MICHAEL LEWIN

# ORIENTATION BY MEANS OF ORIGINAL WORD FORMS AND MEANINGS

## 1 INTRODUCTION: WEAK VS. STRONG VIEW OF ETYMOLOGY

Speech, different forms of vocalization, words, sentences, grammar, punctuation marks, non-linguistic signs, and other elements of communication can be regarded as acts and means of orientation in the widest sense. Our communication mechanisms have been adjusted to our general need for orientation and evolved over time. Hence, a closer look at ordinary language can reveal different ways or layers of human orientation. Consider the word 'perspective' and the multiple forms of orientation enabled by its use. The phrase 'I have a different perspective on that' can be used to express differences. 'You should put that in perspective' is a way to point at something important. An artist can use the linear, color, aerial, or inverted perspective. In German, the word '*Perspektiv*' was used to refer to a small telescope, as it literally enables one to 'see through' (Latin '*perspicere*'). '*Perspectiva*' was the Latin translation of the Ancient Greek '*optikḗ téchnē*,' i.e., optics as a part of geometry. When Leibniz first introduced the term 'perspective' into philosophy, he also used the auxiliary term 'standpoint,' as a perspective usually does not happen from nowhere. Nietzsche has coined the term 'perspectivism' that refers to the process of the human consciousness to see things 'in perspective,' i.e., simpler than they are. Currently, the term

'perspectivism' is also used to express a position in epistemology, philosophy of science, hermeneutics, and moral philosophy. In the *Philosophy of Orientation*, Werner Stegmaier has—for a good reason—devoted a chapter to the interrelated terms 'perspective,' 'standpoint,' 'direction,' and 'horizon': they are well-familiar means of human orientation (see *WO* 43-54).

Stegmaier has also proposed to call the exploration of possibilities for our orientation that are contained in words and phrases "language phenomenology" ("*Sprachphänomenologie*," see *PO* 33, 333) or "phenomenology of the language of orientation" (see *PO* 14; see furthermore Stegmaier [unpublished manuscript]). In contrast to other philosophical methods, e.g., 'conceptual analysis'or 'conceptual engineering,' a language phenomenologist neither aims at a strict decomposition nor substitution of terms or meanings. Rather, the different meanings of words are revealed by exploration of their uses in various contexts. As shown by the example of 'perspective,' this also includes the examination of historical meanings and uses. In this regard, language phenomenology shares one of its areas with etymology. It relies on the work of etymologists to find out which acts of orientation were made possible by older forms of words and their meanings. This may cast light on how contemporary communication communities, which are often unaware of original word forms and meanings, orient themselves.

Etymology is the study of the origin and history of words, their meanings, and uses. The etymological analysis of the term 'etymology' reveals that this discipline is concerned with the true meanings of words. The etymologist looks for 'etymons' (from the Ancient Greek '*étymon*,' adj. '*étymos*,' meaning 'true,' 'veritable,' 'authentic'), the original forms of words, word parts, and meanings that lay the groundwork for derived and altered words and their meanings. For example, '*perspicere'* ('*per-*' and

'*specere*') is the etymon for 'perspective,' and '*étymon*' and '*-logíā*' ('*lógos*,' from '*legere*,' and '*-íā*') are the etymons for 'etymology.' Contemporary etymologists do not necessarily presuppose that the original meaning is the 'true' meaning, and neither does Stegmaier. For him, the etymological method is rather a way to open up new alternatives and bring ('faded') concepts back in motion (see Kann and Stegmaier 2022: 71). This somewhat cautious view can be called the 'weak view of etymology.' It seems to be a viable option given that etymological analyses can mislead or prove to be of little use. According to the weak view, etymology is an occasionally useable instrument to gather more information and 'set free' alternative meanings. However, it seems not to be the option that Stegmaier chooses in his *Philosophy of Orientation*. Firstly, the etymology is used constantly, not only by occasion. Secondly, the meanings that are set free by etymological analyses are often not regarded as arbitrarily selectable alternatives. For example, Stegmaier does not seem to believe that the meaning of the Latin '*perspicere*' (to see through') is somehow irrelevant for the understanding of the contemporary word 'perspective.' In the everyday language use, speakers sometimes use 'perspective' and 'standpoint' interchangeably. According to *WO* (see 43-54), however, things appear 'in perspective,' which is clamped between a standpoint and a horizon. A perspective is hence a differentiated structural part of a situation. According to this rather 'strong view of etymology,' the etymons are constitutive and corrective for the understanding of contemporary uses. Somebody who is trained in ancient languages and etymology has intellectual advantages over those who do not know the original word forms and meanings and can understand the words more adequately. That Stegmaier entertains this stronger view can also be seen by his acknowledgement of Hans Blumenberg's theory of 'absolute metaphors' (see Kann and Stegmaier 2022: 70, 74). According to this theory,

