Types of Greek ancient etymologies. C. Le Feuvre

This list is meant to give a (provisional) concise presentation of the typology used in the field Comment of the online Dictionary. Relevant examples can be found on the Dictionary through the Search function. Here only a typical example is given for each type.

A. Formulation of the etymology

Alternative etymology

Two or more different etymologies are provided for the same lemma, independantly of each other. Etymology A is favoured by a given scholar while etymology B is favoured by another one, and lexicons list them all.

> Ex.: Orion, *Etymologicum*, sigma p. 147: Σκότος. ἀπὸ τοῦ σκιάζειν ὠνομᾶσθαι. οἱ δὲ φασὶν ὅτι σκοπὸς ἐστί. ὅτι δεῖ προσκοπεῖσθαι τὸν προερχόμενον ἐν αὐτῷ· οὕτως Ἡρακλείδης. ὁ δὲ Ἡρωδιανὸς παρὰ τὸ σκέθειν ἡμᾶς, ὅτι ἐπέχει πολλάκις προϊέναι.
>
> "*skotos* 'darkness', gets its name from the verb *skiazō* 'to shade'; but others say it comes from *skopos* 'watcher', because the one who moves forward in darkness must watch carefully before (*proskopeîsthai*) – this is what Heraclides says. But Herodian says it comes from the fact that it holds us back (*skethein*), because often it holds us back from moving forward."

We have here three etymological proposals, ascribed to three different scholars. The first one (σκιάζειν) remains anonymous. The second one (σκοπός) is ascribed to Heraclides and explicitly said to be advocated by other people (οἱ δέ) than the first etymology. The third one (σχέθω, σκέθω) is ascribed to Herodian and explicitly considered incompatible with either the first one or the second one. Those are three possibilities, only one of which is considered correct by the scholar who advocates it. This is the most frequent case, save for the fact that most of the time the etymologies are not explicitly ascribed to a given scholar and we have only a formulation "A comes from X, or from Y, or from Z."

Complementary etymology

Two different etymons are provided for the same lemma in complementarity. That is, etymology A' accounts for the use of the word in a given context A while etymology B' accounts for the use of the word in a different context B. Both etymologies are valid, each accounts only for a part of the spectrum of the word, and together they account for the whole spectrum. Complementary etymology is a formalized type of contextual etymology. The two etymologies can be proposed by one and the same scholar who considers both of them correct, but not in the same context. This is often the case when a word has two different meanings because of the semantic evolution.

> Ex.: Scholia in Batrachomyomachia 81: δέμας σημαίνει δύο· τὸ ζῶν (A) καὶ τὸ τεθνηκός (B). καὶ τὸ μὲν ζῶν ἐτυμολογεῖται ἀπὸ τοῦ δέω τὸ δεσμῶ (A'), τὸ συνδεδεμένον ὂν τῇ ψυχῇ. τὸ δὲ τεθνηκὸς ἀπὸ τοῦ δαμάζω (B'), τὸ δεδαμασμένον οἷον.
>
> "*demas* has two meanings, it refers either to a living body or to a dead body. *Demas* 'living body' is etymologically explained as coming from *deō* 'to bind', it is the body bound to the soul. But *demas* 'dead body' is etymologically explained as coming from *damazō* 'to tame', it is the one who has been tamed, so to speak."

When complete, this type of etymology is framed in a μέν… δέ structure. The difficulty is that very often, as we have only fragmentary attestations, only one of the two etymologies is given, so that the complementarity does not appear. We have to combine several sources in order to be able to reconstruct the full explanation.

Elliptic etymology

Etymology in which the etymon is not given explicitly but replaced by a synonym, or rather, by a translation in usual koine Greek. This is often found for cases where the word was obsolete in koine Greek, or had assumed a different meaning. Next to full explanations giving both the etymon and its translation, introduced by ὅ ἐστιν "that is", we find elliptic explanations in which only the translation is given.

> Ex.: Apollonius Soph., *Lexicon homericum*, p. 147: ἀρητήρ ὁ ἱερεύς, ἀπὸ τοῦ ὑπὲρ τῶν θυόντων τὰς εὐχὰς ποιεῖσθαι.
>
> "*Arētēr* is the 'priest' (*hiereus*), called thus from the fact that he makes prayers (*eukhas*) on behalf of those who sacrifice."

