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Nursery words and hypocorisms among Germanic kinship terms

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By using Jakobson's (1960:127–130) criteria for determining the nursery-word status of a given lexeme, I argue in this article that, even if we should no longer regard PG **aiþīn-/ōn-* 'mother' (Goth. *aiþei*), **aiþma-* 'daughter's husband' and **fabōn-* 'father's sister' as nursery words or hypocorisms (Hansen 2017:207–220), we should certainly still do so for PG **ammōn-* 'parent's mother; wet nurse', **attan-* 'father' (Goth. *atta*), **basōn-* 'father's sister' and **mōnōn-/mōmōn-* 'mother; mother's sister'.

1. Introduction

At the symposium on Gothic held in Odense on 8 March 2016, I argued that some of the Gothic and Germanic kinship terms that are currently classified as nursery words or hypocorisms (i.e. terms based on, or variants of, the initial syllable of known lexical material) may instead be regarded as inherited words derived from well-established Indo-European lexical material. The terms in question are PG **aiþīn-/ōn-* 'mother' (Goth. *aiþei*), **aiþma-* 'daughter's husband' and **fabōn-* 'father's sister' that, in my view, hark back to reconstructed or back-projected PIE **h₁óǵ-ti/o-h₃n(h₂)-* 'who is charged with an oath', **h₁ái-t-m-o-* 'one who is related to share, one who is related to part' (i.e. 'the non-relative husband of the oldest daughter who becomes heir in a family of only daughters and moves in with his wife's family') and **po-[h₂e-]h₂(ó)t-on-* 'the one who is gone, the one who has left', respectively.

However, since I submitted the analysis of these three terms as a contribution to a festschrift (Hansen 2017:207–220), I shall devote my contribution for the present volume to the etymological analysis of the four terms discussed in my Odense presentation that may be interpreted as nursery words or hypocorisms, viz. PG **ammōn-* 'parent's mother; wet nurse', **attan-* 'father' (Goth. *atta*), **basōn-* 'father's sister' and **mōnōn-/mōmōn-* 'mother; mother's sister'.

2. PG **ammōn*- ‘parent’s mother; wet nurse’

The first form pertaining to our sphere of interest is PG **ammōn*- ‘parent’s mother; wet nurse’, the reflexes of which include ON *amma*, MDu. *amme*, OHG *amma* and ModG *Amme*, cf. e.g. Cleasby & Vigfusson (1874:19), Degnbol et al. (1995: I, 406), Fritzner (1954: I, 52), Grimm & Grimm (1854: I, 279), Karg-Gasterstädt et al. (1968: I, 326), Kluge & Seebold (2002:38), Lloyd et al. (1988: I, 205–206), Orel (2003:17), Philippa et al. (2003: I, 135), Pokorny (1959:36) and de Vries (1961:8).

Significantly, we rarely see this term in the sense ‘mother’, but rather as designating another female person of great importance to the little child, viz. either ‘grandmother’ as in Old Norse (SE I 538 *móðir heitir ok amma*) or ‘wet nurse’ not only in Old Norse (Roch.Reyk. 134²³ *og þær latha bavrnen svga sig. og þær heitha ammvr*) but also in Middle Dutch (CG II. Lut.A. *also alst amme te huedenne pleght*) and Old High German (Graff. I 251 *nutrix*). Only in relation to certain modern German dialects does Grimm & Grimm (1854: I, 279) report the meaning ‘mother’.

With its similar “reflexes” in other Indo-European languages in the shape of e.g. Gr. *ἀμμά(ς)*, *ἀμμία* ‘mother; wet nurse, foster mother’ and further Lat. *amita* ‘father’s sister’, Alb. *amë* ‘aunt; mother’ etc., and its nasal consonants, non-high vowels, consonant-plus-vowel pattern, partial reduplication of syllables and “un-Germanic” consonant gemination, cf. Jakobson (1960:127–130), PG **ammōn*- qualifies eminently for being bracketed as a nursery-word, cf. also e.g. Grimm & Grimm (1854: I, 279), Pokorny (1959:36), de Vries (1961:8), Lloyd et al. (1988: I, 205–206), Kluge & Seebold (2002:38) and Orel (2003:17). It should be noted, however, that in this case, unlike PG **attan*- ‘father’, the existence of superficially similar forms outside the Germanic area does not qualify for a nursery-word analysis *per se*, since the same individual-language outputs would have been obtained by means of regular phonological development from a PIE **ammā*- vel *sim*.