there are a number of metaphors that prove resistant to terminological and conceptual demands and changes throughout history. Their complete logification is not possible. The knowledge of a historical and persistent metaphorical meaning of a term or a phrase is therefore a virtue that Stegmaier is also not willing to give up so easily.

The weak and the strong view seem to exclude each other. If etymology is just an occasional limited instrument to set 'concepts' back in motion, then there is no obligation to follow the etymological method and to let earlier or original word forms and meanings have any normative impact on contemporary uses of words. If, however, the knowledge of the latter enables a better linguistic understanding and orientation and helps get rid of confusions and vagueness, then etymology is more than just a collection of outdated yet still inspiring ideas. The weak view can be supported by numerous arguments that question the authority of etymology. It seems easier to argue against the etymological method than in favor of it. Let us first consider possible arguments against the use of etymology in contemporary contexts. After that, we will explore ways to argue for the strong view of etymology.

## 2 ARGUMENTS AGAINST ETYMOLOGY AND THE ETYMOLOGICAL METHOD

One argument against the etymological method could be that the search for the one true meaning is, per se, a futile enterprise, because what is true is, in each case, defined by a community of speakers or (language) experts at a given time. There are, according to this view, many relative truths. For example, it might be true that '*sophia*' ('wisdom') denoted both knowledge and craftsmanship skills in the 5th century BC. Solon, as King Croesus is supposed to have said according to Herodotus, traveled for philosophical reasons, i.e., because he

was interested in gathering knowledge of different countries (and not in trade or war). No one would seriously call a shoemaker or a travel blogger a philosopher today. Hence, the etymological analysis of the term 'philosophy' cannot reveal the one true meaning but rather 'truths' relative to different communication communities and conventions.

One can radicalize this argument by claiming that the conception of truth is an inadequate category when it comes to meanings. Consider the following example. In 2006, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) redefined the term 'planet.' According to the ratified agreement at the end of a week-long conference, an astronomic object must meet the following criteria to be classified as a planet: (i) orbits around the sun, (ii) has sufficient mass to have an approximately round shape, (iii) dominates its orbit, and (iv) clears it of other objects. This has led to the exclusion of Pluto from the class of celestial bodies called 'planet,' since it does not clear its orbit of other objects. Now, the question of whether it is true that Pluto meets the requirements (i)-(iv) is different from the question whether (i)-(iv) express the true meaning of the term 'planet.' The decision to redefine this term was made by less than 4 percent of the world's astronomers and has led to multiple criticisms (see, e.g., Grinspoon and Stern 2018). One counterargument could be: If Pluto is to be called a 'dwarf planet,' this denotation still contains the word 'planet' that must not contradict the general definition of 'planet' (according to the ordinary understanding of how language works—a small dog has the features of a dog plus the feature of being small). Turning to etymology will not help to resolve the disagreement. The Ancient Greek etymon '*planḗtēs*' means 'wanderer,' which does not even come close to the meaning of the phrase 'orbits around the sun.' 'Wanderer' is too general and abstract to be applied to a specific class of astronomic objects.

Furthermore, the condition 'orbits around the sun' fits only the contemporary heliocentric picture of the universe. Hence, if we read texts of Ptolemy and his followers, we must bracket this condition to understand them correctly. Based on these points, one could argue that the question of the meaning of the term 'planet' is not the question of truth and falsity, but of temporal agreement of specific communication communities that disagree with other communities and individuals. According to this view, the question of truth and falsity would concern other dimensions, e.g., when a definition containing a series of descriptions is to be compared with the facts of the real world (Is it true that Pluto does not clear its orbit of other objects?).

