

An Addendum to “Ten Scandinavian and North English Etymologies” (*Edda* and *glide/gleiten*)

Alvíssmál 6 contained my article “Ten Scandinavian and North English Etymologies” (Liberman 1996), consisting of ten sections, each devoted to a word or group of related words. The first section treated the attempts to guess the origin of the word *Edda* (1996, 63–71). I found all these attempts unsuccessful and suggested my own jocular etymology from *æðr* ‘eider duck’ (cf. *Grágás*, *Gullfjörðr*, *Hryggjar-stykki*, etc.). In my opinion, the name *Edda* does not reflect the content of Snorri’s manuscript, be it ‘ancient lore’ or ‘ars metrica’; scholars seem to have searched for the solution where it could not be found. No sooner had my work appeared than my old friend and colleague Fred Amory called my attention to Anthony Faulkes’s article “*Edda*” in *Gripla* 2 (Faulkes 1977). At one time, I also read this article, but for some reason the folder on *Edda* in my office did not contain a copy of it, and I forgot about it while writing my survey. I am grateful to the editors of *Alvíssmál* for allowing me to publish a belated postscript and will use this opportunity also to update my discussion of Engl. *glide* and its unquestionable and putative cognates (1996, 81–86).

1. *Edda*

Faulkes examines the earlier etymologies of *Edda* and mentions one derivation that I missed. Magnús Ólafsson ([1609] 1979, 189) traced *Edda* to Latin *edo*, a counterpart of Icel. *yrkja* ‘make verses’. This etymology was known to Árni Magnússon and Jón Ólafsson frá Grunnavík. Faulkes supports it because of an allegedly close parallel: in thirteenth-century Iceland, the noun *kredda* ‘creed, belief’ from Lat. *credo* also existed. *Kredda* turns up only in Þrándr’s reply in *Færeyinga saga*, but it has continued into Modern Icelandic and now means ‘superstition, illogical belief’. The entry in Fritzner (1972–73, 2:342–43) offers full discussion of this word and a most useful bibliography on the emergence and longevity of similar religious terms. Here is Faulkes’s conclusion about *credo:kredda/edo:edda*.

This parallel makes it possible to imagine Snorri, or one of his small circle of interested friends who must have constituted the first readership of his book, coining the word

edda from *edo* in conscious imitation of the word *kredda*, which he knew was derived from *credo*, as a half-humorous description of the treatise, thus implying that the Edda stood in a similar relation to Latin *artes poeticae* as Þrándr's *kredda* to the official *credo*. There may also at the same time have been an awareness of the pun on the other word *edda*, which might have been taken to reflect the fact that the treatise dealt with a kind of poetry that in the thirteenth century must have been thought by many rather old-fashioned. (1977, 38)

Whether Snorri knew “the other word” (*edda* ‘great-grandmother’) is far from clear (Lieberman 1996, 64–65), but this circumstance is irrelevant in the present context. Only the derivation of *Edda* from *edo* is at issue here. Faulkes reports that in 1976, in a typewritten Festschrift for Halldór Halldórsson (published in a single copy), Stefán Karlsson proposed the same etymology, though he preferred to derive *Edda* from *edo* ‘edit, compile’, rather than from *edo* ‘compose in verses’.

Despite the support of this etymology by two such outstanding scholars, I do not think it is more convincing than any of its predecessors. A literary riddle is appealing only in so far as it can be solved. We are not in the world of the Sphinx, Samson, or Turandot. In the tales about them, riddles were asked to trap the victim. But even the trickiest skaldic puns presupposed an audience capable of deciphering them. Unless the enemy's head is the coveted prize, where is the joy of asking insoluble riddles? However little Latin thirteenth-century laymen might know, they probably understood *pater noster*, *credo*, *ave*, *amen*, and a few other words and phrases of this type. But *edo* is a technical term that “the first readership” of Snorri's book need not have known. The proportion *credo:kredda=edo:edda* would not have occurred to them, as it did not occur to Konráð Gíslason or Guðbrandur Vigfússon centuries later, while Magnús Ólafsson's derivation (*Edda* from *edo*) is a product of sterile Latinity (every word of every language was traced to Latin when it could not be traced to Hebrew or Greek), and, characteristically enough, he did not refer to *kredda*. Snorri wrote on Icelandic myths and Icelandic poetry for the Icelanders who were beginning to forget their past. A Latin pun would have been most inappropriate under such circumstances.

Speaking about himself and Stefán Karlsson, Faulkes notes, “the fact that two people have independently come to revive this etymology is itself a testimony to its plausibility, and I hope that scholars will reconsider it and perhaps add it to the list of possible or likely explanations of the word *edda*.” (1977, 39) The coincidence is indeed remarkable, but the sought-after etymology is as elusive as ever.

