



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Proto-Indo-European \*tsel- ‘to sneak’ and Germanic \*stelan- ‘to steal, approach stealthily’

Lubotsky, A.M.; Kroonen, Guus

### Citation

Lubotsky, A. M., & Kroonen, G. (2009). Proto-Indo-European \*tsel- ‘to sneak’ and Germanic \*stelan- ‘to steal, approach stealthily’. *Studia Etymologica Cracoviensia*, 14, 237-241. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/14935>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/14935>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Editorial Board:  
Marek Stachowski (Chief Editor)  
Kinga Mąciuszak (Co-Editor)  
Tomasz Majteczak, Marzanna Pomorska, Kamil Stachowski  
(Assistants to the Editor)

Academic Consultants:  
Uwe Bläsing (Leiden)  
Anna Bochnakowa (Kraków)  
Robert Woodhouse (Brisbane)

This volume has appeared thanks to the financial support of the Jagiellonian University's Faculty of Philology and the Institute of Oriental Philology at the Jagiellonian University.

We would ask for all references to be encompassed by the abbreviation *SEC*.

The contents and style of the articles remain the sole responsibility of the authors themselves.

All unpublished non-commissioned works will not be returned.

On editorial matters please contact the Chief Editor: Prof. Dr. Marek Stachowski,  
ul. Barska 1/4, PL – 30-307 Kraków; e-mail: stachowski.marek@gmail.com;  
fax: (+48) 0-12 422 67 93.  
Books for review and contributions for publication should be sent to the Editor.

ISBN 978-83-233-2758-5

Copyright © 2009 by Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego  
All rights reserved.

No part of this journal may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from the Publisher.

Jagiellonian University Press  
ul. Wrocławska 53, 30-011 Kraków, Poland  
tel. 0-12 631 01 97, fax 0-12 631 01 98  
mobile 0-506 006 674  
e-mail: sprzedaz@wuj.pl  
http://www.wuj.pl  
Bank account: Pekao SA, 80 1240 4722 1111 0000 4856 3325

Guus KROONEN / Alexander LUBOTSKY (Leiden)

## PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN *\*tsel-* 'TO SNEAK' AND GERMANIC *\*stel-* 'TO STEAL, APPROACH STEALTHILY'

1. The Proto-Indo-European root for 'to creep, sneak' is traditionally reconstructed as *\*sel-* (Pokorny's 5. *sel-* 'schleichen, kriechen'), while Skt. *tsar-* is taken as a compound with an abnormal zero-grade of the PIE preverb *\*h<sub>2</sub>ed-*, i.e. *\*h<sub>2</sub>d-sel-*. This reconstruction is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons: (1) the zero-grade *\*h<sub>2</sub>d* is practically unknown elsewhere and is totally *ad hoc*; (2) since the preverb *\*h<sub>2</sub>ed-* is unattested in Indo-Iranian, we have to assume that the *Univerbierung* took place in PIE already, but at that early stage there were no preverbs, only loose adverbs, and it is difficult to explain how such a syntagm could have arisen; (3) the form *\*tsel-* is not restricted to Sanskrit and must be reconstructed for other IE cognates as well. Let us first discuss the evidence presented in Pokorny's dictionary.

2. Skt. *tsar-* 'to approach stealthily, sneak, creep up on somebody' is a relatively rare verb, attested since the RV. Its paradigm includes *tsáratī* pres., *atsār* aor. (ŚB *atsāriṣam* nonce), *tatsāra* pf., *upa-tsārya* abs. (ŚB). Further derivatives are *tsarā-* f. 'creeping up to' (MS), *tsāru-* m. 'a crawling animal (snake)' (RV 7.50.1), 'handle' (AVP 3.39.5+); *tsārin-* adj. 'sneaking' (RV+).

3. Bartholomae (1904: 1643, 1649f) connected two Avestan forms with Skt. *tsar-*, viz. YAv. *vāhrkāñhō srauaaṇhauuō* nom.pl. (3V 18.65) and *zəmə ... upa.sr(a)uuatō* gen.sg. (3V 7.27). The meaning of these forms is unclear, but a connection with the root for 'to sneak' seems out of the question, since wolves and a harsh winter are in no way sneaking (see Gershevitch 1959: 183 and Klingenschmitt 1968: 157f. for a discussion).

A very likely Iranian cognate is the verb attested in the Pamir languages (cf. Morgenstierne 1974: 75): Sh. *sārd*, Yazgh. *sard* 'to creep, steal, sneak up to, lie in ambush, spy upon', Ishk. *surd* 'to creep, slink'.<sup>1</sup> Iranian *s-* then shows the reflex of *\*ts-*.

<sup>1</sup> Morgenstierne himself has proposed a different etymology, comparing Skt. *śaraṇá-* 'shelter', Lat. *cēlāre* 'to conceal', which seems much less attractive.

4. Arm. *solim* ‘to crawl, creep; to move on smoothly, steal, glide’ (Bible+), *solam* ‘id.’ (John Chrysostomos+); *solun* ‘reptile’ (Bible+); *sol* ‘creeping’ (nom. act.) in Łazar P‘arpec‘i (5th cent.), ‘creeping’ (adj.) in the Alexander Romance. Since Petersson (1916: 256), these Armenian words are connected with Skt. *tsārati*, under the assumption of the development *\*tsV-* > Arm. *\*sV-*, which seems uncontroversial.