Both kinds of arguments against the search for one true meaning or true meanings can be further supported by the widely accepted—also by Stegmaier (see *WO* 71-72)—theory of the arbitrariness of signs. The proponents of this theory hold that there is no direct link between the signifier (e.g., a word or a sound) and the signified (the referent or meaning of a linguistic expression). Hence, one cannot derive the meaning of signs from how they look or sound. For example, the words 'tree,' '*Baum*'(German), '*arbre*' (French), '*derevo'* ('*дерево*,' Russian), and '*puu'* (Finnish) do not have much in common, although they refer to the same class of objects. One might argue that there are at least some exceptions, such as onomatopoeia ('meow,' woof') and interjections ('wow,' 'ouch'). But, as already noted by Saussure, they constitute only a small part of linguistic signs and are based on conventions and approximate phonetic imitation (e.g., 'woof' is '*guau*' in Spanish and '*wan'* in Japanese). He also added that it is often deceptive to believe that certain words (besides onomatopoeia and interjections) are based on imitation of sounds.

The theory of arbitrariness of signs does not entail that the choice of signs is irrelevant in the context of human communication. We use certain signs because we want to be understood, and we cannot deliberately alter meanings that are assigned to words by earlier communication communities without any good reason. We need at least some 'footholds' (see *WO* 72-73) to use linguistic or other signs. Nevertheless, one of the side effects of this theory is that words, their original forms, and history, seem less relevant than what we think, imagine, and mean when we use words. The imagination of a tree remains even if I replace the word 'tree' with 'the green giant', '*arbre*', '*puu*', and 'X.' Their etymologies (where applicable) will not be uniform and will reveal different original imaginations and arbitrary connections between the original signifier and the signified. The view that words are arbitrary additions to cognitive processes has dominated the Enlightenment and the dictionaries that were composed at this time. One can find signs of the purported freedom of thought from the limits of language in the works of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. For example, it did not matter much to Fichte whether his discovered first principle of philosophy would be called 'the absolute I,' 'reason,' 'I-hood' or simply 'the absolute'—what mattered was how it was grasped 'internally' by the mind of the philosopher. It is a mistake, however, to think that contemporary philosophers proceed otherwise. They often care less for words than for cognitive content associated with words. Examples are the names of positions such as 'relativism,' 'perspectivism,' and 'analytic philosophy,' which have been redefined in many different ways without much regard to the meanings of the constituent morphemes. An analytic philosopher must not be a 'champion in analysis' or do anything that looks like an analysis and, at the same time, claim that the phrase 'analytic philosophy' is the perfect match to describe what they do. If words and their

parts are not binding for the 'concepts' as cognitive unities associated with words, why should their etymology be?

Indeed, if words in philosophy and everyday life are overloaded with easily modifiable meanings and definitions, etymological additions can be perceived as disturbing or misdirecting. It has furthermore been claimed that those who try 'overriding' a current meaning of a word by appeal to older meanings to win in a controversy commit the 'etymological fallacy.' 'Fallacy' in this expression means 'informal fallacy,' a 'misuse' as a result of a 'bad reasoning.' Kolb (2018) mentions two examples of what some philosophers call the 'etymological fallacy.' The first is the defense of the expression 'redskins' as part of the name 'Washington Redskins,' which ignores the pejoration that it has undergone. The second are arguments against the view that religion is about love: an atheist can argue that the possible Latin etymon '*religare*' ('to bind') suggests that religion controls and enslaves people; hence religion is not about love. The atheist, as theorists of 'etymological fallacy' claim, ignores the cultural and historical shifts, as well as the contexts of use, which cannot harmonize with contemporary discourses.