The etymon ἀρά is not given explicitly, but only its synonym εὐχή is given, and it is left to the reader to identify the real etymon behind εὐχάς. The complete formulation would be ἀπὸ τοῦ ὑπὲρ τῶν θυόντων τὰς ἀράς, ὅ ἐστιν εὐχάς, ποιεῖσθαι. The reason is probably that ἀρά originally meant 'prayer' but that in 1st century koine it was specialized in the (already ancient) meaning 'malediction', which of course could not account for ἀρητήρ, so that in the older meaning it had to be translated, so to speak, into a synchronic equivalent.

B. Nature of the etymology
(justification of the relationship between the lemma and the etymon)

Causal etymology

This is the most widespread type of etymology: A is so named because it is endowed with a given property, because it has a given appearance. This can apply to simple words or to compounds. There are different subtypes (descriptive, functional).

Contextual etymology

Etymology designed to account for one specific occurrence of the word, usually in poetry, and which is usually backed by a quotation of the relevant occurrence. Most Greek etymologies are contextual and meant to account for all the contexts in which a given word can appear, this is why several etymologies are provided for oen and the same word.

> Ex.: Epimerismi homerici ordine alphabetico traditi, alpha 260: ἀνέμοιο: ὄνομα προσηγορικὸν ἀπὸ ῥήματος. Ἀπολλόδωρος (FGrHist 244 F 233) παρὰ τὸ ἀνύειν. ὁ δὲ ποιητὴς παρὰ τὸ ἀεῖν· ἀνέμων <διάη> μένος ὑγρὸν ἀέντων (ε 478, τ 440).
>
> "*anemoio* 'wind' is a common noun derived from a verb. Apollodorus says it comes from *anuein* 'to achieve', but Homer says it comes from *aeîn* 'to blow': ἀνέμων <διάη> μένος ὑγρὸν ἀέντων (ε 478, τ 440)."

Ἄνεμος is derived from ἄημι (ἄω) 'to blow' because, as everybody knows, the wind blows, and because Homer uses the noun and the verb together in the same line, in what is understood as an etymological figura. Often, however, the quotation justifying the contextual etymology is not given because the formulation has been abbreviated, so that a comparison with other sources, which may preserve the quotation, is necessary.

Descriptive etymology

Subtype of causal etymology in which the etymon given for a word A refers to one formal characteristic of the referent of A, which it describes in a way.

> Ex.: Etym. Genuinum, alpha 1163: Ἀρητήρ· ὁ ἱερεύς· (…) ἢ παρὰ τὸ αἴρειν τὰς χεῖρας εἰς ὕψος.
>
> "the priest (*arētēr*) is so named from the fact that he raises (*airein*) his hands upwards."

Descriptively, the priest usually raises his hands to the sky when he prays a divine being supposed to live in heaven. Raising hands is not fundamental in praying but it can be a manifestation of the process, so that on paintings a praying figure can be identified through this symbolic gesture alone.

Ex.: Meletius, *De natura hominis* p. 112: καυλὸς δὲ, ὡς ἐπίμηκες· πᾶν γὰρ ἐπίμηκες αὐλός· προσθέσει οὖν τοῦ κ, καυλός

Kaulos "stem' of a plant, because it is long, and everything which is long is an *aulos* 'pipe, tube'. Therefore, with a prothetic [k], *kaulos*

The stem is named after its form, that of a pipe.

Etymology *a contrario* (enantiosemy)

A word is explained through the opposite notion, and supposed to be named after what it is not or does not. The canonic example is Latin *lucus a non lucendo* "the wood gets its name from the fact that there is no light in it".

Ex.: Epimerismi Homerici Iliad 1, 219b: κώπη: τῇ λαβῇ τοῦ ξίφους, παρὰ τὸ μὴ κόπτειν τὴν χεῖρα.

"*kōpē* is the 'handle' of the sword, the name comes from the fact that it does not cut (*mē koptein*) the hand."

This type of etymology seems to be rather recent, and is counter-intuitive for us, but enjoyed a certain favour in Roman etymology in particular.

