On the Interpretation of Etymologies in Dictionaries

Pius ten Hacken

Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck
E-mail: pius.ten-hacken@uibk.ac.at

Abstract

Etymological information is an expected type of information in historical dictionaries, but it also appears in many general dictionaries, while it is the key information in etymological dictionaries. Etymologies are generally considered to trace the history of words. However, the notion of a *word* in this statement is an abstraction in more than one way. First, the questions of which forms and which meanings should be placed together as a word does not have an obvious answer. Moreover, the question of which words there are in a language at a particular time cannot be answered on a purely empirical basis. In the light of such observations, I show that what is recorded in an etymology can best be interpreted as the history of the motivation speakers had for the combination of a particular form with a particular meaning. This does not subtract from the value of etymological information, but gives a linguistically sound interpretation of what etymologists have tried to achieve.

Keywords: etymology, historical dictionaries, dictionary interpretation

1   Introduction

Etymological information is a standard type of information for historical dictionaries, and it is not accidental that Considine (2013) treats etymology and historical dictionaries in one chapter. However, etymological information is also common in general dictionaries, and it is central in specialized etymological dictionaries. An example of an etymology in a historical dictionary is the one for *translation* in the OED (2018), given in (1).

(1) *translation*
    < Old French *translation* (12th cent. in Godefroy *Compl*.), or < Latin *translātiōn-em* a transporting, translation, noun of action < *translāt-* , participial stem of *transferre* to TRANSFER v.

In (1), we see that there are two possible historical paths, one from Old French and one from Latin. For the Latin word, which underlies the Old French one, a morphological analysis is given.

In etymological dictionaries, e.g. Kluge (1995), information is much more extensive. Entries do not only give the forms recorded in various periods or reconstructed for periods from which no records are available, but also give arguments for or against the hypothesis of certain relationships. Moreover, entries may be followed by a list of cognates in other languages and references to discussions of the etymology of the word in the scientific literature.

Because of space constraints, general dictionaries tend to be more selective in the etymological information than historical dictionaries. The COED (2011) thus does not give an etymology for *translation*, but only (2) in the entry for *translate*.

(2) *translate*
    ORIGIN ME: from L. *translat-*, *transferre* (see TRANSFER)

It is clear that (2) summarizes information from (1), which is not surprising given the relationship between the COED and OED. The information about the possible Old French origin is only given in the etymology of *transfer*.

Here, I will discuss the interpretation of statements such as (1) and (2), as well as more elaborate etymologies such as given in Kluge (1995). First, section 2 will address the question of what constitutes a word. This question is central to the argument, because etymologies are given for words, e.g. *translation* in (1), and they refer to words, e.g. *transferre* in (1). Then, section 3 will turn to the sources of etymological information. In section 4, I argue for a particular interpretation of etymological statements that is in line with linguistic insights about the nature of words. Finally, section 5 summarizes how etymologies in dictionaries can be seen as well-founded pieces of information.

2   The nature of words

Etymology is concerned with the history of words. What constitutes a word, however, is not empirically verifiable, because a *word* is an abstraction from empirical data. This problem is recognized explicitly by Durkin (2016: 236). In order to understand the different dimensions of abstraction involved, it is useful to start from Saussure's (1916) theory of the word as a *signe*, consisting of a *signifiant* (form) and *signifié* (meaning). Three dimensions of abstraction can be identified. In section 2.1, I will address the abstraction of historical stages, in section 2.2, the synchronic extent of the form and meaning, and in section 2.3, the abstraction of named languages, such as English.

2.1   The history of a word

In determining what is a word, a first dimension of abstraction is the historical one. This can be illustrated with the start of the entry for *lügen* ('lie, tell lies') in Kluge (1995), given in (3).

(3) **lügen** *stV* (< 8. Jh.). Mhd. *liegen*, ahd. *liogan*, as. *liogan* aus g. **leug-a-*

In (3), the verb is characterized as a strong verb (*stV*) attested from the 8th century onwards. Five forms are given. The modern form is the headword. It is followed by documented forms from Middle High German (mhd., 1050-1350), Old High German (ahd., 750-1050) and Old Saxon (as., 8th-12th century), as well as a reconstructed earlier Germanic form. In etymologies, reconstructed forms for which no corpus evidence is available are indicated by an asterisk. The question is, then, in what sense the five forms given in (3) are forms of the same word.

