Nursery words and hypocorisms among 
Germanic kinship terms

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By using Jakobson's (1960:127–130) criteria for determining the nursery-word status of a given lexeme, I argue in this article that, even if we should no longer regard PG *aiþīn-/ōn- 'mother' (Goth. aïpei), *aiþma- 'daughter's husband' and *faþōn- 'father’s sister' as nursery words or hypocorisms (Hansen 2017:207–220), we should certainly still do so for PG *ammōn- 'parent’s mother; wet nurse', *attan- 'father' (Goth. atta), *basōn- 'father’s sister' and *mōnōn-/mōmōn- 'mother; mother’s sister'.

1. Introduction

At the symposium on Gothic held in Odense on 8 March 2016, I argued that some of the Gothic and Germanic kinship terms that are currently classified as nursery words or hypocorisms (i.e. terms based on, or variants of, the initial syllable of known lexical material) may instead be regarded as inherited words derived from well-established Indo-European lexical material. The terms in question are PG *aiþīn-/ōn- 'mother' (Goth. aïpei), *aiþma- 'daughter’s husband' and *faþōn- 'father’s sister' that, in my view, hark back to reconstructed or back-projected PIE *h₁ōj-ti/o-h₂n(h₂)- ‘who is charged with an oath’, *h₁āj-t-m-o- ‘one who is related to share, one who is related to part’ (i.e. ‘the non-relative husband of the oldest daughter who becomes heir in a family of only daughters and moves in with his wife’s family’) and *po-[h₂-e-]h₂(ō)tn- ‘the one who is gone, the one who has left’, respectively.

However, since I submitted the analysis of these three terms as a contribution to a festschrift (Hansen 2017:207–220), I shall devote my contribution for the present volume to the etymological analysis of the four terms discussed in my Odense presentation that may be interpreted as nursery words or hypocorisms, viz. PG *ammōn- ‘parent’s mother; wet nurse’, *attan- ‘father’ (Goth. atta), *basōn- ‘father’s sister’ and *mōnōn-/mōmōn- ‘mother; mother’s sister'.

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2. **PG *ammōn*- ‘parent’s mother; wet nurse’


Significantly, we rarely see this term in the sense ‘mother’, but rather as designating another female person of great importance to the little child, viz. either ‘grandmother’ as in Old Norse (SE I 538 móðir heitir ok amma) or ‘wet nurse’ not only in Old Norse (Roch.Reyk. 134^23 og þær latha bavrnen sgva sig. og þær heitha ammvr) but also in Middle Dutch (CG II. Lut.A. also alst amme te huedenne plegt) and Old High German (Graff. I 251 nutrix). Only in relation to certain modern German dialects does Grimm & Grimm (1854: I, 279) report the meaning ‘mother’.

With its similar “reflexes” in other Indo-European languages in the shape of e.g. Gr. ἀμμᾶς(c), ἀμμία ‘mother; wet nurse, foster mother’ and further Lat. *amita* ‘father’s sister’, Alb. amë ‘aunt; mother’ etc., and its nasal consonants, non-high vowels, consonant-plus-vowel pattern, partial reduplication of syllables and “un-Germanic” consonant gemination, cf. Jakobson (1960:127–130), **PG *ammōn*- qualifies eminently for being bracketed as a nursery-word, cf. also e.g. Grimm & Grimm (1854: I, 279), Pokorny (1959:36), de Vries (1961:8), Lloyd et al. (1988: I, 205–206), Kluge & Seebold (2002:38) and Orel (2003:17). It should be noted, however, that in this case, unlike **PG *attan*- ‘father’, the existence of superficially similar forms outside the Germanic area does not qualify for a nursery-word analysis per se, since the same individual-language outputs would have been obtained by means of regular phonological development from a PIE *ammā*- vel sim.

3. **PG *attan*- ‘father’

(1986: 46), list OFris. *aththa* as a cognate as well, but this comparison is disapproved by Holthausen (1925: 4) and Lendinara (1990: 298), who prefer to derive it from *ēth* ‘oath’, cf. also the meaning ‘sworn man, oath-bound man’. To PG *attan- we also find a couple of derivations, viz. PG *attian- with a meaning identical to that of the base (MHG *ätte* ‘parent’s father’) and the diminutive PG *attilan- producing personal names (Goth. *Attila*, ON *Atli*, OHG *Etzilo*).

