‘to teach’ and ‘to learn’ in (Indo-)Germanic: lexical typology, morphology, and more

Abstract

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Although Gothic preserves all the four groups of weak verbs of Germanic inheritance, it does not have a *-nō/na-*verb meaning ‘to learn’. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to North Germanic, West Germanic being the only branch in which PGmc \**liznōn*- is continued: OE *leornian*, OS *līnōn* (with syncope of *r* and compensatory lengthening), *lernōn*, OHG *lernōn*, (→) *lernēn*, *lirnēn*, etc.

Since *-nō/na-*verbs later became productive only in Gothic and North Germanic, one can ask what it has been of the root-derived verb PGmc \**liznōn-* in those branches of Germanic.

The meaning ‘to teach’ is strictly related to ‘to learn’. Verbs in both meanings in Germanic go back to PIE \**leis-*. The meaning of the verbal root in Germanic is the outcome of a semantic development from ‘to follow’ → ‘to learn’ (imperfective), if Lat. *līra* ‘ridge, furrow’ (jmf. *dēlīro* ‘I go out of the furrow, I deviate from a straight line → I am crazy *vel sim.*’), OHG *-leisa* ‘track’, and OCS *lěcha* ‘ridge between two furrows’ are related. Cf. Got. *lisan* ‘to know’ (< PGmc \**lisan-* ‘id.’) from the perfect stem PIE *le-lói̯s/lis-* ‘to have followed’ → ‘to know’ and the semantic development of Gk οἶδα ‘I know’, Got. *witan* ‘to know’, ON *vita* ‘id.’, etc. from the perfect stem PIE \**u̯oi̯d-/u̯id-* (*sic*!) ‘to have seen’ → ‘to know’.

Causative formations from PIE \**leis-* meaning ‘to teach’ are found in Gothic and throughout West Germanic (< PGmc \**laizijan-*): Got. *laisjan* (with analogical *s* after the preterite-present *lisan* ‘to know’, LIV2, s.r. \**lei̯s-*); West Germanic: OE *lǣran*, OS *lērian*, OHG *lēren*, etc.

The North-Germanic verb ON *læra* [c. 1200+], OSw. *lära* [c. 1350+], ODan. *læræ* [c. 1450+], etc. is a loanword from the West-Germanic linguistic area: from Old English in Old West Norse but likely a somewhat later borrowing in Old East Norse from MLG *lêren*. The verb’s original meaning was ‘to teach’. Cf. the following examples (from ONP, Söderwall, and Gammeldansk ordbog, respectively):

ON *lęri oss nv oc þa en almatci gvd*

‘God omnipotent teach us now and then’ (Epigrammata sancti Prosperi; = Lat. ... doceat ..., PL 51, col. 515)

OSw. *visaþe han ok lärþe himirikis up gang at tolf dygþa trapom*

‘he showed and taught the stairway to heaven through twelve virtuous steps’(Codex Bureanus)

ODan. *han lærde thæm bodhe j wisdome*

‘he taught them both in wisdom’ (Ex. 35:35; = Lat. ambos erudivit sapientia)

The meaning ‘to learn’ is a later semantic development, which likely arose thanks to the contact between the Nordic languages on the one hand and the West-Germanic prestige languages on the other hand, in particular with Middle Low German (MLG *lêren* ‘to teach, learn’ but OS *lērian* ‘to teach’; ME *lēren* ‘to teach, learn’ but OE *lǣran* ‘to teach’).

The Old Norse mediopassive form *lærask* was used from c. 1200 in the meaning ‘to learn’ (see e.g. in the *Icelandic homily book*: *af boka lestre læromc ver* ‘we learn from reading books’, ONP, s.v. *læra*). The situation in East Norse is such that Old Swedish employs the reflexive form *lära sik*, whereas Old Danish has the mediopassive form *læræs*.

The paper will be divided in two parts. Starting with some introductory words on *-nō/na-*verbs, their origin in the Germanic verbal system, and an overview of older studies on PGmc \**lisan-* etc., the synchronic and diachronic situation in Germanic will be addressed. In this respect, is of particular relevance to consider three different possibilities for each verb of the PGmc triplet \**lisan-* ~ \**laizijan-* ~ \**liznōn-*, namely:

1. verb X was only present in those Proto-Germanic dialects which later became that branch of Germanic where the verb is attested in historical time;
2. verb X was present everywhere in Proto-Germanic but was lost in those dialects which later became those branch of Germanic in which the verb is not attested in historical time;
3. verb X was lost independently after the Proto-Germanic linguistic split.

Twenty-seven possibilities arise, which will be dealt with under the light of the phylogenetic theories proposed so-far.

The second half of the paper will be devoted to the lexical-typological dimension: on the one hand the situation in Germanic, on the other a specimen of the diachronic situation in some relevant branches of Indo-European. Three questions will be in focus: 1) what encoding strategies are used in Indo-European?; 2) what are the tendencies from a conceptual/metaphorical point of view?; 3) is there a shift in lexical typology in diachrony?

Abbreviations

Ex. = Exodus.

Gammeldansk ordbog = *Gammeldansk ordbog*. http://www.gammeldanskordbog.dk. Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab.

LIV2 = *Lexikon der indogermanischen Verben*, edited by Helmut Rix et al., 2nd edn by Helmut Rix and Martin Kümmel. Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2001.

ONP = *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*. Copenhagen: Københavns Universitet.

PL = *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Jacques Paul Migne. Paris, 1844–1855.

s.r. = sub radice

s.v. = sub voce

Söderwall = *Ordbok öfver svrenska medeltids-språket*, ed. K. F. Söderwall. Lund, 1884–1918.