Saussure (1916) objects to statements about the history of individual sounds. He gives the example of Latin *conficio* ('produce') and *facio* ('make'), where it would be wrong to say that the *-a-* in *facio* has become an *-i-* in *conficio*. We have to consider the entire system of oppositions synchronically before comparing the systems diachronically. This not only applies to sounds, but also to words. Looking at the history of individual words, as in (3), is therefore problematic. How can we determine that they are actually the same word? What is the status of the individual word forms in (3)? Even in a fairly straightforward case as in (3), grouping together these historically attested and reconstructed forms as a word is an abstraction. Although it is possible to come up with reasons for a particular grouping, no such grouping can be taken as an empirical fact. Groupings only emerge from the combination of a theory and empirical data.

Durkin (2016: 237-241) gives a more elaborate example involving *post*. The OED gives 22 homonyms of different word classes, some derived from Italian *posta* ('postal service') or *posto* ('position'), both ultimately participial forms of *porre* ('put'), others from the Latin preposition *post* ('after').

Establishing the relationships among these homonyms is also complicated by the fact that originally unrelated words of a similar form have influenced each other. This is also visible in (3), where the rounded vowel in *lügen* is a development that does not follow from a general sound law, but probably resulted from the need to distinguish *lügen* from *liegen* ('lie, be in a flat position, be located').

In sum, stating that two occurrences of forms are historically linked to the same word is an abstraction. A word is no empirical entity that exists over the course of time. Grouping historical occurrences together as a single word is thus a theoretical decision.

2.2   The boundaries of *signifiant* and *signifié*

Apart from the diachronic dimension discussed in section 2.1, words are also synchronically abstractions. In fact, a second dimension of abstraction concerns the synchronic extent of the unit referred to in an etymology. Saussure (1916) takes the opposition between *signes* as their determining factor. The *valeur* ('value') of a sign is that it is different from other signs. Both for the form and for the meaning of a Saussurean sign, the question arises how the boundaries are determined. In terms of the *signifiant*, the question is to what extent forms from the same historical stage of a language are combined as belonging to the same word. In lexicography, it is common to assume that headwords are what Matthews (1974: 22) calls *lexemes*. A lexeme includes all word forms of an inflectional paradigm. This raises the question as to which criteria are used to determine inflectional paradigms, i.e. how to distinguish inflection from word formation. As explained in ten Hacken (2014), this is not an empirical question and it can only be resolved on the basis of authority. In recording the etymology of a word, it is not necessary to have as precise an answer in each instance as required in theories of the lexicon or morphology. Ultimately, etymologies apply to individual word forms, but they are fairly trivial if the word forms are regularly formed. Whether *abridged* is taken as a verb form or an adjective does not affect its origin beyond its relation to the verb *abridge*. Conversely, in the case of suppletion, forms classified as inflected word forms should also be explained separately. The etymology of *bad* does not cover *worse*.

A more challenging issue is determining the extent of the *signifié*. Here, the question is which meanings are sufficiently distinct to require a separate unit of description. This is a form of the well-known question of the distinction between polysemy and homonymy. As the representation in one entry or as two entries is a decision that lexicographers have to make on a regular basis, the issue is discussed extensively in the context of dictionary making, e.g. Atkins and Rundell (2008: 265-316) and Koskela (2016). In the case of etymology, the problem is complicated by diachronic variation. Durkin (2016) discusses both cases of lexical merger and cases of lexical split. In the former case, a single word has two underlying forms with different etymologies. Durkin (2016: 246) mentions the transitive and intransitive readings of the verb *melt*, which have different Old English correlates. In the latter case, forms in free variation are assigned contrastive meanings. Durkin (2016: 248-251) discusses the case of *metal* and *mettle*, which until the 18th century were spelling variants of the same word.

