Vries 1962b: 662; Lehmann *et al.* 1986: 403; Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989: 1135; Kluge and Seebold 2002: 779.

The **wikōn* complex is an example of this. To realize what the connection is between the different meanings, a very specialized semantic knowledge is required: that of the Gallo-Roman religion on the Roman Rhine frontier in the first centuries AD, which is where and when Germanic peoples borrowed, translated and adjusted the concept of a ‘week’ from the Romans. In this Gallo-Roman religion there was a popular cult of the seven weekday gods, who were often depicted together in a ‘week cycle’ around an altar pillar (Wessén 1914: 171 ff.). The knowledge of this is the key to the understanding of the ‘week, seven days’ meaning of **wikōn*, and consequently to the understanding of the whole complex. But the etymologists have not been aware of this, so all etymological dictionaries give incomplete explanations. Only Elias Wessén (1914) presents what appears to be the solution.

In cases such as the **wikōn* complex, there is Napolskikh-style reasoning on the semantic side of the etymology because no sound correspondences can help us understand the development and ramifications of the meaning(s). The meanings are (indirectly) connected through the formal side of the words, but when we attempt to reconstruct the relationship between the meanings, the formal connections can no longer help us. They only help us to select, out of the hundreds of thousands of meanings that exist in the language(s) in question, the few meanings that are to be compared, and ignore the rest. In the next step – the semantic reconstruction – the only observable connections between the elements that we compare are similarities. Accordingly, this part of etymological research employs the same way of reasoning as we saw in the Napolskikh example above – with one very significant difference: in etymology, we must not compare all the semantic elements that we think resemble each other in the culture(s) we study. We only compare those few that belong to the formal cognates, which are selected through a quite objective criterion that makes it fairly certain that there really is a (historical) connection between them. Thus, one may say that the semantic reasoning in etymology is Napolskikh-style reasoning assisted by (the knowledge of) sound correspondences, because sound correspondences identify those semantic elements that are connected formally and therefore ought to be connected semantically, too.

At first glance, the principle thus outlined – although sound enough in itself – may seem to have a somewhat limited application and therefore not all that much relevance. This, however, is not necessarily so. Quite a number of word complexes have banal formal sides and semantic sides as difficult as the **wikōn* example or even more difficult, and some of them are highly interesting for the history of religion and for other parts of cultural history.⁹ In each

9 A few such examples can be found in Heide 2006a, 2006b, and Heide 2012, cf. Heide 2009: 365 ff.

of these studies, I discuss one word or one group of closely related words with very different meanings, partly or largely belonging to the religious sphere, and suggest a model of understanding that can contain them all (usually a cluster of meanings rather than one single meaning. In the mentioned works, I discuss Old Norse *gandr* and its compounds and later reflections, and Old and Modern Scandinavian *Loki, loki, Lokke, lokke*, etc.). Here is one example awaiting further exploration:¹⁰

Old Norse	<i>nīð</i>	'a liable'
Gothic	<i>neip</i> /ni:þ/	'envy'
Old English	<i>nīp</i>	'envy, hatred; fight'
Old Saxon	<i>nīth</i>	'enthusiasm, hostility'
Old High German	<i>nīd</i>	'hatred, anger, envy'
Etc.		

Our understanding of *nīð* is imperfect. A systematic comparison of the different meanings in the different languages would probably provide us with a deeper understanding than our current one, but no scholar has undertaken this yet. – Here is an example waiting for a group of scholars:

Old Norse	<i>alfr</i>	'elf, fairy', receiving sacrifices, related to the gods*
Old English	<i>ælf</i>	'elf, fairy, causing diseases'***
Middle and Modern High German	<i>alp</i>	'a (night)mare'****
General Scandinavian	'elf'	subterranean beings receiving sacrifices and causing sudden diseases if not treated well but also helping humans*****
Etc.		

* Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874: 42.

** Bosworth and Toller 1898: 14-15; Hall 2007.

*** Ranke 1927.

**** Jón Árnason [1862-64] 1958-61, I; Hyltén-Cavallius 1863-68, I: 249 ff., Feilberg 1886-1914: 241 ff.; Orlík and Ellekilde 1926: 275 ff.; von Sydow 1935: 144; *Norsk Ordbok* 1966-: 61 ff.; Bø 1987: 66.

Our understanding of the elves is currently quite limited. An extensive, systematic comparison of all the (genuine) meanings of the word 'elf' in all the Germanic languages from the earliest sources until modern times would in all probability be very illuminating. – Here is another example waiting for a group of scholars:

10 Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874: 455; Bosworth and Toller 1898: 722; Schützeichel 1969: 137.

