

A new Indo-European etymology for Greek τραυλός ‘lisp, stammering’

Roberto Batisti (Università di Bologna), roberto.batisti2@unibo.it

The Greek adjective τραυλός ‘lisp, stammering’ has no widely accepted etymology. Three very different solutions have been proposed so far.

The connection with Attic τραῦμα ‘wound’ (Frisk, *GEW*, II, 919) is formally problematic (note that the common Greek form outside of Attic is τρῶμα, cf. τιτρώσκω ‘to wound’) and semantically far from obvious.

Apparently more successful is the idea, first suggested by Chantraine (1933, 238), that the adjective contains a phonosymbolic imitation of the very speech defect it described, which was thought to consist of a confusion between the liquids [r] and [l], as most famously exemplified by Alcibiades according to ancient historians and comic parodies of his speech.

An Indo-European etymology was instead suggested by Wackernagel (1897, 17) and elaborated much further by De Lamberterie (1990, 701-714), deriving τραυλός from the zero-grade of IE **ters-* ‘dry’ via **t̥rs-u-lo-* > **trasulo-* > **tra(h)ulo-*. While the derivation would have some parallels in Greek (especially δαυλός ‘thick, shaggy’ < **d̥ns-u-lo-* from **dens-*), the phonetic treatment of /s/ between syllabic liquid and vowel is still controversial (see Manolissou-Pantelidis 2011), which is possibly the reason why this derivation has not won consensus.

In my paper I try to show that while Chantraine’s onomatopœic explanation cannot be decisively ruled out, it is made less compelling by the fact that τραυλός and its derivatives probably did *not* originally refer to the confusion of [r] and [l], but more generally to any kind of stuttering or stammering. In fact, studies on Greek and Latin terms referring to speech impairments (e.g. O’Neill 1980, Wollock 1997) have shown that these words usually acquired a more restricted, technical meaning only at a later date, and that this meaning was often based *a posteriori* on the phonetic shape of the word itself – so that e.g. ψελλός, starting with Galen (2nd century CE), began to be used reference to a defect in the pronunciation of [ps].

I then put forth a new, tentative proposal, accepting Wackernagel’s phonetic derivation from **t̥rs-u-lo-* but starting from a different IE root **tres-* ‘to tremble’. This etymology is equally good from the phonological point of view (the zero-grade of **tres-* would of course be identical to that of **ters-*), and – as I argue – perhaps preferable from the semantic one, since a ‘trembling voice’ could well refer to stuttering, as shown by uses of τρέ(μ)ω, τρόμος, and Lat. *tremo* in ancient literary and scientific sources, while the parallels advanced for ‘dryness of the voice’ are overall less persuasive.

Select references

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