In sum, both the form and the meaning of a word constitute abstractions. As there is no particular need to group word forms into lexemes for etymology, the synchronic grouping of forms does not pose big problems. However, the distinction between polysemy and homonomy, which is recognized as a lexicographic problem without a clear empirical solution, directly influences the units for which etymologies are given.

2.3   Named languages

Finally, the third dimension of abstraction relates to the system the word is part of. Independently of diachronic variation and the question of polysemy and homonymy, the status of a word as a

component of a language raises questions to which there are no straightforward answers. The significance of this dimension can be illustrated with the difficulty of answering the question as to whether a particular form is a word of English. As an example, let us consider the status of *hypernym* as opposed to *hyperonym*. Many non-specialists will react to the question of whether *hypernym* is a word of English by consulting a dictionary. In fact, the OED (2018) has an entry for *hypernym*. Lexicographers realize, of course, that the inclusion in a dictionary is the result of a decision by a lexicographer., and many will claim that this decision is taken on the basis of the occurrence in a corpus. As I showed in ten Hacken (2012), however, while a corpus can be used to justify a decision, it cannot provide an empirical basis that replaces a decision based on other (i.e. theoretical) considerations. Thus, COCA (2018) gives four occurrences of *inforamtion*, but nobody will claim that this means it is a new word of English. Obviously, they are four errors, where *information* was meant. In the case of *hypernym*, the question is whether it is an error for *hyperonym*. The fact that neither occurs in COCA cannot be used to take a decision. The only proper basis for a decision is a speaker's linguistic competence. However, linguistic competence is organized so as to support the use of language in communication, not its systematic description. Moreover, the existence of a particular word in one person's competence does not predict the existence of the same word in someone else's competence, even if they both speak English. Competence is inherently individual, and nobody's linguistic competence can be equated with *English*.

This does not mean that lexicographers are bound to take arbitrary decisions, but they have to take responsibility for their decisions. It is not possible to hide behind a corpus, but at least in the case of *hyper(o)nym*, it is possible to support the decision by appealing to considerations of analogy and etymology. The opposite of *hyper(o)nym* is *hyponym*. We also have pairs such as *hypotension* and *hypertension*. This seems to favor *hypernym*. On closer inspection, however, *-nym* is not a good parallel to *tension*. We find words such as *synonym* and *antonym*, where the first components are clearly not **syno-* and **anto-*, but *syn-* and *anti-*. Therefore, we get a better analysis if we assume that the second element is *-onym* in all of these words, which supports *hyperonym* as the correct form. This conclusion is not surprising, because the underlying Greek word is ὄνομα ('name'). Therefore, *hyperonym* is also the etymologically correct form. In this example, etymology supports a theoretically informed decision as to what constitutes a correct word of English.

2.4   Conclusion

In sum, we can say that *word* is an abstraction on three dimensions. When we consider the historical development, the question of whether two occurrences at different times are to be considered occurrences of the same word cannot be fully answered by empirical means. Similarly, the boundaries of the variation in form and the extent of the meaning cannot be determined in a fully empirical way. Finally, whether something is a word of a particular named language cannot be decided without an appeal to authority.

3   Sources of etymological information

Before turning to the interpretation of etymologies, it is useful to consider the sources on which they are based. In a way not unlike the question of how we can determine whether *hypernym* is a word of English, we can appeal to three types of information for the compilation of an etymology. First, etymologists have their intuitions a speakers, supplemented by their experience and knowledge built up in the course of their work. Secondly, corpora can be used. Thirdly, analyses by others, published in dictionaries or scholarly articles, can be appealed to.