There are other arguments that can be brought up against etymology and the etymological method. For example, one can argue that the word '*alêtheia*' ('disclosure') is not useful to understand or discuss the majority of contemporary theories of truth. One can also consider that there are non-scientific forms of etymology, such as 'folk etymology,' which operate simply with chains of associations and similarities between word forms. Furthermore, it is obvious that etymologists face many problems when tracing the history of words. They often do not have the complete data and have to build hypotheses, work with uncertainties, probabilities, and reconstructions of missing word forms. For example, it is most probable, but not completely certain, that the word 'religion' is based on '*reli-*

*gare*' or the simplex '*ligare*'—the alternative is the verb '*legere*' ('to collect,' 'to read'), in combination with '*re-*': '*relegere*' ('to pick up again'; see de Vaan 2008 341 and 332-333). The alternative would trigger another set of associations and open up a different semantic field.

## 3 ON THE USEFULNESS OF ETYMOLOGY

As stated above, it is easy to argue against the importance of the etymological method for contemporary linguistic, philosophical, and social orientation. It is, as a result, easy to entertain the weak view of etymology. One of the reasons for this is that etymological analyses and knowledge of ancient and modern languages require additional effort. Not everyone has the time and financial resources to acquire the necessary knowledge, and we, as an inclusive communication community, cannot allow only those who have a certain level of historical linguistic education to participate in discourses. It therefore seems plausible to stick to established meanings defined by contemporary uses of words by a plural society of speakers and tolerate redefinitions and semantic vagueness. A society that eliminates this vagueness by recourse to historical meanings of original word forms is an unachievable—perhaps even dystopian—ideal.

However, this does not mean that etymological interventions in linguistic practices are not useful and necessary. Interventions based on gender, social, and political studies happen on a regular basis. Etymological analyses and clarifications cannot achieve the same broad impact. However, the interests of education and enlightened language use cannot and must not be ignored. Clear, historically informed, and complete understanding of everyday, scientific, and philosophical terms is a basic human need. What matters is whether etymological inquiries provide us with useful informa-

tion to cover this need, and whether this information should have an impact on our language use. Let us consider several examples.

Imagine being on a flight to Rome, which is the first flight of your life. The flight attendant announces that the flight company sells spirits on board and repeats it in Italian using the term '*spiriti*.' Now imagine that you neither know English nor Italian and wonder what 'spirits' or '*spiriti*' means. You remember having heard '*et Spiritus Sancti*' as part of a Latin phrase used in religious contexts, and you know what it means. However, it does not help you grasp what the flight attendant means. Your friend tells you that she is speaking about alcoholic drinks, which strikes you. However, only after landing will you find out that both words are based on the Latin '*spirare*' (to breathe, to exhale) and '*spiritus*' (a breathing, an aspirate). Is this knowledge useful? It gives you an explanation and helps resolve the confusion resulting from learning new languages and confronting new cultures. By gaining knowledge of the original meaning, which often goes back to a simple and concrete act or picture, you receive a key to understanding and reconstructing 'the story' behind the words in a certain culture. The knowledge of the origin and interrelation between 'spirits' and 'spirit' is not useless, because it offers you both linguistic and cultural orientation. It also gives a certain image that you can use to get a concrete, prototypical grasp of the object that a word refers to. Neither the signs that you use nor the meanings are arbitrary—they are a result of a long history and development of language from the concrete to the abstract. The world has not waited for the contemporary communication community or individuals to find out what the words 'spirit,' 'Rome,' and 'colossal' mean. Tracing the history of the word 'Rome' will lead you to the fight between Romulus and Remus. '*Colosseum*,' as you will find out, was originally simply called

'*amphitheatrum*,' before it received its new name due to the Colossus of Nero, a huge statue built nearby, by the example of the Colossus of Rhodes. This will provide you with vivid and concrete images to grasp the meaning of 'colossal' (gigantic) and to use this word safely. Well, at least relatively safely, so far as you can hope that an educated speech community will have similar images in mind.