'Rhine Germanic', early centuries bc	* <i>Wōðan</i> (az?) * <i>Wōðin</i> (az?)	the Germanic cognate of the Roman god Mercury (in the day name 'Wednesday')
Old Norse	<i>Óðinn</i>	'The multifaceted leader of the gods'
Old English	<i>Wōden</i>	
Old High German	<i>Wōtan</i>	
19th c. German	<i>Das wütende Heer</i>	'the raging host, riding in nightly gales**
19th c. Danish/Swedish	<i>Oden's</i> hunt	'the raging host, riding in nightly gales***
19th c. Danish	<i>Oden's</i> hunter	'A nightly rider hunting ogresses'****

* Olrik 1901; Plischke 1914; de Vries 1931; Huth 1935; de Vries 1962a.

** Hyltén-Cavallius 1863–8, I: 162, 166; Olrik 1901; Celander 1920; Olrik 1901.

*** Hyltén-Cavallius 1863–8, I: 162, 166; Olrik 1901; Celander 1920; Olrik 1901.

We have considerable knowledge of Óðinn and the gods, but there is reason to believe that a comparison of these traditions would increase our understanding. – Other examples are Old Norse *jötunn* 'a giant', and *dvergr* 'a dwarf'. These terms have (etymological) cognates in many Medieval and younger languages and dialects throughout Northern Europe, some of them close to the Old Norse meanings, others more distant, but there have been no studies that take as their starting-point the assumption that all the variants together form one corpus.

What I have mentioned are only examples. Many gods, religious phenomena, and other culturally interesting phenomena are described via terms that have etymological cognates in various traditions throughout Northern Europe (and other parts of the world, for that matter). In my opinion, this constitutes a valuable potential that has not been sufficiently realized and exploited. We can select such clusters of cognate terms for studies of history of religion and culture, and in the studies take all their meanings into consideration, because if the terms are connected formally, the meanings are also connected, closely or remotely. This is important because it implies that even certain pieces of late material can be employed in making deductions about ancient times. Thus, this approach can help remedy our lack of ancient material. There is, of course, the risk that the words that seem to be cognates could be homonyms and thus not connected after all, but homonymy is exceptional and should not be an accepted explanation until every alternative avenue has been explored in each case. We should endeavour to explain all the variant meanings as derived from a common origin, that is find a model of understanding that can account for them all – like in the **wikōn* example – because 'accounting for' comes close to 'understanding'. Of course, this implies a risk of forcing the material in order to achieve a positive result. However, this is not the problem in the present situation; the problem is that all too few attempts are made in this direction.

This insistence on accounting for all the evidence can guide us when it comes to selecting our interpretations, because the interpretation that can account for most of the material should be preferred. This requires that all the variant meanings be included because otherwise, the selection of interpretation will be less reliable. As a consequence, the insistence on accounting for all the variants can help us break out of our presuppositions. We must not simply ignore what appears not to fit in. This should go without saying, but often proves hard to live up to. One example of this is the century-long near-universal disregard of the large amount of late traditions connected to the name (or word) *Loki/loki/Lokke/lokke/Luki/luki*. The disregard arose from the seeming discrepancy between the late Loki and the Loki of the Old Norse myths, and it persists in spite of our problems when it comes to understanding the Old Norse Loki, in spite of our need for additional information about him. The ignored variants may provide some keys (Heide 2012).

It is my impression that most scholars are willing to follow me in the reasoning on the semantic side of etymology so long as post-Medieval variant meanings are not included, or the meanings do not differ too much, or these two factors combine. If the total corpus is very diffuse, this is often taken as proof that the late variant meanings are corrupt and thus of no value (perhaps most explicitly in de Vries 1933: 240) or even harmful to the reconstruction. However, an etymologist would never reject a meaning of a word as a 'corruption' just because it is attested only in late sources or because it deviates much from other meanings. That is because the idea of 'corruption' in this context is a misconception, as, in a historical perspective, *all* meanings of words would be 'corruptions', because the essence of word history is that the forms and meanings move away from earlier forms and meanings of those words. Some forms and meanings move further away, others not so far, and they are necessarily attested from different periods of time. Even so, there is no difference in principle as the forms nevertheless derive from earlier, common stages that may still be reflected in the forms (individually or combined). Because of this, etymologists see all forms of a word (or a word complex) as valuable input in etymological deductions about that word (or word complex), regardless of whether they are attested early or late and regardless of their semantic distance from their cognates. If the development has made the forms differ a lot from each other, it may be more difficult to see the connections behind them, but ignoring the late forms will only add to the difficulty, as that will remove information from the calculations in a situation where information is the limiting factor. Statistically, late attestations are likely to be more remote from the common origin than early attestations, which means that late attestations will be harder to use in the calculations – but that is only statistics. In individual