2. Icel. *glenna* ‘opening; joke; woman’; New Norw. *glensa* ‘glide precipitously; joke’; Dan. dial. *glente*, *glinte* ‘woman’

In discussing the words featured in the title of this section (Lieberman 1996, 81–86), I also touched on the etymology of Engl. *glide* and Germ. *gleiten* and suggested that both of them, along with OIcel. **glíða*, had originally referred to precipitous, rather than smooth, continuous motion (cf. Norw. *glenta*). I recon-

structed the following sequence for *glenna/glensa*: ‘move quickly, run, jump’ > ‘entertainment, pranks’ > ‘place designated for entertainments, for example, edge of the forest, clearing’ > ‘open space in general, including patches of blue sky’ > ‘space between the legs, vulva’ > ‘featherbrained woman, coquette’. Consequently, *glenna* ‘clearing’ cannot be traced to the semantic nucleus ‘light space’, despite the evidence of the extremely late Engl. *clearing* and Germ. *Lichtung*. It should be added that the oldest recorded words for ‘clearing in the wood’ have nothing to do with light. OIcel. *þveit*, *þveiti* ‘clearing’ is derived from **þvīta* ‘cut off’; cf. *þveita* ‘cut, hew’ (Mod. Icel. ‘throw, dash, drive someone away’). Middle Engl. *choo* < **cēo* ‘assart land’ (in place-names) may go back to OE *cēowan* ‘chew’ < ?‘tear asunder’ (Kristensson 1984). OE *snæd* ‘detached area of woodland’ and Germ. *Schneise* ‘clearing’ are from the root of *sniðe*, *schneiden* ‘cut’. Engl. *assart*, a verb of French origin, contains the idea of weeding out, and the same is probably true of Icel. *ryðja*, Germ. *reuten/roden*, and their cognates (cf. OIcel. *rjóðr* ‘clearing’).

The problem with *glide* is that if we reconstruct the change from precipitous to smooth motion in its semantic history under the influence of *slide* (a very old hypothesis: see it in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “glide *v.*”), we will have to explain why, in the absence of an exact counterpart of *slide*, Germ. *gleiten* also means ‘glide’. In Modern German, there are no reflexes of *slītan*, for *schlittern* and dialectal *schlitten* are frequentative forms like Engl. *slither* (OE *slidrian*) from the zero grade of the same root. Our last resort will be to posit Germanic *glīdan* ‘move precipitously, run, jump’ and *slīdan* ‘slide’ and assume that Scand. **glīdan* disappeared altogether, with *gleiðr* preserving the only trace of the ancient meaning of the lost verb, if it can be taken as a reference to the runner’s (jumper’s) posture. In light of this reconstruction, OIcel. *gleða*, as well as OE *glida* ‘kite’, should perhaps be glossed ‘a bird swooping down on its prey’ rather than ‘a soaring bird’ (Lieberman 1996, 82). In West Germanic, *glīdan/glītan* survived and merged semantically with *slīdan/slītan*; as a result, *slīdan* was pushed to the periphery or ousted altogether.

The etymology of Engl. *glide* has been discussed only in dictionaries. In the database I have amassed for English etymology, the few mentions of *glide* in articles and books are limited to onomatopoeia. The etymology of any word is naturally the etymology of all its cognates. In May 1996, I started a more systematic sifting of the literature on the history of German. Among the first items I found in the *Bibliographie linguistique* were Krisch 1990 and Mottausch 1992, both on Germ. *gleiten*. Of course they discuss *glide* too, but bibliographers are guided by titles, and someone interested in *glide* will find no cross-reference in the *Bibliographie linguistique* from German to English. That is why I missed these articles.

Krisch and Mottausch struggle with the same problems that bothered me. Krisch proposes to trace *glīdan* to **ga-līdan* and *slīdan* to *-līdan* with movable *s*. Mottausch wrote a long refutation of Krisch’s hypothesis. I cannot side fully with either of them, but, to my mind, Mottausch is wrong in trying to disprove Krisch’s

etymology on such grounds as the impossibility of early syncope in the prefix and the like. From a theoretical point of view, **galīdan* and **s-līdan* could have been related, even though they probably were not! In principle, *gl-*, *gn-*, *gr-* can always be remnants of *gal-*, *gan-*, *gar-* (see the section on *glíma* in Liberman 1996, 86–89), but it is better not to reconstruct forms whose existence is justified only by the etymologist's despair. And there seems to be an argument against combining *glide* and *slide* in one etymon: as pointed out above, the oldest meaning of **glīdan* was probably not 'glide' but 'run, jump'.

**Slīdan* seems to have a well-established Indo-European etymology, while **glīdan* defies all attempts to penetrate its history. In my article (1996, 84, 86), I half-heartedly suggested that **glīdan* may after all go back to **ghlei-* 'light' (Krisch, 1990, 117, is right in positing initial **gh-*), with the original meaning 'move with lightning speed', but I realize how farfetched this metaphor is. Yet I would also hesitate to reconstruct **glīdan* 'move as a runner or jumper does, with one's legs apart', so that 'space between the legs' would provide the desired link between 'light' and 'quick motion' because in my scheme ('run, jump' > 'joke, entertainment' > 'place designated for entertainments, open space in a forest' > 'open space in general' > 'open space between the legs') the concept 'open space' appears late, rather than being the basic meaning of the verb **glīdan*.

Mottausch finishes his article with a brief mention of the Scandinavian synonyms **glentan* and **slentan*, and there is no doubt that these verbs must in some way be related to their synonyms *glīdan/slīdan* and *glensa*. Apparently the words beginning with *gl-* and *sl-* had symbolic value (as they still do), that they interacted over the centuries, and that their etymology is sometimes irreconstructible. A meager and trivial conclusion like this hardly deserved the efforts of so many scholars, but perhaps if we start with **glīdan* 'run, jump' and do not lose sight of all its similar-sounding synonyms, we will be able to make some progress.

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