If there is a good way to argue that the ignorance of the newer word history leads to a fallacy, then one should consider whether the opposite, namely the ignorance of original meanings, is an acceptable attitude towards language. It is plausible not to demand knowledge of original and historical meanings from every interlocutor. However, the knowledge itself is useful depending on different situations, contexts, and interests. One of these interests is a better grasp and understanding of words for orientational, educational, linguistic, philosophical, and other personal and professional purposes. A shallow or intuitive understanding of words is often not satisfactory when it comes to these purposes. For example, once one recognizes that the use of the word 'grasp' can be traced back to a haptic metaphor, it becomes clearer and more concrete. The German word for concept, '*Begriff*,' follows the same metaphor. As G.W.F. Hegel has noted, a '*Begriff*'—in the subjective sense—is always my '*Begriff*,' something that I have taken into my possession (just as when I take a gift into my hands and examine it from different sides). This must be seen in contrast to what I have merely fixated by standing close to something 'understood' ('*verstanden*,' Greek: '*histánai*,' to stand or to cause something to stand). The term 'intelligent systems' (Latin '*intellegere*,' to choose between something; and Greek '*synistánai*' ('*syn*' and '*histánai*'), to put something together) becomes more transparent once one knows where the expressions come from. A student will remember and learn more

easily what a metaphor is by knowing that the word is based on '*metaphérein*,' the act of carrying something from one place to another (e.g., the original, direct, and concrete meaning is brought to a different linguistic context). Knowing that 'evidence,' 'video,' and 'idea' are based on the Ancient Greek word '*eidon*' (the older form is '*e-f-idon*' ('f', Digamma, has since disappeared from the Greek alphabet), a past form (aorist) of '*horao*,' to see) brings order to understanding of language and the world around us.

The reason why etymology works lies in the structure of language and reality itself. The meanings of words are rooted in human, well-familiar (bodily) actions and concrete images. Language is a 'reef of dead metaphors,' as Deutscher (2006: 118) has put it, whereby metaphor is "an indispensable conceptual mechanism which allows us to think of abstract notions in terms of simpler concrete things" and "the only way we have of dealing with abstraction" (ibid.: 142). It is debatable whether 'dead metaphors' is the right image to describe the structural development of word forms and meanings (there are better alternatives, such as 'faded metaphor' or "hardening and congealing of a metaphor" (Nietzsche *WL*-1; Breazeale 1979: 87 – I thank Werner Stegmaier for this hint), which allow graduation and 'revitalization'). Attempts to classify metaphors into dead vs. living or absolute vs. non-absolute lead to more problems than advantages. Who is in possession of the authority to decide for everyone whether 'to grasp' in 'I have grasped it well' expresses a dead metaphor? Metaphors are not dead for those who pay attention to words and meanings, who play language games, study modern and historical languages, and are interested in etymology or philosophy. Once I have learned that 'system' is based on '*synistánai*,' to put something together, I cannot unlearn it. Similarly, I cannot unlearn (only forget) that the Empire State Building was built between 1930 and 1931,

once I have checked it, or that plants perform photosynthesis. Knowledge of historical word forms and meanings is a part of education, and education is what keeps knowledge of facts and metaphors alive.

Ignorance and eradication of the history of morphemes and meanings sometimes have unnoticed but serious consequences. For example, most philosophers are too busy conceptualizing and fighting philosophical positions such as perspectivism and relativism to analyze the words 'perspectivism' and 'relativism.' Both expressions are abstract technical terms. No familiar thing or representation automatically comes to mind when we see or hear them. The more abstract a philosophical term is, the fewer footholds are usually available to understand its meaning. The less footholds are available, the more probable it is that these terms will be defined in various conflicting ways. Philosophers are usually taking advantage of their vivid power of imagination and freedom of thought. They bend and modify constructions that they label 'perspectivism' and 'relativism' to defend their views and to battle others. A way to return the philosophers' heads back from the clouds is to make them aware of the morphemes they use. For example, 'relativism' is based on relation (from Latin *referre*, to relate), -iv (from Latin –*ivus*, tendency to something), and -ism (Ancient Greek –*izein*, an iterating act). Of course, one can start vivid philosophical interpretations based on this linguistic data. One could claim that relativists are those who hold that everything is relative and therefore has no objective truth; that they are indifferentists, non-absolutists, subjectivists, etc. But all this goes too far and leaves the narrow semantic field that results from the analysis of the term 'relativism.' Other words and combinations of words are available to describe these further-going interpretations, so why label all of them simply 'relativism' and cause confusions and fights with windmills?