Etymology by conversion

An existing word-form (which may be an inflected form) is converted into another one, which is the lemma, without any formal change. Conversion in the linguistic sense refers to a change of category without use of derivational means.

Ex.: Etym. Genuinum, alpha 1164: Ἀρήν· τὸ πρόβατον. ἔστιν οὖν ἀρά ἡ εὐχή· ἐκ τούτου γίνεται ἀρήν, τὸ ἐπιτήδειον εἰς εὐχὴν πρόβατον.

"*arēn* 'sheep': *ara* means 'prayer', and from it is derived *arēn*, the animal which is suitable for the prayer."

The Ionic feminine accusative ἀρήν 'prayer' (Attic ἀράν) is converted into the masculine nominative ἀρήν 'lamb'.

Ex.: Eustathius, *Comm. Od*. 1, 9: παρωνόμασται δὲ ἀπὸ τῆς πόσεως ὁ πόσις ὡς δοκεῖ τοῖς παλαιοῖς, διὰ τὴν σπερματικὴν ὑγρότητα.

"The word *posis* 'husband' is named after the word *posis* 'drink', as the Ancients thought, because of the humid nature of the sperm."

The feminine noun *posis* 'drink' is converted into a masculine *posis* 'husband'.

Etymology *ex antonymo*

This type works in antonymic pairs. The analogical square, which is a usual tool for argumentation in the Stoicist system, establishes the following relationship : A : B = C : D, such as the relationship between A and C is identical to the one between B and D, and the relationship between A and B is identical to the one between C and D.

A ⇔ C

↕   ↕

B ⇔ D

Applied to etymology, the analogical square yields the following result : A has an antonym B, and an etymon A'. Therefore since the relationship between A' and B' is identical to the relationship between A and B, B' must be the antonym of A'.

A ⟺ B
↕   ↕
A' ⟺ B'

> Ex.: Philoxenus, *Fragmenta* 475 (transmitted by Orion, *Etymologicum*, epsilon p. 61), Εἰρήνη· παρὰ τὸ εἴρειν καὶ λέγειν ἐν αὐτῇ, εἴπερ Ἄρης, ὁ πόλεμος, κατὰ στέρησιν τῆς ῥήσεως λέγεται.
> "*eirēnē* 'peace' comes from the fact that during peace we 'talk' (*eirein*) and speak, since Ares 'war' is named after the absence (*sterēsin*) of talks (*rhēseōs*)".

The full reasoning is: A (εἰρήνη 'peace') is the antonym of B (Ἄρης, taken in the meaning 'war', ὁ πόλεμος), the etymon of B is B' (privative ἀ- + 'talk' ῥῆσις), therefore the etymon of A, A' must be the antonym of B', hence, must mean 'to talk' (εἴρειν), so that A : A' = B : B'. This type often leads to etymologies which seem weird and not founded, but they are, provided one reconstructs the underlying reasoning. The usual practice of Greek etymologists is to give first the result of the analogical reasoning and only afterwards the base, that is, the antonymic lemma / etymon that was used as a model (B : B' in the above example). The difficulty with that type of etymology is that the logical particle uniting the two etymologies (εἴπερ in the above example) is not always explicit, so that the two etymologies can be presented as independent from each other, and sometimes indeed are not even quoted as a whole, but only one is quoted (for instance only A : A' without B : B'). The four-member system can sometimes, however, be recovered from another source. Often this type of etymology can be fully understood only through the combination of different sources and different lemmas, for we have only *membra disjecta*.

> Ex.: Orion, *Etymologicum*, alpha p. 28: Αὐγή (A), παρὰ τὸ ἄγω (A') ῥῆμα, ᾗ διαγόμεθα. σκότος (B) παρὰ τὸ σχέθειν (B') ἡμᾶς.
> "*augē* 'light' comes from the verb *agō* 'to lead', it is the one in which we move forward. *Skotos* 'darkness' comes from 'to hold back' (*skhethein*)."