In scientific work, using one's own intuitions as a source of information is all but inevitable, but appealing to them explicitly is not generally accepted. As a result, while intuition is used to arrive at a conclusion, the presentation of the results follows a different logic. This distinction between the 'logic of discovery' and the logic of presentation is one of the central insights of Popper (1959), which has since been accepted in the mainstream of the philosophy of science. In the case of language, the situation is somewhat different, because linguistic competence, which underlies any other realization of language, exists in the speaker's mind. On the basis of this insight, Chomsky (1957: 15) introduced grammaticality judgements as a source of data for linguistics. Ten Hacken (2007: 54-57) gives an overview of the issues this raises, and places this type of data in a broader context. In the case of etymology, grammaticality judgements are of little use. Decisions have to be made on what to investigate and how to interpret data collected from other sources, but etymology is not part of linguistic competence in the same way as rules of syntax are. The use of intuition by an etymologist is more like its use by an astronomer who builds instruments to make observations that cannot be made without them, but has to know which instruments to build, how to use them and how to interpret the observations.

Corpora are an important category of instruments used by etymologists, and are an indispensable source of historical data. However, one of the problems of corpora is that they cannot be representative of a language. This is a consequence of the fact that a language is not an empirical entity. The nearest empirical entity is a speaker's competence, but in a large corpus the performance of many different speakers is mixed. Moreover, the performance recorded in a corpus is not a direct, proportional reflection of the underlying competence. What speakers say or write is determined by various other factors interacting with their linguistic competence, e.g. the situation they are in and the aims they have. The realization of the intended performance may also be hampered by interfering factors, leading to what the speaker will identify as errors. Therefore, when an expression appears in a corpus, it may be a performance error, and when an expression does not appear in a corpus, there may be many different reasons for this, unrelated to its status as a correct expression for a particular speaker. Moreover, the etymologist working with historical corpora cannot ask the speakers of the historical period to check this.

A dictionary is an important source of information in the search for an answer to the question of whether a particular word exists in English, because it records the results of the analysis of corpora and linguistic intuitions by trained lexicographers. For etymologists, the sources of this type are much more varied. Traditionally, scholarly articles have been devoted to individual etymologies, e.g. Spitzer (1950). Although the relative weight of etymology as a field of study within linguistics has declined, we still find volumes dedicated to the presentation of individual etymologies, e.g. Hansen et al. (eds.) (2017). In etymological dictionaries such as Kluge (1995), many references to such sources are given to support the proposed etymologies. In addition, historical knowledge about language contact, material culture, and the exchange of ideas is an important source of indirect evidence to support or contest a hypothesis. As such, the work of an etymologist can be compared to the work of a zoologist studying the evolutionary development of species on the basis of fossils. Here the recorded data take the role of the fossils to be interpreted.

4   The mechanisms of etymological explanation

In his systematic overview of etymological mechanisms, Durkin (2009) devotes separate chapters to word formation, borrowing, change in word form and semantic change. In sections 4.1 to 4.4, I will discuss an example of each of these from English and German. For English, I will use the OED (2018) and for German Kluge (1995). In section 4.5, I will address the question of how these mechanisms relate to a speaker's competence and to the speech community.

4.1   Word formation

As an example of word formation in an etymology, let us consider *fiver* in (4).

(4) *fiver*
    < *five* adj. and n. + *-er* suffix[1]

The OED (2018) is very systematic in giving word formation etymologies, even if the origin of the word is relatively straightforward. In the electronic version, the references to *five* and *-er* are hyperlinked to the relevant entries. This is particularly important for suffixes, as they are often highly ambiguous. In fact, the OED (2018) gives six homonyms of *-er*. (4) illustrates how an etymology is incomplete. It is not explained why a *fiver* is a banknote, because this cannot be deduced from the component parts, and etymologies generally do not cover such meaning components.

In German dictionaries, word formation etymologies are much less systematically covered. Thus, the compound *Elternabend* ('parents' evening') needs to be in a dictionary because of its specialized meaning, but the etymology is not recorded in any of the German dictionaries I consulted, because the component parts *Eltern* ('parents') and *Abend* ('evening') are immediately recognizable. In Kluge (1995), such words are not included.

As I argued in ten Hacken (2013a), the under-specification of the meaning of word formation outputs is a core property of word formation rules. On hearing a word formation output, speakers recognize that it is a new word and use the rule and the components to narrow down the range of possible meanings, but they also look in the context of use for a candidate concept that may be named by it. This process is recorded in etymologies only as a reference to a word formation rule, as in (4), or not at all, as for German *Elternabend* and other compounds.

