Robert Mailhammer (ed.)


This volume spotlights a venerable subfield of historical linguistics: etymology. On the one hand, etymology as traditionally understood is a purpose in itself in that it seeks to uncover the origins of words. On the other hand, by establishing diachronic connections between lexical items, it serves to establish historical links between languages or the affiliation of a given language with a language family already identified. In the latter sense, etymology is “a fundamental auxiliary discipline of historical linguistics,” as Mailhammer writes in his short introductory chapter (p. 1). The chapter bears the subtitle “Etymology beyond word histories.” This hints at the gist of the distinction between “structural” and “lexical” etymology, which Mailhammer attributes to Vennemann (2000) and which is also reflected in the volume’s title: “lexical etymology” indicates “traditional” etymology in the sense mentioned above—elucidating the origin of words and their connections. But, as the conception of etymology assumed here emphasizes, a broader perspective, which also takes into account the origins of phonological or morphosyntactic structures of languages, is possible. This is, roughly, what the term “structural etymology” means.

Eight of the ten authors contributing to this volume have an affiliation with the Australian National University, and indeed, as Mailhammer explains (p. 4), a large number of contributions originate from presentations at a symposium on etymology held there. Hence, there is a strong emphasis on data from Australian languages, which are the object of inquiry of six of the articles contained in this volume; two others are concerned with Oceanic languages, two with Germanic, and one is typological in nature. Although the volume is not formally organized into subsections, a thematic organization, roughly along the lines of the distinction between lexical and structural etymology, is nevertheless discernible (as is also brought to light in Mailhammer’s introductory chapter). In
the following, I will briefly go through and summarize the individual articles in
the order in which they appear in the volume, necessarily glossing over many
details. After this survey, I shall return to the major theoretical thrust of the
volume—highlighting the notion of structural etymology—one again.

Mailhammer himself, in his contribution “Towards a framework of contact
etymology,” which immediately follows his introductory chapter, suggests a
general theoretical framework for etymologies due to language contact. A cen-
tral component of this framework is his “Blueprint Principle,” which, informed
by language contact theory, consists of reconstructing a contact scenario for
the origin of a given element (aspects of this are implicitly foreshadowed in
Li, 1985, and somewhat similar reasoning is employed in Ross, 2003). By way
of example, Mailhammer (pp. 26–28) argues that Proto-Germanic *pleganan
‘wager, dedicate, employ’ is a loanword from Punic (Semitic), illustrating each
step in his “Blueprint Principle” framework by means of this brief case study.

Harold Koch and Luise Hercus’s joint contribution “Obscure vs. transpar-
ent cognates in linguistic reconstruction” moves into etymology as an auxil-
iary discipline within the framework of the comparative method, with spe-
cial emphasis on Pama-Nyungan. As the authors explain, previous historical-
comparative work has focused on finding cognates in terms which are seman-
tically directly comparable on the basis of word lists. The broader goal of their
paper is to improve the reconstruction of Pama-Nyungan both methodologi-
cally and empirically. To this end, they also take into account possible cognates
that do not match precisely semantically, or are only partially cognate due to
the etymologically relevant bit being only part of an attested form (e.g., as a
constituent of a compound), constituting the base of a derivative, occurring
in archaisms, or in other “disguised” forms, as they call them. They focus on
four subgroups of Pama-Nyungan: Arandic, Karnic, Thura-Yura, and Yarli, and
rightly point out that their evidence is relevant for (higher-level) subgrouping
and hence contributes to consolidating the idea of the Pama-Nyungan family
and to obtaining a fuller picture of its internal structure.

In “The etymology of a paradigm: the Pama-Nyungan 3SgF reconsidered,”
Harold Koch moves into the realm of “structural etymology” by providing evi-
dence for the presence of a 3rd person singular feminine pronoun (in nomi-
native case *nhan) at the Proto-Pama-Nyungan level. This cell in the otherwise
fairly well reconstructed pronoun paradigm could hitherto only be posited with
doubts because of the low number of reflexes, which are, in addition, only
found in “easterly” (p. 58) Pama-Nyungan subgroups. Koch presents a wealth
of novel evidence and refinements of data already adduced for the reconstruc-
tion of *nhan. Much of this is hard to detect because the pronoun under-
went analogical alteration in shape, is only attested enshrined in extended