Philology and the Andean Highway

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The love of language is the beginning of light in the mind. One way to foster a love for language is to restore philology to the language arts curriculum in English studies. Philology is the history of change and continuity in the structure, sound, sense, and usage of words across time. In time, words build up powerful portfolios which can be a resource to contemporary writers and readers. The invention and interpretation of texts can be rooted in philology. Philology is the art of sorting out the full potential of a word in its contexts, an art of metaphor that helps us interpret discourses in various cultures.

The value of philology became apparent to me when I took a course in German reading at the University of Arizona in 1976. The reading teacher, Herr Oong, encouraged his students to figure out the meaning of new words by analyzing their roots and affixes, and he gave out vocabulary lists which were organized by word roots. Words like heilen (‘to heal’) and heilig (‘holy’) and Heiland (‘Savior’) were grouped together so that we could use the meaning of the Germanic root heil (‘whole’) as a mnemonic device. I learned that words containing the heil root had in common a sense of wholeness, and I saw that English cognates had a similar relationship. Words like ‘heal’ and ‘health,’ which suggest physical well-being, are related to words which imply spiritual perfection, such as ‘holy’ and ‘hallowed.’

Meanwhile, I had discovered Calvert Watkin’s Proto-Indo-European (PIE) Appendix in the back of the American Heritage Dictionary. I learned that philologists (or comparative historical linguists) had used phonological patterns and other linguistic rules to reconstruct the etymology of words like ‘whole,’ ‘heal,’ and ‘holy,’ tracing them back to an Indo-European root *kailo-, meaning ‘whole, uninjured, of good omen.’ A new interest in words and language began to influence my foreign language studies as well as my work in creative writing and English literature.

Herr Oong’s philological approach paid off the following year when I was learning Spanish in Bolivia. Through Spanish, I learned that English had another set of Indo-European roots related to wholeness, holiness, and health. The English word ‘sane’ and the Spanish words sanar and sano have in common the reconstructed Indo-European root *sâno, meaning ‘healthy.’ The words ‘sacred,’ ‘saint,’ and ‘sanctify’ are cognate with Spanish santo and sanctificar through the root *sak-, meaning ‘to sanctify.’ And ‘safety,’ ‘save,’ and ‘Savior’ correspond to salud, salvar, and Salvador through the root *sâl-, meaning ‘whole.’ Even though the Germanic and Latinate words had come from two different Indo-European roots, their roots covered similar connotations of wholeness.

The ambidextrous nature of English in its Germanic and Latinate roots was intriguing, so then I started to look for word root connections in non-Indo-European languages, such as the Aymara language of Bolivia. One of the pre-Incan names of the Aymara people is the Kollas [kol yas], or ‘holy ones,’ and there is a philological connection between holiness and healing in the Aymara language: kollaiia meaning ‘to heal’ and kollanaptayasiiia meaning ‘to hallow’ or ‘to sanctify.’ Even though the parallels in sense and sound between words derived from Indo-European *kailo- and Aymara kolla are probably coincidental, seeing the correspondences helped me remember the new language through metaphoric if not historic connections.

A philological perspective helps me not only as a student of other languages and cultures but also as a teacher. When I teach English as an alternate language or Freshman Composition courses, I incorporate the history of the English language and the Indo-European roots of English into my

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syllabus and ask the students to share their philo-
logical insights about word-building in various texts,
languages, or cultures. I use several of the words
listed in The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-
European Roots to illuminate my teaching and
research.

For example, the reconstructed sense of the
Indo-European root *ar- is 'to fit together.' Words
such as ART, ARTIST, ORDER, COORDINATE,
EXORDIUM, ORNAMENT, and READ are deri-
atives of this root. The English word ORDER
comes from the Latin word ērdō, which originally
referred to a row of threads in a loom. The rhetori-
cal term EXORDIUM comes from Latin ērdāri, 'to
begin to weave.' The connection between fitting
things together, writing, reading, and weaving be-
comes a discussion question for my composition
class. “What does writing an exordium (introduc-
tion) have to do with beginning to weave or fitting
ideas together?” When I teach the history of the
English language, I can show how the meaning of
‘reading’ has changed across time and how the epis-
then of the Anglo-Saxon king, Aethelred the Un-
ready, works as a pun. Besides having the sense of
‘comprehending a written text,’ the Old English
word ērdan meant ‘to explain,’ ‘to advise’ or ‘to
counsel.’ So Aethelred literally meant ‘Noble-Coun-
sel,’ and Unread meant ‘No-Counsel’ (Blair 91).
Through his ineptitude as a leader, Aethelred, who
was supposed to be a person of wise counsel, earned
the epithet of being uncounseled, unschooled,
unwise, or unread.

Another rhetorical term with an interesting
Indo-European root is ARGUMENT. The primary
sense of the reconstructed root *arg- means
‘to shine; white; silver.’ Our word ARGUE come
from Latin arguerē, ‘to make clear, demonstrate.’
When my students and I discuss ways to increase
understanding in spite of differences, we talk about
argument as clarification, illumination, and en-
lightenment through debate, rather than the clever
and vicious contention of intellectual warfare.