4.2   Borrowing

As an example of borrowing, let us consider the German *Fiasko* and English *fiasco*. Kluge (1995) gives the etymology in (5) (non-matching brackets corrected).

(5) *Fiasko*
    (< 19. Jh.). Entlehnt aus it. *(far) fiasco* 'durchfallen', eigentlich 'Flasche (machen)', zu it. *fiasco m.* 'Flasche' aus spl. *flasco* 'Weinkrug', aus wg. **flaska* 'Flasche'.

The meaning of 'fiasco' developed from an Italian verbal expression with *far(e)* ('make'). On its own, the central meaning of Italian *fiasco* is 'bottle'. Going beyond modern Italian, (5) gives corresponding forms in Late Latin ("spl.") and West-Germanic ("wg."), the latter reconstructed. These forms have no relation to the German and English meaning. The reconstructed West-Germanic form underlies the normal words for 'bottle' in German, Dutch and Frisian. The Late Latin form means 'wine jug', which ties in with the prototype of an Italian *fiasco*, which is a wine bottle with a round body, the bottom part covered by a straw basket, traditionally common in the Chianti area. The OED (2018) gives the etymology in (6).

(6) *fiasco*
    < (in sense 2 through French) Italian *fiasco* (see FLASK *n.²*) lit. 'a flask, bottle'.

As a historical dictionary, the OED starts the description of *fiasco* with the sense of the Chianti bottle and, for the more common sense of the word, records the intermediate stage of French. The further etymology of *fiasco* is discussed in the hyperlinked entry of *flask*. Both Kluge's (1995) (5) and OED's (6) are followed by remarks about the relationship between the 'bottle' reading and the 'fiasco' reading in Italian. An important property of borrowing illustrated in (5) and (6) is that the central meaning

of the Italian noun does not play a role in the meaning of the German and English borrowing. Zingarelli (1988) gives the 'fiasco' reading as the fourth, after three readings based on 'bottle'. The OED entry dates from 1895. It also records the 'bottle' reading with a single quotation. It is not obvious to what extent this reading has been added for etymological reasons. The BNC has 232 occurrences of *fiasco*, none of which is of the 'bottle' reading.

4.3   Change of form

Let us now turn to the mechanism of the change of form. We have seen some examples of changes in word form in (3) and (5). This type of information is more important for words where no word formation rule or borrowing can be used as a starting point of the etymology. An example is *Buch*, for which Kluge (1995) gives the etymology in (7).

(7) *Buch*
(< 8. Jh.). Mhd. *buoch*, ahd. *buoh f./n./m.*, as. *bōk* (s. u.) aus g. **bōk-(ō) f.*, auch in […]

The etymology in (7) consists of two parts, of which only the first is quoted. This first part gives a linear historical development in reverse chronological order. The language stages are the same as in (3). The *ahd* ('Old High German') variety is contemporary with the variety indicated by *as* ('Old Saxon'), with the former in the southern part of the German-speaking area, the latter in the northern one. This historical development is followed by a list of cognates introduced by "auch in" ('also in'). The OED's (2018) etymology of *book* in (8) uses a different strategy.

(8) *book*
Cognate with Old Frisian *bōk* book, Old Dutch *buok* large written document, book (Middle Dutch *boec* book, document, Dutch *boek*), Old Saxon *bōk* book, writing tablet (Middle Low German *bōk*, *būk*), Old High German *buoh* book, written text, scripture, (in an isolated attestation) letter of the alphabet (Middle High German *buoch*, German *Buch*), Old Icelandic *bók* book, story, history, Old Swedish *bok* book (Swedish *bok*), Old Danish *bok* book (Danish *bog*), and also (in a different declension: feminine *ō* -stem) Gothic *bōka* letter (of the alphabet), in plural *bōkōs* also in the sense '(legal) document, book' (perhaps also in singular in this sense, as indicated by the compound *frabauhtabōka* document of sale), probably < the same Germanic base as BEECH *n*.