cases it may be the other way around, and even the remote forms may potentially throw light upon the common origin of the forms and the relationship between them. Etymologists sometimes reconstruct ancient words solely on the basis of nineteenth century attestations of a word (e.g. Bjorvand and Lindeman 2000: 156, 347, 349, 453), and reconstructions of the Indo-European language and its vocabulary are based entirely upon late attestations, relatively speaking, as even the earliest attested languages are significantly younger than the Indo-European proto-language. Such studies have provided countless examples of the fact that the semantic side of etymological cognates can remain little changed even after a separation of thousands of years, as exemplified below (and in Berezkin's studies, e.g. 2005).

Actually, even very remote meanings will usually be harmless to the reconstruction. An example of this is the partial association that late Swedish and Danish elf traditions have with alder trees and rivers: the elves are most frequently seen in rivers, especially rapids, where one of them plays the fiddle in a magic way, like *näcken* 'the nix'; or the elves live in or under alder trees (Hyltén-Cavallius 1863–8, I: 249 ff.; Feilberg 1886–1914, I: 241 ff.; Olrik 1918). These notions seem to derive from homonymy and folk etymology. In Swedish, *älvar/älvor* 'elves' became associated with *älvar* 'rivers', and in Danish, after the assimilation of *lf* to *ll*, *ellefolk* etc. became associated with *elletræer* 'alder trees', although these words are unrelated etymologically.¹¹ Here, it seems that misunderstandings brought completely irrelevant elements into the traditions, so these cases may be seen as clear corruptions that should warn against the approach that I advocate. But this is not necessarily so, because even such new branches of meaning need a semantic connection to the earlier meanings in order to become established. In the mentioned examples, this contact point seems to have been an old association between elves and bodies of water as borders and passages between this world and that of the elves. This idea is attested in the thirteenth century Icelandic *Þorsteins þáttur Þójar Magns*, in a passage apparently based upon a medieval variant of a tradition later recorded in the early nineteenth century (*Saga af Þorsteini Bæarmagni* 1827: 176; Heide 2006a: 223): to get to the elves, the characters jump into a river/lake/pond/the sea (sometimes just holes in the ground), passes downwards through fog, and arrives in the land of elves. Similar ways of entering the otherworld is attested many places in Old Norse sources and other Northern European traditions (Heide 2011). The idea seems to be reflected in the Modern Icelandic term *álfavök* 'a round hole in ice, believed to be made by the elves' (Sigfús Blöndal

11 The Swedish words may be etymologically related, but if so only indirectly and very remotely, deriving from a common root meaning 'white'.

1920: 28) – the holes would be understood as passages between the worlds, cf. the Western Norwegian shortened form *alvøk* (Ross [1895] 1971: 4, 28) – and also in Danish traditions that associate the elves with wells and marshes (Feilberg 1886–1914, I: 242; Olrik 1918: 133–4). As we can see, the connection of elves with (bodies of) water is ancient and has been widespread until modern times. It is probable that this semantic element permitted the Swedish association of elves with rivers – and also the Danish association with alder trees, because alders usually grow near rivers or on other moist ground. It is improbable that the elves would have been associated with rivers and alder trees in Sweden and Denmark if there had been no ‘watery’ element in the elf traditions prior to this. Thus, these parts of the Swedish and Danish elf traditions may exemplify that clear ‘corruptions’ still have a semantic connection to earlier meanings, one that can usually be uncovered. This implies that the problem of ‘corruptions’ is smaller than sceptics frequently believe. In many cases it is, in fact, possible to account for the ‘corruptions’, too.

The recognition of late attestations of cognates does not imply a claim that all meanings really are ancient or original or that all meanings are equally valuable or useful. As mentioned, early attestations will normally (statistically) be closer to an essential, common meaning than late attestations, which means that we should regard the quality of late attestations as lower and put greater emphasis on early attestations. However, this does not imply that the lower-quality pieces of information are useless or harmful. All the meanings of cognate words should be taken seriously, placed in relation to each other and explained, because this is what will give a deeper understanding as more input into our calculations is simply better than less input. We are not in a position to reject information *a priori*.