After a discussion of the derivation of literacy,
letters, alliteration, and literature from the Indo-
European root *deph-, ‘to stamp,’ one of my stu-
dents attended a lecture on graffiti which verified the
philological connections between literacy and the
technique of 'stamping' in contemporary inner-city
culture. Students have also seen ‘scratching’ as a
metaphor for writing in the root *gerbh-, the an-
ccestor of Old English ceorfan, ‘to cut,’ from which
we get the word CARVE. IE *gerbh- is also the
ancestor of Greek graiphēm, ‘to scratch, draw, write’
(also gramma and gramme), from which we get sev-
eral important writing words and suffixes: -GRAM,
-GRAFTH, GRAMMAR, and PARAGRAPH. In
discussions and in free-writing, students see literal
and figurative significance in acts of writing by
which they can mark, stamp, or engrave a name
and place for their unique existence in the universes
of discourse.

Many students are concerned about getting
good grades and about getting their college degree,
so I like to introduce the IE root *phrehdh- and its
Latin derivatives gradī, ‘to walk, go’ and grādus, ‘step,
stage, degree, rank.’ These two Latin words gave us
the English words CONGRESS, DIGRESS,
PROGRESS, REGRESS, TRANSGRESS,
GRADE, DEGREE, DEGRADE. Yes, good grades
are related to graduating with a degree, but I advise
students to enjoy each step of the educational pro-
cess, to progress qualitatively and not just quanti-
tatively as they go/walk through the system. And
sometimes I tell students to run like a chasqui (mes-
senger) on the Andean highway, because courses,
discourses, curricula, cursors, cars, chariots, and
careers all have running as their primary sense in
the Indo-European root *kers-, ‘to run.’

The most poetic root could be *deru, with deri-
atives meaning ‘to be firm, steadfast, solid’: Old
English treow: TREE; Old English treowe, pledge:
TRUCE; Old English treowe, firm, true: TRUE; Old
English treowth, faith, loyalty, truth: TROTH,
TRUTH, BETROTH; Old Norse traust, confi-
dence, firmness: TRUST; Latin dāru, hard: DU-
RESS, ENDURE. I like to ask students what trees
and truth have in common, what the relation-
ship is between having trust and being betrothed or
engaged. In Indo-European literatures and legends,
trees have been enduring symbols of truth, starting
perhaps with Siddhartha’s experience under the BO
tree, which has the same root as the word BUD-
DHA, from Sanskrit bodhi, ‘he awakes, is enlight-
ened, becomes aware,’ under the Indo-European
root *bheudh-, ‘to become aware; to make aware.’
Like a BO tree, philology has roots and branches
that can lead us to enlightenment.

Much research remains to be done in other lit-
eratures and in other contexts. Although I am not
advocating the “degrading vassalage" or "slavery”
to philology which characterized English depart-
ments before the advent of late 19th century lit-
erature and linguistics programs (Kinneavy 11-13),
there is something going on in philology that I want
my students to know about. For a methodology, I
ask them first to notice key words as they read or
write or learn a language. Next, I have them search
out the roots and derivatives of key words in a dic-
tionary which provides etymologies to see if they
notice any associations or connections. Then I ask
them to discipline their responses using Louise
Rosenblatt’s scale: 1) Are the associations directly
relevant? 2) Are they peripheral associations? 3)
Are the associations irrelevant? (Rosenblatt 59).
Finally, I ask them to consider whether the under-
lying association of words might help them retain
vocabulary or complement their interpretation and
creation of text.

Of course, in applying philology to texts, read-
ers and writers may make mistakes. Fatuous ety-
mologies are not uncommon; however, consistent
reference to proper tools will eliminate most
unfounded speculations. The connections we see will be influenced by our motives for selecting and interpreting the data, so there are no grounds for insisting on some static, mandatory, fixed pattern. The etymology of the word *philology* is the 'love of words,' or of *logos*—which love requires effort, study, and discipline. In a reader's transaction with a text, says Louise Rosenblatt, "The various strands of response are often simultaneous, often interwoven, and often interacting" (Rosenblatt 69). Philologists see words as part of an interacting and resonating whole that they can be in touch with by respecting language enough to pay attention to it. Like Emerson's etymologist, we may find "the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture" (Emerson 231), if we but open our eyes and a good dictionary. Words have long histories and many songs and stories to tell, if we but listen.

The inherent intelligence of human beings in the language process is more than a linguist's claim or a teacher's hope. It's a given in the network of philological associations which make up language. In his essay "The Poet," Emerson said that every word was once a poem (229). Vico speaks of philosophers and philologers, of poetic logic and poetic proto-languages in which all words are allegories, and "these allegories must be the etymologies of the poetic languages" (Vico 299). Such etymologies are a kind of philologic poetry underlying the languages we acquire at home, at school, or abroad. Perhaps philologic poetry is the deep structure of language, the underlying mental representation of language that theoretical linguists are looking for. At any rate, philology can give us energy as we run messages to each other in the course of our language and literature careers.

**Works Cited**