3. PG **attan*- ‘father’

Goth. *atta*, ON *atti*, OHG *atto*, MHG *atte* and NHG *atto* (Wals dialect) all go back to PG **attan*- ‘father’, cf. e.g. Benecke et al. (1854:67), Degnbol et al. (1995: I, 738), Grimm & Grimm (1854: I, 595), Karg-Gasterstädt et al. (1968: I, 689), Kluge & Seebold (2002:69), Kroonen (2013:39), Lehmann (1986:46), Lexer (1872: I, 104), Lloyd et al. (1988: I, 385–388), Orel (2003:27), Pokorny (1959:71) and de Vries (1961:17). Several etymological dictionaries, e.g. Pokorny (1959:71) and Lehmann

(1986:46), list OFris. *aththa* as a cognate as well, but this comparison is dismissed by Holthausen (1925:4) and Lendinara (1990:298), who prefer to derive it from *ēth* ‘oath’, cf. also the meaning ‘sworn man, oath-bound man’. To PG **attan-* we also find a couple of derivations, viz. PG **attian-* with a meaning identical to that of the base (MHG *ätte* ‘parent’s father’) and the diminutive PG **attilan-* producing personal names (Goth. *Attila*, ON *Atli*, OHG *Etzilo*).

As with the term for ‘mother’ (Goth. *aiþei*), the inherited and originally default term for ‘father’, i.e. PG **fader-*, seems to have been superseded by a term of purported nursery-word origin. Consequently, we find only one attestation of Goth. *fadar* whereas we find 241 attestations of inflected forms of Goth. *atta* in the function of both ‘biological father’ and ‘heavenly father’ (Math. 10.35 [...] *mannan wiþra attan is jah dauhtar wiþra aiþein izos jah bruf wiþra swaiþron izos*, Math. 6.9 *atta unsar, þu in himinam*). Among the remaining languages, the meaning ‘father’ would seem to occur also in Middle High German (Graff. I 145 *pater*), but most of the North and West Germanic attestations bear witness to a use of this term as a personal name, cf. e.g. Old Norse (glosses) and Old High German (Graff. I 145), and, in Old High German, also to meanings such as ‘forefather, ancestor; parent’s father’ (Gl. II 318¹⁷ *attauus*, Clos.Chr. 26 *der (Conradin) wolt rechen sinen atten keiser Friderichen*).

In light of the numerous similar forms in other Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages, cf. e.g. Gr. *ἄττα* ‘father’, Lat. *atta* ‘id.’, Basq. *aita* ‘id.’ etc. as well as Skt. *attā* ‘mother; mother’s sister; older sister’, and the phonological makeup of this term (cf. Jakobson 1960:127–130), it seems safe to assume nursery-word provenance, cf. also e.g. Pokorny (1959:71), de Vries (1961:17), Lehmann (1986:46), Lloyd et al. (1988: I, 385–388), Kluge & Seebold (2002:69), Orel (2003:27) and Kroonen (2013:39). However, if we are to accept a PIE **atta-* vel sim. as a common pedigree for the *atta*-forms of at least the Indo-European languages, we need to address the challenge created by the non-sibilation of the cluster **-tt-*; we would normally expect PIE **-tt-* to develop into PG **-ss-*, cf. e.g. Krahe (1966:109–110), but on the other hand we cannot be confident that an original nursery word would behave according to the sound-laws defined for non-nursery-word terms; it might have remained unchanged due to its universal nursery-word traits. Nor can we be confident that the *atta*-forms of the individual Indo-European languages have not just been created independently in each branch due to these very traits.