As with the term for ‘mother’ (Goth. *aipei*), the inherited and originally default term for ‘father’, i.e. PG *fader-, seems to have been superseded by a term of purported nursery-word origin. Consequently, we find only one attestation of Goth. *atta* in the function of both ‘biological father’ and ‘heavenly father’ (Math. 10.35 […] *mannan wiþra attan is jah dauhtar wiþra aipein izos jah brãp wiþra swaihron izos*, Math. 6.9 *atta unsar, þu in himinam*). Among the remaining languages, the meaning ‘father’ would seem to occur also in Middle High German (Graff. I 145 *pater*), but most of the North and West Germanic attestations bear witness to a use of this term as a personal name, cf. e.g. Old Norse (glosses) and Old High German (Graff. I 145), and, in Old High German, also to meanings such as ‘forefather, ancestor; parent’s father’ (Gl. II 3187 *attauus*, Clos.Chr. 26 *der (Conradin) wolt rechen sinen atten keiser Friderichen*).

In light of the numerous similar forms in other Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages, cf. e.g. Gr. *ἄττα* ‘father’, Lat. *atta* ‘id.; Basq. *aita* ‘id.’ etc. as well as Skt. *atā* ‘mother; mother’s sister; older sister’, and the phonological makeup of this term (cf. Jakobson 1960: 127–130), it seems safe to assume nursery-word provenance, cf. also e.g. Pokorny (1959: 71), de Vries (1961: 17), Lehmann (1986: 46), Lloyd et al. (1988: I, 385–388), Kluge & Seebold (2002: 69), Orel (2003: 27) and Kroonen (2013: 39). However, if we are to accept a PIE *atta- vel sim. as a common pedigree for the *atta*-forms of at least the Indo-European languages, we need to address the challenge created by the non-sibilation of the cluster *-tt-; we would normally expect PIE *-tt- to develop into PG *-ss-*, cf. e.g. Krahe (1966: 109–110), but on the other hand we cannot be confident that an original nursery word would behave according to the sound-laws defined for non-nursery-word terms; it might have remained unchanged due to its universal nursery-word traits. Nor can we be confident that the *atta*-forms of the individual Indo-European languages have not just been created independently in each branch due to these very traits.

Kroonen (2011: 111) offers an alternative solution by suggesting that the geminate plosives may have arisen as a result of Kluge’s Law (PG *-Tn- > *-tt-). His assumption is corroborated by the ubiquitous n-stem declination of this term in Germanic, since nursery words tend to follow the n-stem declension, cf. also PG *ammôn-, *basôn-, *faþôn- and *mônôn-/mômôn- and Olsen (2006: 126–127)
on this suffix of individualisation or determination. Following Kroonen's line of thought, we may therefore alternatively take PG *attan- to have been formed as a nursery-word n-stem *at-on- ~ *at-n- vel sim. in a pre-Kluge's Law era, having obtained its Proto-Germanic shape only by regular sound change. In my view and given the uncertainties concerning such a nursery word, both Kroonen's assumption and the traditional view must be considered equally valid.

4. PG *basōn- ‘father’s sister’

The ancient West Germanic languages possess two almost complementarily distributed and allegedly hypocoristically formed terms for ‘father’s sister’, viz. one continuing PG *basōn- and occurring only in the German area, and one continuing PG *faþōn- and attested only in the North Sea Germanic area. Since I have demonstrated in Hansen (2017:213–215) that the latter is not a hypocorism, we shall concentrate only on the former here, viz. PG *basōn- with reflexes in e.g. OHG basā, pasā, wasa, MHG base, wase and MLG wase, cf. e.g. Benecke et al. (1854: I, 92), Grimm & Grimm (1854: I, 1147–1148), Karg-Gasterstädt et al. (1968: I, 830), Kluge & Seebold (2002: 94), Lexer (1872: I, 133), Lloyd et al. (1988: I, 495–497) and Schiller & Lübben (1880: V, 610).

At the beginning this term denoted mainly ‘father’s sister’, e.g. in Old High German (Diefenb.Gl. 30 amita), Middle High German (Graff. III 215 amita, Parz. 413.29 ich pin miner basen bruoder sun) and Middle Low German (Voc.W. amita, Fahne.Dortm. III 65,269 min aldermoder is mi neger dan mine wase). Occasionally, we also find other uses, e.g. ‘mother’s sister’ in Old High German (Diefenb.Gl. 351 matertera, matruelis = passen kint), and this tendency towards semantic expansion later results in the inclusion of other (paternal?) female relatives, e.g. ‘father’s brother’s wife’ (Luther Lev. 18.14 du soll deines vatert bruder schambd nicht blöszen, das du sein weib nemest, denn sie ist deine wase).