Instead of outlining a linear history at the outset, (8) only gives a long list of cognates in related languages. The order of the languages is roughly from more closely related to English to somewhat further removed. For each language the oldest recorded form is given, along with the later forms developing from it in brackets. There is a lot of overlap of (8) with the information in Kluge's (1995) etymology after *auch in* in (7). The recorded forms in (7) are also included in (8). The difference is that (7) gives a stronger sense of linear development and includes a reconstructed form.

4.4   Semantic change

The final etymological mechanism is semantic change. We have come across an example in which semantic change played a role in (5) and (6). The nature of the connection between the 'bottle' reading and the 'fiasco' reading of the Italian *fiasco* is a matter of debate. However, in this case it is in a sense obvious that the two are readings of the same word, because speakers know both senses of the word. In (8), we also encountered some examples of semantic variation, but in this case the senses are much closer to each other. A general problem with semantic change as an etymological mechanism is that the meaning of a word is not recorded in a corpus, but only arises through interpretation of the form. In general, meaning only exists in speakers and hearers, not in texts and utterances, and this is

the reason people can misunderstand each other. The problems this causes for an etymologist can be illustrated by the verb *spear*. Suppose we have an example like (9) in our corpus.

(9) The poet tells us how the King saw his men speared.

In (9) we have an edited example from the OED (2018: *spear*$_v$). The meaning of *spear* can be inferred on the basis of the current meaning of the word and the context of (9), perhaps supplemented with knowledge of the use in other contexts. However, it is not possible to decide with absolute certainty whether *spear* in (9) means 'attack with a spear', 'wound with a spear', or 'kill with a spear'. Distinguishing these meanings would ultimately require asking the author what he or she meant. For historical corpora, this is generally not possible. This is one reason why semantic considerations are usually subordinate to formal similarity in etymologies. The meaning of words is invoked mainly in order to show that we are dealing with the history of the same word. Sense extensions such as that of the Italian *fiasco* in (5) are essential to trace the history of German *Fiasko* beyond the borrowing from Italian. Meaning changes can also be of the type exemplified by the sense extensions of English *ride* and *drive* or German *reiten* and *fahren* to new types of vehicle. As such, *bicycle* collocates with *ride* in English, which is also used for horses, whereas in German it is not *reiten*, which is used for horses, but *fahren* ('drive') that is used with *Fahrrad* ('bicycle'). The German *fahren* is used with vehicles in general, and also with boats and ships. In Polish, the same verb, *jeździć* ('go'), collocates with *koń* ('horse'), *rower* ('bicycle') and *samochód* ('car'). Such developments are the result of how new means of transport are included in existing classification schemes incorporated in the logic of collocation. Though potentially highly interesting from a cross-cultural perspective, they are generally not covered in etymologies.

4.5   Speakers and speech communities

Having considered the four main mechanisms used in etymologies, let us now turn to their implementation. Given that the underlying empirical reality of language is a speaker's linguistic competence, it must be determined how each of the mechanisms relates to this competence. Three of the mechanisms, word formation, borrowing and sense extension, correspond to the key mechanisms for naming new concepts. Elaborating on this onomasiological perspective, Štekauer (1998: 5) takes the speech community rather than the individual speaker's competence as the point of departure, but ten Hacken and Panocová (2011) show that there is no genuine opposition involved, because naming actions perceived as actions of a speech community are actually performed by individual speakers. A competence-based view of language is not incompatible with the recognition of speech communities. As long as we accept that labels such as "Mhd." in (7) and "Old Frisian" in (8) do not refer to empirical entities with clear boundaries but are fuzzy concepts whose boundaries cannot be determined exactly, there is no problem with their use in etymologies.

The three mechanisms for naming new concepts show different degrees of regularity, but in all cases the meaning of their output is determined by what I called *onomasiological coercion* (ten Hacken 2013b). This means that the meaning is the concept to be named rather than what is predicted by the mechanism used. Word formation is a rule-based mechanism. The rules are implemented in individual speakers. They are used both in coining new words and in understanding them. Here *new* means 'new to the speaker'. Sense extension is very similar, and includes, for instance, metaphor and metonymy. These seems to be less rule-based than word formation, but if we take into account that the actual meaning of a word formation output is determined in large part by the concept to be named, the difference with metaphor and metonymy is less striking. Borrowing is also driven by the need to name concepts, which explains why it is not an entire word with all of its senses that is borrowed, but only a name attached to a concept, as in the case of *fiasco*. In each of the three mechanisms, naming is performed on a case-by-case basis.