Kroonen (2011:111) offers an alternative solution by suggesting that the geminate plosives may have arisen as a result of Kluge’s Law (PG **-Tn-* > **-tt-*). His assumption is corroborated by the ubiquitous *n*-stem declination of this term in Germanic, since nursery words tend to follow the *n*-stem declension, cf. also PG **ammōn-*, **basōn-*, **fapōn-* and **mōnōn-/mōmōn-* and Olsen (2006:126–127)

on this suffix of individualisation or determination. Following Kroonen's line of thought, we may therefore alternatively take PG **attan-* to have been formed as a nursery-word *n*-stem **at-on-* ~ **at-n-* vel sim. in a pre-Kluge's Law era, having obtained its Proto-Germanic shape only by regular sound change. In my view and given the uncertainties concerning such a nursery word, both Kroonen's assumption and the traditional view must be considered equally valid.

4. PG **basōn-* 'father's sister'

The ancient West Germanic languages possess two almost complementarily distributed and allegedly hypocoristically formed terms for 'father's sister', viz. one continuing PG **basōn-* and occurring only in the German area, and one continuing PG **faþōn-* and attested only in the North Sea Germanic area. Since I have demonstrated in Hansen (2017: 213–215) that the latter is not a hypocorism, we shall concentrate only on the former here, viz. PG **basōn-* with reflexes in e.g. OHG *basā*, *pasā*, *wasa*, MHG *base*, *wase* and MLG *wase*, cf. e.g. Benecke et al. (1854: I, 92), Grimm & Grimm (1854: I, 1147–1148), Karg-Gasterstädt et al. (1968: I, 830), Kluge & Seebold (2002: 94), Lexer (1872: I, 133), Lloyd et al. (1988: I, 495–497) and Schiller & Lübben (1880: V, 610).

At the beginning this term denoted mainly 'father's sister', e.g. in Old High German (Diefenb. Gl. 30 *amita*), Middle High German (Graff. III 215 *amita*, Parz. 413.29 *ich pin mīner basen bruoder sun*) and Middle Low German (Voc. W. *amita*, Fahne. Dortmund. III 65.269 *min aldermoder is mi neger dan mine wase*). Occasionally, we also find other uses, e.g. 'mother's sister' in Old High German (Diefenb. Gl. 351 *matertera*, *matruelis* = *passen kint*), and this tendency towards semantic expansion later results in the inclusion of other (paternal?) female relatives, e.g. 'father's brother's wife' (Luther Lev. 18.14 *du solt deines vatern bruder schambd nicht blößen, das du sein weib nimest, denn sie ist deine wase*).

As already mentioned, PG **basōn-* is generally regarded as a nursery word or hypocorism although the details vary from etymologist to etymologist, thus e.g. the assumption of a hypocorism based on PG **fa(der)s(wester)-* (Grimm & Grimm 1854: I, 1147–1148), a nursery word based on the "nursery-word root" **ba-* and the *s*-suffix often used in hypocorisms and similar words (Lloyd et al. 1988: I, 496–497) and a hypocorism PG **baswōn-* on the basis of MLat.-Langob. *barbas* 'father's brother' (Kluge & Seebold 2002: 94). The former two proposals ascribe the irregular development of PG **f-* to *b-* in young children's failure to pronounce the labiodental fricative, cf. also Jakobson (1960: 127–128) on typical nursery-word characteristics. Lacking any attractive extra-Germanic comparanda, we may conclude that PG **basōn-* is a nursery word or a hypocorism, thus revealing –

as with PG **ammōn-* above – children’s familiarity also with other women in the family than their mother (and sisters) in ancient Germanic society.

5. PG **mōnōn-/mōmōn-* ‘mother; mother’s sister’

The last term attracting interest in our discussion here is PG **mōnōn-/mōmōn-* f. ‘mother; mother’s sister’ with reflexes in ON *móna*, ME *mōme*, *mōne*, OS *mōma*, MLG *mōme*, OHG *muoma* and a “j-variant” in e.g. OFris. *mōie* and MLG *mōie*, cf. e.g. Cleasby & Vigfusson (1874: 435), Fritzner (1954: II, 730), Grimm & Grimm (1961: XII, 2644–2647), Kluge & Seebold (2002: 635), Köbler (2013: s.v. *mōie*), Köbler (2014: s.v. *muoma*), Kurath et al. (1975–1979: VI, 643–644), Lendinara (1990: 298), Orel (2003: 274), Pokorny (1959: 694), Schiller & Lübben (1877: III, 110, 116), Tiefenbach (2010: 278) and de Vries (1961: 392).