Especially in cases of abstract philosophical terms: the word is the common ground, an unavoidable fact. Philosophical discussions could become more concrete and fruitful if philosophers would use this foothold. Somewhere else, I have called this procedure “linguistic originalism” and pointed to the problems regarding Kant’s method of conceptual analysis and his exposition of the concept of reason (Lewin 2024b; for applications of linguistic originalism to the mentioned debates on relativism and perspectivism, see Lewin 2024a and Lewin [forthcoming]).

## 4 CONCLUSION

Although it is easier and less binding to argue in favor of a weak view of etymology, the stronger view is more compatible with further-reaching educational goals, such as a better grasp of language, its history, systematicity, and continuity, as well as, for example, the possibilities of human orientation in terms of a ‘language phenomenology.’ There is nothing unusual about people pursuing such goals and trying to interfere with the natural use of language. For example, the pleas to distinguish between ‘perspective’ and ‘position’ and to pay attention to morphemes to limit arbitrary conceptualizations of ‘isms’ are not unreasonable. Arguments against imprecise and uninformed use of terms with recourse to the historical and contemporary meanings of morphemes are not to be equated with the etymological fallacy. They do not neglect the contemporary uses; rather, they try to correct them to avoid unnecessary confusions, especially in such fields as philosophy, where clarity and sufficient distinctions are held in high esteem. In this regard, the weak view of etymology does not meet the demands and must be regarded as only a preliminary attitude and stage for deeper investigations.

---

Find Michael Lewin's website here.

## LITERATURE

Werner Stegmaier's works:

*WO* (=*Philosophy of Orientation*, revised, abbreviated and supplemented English edition): Stegmaier, Werner. 2019. *What is Orientation? A Philosophical Investigation*. Translated by Reinhard G. Mueller. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter.

*PO* (=*Philosophy of Orientation*, original German edition): Stegmaier, Werner. 2008. *Philosophie der Orientierung*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter.

Kann, Christoph, and Stegmaier, Werner. 2022. Welche Sprache braucht die Philosophie? Fragen an Christoph Kann und Werner Stegmaier. *Information Philosophie* 3-4, 62-76.

Stegmaier, Werner. [Unpublished manuscript]. *Die Sprache einer Philosophie der Orientierung*.

Other works:

De Vaan, Michiel. 2008. *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the other Italic Languages*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Deutscher, Guy. 2006. *The Unfolding of Language: The Evolution of Mankinds̀ Greatest Invention*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Grinspoon, David; Stern, Alan. 2018. Yes, Pluto is a Planet. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2018/05/07/yes-pluto-is-a-planet/ (accessed on March 26, 2024).

Kolb, Leigh. 2018. Etymological Fallacy. In Robert Arp, Steven Barbone & Michael Bruce (eds.), *Bad Arguments*. Chichester: Wiley, 266–269.

Lewin, Michael. [forthcoming], Relativism, Perspectivism, and the Universal Epistemic Language. In: *Philosophy of the History of Philosophy*.

Lewin, Michael. 2024a. Nietzsche Was No Perspectivist. In: *Philosophies* 9/1, 9, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies9010009.

Lewin, Michael. 2024b. Philosophie zwischen Begriffsanalyse, Begriffsbildung, ‚Begriffsdichtung' und ‚Begriffsengineering'. Wie die ‚Wortanalyse' das Vagheitsproblem lösen kann. In: Lewin, Michael (ed.). *Klassische Deutsche Philosophie: Wege in die Zukunft, Paderborn*: Brill/mentis, 65-89. https://doi.org/10.30965/9783969753002_005.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *WL*. (=On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense). In: Breazeale, Daniel (ed. and trans.). 1979. *Philosophy and Truth. Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*, 77–97.

BACK TO ESSAYS

Our Story

The Philosophy of Orientation

Glossary of Terms

## Our work

Fellowship

Philosophical Prize Competition

Publications

Our Seminars / Colloquium

Video Podcasts

Events

Photo Contest

## Publications

## Subscribe

**The Foundation for Philosophical Orientation**

P.O. Box 331334

Nashville TN-37203

info@hfpo.com