Sound change is of a very different nature. As explained by Beekes (1995), it underlies much of the historical-comparative work in linguistics originating in the 19th century. Unlike word formation rules, rules of sound change are not realized in the speaker's competence. A rule of sound change is a generalization about historical developments observed by linguists. It is thus worth considering what exactly constitutes the empirical basis underlying such generalizations. Clearly, it cannot be the historical change of a word, because a word is not an empirical entity, as we saw in section 2. In historical linguistics, words are studied primarily as realizations in performance. However, generative linguists have also linked these data to the underlying competence, e.g. Lightfoot (1999). From a historical perspective, performance and competence are in a cyclic relationship. An individual speaker's competence underlies their performance. At the same time, the origin of the competence in an individual speaker is the language acquisition process, which is based on observation of the performance of speakers in the environment. What happens in a sound change is that performance is observed to change gradually. For individual speakers, this does not have to mean that their competence changes. The sound image of a word is a prototype used to interpret perceived speech and produce the word in performance. Without changing the prototype, a certain shift in perceived speech can be accommodated. For a new generation, the prototype will be calibrated anew on the basis of the performance of the community, which has gradually shifted. In this way, changes may take place gradually. A crucial difference to the naming mechanisms is that at no point does a decision by a speaker have to be taken.

5   Conclusion

In ten Hacken (2009), I showed that a dictionary cannot be a description of the vocabulary of a language. The core of the argument is similar to the point made in section 2 that a word is an abstraction. For general dictionaries, I proposed that they should be interpreted as tools for users to solve problems with. Such a conclusion is broadly in line with lexicographic approaches, such as that outlined by Bergenholtz and Bergenholtz (2011), although they arrive at it from a very different background.

If a dictionary is a tool, a central question in the interpretation of etymologies is who needs etymologies. In fact, this is Svensén's (2009: 333) starting point in his chapter on etymology. Svensén takes etymology to be less important from a utilitarian perspective, but is motivated by an interest in "facts of language". This raises the question of what these facts are, given that words as elements of a language are not empirical entities.

Whereas etymology is traditionally oriented towards the history of words, the discussion of the methods and mechanisms above suggests a different interpretation. When Saussure (1916) proposed his theory of the word as a *signe*, he stipulated that the relationship between the *signifiant* and the *signifié* is arbitrary. If we consider the *signifiant* and the *signifié* as entities that can be related, this is no doubt correct. After all, different languages have different words for the same concept. However, the word is not an entity but an abstraction. This is the same for the *signifiant* and the *signifié*. They exist in speakers' minds, but not as speaker-independent entities. For the individual speakers, the relationship between the form and meaning of a word is *not* arbitrary. It is in most cases determined by the performance of other speakers in the environment at the time of language acquisition, itself based in the competence of these speakers. As long as the result is immediately recognizable as 'the same word', this process is not remarkable. What is described in etymology is the cases where there is a change in this transfer.

Therefore, etymology can be seen as the historical record of the motivation of the relationship between the form and meaning of a word. The standard assumption is that when a speaker adds a word to their competence, this is taken over from the competence of other speakers in the speech

community. This corresponds to the situation where the performance of other speakers is interpreted in accordance with how they intended it. A large proportion of this vocabulary extension takes place in childhood. Change of pronunciation may occur as a gradual side effect of the calibration of the prototype on the basis of performance. Change of meaning may occur for the same reason. These are the gradual processes described in etymology. Naming acts are the more striking etymological facts. Here, word formation, borrowing or sense extension are used to name a new concept. *New* in the context "new concept" is of course also speaker-dependent. The difference with regard to gradual phonological and semantic changes is that no model is available in the competence of speakers in the same speech community for a new concept that requires an act of naming.

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