As already mentioned, PG *basōn- is generally regarded as a nursery word or hypocorism although the details vary from etymologist to etymologist, thus e.g. the assumption of a hypocorism based on PG *fa(der)s(wester)- (Grimm & Grimm 1854: I, 1147–1148), a nursery word based on the “nursery-word root” *ba- and the s-suffix often used in hypocorisms and similar words (Lloyd et al. 1988: I, 496–497) and a hypocorism PG *baswōn- on the basis of MLat.-Langob. barbas ‘father’s brother’ (Kluge & Seebold 2002: 94). The former two proposals ascribe the irregular development of PG *f- to b- in young children’s failure to pronounce the labiodental fricative, cf. also Jakobson (1960:127–128) on typical nursery-word characteristics. Lacking any attractive extra-Germanic comparanda, we may conclude that PG *basōn- is a nursery word or a hypocorism, thus revealing –
as with PG *ammôn- above – children’s familiarity also with other women in the family than their mother (and sisters) in ancient Germanic society.

5. PG *mōnōn-/mōmōn- ‘mother; mother’s sister’


Textual analyses reveal quite a large spectrum of meanings associated with this term, stretching from ‘mother, mammy’ over ‘mother’s sister; parent’s sister’ all the way to ‘female relative’ and even ‘old woman’; thus e.g. ‘mammy’ (SE II 226 móna min móna (kveðr barnid) við mik gjöra verst hjóna ‘nolet (móna) mater (móna) mea, inquit puer, me pejus quam ceteram familiam tractare’) in Old Norse, ‘aunt’ (Interl.CG 38.40 God te blis, mome helwis. Son, welcum, by san dinis. Hic am comin to ye, mome, Yu hel me noth, yu say me sone) and ‘old woman’ (Gower.CA I 1634 he sende up for the lady sone, and forth sche cam, that olde mone) in Old English, ‘mother’s sister’ (Gl. IV 257¹⁹ matertera) in Old Saxon, ‘mother’ (Engelh.Chr. 448 sint dat de kindere, wat mach denne de moder syn? vnde gingen to den kinderen vnde vrageden, wor or mome were), ‘parent’s sister; female relative’ in Middle Low German (Diefenb.Gl. wase van des vater wegen, amita, Kil. = matertera, amita, neptis, cognata, Seib.Urk. 463) and ‘mother; female relative’ in Old High German (Gl. matertera).

Judging from the many similar forms in other Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages, cf. e.g. Gr. μάμμα, μάμμη ‘mother’, Lat. mamma ‘id.’ etc., and the phonological makeup of this term, cf. Jakobson (1960:127–130), we may safely assume nursery-word provenance, cf. also e.g. Pokorny (1959:694), de Vries (1961:392), Kluge & Seebold (2002:635) and Orel (2003:274). We may speculate, though, whether this term was formed prior to the sound change of PIE *ā to PG *ā or not, since we would expect the vowel quality a to appear more often in nursery words than that of o, cf. also Jakobson (1960:127). Regardless of the age of the formation, however, the use of this term as a children’s designation for ‘mother’s sister’ and other more distant relatives demonstrates again, as with PG *ammôn- and *basôn- above, that children in ancient Germanic society were
often close to and familiar with women in the family other than their mother (and sisters).

6. Conclusion

As is evident from my etymological analyses above, we have ample reason for still considering PG *ammōn- ‘parent’s mother; wet nurse’, *attan- ‘father’ (Goth. atta), *basōn- ‘father’s sister’ and *mònōn-/mōmōn- ‘mother; mother’s sister’ to be nursery words and hypocorisms. Some of these, viz. PG *ammōn-, *basōn- and maybe *mònōn-/mōmōn-, would seem to have been formed spontaneously in Proto-Germanic, since we do not need any intermediate steps to fit them into children’s phonetic inventory, cf. Jakobson (1960:127–130). PG *attan- and maybe *mònōn-/mōmōn-, on the other hand, were likely to have been formed at a stage earlier than Proto-Germanic, i.e. prior to certain sound-laws (in this case Kluge’s Law and the sound change PIE *ā > PG *ō, respectively) that define Proto-Germanic. Morphologically, we may observe that all four terms belong to the n-stem paradigm, which is to be expected in nursery words and hypocorisms, cf. e.g. Krahe & Meid (1967:91–92), Olsen (2006:126) and Kroonen (2011:110–111).

As a final remark, the very circumstance that we find nursery words and hypocorisms for ‘father’s sister’, ‘wet nurse’, ‘parent’s mother’ etc. reveals that children in ancient Germanic society were close to and familiar with not only their mother and their sisters but other women in the family, which suggests that the Germanic tribes lived in extended families of some kind, cf. also my analysis of PG *aiþīn-/−ōn- ‘mother’, *aiþma- ‘daughter’s husband’ and *faþōn- ‘father’s sister’ in Hansen (2017:207–220).

Primary sources


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Lev. = Book of Leviticus.


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