5. The situation in Irish is rather complicated. Pokorny mentions *selige* (later *seilche*) m. ‘turtle or tortoise; snail’ and a more recent *seilide* ‘snail’ and two verbal nouns: OIr. *sle(i)th* f. (< *\*słtā-*) ‘act of surprising a sleeping woman, having intercourse with her’, the meaning of which incidentally has a close parallel in Sanskrit (AVŚ 8.6.8 *yás tvā svapāntīm tsārati* ‘he (a demon), who surprises you (fem.) sleeping...’), and *intled* (= *\*ind-sleth*) f. ‘snare, ambush; act of lying in wait, ambushing’.

These two verbal nouns were separated from *selige* by Loth (1907: 40), who rather connected them with MW *flet* ‘deceit, trick’ thus reconstructing initial *\*spl-*. This etymology was accepted by Vendryes (1974: 130) and Schrijver (1995: 436ff.). Loth further connected *σπλεκόω* ‘*futuere*’, Skt. *sprśāti* ‘to touch’, but Schrijver has shown that this etymology is unlikely and proposed OHG and OS *spil* ‘game, play’ (which themselves have no etymology) as possible cognates. This controversy can hardly be resolved, as both reconstructions of OIr. *sle(i)th* (with *\*s-* and *\*sp-*) seem formally and semantically cogent. OIr. *selige* must at any rate be related to our root. Its anlaut is totally ambiguous though: it can reflect *\*s-*, *\*ts-* and even *\*st-*.

6. Lith. *selėti* ‘to lurk, sneak, prowl’ (3sg. *sėla / sėli / selėja*), *sėlinti* ‘to steal, slink, sneak, prowl; to waylay’, *pasalà* ‘deceit, deceitfulness’, etc. The Lithuanian *s-* is ambiguous: it can represent both PIE *\*s-* and *\*ts-*, although there are no exact parallels for the latter development.

7. The other cognates, mentioned by Pokorny, are uncertain or improbable. The meaning of Gr. *εἰλί-* in *εἰλίποδας βοῦς* (Hom.) acc.pl. and in *εἰλίπενής* (said of *ἄγρωσις* ‘dog’s-tooth grass’) is unclear, and the interpretation of *εἰλίποδας* as ‘schleichfüßig’ and *εἰλίπενής* as ‘die sich schleichweise ausdehnende’ has little to recommend itself. Alb. *shlligë* ‘viper’ is a variant of *sheligë* and does not belong here, see Demiraj 1997: 359.

8. It seems attractive to add PGM. *\*stelan-* ‘to steal, approach stealthily’ (Goth. *stilan*, ON, OFri. *stela*, OE, OS, OHG *stelan*) to the dossier of our root. In the oldest sources, the verb primarily has the meaning ‘to steal’, but on fur-

ther consideration the evidence seems to suggest that the notion ‘to steal’ may have developed from older ‘to sneak’.

The meaning ‘to sneak’ is particularly prominent in reflexive use of the verb, viz. ON *stela-sk*, Dan. *stjæle sig (ind)*, MHG *sich steln*, G *sich stehlen*, MLG *sik (weg) stelen*, MDu. *hem stelen* ‘to sneak’. The wide distribution of this reflexive indicates that its use must be of an early date.

The same sense is furthermore retrieved from some active forms, cf. MDu. *stelen*, MoE *to steal (into)*, and in view of the lexicalized participles MHG *ver-stoln*, MDu. *verstolen* ‘secretly’, cf. also MoDu. *steels* ‘sneakingly’, this is likely to be an archaism. Additional proof of the seniority of the meaning ‘to sneak’ over ‘to steal’ comes from the Anglo-Frisian formation *\*stal-k-ōjan-*: OE *bi-stealcian* ‘to stalk’, OFri. *stolkens* ‘hidden’ (for the formation cf. *to talk* < *\*tal-kōjan-*), as it must be derived from the active verb.

PGM. *\*stelan-* has no generally accepted etymology, all extant etymological proposals being fraught with formal difficulties. A frequently mentioned idea is that *\*stelan-* is a conflation of Gr. *σπερέω* ‘to steal’ and *\*helan-* ‘to conceal’ (Osthoff 1888: 460-1; Hellquist 1922: 872; Pokorny 1959-69: 1028), but this etymology is no more cogent than other suggestions such as Skt. *stená-* ‘thieve’ (Seebold 1970: 468-9), Lat. *stelliō* ‘villain’, *stolō* m. ‘shoot, runner’, MoIr. *slat* ‘robbing’ < *\*stlatto-* (Falk – Torp 1170; Franck – Van Wijk 1912: 663), Av. *star-* ‘to sin’, Gr. *ἀτάσθαλος* ‘sinful’ (Franck – Van Wijk). It has also been suggested that the word originates from a Pre-Germanic substrate language (De Vries – Tollenaere 1997: 695). Finally, *\*stelan-* has been tied to OIr. *tlenaid* ‘to steal’ by assuming an *s* movable for Germanic (Pedersen 1913: 649, also mentioned by Kluge – Seebold 2002: 879). This suggestion raises the question whether *tlenaid* must not be rather reconstructed as *\*tsl-neh<sub>2</sub>-*. Since, however, the meaning ‘to steal’ originally was alien to the root *\*tsel-* and, consequently, must be assumed to have independently arisen in both Celtic and Germanic, it still seems preferable to maintain the generally accepted link of OIr. *tlenaid* with Lat. *tollō* ‘to lift’ < *\*tl-n-h<sub>2</sub>-* (cf. Pokorny 1959-69: 1060-1), the more so as the formations are identical.