The logical particle is missing and the second element of the pair is itself abbreviated, compared to other formulations where it is better explained (Herodian, *Peri pathôn*, Lentz III/2, p. 830: σκότος: ὁ Ἡρωδιανὸς παρὰ σχέθειν ἡμᾶς πολλάκις προϊέναι, ὅ ἐστιν ἐπισχεῖν "σκότος 'darkness': Herodian says it comes from the fact that it often holds us back from moving forward, that is, it retains us"). The logical particle missing in Orion is explicit in other formulations: Etym. Gudianum, alpha p. 231 (Αὐγή (A)· παρὰ τὸ ἄγω (A')· δι' ἣν ἀγόμεθα, **εἴγε** σκότος (B) διὰ τὸ ἐπισχεῖν (B') ἡμᾶς), Eym. Magnum, Kallierges p. 168 (Αὐγή (A): Παρὰ τὸ ἄγω (A'), ἀγὴ, καὶ αὐγὴ, δι' ἧς ἀγόμεθα· σκότος (B) **γὰρ** παρὰ τὸ ἐπισχέσθαι (B') ἡμᾶς). Other sources give only the first etymology (αὐγή), disconnecting it from σκότος, which makes it difficult to understand because we have only A : A': Etym. Symeonis, vol. 1, p. 303 (αὐγή· παρὰ τὸ ἄγω ἀγή καὶ αὐγή, δι' ἧς ἀγόμεθα), Ps.-Zonaras, *Lexicon*, alpha p. 343 (idem). The main problem in that case is that we cannot give a correct translation unless we have first reconstructed the whole four-term system and analysed the relationships within it. In the case of Orion's formulation, we could be tempted to translate ᾗ διαγόμεθα as "in which we live", which would be conceivable but is erroneous in this context: only taking into account the parallelism with the etymology of σκότος and the antonymic relationship can lead us to the correct translation. The formulation in Byzantine *Lexica*, δι' ἣν ἀγόμεθα (Etym. Gudianum), δι' ἧς ἀγόμεθα (Etym. Magnum, Etym. Symeonis) suggests that Orion's διαγόμεθα results from a rewriting and is not the original formulation and that the verb is not διάγω 'to spend one's time'. Those antonymic pairs can be designed in parallel. However, most of the time one of the etymologies is attested earlier, independently, so that it may be thought to be older, and the

antonymic one was then designed after it: σκότος / σχέθω seems to be older than αὐγή / ἄγω, it does not need αὐγή / ἄγω to be valis, whereas it is impossible to understand αὐγή / ἄγω without σκότος / σχέθω, so that the one may be considered modelled after the other.

Functional etymology

The relationship between the word A and the etymon defines A through a functional characteristic, something A is made for. It is a subtype of causal etymology in so far as it the assumed etymon is a final cause.

> Ex.: Etym. Genuinum, alpha 1164: Ἀρήν· τὸ πρόβατον. ἔστιν οὖν ἀρά ἡ εὐχή· ἐκ τούτου γίνεται ἀρήν, τὸ ἐπιτήδειον εἰς εὐχὴν πρόβατον.
> "*arēn* 'sheep': *ara* means 'prayer', and from it is derived *arēn*, the animal which is suitable for the prayer."

The name of the sheep is derived from a functional feature: one of its functions is to enable men to perform sacrifices. It is not a descriptive intrinsic feature like "white" or "hairy" or "young", but a feature having to do with the function of the referent in an external process (here a cultural one, ritual).

> Ex. : Herodian, *De prosodia catholica*, Lentz III/2, p. 325: τὸ μέντοι κόμη βαρύνεται ἀπὸ τοῦ κόσμος γεγονυῖα, κόσμη γάρ.
> "but the word *komē* 'hair' is barytone, being derived from *kosmos* 'ornament', for it is a **kosmē* 'ornament'."

The name of the hair is not derived from an intrinsic feature like "dark" or "long" or "curly" or "on the head", but is related to a function, which is to be an ornament for an external being, here man.

Functional etymology is especially frequent for words parsed as compounds:

> Ex.: Orion, *Etymologicum*, lambda, p. 94: Λύχνος. ὁ λύων τὸ νύχος, τουτέστι τὸ σκότος.
> "*Lukhnos* 'lamp', the one which dissolves (*luōn*) the **nukhos*, that is, the darkness."

Graphic etymology

Etymology based on the written form of the word and on the shape of the letters.