Textual analyses reveal quite a large spectrum of meanings associated with this term, stretching from ‘mother, mammy’ over ‘mother’s sister; parent’s sister’ all the way to ‘female relative’ and even ‘old woman’; thus e.g. ‘mammy’ (SE II 22⁶ *móna min móna (kveðr barnið) við mik gjöra verst hjóna* ‘nolet (móna) mater (móna) mea, inquit puer, me pejus quam ceteram familiam tractare’) in Old Norse, ‘aunt’ (Interl.CG 38.40 *God te blis, mome helwis. Son, welcum, by san dinis. Hic am comin to ye, mome, Yu hel me noth, yu say me sone*) and ‘old woman’ (Gower.CA I 1634 *he sende up for the lady sone, and forth sche cam, that olde mone*) in Old English, ‘mother’s sister’ (Gl. IV 257²⁹ *matertera*) in Old Saxon, ‘mother’ (Engelh.Chr. 448 *sint dat de kindere, wat mach denne de moder syn? vnde gingen to den kinderen vnde vrageden, wor or mome were*), ‘parent’s sister; female relative’ in Middle Low German (Diefenb.Gl. *wase van des vater wegen, amita*, Kil. = *matertera, amita, neptis, cognata*, Seib.Urk. 463) and ‘mother; female relative’ in Old High German (Gl. *matertera*).

Judging from the many similar forms in other Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages, cf. e.g. Gr. *μάμμα, μάμη* ‘mother’, Lat. *mamma* ‘id.’ etc., and the phonological makeup of this term, cf. Jakobson (1960: 127–130), we may safely assume nursery-word provenance, cf. also e.g. Pokorny (1959: 694), de Vries (1961: 392), Kluge & Seebold (2002: 635) and Orel (2003: 274). We may speculate, though, whether this term was formed prior to the sound change of PIE **ā* to PG **ō* or not, since we would expect the vowel quality *a* to appear more often in nursery words than that of *o*, cf. also Jakobson (1960: 127). Regardless of the age of the formation, however, the use of this term as a children’s designation for ‘mother’s sister’ and other more distant relatives demonstrates again, as with PG **ammōn-* and **basōn-* above, that children in ancient Germanic society were

often close to and familiar with women in the family other than their mother (and sisters).

6. Conclusion

As is evident from my etymological analyses above, we have ample reason for still considering PG **ammōn-* ‘parent’s mother; wet nurse’, **attan-* ‘father’ (Goth. *atta*), **basōn-* ‘father’s sister’ and **mōnōn-/mōmōn-* ‘mother; mother’s sister’ to be nursery words and hypocorisms. Some of these, viz. PG **ammōn-*, **basōn-* and maybe **mōnōn-/mōmōn-*, would seem to have been formed spontaneously in Proto-Germanic, since we do not need any intermediate steps to fit them into children’s phonetic inventory, cf. Jakobson (1960:127–130). PG **attan-* and maybe **mōnōn-/mōmōn-*, on the other hand, were likely to have been formed at a stage earlier than Proto-Germanic, i.e. prior to certain sound-laws (in this case Kluge’s Law and the sound change PIE **ā* > PG **ō*, respectively) that define Proto-Germanic. Morphologically, we may observe that all four terms belong to the *n*-stem paradigm, which is to be expected in nursery words and hypocorisms, cf. e.g. Krahe & Meid (1967:91–92), Olsen (2006:126) and Kroonen (2011:110–111).

As a final remark, the very circumstance that we find nursery words and hypocorisms for ‘father’s sister’, ‘wet nurse’, ‘parent’s mother’ etc. reveals that children in ancient Germanic society were close to and familiar with not only their mother and their sisters but other women in the family, which suggests that the Germanic tribes lived in extended families of some kind, cf. also my analysis of PG **aiþīn-/ōn-* ‘mother’, **aiþma-* ‘daughter’s husband’ and **faþōn-* ‘father’s sister’ in Hansen (2017:207–220).

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