9. Connecting PGM. *\*stelan-* with Skt. *tsar-* presupposes that the initial cluster of the root *\*tsel-* was metathesized in Germanic. Unfortunately, this development cannot be supported by parallels, as there are no other clear instances of an initial cluster *\*ts-*. If Goth. *afskiuban*, OEngl. *scūfan* ‘to shove’ are related to PIE *\*k<sup>(w)</sup>seub<sup>h</sup>-* (Skt. *kṣubh-* ‘to stagger, begin to swing, tremble’, YAv. *xšufsqn* 3pl.pres.subj. ‘to tremble’), it would show that PIE *\*k<sup>(w)</sup>s-* develops into Germanic *\*sk-*, but the etymology is uncertain because of the deviating semantics.

We do encounter a metathesis in three-consonant initial clusters, cf. the development of PIE *\*psten-* ‘teat’ (cf. Av. *fštāna-* ‘breast of a woman’) into ON

*speni*, Kil. *spene*, and possibly of *\*psteiHu-* / *\*tspeiHu-* 'to spit' (Skt. *ṣṭhīṅ-*, Gr. *πτῖω*, Lat. *spuō*) into Goth. *speiwan*. This process shows that a sibilant always emerges word-initially in Germanic. The principle can even be maintained if one wishes to think that the triple clusters survived until the Proto-Germanic stage, so far as can be judged from the doublet *špewwu* ~ *štewwu* 'to spit' (< *\*spīwan-* ~ *\*stīwan-*) in the Swiss dialect of Visperterminen (Wipf 1910: §50, II).<sup>2</sup>

10. It seems plausible to assume that the PIE root *\*tsel-* originally was a compound with a nominal first part (of which only *\*t-* is left) and the aoristic root *\*sel-* 'to start moving' (Gr. *ἄλλομαι* 'to jump', Gr. *ἰάλλω* 'to stretch out, send out'; Skt. *sar-*<sub>[1]</sub> 'to flow, run, hurry', *sar-*<sub>[2]</sub> 'to extend', To.AB *säl-* 'to arise, fly; throw').

Guus Kroonen / Alexander Lubotsky  
Leiden University  
Dept. of Comparative Indo-European Linguistics  
P.O.B. 9515  
NL – 2300 RA Leiden

### References

- Bartholomae, C. 1904. *Altiranisches Wörterbuch*. Strassburg.  
Demiraj, B. 1997. *Albanische Etymologien (Untersuchungen zum albanischen Erbwortschatz)* (= Leiden Studies in Indo-European 7). Amsterdam – Atlanta.  
Falk, Hj. – A. Torp. 1960. *Norwegisch-dänisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. 2. Auflage. Oslo & Bergen – Heidelberg.  
Franck, J. – N. van Wijk. 1912. *Franck's etymologisch woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*. Tweede druk. The Hague.  
Gershevitch, I. 1959. *The Avestan hymn to Mithra*. Cambridge.  
Hellquist, E. 1922. *Svensk etymologisk ordbok*. Lund.  
Klingenschmitt, G. 1968. *Farhang-i oīm*. Diss. Erlangen.  
Kluge, F. – E. Seebold. 2002. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*. Berlin.  
Loth, J. 1907. Notes étymologiques. *Archiv für celtische Lexicographie* 3, 39-42.  
Osthoff, H. 1888. *Etymologica I. Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 13, 460-1.

<sup>2</sup> It is of course also possible that *štewwu* has secondarily developed out of *\*spīwan-*.

- Pedersen, H. 1913. *Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen. Zweiter Band. Bedeutungslehre (Wortlehre)*. Göttingen.  
Pokorny, J. 1959-69. *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Bern.  
Schrijver, P. 1995. *Studies in British Celtic historical phonology* (= Leiden Studies in Indo-European 5). Amsterdam – Atlanta.  
Seebold, E. 1970. *Vergleichendes und etymologisches Wörterbuch der germanischen starken Verben*. The Hague.  
Vendryes, J. 1974. *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien*. Lettres R. S. Dublin.  
De Vries, J. – F. Tollenaere – M. Hogenhout-Mulder. 1997. *Nederlands etymologisch woordenboek*. Vierde druk. Leiden.  
Wipf, E. 1910. *Die Mundart von Visperterminen im Wallis* (= Beiträge zur schweizerdeutschen Grammatik 2). Frauenfeld.