> Ex. : Orion, *Etymologicum (excerpta e cod. Vat. gr. 1456)* 51 : Βίβλος: […] ἢ διὰ τὸ βέβαιον.
> *Biblos* 'book': […] or because it is lasting (*bebaion*).

This etymology cannot rely on the oral shape of the word (the pronunciation [vivlion] / [veveon]) but only on the written shape, which in uncials is ΒΙΒΛΙΟΝ / ΒΕΒΑΙΟΝ. The similarity between the shapes of Α and Λ suggested the change of the one into the other, which accounts for the etymology. In that particular case, the etymology was designed for the derivative βίβλιον, not for the word βίβλος, and was secondarily transferred to the latter.

Mimetic etymology

Subtype of causal etymology in which the relationship between the word and its etymon mirrors the relationship between their referents in extralinguistic reality. If A is the source / the origin of B, then A', the word for A, is the etymon of B', the word for B. As a rule, B' "adds" something to A', one or several letters (since Greek grammarians thought in terms of letters rather than of sounds).

> Ex.: Herodian, *Peri orthographias*, Lentz III/2, p. 554: νείφω τὸ χιονίζω διὰ τῆς ει διφθόγγου. ἔστι γὰρ νέφος […] ἐκ τούτου οὖν τοῦ νέφος γίνεται νέφω καὶ πλεονασμῷ τοῦ ι νείφω.
> "*Neiphō* 'to snow', spelled with a diphthong [ei]. There is *nephos* 'cloud' […] and from that *nephos* one derives **nephō* and through adjunction of [i], *neiphō*."

Snow (B) comes from clouds (A), therefore the verb *neiphein* 'to snow' (B') comes from the noun *nephos* 'cloud' (A') which is its etymon.

Ex.: Orion, *Etymologicum,* kappa, p. 85: Κτύπος. πλεονασμῷ τοῦ κ, τύπος τις ὤν. τὰ γὰρ τυπτόμενα ψοφεῖ.

"*Ktupos* 'din', though adjunction of [k], a *tupos* 'blow, beat', as it were. Because that which is beaten (*tuptomena*) produces a sound."

A blow (A) produces a sound (B), therefore the noun *tupos* 'beat, blow' (A') is the etymon of *ktupos* 'din, noise' (B').

Ex. : Etym. Gudianum Additamenta, epsilon p. 450: Ἔλαφος· […] ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐλλός, τὸ ἔλαφος, παρήχθη παραγ⟦ώγ⟧ως ἔλ⟦α⟧φος, ὡς κ⟦όρ⟧σ⟦η⟧ κό⟦ρ⟧σαφος καὶ ἐν ὑ⟦περβιβασμῷ⟧ καὶ τροπῇ τοῦ ⟦ς⟧ εἰς τ κρό⟦τα⟧φος. ⟦οὕτως οὖν ἔλαφος⟧

"*Elaphos* 'deer': […] or the name *elaphos* was derived from the name of the fawn, *ellos*, as from *korsē* 'temple' *korsaphos* and through metathesis and change of [s] into [t] *krotaphos* 'temple', so *elaphos*."

The fawn (A), as the young, is the "origin" of the adult deer (B), therefore the noun *ellos* 'fawn' (A') is the etymon of the noun *elaphos* 'deer' (B')."

Reversible etymology
The relationship between the word and its etymon can be reversed and both directions are attested.

Ex.: Etym. Gudianum Additamenta, epsilon p. 450 : <Ἔλαφος>· […] διὰ τὴν κουφότητα καὶ τὸ τάχος, ἐλαφρός τις ὤν

"*Elaphos* 'deer': because of its lightness and its speed, being an *elaphros* 'light', as it were."

Orion, *Etymologicum*, epsilon p. 57: Ἐλαφρός. παρὰ τὸ κουφότατον ζῶον τὴν ἔλαφον· ἐλαφηρὸς καὶ συγκοπῇ ἐλαφρός

"*Elaphros* 'light': it comes from the name of the lightest animal, the deer (*elaphos*), *elaphēros* and through syncope *elaphros*."

The relationship can be understood both ways : the deer *elaphos* is so named because it is quick and nimble (*elaphros*), or the adjective 'light' (*elaphros*) means in fact 'deer-like', since the deer is prototypically quick and nimble.