A comparative approach confined to the reflections of one etymological root is not a new idea. A famous example of it is the linking of Old Norse *Týr* ‘a certain (obscure) god’ (<**Tīwaz*) and *tívar* m. pl. ‘the gods’, Latin *deus* ‘a god’, Ancient Greek *Zeús patēr* ‘the father of the gods’, and Sanskrit *Dyáuṣ Pitā* ‘the god (father) of the sky’, etc., which has formed the basis for reconstructions of an Indo-European supreme (sky) god **Dyēus phatēr* ‘the sky father’ (Mallory and Adams 2006: 408 ff., and many others). Another famous example is the linking of Lithuanian *Perkūnas* and Old Russian *Perúnu* ‘the thunder god’, and Old Norse *Fjörgyn* (<**Per-*) ‘the mother of the thunder god’, and possibly Sanskrit *Parjánya* ‘the god of storm and rain’, which forms the basis for the reconstruction of an (North-West-) Indo-European **Perk^wunos* ‘the god of thunder (and rain)’.¹² In these cases, the semantic elements are not assumed to have a

12 Mallory and Adams 2006: 409–10; Jakobson [1950] 1985 and [1970] 1985; Turville-Petre 1964: 97–8; de Vries 1962b: 126; Puhvel 1987: 226 f., 234.

connection just because they resemble each other (semantically) and belong to cultures that belong to the same language family (as in the Napolskikh example above). They are actually connected, with near certainty, through the formal side, namely: the word forms.

Still, these examples do not exemplify my idea, because they are produced through a formal, linguistic competence rather than a semantic one, and because they are heavily studied already. I want to draw attention to an unrealized potential, namely the clusters of cognate terms that are formally *banal* yet semantically rich. Because of the formal banality, such clusters of cognates have not been interesting for etymological studies, whose focus has been the *formal* reconstruction. The demand for formal banality implies that the candidates for study usually will be found within branches of a language family – like *gand(r)* in the Scandinavian languages and ‘elf’ in the Germanic languages – rather than across a whole language family. This again implies that the formal comparison will be less daring, because the elements compared will be closer to each other in time and space. In addition, the candidates for study will be more plentiful when it is sufficient that cognates be found within one language branch.

Some scholars are sceptical about the etymological principle itself because it only recognizes inheritance in isolation and ignores borrowing between languages and cultures. But this, too, is a misunderstanding. The ‘contamination’ caused by borrowing complicates the reconstructive work and reduces the number of cognates and thus the possible reconstructions. However, it does not make this kind of scholarly work impossible, nor does it make it worthless. Reconstructions like **Dyēus phatēr* ‘the sky father’ etc. are still both possible and plausible, and they can even be assisted by loanword studies because ancient loans in other languages may represent ‘petrifacts’ from the proto-language that we are after. A famous example of this is Finnish *kuningas* ‘a king’, which helps reconstruct the Proto-Germanic form **kuningaz*. A study of the *jötnar* in Germanic traditions (pl., sg. above) would benefit from the borrowed Sami form of this word, *jiehtanas* (sg.) and its meanings (Kåven *et al.* 1995: 269; cf. Fellman [1830s] 1906: 102 f.; Qvigstad 1893: 202).

One objection to comparative reconstructions is that they can only be roughly placed in time and space. This is true but that should not count against them. It is useful that etymology can tell us that the Indo-Europeans knew cereals, livestock and metals, and that they probably believed in a ‘sky father’ **Dyēus phatēr*, although it cannot tell us who the Indo-Europeans were or where and when they lived. I am also glad that we can reconstruct the essential meaning of **wikōn*, although the method that makes this possible cannot tell us where or for how long that meaning dominated or existed. If a

method can tell us something, by getting more knowledge out of the limited sources we have, we should appreciate this rather than reject it because it cannot tell us everything.

A related objection is that what we reconstruct probably never existed. This is also true, but again, this should not count against a comparative approach, because this objection would hit any theory of the past, regardless of approach. Our theories never match past reality completely; all we can do is attempt to formulate theories that seem to get closer than alternative theories. If this demand is met, the approach that brought us there is by definition acceptable.

For studies of past cultures, by far the most preferable situation would be to have plentiful, contemporary written sources from within the cultures we study. But, as we all know, this is hardly ever the position we find ourselves in. Instead, we are left to try to squeeze the most information out of the limited sources that we do have. In this toil, a variety of approaches is needed, and which one should be preferred in each case depends upon the problem in question. The semantic etymology approach outlined in this article is only applicable to a minority of problems, but in those relevant cases it may help expand our material with late attestations and thus increase our chances of understanding the past. An essential element in this approach, the principle of taking all the available information into account, has a wider application. While many scholars would in principle agree with this, we could all try harder to fulfil the potential that it opens up for us.

