A SEMANTIC APPROACH TO VENNEMANN’S “GREAT PUZZLE”

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In the latest volume of The Annual of Armenian Linguistics (1996), John Harkness has once again raised the spectre of *dw>yerk in Armenian, and his long review of the literature is more than adequate although some surprising errors in the citations, e.g. that թթբ means 20 or that Pedersen is spelled Pederson, make one question his control of the Armenian material. Harkness’ article is essentially a rejoinder to Kortlandt’s (1989), which in turn was a response to Vennemann (1986).

This vexed question has long troubled those that have attempted a phonological solution for the constellation of Armenian words meaning two թթբ, labor/work թօղ (Adjarian has a quite convincing Pahlavi etymology for this word ‘ rk), birth pains թօղ/թօղ ղ, and perhaps heaven and earth թօղ ղ/թօղ.

The phonological solution has hovered about the rather common instances of resonant metathesis in Armenian (from Grammont [1918] to Harkness), but how does one motivate the presence of the resonant that metathesizes? Moreover, any phonological over-view of Armenian (Vaux, Schmitt) clearly displays the anomalous character of the I.E. cluster *dw- shifting to #erk; all similar clusters of obstruent + continuant seem to have normally simple obstruent outcomes with occasional palatalization and affricatization: *kʷ>ղ, ղ, ղ, *gʰ>ղ, ղ, *tw>ղ, and we, therefore, expect *dw>ղ rather than թօղ.

Typological considerations (the most accepted sonority hierarchy of phonological segments is violated [Blevins]) and timely ordering of sound changes also confound the phonological explanation: an initial #rk- is highly unlikely, while the corrective epenthesis must have followed the posited metathesis (Harkness, Kortlandt, etc.).

One explanatory device that has not been brought to bear sufficiently is phonological feature analysis although Hock’s presentation of the facts includes it. A possible approach is to disassemble the phonemes (allophones or phones?) involved to discover the transformations’ kernels. Both the I.E and Armenian segments are ordered alveolar-velar, the second segments of each differ in voicing, while the first do not, and the truly radical development centers on +/- continuant. One could even suggest that the features ‘obstruent/continuant’ have undergone metathesis. However, all such explanations still founder on the shoals of typological improbability and the change’s anomaly within the Armenian phonological system.

Benveniste, Meillet, Dumézil and Kortlandt have all suggested the semantic solution at one time or another, yet how does one connect the basic idea of duality with the ideas of fear, pain, labor and length (not to mention possibly heaven and earth [Dumézil and Meillet (in Solta)]: that solution assumes that two has been infected by three in the common paradigmatic analogical shift that one sees in Latin (4 & 5), Russian (9 & 10), and English (4 & 5) and that it is the transformed lexeme, two, that has been used as a morpheme in the construction of all of these words. The following will not discuss the word for ‘length’ because it is transparently connected to such phrases as ‘doubled,’ ‘twice as long,’ etc. My inclusion of the word for ‘work’ is very provisional due to Adjarian’s compelling evidence that it is Iranian.

The semantic solution correlates divergent meanings with cognate etymologies. There are many examples of compound words built with numerals taking on very surprising semantics: quintessential (concerning the fifth element that underpins the four elements of Greek science; best, highest, unparalleled), four-flusher (a card-cheater so skilful that s/he can convince the other players that an incomplete flush [five cards] is complete; a cheat or rogue), square (both a four-sided figure and a bore), cadre (both a picture frame and a Communist cell), squad (a military unit), trivial (concerning the riff-raff meeting at the juncture of three roads; silly, meaningless), trivium (the three basic subjects of the Medieval curriculum), trivia (a concept influenced by both of the previous: insignificant knowledge), travel and travail (the most accepted etymology of the common Romance words for ‘work,’ borrowed into English as ‘travail’ [birth pains] and ‘travel’ [the first is clearly connected to the second if one travels by Greyhound in the US] have their origin in a compound word [based on the morphemes for three and palings/poles] for an instrument of torture), union, universe, university, one-of-a-kind, unique, one-up-manship (the ability to always go beyond), unicorn (a one-horned animal; the ultimate magical being), uniform (of one shape; the common clothes of a group; boring), Uniformitarianism (the scientific stance that physical laws do not substantially change through time), a/an (a purely grammatical avatar of the numeral), at sixes and sevens (confused), at odds (in conflict), decimate (to destroy nearly utterly), etc.
My argument then closes with the nature of duality in a late Mesopotamian, early Persianized world: Duality was the nexus of all evil. One does not have to argue the philosophical particulars here because they would have been professionally discussed by Armenians in other languages, probably Persian or Greek; however, we are concerned with the folkloric consequences of that world-view. This is only a short note concerning a subject that could (and perhaps should) be explored at some length. My purpose is not to prove an Evil=Two I.E. Ideology underlying these Armenian words (although it seems an area worthy of elaboration); I simply wish to point out the cogency of such an analysis. The Armenian vocabulary could not have avoided influence from the great religio-philosophical movements of Anatolia and Mesopotamia from the initial venture into the region of Van (circa 800 B.C.) until the first written records in Armenian (5th century A.D.). Obviously, the Armenians were intimately changed as they assimilated the Urartians (a people thoroughly Mesopotamianized), were ruled by the Medes (the core ethnicity of Zoroastrian priesthood), Persians, Greeks, Romans, Parthians, and Sassanians. If one looks at our own records in Armenian (5th century), especially in his recounting of conflicts of the twins Ahriman and Ahuramazda within the womb of Zurvan.

Demonish duality has deep folk roots: twins are often a mark of misfortune: the warring twins in Rome, etc. and the belief in changelings, doppelgaengers, etc. Folk fears are not unassociated with the notions of twoness, mirrors, and reflections. All of these ancient associations would have been grist for the educated-mill of Zoroastrian, Manichaean, Gnostic and late-Platonic dualistic phobias. The first literary records of this influence in the Armenian language would only appear in Eznik in the 5th century, especially in his recounting of conflicts of the twins Ahiran and Ahuramazda within the womb of Zurvan.

The above generalizations are the background to our study; for the foreground, one must realize that Armenian vocabulary could not have avoided influence from the great religio-philosophical movements of Anatolia and Mesopotamia from the initial venture into the region of Van (circa 800 B.C.) until the first written records in Armenian (5th century A.D.). Obviously, the Armenians were intimately changed as they assimilated the Urartians (a people thoroughly Mesopotamianized), were ruled by the Medes (the core ethnicity of Zoroastrian priesthood), Persians, Greeks, Romans, Parthians, and Sassanians. If one looks at our own locations organizing moral behavior, one will see vast changes from the Victorian, not to mention the Early Christian. Scholars have often remarked that normally ameliorative pagan concepts were shifted to highly pejorative concepts by Christian missionaries, and Muslim missionaries worked the same magic on Christian. Scholars have often remarked that normally ameliorative pagan concepts were shifted to highly pejorative concepts by Christian missionaries, and Muslim missionaries worked the same magic on Christian. Students have often pointed out the cognate relationships of the typologist Joseph Greenberg) displays the possible cognate relationships.