

Characteristics of Lexemes of a Substratum Origin in Proto-Germanic

Preliminary notes on language contact

When a language borrows from another, "nativization" takes place. Phonetically, this is most commonly done by the substitution of a segment with the most similar native sound, but a system-based substitution is another possible option. A borrowed term will also be adjusted to conform to a language's phonotactic restrictions. Once sufficiently nativized, it will be subjected to synchronic phonetic rules (Hock 1991: 390-7).

Indicators of a substratum origin (as given in Lubotsky 2001):

- Limited geographical distribution;
- phonological or morphological irregularity;
- unusual phonology;
- unusual word formation;
- specific semantics (semantic areas likely to include borrowings are: animals, animal products, plant names, simple implements, features of the environment, human feelings and perceptions, and human activities (Polomé 1986: 661-3)).

NB: More than one, preferably more than two indicators are necessary to ascribe a substratum origin to a lexeme.

Substratum in Proto-Germanic

While possible that there was more than one substratum in Proto-Germanic and some apparently borrowed terms could have come from different languages, it is preferable to assume that a single language (or at most, a small group of related languages) was in a substratal relationship with Proto-Germanic. Lexemes seemingly of a substratum origin have an almost exclusively European and, most commonly, North-European geographical distribution, which strongly implies a single pre-Indo-European language (or language family) that could influence Proto-Celtic at the westernmost and Proto-Baltic at the easternmost.

Lexemes of a substratum origin in Proto-Germanic

*ahurna- 'maple', *aik- 'oak', *akrana- 'tree fruit, acorn', *akwesī- 'axe', *albut- 'swan', *alh- 'temple', *alis/z- 'alder', *amslōn- 'blackbird', *apan- 'monkey, ape', *artōn- 'wagtail', *arut- 'ore', *arwīt- 'pea', *aspō- ~ *apsō 'aspen', *apa/il- 'nature', *awadī- 'eiderduck', *baira- 'boar', *balika/ōn- 'coot', *baunō- 'bean', *bebura- 'piece of skin, cloth', *benuta- 'bentgrass', *bliwa- 'lead', *dawēn- 'to marvel', *dragjō- 'dregs', *drenan- 'drone', *ēbanþ- ~ *ēbund- 'evening', *ebura- 'boar', *ewwadjōn- 'tit', *fata- 'vat, vessel', *gait- 'goat', *gazda- 'prickle, thorn', *gerstō- 'barley', *habuka- 'hawk', *hafra- 'billy goat, buck', *hakan- 'hook', *hale/up- 'man, hero', *hanipa- 'hemp', *hargu- 'sacrificial mound', *hemerō- 'hellebore', *hnippōn- 'to pinch', *hōkīna- 'kid, young goat', *hringa- 'ring, circle', *hruگان- 'fishroe', *hulisa- 'holly', *humara- 'lobster', *humelan- 'hops', *hwerhwetjō- 'gourd', *kattōn- 'cat', *kisila- 'gravel', *kizna- 'pine tree', *krabita- 'crayfish', *kuban- 'shed', *kumb/pan- 'basin, bowl', *laiwizakōn- 'lark', *lauba- 'leaf, foliage', *lītila- 'small', *magan- 'stomach', *mag-a/īþ- 'girl, maiden', *maldjō- 'saltbrush, oracle', *managa- 'many', *murhōn- 'wild carrot', *pagila- 'measuring stick', *pakka- 'bundle, pack', *pōla- 'pool', *reupōn- 'grouse', *rōbjōn- 'turnip', *sahaza- 'sedge', *samda- 'sand', *semeþa/ō- 'rush', *silubra- 'silver', *smel(h)wō- 'hair-grass', *smērjōn- 'clover', *steura- 'bull', *sturja/ōn- 'sturgeon', *swamb/ppan- 'sponge, mushroom', *swebla- 'sulfur', *tafna- 'sacrificial meat', *tigōn- 'goat', *trabō- 'fringe', *pahsu- 'badger', *peura- 'bull', *ufna- 'oven', *waizda- 'woad', *waldō- 'dyer's rocket', *wisund- 'wisent'.

(Underlined lexemes are plant and animal names. All forms and proposed meanings taken from Kroonen 2013).

#			%	#			%	#			%
1	a	90	19.74	16	d	11	2.41	31	b ~ pp	1	0.22
2	n	36	7.89	17	w	10	2.19	32	a ~ i	1	0.22
3	r	28	6.14	18	p	7	1.54	33	p ~ b	1	0.22
4	ō	24	5.26	19	j	7	1.54	34	a ~ u	1	0.22
5	l	22	4.82	20	ī	6	1.32	35	hw ~ w	1	0.22
6	u	21	4.61	21	þ	6	1.32	36	ww	1	0.22
7	h	19	4.17	22	z	5	1.10	37	e ~ u	1	0.22
8	s	18	3.95	23	ai	5	1.10	38	tt	1	0.22
9	b	18	3.95	24	f	4	0.88	39	q	1	0.22
10	t	17	3.73	25	a ~ ō	4	0.88	40	pp	1	0.22
11	i	16	3.51	26	eu	3	0.66	41	þ ~ d	1	0.22
12	e	16	3.51	27	ē	3	0.66	42	kk	1	0.22
13	m	15	3.29	28	au	2	0.44	43	s ~ z	1	0.22
14	k	14	3.07	29	a ~ i ~ u	2	0.44				
15	g	12	2.63	30	hw	2	0.44				

Table 1: Segment frequencies in lexemes of likely substratum origin

The most notable phonetic features of lexemes in Proto-Germanic that are extremely rare in lexemes of likely substratum origin are: a) consonantal variation (either in voicing or length); b) distinctive vowel length; c) presence of geminated stops. On the other hand, the few cases of vowel alternations found in lexemes of likely substratum origin cannot be explained in Indo-European terms.

Compared with inherited lexemes, those of a likely substratum origin show: a) an approximately same frequency of voiceless versus voiced stops; b) an increased frequency of vowels; c) a decreased frequency of resonants. In phonotactic terms, consonant clusters are much more common in inherited lexemes, though not entirely absent in lexemes of likely substratum origin; the permitted syllable structures in the substratum language appear to have been: V, CV, VC, CVC.

Features of the substratum language:

- distinction of voiceless and voiced stops;
- static accent (resulting in no Verner alternations);
- common vowel *a;
- lack of phonemic vowel length;
- vowel alternations most likely indicate the presence of a vowel unknown to Proto-Germanic.

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