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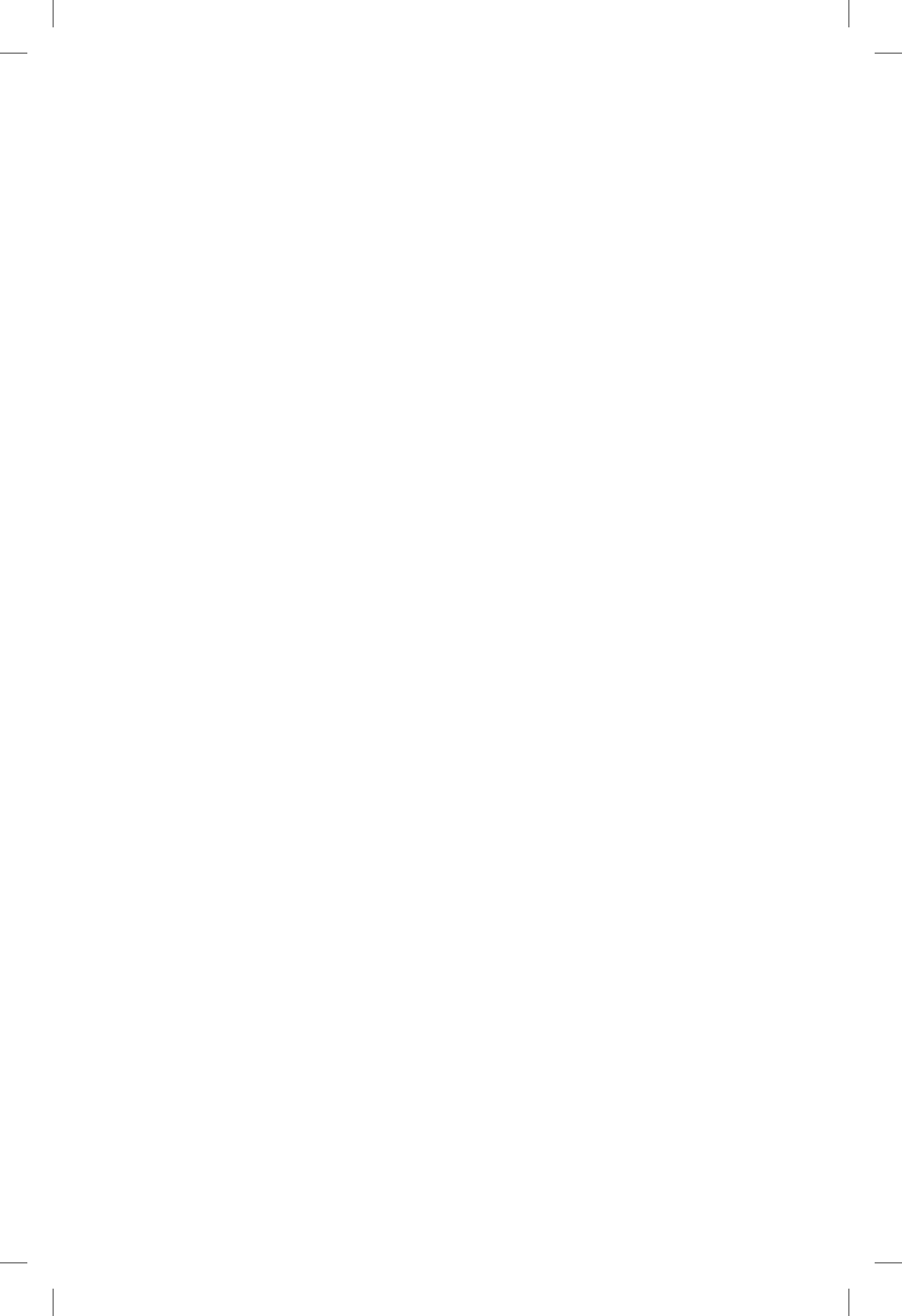
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Resuming methodological discussions: case studies from Northern Europe



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Preface

The articles in this anthology are the result of the conference New Focus on Retrospective Methods, held in Bergen by the Retrospective Methods Network and the Centre for Medieval Studies (CMS) at the University of Bergen, 27–8 September 2010. Out of the 15 papers given at the conference, 9 have been developed into articles and are presented here. We would like to thank CMS for funding the conference and FFC for help and advice in connection with the making of this book.

Bergen and Århus, October 2014
Eldar Heide and Karen Bek-Pedersen



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